

CHRISTMAS TRUTH - Making Spirits Bright - part one

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THE PROMISE OF CHRISTMAS THAT TURNED HEROD INTO A MURDERER

Micah 5:1-6 - "Now muster your troops, O daughter of troops; siege is laid against us; with a rod they strike the judge of Israel on the cheek. [2] 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. [3] 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. [4] 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. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. [5] And he shall be their peace. 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; [6] 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. "

It's a passage so obscure many of you had to look Micah up in the table of contents in your Bible, but the scholars just prior to Jesus' birth knew these verses well. Matthew tells us that King Herod had these very words quoted to him, and they filled his power-hungry heart with trepidation:

"Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, [2] saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." [3] When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; [4] and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. [5] They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: (then the wise men partially quote and partially misquote the words from our text in Micah) [6] 'And you, O 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.' "

The wise men from the east were familiar with this text because they had been studying it. They knew that baby Jesus, born in Bethlehem, was the promised Messiah. They had

also been studying Jeremiah's prophecy about the star and had been following it. In short, they saw what many people saw in those days, that everything was coming about as the prophets had foretold. They knew what so many people today miss - Jesus Christ was the promised Messiah.

Herod was so sure of this fact that it filled his heart with fear. He knew his rulership was no match for the One whom Isaiah said would be called "**mighty God**" with Father God's "**government resting upon His shoulder.**" Herod and the whole religious establishment (that's what Matthew means when he says Herod "**and all Jerusalem with him**") was deeply troubled. His attempted annihilation of all those two years and under evidenced the desperation of his heart.

One of the things that made this prophecy so unlikely was the fact that neither Mary nor Joseph lived in Bethlehem. Joseph was to go there because it had been the place of his birth. He may not have lived there since. Mary was living in Nazareth when she became pregnant and was in no condition to travel anywhere. That is why God saw to it that all the might and muscle of the powers that be in Rome did His exact bidding in calling for a census that would bring Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem.

Let this wonderful old story pound something freshly into your soul this morning. Every Christmas we celebrate not only the **fact** of Christ's birth, but the **way** in which God brings it about. God moves both **galaxies** and **empires** to fulfill His Word. There was absolutely nothing **likely** in Jesus being born in Bethlehem. Everything seemed against it. **How great is our God!**

Matthew doesn't tell us this, but I'm sure more happened than we read in his brief account. I don't believe for a moment that Herod just listened to these wise men make their speech and move on. I think Herod took out the scrolls. I'm sure he blew the dust off of these ancient manuscripts. He saw things that turned his hard heart into butter.

1) **MICAH'S PROPHECY TELLS US NOT TO ALLOW THE SMALLNESS OF THE BIRTHPLACE TO CAUSE US TO MISS THE GREATNESS OF THE BIRTH**

Micah 5:2 - "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, (which means 'fruitful') 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."

Just look at the first phrase for now. Bethlehem was ***"too little to be among the clans of Judah...."*** She was too small to count. There was nothing about Bethlehem that could ***attract*** such an event. There was nothing in Bethlehem that could have ever ***earned*** such a blessing.

I believe we're supposed to learn something about our God from the birth of His Son. Micah's prophecy paints big events in very broad strokes in these 6 verses. Very few details are given. He warns of God's coming judgment at the hand of the ***Assyrians - "Now muster your troops, O daughter of troops; siege is laid against us; with a rod they strike the judge of Israel on the cheek"***(1).

God's people, Israel, are on the brink of terrifying times. Then he says God will come again and restore His people - ***"the rest of the brothers shall return to Israel"*** - but again, there are no details or times given. It's just a fast-forward through the still unfolded pages of future history.

But suddenly, in the middle of all these broad strokes he paints in one careful detail - ***"Bethlehem" - "out of you One will come forth..."***(2). I think there are ***two*** reasons for this detail. We'll look at the second one in the next point. But the first lesson - the one the wise men missed in their presentation of the text to Herod

- is the ***smallness*** of Bethlehem shows all who will see it - right to this day - the ***pattern of how God sends His grace into this world.***

There are people sitting in this sanctuary this morning who need God's grace and help and even forgiveness desperately but won't turn to Him because they feel unworthy. They feel they don't qualify. And those people need to know Micah's prophecy about Bethlehem. They need to know that Christmas is all about ***"glory to God,"*** not ***"glory to us."*** Bethlehem establishes the same pattern as the stable and the manger. None of them attracts any attention to itself. It isn't about them. It's about God's mercy and love.

This is the message we need at Christmas. Santa may know who's naughty or nice and save his gifts for the nice. The problem is, when we look deep enough into our hearts, that system will leave all of us out in the cold. How typical of all man-made systems! How contrary to the true message of the birth of our Redeemer in Bethlehem!

I said there was a second reason for Christ's birth at Bethlehem:

2) **MICAH'S PROPHECY ABOUT CHRIST'S BIRTH AT BETHLEHEM TIES CHRIST'S SALVATION WITH THE PROMISES OF GOD**

One of the mightiest promises in the Bible comes to David when he was least expecting it:

2 Samuel 7:12-16 - "When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. [13] He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. [14] I will be to

him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, [15] but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. [16] And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever."

These are tricky verses. There is a promise made regarding King David's reign. He is told that the establishment of his throne will continue long after his death. The problem is no one person fulfills all the terms of the promise. We know that the one to whom the promise refers will be a person who commits sins because God says ***"When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men..."*** (2 Samuel 7:14). So there's a very **human** side presented here. And yet the promise also says David's successor will have an **eternal** dimension to His reign as well - ***"Your throne shall be established forever"*** (2 Samuel 7:16).

This is one of the many prophecies that has a **double fulfillment**. Of course, it refers to Solomon, David's natural son, who would come after him and build a ***"house for the LORD,"*** the **physical** temple. And Solomon would sin and God would discipline him. But Solomon wouldn't establish David's throne forever. There would be another King to come - one out of the lineage of David - who would establish David's ***"house"*** in a different, eternal sense.

This is really what **2 Samuel 7** is all about. David won't be the one to build a physical house for the LORD. Another, Solomon, would come after him to do that. And part of the reason was God wanted David - **especially** David - to understand his pivotal role in the coming of the Messiah. God says to David, ***"Listen David, you aren't the one to build a house unto My Name. I don't want you to confuse the issue here. The issue isn't you building a house for Me. The issue you need to understand is I am building a house out of you!"***

This is what scared Herod to death. Everyone knew the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem because He would be of the **“house”** of David. He would be David’s offspring. And Bethlehem was the sign to all that **God keeps His promise!**

And the amazing thing about Micah’s prophecy is he asserts God faithfulness and covenant, **not** when Israel was in a period of spiritual ascension, but when they were facing spiritual and physical oblivion. The Northern kingdom was already destroyed and the Southern kingdom was about to be judged as well.

It will be **700 years** before the light of hope will go on in Bethlehem. Micah won’t be around to see it. But some people have the faith to treat God’s **future** promises like they are **present** reality. God bless the people who don’t have to eat the apples in order to faithfully plant the orchard! Herod is scared because, in his heart, he knows if this is what he thinks it is, if this is God’s Messiah, then He can’t be stopped. Even the sinister plans of the king to kill all the babies won’t stand in God’s way. Bethlehem means God keeps His promise. He fulfills His plans.

3) **MICAH’S PROPHECY MEANS CHRIST WILL SHEPHERD HIS PEOPLE AND USHER IN A KINGDOM OF EVERLASTING PEACE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS**

Micah 5:4-5a - “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. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. [5] And he shall be their peace.”

What a pleasure it is to read these words at this Christmas season! Receive them with a joyful, prayerful heart of faith. These are strong, irreversible words of promise. They will come to pass in fuller ways than we can even picture right now.

- a) **Messiah will “shepherd his flock”** - We’re meant to think of David, caring for his sheep. The One **“of the house of David”** will give the same care and protection over His flock. Ultimately, no need will go unmet in Jesus Christ.
- b) **Messiah will do everything He does in the “strength of the LORD”** - I have so many good intentions that I’m unable to fulfill. There is such a gap between my wishes and my ability. But the One born in Bethlehem will not have any of His plans fail for lack of strength. He comes in the **“strength of the LORD.”** No one will stand against His will. No one will be able to fight against the peace He has for His people.
- c) **Messiah will be “great to the ends of the earth”** - This will not be some tribal deity. His rule won’t be limited to the Jewish people. He will not be one among many objects of worship. Every knee will bow and confess Him as Lord. The Bible says the **“whole earth will be full of His glory!”**

Mark it well, church. The day is fast coming when we will see the fulfillment of a Christmas carol we only sing in faith right now:

**“He rules the world with truth and grace
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness
And wonders of His love.”**

The Messiah - the One Micah prophesied about - the One born in the little town of Bethlehem - still has much work to do. And it is firm and certain. All of those blessings are for those who love Him and His future work.

For those who resist His will by asserting their own, for those who are consumed by their own agendas, for those who, like Herod, see the Messiah's rule as a threat to their own, there is nothing but terror. The Bible says He will come with a ***“rod of iron.”*** He will eternally beat down all opposition just as surely as He fulfilled the prophecies about being born in Bethlehem

The greatest enemy of the Messiah is personal sin. But the Messiah is also the Lamb of God. Receive His grace and glory into your heart today.