

The perfect Ruler from an unlikely place Micah 5:2-5a

² *But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, from you, will go out the one who will be the ruler for me in Israel. His goings forth are from the beginning, from the days of eternity.* ³ *Therefore the LORD will give them up, until the time when the woman who is in labor bears a child. Then the remaining survivors from his brothers will return to the people of Israel.* ⁴ *He will stand and shepherd with the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. They will dwell securely, for at that time he will be great to the ends of the earth.* ⁵ *This one will be their peace.*

It's amazing how God chooses to operate sometimes. The Author of life, the Creator of the universe, sometimes chooses some insignificant ways to get his work done. When he decided to appear to his prophet Elijah, he didn't show up in a terrific windstorm, nor in an earthquake that shook the earth, nor even in a fire that burned so hot. God came to Elijah in a gentle whisper. Nothing extraordinary, just a simple whisper. God amazingly "*chooses the lowly things of this world and the despised things*" (1 Corinthians 1:28) to carry out his saving plan. That's what he did when he sent our Savior into the world. He didn't choose to bring his Son into the world through the ruling family of the day. We can understand why the wise men showed up at King Herod's door looking for the newborn King of the Jews. It was in a little town about six miles from the capital city that they'd find him. It seemed like such an unlikely place to be the birthplace of the King of kings and Lord of lords. But that's the way God chooses to operate. While Mary was pregnant with our Lord, she exclaimed, "*The Mighty One has done great things for me—he has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty*" (Luke 1:49, 52, 53). Let us consider the unlikely place that God chose to bring our Savior into the world. May the Holy Spirit prepare our hearts to celebrate Christmas where in an unlikely place we find the perfect Ruler.

Micah's prophecy of our Savior's birthplace came over 700 years before. God had sent Micah with a message that was similar to what Isaiah and other prophets brought. The message was that destruction was right around the corner. God's people for the most part had completely turned their backs on God. Now they were getting what they deserved. Assyria from the north had already wiped out the northern tribes of Israel. Now they were setting their sights on the remaining tribe of Judah.

Just when all hope seemed to go out the window for God's people, God promised a rescue. But that rescue would come from an unlikely place. Micah writes, "*But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, from you, will go out the one who will be the ruler for me in Israel. His goings forth are from the beginning, from the days of eternity.*" The nation of Judah was used to having its kings come from Jerusalem, born in the king's palace. But Bethlehem? Bethlehem didn't even make the list of top 100 cities of Judah recorded in Joshua chapter 15.

Maybe it was an unlikely place from which a king would come, but remember that it was the hometown of the famous King David. Could the next ruler that Bethlehem produced be as great as King David? Why even greater. Micah tells us, *“His goings forth are from the beginning, from the days of eternity.”* This ruler was around long before David. He was around before Israel was a nation. This ruler has been around for eternity. He is none other than God himself. Did that mean Israel was returning to the theocracy it once had when God led them out of Egypt to the Promised Land? Were they going back to when every nation was afraid of them, when they couldn't lose to anyone?

This second ruler from Bethlehem would be great. But his rule would be vastly different than any Israel had before. This ruler would not bring with him military prominence like when David ruled Israel. He would not bring economic prosperity like they had when David's son Solomon was king. Actually their life on earth wouldn't get any better. Micah writes, *“Therefore the LORD will give them up, until the time when the woman who is in labor bears a child. Then the remaining survivors from his brothers will return to the people of Israel.”* Maybe they would not fall prey to the Assyrians the way the northern tribes did. But they were still forced into paying tribute to Assyria. And even though Assyria's power would not last forever, the Lord would use Babylon, the next world power, to carry his unfaithful people 1,000 miles from their homeland. Some would return following 70 years in captivity. But they'd spent the next 400 years subject to the Persians, then the Greeks, and finally the Romans. Neither with military power nor economic strength, would Israel ever be the nation it once was.

Israel didn't change much in 700 years. Think of how the people welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. “Hosanna to the Son of David!” they shouted. Here was their king. But was he the kind of king for which they were looking? How quickly they turned on him. When Jesus made no effort to drive the Romans out of Palestine, they shouted, “Crucify him!” instead. And when he ended up dead on a cross, what self-respecting son of Abraham would want a ruler like that? But Jesus didn't enter our world to set up an earthly kingdom. He told Pilate his kingdom was not of this world. The problem with Israel is that they forgot who the real enemy is. It wasn't Assyria or Babylon, or Persia, Greece, or Rome. Mankind's worst enemy cannot be fought on a battlefield. How do you face an enemy that you cannot detect with the sharpest radar device. You need a perfect ruler to rescue you. And as Micah tells us, the perfect Ruler comes from the unlikely place of Bethlehem.

Micah tells us why he's the perfect ruler. *He will stand and shepherd with the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.* This ruler from Bethlehem has the strength and majesty of God, because his origins are eternal. Like a good shepherd he *“lays down his life for the sheep”* (John 10:11). He's willing to fight to the death for his people. But what good is a dead ruler? Israel had lots of kings who gave their life for them.

None of them did much good after they had died. But that's not a problem for this Good Shepherd. He says, *"I lay down my life—only to take it up again"* (John 10:17). In the field of sports there are certain players you cannot stop. You can only hope to contain them. But with this Ruler, even the grave cannot hold him for long after he give up his life.

Consider the results of his rule. He will not only rule Israel. The prophet tells us, *"Therefore the LORD will give them up, until the time when the woman who is in labor bears a child."* One of Micah's contemporaries was the prophet Isaiah. He spoke of this ruler's birth when he prophesied, *"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel"* (7:14). Micah tells us that when this child is born, *"the remaining survivors from his brothers will return to the people of Israel."* The Good Shepherd spoke of *"other sheep that are not of this sheep pen."* He said, *"I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd"* (John 10:16). His rule would extend worldwide. *"He will be great to the ends of the earth,"* the prophet tells us. In the chapter before this, he mentions, *"Many nations will come and say, 'Come let us go to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths'"* (4:2). So we see what a perfect Ruler he is. His rule has no boundaries.

Micah explains further the results that his rule has on people. *They will dwell securely, ... This one will be their peace.* Security is something that people spent a lot of money and effort to have. In Micah's day, Judah made alliances with powerful nations and paid them well to protect them. While people seem to be living longer, there's concern that our nation's social security may run out. Imagine being secure for all eternity. That's what this ruler brings. He secures eternal life for all. This ruler also brings peace. That's important for people living in a world at war. We see it in our families at holiday times. Why can't we just get along? Why must some hold grudges against one another? The ruler from Bethlehem brings peace. An angel was sent to shepherds outside Bethlehem to proclaim peace. The peace on earth, goodwill toward men is peace between us sinful people and our holy God. The ruler can bring such peace because he came to our world to remove from us everything that would make God angry. He took on the guilt of ever sinner, from our angry words to our hateful thoughts, from our indecent acts to our lustful desires. He carried them all to a cross and he died there to pay our penalty for sin. He rose victorious from a grave and established a kingdom that will never end. He's the perfect ruler. He brings us everlasting security and eternal peace with our God.

That's why we gather for worship at Christmas. That's why we take the annual spiritual trip to Bethlehem. There we find the perfect ruler. His rule is universal. It last forever. It brings us security. It brings us peace. This Christmas let's join our children, family and friends and return to that unlikely place where you'll find some obscure shepherds, a humble couple that have traveled a long ways, and a newborn wrapped in swaddling cloths and place him in a manger. Come let us adore him. He's the perfect ruler. He is Christ the Lord.