

○ BETHLEHEM EPHRATHAH!

Micah 5:2-6

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But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days (Mic. 5:2).

Micah's prophecy of the birth of Christ is not only his best-known passage but is also the central promise of his book. We can see this in three ways. First, there is the structure of the book. Micah consists of two oracles of judgment surrounding a great salvation oracle. The prophecy of a Savior from Bethlehem is the chief promise of the salvation oracle, and thus occupies the theological center of Micah's book. Second, Micah here offers the solution to the chief problem against which he has been preaching. Jerusalem's crisis resulted from corrupt and unfaithful leadership. God's answer is one who "shall come forth for me who is to be ruler in Israel" (Mic. 5:2).

Third, this prophecy of the Messiah's birth in Bethlehem is the most remarkable of Micah's predictions. Chapter 1 prophesied the details of the Assyrian invasion under Sennacherib. Skeptics reject this as a true prediction, since the events took place during Micah's lifetime and thus it is not possible to prove that he told of them in advance. In Micah 4:10, he then predicts Israel's Babylonian captivity, which would not happen for over a hundred years. This, too, is rejected by critical scholars, who first insist that prophecy of the future is not possible, and thus assert that Micah's prophecy must have been inserted in the text after the fact.

No such quibbles can be made about Micah 5:2, which accurately predicts the Messiah's birth seven hundred years beforehand, copies

of which exist from before the time of Christ. Micah's prophecy of Christ's birth was so well known that when King Herod sought the location of the Savior's birth, his royal scholars referred to it without hesitation: "They told him, 'In Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel'" (Mt. 2:5-6).

This prophecy of the birth of Jesus Christ, the Savior-King of Israel, is the chief message that God gave to Micah for the hope of his people. But it is more than a prediction; it is a sermon outlining the chief features of the Savior's coming and unfolding God's mysterious plan for history, centered on the victory of the true king, Jesus Christ.

A SMALL TOWN LAUDED

Micah announces this prophecy against the backdrop of Jerusalem's dire situation around the year 700 BC. Assyria had ravaged the country and, though God had miraculously saved the city, Jerusalem faced the bleak prospects of its ineffective leadership. In chapter 4, Micah promised a future time of strength and glory in a revived kingship. He called the people to look forward to "that day" to come. But where should they look for this new day of hope?

Micah answers in a way that is both remarkable and wonderful. The people are not to look to the high hills of privilege and power, but to a small town in the country: "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel" (Mic. 5:2).

Bethlehem was a remarkable place to bring forth a great king because of its obscurity and insignificance. This is seen in part in that Micah needed to cite not only the name of the town, Bethlehem, but also the district, Ephrathah, so that people would not confuse it with another Bethlehem in the region of Zebulun. An important city, such as New York, London, or Paris, does not require its state or even national affiliation, but Bethlehem (being so easily overlooked) does.

Moreover, Micah observes that Bethlehem was so small as to be "too little to be among the clans of Judah" (Mic. 5:2). When Joshua allotted towns for the tribe of Judah, Bethlehem was not large enough even to be among the 115 cities and towns on the list (cf. Jos. 15:20-

63). In modern terms, Bethlehem wouldn't merit a single traffic-light and wouldn't sport even a single radio station. By referring to Bethlehem as "too little to be among the clans of Judah," Micah makes a point about its political and military insignificance. The word for "clans" is literally "thousands" (Hebrew, *eleph*). This refers to the basic unit of the Israelite army, which each clan was to raise when its tribe went to war. Bethlehem could not raise any such force, so it did not warrant even the modest designation of a clanhold.

But just because Bethlehem lacked political or military significance does not mean that the town had no significance at all. Indeed, when we consider Bethlehem's biblical significance we see this as not only a remarkable but also a wonderful prophecy. This is first indicated by its name – and we remember that Micah takes the names of towns very seriously (cf. Mic. 1:10-16) – which means "house of bread." Likewise, the name Ephrathah means "bountiful". Unlike other towns Micah has mentioned, which will not live up their names, Bethlehem Ephrathah will: she will provide for Israel by bringing forth a king.

Bethlehem had already played a prominent role that belied its secular insignificance. The love story of Ruth, the humble Moabite believer, and Boaz, the kinsman-redeemer, took place in Bethlehem. More importantly, Bethlehem was the hometown of Ruth and Boaz's descendant, King David. When the prophet Samuel sought for a king after God's own heart, God directed him to this small town: "I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons" (1 Sam. 16:1). James Boice comments: "Bethlehem was a small town among the many towns of Judah, but with a great history. And yet, the history of Bethlehem was to become even greater, for it was out of Bethlehem that he who was to be a divine and everlasting ruler over Israel would come."¹

There are several lessons involved in Micah's prophecy. The first is that *God's way of salvation is contrary to the expectations of men*. It was this way in the choosing of David. When Samuel arrived in Bethlehem, he asked Jesse to present his sons. Jesse brought out seven fine-looking young men, but little David was not taken seriously enough to be summoned. Yet, contrary to all human expectations, David was the one God would use to launch his

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *The King Has Come* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 1992), 40.

kingdom. Now, amidst the dying embers of David's line, God promises something even more unexpected. Leslie Allen explains: "In these days of royal weakness Yahweh reaffirms through Micah that his will is not to sweep aside a worn-out, dying institution. It will flourish again in all its pristine beauty. The sacred promise of old will come true in a new demonstration of divine blessing."²

A second lesson is that *God delights to use the least-likely instruments so as better to display his glory*. So it was that a new ruler would come not from a likely-seeming place like Jerusalem, but rather from little, faithful Bethlehem. Bruce Waltke writes, "The focal point in redemptive history is none other than the insignificant town of Bethlehem, showing that Israel's future greatness does not depend on a great human king but on divine intervention to bring greatness out of nothing."³ Likewise, today, God does not achieve his works through the fleshly appeal of charismatic personalities, but through the hands and lips of humble believers committed to doing his will. The greatest example is Jesus Christ, who was born not into prominence but obscurity, not into wealth but poverty, not into power but weakness. Paul stated that the same was true of the early church, which God used to turn the entire world upside-down:

Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But 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, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (I Cor. 1:26-29).

Third, Micah shows that *the true hope of believers lies in God's sovereign grace*. The last thing one could say about King David was that he was a self-made man. No, David was a God-made man! Only by God's sovereign appointment and through the mighty working of God's grace could a shepherd boy accomplish all that David did. David's defining attribute was faith in the greatness and power of God. So it must be for all God's people, Micah indicates. The only way for little Bethlehem to dominate world history is by God's sovereign grace. And so it would be for Bethlehem's greatest son, Jesus Christ, the Savior promised by Micah. Waltke comments:

² Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 344.

³ Bruce Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 272.

The Messiah's success depends on sovereign grace: God's election, intervention, and empowering. He renounces all human pomp and circumstance and power so that it might be evident to all that [the Lord] elected him and his strength is in [the Lord]. His rise to universal and eternal significance defies man's ways and thoughts and can best be accounted for by divine intervention and enablement. Indeed, he triumphs... by committing himself in faith and obedience to his God who elected him and delighted in him.⁴

This was Micah's message to his troubled generation. What hope was there to escape from their troubles? They were looking for some worldly strategy, compromise, or alliance that would enable them to survive. Micah replies, "Remember little Bethlehem. Remember little David. He trusted the power of God and prevailed." Waltke sums up the message: "History mutely bears witness that human ways to greatness lead finally to humiliating defeat (4:14), whereas God's ways lead ultimately to triumph (cf. Isa. 55:8-9)."⁵

A GREAT SAVIOR PROMISED

Believers triumph not because of their own strength, but because God has provided them a mighty Savior. This was the good news

Micah preached to his generation: "From you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days" (Mic. 5:2). From Bethlehem will come a Savior who is great in his person, in his calling, in his ministry, and in his salvation.

This promised Savior is *great in his person*. Micah says that his "origin is from of old, from ancient days" (Mic. 5:2). Scholars debate the meaning of this expression. Some point out that the words translated "from of old" are used in the Bible to speak of God's eternity (Hebrew, *mime olam*). Deuteronomy 33:27 says, "The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms." In this view, Micah's foretold ruler will arise from eternal, and therefore divine, origins. Based on this reading, some commentators see this as a direct reference to the eternal and divine being of Jesus Christ.

While the New Testament most certainly teaches Christ's eternal being (cf. Lk. 1:32-33; 1 Tim. 6:16; Heb. 1:10), many other scholars

⁴ Ibid., 300-301.

⁵ Ibid., 301.

believe that Micah is referring more directly to Jesus' ancient human lineage. They argue that the contextual link with Bethlehem indicates that "from of old" highlights Jesus' ancestral origin from the royal house of David. This view better reflects Micah's immediate context. But Isaiah, in foretelling the same event, ascribes blatant divinity to the promised Savior: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6).

In those days when the house of David teetered on the brink of despair, Micah having already predicted its utter ruin (cf. 4:9, 5:1), God gives a prophesy of a new David who will never fail. When Micah adds, "And he shall stand" (5:4), he indicates that this royal Son will do what David's other descendants could not achieve: the promised Messiah will establish his throne eternally. Isaiah foretold, "Of the increase of his government of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom... from this time forth and forevermore" (Isa. 9:7).

The promised Savior is also *great in his calling*. He comes forth not primarily for the peoples' sake but for God's: from Bethlehem "shall come forth *for me*" (italics added). Here stands the One who comes to achieve God's purpose in history; he is, as Isaiah designates him, the "Servant of the Lord." Isaiah's first servant song says: "Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations" (Isa. 42:1). These words were deliberately echoed by the voice John the Baptist heard from heaven when Jesus was baptized: "This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased" (Mt. 3:17). Walter Kaiser comments, "The Messiah was to be first of all for the Lord's benefit and His plans, and only secondarily in response to Israel and her distress."⁶ Jesus himself asserted this: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work" (Jn. 4:34).

Moreover, the promised Messiah would be *great in his ministry*. Micah adds: "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" (Mic. 5:4). Jesus directly appropriated this prophecy, teaching: "I am the

⁶ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Micah-Malachi*, The Communicator's Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1992), 64.

good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... I know my own and my own know me... and I lay down my life for the sheep” (Jn. 10:11-15). Unlike the false shepherds of Micah’s day, corrupt leaders who betrayed and oppressed the people, God’s promised Savior tends the flock “in the strength of the LORD.” Like the shepherd-boy David, who slew giant Goliath with a hand strengthened by God, Jesus came to overthrow the power of Satan and the curse of sin (cf. 1 Jn. 3:8). David stood before Goliath boasting: “You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied” (1 Sam. 17:45). Jesus submitted his body to the nails and the cross, conquering sin “in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God” (Mic. 5:4). “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” he cried as he died for our sins.

It is the best-known of Isaiah’s servant songs that highlights the very heart of Jesus’ shepherding ministry. Jesus said, “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (Jn. 10:15). Isaiah had foretold this, using words that Micah would likely have known: “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. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:5-6). The only hope of wayward Israel, as for every sinner, is that God would send his own Son to suffer the penalty of our sins.

Lastly, Micah’s promised Savior would be *great in his salvation*: “And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And he shall be their peace” (Mic. 5:4-5). Here was Israel’s only hope: a new David would come in the strength of the Lord, to shepherd them into green pastures. Jesus would offer a security scarcely imagined: the assurance of God’s blessing through the forgiveness of our sins. Michael Bentley writes: “Those who have the assurance that their sins have been forgiven, and who have dedicated their lives to the service of the Lord, experience many spiritual blessings. They know security from all their fears, and they

are aware of the peace of God in every area of their lives.”⁷ This is the blessedness of which David sang of old:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. . .

He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. . .

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever (Ps. 23:1-6).

A MARVELOUS PLAN REVEALED

Micah’s prophecy answers many urgent questions facing his generation. Who? A descendant of David. What? A ruler in Israel. Where? From Bethlehem. Why? For me, says God. That leaves only one question: When? Here the answer is not so simple, nor so comforting. Micah gives an answer, and in so doing offers a glimpse at God’s marvelous and inscrutable plan for history. He begins: “Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth” (Mic. 5:3).

Micah foretold that the coming years – centuries, in fact – would involve such hardship for the Jews that they could only be compared to a woman in the travails of childbirth. The cause would be that God “shall give them up.” Israel would be handed over by God to suffer and be purified. They had turned their hearts to idols, so in the care of idols they would fall into ruin. God would no longer tolerate their empty worship and false hearts. Isaiah wrote: “When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood” (Isa. 1:15). Abandoned by God, over the coming centuries Israel would experience the full fury of her greatest fears, including Jerusalem’s fall, the destruction of the temple, slaughter and exile. Even after God restored them to the city and caused the temple to be rebuilt, the coming centuries would include subjugation to pagan empires, the desecration of the new temple, and occupation by foreign armies. God’s people would have to learn the bitter wages of sin so as to ready themselves for Christ’s coming. Jesus’ first message related to

⁷ Michael Bentley, *Balancing the Books: Micah and Nahum Simply Explained* (Durham: Evangelical Press, 1994), 64.

this chastisement: “The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mk. 1:15). “Therefore,” Micah writes, God would give them up to all the travails of bondage and affliction, for the purpose of readying Israel’s heart for the Savior.

When Jesus was born, the remnant of God’s faithful people was in fact ready and waiting. One of them was Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. He responded to the news of the coming birth by reflecting on prophecies like Micah’s: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets of old, that we should be saved from our enemies” (Lk. 1:68-71). We hear similar words of faith from the lips of Jesus’ mother, Mary, and from aged Simeon and Anna, who were waiting for the Messiah in the courts of the temple (cf. Lk. 2:22-38).

Consider the marvelous providence involved in the fulfillment of Micah’s prophecy, signaling the end of Israel’s divine abandonment. Joseph, the carpenter, was betrothed to the maiden Mary in Nazareth of Galilee. An angel appeared to each of them, foretelling that by the Holy Spirit’s power, God’s Son would be born through her virgin womb. Meanwhile, in far-away Rome, the emperor Caesar Augustus had an argument with King Herod, and as a result decreed that Judea would be levied with a tax. To emphasize his authority, Augustus took the unusual measure of requiring all the Jewish people to be registered in their hometowns. This occurred during the very month Mary was expecting to bear her son. So Joseph and Mary made the arduous journey to the place of Joseph’s origin, which as a descendant of David was Bethlehem. There, not by Caesar’s will but by the sovereign decree of God, in fulfillment of his ancient prophecy, the virgin foretold by Isaiah gave birth to God’s Son, and it was out of Bethlehem that Israel’s Savior-King was brought forth. All the world was sleeping when the sign of salvation was given; as Phillips Brooks wrote in “O Little Town of Bethlehem”: “Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”⁸

⁸ Phillips Brooks, “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” 1868.

This ended the first phase of God’s marvelous plan for his people. Micah then notes two features of the phase that would follow. He states, “then the rest of his brothers shall return” (Mic. 5:3), and adds, “now he shall be great to the ends of the earth” (Mic. 5:4). Both of these refer to the ingathering of the Gentiles through the missionary spread of the gospel to all nations.

This is God’s plan for rescuing his people from their foreign enemies, by gathering believers from all nations as members of one spiritual family through faith in Christ. The Jews were burdened only for their own brothers – their fellow Israelites who had been lost to captivity. But Micah speaks of the return of “his” brothers – that is, the Messiah’s brothers – to include both lost Israelites and lost Gentiles. Jesus foretold this in his good shepherd discourse: “I have other sheep who are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd” (Jn. 10:16). Paul, quoting directly from Micah’s prophecy, states that in the spiritual bond of faith the enmity between Jew and Gentile is finally removed: “Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” (Eph. 2:13-14). Bruce Waltke comments, “In this way Messiah’s rule will become great, even to the ends of the earth, and so Israel will live securely.”⁹

Lastly, Micah presents a vision that is among the most difficult to interpret in the entire book: “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” (Mic. 5:5-6).

Because these verses speak specifically about the Jews’ defeat of Assyria and Babylon, some scholars conclude that this promise must be fulfilled after the return of Christ, when Israel is thought to be regathered in its ancient land against its former foes. But such a view fails to appreciate the prophets’ common practice of presenting distant realities in present-tense form. The substance of the promise is the

⁹ Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah*, 303.

same for all generations – triumph over evil – but to make sense to their original hearers, the prophets necessarily garbed the future fulfillment in the clothes of their present situations.

The threat in Micah’s time came from Assyria, with danger looming from Babylon (“the land of Nimrod”), so Micah dresses his message of future victory in terms of their defeat. Micah says, “We will raise against him seven shepherds and eight princes of men; they shall shepherd the land of Assyria with the sword” (Mic. 5:5-6). The numbers seven and eight speak of an adequate, indeed more than adequate, supply of holy leaders, who under the promised Messiah would defend their territory and strike back with great effect.

Living in Micah’s future, we see this promise fulfilled in Christ’s provision for the security of his church. As Micah foresaw, Christ raises up gifted shepherds and leaders to protect the truth and cast back the enemies of our faith. The sword we wield today, shepherding in more and more of Christ’s sheep and defending the doctrines of the gospel, is the Word of God. And redeemed by Christ’s blood, we enjoy “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding” (Phil. 4:7).

DYING TO LIVE

So Israel would suffer years of travail to chasten them for their sins. Then the Savior, a new and greater David, would appear. He will shepherd not only Israel but all the nations, giving peace and making his name great throughout the earth. His kingdom will stand against all foes, because “he shall deliver us from the Assyrian when he comes into our land and treads within our border” (Mic. 5:6).

Does this plan seem familiar? It should, because its outline mirrors the story of Jesus himself: death, resurrection, exaltation, and eternal peace. Israel must die to sin, finding new life from God, walking in his power, and patiently awaiting his salvation.

So it is for every believer. To be a Christian is to have the story of our former life ended with the words, “And then he died.” Then a new book begins, telling of a new life in Christ, with God’s power working in us and a sure hope of glory. Paul explains, “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with

him in a resurrection like his... For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God” (Rom. 6:5, 10).