

Waiting for God's Peace

Devotional Reading: Revelation 5:8–14

Background Scripture: Isaiah 11:6–10; John 18:28–38;
Ephesians 4:4–6, 13–19

Isaiah 2:2–4

² In the last days

the mountain of the LORD's temple will be
established
as the highest of the mountains;
it will be exalted above the hills,
and all nations will stream to it.

³ Many peoples will come and say,

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of
the LORD,
to the temple of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths.”

The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

⁴ He will judge between the nations
and will settle disputes for many peoples.

They will beat their swords into
plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against
nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.

Acts 17:26–28

²⁶ “From one man he made all the nations,
that they should inhabit the whole earth; and
he marked out their appointed times in history
and the boundaries of their lands. ²⁷ God did
this so that they would seek him and perhaps
reach out for him and find him, though he is
not far from any one of us. ²⁸ ‘For in him we live
and move and have our being.’ As some of your
own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’



Key Text

Many peoples will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.” The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. —Isaiah 2:3

Social Teachings of the Church

Unit 1: Fulfilling Our Obligations to Neighbors

Lessons 1–4

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the main points of Isaiah's prophecy.
2. Explain how God's peace is already present in the world but not fully manifest until Jesus returns.
3. Create a plan for fostering peace in a specific context where unresolved conflict exists.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Yearning for Peace
- B. Lesson Context: Isaiah in Judah
- C. Lesson Context: Paul in Athens

I. Final Peace Among Nations (Isaiah 2:2–4)

- A. Mountain for All (v. 2)
- B. Identification of Authority (v. 3)
- C. Freedom from War (v. 4)

There Is a Place

II. Divine Origin of Nations (Acts 17:26–28)

- A. Creator's Actions (v. 26)
Honoring God
- B. Humanity's Response (v. 27)
- C. Humanity's Awareness (v. 28)

Conclusion

- A. Promised Peace
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Yearning for Peace

Throughout history, war is a constant reality. Examples of conflict are not hard to find; you can pick any century. In modern times, many of us grow weary of seeing headlines about wars and threats of war on a regular basis. We live in a world that is often gripped by terrorism and violence. Nevertheless, most people desire peace. We yearn for it. But how can such peace arrive? Where will it come from?

The Bible tells us that true, lasting peace will only come from God. The total peace he promises has two aspects. The first is peace between us and God. The second is peace between humans, nations, and people groups. The first aspect has already been achieved through Jesus (Romans 5:1). This week, our Scripture texts reveal the path toward the second aspect.

B. Lesson Context: Isaiah in Judah

Isaiah began prophesying at the end of the reign of Uzziah, king of Judah, in about 740 BC (Isaiah 1:1; 6:1). During Isaiah's lifetime, the kingdom of Judah faced threats from within and without. Whether the danger came from war with the massive Assyrian Empire (7:17) or injustice and violence within Judah itself (1:21–23), the future of its capital, Jerusalem, was uncertain.

The beginning of the book of Isaiah warns Judah against an even deeper conflict: a war of rebellion that the people were waging against God. The people of Jerusalem led lives filled with unrighteousness, idolatry, and oppression; the once "faithful city" had become a "prostitute" (Isaiah 1:21). Isaiah explains that the Judeans will have no peace with other nations or among their own people until they first accept God's terms of peace. Thus, Isaiah calls Judah to repent (1:16–17). Amid promises of fearful judgment, however, Isaiah also announces a message of hope: Jerusalem would once again become a "City of Righteousness" through God's redeeming work (1:26–27). The first of today's texts (which has a parallel in Micah 4:1–3) picks up on this theme.

C. Lesson Context: Paul in Athens

On his second missionary journey (AD 52–54), Paul traveled through the region of Macedonia (modern-day northern Greece). During this journey, he planted churches in the cities of Philippi and Thessalonica (Acts 16:6–15; 17:1–9). Due to persecution in Thessalonica, Paul fled to Athens, some 300 miles to the south (17:14–15).

As Paul walked around Athens, he became distressed by all the city’s idolatry (Acts 17:16). He responded by engaging fellow Jews, God-fearing Gentiles, and others in conversation about Jesus. Paul’s teaching drew the attention of local philosophers, who invited him to speak at the Areopagus, the space in which the city’s political council met (17:19). The Areopagus council likely had authority over which religious teachings were allowed into the city. These men had a rich knowledge of Greek philosophy but almost no familiarity with Hebrew Scripture. Today’s passage comes as Paul addresses this new, highly educated audience with the gospel.

I. Final Peace Among Nations

(Isaiah 2:2–4)

A. Mountain for All (v. 2)

2. In the last days the mountain of the LORD’s temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it.

After a first chapter filled with dire warnings for Judah to repent (see Lesson Context), the Lord promises that something incredible will happen *in the last days*. The breadth of this oracle is astounding: *all nations* will come to *the Lord’s temple* in Jerusalem. They will come not as enemies, ready to mount an attack, but as disciples, ready to learn from and have a relationship with God.

It is not immediately clear what Isaiah means by “the last days.” The original audience likely understood such days to be a part of the future history of the nation. Several Old Testament prophets refer to this as a time when God’s glory and authority will be revealed to Israel and the world more universally (Jeremiah 49:39; Hosea 3:5; Micah 4:1; etc.).

The imagery of *the Lord’s temple* located high on the top of *the mountains* indicates the temple’s relative importance. At the time of Isaiah’s prophecy, other fictitious gods were commonly worshiped and offered sacrifices on mountains and hills as well (Isaiah 65:7; compare 2 Kings 15:4). The elevated location of the Lord’s house on *the highest of the mountains* indicates the Lord’s holiness above all other gods and authorities (compare Psalm 3:4; Isaiah 27:13; 56:7; 66:20; Micah 4:7). God had commanded the people of Israel to destroy such sites upon entrance into the promised land of Canaan (Deuteronomy 12:2), but the vision in the verse before us is that of a singular, holy mountain naturally elevated above all others. The last days will make clear that the Lord alone is God and that the God of Israel is the only true God.

The New Testament references the language of “last days” to describe the messianic era, as God speaks to us through Jesus the Son (Hebrews 1:2). Both Jesus’ own physical body and the church as the body of Christ are described as the new temple (John 2:21; 1 Corinthians 3:16–17; 2 Corinthians 6:16). Understood in this light, we can read Isaiah’s prophecy as a promise that the nations will come to learn from Jesus through the church. Through its obedience to God and its proclamation of the truth, the church will make known the mystery of God to the nations (Ephesians 3:9–11).

B. Identification of Authority (v. 3)

3a. Many peoples will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the temple of the God of Jacob.”

How to Say It

Aratus	Air-uh-tus.
Areopagus	Air-ee-op-uh-gus.
Epimenides	Ep-ih-men-ih-deez.
Macedonia	Mass-eh-doe-nee-uh.
Philippi	Fih-lip-pie or Fil-ih-pie.
Stoicism	Stoe-uh-siz-um.
Thessalonica	Thess-uh-lo-nye-kuh (th as in thin).
Uzziah	Uh-zye-uh.

When *many peoples* realize the nature of *the mountain of the Lord* as defined above, they will be drawn toward it and to the God who dwells there (compare Micah 4:2). Further, they will also draw each other to the mountain, encouraging each other to *go up* and approach God together. The image is one of people who no longer oppress each other or encourage each other to pursue idolatry but help each other serve the one true God. The image of many people from various nations worshipping *the God of Jacob* may have shocked its original audience. Still, Isaiah underscores the promise by later prophesying that even Israel’s historical enemies of Egypt and Assyria would experience blessing and become the people of God (Isaiah 19:25).

Jesus echoes this verse’s imagery when he tells his disciples that “repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47; compare Matthew 28:19–20; Acts 1:8).

3b. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.” The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

A logical prerequisite for being able to *walk in* God’s *paths* is learning *his ways* (compare Psalm 86:11). *The law* was given to Israel to guide them as they lived before God in the land he gave to them. Initially, God designed his law to identify people who were distinct in bearing witness to him as the one true God. Israel was to be a “kingdom of priests” with the unique honor of displaying God’s character to a watching world (Exodus 19:6). When the nations saw Israel flourish because of its people’s obedience, they would inquire and want to share in that life with them (Deuteronomy 4:5–8). Sadly, prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah indicate that this beautiful display was not what happened in history. Instead, Israel and Judah often subverted their priestly role through idolatry and oppressive behavior toward others.

In the verse before us, God promises that, once again, people would follow *the word of the Lord*. Israel would truly become a light to the nations by broadcasting that word to all (compare Isaiah 42:6). The Gospel of Luke returns to this image, with the prophet Simeon announcing that Jesus

himself would be that “light” to heal the relationship between God and the nations (Luke 2:32).

What Do You Think?

What steps do you need to take to learn God’s ways better?

Digging Deeper

How do Proverbs 6:23; John 14:15; Colossians 1:10; and 1 John 2:5; 5:3 inform your response?

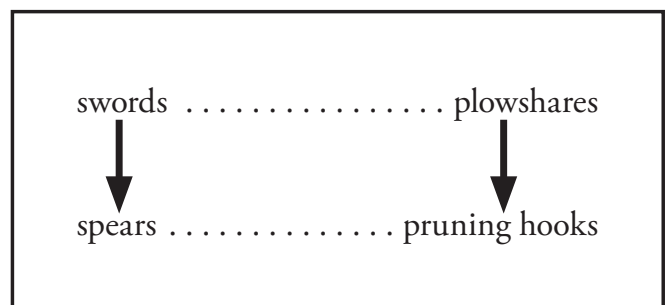
C. Freedom from War (v. 4)

4a. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples.

The word translated *judge* can take the sense of “arbitrate,” though other shades of meaning are possible (compare Isaiah 11:3–4; 37:4; Jeremiah 2:19; Micah 4:3; 6:2). God himself will be the one to decide what is true, good, and righteous as he executes justice between people groups in the world (compare Isaiah 32:1). Yet while *many peoples* from among *the nations* will seek God and learn from his word, many others will not. God will deal with such people according to their folly, violence, and injustice.

4b. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

In each of our three verses from Isaiah, we can see a pattern of *parallelism*. Parallelism, which appears frequently in Hebrew poetry, happens when words in one line of a verse reflect the words in another line to communicate a larger point. In this partial verse, we see parallelism communicating God’s promise to establish a permanent peace between himself and humanity.



At this point, a further promise emerges: when the nations are in fellowship with God, they will

have peace with one another. At the proper time, they will take their weapons, both *swords* and *spears*, and turn them into farming instruments. The destructive tools of warfare will become tools of peaceful creation (contrast Joel 3:10). Nations will be free to seek ways to flourish together.

4c. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.

When every *nation* becomes devoted to God's reign, there will no longer be a need for conflict between them. They will be transformed from self-interested, violent people groups into participants in the kingdom of God. Each nation will be filled with peace, justice, and righteousness. Such nations no longer need to pursue conquest and domination over each other. There will no longer be a need to learn the ways of *war*. There will no longer be any cause for fear from other people (Micah 4:4). When God reigns, peace will reign too.

While we can be sure that the Lord is at work within the church and the wider world, we recognize that the world will not fully know this peace until Jesus returns and all people worship him.

What Do You Think?

In what ways is the message of the gospel one of peace (see Romans 5:1; 2 Peter 3:14)?

Digging Deeper

How can we direct our gospel witness to move people from all nations toward peace with God?

There Is a Place

Stellenbosch, South Africa, is home to some of the most beautiful landscapes in the world. Towering mountains surround acres of luscious green vineyards, plentiful orchards of citrus produce, and vast expanses of farmland that extend for miles. Places such as these remind me that there will be a future kingdom with lasting peace. It will be far better and more beautiful than anything on earth. God's people will flourish and prosper there, surrounded by all that is good, true, and beautiful. Thankfully, we'll never have to leave.

This is not just wishful thinking—quite the

opposite! Many prophetic visions in Scripture speak of a place where war and suffering cease and where people will live in a perfect relationship with each other and the Creator. This calls the people of God to live not with dread or fear toward the future but in hopeful expectation of what is to come. In what ways are you advancing the kingdom of God toward that ultimate reality to come?
—N. V.

II. Divine Origin of Nations

(Acts 17:26–28)

A. Creator's Actions (v. 26)

26. “From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.

Many of Paul's listeners in Athens would have been trained in philosophy (Acts 17:18; see Lesson Context). With this in mind, Paul adapts his usual mode of sharing the gospel. Rather than beginning with obvious references to Hebrew Scripture, as he might with a Jewish audience (example: 17:1–4), some commentators propose that Paul adopts a common three-part form of classical debate:

I. Points of Reference

(*common ground; Acts 17:22–23*)

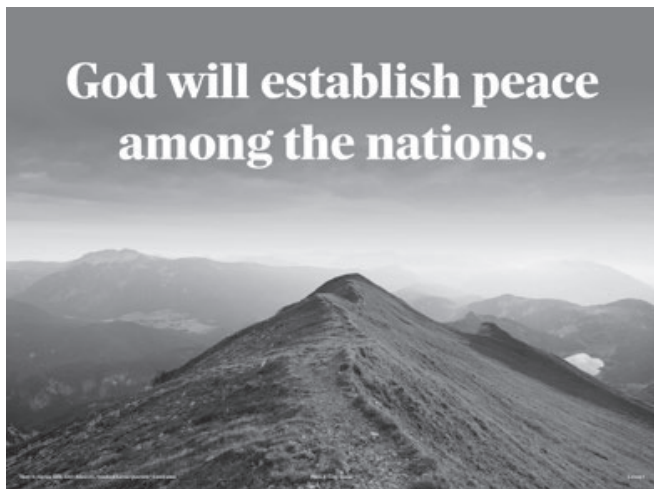
II. Points of Relevance

(*importance of the topic; Acts 17:24–28*)

III. Points of Disturbance

(*how Christianity differs; Acts 17:29–31*)

Well into his second point by verse 26, Paul draws on his knowledge of Hebrew Scripture to strengthen his argument while also referencing concepts found in Greek philosophy. He affirms the creation of humanity from *one man*, affirming all peoples' descent from Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:20). Much of Paul's Greek audience, influenced by a philosophy called Stoicism, would have already agreed that all humanity came from divine origin (though they may not have been completely sure which god was the creator!). Paul's statement regarding *times in history* and *boundaries of their lands* may reflect texts such as Deuteronomy 32:8 and Isaiah 10:13. This language would



Visual for Lesson 4. Display this visual as you discuss the lesson conclusion and associated questions.

have resonated with adherents of Stoicism, who held that all of history was guided by one powerful, driving force.

Honoring God

I live in one of the oldest and busiest cities in the world. Walking down the street is like a history lesson as I pass majestic Victorian-era architecture and buildings that once housed kings. The architecture that remains from past centuries is a powerful, visible reminder that we are all part of something bigger than ourselves. I often find myself wondering what my own life would have been like had I lived in this city a century ago. Would the pace of life be any slower? Would things be simpler, or would they be equally complex?

When I consider the journey that my city has been on in the last millennium, I am reminded of Acts 17:26. God has “marked out” a special time and space for the people of our city to glorify him. It’s like a parent saying to a child, “Here’s a canvas I made for you, and here are the paintbrushes. Go and create something that honors me!” Is that the way you approach your tasks? —N. V.

B. Humanity’s Response (v. 27)

27. “God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.

God created the earth to be inhabited (Genesis 1:28). He allowed all kinds of nations to flourish

in different times and places (see Acts 17:26, above). But *why* did God create nations in this way? Paul explains that God did this in order for the nations to *seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him*.

It is important to recognize that God is not playing a game of hide-and-seek in this regard. Although God transcends both time and space, he is concurrently *not far from any one of us*—this speaks to what is called his “immanence.” This word describes his close presence and activity within the created world. God has always worked among nations to heal the broken relationship between humanity and himself. His works are designed to create opportunities for people from every nation to seek him.

Can people from every nation find God? Paul thinks they can. God has not left himself without a witness through nature and history (see Acts 14:17; Romans 1:19–20). At the same time, people from all nations can be ignorant, blinded, and self-deceived by their own sin (1:18). Idolatry has darkened their sensibility to the true God. Paul even notes that the Athenians ignorantly worshiped what they called “an unknown god” (Acts 17:23).

Nevertheless, the true God never left them. God is present among the nations. Indeed, God is present to every person. The transcendent God is also the “right here, right now” God.

What Do You Think?

In what ways have you experienced the immanence and transcendence of God?

Digging Deeper

How would you explain the significance of these attributes of God to an unbeliever?

C. Humanity’s Awareness (v. 28)

28. “‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’

As Paul addresses the council, he confirms his statements about God by quoting their *own poets*. We might imagine that Paul’s audience was surprised to hear an expert in Jewish law quoting

Greek poets. It should be amazing to *us* how widely read Paul is! It was compelling enough for at least part of the council to want to hear more of what Paul had to say in the future (see Acts 17:32–33).

Paul's first quote may come from Epimenides, a sixth-century BC philosopher-poet who writes that in Zeus, "We live and move and have our being." He then follows immediately by quoting the third-century BC poet Aratus, who describes Zeus with the words: "We are truly his offspring." Paul adapts these quotes to align with the Scriptural truth that God created and sustains all of humanity (see Genesis 2:7; Job 12:10; Psalm 104:29; etc.).

It is important to note that Paul is not arguing that Zeus and the God of Scripture are equal or even similar. Rather, he finds common ideological ground with the philosophers before claiming that the Lord is unique (Acts 17:29–31). This common ground indicates that some people and nations can understand truths about God, even if their ideas about him are misguided in many ways. In effect, Paul says, "Hey, even some of your own people have figured out this part." Paul uses the council's own way of thinking as a springboard for the gospel. In this way, Paul's line of argument in verse 28 proves his words in verses 26 and 27!

What Do You Think?

What common starting points from contemporary secular culture can you draw on to introduce people to the gospel?

Digging Deeper

How can you be a better "student" of contemporary secular culture in this regard?

Conclusion

A. Promised Peace

When we suffer, or see others suffering, from the devastating effects of conflicts between nations, any hope for lasting peace may seem unrealistic. Christians might be tempted to imagine that God has left the nations to fend for themselves. But today's texts tell a different story.

The Lord promises in Isaiah 2:2–4 that, eventually, people will end their conflicts with each

other when they embrace his ways. Peace between humanity and God will ultimately result in peace between nations. Christians can rest assured that peace has been established between God and people through Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1; 2 Peter 3:14). Yet while God's reign of peace has begun, it is not yet fully complete. Until Jesus returns, there will always be wrongs to make right in the world. As his disciples, we are called to be peacemakers (Matthew 5:9; James 3:18). Through Christ's power, the church can be a shining example of peace in the world, starting within our own relationships. We must seek to live peaceably with everyone as far as it depends on us to do so (Romans 12:18). By leading the way in peacemaking, the church can truly be a light to the nations.

Although conflicts sometimes appear too deep to heal, Acts 17:24–26 reminds us that God has made each of these different groups for the purpose of seeking him. Like Paul before the Areopagus council, we can use these differences as a launchpad to share the hope of the gospel.

One day, people from every nation and region, from every ethnic group and language, will stand before the throne of God and enjoy God's peace (Revelation 7:9–12). This will happen when God renews all things, and the new heaven and new earth appear (21:1–4). Finally, all the kingdoms of this world will become one kingdom in our Lord.

What Do You Think?

How will you practice peacemaking, thereby being a light to others of the gospel?

Digging Deeper

How can your class or congregation be agents of God's peace in your neighborhood? town or city? country?

B. Prayer

Lord God, we pray for peace among the nations. Work among the nations through us, God, to move them toward peace and toward you. May they seek your face. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Nations will find peace only when they find God.