

Promise Keeper

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah (Jeremiah 31:31 ESV)

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jeremiah 31:33 ESV)

But You, O Bethlehem

December 18th, 2022

Micah 5:1-5a

Rev. Levi denBok

Introduction:

Good morning! I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Micah 5.

With Christmas fast approaching, we are nearing the end of our advent series in which we have been identifying Old Testament promises that point forward to and find their fulfilment in Jesus. I say “promises” in the plural, but as we have seen, even though the promises are all separated by hundreds of years, they are actually following one consistent thread.

In Genesis 3:15, where the thread began, God promised that a champion would come who would strike the serpent’s head.

In Genesis 12:1-3, the thread was picked up as God promised Abraham that through his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

In 2 Samuel 7, 700 years after God’s promise to Abraham, the thread was again picked up as God promised David that the Messiah would reign on his throne forever.

With each reiteration of the promise, we learn something new about the child who is to come. Like a snowball rolling down a hill, the promise expands as it moves forward. This Sunday, as we draw near to the end of the thread, we will turn our attention to the prophet Micah, who lived

some 300 years after King David. Look with me now to Micah 5. We will be reading verses 1-5. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

Now muster your troops, O daughter of troops;
siege is laid against us;
with a rod they strike the judge of Israel
on the cheek.

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.

³ Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has given birth;
then the rest of his brothers shall return
to the people of Israel.

⁴ And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth.

⁵ And he shall be their peace. (Micah 5:1-5a ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Before we go any further, it would be helpful for us to consider what Israel was experiencing when this promise was spoken. It has been 300 years since God made His covenant with David, and the peace and prosperity that Israel enjoyed at that time are now long distant memories.

In Micah's day, the people of Israel lived under the foot of Assyria. The Assyrians emerged as the most powerful nation in the world, funded by the tributes of conquered lands and enforced by hordes of mercenaries. They employed terrorist tactics to dissuade any thoughts of revolt, and their expansion seemed all but unstoppable. The northern kingdom of Israel was decimated by Assyria, and the southern kingdom was on the verge of collapse.

This background helps us to understand verse 1. Look there again with me:

Now muster your troops, O daughter of troops;
siege is laid against us;

with a rod they strike the judge of Israel
on the cheek. (Micah 5:1 ESV)

Most bible scholars agree that the “siege” that Micah refers to in verse 1 is a reference to the Assyrian King Sennacherib’s siege of Jerusalem in 701 B.C.¹ In this passage, Micah is speaking to a people who are surrounded by a terrifying enemy. These people have spent the last twenty years listening to horror stories from the survivors from the northern kingdom who fled for their lives.

That’s our setting this morning. With a fierce enemy outside the gates, and defeat all but certain, God picks up the thread of promise once again and speaks to his people through the prophet Micah. Let’s turn our attention now to the developing promise.

The Developing Promise

Last Sunday, I introduced the analogy of a dart board to demonstrate how God is using these promises to narrow our focus as we look for the child of promise. The promise in Genesis 3:15 was like the outermost ring. There, we learned that the child that we are looking for will be born of a woman. In Genesis 12, our focus narrowed – the child that we are looking for will be a descendant of Abraham. Last Sunday, in 2 Samuel 7, we found the bullseye – the child we are looking for will be an heir to David’s throne.

Well, in our passage this morning, the prophet Micah – writing about 300 years after God made His promise to David – brings us just about to the centre of the “bullseye”. In this passage, God fleshes out some of the where, the when, and the how of this coming Messiah. First, He tells us:

1. The Messiah will come from Bethlehem

We see this in 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

¹ Bruce K. Waltke, Thomas Edward McComiskey ed. *The Minor Prophets - Volume Two – A Commentary on Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1993), 701.

one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old,
from ancient days. (Micah 5:2 ESV)

The title “Ephrathah” is the name of the district in which Bethlehem was located. There was more than one “Bethlehem” in Israel, so God left no room for error. The child will come from Bethlehem Ephrathah.

Thanks to the Christmas story, everyone in this room has likely heard of Bethlehem, but it’s worth noting that, before this promise, this little town was an afterthought. It was so small and insignificant, in fact, that in Joshua 15, when the towns and cities of Judah were listed, Bethlehem didn’t even make the cut!

Here’s a question: Why wouldn’t the promised king come from Jerusalem – the most famous and powerful city in Israel; the city that was home to the temple, and the throne, where pilgrims migrated, and where dignitaries visited? Jerusalem was a city that was fit for the Messiah!

But the Messiah would not come from Jerusalem. He would come from Bethlehem. Why is that?

The answer becomes clear if we turn back a few pages in our Bibles. As it turns out, this little town made an appearance at a significant moment in Israel’s history. In 1 Samuel 16, we read:

The Lord said to Samuel, “How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and go. I will send you to Jesse **the Bethlehemite**, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.” (1 Samuel 16:1 ESV)

In Bethlehem, Samuel met Jesse’s son – David – and the Lord set him apart as king.

So, why Bethlehem? Because Bethlehem is the place where the Davidic line began, and the Davidic line has fallen so far and has become so saturated by sin that God is hitting the “reset” button. God is going to put a stop to the spiralling descent, and He is going to start again at the place where it all began. God spoke through the prophet Isaiah and said essentially the same thing:

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. (Isaiah 11:1 ESV)

God is chopping the diseased tree down and starting again. Therefore, as we wait in anticipation for the arrival of the promised king, our eyes should be fixed on this little town in Ephrathah.

The Messiah will come from Bethlehem – just like David did.

Before we move on, I want to make note of a developing pattern: God DELIGHTS to reveal His power in and through the weak things of the world.

We have witnessed this week after week. Abraham was a nobody. Sarah was barren. David was a lowly shepherd boy. And, following the pattern, as one commentator observes:

The focal point in redemptive history is none other than the insignificant town of Bethlehem, showing that Israel's future greatness does not depend on a great human king but on divine intervention to bring greatness out of nothing.²

I pray that we would learn this lesson. I pray that I would learn this lesson! We spend so much time trying to impress each other – trying to look like something that we are not – fixated on all of the qualities that the world values and measuring ourselves by impossible standards. We spend so much time chasing a version of “greatness” that was invented by the world. But LOOK! Do you want to be used by the Lord? Who does God use?

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong (1 Corinthians 1:27 ESV)

we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. (2 Corinthians 4:7 ESV)

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:9b-10 ESV)

² Bruce K. Waltke, Thomas Edward McComiskey ed. *The Minor Prophets - Volume Two – A Commentary on Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1993), 704.

If I'm reading this right, then the areas where you are most inclined to boast – most inclined to think highly of yourself – are actually the areas that are most likely to *hinder your usefulness*. It is your WEAKNESS that makes you a powerful weapon in the hands of God! The weaknesses that you try to hide are the cracks through which God's glory will shine brightest! That's the pattern!

From the insignificant, obscure, all-but-forgotten, little town of Bethlehem, the Saviour of the world will come. That's the first thing that we learn in this developing promise. Second, this promise teaches us that:

2. The Messiah will come after a season of scattering and defeat

We see this in verse 3. Look there with me:

Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has given birth;
then the rest of his brothers shall return
to the people of Israel. (Micah 5:3 ESV)

The "he" in this passage is God, and the "them" is His people. God will give His people up – meaning – for a season, He will allow them to suffer the painful consequences of their rebellion.

At the time that this promise was made, the Israelites had spent nearly twenty years watching with horror as the northern Kingdom was destroyed. The tribes of Asher, Dan, Ephraim, Gad, Issachar, Manasseh, Naphtali, Reuben, Simeon and Zebulun – the descendants of Abraham and fellow heirs of the promise – had been WIPED OFF OF THE MAP. The few survivors had scattered – some to Jerusalem, but others to faraway lands never to return. What remained became a tributary to Assyria and was renamed Samaria.

And now, even Jerusalem – the great capital of Judah and home to the temple of God – is surrounded by the Assyrians.

The people who first heard this promise were standing on the brink of annihilation. And this was a painful, yet hope-filled promise. Israel shall be given up – *but only for a time*. The discipline will

be firm, but it won't be forever. God would not ultimately allow David's line to collapse entirely because He had promised:

I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, **I will discipline him** with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, ¹⁵ **but my steadfast love will not depart from him**, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. (2 Samuel 7:14-15 ESV)

Discipline hurts, but discipline also heals. And even though it may feel like it at the time, discipline is not rejection. God promised that His steadfast love would not depart from his people and He is promise keeper! As one commentator notes:

Israel's humiliation is remedial not penal, temporary not permanent, because God's covenant with it is eternal (7:20).³

God loves His children. Therefore, God disciplines His children. Do you believe that? The author to the Hebrews asks us:

And **have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?**

“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reproved by him.

⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and **chastises every son whom he receives.**” (Hebrews 12:5-6 ESV)

That word “chastise” carries the meaning, “to beat with a whip or lash.”⁴ That’s what God does with EVERY SON AND DAUGHTER whom He receives. That’s what God’s word says, and if you choose not to believe that, then the trials and tribulations that you face in your life are going to send you spiralling into uncertainty and disbelief.

Listen: Your heavenly Father – the promise keeping God that we worship – is a God who has demonstrated time and time again in Scripture that He will not sit idly by while His children descend into ruin. You might be that kind of Dad, but He is not. He loves too perfectly.

³ Bruce K. Waltke, Thomas Edward McComiskey ed. *The Minor Prophets - Volume Two – A Commentary on Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1993), 702.

⁴ μαστιγῶω

BDAG, s.v. “μαστιγῶω,” 620.

He has the hard talk. He delivers the hard discipline. He uses the time out. He delivers the painful spanking. And He does it all with perfect, wise, unwavering love and faithfulness.

Therefore, according to the Apostle Paul, if you have put your trust in Jesus – if you are a child of God – then you have never endured a difficulty that wasn't ultimately FOR YOUR GOOD. I can say that without hesitation because God promises us:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28 ESV)

ALL THINGS! HARD THINGS! Assyrian invasions! Barren wives! Exile and captivity!
Hundreds of years of longing! ALL THINGS!

The job loss. The opportunity that fell through. The rejection. All things.

The cancer. The dementia. Death. All things.

For those who love God and are called according to His purpose.

For your good.

He uses the seasons of darkness to tune our ear to hear His voice – to teach us lessons that we couldn't learn in our prosperity – to loosen our grip on the fleeting things of the world so that we can be equipped to lay a hold of the eternal glory that waits for us. O that we could say alongside the great preacher Charles Spurgeon who suffered terribly from depression and gout:

I have learned to kiss the wave that throws me against the Rock of Ages.⁵

Have you learned to kiss the wave? The wave serves a purpose. The wave was sent by Your Father. And, as we see in this promise, the waves will eventually cease. Eventually, “she who is in

⁵ Charles Spurgeon as quoted by Gloria Furman, *Kissing the Wave* (Desiring God, posted September 10, 2013), <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/kissing-the-wave>. Accessed Dec. 13, 2022.

labour” will give birth. The child of promise will come! And, like a shepherd who reclaims his wayward sheep, he will bring home those who were scattered. That leads us to the third and final lesson we learn in this developing promise:

3. The Messiah will shepherd his people into peace

We see this in verses four and five. Look there with me:

And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they shall dwell secure,
for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth.
And he shall be their peace. (Micah 5:4-5a ESV)

This shepherding imagery becomes a critical component of Israel’s expectations. Some 200 years later, God used this same metaphor when He spoke to His people through the prophet Ezekiel:

And I will set up over them **one shepherd**, my servant David, and he shall feed them: **he shall feed them and be their shepherd.** (Ezekiel 34:23 ESV)

Over the years, the Israelites had experienced horrific leadership. In chapter 3, Micah used the shocking language of cannibalism to describe the leaders of his day – they put their own needs before the needs of the flock. There was no shortage of bad shepherds in Israel’s sad history, and there is no shortage of bad shepherds in our story either.

But God promised Israel that the Messiah would come, and he would be to them a good shepherd. This language is meant to direct our attention back – once again – to David. God is comforting His people with the promise that the coming Messiah will be like David *only GREATER!*

Like David, he will come from Bethlehem.

Like David, he will be used by the Lord to bring together a scattered and divided people.

Like David, he will shepherd his people into peace.

But, unlike David, the coming Messiah will reign PERFECTLY.

That's our text for this morning. The circumstances are bleak – the dangers are real – the future appears uncertain – yet, even still, the promise of God stands. The child of promise will come. From Bethlehem, a shepherd king will arise to regather those who have strayed. The champion – the blessing for the nations – the eternal king is coming!

God made this promise to Israel at the time of the Assyrian blockade – 701 B.C.⁶

Guess how long they had to wait for the fulfilment of this promise? I'll give you a hint: B.C.

701 years of waiting! And remember, this promise was made some 300 years after God's promise to David. And God's promise to David was made some 730 years after His promise to Abraham! I hope that, as we follow this thread of promise, we – who are a notoriously *impatient* people – will learn the lesson that God is *playing the long game*. As Mark Dever explains:

the present is a time of *waiting*. This is the natural posture of the Christian: a riveted, expectant, looking to God while anticipating that he will fulfil all of his promises.⁷

Wait. And watch. Your God is a Promise Keeper. As we conclude this morning, I want to invite you to flip ahead in your Bibles to Luke 2.

The Promise Fulfilled

Look with me at Luke 2, verse 8:

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them (Luke 2:8-9a ESV)

Let's pause here. In light of the promise that we have been considering, why do you think that God chose to make this announcement to a group of lowly shepherds? He could have made his announcement to the religious leaders. He could have sent a visitation to the Pharisees, or the

⁶ See Bruce Waltke et al. eds., *New Bible Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 828.

⁷ Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church 4th edition* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 86.

Sadducees, or the Sanhedrin, or powerful members of the upper class. Yet, He sent his angelic messengers to a band of lower-class shepherds. Was it a coincidence?

Or was God once again emphasizing the fact that He DELIGHTS to display His glory through the lowly and despised things of the world, and to reveal Himself to and through the least of these?

Was it a coincidence? Or was God emphasizing that the Good Shepherd who would gather the lost sheep of Israel was coming into the world – and who better to witness and verify his arrival than a band of shepherds?

I love the way that our God works. There is no story in the world like His story! Let's jump back in:

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "**Let us go over to Bethlehem** and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." (Luke 2:8-15 ESV)

With that, the shepherds made their famous trek to a little, insignificant town called Bethlehem. There – 701 years after God spoke His promise through Micah – they found the promised Messiah – and they found him in a manger. The Shepherd King – the seed of Abraham – the promised champion who would once and for all reverse the curse – has come! He came to bring peace, but for whom? Look again at verse 14:

"Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth **peace among those with whom he is pleased!**"

Jesus did not come to bring indiscriminate peace to the world. No, he came to bring peace to the people of God – the people with whom God is *pleased*. And that begs the question: With whom is God pleased? In Isaiah 66, God declares:

But this is the one to whom I will look:
he who is humble and contrite in spirit
and trembles at my word. (Isaiah 66:2b ESV)

Is that you?

If all that you have after this series is a collection of interesting notes and highlights in your Bible, then I would suggest to you that you have missed it! We are not following this thread of promise so as to say, “Wow, those Israelites were so impatient” or, “Wow, those kings were a hot mess” or even, “Wow, it’s interesting how the Bible fits together!” All of that is true, of course, but we want MORE! We want to come away CHANGED! God is pleased with the people who come before His word with reverence and humility and TREMBLING! As one old preacher once said:

It is a small thing how you mark your Bible, but it is of all importance that it mark *you*.⁸

So, what have we learned as we have worked our way through God’s book?

God’s word has taught us that we are sinners who need a saviour. We are under a curse, and we need to be blessed. We are rebels who need a king. We are sheep who need a shepherd. And now, through the promised Son, God is offering peace to those with whom He is pleased. Do you want to please Him this morning? Then, in humility, agree with His assessment of you and lay hold in faith to the solution that He has provided. That is how you become a person “with whom He is pleased.”

Have you done that?

If you haven’t, I want to invite you to pray this prayer with me.

⁸ H. A. Ironside, *Notes on the Minor Prophets*, (New York, NY: Bible Truth Depot, 1928), 241.