

July 19, 2020

Majoring in the Minors
Sermon: Pray for Jon Steingard
Micah 5:1-4

Opening Words: Lost in the back of the Old Testament are the Minor Prophets. Their names should sound familiar by now: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. In the traditional Hebrew canon, they are listed chronologically. Our canon is more concerned with length. Regardless, the order does not matter because each one stands independently. It is important to note, they are not considered minor because they are not important. They are considered minor because they are brief in comparison to the Major Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Many consider the Minor Prophets to be books of judgement. However, they are much more complex. They are books that paint a picture of God who never stops pursuing those who broke his heart. To date, we have looked at Joel, Hosea, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah. Next week, we look at Nahum.

Today, we look at Micah. It is a book that thrashes between two extremes. One moment he is filled with gloom and doom. The next moment is he offering hope and optimism. That is the case in our reading for today, Micah 5:1-4. These words contain one of the great prophecies in the Bible and is a little slice of Christmas in July. These words may sound familiar. This is sermon number seven in my thirteen-part sermon series, *Majoring in the Minors*. Let me call this message *Pray for Jon Steingard*.

Micah 5:1-4 Marshal your troops now, city of troops,
for a siege is laid against us.
They will strike Israel's ruler
on the cheek with a rod.
²"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."
³Therefore Israel will be abandoned
until the time when she who is in labor bears a son,
and the rest of his brothers return
to join the Israelites.
⁴He will stand and shepherd his flock
in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
And they will live securely, for then his greatness
will reach to the ends of the earth.

Pray for Jon Steingard. I will be the first one to admit it. I never heard of him until recently. He is not a close friend. I would not recognize him, if he walked into the room. However, I have found myself praying for him because he has made the greatest mistake in his life. He has announced to the world he is an atheist. He should have known better. He was raised in a Christian home in Canada. To make matters worse, he was a pastor's kid. Until recently, he was the lead vocalist and guitarist for the Christian pop-punk band Hawk Nelson. I do not know why he walked away. Perhaps, he was near sighted or angry at God. He saw all the ugliness of this world and decided God could not exist. He would not be the first one. Perhaps, he walked away because he only heard about Jesus and never experienced Jesus firsthand. There is a world of difference. Regardless, I feel sorry for him. So, let me ask you again. Pray for Jon Steingard. He will regret his decision to leave the faith. How do you walk away from the greatest life that ever lived? That takes us to our scripture reading for today, Micah 5:1-4.

Many years ago, before man walked on the moon, before a civil war threatened to divide America, or before Columbus discovered a New World, there was a man who spoke for God. His name meant "He who is like God," but we just call him Micah. Truly little is known about him outside of this book. However, we do know he lived in southern Judah approximately 700 years before the birth of Christ. At that time, Judah was struggling. Both their present and their future seemed bleak. We can relate to them because the negativity at this time in history is suffocating. However, for the people of God there is always hope. It is still true today.

The scripture reading may so familiar because it is read every Christmas Eve. The great prophecy is read surrounded by decorated trees and poinsettias on that sacred night to big crowds. The key verse in the reading is verse two, *"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."* Ephrathah was the region in which Bethlehem was located, like Youngstown is in Ohio. Bethlehem is approximately eleven miles south of Jerusalem. The people of that small community must have been proud, but the promised ruler would not come in their lifetime. You know the truth. God transcends time. In other words, God does not grow old, so God takes his time. It took 700 years for God to act.

The long-awaited ruler was born to a common couple. They named him Jesus. His name means Savior. His biological mother was Mary. His biological father was God, Himself. That means Joseph had the awful job of being the stepfather to the son of God. How do you discipline the son of God? Seven-hundred years is a long time to wait, but it was worth every second. Let me state it clearly. Jesus was the greatest life that ever lived. Jesus would change the world and our lives. You would not recognize our world if Jesus had never been born. H. G. Wells (1866-1946) was an English writer. He said it best, *"I am an historian, I am not a believer, but I confess as an historian that this penniless preacher from Nazareth is irrevocably the very center of human history."*

Jesus Christ is easily the most dominant figure in all history. "That is a great quote. If you can agree Jesus had a positive influence on our world say, **"Amen!"**

Allendale Baptist Church is in Allendale, Michigan. It is a community of approximately 18,000 people and is less than 400 miles from here. The associate pastor at that church is a man named Tim Arndt. He claims to be the world's tallest Filipino. However, he did not give his height. I read one of his blogs recently. He says Jesus changed our world for the better in five profound ways. I cannot disagree with one. They are listed in no particular order.

Jesus influenced education! Matthew 22:37 quotes Jesus, *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and will all your soul and with all your mind.* "Jesus was interested in the mind. Jesus is saying we are to love God with our whole being. History tells us the Bible was the first textbook for many young children. In 1860, there were 108 colleges and universities in America. 106 of the 108 was started by Christians. That list includes Harvard, William and Mary, Yale, Princeton, the University of Pennsylvania, Columbia, Dartmouth, and Brown. It is ironic the world has tried to portray the faith as ignorant when the faith has done more than any other group to educate the masses. Have you ever stopped to consider how the Christian faith has influenced your education? Do you know anyone who cannot read? Jesus influenced education! How would our world look today if Jesus had never been born?

Jesus influenced women's rights! It is impossible to read the gospels and not notice the major role woman played in Jesus's ministry. That was unique and shocking in his time. Prior to Jesus, the world did not care less about women. In the Roman world, women were property. Jesus saw woman differently. He saw woman for what they were, made in the very image of God. Jesus treated women with dignity and respect. It happened during his earthly ministry. Jesus' friends and ministry partners were women. It happened during his after his resurrection. It was woman who made the great discovery, Jesus had been raised from the dead! It was women who were entrusted with the message which would change the world. The early church was so saturated with women that it was often criticized as "a woman's religion." This church and many other churches would be crippled without the work of women. Jesus values all people. That means Jesus values you. How large of a part have women played in your spiritual development? Jesus influenced education and women's rights! How would our world look today if Jesus had never been born?

Jesus influenced human rights! Matthew 5:44 says, *"But I say to you, love your enemy, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you."* Matthew 22:39 says, *"Love your neighbor as yourself."* Loving and caring for others is at the very heart of Jesus's teachings. That is why the church has always been involved in human rights. The church was a major force in the ending of slavery in the 1860's and the church was a major force during the civil rights of the 1960's. The church will be a major force of the

human rights issues we are facing today. If we ignore or belittle the human rights issues of today, then we are ignoring the words of Jesus, himself, love your enemy as yourself. Today, in America basic human rights are common sense. But that was not always the case. Prior to Christianity, basic human rights were rare. How are you advancing human rights? Our society is far from perfect. Jesus influenced education, women's rights, and human rights! How would our world look today if Jesus had never been born?

Jesus influenced humanitarian aid! In Matthew 25, we find the parable of the sheep and goats. It is a judgement parable. According to the parable, on judgement day we will be separated by God like a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. The sheep will be permitted to enter heaven because they responded to human needs. They fed the hungry. They gave drink to the thirsty. They welcomed strangers. They gave clothes to the naked. They cared for the sick and the incarcerated. The goats did none of the above and were sent to hell. The parable ends with a zinger. Jesus said, when you cared for the down and out you were really caring for him. This is the point. We are responsible for the world's basic needs. Did you know every seven seconds someone dies of starvation? What are you doing to help them? Have you ever needed some help? Jesus influenced education, women's rights, human rights, and humanitarian aid! How would our world look today if Jesus had never been born? How would our world look today if Jesus had never been born?

Jesus influenced medicine! The miracles of Jesus have fascinated the generations. It is true in Jesus's generation and it is still true today. Jesus got the lame to walk. Jesus got the blind to see. Jesus made the demonic whole and resurrected the dead. Those miracles are important because they proved he was the long-awaited Messiah. However, they were also important because Jesus did not want to see people suffer. He wanted them to live full lives. For this reason, many hospitals were started in the name of Jesus. The government has been involved in the medical system for the past 80 years. (How do you think they are doing?) Prior to the government, churches were involved in starting and funding hospitals. Still today, there are 726 faith-based hospitals. When was the last time you required some medical care? Jesus influenced education, women's rights, human rights, humanitarian rights, and medicine! How would our world look today if Jesus had never been born?

Micah may have lived 700 years before the birth of Jesus, but he was right! The most influential life that would ever live was Jesus. Two-thousand years after his birth we see the influence he has had. Jesus offered us hope. Without Jesus our world is a dark hopeless place. Perhaps, H. G. Wells said it best, H. G. Wells (1866-1946) was an English writer. He once said, *"I am an historian, I am not a believer, but I confess as an historian that this penniless preacher from Nazareth is irrevocably the very center of human history. Jesus Christ is easily the most dominant figure in all history."* If Jesus has had any influence on your life say, **"Amen!"**

Charles Templeton (1915-2001) was a close friend and preaching associate of Billy Graham (1918-2018) in the 1940s. He effectively preached the gospel to large crowds in major arenas. However, intellectual doubts began to nag at him. He questioned the truth of Scripture and other core Christian beliefs. He finally abandoned his faith and made an unsuccessful attempt to persuade Billy to do the same. He felt sorry for Billy, saying, "He committed intellectual suicide by closing his mind." Templeton resigned from the ministry and the Christian faith.

Years later, when he was eighty-three and suffering from Alzheimer's disease, Templeton talked about some of the reasons he left the faith: "I started considering the plagues that sweep across parts of the planet and indiscriminately kill — more often than not, painfully — all kinds of people, the ordinary, the decent, and the rotten. And it just became crystal clear to me that it is not possible for an intelligent person to believe that there is a deity who loves."

When asked what he thought of Jesus Christ, Templeton would not acknowledge him as God. Rather, he responded: "He was the greatest human being who has ever lived. He was a moral genius. His ethical sense was unique. He was the intrinsically wisest person that I have ever encountered in my life or in my readings. He is the most important thing in my life. I know it may sound strange, but I have to say I adore him! Everything good I know, everything decent I know, everything pure I know, I learned from Jesus. He is the most important human being who has ever existed. And if I may put it this way, I miss him." Templeton's eyes filled with tears and he wept freely. So, let me ask you again.

Pray for Jon Steingard. He is the 36-year-old Christian singer, who has announced to the world he is an atheist. Who wants to live in a dark empty world with God? Who wants to live in a dark empty world without Jesus? I believe Jon Steinberg will discover what Charles Templeton discovered decades earlier. He will miss Jesus, the greatest life who has ever lived. Who wants to live without hope? Who wants to live without Jesus? If you are thankful for what Jesus has done for you say, "**Amen!**"