

“HOPE IS ON THE WAY” (PART 3) **(Micah 5:2; Zechariah 9:9)**

INTRODUCTION

Ego. It’s a word we hear often. “Boy, he’s got a bit of an ego, doesn’t he?” Or we hear about it in related ways, such as: “Man, who does she think she is — the Queen of Sheba?” “Wow, I love me; who do you love?” Or we hear words or phrases that define that somebody’s ego is a problem: arrogant, self-absorbed, center of the universe, all about me — things like that.

The dictionary defines ego as: “a person’s sense of self-esteem or self-importance.” Now, like everything else about us, ego is a gift of God — part of how he made us. When it is properly balanced, it keeps us healthy both mentally and physically. Ego makes me want to look nice. Ego makes me want to do the best I can at something. Ego also helps me know that I can do something; when I come up here to bring a message, or sit at the piano, ego reminds me that this is something I can do. That is not being cocky; it is simply being aware that something is within the range of things which God has gifted me and provided the teachers to allow those abilities to be developed. Ego also helps keep me safe. I don’t want to do drugs or smoke cigarettes because of what those things would do to me. I want to take care of myself so that I can do things like continue in ministry with you all, and go to the range with you all and go to football games and basketball games with you all and things like that. In all those senses, my ego is a good thing.

When does ego become a bad thing? When it gives us an over-inflated sense of ourselves: our self-worth, our abilities, our skills. If I was to think I was the greatest preacher in the world, that’s ego gone south. If I was to think I was the greatest pianist in the world today, that would be laughably wrong. In those cases, my ego would be lying to me, both telling me AND trying to convince you of something that is very obviously not true.

Ego can also affect our day-to-day interactions with the people around us. For instance, if I get behind a slow driver and I get impatient and even angry, my ego is declaring that my trip and my schedule is more important than that driver’s and, if they “make” me late, somehow it becomes their fault, not mine. If somebody cuts in front of me in line at the convenience store, my anger is declaring that my self-worth has been denied and reduced by their actions, that my spot in line is more important than theirs. If somebody offends me and I won’t talk to them until they come to me first and offer their apology, that’s my ego declaring that my feelings are more important than theirs, that my being offended is the most important consideration moving forward. Now those are all lies, but that’s what an ego out of balance can do.

Now there is another word that we need to look at: humility. The dictionary defines humility as “a modest or low view of one’s own importance.” We need to keep that definition in mind. As Christians, we rightly view Jesus as the greatest human being to ever live, and as the greatest hope the world has to bring all that our lives are meant to be. With that “greatest hope” in mind, we’ve been looking at some of the prophecies of the OT to help us understand the hope for the human race that God promised as a result of Adam and Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden. We’ve been using those prophecies to construct some sense of the picture we could have of what this precious and promised “hope” would look like. So far some of the major points we have learned along the way are that:

- 1) This “hope” would come via very “special delivery”: the mother would be a virgin, meaning a supernatural conception — letting the world know that the child will be both

fully supernatural and, being born of a woman, fully human. He will be known as “Immanuel,” which means “God with us.” This again informs us of the super-natural, divine makeup of this “hope,” whose presence will quite literally be in a way unlike anything we have known or experienced before. And this “Immanuel” would come to us as a child — suggesting that His entire lifetime would be this long-awaited hope.

- 2) This “hope” would have some incredible character traits. He would be a —
 - a) Wonderful Counselor, leading His people through the marvels and wonders of His wisdom and understanding.
 - b) Mighty God, leading His people with might and power such as the world had never seen.
 - c) Everlasting Father, leading His people as a good father — as both provider and protector — in a reign that would never end.
 - d) Prince of Peace, leading His people into a life where no issues of conflict would remain.
- 3) This “hope,” while having the Spirit of the Lord resting on Him, would not appear with the human traits that one usually associates with dynamic personalities; it would be His character — the power in His words and works, the never-ending love — that would be so attractive.
- 4) He would be for all people — Jews as well as Gentiles.

Today we will look at two final pieces of this great “hope.” They actually belong together, so we’ll take them that way. Let’s look at them now:

TEXTS

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for Me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times” — God speaking, Micah 5:2.

Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey — Zechariah 9:9.

Now these Scriptures seem to be disconnected, but they actually have one great thing in common: They both speak to this coming hope’s humility. First, His birth is going to be in a place of incredible insignificance, from a place where no one would guess greatness would come. Then, in the moment of what seems to be His greatest triumph, He will actually present the power of His promised righteous and victorious rule as a “lowly” sovereign — one who rules both from a place of authority AND humility. Never in human history has an all-victorious ruler presented Himself with such humility. In fact, He advertises it; it is an inseparable part of His being.

Now certainly in human history, people with great accomplishments have come from places not very great at all. Larry Bird, one of the greatest basketball players of all time with the NBA’s Boston Celtics, hails from a place called French Lick — a town in southern Indiana of approximately 1,800 people. Singer Taylor Swift was born on a Christmas tree farm in Wyomissing, PA. Country singer Martina McBride comes from a town of only 200 residents — Sharon, KS. Country legend Johnny Cash was from Kingsland, AR — population 450. And odd as it may seem, three-time Stanley Cup champion Sidney Crosby of the Pittsburgh Penguins, considered one of the greatest hockey players of his generation, and country music legend Loretta

Lynn have one thing in common: they both come from unincorporated towns — his being Cole Harbour, Nova Scotia and hers being Butcher Hollow, KY — that don't even list their populations.

But it's not just athletes and entertainers: President Jimmy Carter is famously from Plains, GA — population 734. His successor, Ronald Reagan, was from Tampico, IL — all 750 people. Calvin Coolidge started even smaller — Plymouth Notch, VT with a population of 475. President Lyndon Johnson called Stonewall, TX home — as did only 500 other people. So certainly, fame is not dependent on your point of origin.

But, unlike all these other births, the birth of the Messiah was planned from eternity past; as the apostle Peter tells us: ***He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake — I Peter 1:20.*** You would think that any baby coming into the world with this important a mission for His life would come into circumstances that would afford the greatest opportunities for education and upbringing, not to mention safety and security, along with the blessings of parents who were well to do. But no — what incredible irony, that the greatest human being of all time would begin His life in such an unlikely place, a place considered one of the most remote in the entire Roman Empire, a desolate, rebellious chunk of sand and rock located in the extreme east of Rome's enormous rule, a place called Judea. The place where the prophet Micah predicted He would be born (some 700 years before the event) was a small village called Bethlehem, thought by some scholars to have had a permanent population of around 300 at the time of Christ's birth. Now certainly this was the town where Israel's great king David was from, but the idea is that, according to worldly opinion, great things came from great surroundings. Greatness was found in Rome or Athens or Alexandria, not in some dusty little village like Bethlehem. We get a sense of this assumption of the prerequisites of greatness from the disciples when Jesus famously said that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into heaven. The disciples were dumbfounded; if the rich were such a long shot for heaven, who could be saved? The assumption: Earthly riches equate to God's blessings. And nobody would equate a town like Bethlehem with either riches or God's blessings. And His parents being rich? That's a joke; Mary and Joseph had to offer a pair of doves or pigeons for sacrifice for Mary's rite of purification — a sacrifice meant for only the poorest of people. In human terms, Jesus came from nothing.

Where Christ actually grew up (following His family's becoming refugees as they fled King Herod for Egypt) wasn't much better. Nazareth of Galilee, located in the far northern part of Palestine, is thought by Biblical scholars to have had a population ranging from as few as 120 to as many as 400. It was a small farming village located at the top of a hill, very much existing apart from much of the world; it wasn't even near any important commercial trading route. The disciple Nathanael, when first hearing about Jesus of Nazareth, perfectly summed up Israel's view of his hometown: ***“Can anything good come from there?” — Nathanael, John 1:46a.*** Yet these two seemingly insignificant places would be the site where “Immanuel” began, and where He grew.

The second prophecy, from Zechariah, actually points to a moment at the end of His earthly life, when Jesus entered the capitol city of Jerusalem exactly one week before the horrific events for which He had also been born. This was arguably the moment of Christ's greatest acclaim; in fact, this moment is famously referred to as Christ's “triumphal” entry. And yet, look at how this

“triumph” is carried out: Christ enters to the cheers of the populace, riding on the back of a donkey. What’s up with that?

Now, if He had been a worldly conqueror, like many of the famed generals of Rome’s history, they would have had a parade in Rome that was itself called a “triumph.” In that procession, the honored military chief would have come into town riding in a chariot, pulled by beautiful horses. Sometimes his family would accompany him. All around him, in the company of his marching troops, would be some of the spoils of conquest — conquered, imprisoned people, exotic animals, and other prizes seized by his victory. Nobody in the watching crowd would have missed the message: the greatness of the soldier, the greatness of the conquest, the power at his command.

But not Jesus. He came into Jerusalem in humility, proclaiming not a military conquest, but a conquest of peace, beginning deep inside every individual who believed in Him and His word, to bring a promised victory over an enemy far greater and impacting on the people than Rome could ever be: Satan. As the writer of Hebrews explained: ***Since the children have flesh and blood, Hhe too shared in their humanity so that by His death He might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death — Hebrews 2:14-15.*** And as the apostle John made so clear in his first letter: ***The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work — I John 3:8.*** Despite how this may have appeared in human terms, this would be a complete conquest showing enormous power.

APPLICATION

Over the last few weeks, we’ve been looking at the “hope” that God promised all the way back in the Garden of Eden was on the way, reversing the damage that Satan had done by means of this coming “hope.” And as we looked at before, this “hope” was going to have some incredible attributes that would genuinely make Him a one-of-a-kind individual. But all those attributes were “God” attributes; in other words, they were characteristics that would themselves be divine. I mean, check it out: Somebody who could “crush” Satan. Could you do that? I can’t. Wonderful counselor — incredible wisdom that never fails? Not me. Almighty God, Everlasting Father — those are all “God” things. Prince of peace? Bringing internal peace, stripping our world of all conflict and issues? No way is that me. An origin from ancient times? I’m not sure that 1955 makes me ancient. Righteous and victorious king? Not even in my dreams. Those are all uniquely reflecting this “hope’s” divine nature, coming from that foundation of “Immanuel” — “God with us.” Divinity in the flesh, actually joining us human beings — living with us, eating, sleeping, growing with us — but then dying for us. Only somebody perfect, somebody who had pleased God in every conceivable way, would be qualified to die for us, in a way that allowed their sins to be paid for, forgiven, and washed away. Again — was never going to be me. Never could be.

But today’s prophesies also reflect something of the character of this hope: humility — the ability to be what was read to us right before the message (and I love how the New American Standard expresses it): ***Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal***

interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus — Philippians 2:1-5 (NASB).

Did you hear that last part? Have this attitude (referring back to what Paul had just written) in yourselves. Why? Because Christ Jesus had this attitude — which Paul then amplifies in the following section of verses which underscore Christ’s humility in emptying Himself of all He had to become all we needed.

So, what are we saying? It’s huge: While many aspects of God’s promised “hope” was revealed in the divine power and abilities of Jesus Christ, what is being talked about in these last two prophecies today is something to which we can attain to through the power of God in Jesus Christ: humility.

Why is this important? One reason: the image of God, His image of pure and total holiness, purity and righteousness. Presenting the image of God has been ongoing throughout history. The flood through which Noah and his family survived happened because the world turned its back on the image of God. The Ten Commandments were given to present the image of God to the world. God’s judgements were experienced by the nations of the world when they disregarded the image of God. And, as the ultimate display, Jesus Christ came to represent the image of God to a world that through sin had deserted that image.

Remember what He said:

- 1) ***“My food . . . is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to finish His work” — Jesus Christ, John 4:34.***
- 2) ***“Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by Himself; He can do only what He sees His Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does” — Jesus Christ, John 5:19.***
- 3) ***“I have come down from heaven not to do My will but to do the will of Him who sent Me” — Jesus Christ, John 6:38.***
- 4) ***“For I did not speak on My own, but the Father who sent Me commanded Me to say all that I have spoken. I know that His command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told Me to say” — Jesus Christ, John 12:49-50.***
- 5) ***“I love the Father and do exactly what My Father has commanded Me” — Jesus Christ, John 14:31a.***

What we all need to understand is that Jesus lived and spoke and taught and reached out precisely to show and reflect the image of God. Have you ever wondered why Jesus didn’t just come down from heaven and go immediately to a sacrificial death for our sins? Because He also wanted to present a life — from His very first breath — that displayed the image of God. He obeyed His Father to display the image of God. He preached and taught to explain the image of God. He performed the works He did to announce the image of God. Why do you think He told His disciples: ***“Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father” — Jesus Christ, John 14:9a.*** The whole point of His earthly life was so that people would see the image of God — His Father — through His life.

Now, He’s gone (at least physically) — but we’re still here. And the story is still the same — only now it’s on us, to reflect and present and display the image of God. Exactly what Jesus did. That’s not a matter of being divine. That’s a matter of our being filled with the divine — the Holy Spirit. That’s a matter of obedience. That’s a matter of surrender. That’s a matter of love.

And nothing reflects the image of God — all His love, all His grace, all His compassion for us — like the humility of Jesus. Think about it: Jesus had it all in heaven, and yet He emptied Himself, completely, becoming like us, completely, in order to restore us to the possibility of relationship with His Father. And we are commanded to follow His example; as He said to His disciples: ***“I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” — Jesus Christ, John 15:13.***

So, what’s this all mean? Simply this: Are our lives, how we live, how we relate to each other, how quickly and completely we forgive, how tirelessly we reach out, how easily we turn the other cheek, showing the image of God? Is our praise and worship showing the image of God? Are our lives lived out in front of family and friends, neighbors and co-workers, acquaintances and strangers reflecting the image of God? Have we surrendered ourselves to the image of God?

You see, when we sin, we are living contrary to the image of God. When we hold grudges, we are living contrary to the image of God. When we refuse to heal relationships, when we seek our good first, we are living contrary to the image of God. When we live for the desires of this world, we are living contrary to the image of God. When life becomes our time, our money, our perspective, our feelings, our wills, we are living contrary to the image of God. That’s why we make such a big deal about sexual identity and gender issues and all that: Outside of biblical norms, ALL those things are contrary to the image of God. All these things deny all that Jesus Christ did to present God. That’s why He lived those 30+ years — to present to the world how wonderful life can be when realizing the wonders of the image of God.

CONCLUSION

Christmas is here — like the song says, “the most wonderful day of the year.” What an amazing thing God did — gift-wrapping His Son to not just come to earth, but to live with us, and then to die for us.

And that is the Christmas message we should pray for opportunity to present to the world: the amazing love of God, providing an opportunity to be washed clean from sin, and to come to know a relationship with God the Father. The greatest way to show that? Living our lives in such a way that, when people see us, they see the image of God. That’s what we’re called to do. That’s the gift we are commanded to present to the world in which He has placed us.

What are our lives presenting to the world that shows them God and His wonderful Son? Let’s pray!