

THE OVERWHELMING WEIGHT OF GOD, PART 4: AMENABILITY

Micah 5:1-6; Isaiah 9:6 (ESV)

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One of the sweetest names for Christ which we remember at Christmas time is found in Isaiah 9:6: "**And His name will be called....Prince of Peace**" (Isaiah 9:6). There is a less familiar promise made about the coming of Christ in the prophet Micah which says: "**And he shall be their peace**" (Micah 5:5). Notice that it does not say that he will deliver peace like a delivery man, but that his very person is our peace. There is no peace without the person. How sweet is that promise! The battle is to experience that sweet peace in daily life. Many times I have heard those verses and thought wistfully: *If only I could have that—at this moment!*

Recently I had an experience which sheds light on what it takes to move into this great promise of peace in Christ. I was running a typical five-mile run one morning and began to feel, shall we say, "crummy." By the time I got to the second mile at the bottom of the Star City hill I was forced to downgrade my status to "really crummy." And within a few minutes I was having a stranger in a parking lot calling 911 for me because it had become obvious that the elephant sitting on my chest and arms meant that I was having a heart attack.

Fortunately, we have a wonderful health care system in this town and dozens of people swung into action to help me. In that situation, I was already pre-equipped with a conviction which impacted how I interacted with everyone in the health care system, beginning with the paramedics, and it is this: *These people know what I need at this moment.* I had no doubt of my need and no doubt that those folks knew what should be done for me.

So the whole experience became an extended process of agreeing to all the smart things I was being told to do. They would say: "Chew up these baby aspirin and swallow them." And I would say OK. "Put this nitro pill under your tongue and keep it there until it dissolves." OK. "Take off your shirt so we can put these electrodes on your chest." OK. And question after question about my medical history and the circumstances of the event which the paramedics were managing for my good.

Then they swapped me to a bed in the emergency department of the hospital and a whole new bunch of people started telling me things and asking me things. One of the funniest things they told me was when I was in the cath lab getting an angiogram and angioplasty. I was pretty much out of it until a certain point when all I can remember is popping up my head and watching the doctor running a tube up to my heart through an incision at the top of my leg. Right at that moment someone called out: "Don't do that!" I really didn't have time to respond. They did something and knocked me right back out again. But I would simply have said OK! for the hundredth time.

As it turned out, I felt better as soon as the cardiologist inserted a STENT in a 100% blocked artery. And the process of saying OK proceeded from there. I have had a fabulously good outcome, and now I am saying OK repeatedly to the fine nurses at cardiac rehab three times a week. Honestly, if someone had said: "Stick this Cardiac Intervention Twinkie in your ear," I would have done it!

AMENABILITY TO THE PRINCE OF PEACE

Do you realize that at any point I could simply have said: "Nahhh, I'm not doing that." And then I would have suffered incalculably bad consequences. But I must say that it was easy for me to say OK over and over again. I knew that my life was in the hands of good people who were part of a highly developed medical system. It was a no-brainer. And so my compliance has been and will continue to be crucial to my good outcome. Someone who sent me a get well card in the hospital anticipated this and issued the excellent advice: "Listen to your doctor!"

We might call this the virtue of amenability. Amenability as a concept only makes sense with reference to something or someone. You could be compliant toward the wrong thing. As A. W. Tozer wrote, if being "well-adjusted" means being adjusted to a lost world, then it is better for Christians not to be "well-adjusted."

So we are speaking of amenability specifically to Jesus Christ as a virtue. And the likelihood of our compliance with him and his program is dependent on what we think of him. If we only see him as a baby in a manger who is a nice background to our annual December Festival of Overeating and Overspending, then we have little reason to respond when he says things like: "If you hand causes you to sin then cut it off."

Tozer wrote: "...The gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like. We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. This is true not only of the individual Christian, but of the company of Christians that composes the church. ...Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, "What comes into your mind when you think about God?" we might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man" (*The Knowledge of the Holy*, New York: Harper & Row, 1961, p. 9).

That is why we must fight to adjust our awareness of who Christ is. The Christian celebration of the Incarnation at Christmas did not pop onto the scene of world history with no antecedents. It is part of a trajectory of redemptive history which gives it meaning. God has revealed that history in Scripture so that, when we are confronted with the baby in the manger we can give a proper answer to the question: Who is this? From there it is easy to answer the obvious next question: How should we respond to him? And so we look to the prophecies about the coming of Messiah Jesus to draw his portrait for us.

A PORTRAIT OF THE MESSIAH IN THE MANGER

The prophet Micah spoke for God in the eighth century BC to an obstinate nation of Israel. The judgment of God was bearing down upon them like a burning flow of lava. They could see it coming, prophets like Micah kept telling them why it was coming, and yet they persisted in voluntary blindness and denial of the consequences of their actions. The first verse of chapter five in the English translation of Micah—which is the last verse of the previous chapter in the Hebrew Bible—paints a grim picture of Israel's future: "**Now muster your troops, O daughter of troops; siege is laid against us; with a rod they strike the judge of Israel on the cheek**" (Micah 5:1). The "daughter of troops" is a Hebrew way

of referring to the cities of Israel which were the focus of the troops' protection. And since Israel had wanted a "king like all the nations" in disobedience to the Lord, the Lord was going to have the invading armies disgrace Israel's unbelieving king. He is here described as a judge because his most important function from God's point of view was supposed to be the administration of the word of God to the people—at which he had failed miserably. Israel's failed monarchy would get smacked on the cheek with a rod as the nation was overrun.

And then the light of hope begins to dawn in Micah's prophecy: **"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"** (Micah 5:2). Immediately we are confronted with the sovereign working of God who brings forth a new Ruler for the wayward people of Israel from a completely obscure place. The first century church used this verse to prove that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, because he was actually born in Bethlehem!

This ruler comes for **"for me,"** the Lord says. One of the great questions in ancient Israel during the days of decline was: Who is for the Lord? This Ruler will, in every possible way, be for the Lord. Micah tells us that he will be supernatural, because no normal human is born **"from of old, from ancient days."**

Micah continues with this pregnant prophecy: **"Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel"** (Micah 5:3). Israel will, in harmony with the words of all the prophets, have a time of abandonment from God and dispersal among the nations, though they will never be completely forsaken. The "she" who gives birth to this coming Ruler is probably a reference to Bethlehem, although we all know that the human mother was Mary. We find also the great truth that the coming Ruler will arise from Israel and will be their brother. Finally, the time will come for a great regathering in the perfect timing of the Lord.

In fact, this prophecy is shot through with the concept of divine *kairos* moments, those special moments when the work of the Lord is afoot in a unique way. The Ruler comes in the fullness of time to the place of the Lord's choosing, Bethlehem. Israel is abandoned to her judgment at the time of his choosing, and then sovereignly regathered the moment the Lord is ready. Surely this should make us recognize that nothing we want to do can happen unless it is in the Lord's timing. That makes it much more important that we seek to get involved with what God is doing than that we invite God to bless what we are doing.

Micah continues painting his portrait: **"And 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 now he shall be great to the ends of the earth"** (Micah 5:4). That he should **"stand [or "arise"] and shepherd his flock"** is a picture of authority and loving care, wedded to **"the strength of the Lord."** The result for believing Israel will be ultimate security. How different from the failed security of the failed kings of Israel! By his own sovereign hand God will provide the holy leader Israel always needed and never had, even in the finest of her human kings.

And then we come to a blockbuster promise in the first part of verse five: **"And he shall be their peace"** (Micah 5:5). There is no possessive pronoun in the Hebrew text, so some translations say

"their peace," some say "our peace," and others just say "the peace." That's because he actually will be the peace—for Israel first, and then for anybody who believes in him. The peace is integrally wrapped in his person. It cannot be had apart from him.

And this peace is the rich Hebrew concept of *shalom*. It means harmony with God, prosperity, and tranquility of soul. If you are blessed by this Ruler, you are blessed in every way. *Shalom* is what the first humans had in the Garden, and it is what we are all trying to recover. I yearn for this intensely—don't you?

And the only way to get it is by total amenability to this coming Ruler who showed up in the manger at Bethlehem, just as prophesied. It involves trusting him for virtually everything. Matthew Henry wrote of the spiritual transformation of Israel in the last days: "They shall be brought off from all carnal confidences" (*Commentary, in situ*). We need the same transformation—every one of us.

It will be hard to reject all confidence in ourselves and other humans if our picture of the baby in the manger is that of only a baby. But Micah has labored to help us see the One Who Was to Come as Supreme Ruler, Messiah, Ancient One, invested with divine power, full of care for his people, majestic, and victorious. If we could be in his glorified presence for an instant all of our difficulty with compliance would melt away. The overwhelming weight of his presence would transform us.

But that is not the path we have been granted by the sovereign Lord. Our path is to learn amenability to him by the revelation he has given through Jesus Christ. Do we want the *shalom* that is harmony with God, prosperity, and tranquility of soul? Then let us remember that the baby in the manger is himself our peace and our Great Physician. Our future in this life and the next is dependent on this question: Will we listen to our Doctor?

When he says: "Read the Bible," we say OK. When he says "Pray for those who persecute you," we say OK. When he says: "You need to repent of your hardness of heart toward this person or that person," we say OK, Lord. Or perhaps, if you have never faced him before, he may say to you: "Confess your sins to God and abandon them. Trust only in me and you shall be forgiven. It's the whole reason that I came." Will you listen to the Doctor of your soul?

Don't be afraid of total amenability to Christ. It is the only way that he will be our peace—our *shalom*.