

Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:1-12

The Prophecy of Bethlehem

But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting – Micah 5:2

How do you know? Has anybody ever asked you that? How do you know that your religion is true? How do you know that you're really worshipping the right deity? One Wiki-pedia article points out that there are roughly 4,200 religions in the world. You could probably break it down even more than that if you were to consider sub-sets within each religious heading. In other words there are variations of religions. We know this to be true of Christianity.

Depending on what source you consult you can find some sources that suggest there are anywhere from 20,000 to 30,000 different Protestant denominations in the world. This is one of the arguments that the church of Rome uses to suggest that everyone ought to return to the mother church. It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that there is only one brand of Roman Catholicism. Within the ranks of just about any denomination can be found the same variations that you could find among the Jews in Christ's day. Just as you had the Pharisees who put greater emphasis on the authority of the Bible so you can find evangelicals and fundamentalists that do the same today. And just as Sadducees were much more liberal and who denied the supernatural aspects of Judaism so you can find the same thing in many denominations today.

So it seems to be a valid question when that question is asked *How do you know?* Not only is it a valid question but it becomes a very important question when you consider what's at stake in the asking of such a question. When you consider that you're dealing with such matters as heaven or hell or life after death or the eternal destiny of your soul, then you can begin to appreciate the importance of knowing the right answer to the question *how do you know?*

We know, of course, that not everyone who raises such a question really has a desire to answer it. To those who love sin or to use the Apostle John's language, they love the darkness rather than the light – people with that kind of affection really aren't interested in any sort of assurance of the truth. Indeed their strongest defense for continuing in their sin is the fact that there are so many different religions and therefore so many possible answers to the question of which one is right. They're quite content to say that it's impossible to know and so they become agnostics in their worldview and they're happy to continue in their sin because it's really up to them to decide for themselves what even is sin.

At the end of the day what the matter really boils down to is this – whether or not God can make Himself known – whether or not God has revealed Himself. As Christians we say that He can and that He has. And we recognize two sources for God's revelation of

Himself. We recognize what some refer to as the book of nature: *The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork* – Ps. 19:1.

And although nature is not sufficient to show unto man the way of salvation, it is enough, according to Paul in Romans 1 to leave man without excuse especially regarding his accountability to God. *Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.* (Rom. 1:19,20).

It takes more than nature, however, to show man the way of salvation and hence the second source of revelation sometimes referred to as God's special revelation and that is God's book, the Bible. Peter refers to God's book as *a more sure word of prophecy* (2Pet. 1:19). The very fact that Peter refers to God's Word as a more sure word indicates to us that the chief purpose this book serves is to increase our confidence in the matters that are addressed in this book. Our text this morning from Micah 5:2 which is quoted in Matthew 2:6 is a perfect example of this more sure word of prophecy. We have a very sure word of prophecy that pertains to the very place where Jesus Christ was born – that little town of Bethlehem carries great significance in assuring us that as Christians we've come to the right place, and we worship the right person and we trust in the right plan of salvation.

I'd like to focus on this specific and sure word of prophecy this morning. And I want to focus on it so that you, as a follower of Christ may have your confidence in Christ increased this morning and in the coming days. The blessing of this sure word of prophecy is my theme, then:

But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.

I'd like to analyze this sure word this morning with the aim of enabling you to see with confidence a number of things. Consider with me first of all how:

I. This Sure Word Assures Us That We've Come to the right Place

Where does this Word bring us? We should note that the word I'm referring to now is found in Micah 5:2. Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah. Isaiah and Micah proclaimed their prophesies some 700 to 800 years before Christ was born. One very famous prophesy in Isaiah reveals to us to supernatural birth of Christ and how He was born of a virgin. So in Isa. 7:14 we read: *Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.* And Isaiah's contemporary, Micah, tells us the very place where Christ would be born: *But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.*

You are aware, I'm sure, that the Bible is a book of prophecy. One modern day preacher who has done his homework remarks:

How about the prophecies concerning the Lord Jesus Christ? The greatest fulfillments of prophecy are found at the first coming of Christ, not even the second coming but at the first coming. It was prophesied in the Old Testament that Jesus would be born of the seed of Abraham, Jesse, and David.

He would be born of a virgin, called Emmanuel, born in Bethlehem. Great persons would come to adore Him, there would be the killing of children in Bethlehem. He would be called out of Egypt. He would be preceded by a forerunner. He would be anointed with the Holy Spirit. He'd be a prophet like Moses, a priest after the order of what is now Melchizedek. He would be entering into His public ministry in Galilee. He would be entering publicly into Jerusalem and come into the temple. He would live in poverty and meekness, tenderness, and compassion. He would be without deceit, He'd be full of zeal, preaching with parables, working miracles, bearing reproach. He would be rejected by His own Jewish brethren. The Jews and Gentiles would combine together against Him. He would be betrayed by a friend. His disciples would forsake Him. He would be sold for thirty pieces of silver. And that price would be given for a potter's field.

He would die with intense suffering yet be silent under that suffering. He would be struck on the cheek, His visage would be marred. He would be spit upon and scarred. His hands and His feet would be nailed to the cross. He would be forsaken by God, He would cry out, "My God My God, why have You forsaken Me?" He would be mocked. Gall and vinegar would be offered to Him. His garments would be parted. Lots would be cast for His clothing. He would be numbered among the transgressors. He would intercede for His murderers. He would die but not a bone of His body would be broken. He would be pierced long before crucifixion would even be invented. He would be buried with the rich. His flesh would not see corruption. He would be raised from the dead. He would ascend back to the right hand of God the Father.

All of this recorded hundreds of years before Jesus ever entered this world. And many of these prophecies are fulfilled not by His friends but by His enemies who stand to lose the most with their fulfillment. And many of these prophecies being fulfilled before He was born, while He's in His mother's womb, and while He is in the grave. (From Steven Lawson – 2010 Ligonier Conference).

So like I said – the Bible is a book of prophesy. Why do you suppose that is? Why did God see fit to pre-record history instead of just record history? I think the answer has to be that God saw fit to pre-record history in order to make it all the more apparent that this book was ultimately written by God Himself. As Peter tells us in his 2nd epistle: *For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.* So when I say you've come to the right place, I'm referring not merely to Bethlehem, but I'm referring to the source book – God's Word, the Bible.

In the context of that statement Peter makes regarding that more sure word of prophecy, reference is made to his own experience in the Mount of Transfiguration.

For he received from God the Father honour and glory, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. 18 And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him in the holy mount (2Pet. 1:17,18). This is a very clear reference to that time when Christ took Peter and James and John into the mount and was transfigured before them in such a way that Christ did shine with a brightness that outshines the sun. Peter recalls how on that occasion they were with Christ in that mount and they beheld His glory and they heard the voice of God the Father.

But then Peter goes on to say in his 2nd epistle that there is a certain phenomenon that contributes even greater certainty to the truth of Jesus Christ. Listen to what he says in v. 19 *We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed...* That's a very strong statement isn't it? And it serves to answer the question I raised a moment ago as to why God would see fit to pre-record history. He's pre-recorded history and then also recorded the fulfillment of that history so that you and I might have a more sure word of prophesy about the things that pertain to Christ.

I can draw a similar analogy to Peter's experience from those shepherds in Luke 2 who watched over their flocks by night. What an experience they encountered when the glory of the Lord shone round about them and they heard the angel proclaim *Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord (Lk. 2:10,11).* And then they saw the heavens opened and they were able to behold how worship is done in heaven when they heard the multitude of angels say (or perhaps sing) *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men (Lk. 2:14).*

An experience you could say that in some respects was similar to Peter's experience in the Mount of Transfiguration and yet the same thing would apply here as what Peter applies in his account of that Transfiguration and that is that *we have also a more sure word of prophecy.* And that sure word is given to us in Mt. 2 where we have the account of Herod summoning all the chief priests and scribes together, demanding of them where Christ should be born. And in their response to Herod's demand they cite that sure word of prophecy that comes from Micah 5:2. *And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, 6 And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel (Mt. 2:5,6).*

So when I say that we can have confidence that we've come to the right place, I'm not just simply referring to the city of Bethlehem but I'm referring to the source through which we learn of Bethlehem. I'm speaking of God's Word, the Bible. By coming to this book you have come to the right place to learn of Christ and to learn of everything that pertains

to salvation. And this leads to my next point for not only does our text show us that we've come to the right place (or source) but it also shows us that:

II. We're Trusting in the Right Plan of Salvation

Listen again to the words of the text and bear in mind now that Bethlehem is being addressed directly: *But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel.*

You could say that in this statement addressed to Bethlehem, God through the prophet Micah declares in a very general way what the plan of God is for the ages. That plan is for One to come forth, and not just come forth but *he's to come forth unto me* – i.e. He's to come forth unto God Himself.

That's something that's easy for Christians to overlook and especially when you hear the message of the angels to the shepherds when they say to them in Lk. 2:11 *For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.* This is good news for men. This is especially good news for lost sinners. *Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.* You would be mistaken, however, to presume that the ultimate purpose in Christ's coming forth was simply for the benefit of those who would see their need of a Savior. Christ's coming forth is ultimately unto His Father.

This becomes readily apparent throughout the gospels when you discover that the words Christ spoke were words given to Him by His Father. Jn. 17:8 *For I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me; and they have received [them]...* You can add to this Joh 12:49 *For I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak.*

The same can be said of the works of Christ. These represented Christ coming forth unto His Father. Jn. 5:19 *Then answered Jesus and said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise.* All that Christ did, He did unto His Father. *I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do* (Jn. 17:4).

So can you identify each and every part of Christ's ministry as a going forth to His Father. He left heaven to be born of a virgin in the city of Bethlehem as unto His Father. He was baptized to mark the starting point of His official earthly ministry as unto His Father. He lived a life of perfect obedience as unto His Father. He performed His miracles as unto His Father. He went all the way to Cavalry's cross as going forth unto His Father having prayed to His Father, *not my will but thine be done.*

This should tell you something about the unity between the Father and the Son. There is no disparity between them. They are perfectly joined together in the plan of salvation. Christ does not have to make intercession to a heavenly Father that is reluctant to bless, Christ rather makes intercession in order to remind His Father of what they both agreed to

in the covenant of redemption and how Christ has done His part in securing the blessings that He and His Father agreed to for all who would trust in Christ.

And would you notice from the text that the aim of Christ in going forth unto His Father was that Christ would be ruler in Israel. *But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel.*

We recognize a 3-fold mediatorial role for Christ. He is our prophet, priest, and king. And when you think of Christ in this 3-fold mediatorial role you should think of His priestly functions as being foundational to everything else. Question #25 of our shorter catechism tells us that *Christ executeth the office of a priest, in his once offering up of himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, and reconcile us to God; and in making continual intercession for us.*

His priestly ministry of offering himself as a sacrifice for our sins provides the content or the substance of what He tells us as our prophet. And it was because He successfully accomplished His mission of redemption by dying for our sins that He won the right to take His place as our King at the right hand of God. I love the way this is expressed in Heb. 1:3 which speaking of Christ says *Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high.*

So our text this morning tells us that we've come to the right place by coming to the Word of God. It also assures us that we're trusting in the right plan when we trust in Christ for salvation. His plan of salvation is the plan of the ages. The Bible from cover to cover is the unfolding of that plan.

Before I leave this point pertaining to God's plan could I point out quickly and briefly how the little city of Bethlehem illustrates for us the kind of people that Christ came to save. Did you notice how Bethlehem is described in our text? *But thou Bethlehem Ephrata, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah.*

Bethlehem was little to the point of being insignificant. It was not like the stately city of Jerusalem where the temple was located. In fact it was a tiny suburb about 5 miles South of Jerusalem. It's mentioned for the first time in the Bible back in Gen. 35:16. It's mentioned in connection with Jacob's wife, Rachel, when she lost her life giving birth to her second son. She called his name Benoni which means *son of sorrow* but Jacob changed his name to Benjamin which means *son of my right hand*. And in both of these names we find a vivid description of the One who would be born there many generations later.

We should note as well that this insignificant suburb which lie 5 miles South of Jerusalem is the main setting in the book of Ruth where we read of Boaz, the Kinsman-redeemer fulfilling his role by taking Ruth to be his wife. And as that book comes to a close, the setting still being in little Bethlehem, we read of the lineage of Boaz who through Ruth begat Obed who in turn begat Jesse who in turn begat David. Of all the kings of Israel, only David and Jesus were born in the little town of Bethlehem.

But let me be a little more direct here, if I may, by suggesting to you that Bethlehem, the littlest among the thousands of Judah illustrates for us the kind of people that the everlasting plan of redemption would apply to.

We can draw from Paul's words to the Corinthians to make this application when he writes to them in 1Cor. 1:26ff *For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: 27 But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; 28 And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are.*

Can you see the connection now between the little city of Bethlehem and the recipients of salvation. Like Bethlehem, the recipients of salvation are little, not mighty, now wise by worldly standards, not noble among men but little, in the sense that they see their own unworthiness for the least of God's blessings. Another way to describe them would be in terms of the first beatitude – they are poor in spirit. They stand in contrast to others who like the Pharisee in the temple pounded his chest and said *Lord, I thank thee that I am not like other men.* Such pride has no place in Bethlehem and certainly no place in the hearts of those who are the recipients of salvation.

And so I wonder this morning, can you make the spiritual connection between yourself and this little town of Bethlehem? Have you seen your sin? Will you see your sin and come to Christ. Our text this morning should give you great confidence that in coming to Christ you've come to the right person who executed the right plan for the ages, the plan of redemption.

I have but one more point I want to leave with you from our text. We've seen how our text assures us that we've come to the right place and we're trusting in the right plan. Let me close by showing you how this text bolsters our confidence that:

III. We've Come to the Right Person

Our text ends with a statement that has been rightly identified as making Micah 5:2 a key verse that refers to the deity of Christ. *But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.*

Christ was born of a virgin and born in the city of Bethlehem. We know, therefore, that He was a man, a true man. Our shorter catechism tells us in answer in #22 that Christ, the Son of God, became man, by taking to himself a true body, and a reasonable soul, being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and born of her, yet without sin. So He was born a man. But He was and is also God.

He showed Himself to be God over and over again. His supernatural birth at Bethlehem shows us His divinity. His many miracles show us His divinity. To die the death that He must die He must be more than a mere man. Indeed He must be more than a good man or a

wise man. He must be the God-man. Who else could undergo such wrath from His Father and prevail over that wrath so that He could make the announcement *It is finished*. Only Christ, the Son of God and the Son of man could bring forth such an accomplishment.

This is why those wise men worshipped Him when came from the East and were guided by the star to Christ in Bethlehem. If this child, born to the virgin Mary is not God, then those wise men grievously erred for only God is to be worshipped. And so we may worship Him today in confidence knowing as we do that we're not following cunningly devised fables when we speak of Christ and His atoning death. He's shown Himself to be God.

And though we focus more, perhaps, on His birth this time of year than we do at other times of year we nevertheless confess also His resurrection from the dead for by that resurrection He was declared with power to be the very Son of God.

So how do you know? – as I asked in the beginning of this message. How do you know you're worshipping the right person? How do you know your religion is true? How do you know salvation is real? And the answer is really quite simple – we've come to the right place which means we've come to the right source – God's word which gives us so much pre-recorded history and then gives us the fulfillment of that history that we come away knowing and saying that there is no other book like the Bible. There is no other book that has the stamp of God on it like this book does.

And we're trusting in the right plan. It's the plan of the ages. It's the plan that reveals itself before time even started. Before man even fell into sin God has His rescue plan in place. It was the plan of God's own Son leaving heaven to take His place in the virgin's womb and to be born of her in the city of Bethlehem. It's the plan that shows Him going forth unto His Father in order to accomplish redemption and thus become the ruler of Israel. And we know because we're trusting in the right person, the person of Jesus Christ, the One whose goings have been from old from everlasting. Or to use another title given to us in the book of Revelation – He's the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.

I hope that during this season when much is made of our Savior's birth that you'll think much on Christ and that your confidence in Him will be strong and grow stronger.