



David Kerrigan

The Prince of Peace in a World of Wars

BRF Advent Book

Applying the message of
God's love to a needy world

The Bible Reading Fellowship

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The Prince of Peace in a World of Wars

Applying the message of
God's love to a needy world



For Janet
my companion on the way
and for the BMS World Mission family
who gave us the opportunity to be peacemakers

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Introduction

The Prince of Peace in a world of wars

Every Christmas we take the seasonal decorations from the attic, and among them is a candle adorned with the titles given to Jesus. One of those is Prince of Peace, and the purpose of this book is to ask what that title means and how its promise can be real for us and for the world in which we live.

I love mobiles. Not the phones but the kind that we hang over a baby's cot to provide something of interest for the infant as they begin to get to grips with this strange world into which they have arrived. Left alone, the mobile will achieve a state of equilibrium, but a puff of air, a small vibration or a sideways swipe will destroy the balance.

Is that a picture of what peace is? For sure, peace *can be* an experience of stillness, but if we want our lives to be peaceful – literally full of peace – we need something more fluid, more adaptable, something that is with us when the pieces are moving, when life is fast and uncertain, when problems emerge unpredictably from left and right. We need something that is dynamic not stationary, fluid not rigid, as we ride the rollercoaster of the joys and the storms of life.

My earliest memory of a disturbance of the peace was me cuddling my one-year-old baby brother, arms wrapped around him, genuinely worrying whether our family life was about to be destroyed by a nuclear war. If that seems fanciful, just the product of a febrile imagination, let me tell you that the year was 1962, I was eight years old and the Cuban missile crisis held the world in its grip. Each day brought new developments, but the atmosphere was palpably

tense, even to an eight-year-old. These were not the days of 24-hour news, so gathering round the radio or the recently acquired black-and-white TV was an anxious experience. We needed to know what had changed from yesterday or last night. Even at that young age I was taking in everything, and I was scared.

The year 2018 marks the centenary of the end of World War I, supposedly 'the day the guns fell silent'. But they haven't been silent for long, and in the years since there have been countless wars that continue to this day. Understandably, we ask whether we will ever see a world at peace.

But not all wars are between armies. There are the wars that tear relationships apart. Once-lifelong friends argue and stop speaking to each other for years. Children grow up and flex their muscles and distance themselves from their once-revered parents, who now can only look on and feel the pain of unexpected rebellion. Elsewhere, wives and husbands rage over matters great and small. In the silence of the night they weep and ache in equal measure and whisper to themselves in the outgoing breath, 'How did it come to this?' They fight daily battles, often against their better intentions, but they don't know how to stop. They've become utterly lost and cannot find the way back. They're not even sure they want to.

Even closer to home, there's the battle inside each one of us. The polished exterior that we present to the world masks a multitude of contradictions. Fears, addictions, guilt and bad memories have moved in over the years and taken up residence, invading the space we'd rather reserve for that elusive thing we call peace.

For a moment's respite, we turn on the TV but find no solace for the soul. Within our nation we see stresses and strains that bubble over and destroy whatever semblance of peace we thought existed. The 'haves and have-nots', the unemployed and the unseen decision-makers, desperate migrants and troubled hosts. Wherever difference exists, tensions can rise and explode in our faces. Trouble erupts as

sections of society reach breaking point, giving tangible expression to Martin Luther King's declaration that 'a riot is the language of the unheard'.

I'm aware that the canvas I'm painting here is a gloomy one, so let me add quickly that this is only a part of the picture. Most of life's experiences, for most people, are nowhere near as negative. Instead we can recall times of great pleasure around the table with friends, enjoying good food and conversation, or meeting up with pals for a drink where for once we feel we can really be ourselves. And while family life is rarely perfect, it often brings great pleasure. There are joyful moments around birthdays, weddings or holidays, surprise visits and seasonal gatherings that will be remembered in later years when photos are found, memories are shared and the details are willingly exaggerated like the fisherman's daily catch.

Most of our memories will be of ordinary times, of a spring afternoon walk or the light of the weakening sun hitting the golden autumn leaves. These things come and go almost unnoticed, but over the years they make up the sweet normality that life depends on, and if the balance tips in their favour our lives are happy ones and we can speak of the peace that we enjoy. It is these experiences that evoke a fragrance of peace. They are net contributors to the common good, and the peace they create is the gift we crave – the gift we'd cling to if we could only grasp it. I describe this peace as a fragrance, because part of its nature is that it's not tangible; it's elusive. It's not an object that we can pick up and hold, let alone refuse to release.

As we shall see shortly, the disciples who were with Jesus on the night before he died experienced this deep-seated disquiet, and they were afraid. Jesus' response will be our starting point in this quest, and as we will see peace is actually within our grasp. But first we will need to understand what it really is, what it means, what it encompasses. Then we will want to learn from the saints of scripture how they found a measure of peace in trying circumstances. Maybe then we will be in a position to consider the disciplines that can take

us to that place of peace we long for, and hold us there, long enough to build a more peaceful world for others.

Along the way, we shouldn't be surprised to see that right at the heart of this story is the birth of a child. There's a degree of irony here, of course, for the birth of a child in some ways fractures the peace of a household – the midnight crying and the incessant demands for attention. Perhaps here we glimpse a truth that will become more apparent as we move on, and priceless too: the peace of God is most needed, and most real, in the midst of turmoil.

A few practical matters to note as we get started. First, the passages I've chosen build a story, but they are not in chronological order. We will first explore that final evening that Jesus spent with his disciples, then dive back to the early pages of the Old Testament, and so on. But gradually I hope that an amazing picture will emerge that will encourage us to see that peace is the very essence, and goal, of the mission of God.

Second, each day will begin with a suggested passage to read. Where the text to be read is too long to be reproduced in full, such as the reading for 1 December, then the verse reference will say, for example, 'Read John 14:22–31' followed by a short extract. Where the text to be read is reproduced in full, as in the reading for 2 December, then the verse reference is simply given (for example, John 14:15–20) followed by the whole passage.

And last, as you're probably reading this book as a devotional aid, do more than read it for information. Read it with an open heart towards God, that he might grant you his peace in the very parts of your life where you need to know it most.

Part I

Understanding peace

1 December

Living with our fears

Read JOHN 14:22–31

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

v. 27

Welcome to the beginning. It isn't the beginning in a chronological sense, but it is the beginning of our journey of understanding. We've joined the story towards the end of the earthly life of Jesus. His disciples have travelled with him and learned to trust and love him. They have occasionally puzzled over his teachings, and some have left the group. Over the years together they have seen miracles and observed how different and mysterious this man is. They will have laughed a lot, talked much as they walked along the highways and byways, wondered who he was late into the night and gradually come to that place where all their hopes and dreams are invested in him. They sense he may even be the Messiah, though they can hardly bring themselves to say it. So here are the loyal, faithful, hopeful ones, moments after Judas Iscariot has slipped out into the night.

The mood has been strange all evening. They have been celebrating Passover together, and we're told that Jesus knew his hour had come (John 13:1). No doubt the disciples read something unsettling into Jesus' mood. He has just washed their feet and told them that they should do the same – to serve and not be served is so important. He has hinted – more than hinted – that there was a traitor among them (John 13:21): a strange thing to do, but Jesus had done many strange things over the years.

Jesus spoke of Peter's forthcoming denial, and this will have added to a sense of foreboding. If this was a movie, we would hear the rumbling of thunder in the distance, and an occasional flash of lightning to heighten the tension. If you asked them what was on their minds, the disciples might have quoted Job 3:26: 'I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil' (NIV).

The disciples are scared.

Recognising this, Jesus seeks to calm their anxiety. 'Do not let your hearts be troubled,' he says (John 14:1), an unmistakable confirmation that they were indeed *very* troubled. He speaks of the Holy Spirit who will come, elsewhere called the comforter, and then he adds the most enigmatic of statements: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid' (v. 27).

What did he mean by this? What does it mean to have *his* peace? Are there *other* sources of peace? And, strangest of all, what did he mean by 'I do not give to you as the world gives'?

Here, you see, is why this a good place to begin. It's the moment when Jesus spoke most clearly about peace, and in these few words he acknowledges that fear robs us of peace – fear of the known and the unknown; rational fears and irrational ones; big things and small things. But in some mysterious sense, he offers an experience of peace that he himself says is not like the peace you get anywhere else. What kind of peace is he talking about?

Before we address that, let's explore briefly what the absence of peace might look like.

Maybe as you read this you can remember going through a time of illness or depression, or maybe you're going through that today. Living longer is a blessing in many ways, but some of us fear dying. Maybe there are tensions in your marriage or in your relationship

with your children, parents or friends. Perhaps it's debt that imposes a weight on you that feels crushing. For others, it's the ache in the stomach from being alone. We crave love and affection; we long for the experience of simply being hugged or touched, yet for some that is elusive. Maybe you're carrying a guilty secret – sometimes we hate these things and love them in equal measure – and we fear the consequences of being found out.

Away from ourselves, switch on the news and we sometimes hear nothing but a litany of woes. Crime is always there in some guise. Terrorism too. Racism and hate rear their ugly heads. Nation rises against nation, and a whole generation of young people have their futures wiped out. If you were an ordinary Syrian family, what would peace look like for you? Or if your fears were for your children as they go to play on the streets of your estate, where drug dealers frequent the darkened stairwells, what would peace look like for you? When you think about climate change and the deep anxiety we have for the generations to come, what would peace look like in that area?

These are just some of the sources, the tip of the iceberg, of our unease. You may be reading this today and in your heart you have an ache that comes from another experience. For you, for most of us, this is all too real.

Peace, I suggest, could simply be the absence of these things, the elimination of that which breaks into our lives and brings fear, anxiety and turmoil. We long for these things to be taken away, and there is nothing wrong in this. Nothing shallow. We often know what robs us of a lightness of spirit, and we want to be rid of it.

These are examples of mostly external factors that affect our sense of peace, but there are others. Many would speak of an inner disquiet, a longing for something deeper, more meaningful and that connects to the spiritual dimension of who they are. Though it's a simplistic picture, the idea of a God-shaped gap in some people's lives illustrates well this yearning.

A moment ago I asked, 'Are there other sources of peace?', and of course the answer for some of the above is yes. This is where, as Christians, we need to be wise in our words and not pretend that the world in which we live has nothing to offer. If our fear is caused by sickness, we need a doctor. If we long for companionship, we want someone to love. Money owed? A windfall wouldn't go amiss. A strained relationship? Let us be reconciled. These things are not just what we crave, but if they come, they work, at least to some degree. We might call these things therapeutic solutions, and they are not to be dismissed.

I stress this because we must not be lazy and write off the world as a no-hope place that at best serves only as heaven's waiting room. We should have no time for a defective theology that refuses to see that God's purposes for the thriving of human life can be fulfilled in part through the gifts and skills he blesses us with as human beings.

But all therapeutic solutions have their limits. Some problems can't be solved. The obvious remedy isn't forthcoming. There isn't an easy answer. And even if one intrusion into our lives is eradicated, there will be something else along in due course. One day we'll all breathe our last, and our life will end. For many people, these scenarios breed fear.

So the really big question is 'Where is a different kind of peace to be found?' A peace that can surmount what seems insurmountable – we might even call it a peace that passes all understanding!

It's to this we turn next.

2 December

The presence of God

JOHN 14:15–20 (NIV)

‘If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me any more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.’

With the resurgence of Celtic spirituality in recent years, there has been a renewed interest in the intricate, intertwining artwork that seeks to express the mutual indwelling of the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Each design weaves in and out, without beginning or end.

We cannot pretend to fully understand what it means to say that God is three-in-one, but the scriptures clearly reveal that the God who is love not only exists in community but *is* community. As Christians, we cannot envisage God other than in the unending, unstarting, interdependent coexistence that we call Trinity. This is often referred to as *perichoresis*, a Greek word that evokes a dance-like movement of weaving in and out; a single entity yet comprising three individual entities. And in this movement we see community – a community of mutual giving and receiving; a community of love, hence John’s description that ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8).

But as if that was not enough, we are also invited to participate in this divine dance. We can spell it out like this:

- Jesus will ask the Father and he will send the Holy Spirit (v. 16).
- The Holy Spirit will be with you forever (v. 16) and will be in you (v. 17), and you are in Jesus (v. 20) and Jesus is in the Father (v. 20).

In the face of the fear of the apostles, Jesus promises them his peace and this peace is expressed and made real by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Through the Holy Spirit we are in Christ and Christ is in the Father (see Colossians 3:3).

In times of trouble or anxiety, it is good to face that situation with a friend or a loved one. There is no doubt some validity in the saying that ‘a problem shared is a problem halved’ or ‘a friend in (my time of) need is a friend indeed’. But the companionship of one another is not the same as the presence of God. The peace that we read of in the Bible, the peace that Jesus speaks of, is not simply the chumminess of friends. If it was then Jesus would have said to his disciples on the night of the Passover, ‘Why are you all so glum? Cheer up – you have each other!’

The fear of the disciples is that Jesus is leaving them. The peace he offers is that he is staying. Later, he makes this even more explicit:

But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.

JOHN 16:6-7

And a few verses later, in John 16:33, he says again, ‘I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace.’

Perhaps here we are beginning to understand what peace means to those who have faith. Christ offers the peace that holds us safe

amid the crisis, gives us strength to stand while the storm rages, and carries us through until, perhaps, the problem passes or is resolved, or ultimately until we find our healing in him.

The peace he gives us is his real presence with us. This peace brings about a change in the circumstances of the one who trusts in him, which is why he goes on to say, ‘Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid’ (John 14:27). This is why the apostle Paul later refers to the peace Jesus offers as that ‘which surpasses all understanding’ (Philippians 4:7). ‘The Lord is near’, Paul says in Philippians 4:5, but of course those who do not believe can’t see this; they can’t experience it, hence they can’t understand it.

This, then, is the secret we will explore in this book: how the presence of God in our lives can be experienced and how it offers us a peace that is beyond measure. This is a most precious gift. This is why the birth of Jesus is of the utmost importance to us, and to the world.

Before we move on, however, let me add a word about what I have called therapeutic solutions that bring peace. As we saw yesterday, the world and its wonderful people will at times be able to ease or even remove our problem. In this book I want to hold together both the goodness of this fallen world, which can still contribute to our peace and well-being, and the absolute necessity of a relationship with God, whose peace is unimaginably different from that which the world can offer.

But if the peace that comes from our human endeavour – the healing, prevention, cure and companionship – is of value, then these things are not just to be celebrated but encouraged. We live our lives as embodied people, and what robs us of peace is the absence of food and water, clothing and shelter, health and education, justice and security. The Bible has no space for a ‘peace’ that ignores these things, saying in effect ‘life may be awful but it’s okay because we have Jesus’. A cursory glance at Matthew 25:31–46 tells us that Jesus cared about life’s necessities being available to everyone, especially

‘the least of these’. Yes, the presence of Jesus has sustained countless souls in the most awful circumstances, but that is no excuse for inaction in the face of injustice. If the goal of God’s kingdom is the restoration of God’s peace, then the mission of the church must aim to restore that peace as best we possibly can.

In truth, peace hardly seems a strong enough word to describe all of this. So I suggest we use a different word for a while, and that word is ‘shalom’, the word for peace in the Hebrew of the Old Testament. It is a wonderfully rich word. Understanding shalom is our next task.



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The biblical title 'The Prince of Peace' leaves us in no doubt that God's purpose in Jesus Christ is to bring peace – universal peace, both with God and with our neighbours. But have we really understood what this peace might look like, especially in a world of wars and suffering?

David Kerrigan sees the coming of Jesus at Christmas as central to the divine plan to bring peace to the world. Through reflection on biblical texts and mission stories, he locates God at the centre of our mission and encourages us to restore the peace, joy and hope that come from accompanying Jesus.



Until 2017, **David Kerrigan** was General Director of BMS World Mission. Previously, he and his wife Janet worked as missionaries in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. He also pastored a church in Exeter. He is an elder in his local church, the Chair of the Council at Spurgeon's College, London, and a member of the Executive Committee of the Baptist World Alliance.

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