

## Salvation Through a Small-Town Messiah, Micah 5:1-5a

Caleb Nelson | Harvest Reformed Presbyterian Church | December 18, 2016

**5** Now gather yourself in troops, O daughter of troops: they have laid siege against us. With a rod they will strike the judge of Israel on the cheek. **2** But you, Bethlehem Ephratah, little to be among the thousands of Judah, from you for me will come forth one to be a ruler in Israel. And His goings forth are from of old, from the days of eternity. **3** Therefore He will give them up until the time when she who is laboring brings forth; then the rest of his brothers will return to the people of Israel. **4** And He shall stand and shepherd His flock in the strength of Yahweh, in the majesty of the name of Yahweh His God. And they shall dwell [secure], for He shall be great to the ends of the earth. **5** And this one shall be peace. When Assyria comes into our land and tramples on our citadels, then we shall set up against him seven shepherds, and eight princes of men. **6** They shall shepherd the land of Assyria with the sword, the land of Nimrod in its entrances, and He will deliver us from the Assyrian when he comes into the land and when he tramples on our borders.

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**Proposition:** When things are at their worst, God delivers His people through a glorious small-town Messiah.

## **Introduction**

The prophet Micah, to whom we turn this morning, prophesied at the same time as Isaiah, his better-known neighbor. This was around 720 B.C. Micah was from Judah, and his prophecies were delivered during the time when the Assyrian Empire was growing in power and dominance. In fact, Judah's close neighbor Israel was conquered by Assyria in 722 B.C., right during the time of Micah's active ministry. So keep this context in mind this morning as we listen to what Micah had to say.

This morning, we look at Micah's most famous prophecy. As you all know, virtually the entire visible church will celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ next Sunday, Dec. 25. That birth was predicted seven hundred years earlier by Micah of Moresheth. What I want to give you this morning is a taste of the hope Micah brought his original audience and still brings to all of us who listen to his words. You should listen because you need that hope. I've heard that the church calendar's creators chose to place Christmas on Dec. 25 because it was a reminder that when everything is dark and cold, God's salvation comes and changes everything. Listen because we just experienced a cold week. The longest night of the year is coming up in just a few days. On a broader scale, we see the church in retreat across much of the Western World. We see the forces of evil gathering strength, or at least appearing to gather strength. What do we do at this time? We listen to the words of Micah, who spoke to Judah when her enemies were strong and deliverance seemed impossible. What we'll hear is this: when things are at their worst, God delivers His people through a glorious small-town Messiah.

### **I. The Background: Israel's Humiliation and Need for a Savior, 5:1-3.**

The background to the famous verse about Bethlehem Ephrathah is found right here: Israel is being humiliated, trampled upon by the powerful Assyrian empire.

#### **A. God's People Besieged, v. 1a-b**

Micah urges God's people to prepare for war, to gather in troops, because Assyria is at the gates. Remember, in the days before air power the best way to keep your enemies away was to build a high wall. The only way to break into a walled city was to go over the walls, under the walls, or bash in the gates. A "siege" was the name for the method of warfare that sat outside a walled city and sought to find a way in. Eventually, if food could be kept out long enough, the city would capitulate. This is what Micah is talking about here: God's people have been besieged. The Assyrians are trying to get into their city, that is into Jerusalem.

#### **B. God's People Conquered, v. 1c-d**

But Micah swiftly moves from the scene of Jerusalem besieged and shows us Jerusalem conquered. The judge smitten shows the utter capitulation of earthly Israel to worldly oppressors. The most powerful individuals in Judah will be struck. In short, the defenses will be broken, the

rulers beaten up, and Judah will come under foreign domination indefinitely. One might think of the parallel in Isaiah 50, where Messiah Himself, the greatest Israelite in history, will be literally smitten on the cheek.

### **C. God's Response, vv. 2-3**

Jerusalem has been besieged. In fact, Jerusalem has fallen. So what does God do? He starts talking.

#### **1. A Deliverer Coming from an Obscure Place, v. 2**

The first thing He does is promise a deliverer from Bethlehem — a small-town Messiah, if you will. When military disaster is staring God's people in the face, this is His solution. He doesn't promise a weapons deal with some great power. He doesn't provide nuclear weapons for His people. No. He promises that a Ruler will come from Bethlehem in God's good time.

Can you accept this promise? Do you see the Divine Wisdom at work here? We want worldly solutions and we want them now. God's solution is totally different. When the world is descending into warfare and chaos, He promises a person who will come and make everything better — in His own good time.

#### **2. God's People Given Up to their Enemies, v. 3a**

In the meanwhile, though, in order that this prophecy about a small-town Messiah from the royal line might come to pass, God gives His people up. Some comfort you are, Micah! You tell us that God is going to let His people go, hand them over, give them up, make them suffer under foreign domination for centuries!

That's right, brothers and sisters. The God we serve and trust is a God who is perfectly willing to "give up" His people, to let them be ruled and brutalized by those who don't know God and don't care about what He says. Just as Jesus waited an extra day to be sure that Lazarus would die, so that God would be even more glorified, so God here waits and waits and waits, letting His people get good and ready for a Messianic deliverance so that it would be crystal-clear that God saved them; they didn't save themselves.

If you move in academic circles at all, you will know that one of the reigning moral causes of our age is opposition to colonialism. One of the greatest possible sins, as defined by our cultural elite right now, is the sin of going to another country and imposing on them your rule, your values, your culture, and your language. Great Britain and many other nations of Europe are the target of vicious criticism for their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century imperialism.

But what side of colonialism are God's people on in this text? They aren't the colonizers. They are the colonized. They are the ones subject to foreign culture, language, government, and mores. They are the dispossessed, the strangers in their own country. You may be radically opposed to colonialism, but the fact remains that according to Scripture, in most cases God's people will be the colonized, living under the power of those who neither know nor care what we value most.

Can you serve a God who would give His people up for almost six hundred years? That's the question. That's the challenge Micah's prophecy poses to us. Micah is not trying to hide anything. He freely admits that when the hard times come, when the forces of evil are arrayed against God's people, God just might let them win. He might let them win for a very long time.

## **II. The Message: The Glory of Israel's Small-Town Messiah, 5:2-5**

But Micah's further message is that God will not let the forces of evil win forever. Someday the colonizers will be conquered and driven out. Someday God will prevail over the forces of evil, saving His people and fulfilling His promises to them. He will do it on His own schedule, but *He will do it*. In these four verses, Micah describes for us a dozen qualities of the Messiah. He reveals to us 12 things about God's answer to the problem of foreign oppression and attackers.

### **A. Messiah Will Come from Bethlehem, v. 2a**

The first of these things is that Bethlehem is the place. Just as David, the youngest son, was from Bethlehem, so the Messiah will be from Bethlehem. Micah highlights two things about Bethlehem:

#### **1. Bethlehem Is Little**

First, it's a tiny place. Just as our county has towns like Spotted Horse, where there's just nothing, so Bethlehem was practically a town in name only. Maybe it didn't even have a post office.

#### **2. Judah Is Comparatively Powerful**

Second, Judah is the larger region in which Bethlehem was to be found. At the time of Micah, it had been known for centuries that the Messiah would be from the tribe of Judah. Bethlehem is not the most powerful town in Judah; it is comparatively weak. But of course, compared to the Assyrian Empire, Judah itself is of little earthly significance. Just as Wyoming doesn't have a huge place in the counsels of the great and powerful in our country, so Judah was hardly known worldwide as a powerful entity. Yet compared to Bethlehem, Judah is a big deal — which only goes to show that Bethlehem is not a big deal. Bethlehem is tiny. Its only claim to fame is that it is the birthplace of Messiah. And that, of course, is indeed a claim to fame.

### **B. Messiah Is for God, v. 2c**

Well, the next thing Micah tells us that the Messiah would come forth “to” God, or “unto” God. This isn't a spatial claim; rather, it is the promise that Messiah would live His whole life directed toward God. The Messiah is coming forth from Bethlehem, but He is coming forth for God.

Do you think about this? That Jesus wasn't here for Himself, but ultimately that He lived His life for the glory and honor of God? We are told by our culture what we already want to think — that we exist for the sake of self-fulfillment. But Jesus Himself existed to do what God wanted. Can we do any less?

### **C. Messiah Is a Ruler, v. 2d**

Well, we also see that the Messiah is described here not as “the Messiah” but as “Ruler in Israel.” If your hope is in any way connected to this child born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the King, then you need to obey Him. He is a ruler. Micah doesn't call Him a king, or a

prince, but the more generic “ruler.” Nonetheless, the idea is the same: He is in charge. He calls the shots. If you want deliverance from oppression, then you must first submit to the rules of this Ruler. Don’t be like Peter and utter that contradictory phrase: “No, Lord!” The only proper response to Jesus the ruler is to be ruled by Him. He came forth for His Father — but He asks us to obey Him. Specifically, His rule is over “Israel.” This is simply a name for the people of God. Possibly when Micah was prophesying here Israel as a nation had already fallen to Assyria. Yet though earthly Israel may have been no more, Israel as God’s people endures, and Jesus reigns over God’s people right now. If you claim to be part of God’s people, then obey Him.

#### **D. Messiah Eternally Goes Forth, v. 2e**

Well, Messiah is said to have gone forth from “of old, from the day of eternity.” This word “eternity” means something like “time immemorial.” Some commentators apply it to the times of David, the other ruler from Bethlehem Ephrathah. But though Messiah did come from David, it’s not His earthly origin that’s in view in this verse. It’s His “goings forth.” Now, what are those?

I got in trouble with my editor on the first published book review I ever wrote. I said that the author’s words were sometimes “more evocative than lucid.”

“Can’t you just say he’s hard to understand?” my editor asked?

Well, brothers and sisters, these “goings forth” are more evocative than lucid. The instant you hear them, you feel like you know what they mean — but when you have to define them, you can’t. At least, I can’t. To “go forth” is to leave somewhere, to proceed out. I could say that I “went forth from Florida” last Monday, or that I will “go forth” from church once this service is over. At the most basic level, to “go forth” is to be alive, to move, to go out from a particular place. You don’t necessarily have to leave a place behind to go forth from it; think about a river flowing forth from a spring. The river is always flowing away, yet always connected to the spring. Electricity is always going forth from the power plant, yet ultimately, the electricity cannot be severed from that power plant.

The goings forth of Messiah are from of old, from the day of eternity. Can you really say that the begetting of Solomon, Rehoboam, Abijah, Asa, etc., the “flowing forth” of David’s line down to Christ, is a plausible interpretation of these “goings forth”? I can’t see it. As I understand this verse, the only thing it could be talking about is the eternal generation of the Son of God from His Father. From the day of eternity, the Son has been flowing forth from the Father, yet never leaving the Father’s side. From the day of eternity, the Son has been what we confess as God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God, begotten, not made. These are the “goings forth” of Jesus Christ, God’s only-begotten Son. He comes for His Father, as we saw a moment ago — and He also comes from His Father, in an ultimate sense.

We will celebrate next Sunday the fact that God’s Son became a man. But today, I want you to focus on the truth that God’s Son has always, eternally, been coming forth from God, and yet never leaving Him. Not just since David’s time, but always, even before anything else existed, God the Father has been begetting God the Son. Just as you generate a word in your mind but do not yet utter it, making it simultaneously part of your mind and yet separate from

yourself, so Jesus is the Father's generated word, brought forth from the Father, separate from the Father in personhood, yet one with the Father in divinity, in purpose, in power, and in glory.

Do you see how this proclamation from Micah brings hope in the midst of colonizing oppressors who refuse to let us as God's people live our own lives in our land and instead try to force us to think of things their way, to do things their way? We have a Messiah who's more powerful than any of that. Our Messiah has been going forth since the day of eternity. He's always existed. He's always come from His Father. And He is going to be — in fact, He has been — born in Bethlehem.

### **E. Messiah Brings Unity Between Jew and Gentile, v. 3**

Who is the person in labor? The church. The people of Israel. In one sense, of course, you can take this as a reference to Mary — but Micah speaks as though this woman is already in labor, and Micah 4:9-10, just a few verses prior to this, make it clear that the Daughter of Zion is being addressed. When Israel gives birth to the Messiah, then Israel's separated brothers will return. Who is this? Apostate Israelites? The northern Kingdom? I think not. Here, as in many other places of Scripture, the events of history are the best interpreter of the prophecy. What happened when Jesus was actually born and completed His messianic work? The fullness of the Gentiles began to come in. The Gentiles came to Israel to seek salvation. The Gentiles came to Israel to find salvation through this small-town Messiah.

Race relations have been in the news a lot this year. Many people of color say that they don't feel at home in their own nation, despite having been born here and living here their whole lives. Many white people say that they feel threatened by immigrants or people who aren't from here. But these differences and more are addressed by the promise that in Messiah, Jews and Gentiles both find salvation, fulfillment, rest. Jesus is a savior for everyone He calls brothers, and He calls black and white, slave and free, Jew and Gentile, Mexican and Asian, *brothers*. Do you believe it? Can you participate in that reality? All you have to do is submit to His Lordship.

### **F. Messiah Stands Unmoved, v. 4a**

Well, we have heard about Messiah's birth. But what will He do? He will *stand*, Micah says. We could say that He will stand firm, that He will stand unmoved. He will not be threatened or changed by the world's opposition. He will not be pushed into a corner. If you are a Christian, then you serve an immovable Messiah. He *stands*. Does that comfort you? Help you? Remind that you too can stand, because even if the forces of evil murder you for your stand, you serve a Lord who can't be budged.

### **G. Messiah Feeds His People, v. 4a**

The second thing Messiah does is *feed His flock*. The Hebrew word is a word for "shepherd" that is always used of shepherding sheep, or people conceived as sheep.

How does Jesus do this? By sending preachers. By sending teachers. By giving His word. By giving you time to read His word. Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word which proceeds out of the mouth of God.

Are you an anorexic Christian? Do you read God's word every day, or do you starve yourself? Do you pay attention in church, feeding on the food of God's word as delivered to you in sermons and Sunday School lessons?

By the way, people of God, this is why we have added Sunday School this year. This is why we as elders have added an evening service. It's because Jesus feeds His people, and because He says in Jeremiah 3 that He feeds His people by using under-shepherds who feed on His behalf.

Jesus wants you to be a well-fed Christian. He has made provision for you to eat, to feast on His word. But you know something? If Jesus feeds you, what is your responsibility? That's right: to eat! If you don't come to Sunday School to eat God's word, why not? If you don't come to evening service to eat God's word, why not? Are you doing something more important than feeding on God's word?

Obviously Sunday School and the evening worship service are not Jesus' only way of feeding His flock. Nonetheless, public worship and teaching in the church is the way God has chosen to build up His people. If you don't eat these meals, you need a good reason for it. Can you imagine Micah writing, "He will stand and feed His flock, but they will only eat about a third of what He prepares"?

#### **H. Messiah Operates by God's Strength and Majesty, v. 4b-c**

Well, the Messiah is God's agent who works in God's name and with God's strength and majesty. If Jesus stands, it's because God stands with Him! If Jesus feeds His flock, it's because God feeds it with Him! Do you see divine majesty in the work of Jesus Christ? Does reflecting on how Jesus feeds His flock move you to worship? Does seeing how immovable He is in the face of the world's misrepresentations and outright lies and attacks move you to worship? It should. It must.

#### **I. Messiah Is in Covenant With God, v. 4c**

Micah mentions that the Messiah will do these things in the name of Yahweh *His God*. God is Jesus' God. He belongs to Jesus, in a sense. He is a sworn relationship with Him. We don't have time to unpack this now; we will talk about it a little more tonight. Suffice it to say for now that Jesus does what He does in expectation of a reward from the Father. He can call the Father His God. We say, "Zeus isn't my god. Allah isn't my god. Vishnu isn't my god." We don't know those gods, and they don't know us. But to say that "Jehovah is my God!" is to say that He does know me, and that I know Him. Jesus knows God, walks with God, claims God as His own. Do you do that? If you are united to Jesus by faith, you can.

#### **J. Messiah Keeps His People Dwelling Safely, v. 4d**

Not only does Messiah stand firm; His people "abide," or "dwell securely." They will be protected and taken care of. What Abraham Lincoln claimed about government of the people, by the people, and for the people is far more true of the people who obey Jesus Christ: they shall not perish from the earth.

#### **K. Messiah Is Great to the Ends of the Earth, v. 4e**

How can this be guaranteed? By Jesus' international greatness. He's not just great in Israel, or even in the Mid-East region of the globe. No, He is great in Kuala Lumpur, in Buenos Aires and Los Angeles and Sydney and Paris. He is great in New York and Tokyo, in Johannesburg and Jerusalem. This is our confidence. We serve a small-town Messiah. The Bible is up-front about His origins in Bethlehem. But He didn't stay there. Now, He is great, to the very ends of the earth. If you were the butler for the present Queen Elizabeth, you would have some reason to be proud of your employer, and even willing to brag a little bit. But if you are a Christian, you serve someone far greater than Queen Elizabeth. You serve Jesus Christ, who is great to the ends of the earth and beyond.

#### **L. Messiah Is Peace, v. 5a**

Jesus is peace. Several months ago, I preached two sermons on "Blessed are the peacemakers." To refresh your memory, I will remind you that peace is the union of the appetite's inclinations, and that if there is the peace in the heart, there will be peace in the family; if there is peace in the family, there will be peace in the city; and if there is peace in the city, then there will be peace in the nation; and if there is peace in the nation, then there will be peace in the world.

Who is the only one who can unite the appetite's inclinations? Who is the only one who can bring peace on earth? That's right. Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

So next time you pray for peace on earth, or even just peace in your own home or your own heart, remember where true peace is to be found: in this small-town Messiah.

Brothers and sisters, you can find security and peace only in your Messiah, *not in your circumstances!* This week, as the chaos of a materialistic celebration of Jesus' birth happens around us, remember what Micah proclaimed about the Messiah so many centuries ago. Trust that Jesus will deliver us, even though we are besieged by a hostile culture. He is majestic. He is powerful. He will stand, and feed His people, and no one will be able to stop Him. Celebrate His birth this week, rejoicing in the glorious truth that our small-town Messiah is our Savior and Lord. He rules Israel. Let Him rule you, and you will find His peace. Amen.