

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Broadcast Date: 23 December 2001

No. T0194

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Gospel Messages on "Little things": A Little Town - Micah 5:2

Some time ago, a young man who was soon to be married approached an older man who had been married for many years. He wanted to know what the secret of a long and happy marriage was. The older man told him that at the beginning of their marriage, he and his wife had decided that he would make all the big decisions and his wife would make all the little decisions. This seemed to make good sense to the younger man and so he asked the older man for examples of decisions his wife took. "Oh, just things like how big a mortgage to get, where the children would go to school, where they would live and so on." Thinking that these were pretty big things, the younger man then asked "Well, what are the big decisions that you make?" "What we should do about global warming, or the missile defence system," the older man replied!

As we begin our series of talks looking at little things in the Bible, it seems appropriate that, first of all, we confront ourselves with the issue of how we evaluate things. Nowhere is this more appropriate than in a draughty manger, in a little town called Bethlehem. Christmas day is almost upon us, so it is doubly appropriate that our thoughts focus on Bethlehem. You see, we all tend to think more of ourselves, and our surroundings, than we ought to. We have a deep rooted desire to be noticed and appreciated, to make our mark, to stand out from the crowd. It's a part of our sinful human nature that we almost cannot help, but neither do we make all that much effort to control! A couple of questions would help to reinforce the point. What is the longest river in the world? Or, what is the highest mountain in the world?

I guess many of you will have been able to get the answer to these questions right with only a moment's thought. Now let me ask you another couple of questions. What is the smallest mountain, or what is the shortest river? Any takers? You see, from our very earliest years, we are taught that biggest is best. We may avoid the excesses of this attitude that was especially evidenced in the "yuppies" of the 80s, or the fat-cat bonuses of the 90s. However, from the very beginning of our history, humanity has evidenced the desire to try to be more than we truly are.

In Genesis 1:27, we read, "So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." One might have thought that nothing could be greater than being created in the very image of God. And yet in 3, we read how Satan tempts Eve with the words, "and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." Eve took the bait, thinking there was more to be had and lost everything. It is no wonder, then, that Jeremiah had to confront his listeners with the solemn words, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9).

The thoughts and actions of God, on the other hand, are quite different. So, in Micah 4:12, the prophet says, "But they do not know the thoughts of the LORD, nor do they understand His counsel." God knows exactly who He is and never puffs Himself up with pride. This message was one that Samuel had to learn directly from God, as God told him, "For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart," (1 Samuel 16:7). In all the splendour of the majesty of God, He does not need any outward adorning to enhance His glory. No, when God chose to enter this world, He did so in the most humble of circumstances. Imagine I owned one of the masterpieces of Van Gogh. I wouldn't then choose to hang it in a gaudy frame, against a wall covered in a beautiful floral wallpaper. No, that would only detract from the picture itself. In much the same way, any human glory in terms of city or building, fanfare or ceremony, could only detract from the displayed excellence of the incarnation of the unique Son of God.

Let us then read together about our little town: "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting" (Micah 5:2).

Bethlehem was a small town, about 10 km to the south of the capital city of Jerusalem. It is here identified as Bethlehem Ephrathah, in much the same way as we speak about Newcastle-upon-Tyne, as opposed to Newcastle-under-Lyme. One can almost hear the surprise in the voice of the prophet. Are you sure, God? Really, this Bethlehem! But it is only a little town amongst thousands in Judah. And Judah hadn't even been the oldest son of Jacob. There was certainly nothing to highlight this one town as special. And yet it was to be here that the promised Ruler would be born. From these small beginnings would come, in God's good time, the One who would rule over Israel.

The first mention of a place, or person, in Scripture is often interesting. We first read about Bethlehem in Genesis 35:19. It was here that Rachel, the beloved mother, was buried, after giving birth to Benjamin (whose name means "Son of my right hand"). So from the very beginning we have Bethlehem associated with a life given for a child that was much loved. As we consider the One who fulfils this prophecy in Micah, we cannot fail to see in Jesus, the One who loved us, and gave His life for us, His children.

Throughout the period of the judges, we read of Bethlehem being caught up with the religious confusion that became such a trademark of the Israelites. Out of this confusion was to come One who would bring perfect clarity. Can any truly doubt the love of God, or His holiness, when they view the lengths that He has gone to, to bring salvation to this world?

We next read about this little town in the book of Ruth. It was from Bethlehem that Naomi had set out, and then returned. The following story is one of the greatest pictures of redemption in the Bible. Peter, in his first letter, speaks about our being redeemed "not with corruptible things, such as silver or gold ... but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:18-19). Such small beginnings, such great results!

Bethlehem is perhaps best known of as the birthplace of King David (1 Samuel 16:1). So the town inherited a part in the royalty of the nation. But as God spoke to Samuel about Jesse, David's father, saying, "I have provided Myself a king among his sons" we can easily imagine, as it were, God's thoughts filling up with a picture of His Son, the King of kings, born in Bethlehem's draughty manger.

The other great mention of Bethlehem is to be found in 2 Samuel 23. As David longed for the waters from the well in Bethlehem, his men hear his desire and risk their lives to fetch some. As they offer it to their king, he pours it out as an offering to God. Who was he to satisfy himself at the expense of other men's lives. Yet, in the fullness of time, there was going to be born in Bethlehem, One who gave His life for us and who, consequently, truly does deserve the sacrifice of the whole of our lives. In his famous hymn, Isaac Watts could write;

*"Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small:
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all."*

Yet, like David, Jesus never lightly receives anything done for Him. He alone knows the true cost of sacrifice, any sacrifice, and will always value what is given to Him. In Mark's Gospel, the Gospel that shows us the perfect Servant, we get that marvellous promise, "I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of cold water in my name because you belong to Christ, will certainly not lose his reward." (Mark 9:41). Love to the point of death, redemption, royalty and reward, all these things had been associated with this little town in the heart of Judah. But now, as Micah prophesies, all these things, besides many more, would unite in the one blessed person of God Himself made flesh!

At this time of year, so many minds will, in some way, consider the enormity of what happened in this insignificant town. In the person of Jesus, God became a man. It was not that Jesus represented all that God wanted mankind to know, although He did. No, far more incredible, all the fullness of the Godhead chose to dwell in bodily form in Him. Yet Jesus was truly man. He could be thirsty, He could grow weary, He felt pain and sorrow and happiness. The biological and chemical reactions that occur to enable life to continue took place in Him as they do in us today. And yet He still remained wholly divine. Not for one moment was He any less than God when He took on human form. These two natures were perfectly blended in Him, although we may try to understand and speak of them as though they were two natures. He never acted in His divine nature at the expense of His humanity. He never expressed His humanity to the detriment of His divine nature. This incredible, fantastic, incomprehensible reality would be utterly impossible normally. But then Jesus was no ordinary man. When we consider who God is, then the impossible becomes perfectly acceptable, although we may not be able to understand how it could be. We don't need to. I don't understand how the earth maintains its constant orbit, nor how some carbon reaction can make a happy memory, but I'm glad that they do. How God could adopt humanity, in all its fullness, sin apart, is far too much for me to begin to understand. Yet as a man He came, born in this little town, to go to the cross at Calvary and there to lay down His precious, unique life in death to become the Saviour of the whole world. As you listen this morning, nothing else matters other than this. Is Jesus your Saviour? Atheist, agnostic or religious person alike – this Jesus, born in this little town, has died to pay the debt due to God for our sins. In all the giving and receiving that will be going on this Christmas time, today is the day to receive Him and the forgiveness and peace He alone can give. You don't deserve it! Whoever could? You don't understand how it could be! Whoever can? Charles Wesley summed it up as he wrote, "Our God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made man." All that is left is for us to accept it!

In the coming of the Lord Jesus at Bethlehem, we see how God works. He made Himself small, and achieved so much. So often we puff ourselves up, and achieve so little. I'm reminded of the story of Elijah. You can read it for yourself later in 1 Kings 17. As he comes to the dead boy, we read that he stretched himself out on the lad, and

prayed. Elijah, a full grown man, stretches himself out and becomes small! So God hears him, and the boy comes back to life. Sometimes we must miss out on so much that God has for us when we try to be more than we are.

The prophecy closes with the important words: "Whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting", or as the New International Version puts it, "whose origins are from of old, from days of eternity."

CI Scofield, commenting on these words writes, "The Ruler comes from Bethlehem in time, but His activities have been from eternity. His goings forth were in creation, preservation, providences, theophanies, and redemptive activity. The eternal pre-existence of the Messiah is thus strongly presented."

When Jesus was born, His life did not begin, merely His existence in human form. In this, He is absolutely unique. My mother can look back to a day before I was born, and probably wonders what she ever did with all her time! At that time, I was utterly unknown because I did not exist. I wonder as Mary and Joseph looked down at the tiny form of their newborn baby, had they any comprehension that here was One who had existed before they were even born, before the world had ever been created. The one and only Son of God is eternal. In John's Gospel, we have the same truth taught. There we can read, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). In the language used in John 1, there are two verbs that can be translated into English as "to be". In English we have the verb "to be" and the verb "to become", the former implying something that always was, whereas the latter suggests a start in time. Here in verse 1, the verb used is the "to be" that has no time attached to it. The Word always was, right from the very beginning, before time and creation occurred. But in verse 14 we read, "The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us." So the One who had always been, became human. Jesus took on human form as the Baby of Bethlehem. And it all started here, in this little town. This eternal Ruler stepped into time, as a man, in a manger, in a stable, because there was no room for Him anywhere else. But that was also where He chose to appear, right at the bottom, as it were. He took no outward trappings of human glory, for nothing could add to the glory that was already His. Had we finished reading John 1:14, we would have read "and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." In His humility and littleness, He was greater than all the greatness of man combined. No wonder Bishop Phillips Brooks could write:

*"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."*

Who could begin to count the hopes and fears that exist throughout the world just today? And yet they are met, and can be answered, by the One born in this little town.

As we draw to a close this morning, we should look on to the end of the story. You see, this little town was just the beginning. The end of the story is foretold in Genesis 49. As Jacob approached the end of his life, he gives each of his sons a prophetic blessing. To Judah he says, in verse 10, "The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until He comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is His." Micah foretold a ruler who would rule over all Israel. However, this rule is to be expanded to include the whole world. This same One, who was so small, shall be universally acknowledged by friend and foe alike. Those who love Him will soon gladly bow their knees to Him; those who do not even acknowledge His existence will be forced to do so. Every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. What God has started, He will complete in the person of His Son. From Jerusalem, to the farthest reaches of the world, He will reign, to the good of all mankind. And in this little town? In this little town also they will make room for Him one day. Will you make room for Him today?

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