



BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: A Hope-Filled Christmas

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Message Title: This One Will Be Our Peace Pt. 1

Release Date: Friday 12/20/19

You happen to know anyone in your world that has some unhealthy control issues? Might be somebody you live with, might be somebody you work with, might even be you. One thing I've learned over the years is, most people that have unhealthy control issues, don't think they do. So, I'm just asking, would you be willing to at least consider the possibility, that maybe you are controlling to an unhealthy level? No, I'm not a psychologist. I've just learned over the years, that most people that I've talked to, that have control issues, can trace it back to a time in their life where their environment was out of control. And when that environment was out of control, they were deeply wounded and deep in their subconscious, they've concluded if I can control the people and the environment around me, I won't get hurt again.

Well, the problem with that is it just doesn't work. As a matter of fact, what it does do, is it makes you and the people around you miserable. The other problem with that, is simply the fact that you're not capable of that task. Try as hard as you want; you cannot control your world. Think about in the course of a day, everything that's out of your control. The reality is it's almost everything. At the end of the day, there is very little you can control. You can control your attitudes; you can control your behaviors. There isn't much else you can really control, which raises the question, then what do you do? What do you do in a world that seems like it's full of chaos and out of control? Well, if you have a Bible, turn with me to Micah Chapter Five.

One of the themes in the Book of Acts, was that Peter kept reminding the religious leaders of the First Century, they should have known the story of Jesus, because it was clearly told in the Old Testament Law and the Prophets. Isaiah and Micah were contemporaries. They lived basically in the same time period, dealing with the same basic circumstances. If you could imagine an environment that was absolutely, totally out of control, that would be the environment that the nation of Israel was in, during the time period of Micah. The northern tribes have been captured and hauled away. The southern tribe of Judah, they are about to be captured, and Nebuchadnezzar is coming with his army. They're surrounded. There really is no hope from a human standpoint. There is every reason for despair; but more than that, every reason for fear. The reality that they were soon to be conquered, tortured, perhaps raped, put to death, or enslaved, was just an absolute reality that was before them. So, in terms of environments that were absolutely out of control and had every reason for fear, that's the environment that Micah is dealing with.

In the midst of all of that, then Chapter Five, Verse One, he introduces a message of hope, as it relates to the coming of a powerful king:

Now muster yourselves in troops, daughter of troops; They have laid siege against us;
With a rod they will smite the judge of Israel on the cheek. (*NASB, Micah 5:1)

Chapter five Verse One is basically setting the scene. It's a reminder that they need to muster their troops because the enemy is outside. The enemy's about to invade. This is, in essence, the last leg of the battle. This is the last chapter. It's kind of time for do-or-die. Basically, they're told that they're going to be defeated and their king will be humiliated. That word that's translated siege is an interesting Hebrew word. It's very unique. The only time it's used in the Old Testament is in reference to Nebuchadnezzar and his campaigns. And that is the case here: Nebuchadnezzar and his troops are about to invade. The idea of their king being "smitten on the cheek" is not just saying that they will be defeated; it is saying that they will be humiliated. They will be embarrassed. The pagan nations hated the Hebrew people. They didn't want to just defeat them; they wanted to humiliate them. They wanted to abuse them. They wanted to enslave them.

Most scholars think that the reference here, is the story that's told in Second Kings, Chapter 25, when Zedekiah was the king, and Nebuchadnezzar and his troops came in, and they conquered Jerusalem and Zedekiah was captured. But it wasn't enough just to capture him; they brought all of his sons before him, and while he stood and watched, they slaughtered in cold blood, one son after another, until they were all dead. And when that was done, they poked out his eyes; they put him in shackles; they tortured him; and they dragged him off to enslavement. So, you have to understand, these people had every reason to be filled with terror. They understood Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians, and they were not a friendly people. So that's basically the reference in Chapter Five, Verse One.

But (Verse Two) as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel.

In the midst of all of this, there is a promise of a coming King, a ruler that will come from God, and He will originate out of Bethlehem. There is a reminder in the text, that Bethlehem was seemingly an insignificant little town. It's only claim to fame was, that's where King David was born. But in the future, there would come this ruler sent from God, that would come out of Bethlehem.

It says that:

His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity.

His "goings forth" mean His actions, His activity. In essence, what's being said is, even though this King will be born in Bethlehem, He's been actively involved in the activity of His people from eternity past, down through the years.

Think of it like this, if Jesus were to write out a resume, His resume would not begin with what happened in the First Century. His resume would begin with eternity past. Jesus has been active from all eternity. We know from Colossians; Jesus was the God of Creation from Genesis One. Jesus appears many times in the Old Testament, through what we refer to as theophanies; so, it isn't that Jesus just one day started - He's always been. But there was a time when this eternal God became the God-man and was born as King in Bethlehem. So, it's obviously a statement that this King would be God. Now a question might be, would these readers have understood that? And the answer is, absolutely, yes. If you go to Matthew, Chapter Two, when the Magi stood before King Herod, and King Herod asked questions about this King, they quoted Micah 5:2, that, "We know that this will be a King from God. We know He'll be a King. We know He'll be born in Bethlehem." They quoted this text, so the answer is, yes, they did understand what was being said here.

Verse Three:

Therefore, He will give them up until the time When she who is in labor has borne a child. Then the remainder of His brethren will return to the sons of Israel.

One of the things that's a little bit challenging to understand in the Prophets is, in many of the Prophets, there's an immediate application of the text - what we would call, "to the first readers" - then there's an application or a fulfillment of the prophecy, and then there's an ultimate fulfillment of the prophecy. There was an application that would be applied to the first reader. There was a future fulfillment which would have been at Christmas, but there is still an ultimate fulfillment to the words that are spoken, that even today, is yet future. It's referring to the Second Advent, the second return of Jesus.

Now going back to the original readers, they didn't necessarily understand this clearly; they just understood the immediate. If you think of these prophecies like a mountain range: when you're miles away from the mountain range, three peaks might seem like they're side-by-side, and that's how they would have understood the words. But as you get closer, you realize, actually one mountain peak is behind the other one, and then there's yet a third one behind that one. But they look like they're back-to-back. That's how people in the First Century understood the prophecies. They understood that there was to be a Second Advent, a return of Jesus, but they expected it immediately. They expected it in their lifetime. They expected the events just to take place back-to-back. But when you actually get up to the mountain peaks themselves, you often find that there's a deep valley, and many miles between one peak and the next peak. That's the advantage that we have. We have the completed Scripture. We now have time to realize that there was a time gap between the first peak and the second peak, which was the First Advent of Jesus, and a considerable amount of time between that peak and the ultimate fulfillment, that we're still waiting for. So, we understand there are these degrees of fulfillment, and the ultimate is yet to come.

In Verse Three, when he's talking about the woman in labor, he's not referring to Mary. He's actually going back to an imagery that he started in Chapter Four, Verse Nine. In that verse, he's talking about the fact that there is no king among them. In an ancient culture, everything had to do with the king. If you had a strong, powerful, righteous king, you had a pretty good chance of living out your life in some degree of peace. But if you had a weak, wicked king, you understood that everything was in jeopardy, and the chance of you having a peaceful, enjoyable life was almost zero. It's not liked our country, where we elect a president. If we get a bad president, we all kind of moan and groan for four years, and then somebody else is elected. That's not the way it worked in a monarchy. If you had a bad king, you had a bad king, and chances are that they were going to be defeated, and your lives are going to be miserable the rest of your life. So, when he's talking about in Chapter Four, Verse Nine, that they don't have a king - meaning, they don't really have a king with any power or any influence - it created within them an agony; and he uses the imagery of a woman in childbirth. "That agony has gripped you like a woman in childbirth." That was probably the most agonizing imagery that he could imagine. That's what these people were feeling during the days of Micah, was like a woman in childbirth. It was this horrible, painful agony. And in some sense, maybe wondering if it would ever end.

Well that's the imagery he picks up in Chapter Five, Verse Three, and ultimately, what he's saying is, there will come a time when they will move from the agony to the birth, and it will go

from agony to joy, just like it does for a mother as the child is born. When he says, Therefore He will give them up for a time, he's referring to the fact that yes, they will be captured and they will be conquered, and they will go through a miserable time, and it will seem like agony, but eventually the nation will give birth to this One, who will be the ruling King forever.

It's very important to remember, that at this time, the nation of Israel was far from God. They were rebellious. They had long since walked away from God. They were worshiping the Canaanite gods. They were a mess, and as a result of that, God was going to discipline them, and basically for the next 500 years, they would be conquered by one nation after another. Their lives would be miserable; and ultimately then, the fulfillment, the birth of this King at Christmas time.

Verse Four:

And He will arise and shepherd His flock in the strength of the Lord, In the majesty of the name of the Lord His God. And they will remain, - or be safe; they'll be protected - Because at that time He will be great to the ends of the earth. This One will be our peace. (Vs. 4-5a)

It's talking about the day when this King reigns, and this King will rise as their shepherd. He'll care for them and lead them, He'll protect them, as a shepherd protects the sheep. He will have the power of God himself. He will have the majesty of God himself, and they will be safe, and they will be secure. And the reason they will be safe and secure, is because this King will not just reign over their territory, He will reign over the Earth, from one end to another. And then the great statement, "This one will be our peace."

Now, imagine living in an environment, where your king is powerless; the enemy is outside the walls. You're living in absolute terror. And you have good reason for that, and it feels like your life is filled with despair and hopelessness. And trying to imagine there is a promise, when this King will reign that is so powerful, that he will sit on a throne that governs the entire Earth. And because he has the entire Earth under control, everything will be peaceful. It would be hard for these people to even imagine a day so glorious. Because this King will have the power of God - this King will have the majesty of God - this King will rule the Earth, and the result of that will be peace, from one end to another. Of course, that is a day still coming with the Second Advent of Jesus, but certainly a message of hope.

He goes on to unpack that a little bit in Verse Five:

When the Assyrian invades our land, when he tramples on our citadels, then we will raise against him Seven shepherds and eight leaders of men. They will shepherd the land of Assyria with the sword, the land of Nimrod at its entrances; and He will deliver us from the Assyrian When he attacks our land and when he tramples our territory. (Vs. 5-6)

In simple terms, he's just saying when the enemy attacks, because of who our King is, we will conquer them.

Verse Seven:

Then the remnant of Jacob - meaning the people of God - Will be among many peoples
Like dew from the Lord, like showers on vegetation Which do not wait for man or delay
for the sons of men.

This is a great imagery, when you understand that the Hebrew people lived among other nations but were hated and were despised. He's saying there will come a day, when rather than being hated and despised, they will be celebrated and be seen as the refreshment, or the blessing on the world. In that ancient culture, they had basically six months of a rainy season and six months of a dry season. In the dry season, the only way they survived was through the dew, so the dew would have been celebrated as a gift from God, that allowed them to survive during that difficult time of the year. Of course, the rainy season would come, and the crops would grow, and just like farmers today, that was celebrated as a gift from God. What he's saying is, the people of God will be like that dew. They'll be like that rain. They will be viewed as a very gift from God, as they dwell among the peoples, because God will be their King.

He sets up a second imagery in Verse Eight:

The remnant of Jacob Will be among the nations, among many peoples Like a lion
among the beasts of the forest, like a young lion among flocks of sheep, Which, if he
passes through, tramples down and tears, and there is none to rescue. Your hand will be
lifted up against your adversaries, and all your enemies will be cut off. (Vs. 8-9)

The imagery here is the imagery of a lion, a lion among the sheep. Imagine that these people live in absolute terror. They're bullied, they're pushed around, they're about to be tortured. They're about to be enslaved, but there's coming a day, when the King from God will reign with God's power, will reign with God's majesty, and because of who the King is, the people of God will no longer be fearful and frightened and abused and pushed around, but they will be like a lion among sheep. In other words, they will be filled with confidence. They will be in charge, and if anybody gets out of line, they'll take them out, because now they have nothing to fear, because of who the King is. It's a beautiful imagery, that would fill them with a level of confidence and hope, that I'm sure in Micah's day, they couldn't even imagine.

Arnie: So, Bryan, the idea of the lion just hanging out with the sheep; I know that meant a lot to the people in Micah's day. Is that also a picture of Christ for us today?

Bryan: Yeah. So, understanding like you said, that would have been a very odd image where lion ate sheep, but for the lion to be dwelling among the sheep, carried the idea of safety, and the lion had nothing to fear, and the sheep seemed to be at ease with that - so, a powerful image. So yeah, it's true at least partially today. It's kind of like we talked about, there's partial fulfillments and complete fulfillments. So yeah, the lion Jesus dwells among His sheep but His sheep still are getting beat up. And it won't be until the New Heaven, the New Earth, that there will be the ultimate peace that we long for.

Cara: Micah's living in a dark time in his country. So, he's warning people, but he also seemed to have a great deal of hope.

Bryan: Yeah. So, I can't imagine what they were facing. It's absolutely terrifying. And Micah found hope in knowing that the story doesn't end there, that somehow God's going to win. And in the end, there was a greater victory. It's kind of like martyrs down through the years, who die joyfully singing praises, because they know this isn't the end of the story, and they win, and they died believing that.

Cara: Well, the Jewish people throughout history have been really hated and despised, and it's still going on today. So how relevant is the book of Micah to the Jewish population today?

Bryan: Yeah, so, great question. So, there's different opinions about the Jewish nation and whether there's still unfinished business for them, but I would say there's agreement that right now, today, the hope from the book of Micah is the same for the Jews as it is for any of us. And that is, that the hope is in Jesus, and Jesus promises a better world to come. You know, I've been to Israel several times, and it's just astonishing, that you have millions and millions and millions of tourists looking at all these sites that they're so familiar with, but they do not get Jesus. And consequently, they have no hope. There are people still practicing the same things they were doing 2000 years ago. And those people have completely missed the point that Micah was making.

Arnie: I love the way you explain how the prophecies relate to the past, present and future. Would you review that for us?

Bryan: So I use the illustration of a mountain range, and from a distance it looks like maybe there's three mountains that just back into one another, but the closer you get, you start to realize there's a distance between them, and maybe by the time you get there, there's quite a bit of distance between them. So, I think that's how biblical prophecy looked. We always ask, how would the first readers have understood this? And there would always be an application to them. And then there may be some sort of a partial fulfillment, somewhere down the road, but that's still partial. And then there's the ultimate fulfillment that is yet to come. And a lot of biblical prophecy is like that.

Cara: Verse Seven talks about believers being viewed as a gift from God to their neighbors. And I think that's a really pretty picture of who we can be to unbelievers; reaching out to lonely people or volunteering are some of those examples.

Bryan: Yeah, absolutely. So, the imagery in Micah is, the people of God are like the dew in the morning, bringing the necessary water for life. It's great imagery, full of that which is refreshing and life-giving. So just what you said, I think it's wrestling with the question, what's really needed? What can I do to make a difference? Again, think in terms of relationship, not just dropping something off. It's a chance to reach out and to build relationships even with your community. And Christmas is great for that.