

# THE PASTORS' PEN

articles from the elders of BBC

The last three articles in the ancient Christmas series have focused on Isaiah's prophecy. Around the same time that Isaiah ministered to Judah, a lesser-known prophet ministered in the small Jewish town of Moresheth, some 35km south of Jerusalem. Though less famous than his counterpart, Micah's ministry was sufficiently influential that it bore fruit in Hezekiah's life and was still remembered six hundred years later (Jeremiah 26:18–19).

Micah's message was basically one of divine judgement for Judah and Israel's sin, coupled with a divine offer of forgiveness for repentance. He directly addressed specific sins committed by God's people—covetousness, theft, corruption, etc.—and called them to follow the Lord in holiness. But even as he decried the people's sin, he spoke of a coming shepherd-king who would deliver God's people from oppression.

The historical context, as with much of Isaiah, was military threat from Assyria. The Assyrians, once Judah's allies, had turned against them and were threatening to conquer Jerusalem. In chapter 5, Micah tells the people to prepare for the Assyrian siege. But he also promises that a deliverer will be born. Until then, the people will be given to their enemies, but the ruler will come to shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, extending his influence to the ends of the earth, standing as his people's peace.

Whenever God's people in the Old Testament faced the threat of judgement, false prophets—unauthorised by God—rose to promise divine deliverance. Micah was no false prophet. As uncomfortable as the truth of an impending siege was, he proclaimed God's truth.

As with the previous prophecies of Christmas, the promise here is set against the backdrop of a particular problem. That problem, as noted above, was the invading might of Assyria. The

Israelites must muster troops in anticipation of an Assyrian siege (v. 1). Assyria would overpower God's people, who would, for a time, be given to its enemies. It is not a happy scene, but it is also not a hopeless scene, because a ruler from Bethlehem is promised as a deliverer (v. 2).

David, of course, was from Bethlehem—an extremely unlikely place for a king to come from. But Micah here prophesies that another king—the ultimate king, God's Messiah—would also come from Bethlehem. This prophecy was universally understood by those familiar with the Jewish Scriptures to be a prophecy of Messiah. When Jesus was born, the

unbelieving, hostile Jewish authorities knew that Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1–6). Years later, Jesus' opponents wrote off the idea that he could be Messiah because they thought he was from Galilee, while they knew that Messiah would come from Bethlehem (John 7:40–43).

This ruler, promised “from of old, from ancient days” (v. 2), would be Israel's ultimate deliverer. Until he was born, Israel would experience consistent oppression—beginning with Assyria, and continuing with foreign nation after foreign nation: Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, etc. Israel would perpetually find itself given to enemies—until the promised ruler was born (v. 3).

The Bethlehemite ruler would be a good shepherd, divinely empowered to lead God's



“An Ancient Christmas: The Ruler”  
(Stuart Chase)

people faithfully. In fact, he would lead both Israel and the Gentiles in this way: He would “be great to the ends of the earth” (v. 4). He would stand as a shepherd for anyone who trusted in him. And not only would he rule and shepherd his people, but he would “be their peace” (v. 5). God’s people, so burdened by turmoil and oppression, would experience peace through the wise, empowered shepherding of the promised ruler.

The concept of peace has already appeared in ancient Christmas prophecies. It is a weighty theme in Old Testament messianic prophecies and a significant theme in the New Testament.

In the English language, peace is typically understood to be the cessation of hostility. It is used to describe a state or period in which war has ended. But the Jewish understanding of peace was far richer than that.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word usually translated peace *shalom*. Wiersbe notes that “the word carries the ideas of health, prosperity, safety, completeness, harmony, and fulfilment. It speaks of a full and satisfying life.” Zechariah knew that Messiah was given to guide God’s people into peace (Luke 1:79), and the angels declared peace on earth at the arrival of Messiah (Luke 2:14). But note that the peace Messiah would bring was not—at least as the angels promised—universal peace, but “peace among those with whom he is pleased” (Luke 2:14).

When American Poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow lost a son in the Civil War, he wrote a poem titled Christmas bells, which reads, in part,

I heart the bells on Christmas Day  
their old familiar carols play;  
and wild and sweet  
the words repeat  
of peace on earth, good will to men.

And in despair I bowed my head;  
“There is no peace on earth,” I said;  
“For hate is strong,  
and mocks the song  
of peace on earth, good will to men.”

From an analytical standpoint, Wadsworth was right. Peace—the cessation of war—has not exactly been a hallmark of human experience since the first Christmas. But that is because humans tend to pursue their own selfish ends (see James 4:1). War is, at root, a heart problem.

But Jesus came to give peace to those with whom God is pleased. He did so at the cross. By his death, he reconciled those for whom he died to God (2 Corinthians 5:18–19). Those who are the recipients of this reconciliation—who have been justified through faith—have peace with God through Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1).

We can experience peace if we keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–25). If we, with thanksgiving, make our requests known to God, his peace will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:6–7). Peace is promised to those who trust in God (Isaiah 26:3).

As tumultuous a time as Henry Longfellow experienced at the loss of his son, and as honest as he was in expressing that in his poem, he knew that God’s promised peace went deeper than the cessation of hostility. As he mourned the death of his son, he remained optimistic about the peace of Christmas. He closed his poem with these words, which get to the heart of the Christmas message:

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:  
“God is not dead, nor doth he sleep!  
The wrong shall fail,  
the right prevail,  
with peace on earth, good will to men.”