

Little Town - Great Salvation

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Date: 13 December 2020

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[0 : 0 0] Well, every time, every year at this time, of course, we hear reminders on the one hand of the need to put Christ back into Christmas, and on the other hand, the strident voices of those who object to religion getting into everything.

Just before Christmas, a few years ago, the well-known writer Melanie Phillips wrote about people preparing for, and I quote, an enjoyable and even, dare one say it, spiritually uplifting holiday.

And her article began with this, you really would have to have a heart harder than the five pence piece in the Christmas pood not to feel sorry at present for, and then she mentions in particular Professor Richard Dawkins, all that cheerfulness and pleasure associated with Christianity's main celebration seems to drive him nuts.

She's not even a Christian, as you may know, but the somewhat unsubtle title of her article went right for the jugular because the heading was, Oh, do put a sock in it, you atheist Scrooge.

No hinting there. But what about that phrase, an enjoyable and even spiritually uplifting time? May it be so, as we rejoice in the birth of the Savior in that little town of Bethlehem.

[1 : 3 3] And that's my text from Micah chapter 5 and verse 2, where we have mentioned centuries beforehand of the place where he would be born. Micah chapter 5 and verse 2, Micah was an 8th century BC prophet who lived in the southern kingdom of Judah at the same time as Isaiah.

Isaiah of, unto us a child is born, fame. And it's in this verse that we find Micah's prophecy about the coming of the child, which names Bethlehem as the very place where he would be born, the special one.

Not Jerusalem or Athens or Rome, Bethlehem, that little insignificant town.

And that's where you can expect the Messiah to be born. If it were written today, I suppose it would be, people would say, well, surely he'd be born in Edinburgh or London or Washington.

Only to be told, no, it'll be in, let's say, Achter Tara, if anybody knows where that is. Or Itham Wells or something. No offense to Itham Wells.

[2 : 5 9] But we don't know a lot about Micah as a person, but his prophecies sound out a message that is both a message of challenge to the apostasy and godliness of the times in which he lived, and also a message of hope as he looks to the coming of the Messiah in the fullness of the times.

And I want to just summarize and focus on four things. And the first is simply, it speaks of a little town. Here we are, more than 700 years before the event, learning that Bethlehem would be the place, which is amazing, really.

And perhaps we can recall that part of the familiar story that's sometimes recorded or heard in song. Herod then with fear was filled.

A prince, he said, in jury, all the little boys he killed at Bethlehem in his fury. There was only room for one king, and he was that king, and there must be no rivals.

But then, do you remember how the wise men appeared in Jerusalem, and Herod called together, it says, the chief priests and teachers of the law, this is Matthew 2 and 4, and asked them where the Christ was to be born.

[4 : 21] As if to say, you're the experts in this kind of thing, you should know. And they did know. And right away, they quoted the words of this text. They replied, And so Herod sent the wise men to find the baby.

And let me recall it in the words of, poetic words of Jimmy and Carol Owens. I don't know if any of you knew the musical that they produced on the events of Christmas.

It was called the glory of Christmas, which was very much part of our family life when our children were young, and I hear one of my sons often referring to it still.

Part of it, it says, King Herod heard that they were in town and had them up for tea. He asked about this newborn king that they had come to see. My uncle on the palace staff said they caused quite a stir when they said they'd come to worship him with frankincense and myrrh.

And it goes on in that poetic vein, calling in the experts of the law. Well, Herod called these scholars in and asked them if they'd heard about a king of Israel God promised in his word.

[5 : 45] They reasoned and debated, and they finally agreed that the prophecy of Micah was the one the king should read. They hurried then to tell the king what they had figured out.

The birthplace would be Bethlehem. They knew without a doubt. They drew a map and marked the spot so no one could go wrong. But then they used their common sense and didn't go along.

And they go on following through the story. Herod showed the travelers the way that they should go. He said, if you should find him there, be sure to let me know so I can come and worship him, the savior of mankind.

But my uncle said he didn't think that's what he had in mind. And so on. But yes, the priests were quoting this Micah text.

And where the Micah text said Bethlehem was small among the clans of Judah, they actually said in the Matthew passage, by no means least among the rulers of Judah.

[6 : 46] And indeed, Bethlehem has become the focus of world attention because of what happened there. Little town indeed.

Up till then, maybe insignificant town. But because of Christ's birth there, now the focus of attention for all the centuries since.

With pilgrims, maybe some of us here have done it. Pilgrims going to that place which is supposed to be the place where Jesus was born and entering in through that little doorway where you have to bow low to go in as a sign of humbling yourself before the great king born then.

And if singing were allowed at this time, there would be the sound in many places of O Little Town. And you know the carol, O Little Town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.

Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight. And how was it that Jesus was born in that little town?

[8 : 03] Well, Joseph and Mary were descendants of the great King David whose town was called Bethlehem, House of Bread. But of course, they didn't live in Bethlehem.

They lived in Nazareth. We know all about that. And if you say, how come the child was born in Bethlehem? Well, we know how it happened. And these days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.

Need to sort things out. Get a proper system so that we know who's who and who's due what. And we can tell everything about everybody. You know, long before the days when they could know about just about everything about you by other means.

But we've got to find out. We've got to have a system. And for this purpose, Bethlehem can be center one. And it's quite remarkable, really, how it all came together.

Registrations of that kind were not particularly common. But even apart from that, what about the timing? Why did it all happen during the precise month?

[9 : 08] Whatever month it was. And you know how people debate that. Some scholars think it might have been June. Spoiled many a Christmas card, of course. But why did it happen at the time when Mary was coming to full term in her pregnancy?

Why? Because of God's providential ordering of things. Everything came together so that the plan of God might unfurl at just the right time.

Entirely on schedule and right down to that very village where the baby would be born. Out of you, you little town of Bethlehem, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel.

Charles Spurgeon wrote about that text, it was Caesar's whim, but it was God's decree. There you are. You have this theme again of how God's sovereign will is accomplished even through the free choice of human beings.

Another hymn says, God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform. And there's that verse that says about it, deep in unfathomable minds of never-failing skill, he treasures up his bright designs and works his sovereign will.

[10 : 31] And so it was in this amazing event of Christmas, everything working together to bring about the circumstances in which this prophecy would be fulfilled.

The Christ would be born in Bethlehem of all places. Not in some grand palace in a capital city surrounded by the world's attention, but in this little and not very significant village.

And even there, of course, not in some plush boarding house or hostelry, but in a stable of some kind where he was laid, as Luke 2 tells us, that there was no room in the inn.

It's rather remarkable, is it not, how it all came together, that which had been prophesied eight centuries before. What was that thing, Spurgeon? It was Caesar's whim, but it was God's decree.

And he went on, it is for us to believe that man does as he pleases, because God has given us free will and allows us to make our choices, yet notwithstanding, he always does as God decrees.

[11 : 45] Everything is of God, and unto him who guideth the stars and wingeth the sparrows, who ruleth the planets and yet moveth atoms, who speaks thunders and yet whispers zephyrs, unto him be glory, for there is God in everything.

This was no accident. It was God's providence. Bethlehem, indeed. That's the first thing. The text speaks of a little town. And then secondly, a coming king.

That's what it says. For you shall come, from you shall come forth for me, one who is to be ruler in Israel. The herald angels sing glory to the newborn, what?

Not newborn baby, child who may make its mark in the world. No, glory to the newborn king. And that's the whole point.

It was the whole point for Herod, of course. He couldn't have any other kings roaming around in Judea. But it was the quest of the wise men. Where is he?

[12 : 59] The one who has been born king of the Jews. That was the quest of the wise men then. And isn't it interesting, significant really, how it was also the last jibe of cynical Pontius Pilate.

Thirty-three years later, when he finally signed the warrant to allow them to crucify this Jesus. And what should they write on the board that would be nailed to the cross above his head?

Usually something that would declare the crime for which the victim was being crucified. But what was it? Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews. The very words, really, from this nativity story.

And you know how his enemies wanted Pilate to change it so that it would read, this is he who claimed to be the king of the Jews.

And we find Pilate displaying a degree of resolution that had been sadly lacking up till that time when he refused. He refused to do their bidding with his famous what I have written, I have written.

[14 : 07] And of course, what he wrote was the truth. This child, this child born in lowly Bethlehem and crucified on that grim hillside was indeed, is the king of the Jews.

And not only of the Jews, of course, but of people of all nations and races and cultures and backgrounds. And at the end of verse 4, we have the prophecy, his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.

Wonderful message, a universal kingdom. And it's his rule, his kingdom, his reign that is so desperately needed now in this confusing and confused world.

A few years ago, there was a letter circulated from the man who was then General Secretary of the Bible Society in which there was this little story.

And I just quote it. General Nikolai Stolyarov, vice chairman of the KGB, gestured to the wall behind him and to the nail.

[15 : 21] The KGB conference room was vast with high ceilings and wood-paneled walls. On the center wall, now bare, you could see the faint outline of a large square where a picture had once hung.

The picture must have hung a long time. Around it, the wooden panels had darkened as wood does with sun and age. But inside the square, the wood was lighter. In the middle hung a single empty nail.

And the letter goes on, the Russians call it the empty nail. Almost every home has one. Every government building, every office. Upon this single nail rests the story of the Soviet Union and now the future of Russia.

You see, upon this nail hung the picture of Lenin, the Russian revolutionary leader and Soviet premier. His picture hung in prominence for seven decades.

now it is gone, removed, leaving blank walls and empty lives behind. So the urgent question is what will fill this empty nail?

[16 : 34] Who will fill the enormous spiritual vacuum which the demise of communism and atheism leaves behind? And of course the letter went on to say there can be only one answer, one person, Jesus Christ.

Micah 5 was written way back in the 8th century BC drawing a picture of this coming king and it's this picture that is so much needed on that empty nail.

An empty nail that you could perhaps say is on our country's wall as well, not a literal picture of course, but it's a parable. We need a renewal, a revival, a restoration of committed faith in Jesus Christ.

But the trouble is the nail won't stay empty. And in a different image you remember how one of Jesus' little parables pointed up that salutary message for our society, for any society, listen to it, this is what Jesus said, when an evil spirit comes out of a man it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it.

Then it says I will return to the house I left and when it arrives it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself and they go in and live there and the final condition of that man is worse than the first.

[18 : 13] That is how it will be with this wicked generation. And that's what we see don't we? That's what we see happening all around us. People filling the void with this, that or the other.

But you know the saying if it is a God shaped blank that there is in the heart of every human being then nothing else will fill it.

God has as Ecclesiastes says put eternity in the heart of man and if that shape is God shaped then nothing else can fill it.

Carl says of the little town of Bethlehem yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light and it points to the fulfillment of this prophecy and to the great answer to the empty nail which is the symbol of fallen men and women.

This is the king that we need this king prophesied by Micah so long before he came the one who did come the one who will come again and the one that we should crown as lord of our lives.

[19 : 31] The little town the coming king and then thirdly let me refer to how this text speaks of an eternal lord. The last words of verse 2 whose origins are from of old from ancient times which is a remarkable word and it reminds us that the one who would be born at Bethlehem is the eternal word of the father now in flesh appearing.

One who didn't come into existence at Bethlehem but the incarnate lord. This was the incarnation of the one who had existed from all eternity. Verse 3 there refers to the time when she who is in labor gives birth.

The time when a virgin would conceive by the Holy Spirit and when the nine months of her pregnancy were completed would bring forth her son.

But you could say this as well that it wasn't just Mary who was in labor because in a way the whole story of Israel was a story of a centuries long labor before the Messiah would come forth from the womb of Judaism to be the savior not only of the Jews but of all who would receive that salvation.

At the time when this prophecy was given things looked very bleak. The northern kingdom of Israel had been overrun by the Assyrians and perhaps this comes from the very time when King Sennacherib was attacking Jerusalem great and powerful King Sennacherib as he was who wrote in his own annals as for Hezekiah who was the Jews reigning king at the time who did not bow in submission to my yoke 46 of his strong walled towns and innumerable smaller villages in the neighborhood I besieged and conquered he himself actually perhaps Micah's hometown of Moresheth was one of them and Sennacherib wrote about the king he himself I shut up like a caged bird within Jerusalem his holy city.

[21 : 49] A caged bird this is the king of Israel God's servant in the line of David to whom such tremendous promises had been made.

I kept a SU note I think it was in Daily Bread or something once that said it looks as if the Davidic covenant has been abandoned and the Assyrian is triumphant but to think that is to discount the power of the word of God.

Bethlehem hadn't looked a likely birthplace for a king like David no reason why it shouldn't spring another surprise. Well of course spring another surprise it did when in the fullness of the times the true Messiah and king was born there but you Bethlehem Ephrathah though you are small among the clans of Judah out of you will come one for me who will be ruler over Israel whose origins are from of old from ancient times.

It's a text that speaks of a little town coming king an eternal lord and lastly of a good shepherd. Verse 4 he will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the lord in the majesty of the name of the lord his god.

And that's a rich strand of bible teaching isn't it? It's the most popular of all hymns and psalms. The lord's my shepherd. But of course the bible's challenge is for how many people who sing the lord's my shepherd for how many people is he their shepherd?

[23 : 33] Just as we can say in these weeks when the name of Bethlehem is perhaps on the lips of many is the Christ of Bethlehem in their hearts? That's the all important question.

Is he in your heart? In mine? Is he our shepherd? First Peter, listen to this in first Peter 2, you were like you were like sheep going astray but now you have returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls.

That was Peter addressing the Christians of these early days and that's what it is to be a Christian at all. It is to have returned to the good shepherd.

What does he say? You were like sheep going astray. That's the truth and the only thing is will we admit it?

Because there is something in proud human hearts actually that hates to admit it. I found it once wonderfully illustrated in a story from the 18th century of the well known Christian lady with the wonderful title of the Countess of Huntingdon who had a great burden to witness to the people of her own upper class set and one such was called the Dowager Duchess of Buckingham whom the Countess invited to come to a meeting where the Methodist preacher George Whitefield was to preach.

[25 : 10] And this was the reply that she received from this, what was it, Dowager Duchess. This was the reply, I thank your ladyship for the information concerning the Methodist preachers.

Their doctrines are most repulsive and strongly tainted with impertinence and disrespect before their superiors in perpetually endeavoring to level all ranks and do away with all distinctions.

It is monstrous to be told you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth. This is highly offensive. So I don't think she was inclined to go, was she?

Can you believe that anybody would express such sentiments, really? And of course, I suppose that has to be seen against the background of the class-ridden society that Great Britain then was, but she spoke of the Methodist preachers doing away with all distinctions.

Actually, it's God who does away with all distinctions. What does Romans 3.22 say? All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

[26 : 20] There is no distinction. And of course, it goes on there to say, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ.

That's the way of salvation, and it's the way of salvation for all classes and conditions of human beings. So Peter could address his readers, you were like sheep going astray, but then something happened.

They came to put their trust in Christ as their Savior, and the way he puts it is, and now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

Could the same be said of you? That you have given up all thought of being justified by your own goodness, but trusted instead in this great Savior and shepherd who came to be born at Bethlehem, the one of whom Micah 5 and 4 says he will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.

And it goes on to say at the start of verse 5, and he will be their peace, their shalom, which stands for the highest well-being in every way, not just physically and socially, but spiritually also.

[27 : 47] The one who would make them right with God and give them eternal life. And shouldn't it be our prayer like that children's song really that says, Savior, you're like a shepherd, lead us.

Much we need thy tender care. Blessed Jesus, thou hast bought us. Thine we are. Let me finish with this, that one of the newspapers last year told this interesting story of a group of tourists who were walking not too far away, out near Balmoral, when they met in with an elderly lady in tweeds and a headscarf.

And they asked whether she lived in the area and she said, well, yes, she did have a house nearby. And then they asked if she had ever met the queen. And the lady pointed to the close protection officer that was standing beside her and said, no, but this man has.

And the report said that the group moved on with no idea of whom they had just met. Well, how tragic would it be to mark Christmas, albeit differently from usual, and not realize what it really is.

You, Bethlehem, Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you shall come one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.

[29 : 25] This is the little town, the coming king, the eternal Lord, the good shepherd. And may he bless his word to our hearts. Let's pray to him now.

Lord, we give thanks for these words of prophecy by Micah and others that prepared the way, that foretold in advance of all that would happen in that little town of Bethlehem.

And we thank you for the way in which it all came together under your providential care and guidance, how all the circumstances led to that great event when he, the Lord, became incarnate.

He came down to earth from heaven, the one who is God and Lord of all. We thank you, O Lord, for the message of the coming king, the eternal Lord, the good shepherd.

And we pray that in this season many more may come to receive him into their hearts and lives as king, savior, Lord, and master, the good shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep.

[30 : 37] So may it be, Lord, as we give thanks for your word in the name of that same Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen.