

## A Ruler Out of Bethlehem

Call to Worship: Psalm 2

1st Scripture: Micah 5:1-5

2nd Scripture: Matthew 2:1-6

Hymn #109- *This is My Father's World*

Hymn #152- *O Little Town of Bethlehem*

Hymn #105- *Let Them Praises Give Jehovah*

### Introduction

Last time, we looked at the whole narrative found within the first twelve verses of chapter 2, and we concluded by considering the three different types of responses given here, to the advent of Christ.

This morning, I want to especially hone in on verse 6, which contains a second Old Testament prophecy that affirms Jesus as the Messiah/Christ. You'll recall that, after the wisemen had come to Jerusalem, looking for information about the location of the young Messiah, King Herod, attempting to find out where exactly He was to be born, called the religious leaders together (the chief priests and Scribes), to seek out this information. Fearing for the security of his own throne, ultimately, he wanted to have the child killed.

Quoting from Micah 5:2, the religious leaders show that the Messiah was to come out of Bethlehem, the place of King David's birth. Now, before we move on to examine this text more closely, it is important to recognize that, in providing this information, Matthew is showing that even the religious leaders of the day, though indifferent to the promise of the coming Messiah, knew very well (and here had affirmed) where the Messiah was to be born. And so, while being born in Bethlehem, in and of itself, doesn't equal, being the Messiah, it is another necessary piece of the prophetic puzzle, which when added to the whole, served to affirm the Messianic office and calling of Jesus. And this was especially important, because some had assumed that Jesus was born in Nazareth of Galilee, where He later spent much of His childhood life. We find evidence of this confusion found in John's Gospel, in chapter 7:40-44:

*"Therefore many from the crowd, when they heard this saying, said, "Truly this is the Prophet." Others said, "This is the Christ." But some said, "Will the Christ come out of Galilee? Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the seed of David and from the*

*town of Bethlehem, where David was?” So there was a division among the people because of Him. Now some of them wanted to take Him, but no one laid hands on Him.”*

## **I. Micah’s Context**

Micah’s short Book of prophecy (7 chapters) was written during the same time that much of Isaiah’s much larger Book (66 chapters) was written, during the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, who were three kings that had reigned, one right after the other, in the southern kingdom of Judah. And he addresses both the northern kingdom of Samaria and the southern kingdom of Judah in his Book (see verse 1). Now, keeping in mind that the northern kingdom of Israel/Samaria went apostate, right from the moment the kingdom was divided (when Jeroboam reigned in Samaria), and that Judah itself was not fairing too well (remember, Jotham’s father Uzziah had gone deeply astray in the latter part of his reign, and King Ahaz, the middle of the three kings here mentioned, had committed some of the most heinous sins imaginable, and that, without repentance), we would rightly suspect that Micah is going to be addressing matters of coming judgment.

And yet, as is often the case, because of the incomprehensible grace of God, even in great judgment, He remembers mercy, leading to the sparing and sanctifying of a remnant. One cannot help but recognize a common pattern in the prophetic Books, where the giving of the “bad news,” while dreadful, is always accompanied by good/gracious news, especially foreshadowing the coming of the Messiah, who would ultimately bring about the true peace that God had promised from the beginning, and which was so desperately needed, in both, Israel, and the world at large.

Now, the emphasized judgment that is given in Micah’s Book, involves the powerful, antagonistic nation of Assyria, whom God had raised up and would use to bring total judgment upon the northern kingdom of Samaria, and partial, severe judgment upon the southern kingdom of Judah. Later on, the Babylonians would conquer the Assyrians, leading to the sparing of Judah for a time, until they likewise, would face the same complete judgment of exile. For now, during the reign of Hezekiah, the Assyrians would come in to destroy and exile Samaria (and the northern kingdom, under the reign of Hoshea). Following this, they would take many of the

fortified cities of Judah, and surround Jerusalem, with the intent of conquering Jerusalem as well. But, following the intercession of Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah, God would deliver Jerusalem from the powerful hand of the Assyrians, ultimately bringing judgment upon the Assyrians, whom although He had used them to conquer many nations, had boasted in their own strength, as if they themselves had accomplished their feats.

And so, Micah is writing to Samaria and Judah, in anticipation of what the Assyrians would do, as a vehicle of God's judgment upon the two kingdoms. And our text, which points to a far greater Messianic fulfillment, carries a deep pocket of good news, revealing the grace that God would yet bring, following this context of great and dark judgment against the rebellious acts of the Jewish nations.

## **II. A Ruler out of Bethlehem** (Micah 5:2-5)

Now, the stark and profound impact found in verse two, is hard to appreciate from our standpoint, but from a Jewish standpoint, living during the time of the events that were already taking place, under an increasingly growing and powerful Assyrian empire, the insertion of verses 2-5 into the entire context of Micah's prophecies, would have shaken the soul to the core. It was an absolute paradox, which of course, we have learned more and more, to see as God's common tool for glorifying His mighty Name.

In the midst of all of this ordained tragedy and judgment, you have the word, "But," inserted, but what follows this "but," could never have been imagined, in any realistic sense, in the Jewish mindset. God was going to do something, in a most profound and unpredictable way, so that, in spite of the gross, rebellious atrocities committed by His own people, He would ensure that His great and glorious Name would be exalted and glorified, by accomplishing what He alone could accomplish; victory over all of His enemies, by a means that could be seen as nothing less than His marvelous work.

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting" (vs. 2).

Now, imagine the following scenario for a moment, to try to get a taste of the profound sense of this statement. Imagine a large hall, full of representatives from all over the world (from every nation, first to third world). And they are gathered there to discuss a worldwide problem; a looming catastrophe that is on the horizon, which if not dealt with, could very well lead to the extinction of mankind and life as we know it. And this problem, is something that would seem to require some kind of a combination of strength, intelligence, scientific advancement and technology, along with a host of other critical expertise, to even begin to deal with it. But, here's the catch. Only one nation can be trusted to deal with this problem. And these representatives are gathered together to vote on who that nation would be. And so, they vote, and the nation chosen to deal with this worldwide, life or death problem, is "Botswana!" How would you feel about that?

Well, out of all the places in the vast scope of the land of Judah, Bethlehem, a town for breeding shepherds, was just not the town that you would ever imagine a great ruler coming from. It was just not known for its military prowess, royal decor or popularity, in any sense of the word. Yes, David was born in Bethlehem, but even that seemed to be an anomaly, and he was far more known for making Jerusalem famous, that glorious city, elevated on Mount Zion. Micah even has to clarify that the Bethlehem that he is speaking about is the one where, Ephrathah is located, so as to distinguish it from the Bethlehem that was in Zebulun, which perhaps would have been a more optimal choice even? It were, as if, he wanted to ensure that the last place in Israel that one would suspect to be the place of origin for this Ruler, is precisely the place that God has in mind.

Though this small town was recognized as little among the many military divisions of Israel, Micah continues, "Yet out of you shall come forth to Me, the One to be Ruler in Israel..." You see, God often chooses His greatest servants out of the least noisiest, most fragile and unexpected places. We already saw how He used mangy, dejected, unclean shepherds to proclaim the birth of His Son, foreign wisemen to behold the glory of His Son, and when you go back through Biblical history, you will often find that some of God's greatest and most well respected representatives, were hardly, naturally fit for their God given tasks. Well here, the greatest Ruler of all time; the One who would rule over the true Israel of God, and ultimately

over the entire universe for that matter; the One who would bring about the greatest deliverance for His people, not simply from powerful enemies like the Assyrians, but from the power and curse of sin, would be born in a feeding trough in Bethlehem.

This One would come forth *to God*. Though man is impressed by all manner of outward show and power, God calls unto Himself, this One, from the lowest earthly origin; a Ruler who will exhibit the highest form of humility and lowliness, to be His greatest warrior and representative....because God looks at the heart and not at the outward appearance. God looks at the strength and power, found in the glorious virtues of love, humility, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control, and not at bulging muscles, scholarly degrees and athletic precision. This Ruler's life would suit His birth; a man of lowly origin, suited to live a life of lowliness...God's King! This Ruler, who would sacrifice for a time, the glory of His heavenly reign, to become one of us in Bethlehem, would likewise sacrifice His very humanity to redeem and bring, many sons to glory! Yes, Bethlehem was quite suited for Him!

And to make things even more mind blowing, the Lord also reveals that this Ruler is One, "whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting." This One who was to come in the future, born in the lowly town of Bethlehem, is also one who has a past...an everlasting past! How in the world does this pan out! And the language here is intentionally thought provoking. The One who shall "come forth" is also the One who was already "going forth." One, who was moving about and consciously active from eternity, will come forth, being born of a woman. Beyond the shadow of any doubt, Micah is here stating that the One to be born Ruler over Israel, is One who has already existed eternally. There is no stronger assertion of infinite duration that can be expressed in the Hebrew language ("oulm" "from eon" - Jamieson-Fausset-Brown). [Consider Psalm 90:2, Proverbs 8:22-23 & John 1:1]. There is hardly a clearer way for the prophet to state, "God will become man!" [Note: When David says, "The Lord said to my lord, sit at My right hand until I put Your enemies under Your feet" - Matthew 22:44; Psalm 110:1]

Returning then to a summary conclusion of the coming judgment of God upon Israel, Micah then inserts this Hope, into the overall unfolding of God's preordained plan. Micah 5:3-5:

*"Therefore He shall give them up, until the time that she who is in labor has given birth;*

*Then the remnant of His brethren shall return to the children of Israel. And He shall stand and feed His flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD His God; And they shall abide, for now He shall be great to the ends of the earth; And this One shall be peace.”*

And so, here Micah returns to expressing the reality of the coming judgment upon Israel and Judah, “Therefore He (God) shall give them (“His people”) up...” Dark times are coming, very soon for the northern kingdom, but ultimately for both kingdoms. They will face devastation for a time. But, even in spite of this terrible reality, there is a far greater hope of redemption to come. And while, a remnant of ethnic Israel would be brought back from the exile in due time, even this reality is meant to foreshadow a far greater reality, which is to come in the redemption of the true Israel of God, a remnant called out of all nations, who will be circumcised not merely in the flesh, but in the heart; children of Abraham by faith, who share the same faith as Abraham, which Justified Abraham before he was circumcised. And they will receive the greater, far more glorious redemption that God has ordained from the very beginning!

And so, God would give them up for a time, *until the time that she who is in labor has given birth*. Better times are coming, when this Ruler is born of a virgin (in keeping with the prophecy of Micah’s contemporary, Isaiah). And then, God will call true, spiritual Israel, out of her captivity and bondage to sin (again, foreshadowed in the return of the Jewish exiles). “*And He shall stand and feed His flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD His God; And they shall abide (they will no longer depart from serving the Lord, and therefore, they will no longer be judged and cast out of God’s presence), for now He shall be great to the ends of the earth (again, His reign will be universal, reaching out to all nations and peoples and tribes and languages); And this One shall be peace (peace between all nations, and more importantly, and in keeping with our Matthew context, peace with God)!*”

Finally brethren, we simply note that it is no coincidence that the word “Bethlehem,” means “House of Bread.” For, it is there that the “Bread of Life,” and the “Bread of Heaven” would be born, and He would feed all nations with the eternally satisfying blessings of God’s kingdom and presence. They will never hunger or thirst, and they will experience perfect peace and satisfaction in the presence of God, and among the people of God...forever!

### **III. Conclusion**

Returning once again to Matthew's Gospel and context, we find then, the glorious, ultimate fulfillment of this, Micah's prophecy; that great hope, which followed times of great darkness and dread for the people of God. And interestingly enough, it was the chief priests and scribes, who unknowingly, were used by God to affirm that the Lord Jesus Christ was the great fulfillment of this prophecy.

Now, one might ask, "In what sense, could the Lord Jesus Christ be said to have fulfilled this prophecy, since he never sat on the literal throne of Israel? How can He who was ultimately crucified be said to *rule*, in any sense? Well, at the end of Matthew's Gospel, in Chapter 28:18ff, we are given the answer to this very question. You see, Jesus was indeed crucified, but only that He, by means of His substitutionary atonement, might redeem and purchase a people for Himself, from every nation in the world. He needed to die for His subjects first, so that they could be welcomed into His righteousness kingdom as His forever blessed subjects. And then, following His death, three days later, God had raised Him from dead. And when He had done so, He gave Him all authority in heaven, on earth and under the earth. And so, He gained the authority of His reign by means of His resurrection. And then, He ascended to the right hand of God, where He reigns, until all of His enemies are put under His feet, and His people are called into His kingdom, by the regenerative power of the Holy Spirit, who grants His people the faith that justifies and unites to Christ!

And so, He reigns in the greatest sense now, ordering all events and things unto the fulfillment of His glorious will. And this is evidenced in the building of His church, the true Israel of God, who subject themselves to His reign, in obedience and faith. He reigns in the hearts of His people, and when He returns, He will exercise vengeance upon all who do not know Him, and He will consummate His kingdom, such that what is now a kingdom of the heart, realized only by those who are saved, will come into the fullness of its outward expression, as every knee will bow to Him, in heaven, on earth and under the earth! And so, indeed He is the Ruler from Micah's prophecy, who presently reigns, and who will reign forever!

In the meantime, the call is for all people, from Israel and out to the whole world, to submit themselves to Christ now, while the hope remains of receiving His mercy and grace!

Friend, where does that put you, this morning? The Gospel!

Amen!!!

Benediction: Jude 1:24-25