

“O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM”

**I. Introduction**

- A. The fact that Matthew quotes this passage from Micah in his account of Jesus' birth makes this a familiar passage for most Christians, but we are less familiar with the context in which this prophecy was originally given.
1. Micah was a prophet to Judah, Israel's southern kingdom after the nation had been divided in two.
  2. Micah was a contemporary of the prophet Isaiah, carrying out his prophetic ministry in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.
  3. It was a time when Judah was enjoying a measure of material prosperity, but all was not well with the people of God.
  4. The wealthy were oppressing and exploiting the poor.
  5. The rich were setting up schemes to steal people's land and they were bribing judges to ensure that the poor had no way to obtain justice. (see 2:2; 3:1-2)
  6. Because of this, God sent Micah to warn Judah of the judgment that he was about to send upon her.
- B. Like most of the other Old Testament prophets, Micah's message alternates between pronouncements of woe and words of comfort.
1. The prophecy that we are considering tonight is obviously one that announces comfort.
  2. It is a prophecy of the birth of Christ in Bethlehem, an event that took place seven hundred years after Micah penned these words.

3. But even though this is a message of comfort, there are some unpleasant elements in it.
4. God's people are under siege.
5. They are disgraced before their enemies.
6. Their enemies even enter into their land and tread into their palaces
7. God offers the people of Judah hope, but he is also up front about the afflictions that will come upon them.
8. This leads Calvin to say that God speaks to us in this way so that we can "be always ready to endure temporal evils, and that our minds, sustained by hope, may, at the same time, depend on the Lord."

## II. Under Siege

- A. Our passage begins with a call for Judah to muster her troops because siege is laid against her.
  1. This is referring to a siege that took place in the year 701 B.C.
  2. Twenty-one years earlier, Israel's northern kingdom had been overthrown by the Assyrians.
  3. The Assyrian empire was known for its ruthless treatment of those whom it conquered.
  4. They had a systematic program for obliterating the national identity of those whom they defeated, a program that involved deportation to various locations and the resettlement of land with foreigners.
  5. For two decades, Judah lived in a state of uncertainty and fear, worrying that they might be next.

6. And sure enough, the Assyrian king Sennacherib eventually directed his army to Jerusalem.
- B. The situation did not look good for Judah in 701 B.C.
1. The Assyrians had conquered all of the cities around Jerusalem, even the city of Lachish, a fortress town that guarded one of the main roads into Jerusalem.
  2. Having taken the surrounding towns, the Assyrian army was now encamped around Jerusalem, preparing to lay siege to it.
  3. In the face of this terrifying situation, God commands his people not to lose hope but to exercise faith.
  4. This is the meaning of the phrase, “muster your troops.”
  5. God is calling his people to trust in him as their mighty fortress.
- C. In the second part of verse 1, Micah says that the Assyrians strike the judge of Israel on the cheek with a rod.
1. In the ancient world, striking someone on the cheek in public was a way of disgracing them.
  2. Micah is using this as a figurative way of saying that Judah was being made an object of public scorn by the Assyrians.
  3. We are told more about this in the account of this siege in 2 Chronicles 32.
  4. In that chapter, Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, sends messengers to say this to the people of Judah: “On what are you trusting, that you endure the siege in Jerusalem? Is not Hezekiah [Judah’s king] misleading you, that he may give you over to die by famine and by thirst, when he tells you, ‘The LORD our God will deliver us from the hand of the king of Assyria’? Has not this same Hezekiah taken away

his high places and his altars and commanded Judah and Jerusalem, 'Before one altar you shall worship, and on it you shall burn your sacrifices'? Do you not know what I and my fathers have done to all the peoples of other lands? Were the gods of the nations of those lands at all able to deliver their lands out of my hand? Who among all the gods of those nations that my fathers devoted to destruction was able to deliver his people from my hand, that your God should be able to deliver you from my hand? Now, therefore, do not let Hezekiah deceive you or mislead you in this fashion, and do not believe him, for no god of any nation or kingdom has been able to deliver his people from my hand or from the hand of my fathers. How much less will your God deliver you out of my hand!" (32:10-15)

5. Notice how the focus of this speech is upon the futility of trusting in the Lord for deliverance.
  6. Sennacherib is not just trying to get the people of Judah to surrender, he is trying to get them to apostatize.
  7. He is telling them that they are foolish to believe that the Lord is able to save them.
- D. It is important to remember that this disgrace came upon the people of Judah because they had turned away from the Lord.
1. This is made clear in Micah 3, where the prophet says, "Hear this, you heads of the house of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel, who detest justice and make crooked all that is straight, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with iniquity. Its heads give judgment for a bribe; its priests teach for a price; its prophets practice divination for money; yet they lean on the LORD and say, 'Is not the LORD in the midst of us? No disaster shall come upon us.' Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height." (vv. 9-12)

2. The fact that the Assyrians were setting siege to Jerusalem did not mean that Israel's God was too weak to protect his people.
3. On the contrary, it was the Lord who sent the Assyrians against Judah.
4. God did this to expose their corruption, to humble them, and to cause them to see their need for his grace and mercy.
5. The Lord continues to work this way in the lives of his people today.
6. He uses trials and troubles to humble us and to strengthen our faith.

### **III. A Promised Ruler**

- A. While the people of Judah were only receiving what they deserved, God did not leave them in their state of disgrace.
  1. In verse 2 he promises that a ruler will come forth from a little town in the district of Ephrathah, the town of Bethlehem.
  2. Bethlehem was not the kind of town that you would expect to produce a king.
  3. Nevertheless, it was the town in which David had been born.
  4. And not only was David from an insignificant town, he was also a shepherd, an occupation that was held in high regard.
  5. Even in his own family, David was not the one who seemed most likely to be of any importance.
  6. His brothers were more outwardly impressive than he was.

7. No one thought that David had a chance when he went up against Goliath, the Philistine giant who was mocking God's people.
  8. But it was through this lowly shepherd that the Lord worked a great deliverance for his people.
- B. In this prophecy, Micah is telling us that Jesus will also come from humble origins.
1. He too will be born in little Bethlehem.
  2. He will be born in a low condition, to poor parents in a building in which animals were housed.
  3. He will not have the outward appearance of a king.
  4. As Isaiah says in one of his messianic prophecies: "he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him." (53:2)
  5. The only crown that Jesus wore during his days on earth was a crown of thorns.
  6. And even now, we do not see Jesus in his kingly glory.
  7. Just as Sennacherib ridiculed the people of Judah for their faith, so also does the world scoff at us for believing that Jesus can deliver us from the many troubles that we face in this life.
  8. But regardless of how things appear, we believe Jesus when he tells us that he has been given all authority in heaven and on earth.
  9. We believe that because he is with us, nothing can ever be against us.

10. Even if we are surrounded by enemies and afflictions on every side, we know that the One who is with us is greater than the world and he has already overcome the world.
- C. Micah also tells us that the coming forth of this promised ruler is “from of old, from ancient days.”
1. The phrase “from of old” can either refer to eternity past or to the ancient past.
  2. It is possible that Micah is referring to Jesus’ pre-existence here, but it is more likely that he is speaking of the ancient days in Israel’s history.
  3. This is supported by the fact that the phrase “from ancient days” is always used in the Old Testament to refer to the days of the distant past.
  4. The point that Micah is making is that this king has an ancient lineage.
  5. He is the promised offspring of David.
  6. He is the One in whom all of the promises of God find their “Yes” and their “Amen.”

#### IV. Handed Over

- A. After setting forth such a wonderful promise, we might expect Micah to tell us more about the great deliverance that this ruler will bring about.
1. Micah has more to say about this later in the passage, but in verse 3 he says this: “Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is labor has given birth.”
  2. And in verse 5 he says that the deliverance will not come about until after “the Assyrian comes into our land and treads into our palaces.”

3. In other words, the people of God will be given into the hands of their enemies until the time when the promised ruler is born.
  4. Now, try to put yourself in the shoes of the people of Jerusalem in Micah's day when they heard this.
  5. What would you be thinking?
  6. You would want to know just how long it is going to be until this promised ruler comes along.
  7. Why do we have to wait?
  8. Why can't God save us before the Assyrian treads into our palaces?
  9. For how long will we be given over to our enemies?
  10. The point that we need to learn from this is that God had his purposes in making Israel wait, and he has his purposes in making us wait for our final deliverance too.
- B. Another thing to note about Micah's mention of the Assyrians treading in the palaces of Judah is that this never literally happened.
1. God saved Jerusalem from the Assyrian siege in 701 B.C.
  2. You can read about that great deliverance in 2 Chronicles 32 and Isaiah 37.
  3. It was the Babylonians who entered the land in 586 B.C., laid waste the temple, and carried many of the people into exile.
  4. This tells us that Assyria is being used symbolically here.
  5. Assyria represents all of the foes of God's people, similar to the way Babylon is used in the book of Revelation.



6. These nations represent all of the world powers that align themselves against Christ's church, whether in Micah's day or in our day.
- C. This helps us to see that this prophecy is a promise of deliverance from *our* enemies, from all of the forces in this world that seek to destroy our faith.
1. We can take great comfort in this promise, because we have some pretty fierce opposition.
  2. It often appears that the church is no match for the world.
  3. It sometimes seems like Satan is too powerful for us.
  4. But as Luther reminds us in his great hymn,
 

*And though this world, with devils filled,  
Should threaten to undo us,  
We will not fear, for God hath willed  
His truth to triumph through us:  
The Prince of Darkness grim,  
We tremble not for him;  
His rage we can endure,  
For lo, his doom is sure,  
One little word shall fell him.*
  5. That "little word" is the Word that became flesh, the Word that was born in little Bethlehem.
  6. As we sing in another hymn, the Voice from the manger calls to us saying,
 

*"Brethren, from all ills that grieve you,  
You are freed;  
All you need  
I will surely give you."*

- D. While God promised deliverance in this passage, the calamity that befell Judah in 586 B.C. was so great that it seemed to threaten the existence of God's people.
1. Yet Micah assures Judah that against all hope, a remnant will be preserved.
  2. When the promised ruler is born, "then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel."
  3. There have been many points in church history when things looked bleak for the covenant people, but God has always preserved a remnant.
  4. It was true in Micah's day, it was true in Jesus' day, and it remains true in every age.

## V. He Shall Shepherd His Flock

- A. As we come to verses 4 and 5, we finally see a description of the deliverance that this promised ruler will bring about.
1. In spite of all that is arrayed against his kingdom, this king will stand.
  2. He will shepherd his flock, and his shepherding will not be done by human might but by the strength of the Lord.
  3. Because he defends us, we dwell secure.
  4. He is our peace, not just on a horizontal level but also on a vertical level.
  5. Christ not only gives us peace from our enemies, he also gives us peace with God.
- B. In verse 5, Micah says that the advent of this ruler from Bethlehem will cause God's people to raise up seven shepherds and eight princes to conquer their enemies.

1. This is a reference to the leaders whom God's people will choose to serve in their midst: the church's ordained officers.
2. It is clear that the numbers seven and eight are being used figuratively here.
3. Seven is the number of perfection, and eight is one more than seven.
4. The point is that there will be a sufficient supply of these leaders.
5. It is also significant that there is a change in pronouns in verse 6.
6. It begins by saying "*they* shall shepherd the land of Assyria with the sword," but then it says, "*he* shall deliver us from the Assyrian."
7. This tells us how Jesus defends and cares for his sheep in this present age.
8. He works through the leaders that he raises up in his church.
9. This verse assures us that the church's officers are given sufficient power to deliver God's people from all of the things that threaten her.

## VI. Conclusion

- A. In speaking of the same salvation that Micah describes in this passage, Micah's contemporary Isaiah proclaimed, "In that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah: 'We have a strong city; he sets up salvation as walls and bulwarks... Trust in the LORD forever, for the LORD GOD is an everlasting rock. For he has humbled the inhabitants of the height, the lofty city. He lays it low, lays it low to the ground, casts it to the dust.'" (Isa. 26:1-5)
- B. We live in the day of salvation that these great prophets foretold.

- C. The ruler has been born in Bethlehem.
- D. He is gathering his remnant people to himself and keeping all of them secure.
- E. The proud and boastful city of the world keeps laying siege to the church, but in Christ we have a strong and invincible city.
- F. Our king is great to the ends of the earth.