

Happy New Year.

I look forward to your continued support and fellowship this year as well.

Shall we also greet those next to us, and those in front of and behind us?

There will be a prelude, so let us quiet our hearts in silent meditation and wait expectantly for the Lord.

### **“The God Who Makes Us One”**

Proverbs 17:1; 15:17

Ezekiel 37:15–19

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**Proverbs 17:1; 15:17 (PowerPoint)**

**Ezekiel 37:15–19 (PowerPoint)**

### **Preface**

The descendants of Noah, recorded in the first book of the Bible, Genesis, built the Tower of Babel.

The reason was that they were acting in opposition to God.

In the days of Noah, they did not remember and reflect on the fact that they had once been destroyed by a great flood because of their own violence and corruption, nor did they think, “Let us obey the word of God so that we will not receive such punishment again and be destroyed.” Rather, they thought, “If this so-called God tries to destroy us again with a flood, we will rely on our own technology and abilities—great enough to build a strong and massive tower. We will climb to the top of the tower and survive.” With such thinking, they built the Tower of Babel.

At that time, the punishment God brought upon them was something quite unusual and distinctive.

He did not rain down fire and sulfur from heaven, nor did He cause another great flood with waters. Instead, He confused their spoken language—the languages of all the people living on the earth.

That was the punishment God inflicted upon them.

As a result, they suddenly could no longer understand one another’s words. They became unable to live together, and they scattered and were scattered over the whole face of the earth.

Because they could no longer understand one another’s words, they eventually became enemies and adversaries, quarreling, refusing to yield to one another, opposing one another. Conflicts arose on the earth, disputes arose, wars arose—so much so that one might say it became a world in which it could hardly be said that there was any hell other than this.

## Part One

Now, about two thousand years ago, on the day of Pentecost—the day that could be called the birthday of the church—while the people were earnestly praying, just as Jesus, who had been resurrected and ascended into heaven, had promised, they received the promised Holy Spirit.

When they received the Holy Spirit and were filled with the Holy Spirit, the very first gift that appeared among them was tongues.

As the Spirit enabled them to speak, they began to speak uniformly in various languages and words, declaring the mighty works of God.

When we consider what the meaning of the tongues spoken at that time was, we realize that it was the phenomenon in which the words—the languages—that had been scattered over the whole earth at the time of the Tower of Babel recorded in Genesis chapter 11 were being restored and made one again.

When we look at the scene recorded in Acts chapter 2, we read that “the people who had gathered from every nation under heaven were utterly amazed and marveled, saying, ‘How is it that we hear them speaking in our own languages about the mighty works of God?’”

In other words, they began to understand one another’s words.

Through the work of God the Holy Spirit, the languages that had been completely scattered and fragmented became mutually understandable as they spoke uniformly of God’s works. Because words were understood, hearts began to understand one another as well.

By knowing God and speaking God’s word, the hearts of the people were brought together and made one.

The exact opposite of what happened at the Tower of Babel took place.

At the time of the Tower of Babel, people were scattered and dispersed, becoming unable to remain together. But in the first church that came into existence two thousand years ago—the early church, the church that had received the Holy Spirit—the important phenomenon that appeared was that people began to gather earnestly with one heart.

They began to become one.

Not merely a “oneness” of being together in a particular place or space, but their hearts began to become one.

Instead of each person insisting on ownership—“what is mine” and “what is yours”—those who had possessions and those who did not have possessions came together, using what they had according to each person’s needs, becoming a community like a living picture of heaven.

Here, there is an important teaching.

The Holy Spirit makes us one, and the phenomenon that appears when we extinguish or quench the Spirit is scattering, collision, quarreling, judging one another, conflict, and fighting.

## **Part Two**

As we live our lives, it seems that there are many things that are extremely painful, difficult, and distressing.

For each of you, what has been the most painful and hardest thing you have experienced in your life up to now?

Having one's workplace go bankrupt, or falling into financial hardship, are certainly very painful and difficult experiences.

Becoming ill and having to live a life of battling sickness is, of course, also painful and difficult.

But I wonder whether the most painful and difficult thing of all is discord—disharmony, broken relationships, and strained human relationships.

What do you think?

Relationships deteriorating, becoming estranged, quarreling, coming to hate one another, engaging in conflict, becoming divided, parting ways—are these not the greatest misfortunes in our walk of life?

I have chosen Proverbs 17:1, Proverbs 15:17, and Ezekiel 37:19 as this year's theme verses.

In Proverbs 17:1 and 15:17, it is written as follows:

**Proverbs 17:1 (PowerPoint)**

**Proverbs 15:17 (PowerPoint)**

And furthermore, verse 16:

**Proverbs 15:16 (PowerPoint)**

For us, financial poverty is certainly a hardship. But do you not think that discord is far more painful than poverty—so painful that it cannot even be compared to material lack?

Discord and conflict.

If we quarrel with one another, hate one another, envy and resent one another, and fight with one another, then even if we could eat as much rich, delicious, high-grade Wagyu beef as we wanted at any time, what happiness would there be in that?

When watching dramas, we sometimes see scenes like this.

One of the characters is at a high-end steak restaurant, eating expensive beef to their heart's content as usual, when suddenly their phone rings. He receives news that worsens a conflict with someone else even further, causing his anger to boil over. In an

instant, it is as if the happiness he felt while eating the beef is blown away; he throws down his chopsticks or knife and fork, shouting, “What did you say?! Don’t mess with me!” with a face twisted in bitterness and pain.

No matter how delicious or expensive the beef may be, it cannot overcome the bitterness, pain, and suffering that come from a worsening relationship with another person.

I apologize for speaking about my own family, but we experienced something like this as well.

Ten years ago, when we went to study at a seminary in the United States, as I have shared before, no matter how we calculated it, our finances were nowhere near enough for a family of six to live for three years.

I still cannot understand why our visa was approved—it was a life in America that could only be described as a miracle performed by God.

There were many nights when my heart was filled with fear, thinking that tomorrow might be the day when we would have to return to Japan, resenting the empty rice container that had been emptied to the bottom, thinking, “This is it—we can’t go on.”

About two months after that life began, on our way back from going to Koreatown in Los Angeles to buy groceries, we decided to eat out together as a family for the first time in a long while. With nervous expressions, we entered a Korean restaurant.

It was not only our first time eating out as a family in America, but our budget—including tips—was at most fifty dollars, preferably under forty. We entered the restaurant with a somewhat reckless hope of “If only our family of six could eat until we’re full,” while nervously worrying, “Will we be seen as poor because we don’t have money?”

When we called the server to place our order, perhaps because we looked poor, they kindly advised us, saying, “Each dish here is quite large. If you order three dishes, rice will come with them. If you add three more bowls of rice, that should be enough.” When the food was brought out, we offered a prayer of thanks, and our family was able to spend a truly happy time together for the first time in a long while.

As a parent, I felt sorry that I was making my children feel a little embarrassed, and yet, seeing them eat and say, “It’s delicious, it’s delicious,” nearly brought me to tears. It was a moment that somehow tightened my heart, but at the same time, was filled with deep gratitude.

It was exactly the lived experience of the words: “Better is a dry piece of bread with peace than a house full of feasting with strife. Better is a dish of vegetables where love is than a fattened ox where hatred is. Better is little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure with turmoil.” Even now, when I remember that time, my heart sometimes feels

painfully tight with a sense of sadness and tenderness, but it has become an unforgettable and precious memory of the Lord's grace.

### **Part Three**

One of the greatest blessings that the Lord God gives to us is peace, and the greatest pain that we human beings—who have departed from God—experience is conflict, hatred, quarreling, discord, and opposition.

In the time of King David, the nation of Israel was one.

Just as Japan's Kanto and Kansai regions are naturally one, Israel too was one.

However, after King David, Israel was divided into north and south.

The northern kingdom called itself Israel, or Ephraim, taking the name of the tribe that held the greatest power, and the southern kingdom called itself Judah. Thus, the nation was divided into two kingdoms.

This division was, in the heart of God the Father, a pain as if God's own heart were being torn apart—a pain greater than any other for God.

And yet God declared that He would make the northern kingdom of Israel/Ephraim and the southern kingdom of Judah one again, and He commanded them, "Strive to become one."

Let us once again read from the book of Ezekiel.

### **Ezekiel 37:15–19 (PowerPoint)**

When God said, "Join them together into one stick, so that they may become one in your hand. I will make you one in My hand," at that time, more than one hundred years had already passed since the northern kingdom of Israel had been destroyed, and the nation of Israel/Ephraim itself no longer existed.

Even so, the southern kingdom of Judah was still barely surviving, going back and forth into captivity.

To such Israel and Judah, God says, "I will make them one in My hand; make them one in your hand."

The Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is Himself one, a perfect being of complete peace, and therefore He is the One who makes us one.

He is the One who grants us the blessing of peace and bestows upon us the gift of reconciliation.

### **Part Four**

We live our lives experiencing many conflicts and struggles—in the church, in the home, in the workplace, and in places of learning.

We live while fighting with others, competing with others, and colliding with others.  
We live while becoming enemies and adversaries.  
We live while viewing others as enemies, detesting them, avoiding them, while hating them.  
In reality, hell is not necessarily somewhere far away.  
The very place where we live our lives can become hell.

But the Lord God says, "I will make you one in My hand."  
At the same time, in parallel, He also says, "Make them one in your hand."  
That is to say, God desires that we become peacemakers.  
As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount:

**Matthew 5:9 (PowerPoint)**

**"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."**

These are the words of Jesus.  
They are the Word of God.

The most essential characteristic of the Kingdom of God is shalom—peace.  
God is the One who gives us peace.  
The very first words spoken by Jesus after His resurrection when He appeared to His disciples were, "Peace be with you."  
The Apostle Paul, to whom Jesus spoke saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" repented of the fact that he himself had been a destroyer of peace. He then taught that "those who believe in Jesus Christ are ambassadors of reconciliation in place of Christ, people who have been given the ministry of peace by God" (2 Corinthians 5:18–20).  
He also taught, "So far as it depends on you, be at peace with all people" (Romans 12:18).

Therefore, those who are peacemakers in the Lord Jesus will be called children of God.  
By this, people will recognize them as disciples of Jesus.

However, in this world, there may be more people who create discord than those who create peace.  
People who cause conflict, stir up strife, tear relationships apart, plot wars, and make others fight.  
People who intentionally bring about hatred, jealousy, quarreling, and discord—how many such people there are.  
If peacemakers are children of God, then are those who produce discord not becoming children of Satan?

What we must seriously consider here is this: It may be said that when a world that does not believe in God, when people who do not believe in God act in such ways, it may be unavoidable. Because they are not children of God, because they do not believe in the true God, they become children of Satan and are used to divide people and create discord. But if those who claim to believe in God and in Jesus—if we ourselves—are being used in such ways, then how can we say, “I am one who believes in God, in Jesus”?

In order to live for peace, to create peace, to be peacemakers, we must take great care not to become creators of discord. Above all, we must pray, be corrected by the Word of God, be shown that we ourselves are the most deeply rooted sinners of all, and when this is shown to us, we must strive to acknowledge it honestly. For our very nature is not peace.

### **Part Five**

Peace is not something that comes about simply by us doing nothing.

Our nature is not peace, but discord.

Why is that?

Because of sin.

Then what is sin?

It is desire.

As it is written in James 1:15:

#### **James 1:15 (PowerPoint)**

**“Then desire, when it has conceived, gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is fully grown, brings forth death.”**

Because of this desire, we are constantly fighting.

When we hear the word “desire,” we may immediately think of greed for sudden wealth, sexual desire, or appetite. But there are also the desire for honor, the desire not to be looked down upon, the desire to look down on others, the desire to think oneself superior, the desire not to notice one’s inferiority, the desire to remain in a sense of superiority, the desire to be recognized, the desire to have things easy, the desire to boast in victory, the desire to feel good, the desire to temporarily fill the empty space in one’s heart, the desire to assert one’s own correctness and correct others’ mistakes, the desire to escape reality—indeed, all kinds of desires exist.

And because of these desires, we fight, battle, quarrel, and struggle, turning others into enemies.

### **James 4:1–4 (PowerPoint)**

It teaches us that by becoming friends with the world that says, “What is mine is mine. I will destroy you so that I may live, oppose you thoroughly to prove my righteousness, and if possible, have you fall, trample on you, and use you as a stepping stone to demonstrate my own correctness and rise above,” we ultimately make not only others but ourselves enemies of God.

So then, what should we do?

Ephesians 4:3—this is a precious word.

### **Ephesians 4:3 (PowerPoint)**

Peace is Christ Himself, and the Spirit is, as Jesus said in the Gospel of John, the very Word of God—the Word of Jesus Himself.

The Word of Scripture itself is the Spirit of God.

From the very first day of the New Year, we have gathered here to hear God’s Word, think on God’s Word, be nourished by God’s Word, be taught by God’s Word, and to live this entire year in God’s Word.

The Word of God itself is the Spirit of God, and the work of the Holy Spirit cannot exist apart from the Word of Scripture.

Above our own thoughts—God’s Word. Above our own fixations—God’s Word. Above our own sense of righteousness—God’s Word. Above our own history and experience—God’s Word. Above the teachings and words of admirable people—God’s Word. Those who listen to that Word, who are broken and humbled by it, and who continue to believe in Jesus Christ—what God expects of such people, the most important thing they must strive for, is to create peace.

It will be a narrow and difficult path, requiring humility, self-denial first, and the attitude of Jesus, who regarded others as more important than Himself.

But if this is the will of God, we cannot abandon it.

### **Conclusion**

Is the church always peaceful?

I do not think so.

Because sinners are living together there.

Conflict, disputes, entanglements, quarrels, troubles, and hatred exist even within the church.

But at such times, rather than being used by Satan as people who cause discord, promote conflict, and further entangle matters, we are called to live as peacemakers. We are called to choose a way of life that corresponds to the words of Ezekiel, “Join them together into one stick, so that they may become one in your hand,” to choose such a way of life, to live like Ezekiel. And if we could live that way, how blessed and happy it would be.

In the home, in the workplace, in places of learning, in whatever place we are set, may God’s peace be brought about through us. May conflict cease, hatred, jealousy, and quarreling stop, wars end, and people be bound together by the bond of peace and made one—north and south, east and west becoming one in your hand, Judah and Israel becoming one while loving one another.

May we live such lives—building a human community like a living picture of heaven, like the early church, where cracked, torn, and scattered people gathered together in one place with one heart, devoting themselves to being one, sharing meals with joy and sincerity of heart. We desire that this year be a year in which we live and pray before the Lord who says, “I will make them one in My hand.”

As we continue to sing the theme song throughout this year, may we be people of peace who examine its content before the Lord.

Let us pray.

Benediction: Ezekiel 37:19 (“Behold...”)