

December 21, 2014
Sunday Evening Service
Community Baptist Church
Christmas
642 S. Suber Rd.
Greer, SC 29650
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to hear from Micah 5:1-6.

1. What were circumstances like in Judah when Micah wrote this prophecy?
2. List some important things or people connected with the town of Bethlehem in Old Testament times.
3. What is the overall message of these verses God wanted His people to hear?
4. How can we be encouraged by the work God did in and for Bethlehem?

BETHLEHEM WAS SUCH A LITTLE TOWN
Micah 5:1-6

Regardless of the gross foolishness going on around us, this is the season when Christ's followers celebrate the grand event of His incarnation. The birth of Christ, God taking on human form, is one of the great events of eternity. Indeed, the event itself is replete with eternal ramifications. Without the birth of Christ there is no hope for eternal salvation. Immanuel, "God with us," was an essential component for the plan of salvation.

Since the birth of Christ is such an important part of our eternal well-being, it is natural for us to focus almost exclusively on that event during the Christmas season. However, the incarnation is but a critical link to a broad array of God's promises and plan. Therefore, it is also

very encouraging to consider the many promises that God gave through His prophets about the birth of Messiah. Hundreds of years before the event, God gave glimpses into the amazing fact of incarnation. He promised at various times, through various spokesmen, that the Son of God would come to earth in order to win salvation from sin for all who would receive it.

But sometimes the prophecies of the Old Testament are confusing, especially when it is difficult to pin down exactly the event the prophet foretold, or when the timing of the promised event is not exactly clear (as is often the case). As a result, it is not uncommon for Christians to find a prophecy in the Old Testament that clearly promises a truth about Jesus Christ as the Savior from sin. And we rejoice in it. But at the same time, devout Jews interpreted the same prophecy as a statement or promise about a near event that would effect the nation. Or they might interpret the promise as it would apply to the king who was a contemporary or near contemporary of the prophet who gave the message.

There is a simple principle of interpreting prophecy that helps to clear up this confusion. Often when the Old Testament prophets declared a message from God, it was like a man looking at a range of mountain peaks. When a person looks out over the horizon toward the mountains, he is able to see several different peaks, but he is not able to see the valleys between the peaks. While the mountain peaks offer a stunning view, the valleys offer beautiful and intricate details of their own. So, too, a prophet could declare a message that might have some fulfillment immediately, a similar or continued fulfillment several years later, and complete fulfillment after a couple of millennia. The mountain peaks are the flashes of prophetic fulfillment, while the valleys are the intervening years of average, common life.

That is the case with this prophecy from Micah. He prophesied during a difficult period in Judah's history. What he said had bearing on his day, but it also pointed ahead to even more difficult days over one hundred years in the future—and beyond. Some of what Micah promised will not come to pass until the Millennium.

Against the backdrop of current trouble, future trouble, and far future trouble, God gave Micah one of the greatest messages of hope and encouragement. God promised that the supreme ruler of the ages, the Great Shepherd of His people, would come out of the little insignificant village of Bethlehem. This prophecy is a wonderful reminder that *God*

chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are (1 Corinthians 1:27-28). God's ways are not man's ways because His ways are higher and deeper than anything the wisest people can contrive. The celebrations of this season should serve to remind us that God is indescribably great.

Times Were Tough In Judah (v.1).

At the time Micah wrote God's message, which we have in this book before us, Jerusalem was under siege. That is evident in the opening words of 5:1. *Now muster your troops, O daughter of troops; siege is laid against us (v.1a).* The city was under siege by the Assyrian army, who, under the leadership of the time Sennacherib had attacked Judah. God's people just happened to be in the way that this great king's war machine was marching.

By this time God had already judged the northern ten tribes named Israel for their sins (1:2-7). For many years, through many prophets, God had warned of this impending judgement. Why? Micah opened this writing with the explanation. *All this is for the transgression of Jacob and for the sins of the house of Israel. What is the transgression of Jacob? Is it not Samaria?" (Micah 1:5a).* Therefore, God allowed the enemy to make a waste of Israel just like He promised He would. *"Therefore I will make Samaria a heap in the open country, a place for planting vineyards, and I will pour down her stones into the valley and uncover her foundations" (Micah 1:6).*

All of this carnage happened in 722 B.C. Tiglath-pileser III, king of Assyria, expanded the kingdom into Israel, making it a vassal state (ca.735 B.C.). While that was happening, Israel was winding down and becoming so ineffective and disjointed as a nation that little men like Hoshea killed Pekah the appointed king and took Israel's throne. Not surprising, he led the nation into rebellion against Shalmaneser V (726 b.c.). Shalmaneser V decided he was done fooling with those Jews and went down and overthrew Samaria (the capital) and scattered Israel (though his successor Sargon II took credit for the victory 722 B.C.).

Now, in Micah's writing, it was twenty years after Samaria fell that another Assyrian king was ravaging the land. In 701 B.C. Sennacherib,

son of Sargon II, led his army into Judah. In a sweeping movement southward along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, and then upward like a hook, Sennacherib overthrew the major Philistine cities and then sacked many strong cities of Judah. Micah listed some of the cities, both Philistine and Judean (1:10-16). And now Sennacherib had laid siege to Jerusalem and taunted Hezekiah and God to try to defeat him. God had that story recorded in (2 Kings 18:13-19:37; Isaiah 36:1-37:37). That is why Micah encouraged Jerusalem (daughter) to muster her troops.

But mighty Sennacherib knocking on the gates was not to be the end of Judah's concerns. Years later other powers would overrun Judah. For example, God would send Nebuchadnezzar with the mighty army of Babylon into Jerusalem beginning 601 B.C. and ending with the razing of the city and temple in 586 B.C. Many scholars believe that attack is Micah's primary focus in the promise that God gave here. It does fit much of the prophecy. Especially the reference to the "remnant" (v.7), which we know was hauled away only to return to Jerusalem seventy years later. However, the reference to the Assyrian army in verses five and six doesn't fit the 586 B.C. time period. We'll consider that in a few minutes.

Furthermore, the attack by Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon was not the last time of trouble for Israel. We know from history that the Roman general Titus would completely raze Jerusalem and the temple again in A.D. 70. But even that attack was still not the end of trouble for Israel. We also are sure that Antichrist will make the final assault against God's people in the last days. That is the plan according to Jesus' teaching in Matthew 24 and Revelation chapters 12-13.

In the attack that was on Micah's mind, the judge of Israel was humiliated. He promised that *with a rod they strike the judge of Israel on the cheek (v.1b).* Of course we wonder who the *Judge* was. The record does indicate that Sennacherib put Hezekiah to the test. He taunted Hezekiah. His spokesman loudly taunted by telling the people on the wall not to let Hezekiah deceive them. He claimed that Sennacherib even dared to mock Hezekiah's God. But the Assyrians did not literally strike the judge or king on the cheek.

It is possible that God was uncovering something through Micah that still lay ahead at the later date of 586 B.C. when Nebuchadnezzar imprisoned Zedekiah. He killed Zedekiah's sons before his very eyes and then plucked out the king's eyes. That wicked king humiliated the king of Israel in every way. He certainly had his men strike the ruler of Israel

on the cheek. .Probably this is the situation Micah had in mind when he wrote verse one.

Try to imagine how discouraged Micah and his peers would be in that setting. Those were difficult days. Sennacherib was knocking on the door, and no one had stopped him yet. One hundred and twenty years later Nebuchadnezzar would be unstoppable. He would plunder the city of God and take the people captive. Six hundred and fifty six years later Titus would do the same thing. In the final days, Antichrist will launch a worldwide attack against Israel. We can easily imagine the citizen of Jerusalem asking, “Now tell me again, what do we have to look forward to?” Is there no hope? When will the pain stop?

This is often how sinners feel – and it is good when they do. They wish they could stop sinning, but it is a futile wish. They experience every day that sin is part of their nature. They love to sin. They are captivated by sin. They are slaves to sin, and there is no hope for deliverance.

Sometimes even Christians act like we are as hopeless as sinners. We look at world events and wonder how bad things can get. Is there no hope? We are likely to ask that question when we assume that the totality of God’s plan centers on our life, our work, our ministry. To assume that God’s eternal plan succeeds or fails only within our short lifetime is a sure plan for feeling discouraged. Instead let’s consider what God revealed to His people through Micah the preacher.

One Day The Supreme Ruler Would Come From Bethlehem (v.2).

In Micah’s day, Bethlehem was probably considered an insignificant village. *But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah (v.2a).* The town was considered too little to be of any account among the clans of Judah. Bethlehem was nothing but a dot on the globe. Even in Micah’s day the village would have been virtually unnoticed by the populace in the Middle East. In fact, the prophet admitted that Bethlehem was considered little and insignificant even in the comparatively little tribe of Judah.

In Micah’s day, no important people from the important families of Jacob lived there. Apparently, it never was a significant place because Joshua did not even list it as one of the important cities of defense. About the time Micah wrote this message from God, Sennacherib had overrun Bethlehem and the event didn’t merit mention.

Bethlehem was a typical Judean village located in the rolling hills a few miles south of Jerusalem. Jerusalem – now that’s where the important people, like kings, lived. Maybe Bethlehem’s only claim to fame might be the burial place of Rachel (and that is not certain). It was such an out-of-the-way place that you might expect to find shepherds herding their flocks in the nearby fields.

Oh, that mention of shepherds reminds us, “Did we mention that Bethlehem was David’s town.” It is true that King David’s (the great king of Israel) lineage was rooted there. That presupposes that Bethlehem was also the site of the Ruth and Boaz story. But Micah wrote this message over 300 years after David grew up in the little village. Mentioning David in connection with Bethlehem is like referring to Clemson’s national championship with the 1981 football team. Modern kids want to know if that was BC or AD. Since David’s time, no one or nothing important came from Bethlehem.

Yes, but still it had been home to the king God had chosen to bless with a great promise. God had given an amazing promise to King David. He said through Nathan the prophet, “And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever” (2 Samuel 7:16). In this statement, God clearly promised that He would send Messiah, God the Son, through David’s lineage.

Therefore, Micah was right on to remind the discouraged people that the eternal Ruler would come from the insignificant village. The “Christ” is the fulfillment of God’s promise to David when God said, *From you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel (v.2b).* Notice the very important words, “*For me.*” Having the Christ born in Bethlehem was God’s plan, not David’s. This promise was all about God. The eternal Ruler will carry out God’s work for God’s glory forever! For Him to come forth from Bethlehem, God the Son had to be born there. In such an insignificant place in the Middle East God took on human form. Even at that moment God the Son, the eternal Ruler, was doing the work of the Father.

It is altogether fitting that the Christ child was doing the Father’s work because He is the eternal God Himself. Micah described Him as such: whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days (v. 2c). His origin is from ancient times. Indeed, He always was, is, and shall be. He revealed Himself to the apostle John by saying, “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty” (Revelation 1:8).

As such, *For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:16-17)*. All of the great kings born and ruling in Jerusalem could not deliver God’s people from the enemy. Only the truly Great King will do that. He will do it perfectly.

Ultimately Messiah Will Be The Perfect Shepherd (vv.3-6).

He will bring peace to His people (vv.3-5a). In fact, the nation of Israel will know no peace until all the brothers return. *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 (v.3)*. Some say that this return already took place during restoration after Babylonian captivity, but there was no true peace then. Was it after Mary gave birth to Jesus (“when she who is in labor has given birth”)? No.

Probably this is a reference to events during the Tribulation. It would certainly fit the picture of the pregnant woman in Revelation 12:1-6. That is a picture of the nation of Israel. God will gather the remnant of Israel back to the land during the Tribulation. Israel will know peace when Messiah shepherds them (vv.4-5a). At the end of the Tribulation, this same Jesus who was born in the insignificant village of Bethlehem will come and destroy every enemy of Israel (Revelation 19:11-21). Then He will set up His literal kingdom on earth where He will rule for 1,000 years (Revelation 20:1-6).

In that setting, King Jesus will shepherd His people. *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 (v.4a)*. Notice that as the Shepherd He will show great strength (v.4), He will reveal Divine majesty (v.4), and yet He will be a tender shepherd (v.4). While the Divine Shepherd leads, it is not surprising that His people will know peace. *And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth (v.4b)*. They will be secure (v.4). They will be known as great people (v.4). For the first time they will know real peace (v.5) because *He shall be their peace (v.5a)*.

As the mighty Shepherd, our Lord will subdue the enemy (vv.5b-6). It is especially clear that during the Millennium Christ will rule supreme. God promised through Micah, *When the Assyrian comes into*

our land and treads in our palaces, then we will raise against him seven shepherds and eight princes of men, they shall shepherd the land of Assyria with the sword, and the land of Nimrod at its entrances; and he shall deliver us from the Assyrian when he comes into our land and treads within our border (vv.5b-6).

There are going to be Assyrians around during the Millennium? No. That name *Assyrian* is probably used in this case to picture any enemy of God’s people. Sin will not be tolerated in Christ’s kingdom (*princes will arise and snuff it out*). Sin will not be known in Christ’s kingdom until Satan (the master behind Assyria) is released for a season. Finally, Satan, all sin, all enemies of God’s people will be forever destroyed in the Lake of fire (Revelation 20:11-15).

This is a wonderful promise, but it is not all future. Even now Christ rules over the enemy of His people. By faith in Christ’s mighty power and divine, finished work, we know and experience forgiveness of sins, release from the power of sin, and release from the penalty of sin. We can be confident that the enemy—sin and Satan—will not have ultimate victory over us.

We know and experience this confident peace only because the Ruler of Eternity came from Bethlehem. The Eternal Ruler submitted to becoming a human. He was born of the virgin. He was born in a lowly stable in the insignificant village of Bethlehem. He lived perfectly according to God’s law. In spite of living perfectly, *He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not (Isaiah 53:3)*. But in the process, *Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed (Isaiah 53:4-5)*.

Even in our Savior, God the Son, God delights to use the weak things to accomplish His glory! The despised and rejected man from Galilee is the Eternal King and Savior from sin. The recipients of His salvation are not the proud, the noble, the mighty, but are often seen as the offscouring of the earth.

Today, because you are a Christian—a follower of this Christ—you are not allowed to offer a greeting that hints toward His name (i.e. Merry CHRISTmas). You are not allowed to place a scene in the public square that depicts His coming to be one of us in order to save us. Satan

hates Jesus Christ. The world is thoroughly under Satan's influence. Therefore, people will do his bidding, be accomplices in his work, and seek to silence his enemy Jesus. There are many times we do seem like we have chosen the losing side. But let's remember this day that the Creator and Sustainer of the universe has promised that King Jesus will be eternally victorious AND He has chosen us (weak and lowly though we may be) to be on His side.