

The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 29 November 2020. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.

The Call to Bethlehem

On nearly every Christmas Eve during my childhood, my family made a 25-mile trip northward to a little house on Burton Lane, in the town of Mansfield, to visit my grandmother, my aunts and uncles, and my cousins. We would load up the boot with presents, and with plenty of good food, which my mom had worked all day to bake. Oftentimes we would travel on a little country road that we called “Cutnaw Cut-off,” down to the Clear Fork River; and after crossing the old cast-iron bridge, we would pass by the Wade and Gatton Nursery, so that we could look at the snow that glistened in the moonlight on the boughs of the pine trees. If the roads were too icy to travel Cutnaw Cut-off, we would go down through the village of Butler instead, so that we could see the Christmas lights. As we passed through Bellville, and then Lexington, and then Mansfield, there were plenty more pretty lights to look at; and all the way, we would sing our favourite Christmas hymns in our best harmony. (I loved to pick out the tenor part!)

When we arrived at my grandmother’s house, we would all stand at the door; and as soon as Grandma opened the door, we would sing “We Wish You a Merry Christmas.” After eating a delicious meal, and eating plenty of sugar cookies and pumpkin pie, we would play games, and exchange presents. Later, we would read Scriptures about the birth of Christ, and would sing more songs about Christ’s birth. Finally, the time came to get ready to go home; but for some mysterious reason, one of us kids would always have a missing shoe or a missing coat that had to be found; and we would end up spending another half-hour “looking” for it. (In reality, we would spend more time playing with our cousins.) Finally, it was time to go; but before leaving, we would all sing *Stille Nacht* in German. (My mom and aunt and uncle never did learn the “mother tongue” from Grandma; but singing *Stille Nacht* was our way of remembering our German roots!) Usually around midnight, we’d load up the car and head back to Butler; and when we arrived back home, we’d all plop into our toasty beds and fall asleep.

I love those Christmas journeys that we made to Grandma’s house! It was always a time of fun, warmth, good food, and good cheer. What a contrast to the first Christmas journey that was ever made! The first Christmas journey was made by the Son of God; and it wasn’t a little 50-mile round trip. Christ travelled the greatest distance that anyone ever travelled--the distance from Heaven to earth and back! He made the *longest* journey ever made, as well. It wasn’t for a night, or for a week, or for a month, or for many months. For a full *thirty-three years* He travelled from place to place down here on earth. It wasn’t a pleasure trip, either. Jesus left the dazzling glories of Heaven to travel down to a dark, dirty, wretched, sin-cursed world, where men hated and rejected Him. Though He grew up in a loving family, and had times of joy and gladness in our world, His life was, for the greater part, one of affliction and grief--so much so, that the prophet Isaiah called Him “***a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.***” In contrast to my family’s Christmas journey, which was filled with plenty of good food, and warm couches and armchairs in which to relax, Jesus was poor, and often hungering and thirsting, and without even a place to lay His head. While the mission of *our* Christmas journey was to make merry with our family, the purpose of *Christ’s* journey was to die in disgrace on the cross, with the sins of the whole world laid upon Him, and to descend into the lower parts of the earth for three days, and then to arise from the dead.

However, the *end* of Christ’s journey was infinitely better than ours! When my family arrived back home, we lay down in our warm beds; but when Christ Jesus arrived back home, He sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high, where there are pleasures forever more!

Over the next several weeks, we will be talking about the journey that Christ made to earth for us; and as we do so, we will be examining five places through which Christ travelled when He was here on earth. Jesus did *not* travel to these places randomly! In every place where Jesus journeyed, He was answering His Father's call. When Christ came into this world, He said to His Father, "***Sacrifice and offering thou didst not desire; mine ears hast thou opened.***" In other words, Christ was ready to hear and obey whatever His Father commanded Him to do. He also said, "***Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, O my God***" (**Psalm 40:6-8**). Every stop in Jesus' journey was made in explicit obedience to His Father's call; and He delighted to fulfil that call.

This morning, we will examine the first stop that Jesus made when He journeyed into our world. That stop was the town of Bethlehem. *Why* did the Father call His Son to Bethlehem? There are at least four reasons why. First of all, the Father called His Son to Bethlehem...

I. Because the Scriptures had to be fulfilled.

Read Micah 5:1-2.

Five hundred years before Christ came down into our world, the prophet Micah made this prophecy concerning the place of Jesus' birth. He said that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Micah was very specific, too. Not only did he prophesy that the Messiah would be born in "**Bethlehem**," but he specifically said that He would be born in "**Bethlehem Ephratah**." There was another town named "Bethlehem" in the northern region of Israel, in the tribe of Zebulon; but that is not the Bethlehem that Micah is talking about. He's talking about "**Bethlehem Ephratah**." "**Bethlehem Ephratah**" was the birthplace of King David, in the southern part of Israel, in the tribe of Judah. It was *this* town that God chose to be the first stop in His Son's journey to earth. The Scripture had to be fulfilled, just as God had spoken. The Father called His Son to Bethlehem; and that is where He went.

Micah 5:2 is one of the most famous prophecies of the Messiah in the Old Testament. Yet, there is *another* important prophecy of the Messiah only one verse before it! We just read it a minute ago. Let's read that verse again. (**Read verse 1.**) What is going on in this verse? First of all, Micah is prophesying that Israel would be besieged by an enemy; and *God Himself* was that enemy! Think of that! God would make Himself an enemy to His own people! Micah says, "**He** [meaning "God"] **hath laid siege against us.**" God is giving His people warning. He's saying, "Go ahead, Israel. Gather your troops, and try to defend yourself, because I am going to lay siege against you."

Now, *at what point* in history was this siege against Israel to take place? Well, you can take your pick. The Lord could be talking about 586 B.C., when He allowed the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem. He could be talking about A.D. 70, when He would allow the Romans to destroy Jerusalem--or A.D. 130, when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem for a second time. God could also be talking about the future Battle of Armageddon, when He will allow *all the nations of the earth* to besiege Jerusalem. In God's eyes, all these events are "one."

But *why*? *Why* would God allow His people to be besieged? God answers that question at the end of **verse 1.** (**Read verse 1 again.**) Why did God allow Israel to be besieged? Micah says it is because "**they**" (the nation of Israel) would "**smite the judge of Israel with a rod upon the cheek.**" This "Judge of Israel" is none other than Israel's Messiah. Israel *literally* smote their Messiah upon the cheek with a rod. **Matthew 27:30** says that the people spat upon Jesus, "**and took the reed, and smote him on the head.**" No wonder God allowed His people to be besieged by their enemies! Because Israel smote their own Messiah--their own Saviour--upon the cheek, these calamities have come upon them, again, and again, and again.

Now, this isn't the end of the prophecy. God has more to say. In order that Israel might understand the enormity of their crime, the LORD goes on to tell us exactly *who* the "***judge of Israel***" is. In **verse 2**, we are told that this Judge of Israel--this "***Ruler in Israel***"--would come from the small town of Bethlehem. Yet, He would not be a mere man. Micah says that His "***goings forth***" are "***from everlasting.***" My friends, only one Person is "***from everlasting***": and that is God!

So, there you have it! Micah is telling us is that Israel would be besieged by her own God as punishment for the crime of smiting the Judge of Israel upon the cheek; and this "***judge of Israel***" is none other than the *God of Israel Himself*, in human flesh! How is that for a prophecy, folks? In two short verses, God zoomed the "camera lens" of history from the future Battle of Armageddon, to the crucifixion of Christ, to His birth in Bethlehem, to eternity past! This is the way that *God* sees things! He sees the past, present, and future as one. From eternity past, God had a plan for our redemption; and everything that comes with the "redemption package" is as good as "done," as far as God is concerned!

As Jesus walked on this earth, He was constantly telling His disciples that He must go to such-and-such place and do such-and-such thing because "***The scriptures must be fulfilled.***" Jesus fulfilled hundreds of prophecies during His journey in our world; but **Micah 5:2** was one of the very first prophecies to be fulfilled. Christ had to be born in Bethlehem. Why? Because the "***mouth of the LORD hath spoken it***"; and what God has spoken must be!

Now, why else did the Father call His Son to Bethlehem? He called His Son to Bethlehem...

II. Because He is the Son of David.

In **John 7**, we are told about an event that took place in Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles, in the last year of Jesus' ministry. On the last day of the feast, Jesus stood up in front of the multitude, and offered all who were thirsty to come unto Him and drink of the water of eternal life. Now, the reaction was mixed. Some of the people received Jesus' words, and believed that Jesus is the Messiah. However, many others refused to believe that Jesus is the Christ; and this was their reason. They said, "***Shall Christ come out of Galilee? Hath not the scripture said, That Christ cometh of the seed of David, and out of the town of Bethlehem, where David was?***" (**John 7:40-43**).

As you can see, the Jewish people knew that the Messiah was to come from Bethlehem. They knew Micah's prophecy. They had heard about **Micah 5:2** all their lives. It was a well-known fact that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. The problem is that most people simply *refused to believe* that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Jesus was known as "Jesus of Nazareth" because He had grown up in Nazareth for most of His life; yet, most people refused to acknowledge that He had, in fact, been *born* in Bethlehem.

Now, why is this? Why were so many people stubbornly unwilling to acknowledge the true place of Jesus' birth, even though Jesus' family could verify the facts? It's simple. They didn't want to believe on Him, because He exposed their sinful hearts. His perfect holiness made them feel very uncomfortable. They wanted to cling to their own sense of self-righteousness. Therefore, they chose to disqualify Jesus as the Messiah in their own minds. Despite the countless miracles that Jesus did to prove who He is, people kept repeating the lie that Jesus was born in Nazareth, and not in Bethlehem.

Obviously, this prophecy about the Messiah's being born in Bethlehem is no small matter. It is important because of the simple fact that *God said* He would be born in Bethlehem. (We've already seen this.) However, there is another reason why Bethlehem is so important. You see, Bethlehem is the city where **David** was born; and you cannot separate the Messiah from His father David. God has linked their identities together in a powerful way. In fact, in some Old Testament prophecies, God refers to the Messiah not only as "the *seed* of David," but simply as "David"! Even the Jews who didn't believe on Jesus understood the link between David, and Bethlehem, and the Messiah. They understood that the Messiah *must* be born in Bethlehem because Bethlehem is the City of David, "**where David was.**" Let's look at God's promise to David, and see how important Jesus' title "the Son of David" is.

Read 2 Samuel 7:1-17.

Read Psalm 89:19-37.

In these two prophecies, God said that David's throne would be established "**for ever.**" Not only would David's throne be established over Israel, but over the whole earth! Yet, *who*, exactly, would sit on the throne of David? In **Psalm 89:20** God says, "**I have found David my servant; with my holy oil have I anointed him.**" He continues to describe David's reign for several more verses. Then, in verse **27**, we read that "**I will make him my firstborn, higher than the kings of the earth.**" On the surface, it sounds as though God is talking about David himself! Yet, we know that he is not talking about David. Rather, He is talking about one of *David's descendants*. He's talking about the Messiah. God promised that *many* of David's descendants would sit on the throne of Israel (which they did); however, when the Messiah comes, His throne will be established *forever*. David, powerful though he was, was never "**higher than the kings of the earth.**" However, David's great *Seed*, or Descendant, *will* be higher than the kings of the earth. When Jesus Christ returns to earth one day to set up His kingdom, He will rule over the entire world for 1,000 glorious years; and then, His reign will roll over into the eternal ages, in the new heaven and new earth that God will create.

So, what is the point? The point is that the Messiah is truly a *Man*. He is the Seed of David. His identity is so linked to David, that He is sometimes simply *called* "**David**" (such as in **Ezekiel 37:24-25**). **Romans 1:3** says that Jesus was "**made of the seed of David according to the flesh.**" Yet, while Jesus is the *Son* of David, He is also David's *Lord...and God!*

Read Psalm 110:1.

Who is this Man will one day sit at God's right hand of power, until He makes His enemies His footstool? David's Descendant, the Messiah! Yet, how did *David* address the Messiah in this verse? David calls Him "**Lord**"! (This is God's name, *Adanay*.) Now, how can the Messiah be David's biological Descendant, and yet, at the same time, be David's *Lord and God*? There is only one way. *God* had to become flesh! *God* had to take on a human nature, and be born into the biological line of David!

Jesus Himself pointed out this truth when He was speaking to the Pharisees a few days before His crucifixion. He challenged them with the question, "**What think ye of Christ [the Messiah]? whose son is he?**" Of course, they knew the answer to that question: and they promptly answered, "**The son of David.**" But then, Jesus dropped the bombshell question. He said, "**How then doth David in spirit call him Lord, saying, The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, till I make thine enemies thy footstool? If David then call him Lord, how is he his son?**" The Pharisees had no answer to that question. They were

stunned! Jesus was making it clear that the Messiah cannot merely be a great *Man*: He must also be *God*. By the way, you'll notice that in **Psalm 110:1**, "***the LORD***" (Jehovah God) is speaking to "***the Lord***" (Adonay, who is also God). How can God speak to God? There is only one way. The Father and the Son are distinct Persons, yet co-equal in being, essence, and power!

Jesus isn't just *a* son of David; He is *the* Son of David. He is David's Descendant *and His God* at the same time! That is why Jesus said, "***I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star.***" As God, Christ is David's "***root***" (the one who created him, and gave him life); but as *Man*, He is David's "***offspring***" (his Descendant).

Do you see why the Son of God made His first stop in Bethlehem? He *had* to be born in the city of David, because He is the "***root and offspring of David.***" He is the one who Micah said is the "***ruler in Israel, whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.***" God has linked Jesus' human origin *and* His divine entry into this world to the town of Bethlehem!

I would ask you: "Have *you* believed on the Son of David?" I'm not merely asking if you believe that Jesus *is* the Messiah, because many people in Jesus' day supposedly "believed" this truth. Many of the chief rulers of Israel "believed" it, because the evidence of His messiahship was overwhelming. Yet, because of their fear of being cast out of the synagogue, and their desire for the praise and good opinion of men, they would not confess His name. Their "faith" was not real faith, because there was no repentance or surrender to Christ. When Jesus entered Jerusalem a few days before His crucifixion, seemingly most of the city cried "Hosanna to the Son of David!" Yet, only a few days later, seemingly the whole city cried "Crucify him!" Without a doubt, many of the same people who cried "Hosanna" later cried "Crucify him!" Why? No repentance! Jesus said, "**Repent ye, and believe the gospel.**"

By the way, what is real repentance? Perhaps the best way to define *real* repentance is to point out what *fake* repentance is! With fake repentance, there is no change of life following one's supposed "conversion." With fake repentance, there is no true inner remorse for one's sin. With fake repentance, people continue to try to justify their sin, and to keep blaming others for their sin. If *this* be the kind of repentance you profess to have, then you are not saved; and I urge you to repent and believe on the Son of David today!

Now, why else did the Father call His Son to Bethlehem? He called His Son to Bethlehem...

III. Because He had some important types to fulfil.

The Scripture is filled with beautiful types and pictures of Christ. There are many people, places, and things that are associated with Christ because those persons, places, or things remind us, in some way, of Christ's character. So it is with the town of Bethlehem. There are things about the little town of Bethlehem that remind us that Jesus is the Saviour of mankind.

First of all, the town of Bethlehem, from ancient times, was associated with sheep and shepherding. It was the town where Jacob himself built a sheep tower. Also, the field just outside Bethlehem was the place where, from ancient times, sheep were raised *specifically* for the purpose of providing sacrificial lambs for the Temple! The shepherds to whom the angels appeared on the night of Christ's birth were Temple employees!

Why, then, did God choose to announce his Son's birth to these shepherds who worked for the Temple? For two reasons. First, Jesus is the Lamb of God--the true sacrificial Lamb, who

takes away the sins of the world. Secondly, He is the Good Shepherd, who laid down His life for His sheep! Just as David tended sheep in the fields outside Bethlehem, and often hazarded his life to protect his father's sheep, so Jesus, the Good Shepherd, tends *His* Father's sheep (those who are saved): and He *actually* laid down His life for them. In **Ezekiel 34:23**, the LORD made this prophecy about the coming Messiah: "*And I will set up one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them, even my servant David; he shall feed them, and he shall be their shepherd.*" In this same chapter, the Messiah Himself made this prophecy about His future ministry. He said, "*I will feed my flock, and I will cause them to lie down, saith the Lord GOD. I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away, and will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick.*"

Read John 1:19-29 and 10:1-18.

Bethlehem reminds us that Jesus is the Lamb of God *and* the Great Shepherd of the sheep! But that's not all. Bethlehem also reminds us that Jesus is the Bread of Life. How so? By its very name! Bethlehem literally means "house of bread." What a fitting name for the birthplace of Christ! Just as we cannot live without physical bread (or food) for our bodies, so we cannot live spiritually (have eternal life) without "eating" the Bread of Life, Jesus Christ! When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Bethlehem truly became "the house of Bread"!

Read John 6:29-51.

My friend, have you "eaten" of the Bread of Life? In other words, have you "believed" on the Lord Jesus Christ? Have you *personally* trusted in Him as the Lamb of God? Have you stopped trusting in your own worthless good works, and instead entrusted your soul to the one who went as a lamb to the slaughter, and paid your sin's penalty, so that you might be saved? Is Jesus *your own personal* Good Shepherd? Has there been a time in your life when you decided to stop wandering away from God, and allowed the Good Shepherd to gather you in His arms, and take you into His fold? If not, I urge you to *stop* wandering as a sheep without a shepherd, and allow Christ to save you today! Should you be saved already, I would ask: "Are you listening closely to your Shepherd's voice? Are you living in full obedience to Him?"

There is one more reason why Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem. Jesus had to be born there...

IV. Because God delights in using small and unlikely things.

Read Micah 4:8.

It's easy to read over a verse such as this one and miss its meaning. This isn't a very well-known Scripture; but it contains a powerful prophecy of Christ's birth. This prophecy all centres on the phrase: "*the tower of the flock.*" To understand what Micah is talking about, we need to go back to **Genesis 35**, and read about an event in Jacob's life.

Read Genesis 35:16-21.

In this Scripture, we are told that after Rachel died, Jacob erected a "*pillar*" to mark her burial place; and he erected it in Ephrath. Ephrath is a suburb of Bethlehem. Now, this "*pillar*" was more than a grave marker: it was actually a small watchtower, which was built for the purpose of keeping watch over Jacob's flocks. **Genesis 35:21** says that Jacob, after moving into Ephrath, "*spread his tent beyond the tower of Edar.*" The Hebrew word *edar* means "flock"; and so, "*tower of Edar*" literally means "tower of the flock."

As it turned out, this "***tower of the flock***" stood for a long time. In fact, it stood for hundreds of years. Even in Micah's day (in 700 B.C.), it was still standing. When Micah wrote about the "***tower of the flock***," his readers knew what he was talking about. They knew that he was talking about Rachel's grave, just outside Bethlehem. It was famous not only because it was the place of Rachel's grave, but also because it stood outside the city of David—Bethlehem.

Now, in light of this, the next question is: What does Micah mean when he says that the "***first dominion***" would come to this "tower of the flock"? Well, this is where it gets interesting. Alfred Eidersheim, a 19th-century Jewish Christian, recorded some valuable information from Old Testament-age Jewish tradition. He said,

"That the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem was a settled conviction. **Equally so was the conviction that He was to be revealed from Migdal Edar—'the tower of the flock.'**" This Migdal Edar was not the watchtower of the *ordinary* flocks which pastured on the barren sheep ground beyond Bethlehem, but lay close to town, on the road to Jerusalem. A passage in the Mishna leads to the conclusion that the flocks which pastured there were destined for Temple sacrifice--and, accordingly, **that the shepherds who watched over them were not ordinary shepherds.**" Eidersheim went on to explain: "Thus, Jewish tradition...apprehended the first revelation of the Messiah from the *Migdal Edar*, where shepherds watched the Temple-flocks all year round."

What Edersheim is telling us is that the rabbis, long before Christ's birth, understood that **Micah 4:8** was a prophecy of the Messiah. The rabbis believed that the "***tower of the flock***" in Ephrath would be the very place where the Messiah's arrival would be announced! The rabbis figured that since the shepherds who worked in this place were *Temple* employees, who made sure that the lambs were perfect for sacrifice, they would therefore receive some kind of unusual privilege in regard to the announcement of the Messiah! Little did the old rabbis realise how right they were! The tower of the flock did, indeed, turn out to be the spot where Temple shepherds received the announcement of the Messiah's birth!

Read Luke 2:1-14.

The "***first dominion***" (in other words, the fame) that belonged to the town of Bethlehem in David's day was restored, just as Micah prophesied. Bethlehem is now known not only as the town of *David's* birth, but also as the town of *the Messiah's* birth. How appropriate, too, that the very spot where sheep were inspected by Temple employees turned out to be the same spot where the birth of the *Lamb of God* was announced to the shepherds! The "tower of the flock" may have seemed insignificant; but it was marked out by God. In time, it "marked the spot" where God's angels made the announcement of Christ's birth.

Now, what practical application can we draw from this? I think it shows that God loves to use small things! God used a small *town* to be the place of Jesus' birth; and He used a small *tower* to "mark the spot" where the announcement of His birth would take place. He also used "small *people*." It wasn't a king, or a prince, or a rich noble who received the announcement of Jesus' birth; instead, it was a band of lowly shepherds. Brethren, God is still using "small" people like you and me. God wants to use *your* life to serve Him. It doesn't matter what your age is, or what your education level is, or what talents you have, or how much money you have in the bank; God will use *anyone* who is willing to be a humble servant of the Lord.

Conclusion: When Gabriel announced to Mary that she was to be the mother of the Messiah, her response was, “***Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to they word.***” As we close this morning, I would ask: “Do you have Mary’s attitude?” Are you willing for God to use your life? God used the least likely of Jesse’s sons--David. Similarly, He will use *your* life in a wonderful way, if you will let Him have full control of your heart! **I would also ask,** “***Are you saved?***” Has there been a time in your life when you repented and believed on Him? Christ left the glories of Heaven, and came to Bethlehem, *for you!* He loves you, and wants to save you. Won’t you believe on Him today?