

Peace on Earth?

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Preacher: Ian Naismith

[0 : 00] Bowie turned up at the taping of Bing Cosby's last ever Christmas special and was told Bing wants to do a duet on Little Drummer Boy. And David Bowie says, I absolutely hate that song. Can't we sing something else? And so the producer of the show went away. They took an hour and they wrote the little sub-song that's in it, Peace on Earth. And that really is what sets it apart, isn't it, from the normal run-of-the-mill traditional Christmas fare.

You might have had some difficulty hearing some of the words for the rum-pum-pum-pums. And so I'll put them up on the screen there just so we get a flavour of what it was that Bowie was singing about. He's taking the words of the shepherds from Luke chapter 2.

I'm thinking about it and thinking, well, is this realistic? The angel sang about peace on earth. Is that something in our day we can see?

And they were hoping that perhaps it would be. As throughout much of the 20th century, people thought, if only we can get the technology right and get people talking together, we can have peace on earth.

[1 : 07] Well, it hasn't really happened, hasn't it? Has it? This year, wars have claimed around 50,000 lives in Syria, 35,000 in Afghanistan, 20,000 in Iraq, 11,000 in Central Africa, Nigeria and so on with POCO Haram, 6,000 in Yemen, 6,000 in Mexico from drug wars, 4,500 in Ukraine, and I could go on and on.

And every single one of these statistics was a son or daughter, a husband or wife, a father or mother. Peace on earth, as we look around, is something that we really haven't seen in our time. Guys pressed the wrong button there, apologies to the guys at the back. So what did the angels get it wrong when they sang about peace on earth?

Well, let's look at what they actually sang. You remember the context, which was that the shepherds were out in the field looking after their flocks, and the angel, single angel to begin with, appeared to them and said, with the glory of God shining round about, and said, don't be afraid, for unto you is born today in the city of David a Saviour who is Christ the Lord.

And then the great multitude of the angels appear in the skies, and this is what they sang, glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.

[2 : 34] So they didn't actually say that there would be peace on earth in the sense of absence of war. Rather they said that what was given to us through Jesus was peace for those on whom God's favour rests.

We'll come back in a minute to think about what that means. But let me just for a second talk about something different in the angel's song. Because hidden away in it, there are two military themes. Now it's not very obvious if we think about angels, shepherds, songs about peace, how it is military. But there are two things of military significance. And the first is we think of the angels as a heavenly choir, but actually what it says is a multitude of the heavenly host.

And what that really means is it's a multitude of heaven's army. In the Old Testament, the traditional versions, many, many times it talks about God as the Lord of hosts.

If you read a more modern version, it may well say something like the Lord of heaven's armies. And the angels who appeared there, the heavenly host who appeared there, I'm sure they didn't have their sword face or anything like that, but it was a show of divine strength, of the great multitude that God had to call on as his messengers, as his people, and if necessary, as his army.

[4 : 04] It was heaven's army that was appearing in the sky. The second thing was down on earth. The shepherds would probably, if they heard the word peace on earth, might well have recognised and thought about something called the Pax Romana.

The Pax Romana was peace of Rome, and it was something that started by Caesar Augustus about 20 years before the Lord was born, and lasted for about 200 years, and it was the principle in which the Roman Empire was founded that they wanted to have peace within their boundaries. They weren't constantly going to look and aggressively extend the boundaries of their empire, it was already huge, but what they wanted to do was to ensure peace within the boundaries, not to have nations rising against them, and to have a civilisation where people felt that they could live peacefully, and that they were protected by Rome.

Now that worked to an extent, and there were no great wars most of the time, but of course there were pockets of resistance, there were pockets of resistance in Israel among other places, and they were put down with great brutality by the Romans.

So although there was the semblance of peace externally, actually it was a peace that came from fear, and from the knowledge that if you dared to disturb that peace, then really nasty things would happen to you.

[5 : 27] There was a Roman philosopher called Epicurus, and he said this, While the emperor may give peace from war on land and sea, he is unable to give peace from passion, grief, and envy.

He cannot give peace of heart, for which man yearns more than even for outward peace. So the Romans could have a semblance of peace, they could have an absence of war in their empire, but the regime that they had didn't bring real peace.

What the angels were saying to the shepherds is, we have something today to bring to you that will bring real peace to those who will receive it. Not just the absence of war, but that peace of heart that people are looking for, that peace that can see us through the hardest times in our lives.

It is the peace from God. Trust me, that I want to think about, as we think about what the shepherds were told. First thing is, the importance of having peace with God.

Now the angel said to the shepherds, that there will be peace for those on whom God's favour rests. Who are those on whom God's favour rests? They are those who are willing to receive him, and in particular who are willing to receive that baby who was born in Bethlehem, who went on to be the saviour of the world.

[6 : 57] So Paul writing to Christians in Rome could say, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. And Jesus came into the world, he was born, he lived a perfect life, he died our death on the cross, so that we could have peace with God.

So that what had been created by our rebellion against God, what we would call our sin, what had been done through that which had separated us from God, could be done away with, and through the death of the Lord Jesus taking our place, taking our sins, we could come to a position of peace with God.

And the second thing that was offered as Jesus came into the world was the peace of God. So you have peace with God, you have a relationship with God that is living and is active, and then you can experience in your life the peace that can only come from God.

These are the words of Jesus I put up on the screen from just before he died, he was in the upper room with his disciples, and he said this, peace I leave with you, my peace I give you, I don't give you peace as the world gives, do not let your heart be troubled, and do not be afraid.

And what Christ can offer us this Christmas is peace with God, the peace of knowing that our relationship with God has been restored as we have put our trust in the Lord Jesus.

[8 : 27] And he can offer us the peace of God, the peace that in whatever circumstances we find ourselves in life, we can know that God is with us and we can enjoy his presence.

Over the last year or so, there have been five ladies from our church fellowship here who have gone to be with the Lord through death. I was privileged to be with a couple of them in hospital in the last few days of their life to visit them there, and I was very struck by the peace that they had. They had absolute confidence that when they left this world, when the illnesses they had finally took them, that they would go to be with the Lord Jesus, and that would be for them much better. And they didn't look forward to death with fear and with wonder of what was going to lie beyond it. They looked forward to the fact that the sufferings of this life would be behind them. They would go to be with Jesus.

That's an example of the peace of God as peace we can also have in our everyday life. If we know Jesus, if our trust is in him, and if we're following him and depending on him.

[9 : 40] If you want to know more about this peace, we have a couple of books we'd be very happy if you took away. Many of you have got this one as you came in, if I remember to hand it to you. A

Very Different Christmas by Rico Tice.

Some of you may have got the red one through the doors, the gospel by Luke, and the full story of Jesus. If you haven't got them, please do take them when you leave this evening and read them.

I want to finish though by changing the words of Epictas and thinking what they mean for us if we know the Lord Jesus. Perhaps it could go something like this.

While Jesus doesn't promise peace from war on land and sea, he is able to give peace from passion, grief which man yearns more even than for outward peace.

May we know that peace and the joy that comes through the Lord Jesus this Christmas. Let's pray together. Our Father, we thank you for the peace that the Lord Jesus brings.

[10 : 44] We thank you it is much more important even than peace from war. It is the peace of knowing that we have a relationship with the living God. It is the peace of knowing that our future is eternally secure.

It is the peace that comes from having the presence of the Lord Jesus with us. We pray that each of us may know that peace this Christmas, that we may think something of what the Lord Jesus has done for us, and that we may make sure that our trust is in him.

And now may the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace as we trust him so that we may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.