

The Fruit of the Spirit is Peace
A sermon preached at Heritage Presbyterian Church
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4 May 2025
Zechariah 8:9-17
Ephesians 2:11-22

Zechariah 8

⁹Thus says the LORD of hosts: Let your hands be strong-- you that have recently been hearing these words from the mouths of the prophets who were present when the foundation was laid for the rebuilding of the temple, the house of the LORD of hosts.

¹⁰For before those days there were no wages for people or for animals, nor was there any safety from the foe for those who went out or came in, and I set them all against one another. ¹¹But now I will not deal with the remnant of this people as in the former days, says the LORD of hosts. ¹²For there shall be a sowing of peace; the vine shall yield its fruit, the ground shall give its produce, and the skies shall give their dew; and I will cause the remnant of this people to possess all these things. ¹³Just as you have been a cursing among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so I will save you and you shall be a blessing. Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong. ¹⁴For thus says the LORD of hosts: Just as I purposed to bring disaster upon you, when your ancestors provoked me to wrath, and I did not relent, says the LORD of hosts, ¹⁵so again I have purposed in these days to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah; do not be afraid. ¹⁶These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace, ¹⁷do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath; for all these are things that I hate, says the LORD.

Ephesians 2

¹¹So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called "the uncircumcision" by those who are called "the circumcision"-- a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands--¹²remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. ¹⁵He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

I. Introduction

Last Sunday, we began a deep dive into the fruit of the Spirit by looking at joy. We saw that in the New Testament, "joy" is the consequence of recognizing and acknowledging our saved status as Christian believers, combined with our obedience to Jesus' commands. While

John's gospel only mentions loving one another as Jesus has loved us, that command can be combined with the commands in the other gospels to love God, to love our neighbors, and to love our enemies. It is this combination of our recognition of who we are because of our faith in the Risen Savior and our faithful obedience to what our Risen Savior commands us that allows the New Testament authors to prioritize and promote joy even in the midst of trials and tribulations, and to instruct Christians to welcome the trials and tribulations that we go through because of the purifying effect it has on our faith. That's not an easy thing to do by any means, because there is so much pressure on us by contemporary society to treat joy as the passive, positive consequence of things that happen to us, as opposed to the active attitude of joy and posture of obedience that the NT raises as our example.

Something similar is going to be true with today's sermon on peace, except that it will be much more difficult to cover it adequately. Like last week, I hope to hit the highlights of the Bible's distinctive understanding of peace but I obviously won't be able to hit every verse where "peace" occurs. So let's begin with the passage from Zechariah and the wider Old Testament context, and see what Scripture has to teach us about peace.

IIA. Pivot to Zechariah and the OT

The book of Zechariah is one of the twelve minor prophets, and like other books in the Old Testament, it has gone through a complex history of development and composition. If one reads the first eight chapters of the book and then turns to chapter 9, it will seem as though we've opened the page of a new book whose title page has been lost or ripped out, because the language and the style of chapters 9-14 is vastly different from chapters 1-8. Scholars therefore rightly conclude that the prophecies in chapters 9-14 (strictly speaking, chapters 9-11 and 12-14) were

originally separate from the material in chapters 1-8, of which chapter 8 was intended to be the closing chapter of the earliest edition of the book (see, e.g., Floyd FOTL 303-04; Peterson OTL 109; for a more nuanced view, see Boda NICOT 23-29).

(slide2) And what a closing chapter it is! It begins in verse 2 with the words, "I am jealous for Zion with great jealousy (קַנְאָה גְּדוֹלָה), and I am jealous for her with great wrath (וַחֲמָה גְּדוֹלָה)." The obvious implication is that something bad has happened to the city of Zion - many scholars think that this is an allusion to the Babylonian exile (e.g., Peterson OTL 299 mentions "this author's view of postexilic restoration") - and that God is about to do something to correct that bad situation. We are told what that something is beginning in verse 3: "Thus says the LORD: I will return to Zion (compare Zech 1:16, "Therefore, I have returned to Jerusalem with compassion"), and I will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem; Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city (עִיר־הַאֱמֻנָה; only here in the Hebrew Bible), and the mountain of the LORD of hosts shall be called the holy mountain (הַר הַקְּדוֹשׁ; see also Jer 31:23)." But not only will Zion be redeemed and restored to her former greatness; the people who live in Zion will also be blessed. According to verses 4 and 5, "Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets." That is an obvious metaphor for the positive change in the situation envisioned by Zechariah's prophecy because old men, old women, and boys and girls are basically defenseless in the face of an opposing army. That they can sit in the street and play in the streets means that there is no danger of any kind of military attack on the city, which in turn means that the city must be enjoying a period of peace. That becomes explicit in verses 7 and 8, where the Lord says, "I will save my people ... and I will bring them to live in Jerusalem. They shall be my people

(וְהָיִיתִי לָהֶם לְאֱלֹהִים) and I will be their God (וְאֲנִי אֶהְיֶה לָהֶם לְאֱלֹהִים), in faithfulness and in righteousness." That language of the people being God's people and the Lord being their God may be familiar to you, because it occurs elsewhere in the OT as a formula that depicts the special and intimate relationship between God and the chosen people. So for example, in Jeremiah 31:33, we read, "But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (see also Jer 24:7; 32:38; Ezek 11:20; 14:11; 37:27; and with the second person pronoun "your" instead of the third person pronoun "their," Jer 7:23; 11:4; 30:22; Ezek 36:28 per my [Commentary on Jeremiah 31:31-34 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#), accessed 29 April 2025).

(slide3) Well, if you were a child of Israel, held in captivity outside of Jerusalem, and longing to get back home again, all of this would be great news. But there is still more good news to come. In verses 12-13, God says that "*there shall be a sowing of peace*; the vine shall yield its fruit, the ground shall give its produce, and the skies shall give their dew; and I will cause the remnant of this people to possess all things. Just as you have been a cursing among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so I will save you and you shall be a blessing." And what are the consequences of this promised sowing of peace of the children of Israel? We get to that in verses 16-17: "Speak *the truth* to one another, render in your gates *judgment that are true and make for peace*, *do not devise evil* in your hearts against one another, and *love no false oath*; for all these are things that I hate, says the LORD."

In other words, the peace envisioned by this passage starts with what God has done and ends with what the children of Israel are instructed to do as they participate in the sowing of peace that is started by God. That God is the author and giver of peace is mentioned many times in the OT. Leviticus 26:3-6 tells us that "If you follow my statutes and keep my

commandments and observe them faithfully ... I will *grant peace* in the land, and you shall lie down, and no one shall make you afraid," a sentiment echoed in Ps 147:12-14, which says, "Praise the LORD, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion!... He *grants peace* within your borders." And it is crucial to notice that in Zechariah 8, "peace" is accompanied by the virtues of truth (תִּמְנֹן) and justice (מִשְׁפָּט), and that elsewhere in the OT "peace" is associated with righteousness (צְדָקָה) (e.g., Ps. 72:7; 85:8, 10 [= MT 9, 11]; Isa. 9:7 [= MT 6]; 32:17f.; 48:18; 60:17 [cited from RISBE 3:732]). That is something very different from our modern definition of peace as the avoidance of conflict. To be sure, the meaning of peace in the Old Testament resonates in many ways with our understanding of peace today. The word "peace" is often contrasted with the language of war, conflict, and battle because peace does not and cannot exist when people, cities, or nations are in the midst of war, conflict, or battle. Moreover, we sometimes sing in church the 1873 chorus, "It is well (it is well) with my soul (with my soul); it is well, it is well, with my soul." But the beginning of that song invokes the idea of "peace" because it says, "When peace like a river attendeth my way." But the biblical understanding of peace is much deeper, much broader, and more complex than just the absence of conflict or my own individual state of mind and spiritual or emotional well being. The biblical understanding of peace is that peace is something to be actively pursued by the positive acts of speaking the truth to each other, of making true and just decisions when such decisions are needed, and by living lives that are characterized by virtue and righteousness; it is the active rejection of lying or planning evil revenge against those who have done us wrong. In a community where everyone is doing that, it is easy to imagine that peace is both attainable and a noble goal to reach.

IIB. Pivot to Ephesians and the NT

(slide4) That understanding of peace takes center stage in one of the most important passages on peace in the entire New Testament. The larger social and cultural context of Ephesians 2 is the religious and social alienation between Jews and Gentiles in the first century. That is why our New Testament reading begins by singling out the Gentiles as people who were at one time "without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph 2:12-13). Nor are these Gentiles people with no hope and without God by their own conscious choices, because verse 11 specifies them as "Gentiles by birth" (ἐν σαρκί, literally "in [the] flesh" with the intention of separating those born Gentile from those born Jewish; see, e.g., Nida and Bratcher, UBS Handbook 49 ["The words 'in the flesh' designate their natural condition as non-Jews, that is, uncircumcised people, as they are called by the Jews, who are circumcised"; see also Lincoln WBC 135 ["The additional qualification 'in the flesh' underlines that the writer is making an ethnic distinction"]; Best new ICC 238; Abbott old ICC 56). And because God's covenant with Abraham became a covenant with Israel and thus with the Jewish people, the fact that Gentiles were excluded from the covenant with Israel and thus "aliens" and "strangers" was just too bad for them.

(slide5) But their exclusion from God's covenant because of their birth was not a permanent situation for the Gentiles. Instead, verse 13 affirms that "now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near (ὁμοῖς οἱ ποτε ὄντες μακρὰν ἐγενήθητε ἐγγύς; Nida and Bratcher UBS Handbook 54 correctly points out "a basic problem involved in the order of the various elements in verse 13. The first part of the verse refers to present time, while the second part refers to a past experience"; while this issue is not addressed by the commentaries at my disposal, professor Gary Manning proposes that the adverb ποτε turns the clause into a past tense construction) by the blood of Christ." Commentators believe that this language depends on the words in Isaiah 57:19, "Peace, peace, to the far and the near" (בְּרִיָּה וְשָׁלוֹם לְרִחֹק וְלְקֵרוֹב; LXX τοῖς μακρὰν καὶ τοῖς ἐγγύς) says the LORD), which explains the continuation in verse 14, which says "For he is our peace," our meaning both Jews and Gentiles together; "he is our peace; in his flesh he has made

both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." What does it mean that Christ Jesus is our peace? That we read about in verses 15-16, which say "He has abolished (καταργήσας) the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity (ἓνα καινὸν ἄνθρωπον) in place of the two, thus making peace (ποιῶν εἰρήνην), and might reconcile (καὶ ἀποκαταλλάξῃ) both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death (ἀποκτείνας) that hostility through it." It is difficult to find a more decisive statement about the effect of Jesus' death and resurrection on two groups that were deemed to be utterly, completely, and totally separate from each other. From a negative point of view, the verbs "to abolish" (καταργέω) and "to put to death" (ἀποκτείνω) are once-and-for-all verbs. Things that get abolished stay abolished, and things that are put to death stay dead. From a positive point of view, we've become a new creation - not individually, as Paul asserts in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "So if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation" (on the grammatical issue in this verse, see my 30 March 2025 sermon, "two Out of Three Ain't Bad") - but corporately as two separate peoples, races, and ethnicities coming together as one people. This is possible because in his death and resurrection, Christ "made peace" and "reconciled" **both** groups to God - not just the Jews who were God's chosen people and thus thought of themselves as the highest people of the totem pole of nations, but also the Gentiles, people not born Jewish and thus were strangers, aliens, without hope and without God in this world. The result of this act is made clear in verse 19: "So then, you" - meaning you Gentiles - "you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints (συμπολιταὶ τῶν ἁγίων) and also members of the household of God (οἰκεῖοι τοῦ θεοῦ)."

But there is something present in our earlier (passage from Zechariah that is absent from our passage from Ephesians, and that is the consequence of what we are to do once we have received this peace. In Zechariah 8, the children of Israel are told by God, "These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace, do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath; for all these are things that I hate, says the Lord" (verse 16-17). There is nothing like that here. So does that mean that once we accept the peace that God has created our task is done and we have nothing more to do?

(slide6) Of course that isn't the case. We just have to expand our horizons a bit and look at the rest of the New Testament. At places like Romans 12, where in a list of commands that includes imperatives like "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor" and "bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them," Paul also says, "Live in harmony with one another ... If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" (Rom 12:9-10, 14, 16, 18). Or at 2 Corinthians 13:11, which says, "Finally brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you." Or in 1 Thessalonians 5:13, which says, "Be at peace among yourselves." The peace we get from the God of peace (see elsewhere in the NT Rom 15:33; 16:20; Phil 4:9; 1 Thess 5:23; Hebr 13:20; see also 1 Cor 14:33 ["for God is a God not of disorder but of peace"]; 2 Cor 13:11 ["and the God of love and peace will be with you"]; 2 Thess 3:16 ["Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways"]; this phrase does not occur in the Hebrew Bible to my knowledge) is the reason why we are to pursue peace with each other. After all, if God has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between us (Eph 2:14), why should we work at rebuilding it? If God has created one new humanity through the death and resurrection

of Jesus (Eph 2:15), why work at tearing that down and because we disagree with someone else's view? If both Jews and Gentiles are reconciled to God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Eph 2:16), why try so hard to stay unreconciled with one other over some perceived slight or slur? And of course, there is Jesus' promise in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the peacemakers (οἱ εἰρηνοποιοί, only here in the GNT and LXX), for they will be called children of God" (Matt 5:9). I kind of think that's one of our church member's favorite verses in all the Bible, given her commitment to matters of social justice and her concern with unjust and inequitable circumstances in our not-yet better world 😊

III. Pivot to Today

In one sense, then, this morning's sermon parallels last week's sermon. Peace is something that we receive as the gift of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is therefore, first and foremost, the reconciliation of sinners to God through the blood that was shed on the cross. It is not, first and foremost, the passive acceptance of things I cannot change just because I cannot change them. In that sense, peace as a fruit of the Spirit parallels joy as a fruit of the Spirit, because both begin with the acknowledgement of our saved status believers in Jesus, not with a certain perspective on the events and circumstances that surround us.

And because we have peace with God through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we are also charged to be active pursuers and promoters of peace, in the same way that being joyful presumes our obedience to Jesus' commands to love God, love our neighbors, love our enemies, and to love one another as Jesus loved the disciples. The difference is that there is no association of "peace" with "love" in the Bible that mirrors the association of "joy" with the act "loving others" in John 15 with the possible exception of 2 Timothy 2:22, which says "Shun

youthful passions and *pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace*, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart" (but see Ps 85:10 [Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other"]; Isa 54:10 [For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the LORD, who has compassion on you]; Jer 16:5 [for I have taken away my peace from this people, says the LORD, my steadfast love and mercy]; 2 Cor 13:11 [Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you]; Jude 2 [May mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance]).

(slide7) Instead, the way we pursue, promote, and create "peace" has to do with the virtues of truth, justice, and righteousness. Read as a whole, the kind of peace that Scripture presumes that Christians want is based on the choice to value truth over lies, justice over power, and righteousness over evil. Which means that if we really want to be peacemakers, then it presupposes that we will choose to follow truth, even it disagrees with what we want it to be, we will choose to follow justice, even when it punishes us, and we will choose to follow righteousness even when it might be so much easier and oh so much more profitable to be selfish and evil. We don't promote peace when government officials push legislation prohibiting the provision of cat litter in public schools when the same government officials cannot cite one example of cat litter being given to a student, much less being given as an inducement for students to identify as feline rather than human. We don't promote peace when we deport 4 year old children with cancer with their parents despite a constitutional requirement for due process for all individuals living in the US, especially when the child is a US citizen. We don't promote peace when we allow white fundamentalist pastors access to the White House but arrest African American pastors who are praying at the Capitol while wearing a "Jesus was a poor man" clerical stole. None of that is based on truth, justice, or righteousness and according to the Bible, following this path is not the path to peace. In that sense, these

individuals fall under the same condemnation that Jeremiah and Ezekiel proclaimed when they accused the false pro-Israel and pro-Judah prophets of treating "the wounds of my people carelessly, saying 'Peace, peace' when there is no peace" (Jer 6:14 || Jer 8:11; see also Ezek 13:10, where Ezekiel accuses the false prophets of misleading "my people, saying 'Peace,' when there is no peace" [see also verse 16]). When the "appearance" quote unquote of peace comes from lies, injustice, or unrighteous evil, it may look like peace, but it isn't according to the Bible.

So let's not be false prophets. As we consider and think about ways to manifest peace as the fruit of the Spirit this week, let's make sure that it stems from the peace that God has granted to us in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and that it aligns with values of truth, justice, and righteousness that God expects from us. That is how we will be peacemakers in today's world, and thus become the children our Heavenly Father wants us to be. Hallelujah. And amen.