



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Micah 5:1-2

“Bethlehem Becoming the House of Bread”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Our theme over these last dozen weeks or so has been the Old Testament anticipation of the Messiah. And of course we could spend many more weeks on the passages of the Old Testament that have to do with the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, but this is our last of the studies of this particular series. And we’re looking at Micah chapter 5 verses 1 and 2 and our subject is Bethlehem becoming the house of bread.

Religious disorder and spiritual chaos characterize our day. The church of Jesus Christ is no longer the little flock meeting in Jesus’ name to worship the Father according to the Holy Scriptures under the oversight of godly elders. Generally the church has become a large worldly organization meeting in the name of a Unitarian god to canvas modern religious views according to the latest discoveries of human wisdom and reason under the oversight of organizational puppets trained and handled from secularized and politicized headquarters. The words are strong, I realize that, and that’s why I’ve used the word generally. I believe however that the sentiments are true although I’m happy to say not universally true.

Fifteen years ago a well known Baptist minister, at one time minister of the First Baptist Church of Charleston, South Carolina, wrote these words,

“We’re living in a day of hazy standards of right and wrong, the old line of demarcation has practically disappeared from modern thinking. (He didn’t know the chaos that would produce in the eighties.) A prominent minister said, (he continued,) the delineation has undergone a transformation somewhat similar to that which is taken place in the world of painting. The old clear cut lines have given way to an impressionistic indefiniteness. The black and white contrasts to low tone grays. The churches have adopted a hush policy on the doctrine of depravity and a Rotarian gospel takes the place of repentance. I like his reference to painting, (the pastor said) there was a time when you could look at a picture and tell what it was. Today, black and white have become gray.

Someone has said the religion of China is Confucian; the religion of America is confusion. A country school teacher applying for a job was asked, “Do you teach that the earth is round or flat?”

“Which way do you want it taught?” was the reply, “I can teach it either way.” Something like that is the attitude of many a pulpit today. How limpid and lucid on the other hand is God’s word? Even its prophecies are not vague and hazy as those of modern false prophets such as Edgar Cayce and Jeane Dixon.

The promises of the Redeemer to come illustrate the point. They narrow systematically in the Old Testament revelation. The first of them declares that the Redeemer shall come from mankind being the seed of the woman as Genesis 3:15 puts it. Then the Scriptures foretell him as coming from the Semitic division of mankind, chapter 9 verse 26. And next the Abrahamic family line in chapter 12 and verse 3, and then from Judah’s tribe in Genesis 49:10, and then from David’s family in Judah 2 Samuel 7, and finally born of a virgin mother in the town of Bethlehem of Judah, Isaiah 7:14 and our text, Micah chapter 5 and verse 2.

Bethlehem was the place of Rachael's death, the beloved wife of Jacob, the scene of the love affair of Boaz and Ruth, and the birthplace of David. But while its name means house of bread, it never was the house of bread until he, the Messiah was born there. The prophecy of his birth there is found in Micah chapter 5 and verse 2, the text to which we now turn. The prophet writes in verse 1 and verse 2 of Micah chapter 5,

“Now gather thyself in troops, O daughter of troops: he hath laid siege against us: they shall smite the judge of Israel with a rod upon the cheek. 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 first describes the place. And let me say a word about the context first of all. And we look at an overview of chapter 4 verse 9 through verse 13. Micah was an eighth century B.C. contemporary of Isaiah, Hosea and Amos. And he ministered to his land in the days of their departure from the word of God and the consequent moral decline that followed. Morals were low, the government was decadent, the courts were corrupt, religion was formulistic. The nation had lost its integrity. Assyria had captured the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. and resumed the deportation of its people.

About twenty years later in 701 B.C. the Southern Kingdom, Judah was also overrun by the Assyrians although Jerusalem was spared. Around this time and in these circumstances Micah uttered the prophecy of the Messiah's birth in Bethlehem. If the occasion of the prophecy is the siege of the city by Sennacherib the Assyrian, Micah may well have spoken this great prophecy at the time to which the proud Assyrian king refers in his boast of his siege of Jerusalem and King Hezekiah in 701 B.C. Sennacherib in his account said that he besieged Hezekiah the Jew, “I shut him up like a caged bird,” he wrote. He says nothing however of God's miraculous deliverance of Judah and his defeat

by the hand of the Lord described in 2 Kings chapter 19. Herodotus, the Greek historian described the defeat as caused by a multitude of field mice devouring during the night the Assyrians quivers and bows and the straps by which they held their shields.

A well known Old Testament scholar once said that Isaiah 4 told the Messiahs virgin birth while Micah 4 told his village birth. One might also add that Isaiah is the first prophet cited in the New Testament while Micah is the second, one speaking of his birth, and the other of the place of his birth.

The opening verse of the 5th chapter of Micah begins with the kingdom facing a desperate situation. The city is addressed and commanded to prepare itself for a siege by the enemy, her king is to be treated in humiliating fashion. It was the custom for the king when acting as judge to stride with his scepter wrongdoers who appeared before him, now however, cooped up in his capital as Sennacherib said, “The king himself, the judge of Israel is to be struck with a soldier’s club.” To be struck on the cheek was a deep insult and thus the fate of the judge of Israel is a picture of the humiliation of the Southern Kingdome that is to come.

There is however an astonishing divine design in all of this, and that the prophet turns to in verse 2. Contrasting verse 1 he says, “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.” As you can see, it is God who speaks the 2nd verse through the prophet. The present humiliation for the city and king in the day of the Assyrian attacks is not the end of things for Judah. Discipline may be necessary, but the future is surprising and glorious.

The prophet writes about this when he says, “But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah.” The forcefulness of the prophecy is seen in the method of address, it is direct, “But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah.” And the words suggest the comfort of the promise, for they mean house of bread, fruitfulness, suggesting things far different from the present situation. As one of the recent

commentators has said, “The figure of failure of verse 1 stands as a foil to his radiant counterpart here. While the king such as Hezekiah may fail, there is coming one from Bethlehem who will not fail.” Hezekiah, the figure of failure then, stands over against the Davidic ruler, the figure of majesty. From the rank and ruin of a disciplined Judah shall come Abraham’s seed and David’s son the king.

The covenants still sustain, Yahweh, the Lord God remembers them in everlasting love. With him, even lowly shattered Bethlehem can produce the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. It’s not strange that God called his man from such a lowly source, “he wishes it to be known that he can take acorns and turn them into mighty oaks,” as someone has said, “As a matter of fact, he does not even need an acorn to do the trick.” As Paul puts it, he calleth those things that be not as though they were. He takes a Gideon, a self-confessed “the least in my father’s house” and conquers one hundred and thirty two thousand Midianites with about three hundred men and Gideon.

One other thing calls for notice here, the prophecy concerns Bethlehem Ephratah. Now, there were two Bethlehems, one in Judah and one in Zebulun. God has no need like the Delphic Oracle to phrase his prophecies carefully so that they might be fulfilled in many ways just to increase the odds against failure. His are always definite. The Bethlehem in Judah is singled out as the one that is meant as the Ephratah, the district in which Bethlehem of Judah indicates.

Secondly, the prophet describes the purpose of God. “Yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel.” Initially God had told Samuel to visit Jesse, David’s father, “For I have provided me a king among his sons,” 1 Samuel 16:1. Still another, long after David’s death is to come and be God’s ruler in Israel. I think it’s rather important to note that God promises that the ruler will be a ruler in Israel. This prophetic promise seems to demand that there exist at the time of his coming and service an Israel, the ethnic people, for that is the sense of the term here. In other words, the promise secures the people future existence and blessing.

In the New Testament the text from Micah is cited by the chief priests and scribes who reply to Herod's question about where the Messiah was to be born. Matthew gives their reply in these words, “And you Bethlehem, land of Judah are by no means least among the leaders of Judah, for out of you shall come forth a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.” The words for me found in Micah appear to be expanded into the clause, “who will shepherd my people Israel” in Matthew, taken probably from 2 Samuel 5:2 where they are the Lord's promise to David. The saintly bishop Lancelot Andrewes who lived in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in a touching sermon on the text from Matthew took the New Testament citation to say that he would be our guide, and therefore inclusive of his three offices of prophet priest and king.

Now he is our great prophet who guides are feet in the way, he is our mediating priest who feeds us from the benefits of his sacrifice, and he is our exalted king who guards us in the way, however, the text clearly lays the principle stress upon his royal office of ruler. And the context makes it plain that that sense receives the emphasis. He is the ruler who inherits the Davidic throne. The note of the royalty of our Lord is often neglected in the church today. Gentle Jesus, meek and mild is the syrupy stress of the pulpit today.

Horton Davies in a book on the varieties of English preaching describes the preaching of Leslie Weatherhead in this way,

“In a Christmas sermon he speaks of the strangeness of the gifts of the three magi for the Christ child and then continues, (and this of course is of Leslie Weatherhead) I do not mean to be in the least irreverent, but did no one give him a soft cuddly woolly toy the ancient equivalent of a teddy bear, did no one give him a rattle, did no one treat him as a little baby thing? And here (Mr. Davies says,) R. W. Dale's rebuke would be apt, that this is to forget that Christ is king, that he is not to be fondled but to be revered. We must not (as Davies adds) in our reference to Christ to allow pathos to degenerate into bathos.

Let us always remember that he is king of kings and Lord of lords, not to be fondled, but to be revered as supreme sovereign of the universe and of us.”

The wise men from the east to Jerusalem ask about the one who has been born King of the Jews. To be born a king is rather unusual; in fact it may be unique. Very few have ever been born king. Spurgeon remarks,

“Men are born princes, but they’re seldom born kings. I do not think you can find an instance in history (he says) where any infant was born king. He was the prince of Wales perhaps and he had to wait a number of years ‘till his father died and then they manufactured him into a king by putting a crown on his head and a sacred chrisom and other silly things, but he was not born a king. I remember no one who was born a king except Jesus.”

And there is emphatic meaning in that verse that we sing, “Born thy people to deliver, born a child and yet a king.”

The final words of the verse give us a description of the person. There we read, “Whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.” Those are striking words, and Paul’s words come to mind as I read them, “Great is the mystery of godliness,” for these final words have been understood in different ways. Some of them who have studied the text have seen a reference to the eternity of the Messianic King in the words, “From of old, from everlasting.” The usage of the terms in the original text argues against that interpretation. The expression translated, “From of old,” for example is found in Nehemiah chapter 12 and verse 46, and there it is rendered by, “of old,” and it plainly is used of the age of David in that place. Further the expression translated, “from everlasting,” is found also in Micah 7 verse 14 and refers there to a historical time, not to eternity. In fact, elsewhere it’s always found in historical context. It therefore seems better to refer the phrase here to the distant historical past, the glorious time of the

beginning of the dynasty of David when the original covenantal promises were made. The words are meant to encourage the nation in its difficult times by assuring them that the election of David and his dynasty for future glorious national blessing through a divine unconditional covenant still holds. Those promises are still valid. Let us never forget that.

As God said of the Davidic dynasty in the 89th Psalm, “Once I have sworn by my holiness, I will not lie to David. His descendants shall endure forever, and his throne as the sun before me. It shall be established forever like the moon, and the witness in the sky is faithful.” By the way, the witness in the sky in that text is the Lord God himself. The ancient glory shall return only magnified and meld into the glory of the Triune God. “Out of thee shall he come forth unto me,” is then a declaration that the royal house established by the Messiah in the future has its root in the ancient city of David and the covenant established with its famous historical king.

The final words state that the Messiah to come has hereditary right to the throne. Being of kingly Davidic lineage, in his human veins there flows royal blood, for he is not only David’s Lord, he is also David’s son and heir. There may be some doubt about whether Micah’s words in verse 2 refer to a divine Messiah, but the following context makes it quite clear that the majestic king, a shepherd king who is to come and deliver Israel is more than a man. To him shall come universal empire as the prophesied Davidic sovereign whose deity is explicitly declared by our Lord in his incarnate ministry. Listen to verse 3 and verse 4 of Micah chapter 5,

“Therefore will he give them up, until the time that she which travaileth hath brought forth: then the remnant of his brethren shall return unto the children of Israel. And he shall stand and feed in the strength of the LORD, (You’ll notice the Messiah shall stand and feed in the strength of the lord) in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God; and they shall abide: for now shall he be great unto the ends of the earth.”

He's not endowed with human weakness; he's endowed with the strength of the Lord God. And so whether our text in verse 2 refers to his deity or not, it's quite plain that the context demands that he be that, the divine God man. Our Lord arguing in his day in the day of questions in Matthew chapter 22 verse 41 through verse 46 pointed out that David's son is also David's Lord.

Let me say a few words by way of conclusion. Bethlehem means house of bread, but only on the night of his birth did the village reach its potential. Then she truly became the house of bread when the Bread of Life was born there in the manger. Having come down from Heaven as he himself says in John 51. Israel tried Sinai and Moses' law, but while it is holy just and good, it cannot save sinners from their sin. Bethlehem and her Davidic shepherd king can alone feed his people with the bread of life. He is no blind guide to Heaven and to the possession of eternal life, for he has been there and has that life eternal with the authority to convey it to the ones given him by the Father. As the Lord Jesus says in John chapter 17 and verse 2 in the great high priestly prayer, “As Thou, Father has given him power over all flesh that he should give eternal life to as many as Thou hast given him.”

Why will we not be led, guarded and fed by him? Is it as in the innkeeper's case who assigned the royal family to the stable and manger that we are ignorant of who he is, when he should come and for what purpose he should submit to crucifixion? The Scriptures are clear when they say, “But when the fullness of time was come God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law to redeem them that were under the law that we might receive the adoption of sons.” Let us abandon the liberal Unitarian gods of fallible human reason that cannot save and the false views of human self righteousness that keep us from fleeing to Micah's shepherd king and God's divine Son. Let us throw off the little gods of our day and give ourselves to our majestic savior God the Lord Jesus Christ to whom all power in heaven and on earth has been given.

Some years ago, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland meeting in Edinburgh heard Sir Bernard Lovell speaking on the immensities of the world of astronomy, Professor Burleigh, professor of Church History at New College in the University of Edinburgh and moderator of the Church of Scotland that year thanked the astronomer for a fine address but concluded with the telling words, “But we believe that our God rules over all your worlds.”

It is this father God who has given to his Son authority to give eternal life to those who trust him and his saving sacrifice. May the Lord enable us, may the Lord enable you to recognize our sin and need, and cast ourselves upon him for time and for eternity. I know of no better time to do that if we have never done that then right now. May God at this very moment cause you in his marvelous grace to give him thanks for the revelation of your sin and of Christ’s sacrifice for sin and of the divine offer for salvation for those who come to him confessing their need of him and resting on him and what he has done in the shedding of his blood for time and for eternity.

Well next week as we continue to look at the story of the Messiah we’re going to turn to the theme of the New Testament revelation of the Messiah and our first two or three studies will be on the Messiah’s birth, and so next week ...

[AUDIO ENDS ABRUPTLY]