

Peace from Bethlehem
Andrew Kneeland, December 19, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

What's the best news you've ever gotten?

You've probably gotten a lot of good news. A call telling you you're going to be a grandparent? That's good news. A promotion or a raise at work? That's good news. A spouse or relative getting a clean bill of health from the doctor? That's definitely good news.

But sometimes the situation we're in can make good news even better. Have you noticed that? Finally holding a job and buying a house after years of being homeless? A positive pregnancy test, after years of trying? That's good news, but it's even better because of the struggle that came before.

Christmas is a time for good news. It's good news that Jesus was born and it's good news that he defeated sin, death, and the devil for us. We know Christmas is good news, but sometimes we don't realize how *desperately* we needed this good news.

Father God, bless our time in your Word this morning. Teach us your truth and refresh us with your Gospel. In your name we pray, amen.

The book of Micah was written hundreds of years before Jesus was born. Micah is telling the people of Israel a story about good news. A prophecy of what would soon happen. Imagine this morning that YOU are hearing this prophecy from Micah. Put yourself in their position.

He says in verse 1: "A siege is laid against us!" Can you imagine this? The enemy troops are closing in. These enemies have come from a far-off land to attack and defeat you. You've never seen them before but you know all about them. They are Babylonian. They have a reputation for being the most cruel and ruthless people in the world. They've destroyed everyone in their path. And they don't just defeat their enemies, they annihilate them. They humiliate them. They do unspeakably evil and violent things to their conquered foes.

You know about this enemy. You know what the Babylonians are capable of, and you're terrified of them. And now they're coming here, to attack your city and kill

your family. A siege is laid against us.

Micah says they will “strike the judge of Israel on the cheek with a rod.” This isn’t going to just be a siege, it will be an invasion. The city walls won’t be enough to keep the enemy out; they’ll march right in and get so close to you, your family, and your king that they’ll be able to reach out and touch you.

And if you’re an Israelite, hearing this terrible news from the prophet Micah, your eyes would have gotten huge when Micah said the word “rod.” This was an important word to you.

God has been with your people for thousands of years. A lot has happened in the history of your people, the Jews. A lot of bad things and a lot of good things. But through it all, God has whispered promises to you. Promises to never leave you, promises to protect you, promises to guide you.

And one of these promises that has been in the back of your mind ever since you were a child was from the patriarch Jacob. He said: “The rod shall not depart from Judah or his descendants until Peace comes.” A rod was a ruler’s staff, this promise meant that Judah will be in control and will be a ruler until the promised Messiah comes to take over.

Judah will always have the ruler’s rod, and will be in control until the Messiah comes to bring peace. But what did Micah say? The *Babylonians* will be holding the rod.

Can you imagine the gut-punch this must have been to the Israelites? A ferocious and terrifying enemy was coming, and they would brutally defeat everyone. And they would defeat you with the same ruler’s rod that God had promised would always be yours.

All of that *bad news* is packed into verse one. In just one sentence Micah has given us some of the worst news we could imagine. But now comes verse two. It seems like Micah is giving us a solution to the invading Babylonians!

It’s a solution to our unsolvable problem, but it’s not a solution that makes a whole lot of sense. The enemy is encircling our city and is about to breach our gates and kill our king and spoil God’s promise. But Micah says an unlikely

champion will come from an unlikely place and save us.

Verse 2: "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days."

A hero will come from the town of Bethlehem. Now, you didn't know much about Bethlehem. You knew that it was a small village just outside the mighty walls of Jerusalem, but it was an afterthought. It had never been a very important town.

When Joshua and the Israelites first entered the Promised Land and divided up the land to the twelve tribes of Jacob, the people of Judah were given a huge portion of the land. Over one hundred cities are listed in Joshua 15, showing just how big this share of land was. They were given Bethlehem, too... but it wasn't big enough to be included on this list of 100 cities. To many people, it was an afterthought village. If you were waiting on a hero to come from *Bethlehem*, you'd be waiting a long time.

But Bethlehem wasn't an afterthought village to God. It was an important town. Bethlehem was where Benjamin was born, the promised son of Jacob. It was where Ruth had gleaned wheat in Boaz's field, and where Ruth's great-grandson was born: whose name was King David.

Bethlehem was King David's city. It might have seemed insignificant, but Micah said Bethlehem was going to play a big part in saving you from this terrible enemy, who were drawing nearer and nearer to your city gates every day.

But wait a second. Imagine you're listening to this terrible news about the invading enemy and you hear this second line. You might think, "Okay, a champion will come from the city of Bethlehem, and he will be our ruler." But what did Micah just say would happen to the ruler of Israel?

The murderous attackers would take away his ruling rod and strike him on the cheek! How can this ruler from Bethlehem be our hero if he dies? How can he save us from the Babylonians if he is killed by the Babylonians? How can this be good news?

But then Micah starts verse 3: "Therefore he shall give them up until the time

when she who is in labor has given birth.”

This ruler who is coming from Bethlehem will let the enemy invade your city. He will let them destroy your home and take you and your family as slaves. He will “give you up.” What kind of a leader would do that? Is there any hope at all for you or your family?

But the night is darkest right before the dawn. Just when all hope seems to be lost, when the situation is dire and impossible... **this** is when our God makes things better. This is when God brings good news. This is Christmas.

Look back at verse 3. UNTIL. This is one of the best, most hopeful and encouraging words in the Bible. UNTIL. Micah tells us this story about the invading Babylonians, telling us what they’re going to do and how helpless we are to stop it, and how devastating and destructive their conquest will be. All this will happen, and it will be terrible, painful, discouraging, and exhausting. We will be helpless and hopeless. UNTIL.

Until she who is in labor has given birth. Until the baby has been born in Bethlehem. The unlikely hero from an unlikely place will give his people an unexpected victory just when all hope seems lost.

As soon as that miraculous birth takes place, Micah tells us what will change. The children of Israel will return from their captivity back to the land God had given them. They will return from slavery and captivity and be restored to their Promised Land. And this God-who-became-man will “stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord.”

And listen to this again: “And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth.”

They shall dwell secure. They will be restored! That was good news! The people of Israel couldn’t trust their city walls to withstand the Babylonian siege. They couldn’t trust any other ruler to lead them to safety and prosperity. But, at just the right time, the child from Bethlehem would restore them.

The situation we’re in can make good news even sweeter, can’t it? With the cruel Babylonian army threatening their city, it would have been so sweet to hear this good news about a coming child who will be their perfect king and give them

perfect peace. Even though the road ahead would be painful, God would save you.

But here's the key: Micah wasn't just talking about the Babylonian invasion. This child from Bethlehem did not come to *only* save the people of Israel. Micah's prophetic story about invasion and restoration is also about *us*.

Earlier I told you to *imagine* you were hearing this message from Micah and to put yourself in their shoes. But this short prophecy is also for YOU. For US.

The enemy is also threatening *our* homes and *our* lives. Not the Babylonians, but an opponent more cruel, more ferocious, more terrible, and more deadly. Satan and his forces of sin and evil are marching against us and they've already invaded our lives. He is among us, destroying lives and marriages and families. No earthly ruler can keep us safe from the devil.

We have promises, too. God's promised to keep US safe, he's promised to give us REST, he's promised to SATISFY us.

And just as the Babylonians used the ruler's rod to kill Jerusalem's ruler, the devil uses the promises to us to destroy us! HE promises to fulfill our needs, HE promises to give us rest, HE promises to SATISFY us. Do you recognize his lies? Do you know what he's doing? Just like Micah warned the Israelites, Satan is using the things we KNOW we need... the things we KNOW we've been promised... to destroy us. To strike our ruler on his cheek.

OUR sin is what led to the death of OUR king. How can OUR king be a hero if he dies? For us, too... the situation is helpless and hopeless.

But the night is darkest right before the dawn. THIS is when our God makes things better. This is when God brings good news. This is Christmas.

The good news of Christmas is that the baby HAS been born! Our King Jesus WAS born in Bethlehem, just like Micah said. We don't have to wait for his coming, he has come! And look at what changed when he came:

Verse 3: "The rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel." Micah used this phrase a lot throughout his small book of prophecy. He initially meant that the Israelites would return from exile in Babylon and be restored to their rightful land.

But he also was looking ahead to when Gentiles would join God's Church. When you and I would be considered "children of Abraham," just like the believing Jews. When we were grafted into God's family tree and adopted into his family.

The God-man Jesus is not just the king of the Jews. He's the king of the universe; the savior of anyone who calls his name.

And this Bethlehem-born baby "stands and shepherds his flock"—us!—in the strength of the Lord and in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. We can DWELL SECURE because our hero, even though he came from an unlikely place and won his victory in an unlikely way, is great throughout the entire earth.

And then look at those last few words of our reading today. In Hebrew it's just three words: **וְהָיָה זֶה לְשָׁלוֹם**. It means: "He will be their peace."

The good news of Christmas is that Jesus was born to be our peace.

Do you remember what the angels sang to the shepherds in Bethlehem the night Jesus was born? "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will among those with whom he is well-pleased."

Jesus brings us peace. Peace with God and peace with our enemies. The good news of Christmas is that the promised baby was born in Bethlehem, and he has permanently and ultimately defeated our enemies. When we needed him most, he brought us PEACE.

Amen.