

Bethlehem Ephrathah

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[0 : 00] Now obviously in the passage that we read, the most famous verse within it is that which we find at verse 2. But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.

And this, of course, is the verse which is cited by all the wise men and the religious leaders in Jerusalem. When Herod inquires, when the wise men visit, he inquires about where the King of the Jews, the Messiah, is to be born.

And this is cited, of course, in Matthew's account of the Gospel there in chapter 2. Now there's a slight subtle change you might be aware of when it's quoted in Matthew.

And that is when it's quoted there in verse 6 of Matthew chapter 2. It says, you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah.

Now that's a subtle kind of change of emphasis here. Because in the original, it appears to say, you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah.

[1 : 15] In other words, not even worth mentioning. If we think about the ancient text, the times when Joshua and the others came into the land, Bethlehem didn't really rate a mention there.

Certainly not as one of the cities of Judah. It didn't come to be built and fortified as a city until much later in Israel's history. Of course, the definition of a city in those days was it was very clear. It was one that had a wall round about it. A wall and gates and bars. That made you a city. If you just were undefended, that made you a village. Bethlehem was regarded as insignificant for most of its history.

The most significant thing that came out of it after, of course, the incident we read of in the book of Ruth with Boaz and Ruth. And then, of course, they have a child, Obed, who becomes the father of Jesse, who becomes the father of David.

And Bethlehem is then taken as being the city of David, the birthplace of David from whence he arose. And then we have this prophecy hundreds of years later in the prophet Micah that out of Bethlehem will come not simply David himself, but somebody whose purpose, whose task is going to be infinitely greater than anything David was able to accomplish in the days of his flesh.

[2 : 38] It talks about here a shepherd, a Messiah, whose kingdom will fill all the nations. A remnant of Jacob shall be among the nations in the midst of many people for a lion among the beasts of the forest.

Your hand shall be lifted up over all your adversaries. All your enemies shall be cut off. And that day declares the Lord, I'll cut off your horses from among you, destroy your chariots. Anyone who will not obey will be destroyed.

It's envisaging a messianic triumph. But only at the end, at the time when the Messiah who is prophesied to be born out of Bethlehem is coming, in that day it's a day of trouble as we can see in the rest of the chapter here.

The Assyrians are in power at the time when this prophecy is given. And for Assyria, we should understand that being a sort of token for all the powers of the world, the flesh and the devil, ranged against the Lord and his people.

When the Messiah who is promised, when the one to whom this prophecy is looking, is born, it doesn't change the world in terms of switching on a light in a dark room.

[3 : 52] But rather more like planting a seed which is going to grow and spring up through the soil and eventually take over all the area round about.

When Jesus is born, of course, apart from the incidents surrounding his birth itself, which we're told of in Luke and in Matthew's account of the gospel as well, other than that, we have long years of

silence, just as you would expect for this quiet work of God to be going on, whilst his people are under oppression from the Gentile Romans, whilst the temple and the religion of Israel was degenerating and becoming almost as corrupt as it could be before finally in the end they sealed their own corruption by putting to death the Lord's own Messiah.

But what we find here is that this promise, this message, is coming not into a world that is already made fine and all right.

It's not a case of like so many people would imply or suggest at this time of the year as though, oh, it's a season of goodwill, everything's sweet, everything's nice, everything's just being made brilliant, and then you've got the little baby Jesus icing on the cake.

It's not this sort of rounding off all this time of perfection and goodness and sweetness and light because as we know it's not really a time of sweetness and light and perfection.

[5 : 19] It's often a time of great hassle and difficulty and too many things to do. And for some people, of course, it's a tragic time of year. If bad things happen, we think, of course, the family of the boy who has died recently in the Nicholson in town there.

This time of year is just going to be painful for them every time it comes around. And all those who are either bereaved or suffer tragedy at this particular time of year, it's going to be a painful reminder.

And the Messiah who comes at this stage is not coming into a world that is sort of all made smooth and ready and prepared for him just to waltz in.

But rather, it is precisely into a world dominated by trouble and oppression and fear and pain and misery and all the problems that sin brings with it.

It is precisely into such a world as this. And into such a situation as that. That the Lord comes and that he speaks his life-changing message.

[6 : 26] And in such an insignificant place, we often draw attention perhaps this time of the year to the circumstances in which Jesus was born. Comparative poverty.

It doesn't say, of course, anywhere in the gospel accounts that he was born in a stable. All it says is that he was laid in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.

And then a whole sort of industry of speculation has built around that one simple statement. But what we do know is that even into the place in which he was born, it is considered at the time of this prophecy too little to be among the clans of Judah.

From this insignificant source. Bethlehem, which means house of bread. Ephrata, which means fruitful. Yes, there is a rich possibility of abundance.

But it is a different kind of fruitfulness that is going to come forth from Bethlehem. This insignificant little place with a rich history. Yes, but that is in the past. What is God going to do now for the future?

[7 : 32] He shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth. That the rest of the brothers shall return to the people of Israel.

This Messiah is going forth. His coming forth is from of old. In other words, from all eternity. This has been set and prophesied from ancient days.

But it is going to be an everlasting kingdom. He shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord. In the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.

And they shall dwell secure. For he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And he shall be their peace. Now, of course, we tend nowadays to translate that into, oh yes, peace, goodwill toward men.

As if everybody is friendly at this time of year. And perhaps some people make more of an effort to be friendly with each other at this time of year than they might at other times. But that is not ultimately what it is about.

[8 : 29] But ultimately, it is about the peace that is made between heaven and earth. The peace that is made between God and man. And of course, that is then reflected not only in the horizontal and the vertical relationship between God to man.

But in the horizontal relationship between mankind. Different races, different countries, different nations. And relationships between men and women and boys and girls.

Ephesians, of course, sums this up in chapter 2. It is talking about relations between Jews and Gentiles. But it is equally applicable to the relationship between God and men.

Chapter 2, verse 14 of Ephesians. For he himself is our peace. Who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.

By abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances. That he might create in himself one new man in place of the two. So making peace.

[9 : 29] And might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross. Thereby killing the hostility. How can he reconcile the two into one?

How can he be both Jew and Gentile? Well, of course, he is not Gentile. Physically, Jesus isn't. But in coming to pay the price of sin for all the nations of the world.

All mankind. There is no other Savior except Jesus. Then all the Gentiles are invited into this peace. And made one. Made reconciled to God through what Christ has accomplished.

And yet at the same time, Jesus is as Jewish as Jewish can be. His pedigree goes all the way back to King David. To Abraham and so on. He is more than Paul.

He is a Hebrew of the Hebrews. He is the epitome. The personification of Israel. Not just in the flesh, but Israel as it was meant to be. The perfect offering up of the sacred people of God.

[10 : 30] It's what Jesus is meant to be. As well as opening the way and being the Savior for the Gentiles as well. He has broken down whatever walls of division or hostility were between men and men.

Because he's already done the difficult thing. And broken down the enmity between God and mankind. Reconciling in himself the holiness of God.

And the sinfulness of man which he himself takes upon himself. And then has it put to death upon the cross. He shall be their peace.

Verse 8. Verse 5. I beg your pardon. And when the Assyrian comes into our land and treads in our palaces. We will raise against him seven shepherds and eight princes of men.

They shall shepherd the land of Israel with a sword. Now this can sometimes cause people to think. Oh well that's very deep. Seven shepherds and eight principal men. I mean what does that mean?

[11 : 30] It's. We shouldn't be looking through the history of Israel. Now which are the seven men? One, two, three, four. And who's the eight princes or the eight principal men?

We have to remember that in scripture seven is a particular kind of number. It is taken as being a number not only of that which is perfect. But that which also is divinely perfect.

If there are seven shepherds and eight principal men or eight princes. The word literally means anointed. Those set apart. Eight set apart.

It doesn't mean oh yes one, two, three, four, five, six, seven. It means a perfect number in abundance. Seven being the divine number was also the number of perfection.

So it is a perfect number in abundance. Seven and eight. There are seven shepherds and eight princes of men. Not unlike what we find for example in Ecclesiastes chapter 11 verse 2.

[12 : 31] Give a portion to seven or even to eight. For you know not what disaster may happen on the earth. In other words make sure your generosity is perfect and abundant.

Give to the seven, give to eight. You've got the perfect number and abundance. Enough and to spare. Not unlike how you find the numbers six and seven used elsewhere in the Old Testament. Job for example in chapter 5 verse 19. He will deliver you from six troubles. In seven no evil shall touch you. It doesn't mean that you know by the time you get eight troubles.

Oh well you have your problems then. Because it's one, two, three, four, five, six. Okay seven and after that you're on your own. It rather means a perfect number. There's complete deliverance in what the Lord gives.

Again in the Proverbs in chapter 6 verse 16. You know the verses. These six things that the Lord hate. Yea seven are an abomination unto him. A proud look.

[13 : 34] A lying tongue. And hands that shed innocent blood. And heart that deviseeth wicked imaginations. Feet that be swift in running to evil. A false witness that speaketh lies. And he that saw discord among brethren.

Although there's seven things that are numbered off. It doesn't mean that only these things God hates. But not anything else. It means that it's the perfect number. And the use of six and then seven.

And likewise the use of seven and then eight. Means that there will be an absolute divine sufficiency. For all the needs of deliverance.

When the Lord brings in this deliverance. This Messiah that is going to come. This deliverance he is going to bring. Will be a perfect deliverance.

When the Assyrian comes into our land. And treads in our palaces. In other words. When the Lord's people are beaten down by the world. When they are crushed as it were.

[14:32] Then we will raise against them. Seven shepherds and eight princes of men. They shall shepherd the land of Israel. With a sword. The land of Nimrod at its entrances. He shall deliver us from the Assyrian.

When he comes into our land. And treads within our border. It's not a reference. First and foremost. To a political deliverance. It's not saying. Here come the Assyrians.

Right. We'll fight back against them. Here's the sword. Here's the shepherd with the sword. And so on. Some people thought. When the Messiah would come. Of course. That he would deliver. The people of Israel.

From the Roman occupation. Well. In one sense. You could say. In the fullness of time. That is what the Lord did. Because. As the gospel spread. Throughout the Roman Empire.

And as more and more. People became Christians. In all levels of Roman society. Throughout the Empire. And all the different countries of it. And as the authorities kept on trying to persecute it to death.

[15:32] They got to the stage. Where the number of believers. Was multiplying so fast. Throughout the Roman Empire. That they literally couldn't kill them fast enough. And so what option did they have?

Eventually. The Roman Emperor himself. Became a Christian. And so the Empire was changed. Into an outwardly. Officially. Christian Empire.

And the enmity of that Empire. Against the Lord's people. Ceased. And the Lord overcame. Not with a sword in the short term.

But gradually. Like we said at the outset. Like with a seed planted under the soil. That grows. And spreads. Its roots downwards. And its boughs upwards.

Until it fills. All the land round about. Think about Daniel's. Or description of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. Remember the image. With the head of gold.

[16:31] And the chest of silver. And the arms of silver. And the legs of bronze. And the feet of clay and iron. Mixed together. And this great image. Is representing all the different empires.

And nations. And powers. Of the world. Which we've got summed up here. With the term Assyrian. But it means all the powers of the world. And then there was a rock.

Cut out from the mountain. Without hands. Nobody chiseled away at it. Nobody quarried it. Humanly speaking. It was cut out. Without hands. Rolled down the mountain.

And struck against the image. At its feet. And the whole thing. Crumbled to dust. And was blown away in the breeze. And that rock that was cut out. Expanded and filled the whole earth.

That's what we're talking about here. That this which begins. Humanly speaking. In Bethlehem. In the land of Judah. It fills eventually.

[17:27] The whole earth. As it is in the process. Of doing now. As it is in the process. In country after country. In the world. Where despite. The increased persecution.

Against the Lord. And his people. This gospel message. Is satisfying. The inherent need. That people have sought. To find.

In false religions. False prophets. False gods. Or the hopeless emptiness. Of our own western atheism. And indifference. It doesn't. Cut it.

All these false religions. All these false philosophies. And ideologies. And so on. It does not satisfy. The human soul. And the gospel.

Is filling that. We don't see it so much. In our country. In our time. But even so. As we heard. In prayer earlier. There are still brands. Plucked from the burning. And in other countries.

[18:21] The Lord is bringing on. More. And more. Just as. To begin with. In the history of the gospel. Of course. The Lord's people. Who were originally the Jews. Didn't receive it.

Or turned their backs in it. For the most part. But those who did receive it. Spread it throughout the world. And this. I think again. Is also prophesied. The remnant.

Of Jacob. Shall be in the midst. Of many peoples. Like dew. From the Lord. Like showers. On the grass. Which delay not. For a man. Nor wait for the children.

Of men. When the dew comes. In the morning. It's not. So you can't go out. With a hose. And try and spread it around. It's far more widespread. Than anything. That man can spread. It doesn't wait.

For when man is ready. It just comes. In the Lord's time. And this. That spread the gospel. Throughout the world. Was not initially. Done by Gentiles. It was done by Jews.

[19:16] The remnant. Of Jacob. Shall be in the midst. Of many people. Like dew. From the Lord. Now. Some people. Of course. Take the line. That. Okay. That was then. But this is now.

And now the Lord. Is done and dusted. With his people of Israel. And now. It's just the church. The largely Gentile church. Which is like. The Israel of God. I would suggest to you.

That I think. Scripture teaches. Both in the Old Testament. And the New. That there is yet. Still. A purpose. Not yet fulfilled. For the people of Israel.

According to the flesh. The people of the Jews. Throughout the world. According to the flesh. Of course. They will not be saved. By any means. Other than by their Messiah. The Lord Jesus Christ. But when the fullness. Of time is come. I would suggest to you. That evidence. Of scripture. Suggests. That there will be. An in gathering. Of the Jews. Which will itself.

[20:11] Be used of the Lord. As an explosion. For Christian evangelism. Throughout the world. And throughout the. As yet unreached world. Prior to the Lord.

Coming back. Romans 11. Verse 12. We read. For example. Now if their trespass. Means riches. For the world. And if their failure. Means riches. For the Gentiles.

How much more. Will their full inclusion. Mean. Talking about Israel. After the flesh. And at verse 15. For if their rejection. Means the reconciliation. Of the world. What will their acceptance.

Mean. But life. From the dead. Now it's not the case. Of course. That the majority. Of the Jews. Rejecting. Rejecting Jesus. As their Messiah.

Oh well. That's a benefit to us. It's good when people say no. To Jesus. It's not good when people say no. To Jesus. It's never good. When people say no. To Jesus. But what's being referred to.

[21:06] Here in Romans. Is the. By and large. Rejection. By most. Of. The people. Of Israel. Most. Of the Jewish. Nation.

Rejecting. Their Messiah. And the very few. Which did. Believe. The very few. Which did. Accept. These were the means. By which the gospel.

Was spread. Outwards. To all the nations. Of the world. The very few. Jewish believers. In the days of Jesus. And the apostles. Remember. All the apostles.

Were Jews. All the first Christians. Were Jews. This was. The casting away. Of the Messiah. By the Israelite nation. Only a very.

Very few. Believe. But of those. Very few. And from those. Very few. The gospel. Went out.

Throughout the world. Now that was the case. With the very few. That were left. After the rejection.

[22:00] By the majority. What will it be. Paul is saying. What will it be. When the majority. Turn. Or when there is. An in gathering. What kind of glory.

Should we be able. To look forward. To. Then. There is a great. Plan. For the remnant. Of Jacob. In the midst. Of many peoples. To be like.

Dew from the Lord. Like showers. On the grass. The remnant. Of Jacob. Shall be among the nations. In the midst. Of many people. Like a lion. Among the beasts.

Of the forest. Like a young lion. Among the flocks. Of the sheep. All of these things. That will come in. In the midst. Of what seems. To be. Weakness.

What seems. To be. Difficulty. And problem. You. Bethlehem. Aphrata. Who are too. Little to be. Among the clans. Of Judah. From you.

[22:55] Shall come forth. For me. One who is to be. Ruler in Israel. Who is coming forth. As some of old. From ancient days. He shall give them up. Until the time. When she. Who is in labor.

Has given birth. The rest of his brothers. Shall return. To the people. Of Israel. And he shall stand. And shepherd his flock. In the strength. Of the Lord. They shall dwell secure.

For he shall be great. To the ends. Of the earth. And he shall be their peace. And finally. Of course. The closing verses. Of this chapter. Talk about the time.

When Messiah. Comes in his power. There is a cutting off. Of idolatry. Of fortune telling. Of paganism. It all gets. It all gets. Swept away.

As the way. Is made clear. For the coming. Of the king. As the Lord. Brings in. His own kingdom. There comes a time. When it comes. In its fullness. In its strength.

[23 : 49] But all that we see. Just now. Is the seed. Beginning to sprout. And be planted. All we see. Just now. In this prophecy. Here. Is looking forward.

To something. Which at that time. Had not yet. Happened. Now of course. It seems to be. That God is coming. Amongst men. In great weakness. But of course.

The apostle Paul. Makes clear. Later on. Weakness is something. God can use. For the sake of Christ. Then. I am content. With weakness. Second Corinthians. Chapter 12. Verse 10.

I am content. With weakness. Insults. Hardships. Persecutions. And calamities. For when I am weak. Then I am strong. When I am not. Depending on my own strength.

When I am not. Pretending. That I have power. To change the world. When I look. Only to Christ. And what seems. To be his weakness. What seems.

[24 : 43] To be his. Insignificance. In the world. And some people. Would have you believe. That Jesus. Is completely insignificant. In the world. Well for something. Of such insignificance. It has literally.

Changed. The world. Over the last. 2000 years. And continues. To do so. In the lives. Of all. Who will actually. Come. And receive him.

This verse. Which we love. To hear quoted. At this time of year. Like every text. It has a context. And the context. Is one of.

Worldly oppression. Of trouble. In the world. Of difficulties. Being faced. By the people of Israel. And by all the nations. Round about. And the prophesying.

That after this. Promises fulfilled. Through Bethlehem. And the land of Judah. Then the Lord. Will raise up. A sufficiency. An abundance. Of those.

[25 : 38] Who by. Following. His means. And his teaching. Will overcome. All the empires. Of evil. In the world. And the Lord. Will bring in his kingdom.

In the fullness of time. We're not seeing. That fulfillment. Yet. But we are. At the stage. Where that. Planting of the Lord. Is expanding. And filling the earth.

Not so much. In our country. Not so much. In our culture. And in our land. But it is certainly. Happening. Throughout the other countries. Of the world. And such modern inventions.

The internet. And so on. Being used. To spread it. In places. Where physically. Missionaries.

Cannot go. And where the authorities. Would prevent the message. From reaching.

Where books. Of the gospel. Are banned. Bibles are banned. But they can't stop people.

Downloading things. They can't stop people. Receiving gospel messages.

[26 : 31] On their phones. They can't stop people. From accessing. Material. Which is. To the forces and powers. Of this world. Dynamite.

This is what is going to change. The world. And is in the process. Of doing it. Even now. It is why. This verse.

Reminds us again. Of what God has done. And what he continues to do. In the midst of weakness. The apostle said. When I am weak.

Then I am strong. Well. We look at ourselves. And we are. Acutely conscious. Of how weak we are. Maybe. That is not a bad thing.

When we are so conscious. Of our own frailty. And fragility. And think. Well. What can I do? Maybe you and I. Can't do anything. But God. Can do anything. And it is.

[27 : 26] Into such. A world. Of trouble. And oppression. And violence. And difficulty. That this promise. Is spoken. The oppression.

Of the Assyrian. And all the powers. Of the world. That it symbolizes. It is in other words. For a real world. For real life. And real problems.

And real difficulties. And real fallenness. And real brokenness. And real people. Like you and me.

That Jesus has come. That is the good news.

That there is no condition. In this world. That is too dark. Or too depraved. Or too broken. Or too sin ridden. Or too deeply cast down.

To be beyond the reach. Of his mercy. And the fact. That that mercy. Appears in weakness. Means that. At the very least.

[28 : 21] It is not something. Of which. Even the most vulnerable. Need ever be afraid. In that sense. Yes. We fear the Lord. And his righteousness.

And his power. But when he comes. To us. As he comes. He makes himself. Vulnerable. He makes himself. Insignificant.

He makes himself. Weaker. Than our weakness. So that we don't. Have to be afraid. Of this message. But rather.
We should be ready. To embrace it. This. This. Savior. This Messiah. The fulfillment. Of this. Prophecy. And this place.
Where it was. To be fulfilled. But you. O Bethlehem Ephrata. Who are too little. To be among. The clans of Judah. For you. Shall come forth.
[29 : 14] For me. One who is to be. Ruler. In Israel. Every text. Has a context. Christ. And the context. Of this. Most famous verse.
In the chapter. Is one of real need. In a real world. To which God provides. A real. Savior. And a real.
Deliverance. Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray.