

There is a very popular and beloved Christmas hymn called “Silent Night” and the first stanza of this hymn reads like this,

“Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright. Round yon virgin, mother and child! Holy Infant so tender and mild, sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.”

I read about a children’s Sunday School class that heard the Christmas story and afterwards they sang “Silent Night.” They were then asked to draw what they thought the nativity scene might have looked like that silent night. One little boy drew a good likeness of Joseph, and Mary, and the baby Jesus, but off to the side was this roly-poly figure. The teacher, thinking that the boy had somehow worked Santa Claus into the nativity scene, asked him who that was to which the boy responded, “Oh, that’s Round John Virgin!”

So, the boy did not have right picture when it comes to the Christmas story, but that can go for us just as well. Often times when we think about the Christmas story or look at Bible passages related to Christmas, we don’t see the right picture either, and what I mean by that is this – we tend to look at what is being described for us in isolation, as a stand-alone event, rather than seeing the passages correctly within the context in which they are given – a context that typically includes great tension and turmoil as the backstory. That’s the consistent and often overlooked context behind the Christmas story.

Since the beginning of December, I have been sharing Christmas related messages from the Old Testament, and this morning I am going to do the same – this time from the book of **Micah**, and for the sake of context, I need to provide you with some background.

The prophet Micah was from the village of Moresheth, which was situated about 25 miles southwest of Jerusalem. It was located in a rural part of the country, a farming community, far outside the urban influences of the capital city. In those days, just like in our days, greedy investors were buying up small family farms and developing properties which created all sorts of social problems – problems which greatly concerned Micah. He saw that those with power, those who engaged in shady business practices, those who had influence in the government lived in luxury, but it was off the backs of the less fortunate who suffered. Micah spoke out against the social injustice created by the greedy political and spiritual leaders of his day, he courageously pleaded for change, but unfortunately, his message, for the most part, fell on deaf ears.

As a prophet, Micah primarily ministered to the southern kingdom of **Judah**, but he also prophesied about the northern kingdom of **Israel** as well. He saw the coming judgment of **Israel** by the Assyrian Empire in 721 B.C., and he then warned **Judah**, who would survive the Assyrian onslaught, that unless they returned to faithful worship and sincere obedience, they too would fall under God's judgment.

Well, we know from biblical history that Judah, under the rule of King Hezekiah – a righteous king, did respond to Micah's message from God; however, their repentance was shallow and short-lived, and as a consequence, under the rule of a disobedient king some 135 years later, **Judah** and its capital city of Jerusalem would be overrun by the Babylonian Empire in 586 B.C.

The prophet Micah sees all of this coming for God's wayward people – people who don't want to listen – people who don't want to change their ways, so in judgment, the Assyrians will pounce on Israel and take them into exile, and later the Babylonians will defeat Judah and deport its people. It's going to happen just as God has told the prophet Micah.

That's backstory of this book, so if you have your Bible, turn to **Micah 5** and we will begin with **verse 1**. Micah says,

**“Now muster yourselves in troops, daughter of troops;
They have laid siege against us;
With a rod they will smite the judge of Israel on the cheek.”**

In this verse, Micah looks ahead to the long siege of Jerusalem – the capital of Judah, and they are told to get their troops ready to defend themselves because the fight is coming to them – a fight that will even threaten their king.

History tells us that the Babylonians will come in force, and when all seems hopeless in Jerusalem, King Zedekiah and his officers will try to escape, but the Babylonians will overtake them. They will strike Zedekiah to humiliate him and then to add great insult to injury, his sons will be brought in and executed right in front of him. That will be the very last thing Zedekiah sees because the Babylonians will put out his eyes and then drag him off to Babylon in chains.

So, Micah delivers a very somber prophecy of judgment that's coming – it's a prophecy filled with great tension and turmoil, and yet Micah is also allowed to see

far beyond – to the future restoration of God’s people from an unexpected place. Let’s continue with **verse 2**.

**“But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
Too little to be among the clans of Judah,
From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel.
His goings forth are from long ago,
From the days of eternity.”**

In contrast to the great tension and turmoil prophesied against God’s wayward people – there is a glimmer of hope for the future, coming from the last place they would think of – the little town of **Bethlehem**.

Bethlehem was located in the ancient district of **Ephrathah** given to the tribe of **Judah** – identified this way to distinguish it from another Bethlehem, which was in the tribe of Zebulun. When describing Bethlehem Ephrathah, Micah tells us that it was so little and so lowly that it wasn’t even counted among the cities of Judah when the land was divided during the time of Joshua. Now, if you recall, it was the hometown Naomi and Boaz. It was the hometown of King David, but even so, there were only a few hundred people living there. It was **too little to be among the clans of Judah**.

So, the prophet Micah tells God’s wayward people that their present situation is hopeless, but God’s plans go far beyond the present into the future, and in their future, from the most insignificant place, there would come the most significant person – the ruler of God’s people. His physical birth place would be humble, but He is eternal. Micah says, **“His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity”** and this is where we jump into the deep end of the theological pool.

Obviously, Micah is referring to Jesus, who some 700 years later would be born in the little town of Bethlehem, but before Jesus was wrapped in swaddling cloth as a baby, before He was laid in a feeding trough – Jesus preexisted in eternity past.

Let me share a few passages with you that speak to this truth. In the first few verses of **John 1**, the Apostle John wrote this when describing Jesus,

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. ⁴In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men.

Then later in **verse 14**, John says,

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Before there was any conceivable point in eternity past – God existed, and throughout various accounts described in the Old Testament, God revealed Himself in dreams and in visions, as fire of a burning bush, in mighty miracles such as the parting of the Red Sea, and in the glory and glow from the ark of the covenant, but there came a point in time when God stepped out of eternity and became tangible – flesh and blood, who could be seen, and heard, and touched. Jesus became the tangible image of God, stepping out of eternity into humanity to dwell among us. That’s the miracle of Christmas.

The Apostle Paul also had something very similar to say about the eternity of Jesus as well. Turn to **Colossians 1** and beginning with **verse 15** Paul says,

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

Jesus is before all things, the first cause of all things, the first of importance – the visible expression of the invisible God, meaning the very nature and character of God are perfectly revealed in Jesus, like the reflection seen in a mirror.

I once read of a great European cathedral whose ceiling was adorned with a painting of God, drawn in brilliant colors, but the ceiling was so high and the cathedral so narrow that it physically hurt visitors to crank their necks back to view the painting. So, the ingenious priest placed a mirror at ground level, and tilted it so that worshippers, by looking in the mirror, could study the image of the painting above.

Jesus made it so that God was tangible and accessible to our human senses; therefore, when we want to know what God is like, we simply need to look at the life of Jesus, for He alone is the “visible image of the invisible God.”

Lastly, just to make you think a bit, let's go all the way back to the creation story described in the book of Genesis. In **Genesis 1** beginning with **verse 26**, we are told,

²⁶Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." ²⁷God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

In all the previous moments of the creation story, the Bible simply tells us, "*Then God said,*" and it was done, but then we come to this passage and we are presented with these interesting pronouns. **Let Us. Our image. Our likeness.** They are plural – referring to God in three Persons – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

When put all together, Micah is saying the same thing. From long ago, from the days of eternity past, before the measurement of time, before the foundation of the world – Jesus existed, and some 700 years later, during another time of great tension and turmoil – a time when another foreign invader ruled the land – the Roman Empire, Jesus would step out of eternity into humanity.

Now, let's transition to the New Testament, and we'll see how this prophecy of Micah unfolded. In another little town – the town of Nazareth – a back woods farming town some 80 miles north of Bethlehem, a young virgin named Mary receives an unexpected visit by the angel Gabriel. Understandably, Mary is startled by his appearance, but Gabriel comforts her by telling her she is favored by God. Then, as if Gabriel's appearance wasn't enough to deal with, he gives Mary a surprise birth announcement.

In **Luke 1**, beginning with **verse 31**, the angel Gabriel announces to her,

³¹And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. ³²He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; ³³and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end."

³⁴Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵The angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.

“So, Mary, congratulations – you’re going to be a mother. Your baby will be a boy, and you will name him Jesus. And oh, by the way, just so you know – He is the Son of God – the long-awaited Messiah that you and your people have been hoping for. He’s the King, not a king, but the King who will ultimately rule forever.

Later an angel, maybe it’s the angel Gabriel again, appears to Mary’s fiancé Joseph, who is trying to figure out why Mary is pregnant – well, not really *why* but *who*, and in a dream, the angel tells Joseph that Mary has not been unfaithful as he assumed. Yes, she is pregnant, but the child which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. Joseph is told that Mary will bear a Son, and His name will be Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.

Both Mary and Joseph are now on board with God’s plan, and with the support of family and friends, Mary can deliver her baby boy in Nazareth. But wait, according to God’s word proclaimed by Micah, Jesus is to be born in Bethlehem – not Nazareth, and that brings us to **Luke 2**, where we are told in **verse 1**,

Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth.

Luke tells us that Caesar Augustus, the nephew of Julius Caesar, the Roman Emperor at that time, ordered a census to be taken for the purpose of collecting taxes for Rome. This was done every 14 years, but in this case, each Jewish male had to return to the city of his father to record his name, his occupation, his property, and those in his family.

At that time, Rome was ruling the known world, and Caesar Augustus was its pagan emperor. Caesar didn’t know anything about the One true God, but he unknowingly becomes an instrument in God’s hand to move Joseph and Mary some 80 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem to fulfill His promise that the Messiah would be born there.

“But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity.”

In God’s sovereignty – in the right place, at just the right time, Joseph and Mary get to Bethlehem, and while they were there, Mary delivered her firstborn Son,

wrapped Him in swaddling cloth, and laid Him in a feeding trough, because there was no room for them in the inn.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem, we are told this in **Matthew 2**, beginning with **verse 1**.

¹Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, ²“Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.”

Contrary to your nativity set, this does not occur until Jesus was about 1½ to 2 years old, so if you lose or break those figurines – don’t worry about it.

We are told a group of **magi** – astrologers, stargazers, who looked for signs in the heavens and were following a special star, come from the east to Jerusalem because they wanted to find the One born the King of the Jews. **Why Jerusalem?** Maybe because Jerusalem was the capital city. It’s where the royal family was, so maybe they expected to find a toddler in the royal court – I mean they are looking for a future king. They knew He had been born, they have been following His star, but they didn’t know exactly where, so they ask, **“Where is He?”** **“Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?”**

Well, when King Herod heard this, he was troubled, he was threatened by the news that another king had been born, so he called together all the chief priests and the scribes and he had just one question for them – **“Where is the Messiah supposed to be born,”** and without any hesitation on their part, they share the prophecy from Micah that the future Ruler and Shepherd of God’s people would come from Bethlehem.

No one doubted the prophecy given by Micah, and that brings up an insight I want to share with you. When speaking of prophecy, and I know many of you are very interested in prophecy, Warren Wiersbe said this,

“Whenever a prophet foretold the future, it was to awaken the people to their responsibilities in the present. Bible prophecy isn’t entertainment for the curious; it’s encouragement for the serious.”

When Micah gave his prophecy to God’s wayward people, the present desire was that repentance would come to them and they would turn to their God, but

unfortunately, God knew they would not. Yes, they had a knowledge of God, but they were not serious about following Him, and they suffered the consequences just as foretold by the prophet Micah.

Now, if we were to continue with Micah's prophecy, we would learn that Jesus will be rejected by His own people the Jews, and as a consequence, God will put them on the back burner so to speak. God's attention will then be given to the church – to us, but there will come a time, and it could be at any time, when the church is snatched away – raptured to heaven, and once again the Jews will be on the front burner during the Tribulation period. The Tribulation period is primarily for the Jews so that they may turn to the Savior they rejected, and after that, just as promised, Jesus will come again – not as a helpless baby, but as the Ruler and Shepherd to establish His earthly kingdom and to restore His people once and for all.

Christmas reminds us that even in the tension and turmoil, God keeps His promises. Just as promised, at just the right time, the God of eternity past humbly stepped into humanity in the little town of Bethlehem. That's the miracle of Christmas, and as promised, and just as miraculous, at just the right time, Jesus will come again – but this time in victory for all the world to see.

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