

MICAH 5:2-5 “UNTIL THE TIME”

Here is a Christmas gift for someone who has everything.

It is a watch called “The Crazy Hours.” On this watch, the “8” is where the “12” should be. The “2” is where the “6” should be. And so on.

When the new hour strikes, the hour hand jumps five places, instead of one. Mercifully, the minute hand moves normally.

“At first, it’s tricky.” says a company spokeswoman. “But the concept of the watch is to get people to think about time in a different way.

“It’s to get them to notice that every moment is fleeting.”

By the way, you can get this watch for only 20-thousand dollars.

We read in Peter’s first letter, “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years is like a day.” We think we understand time, but God’s time is not our time.

Maybe you wonder if he has one of those watches.

Maybe you wonder about God and time, as you walk through a trial that seems like it will never end.

Maybe you wonder about God and time, as you live through a world that seems like it must soon end.

You wait, and you wonder.

We are spending the month of December with the prophet Micah. He wrote about 700 years before Jesus, and he wrote about a ruler over Israel.

We have learned that:

* This ruler will come from the small, insignificant town of Bethlehem.

* The ruler is existing and eternal. He has forever purposed to do what he has done, and he always performs what he purposes to do.

As we look back at Micah’s prophecy, and as we look at the words of the gospel of Matthew, we believe Jesus is the fulfillment of these words.

But Micah and his people wondered when this ruler would come. Today, we wonder when this One who came once, will come again. And we wait.

As we start, let’s spend a moment thinking about how we understand these and other Old Testament prophecies.

First, these words can be fulfilled multiple times. Sometimes we read a prophecy, and we can see how the words are fulfilled quickly, or at least in the days of the Bible. But we can also see how those same words are still to be fulfilled at some point in the future.

Second, these words can be fulfilled in multiple ways. Many of the Old Testament prophecies are about Israel - God’s chosen people. But often in the New Testament, the words of the prophets are applied to the non-Jews, or the “Gentiles.” This does not mean God has forgotten about the Jewish people. But it does mean his promises are not just for Jews, but for people of all nations.

For our purposes, these principles help us understand that:

* These words are fulfilled in the first coming of Jesus, but there is yet another fulfillment to come, in the second coming of Jesus.

* These words involve both the nation of Israel, and all the nations.

Micah’s people waited and waited. We wait and wait. Let’s think about their wait, and our wait.

First, THEIR WAIT.

Let’s start with THE PROMISE.

We read in verse 3, “Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor gives birth and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites.”

Let’s pull out the phrases here.

Israel will be abandoned. Because the people of Israel have abandoned God, he will abandon them. They will be carried into captivity - first the northern kingdom of Israel, then the southern kingdom of Judah.

Yet someone who is in labor, will give birth. This “she” may be Mary, who gave birth to Jesus, or the town of Bethlehem, where Jesus was born. Either way, Micah looks forward to a child’s birth.

And the rest of the brothers will return. The captivity will end. The brothers of Israel will be gathered, after they have been scattered.

The promise is of a birth. But the nation will have to wait until after Israel’s abandonment and return.

Indeed, the nation did wait. Jesus was not born for about 7-hundred years after this.

To understand how long that is, think of our nation’s history.

* Columbus “sailed the ocean blue” about five hundred years ago.

* Our founding fathers declared independence from Britain about two hundred years ago.

* The Civil War ended about a hundred and fifty years ago.

Think of how many generations have come and gone. Think of how the world has changed. Think of how those events seem so long ago!

As well, remember that this is not the first promise of this person. The first promise was given about 12-hundred years before Micah!

But after the promise, came THE FULFILLMENT.

If you read the first two chapters of Luke's gospel, you will read about a lot of people who are waiting. When they understand who Jesus is, and that he has been born, they realize the promise has finally been fulfilled.

* When the angel reveals God's plan for Jesus' birth to Mary, she says, "He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers." In the coming of Jesus, God is fulfilling the promise made to Abraham.

* When Zechariah hears of this, he proclaims, "He (God) has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago)." In the coming of Jesus, God is fulfilling the promise made to David.

* When we meet Simeon, soon after Jesus birth, we read that "He was waiting for the consolation of Israel..."

* Then Anna sees the baby Jesus. She gives thanks to God, and tells of him "to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem."

In the coming of Jesus, Israel knows God has not abandoned her forever. The wait is over. Joy to the world! God's promise has been fulfilled! This Ruler, promised by Micah and so many other prophets, has come!

That is their wait. What about OUR WAIT?

Once again, we see promise and fulfillment.

What is THE PROMISE for us?

Jesus is born. Jesus lives without sin. Jesus dies for sinners. Jesus rises from the dead.

The disciples wonder, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" They don't seem to understand that Jesus' purpose extends far beyond Israel. As Micah said, "his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth."

So Jesus promises the Holy Spirit, and he promises that in the power of that Spirit, his followers will be witnesses to even the ends of the earth.

Then he is taken up in a cloud, and the disciples hear this promise:

"This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

The promise is that Jesus will come again. The promise is that his greatness will be seen by all, even to the ends of the earth.

So when is THE FULFILLMENT?

Wouldn't we like to know! But we do not know. The New Testament is abundantly clear that we do not know, and we cannot know.

We don't like this. So we try very hard to figure it out. All through the history of the church, people have convinced themselves that Jesus will come at this time, or in this generation, or after this event.

But the Lord does not tell us to predict. He tells us to watch and wait.

He tells us that just as the generations of Micah's people waited for the first coming, we must wait for the second coming.

We don't like this, either. We want to know, and we don't want to wait. But while the Lord does not wear a "Crazy Hours" watch, he does not work on our timetable. He works on his. At just the right time, Jesus will return. Not a minute before, and not a minute after. We are left with our wait.

So how do we do this? How do we wait?

In 2 Peter 3, where Peter describes how God's timing is not our timing, he tells us how to wait. He writes of the day when Jesus will come and the present heavens and earth will be replaced by the new heavens and earth.

Then he asks, "What kind of people ought you to be?"

Here is the answer: "You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming."

We wait, by living holy and godly lives.

God is good. We are not. So the good God has sent his good Son to die for our evil, and give us peace with the good God.

What is the result? The good God grows us in goodness. We strive to be holy and godly, so that we may "know and make known" this good God.

We are like a young man or young woman, getting ready for a wedding. You look at anyone's wedding pictures, and you see how they tried to make themselves look as good as possible, in preparation for the great day.

In the same way, as we wait for the day of Jesus' second coming, we are "making ourselves look good" to a good God.

We do not do this to impress God. Jesus has done everything we need to make us right with God! None of our goodness will earn God's love.

We do not do this to impress others. That is pride. If we want to be holy and godly to show how much better we are, we are not being holy and godly!

We do this because we know this day is coming, and we want to grow into the good people the good God has saved us to be.

Maybe you don't care about holiness and godliness. If so, I would ask you to question whether you know the good God at all.

Maybe you do care, but you struggle to grow in godliness and holiness. Maybe you have just given up.

Never do that. The good God has sent his Holy Spirit to help you grow. Ask him for help to give you the desire for holiness and godliness, and seek his help in every situation, that you may live a holy and godly life.

We wait, by looking forward to the day of God.

Since everybody in our family is now big enough to ride just about every ride, we made our first family trip to King's Island this summer.

We spent a while deciding whether to ask Emily if she wanted to ride the "Beast." If you have never ridden the "Beast," it is a lovely ride, except that when you are done, you feel as if most of your skin, and several of your vital organs, have been left behind you on the track.

Would she be excited or terrified?

She was excited. Why?

I think partly because I had gone on the "Beast" before, and I had (more or less) survived, and she knew I would go with her as she rode. Emily could look forward with hope, because I had gone before her, and she trusted me.

And, yes, she loved it.

In the same way, we look forward to the day of Jesus' second coming, because we know he has come, and we trust him.

How this helps us in this world, where we wonder about so much, and we often wonder how long we must wait!

We gain a new perspective about our "ride". We know God has not forgotten his promises to us, and we can hope in him during our wait.

How are you waiting today?

Maybe you are waiting for perplexing problem to be solved.

Maybe you are waiting for a wrenching conflict to be resolved.

Maybe you are waiting for a draining crisis to be over.

Maybe you are waiting for this terrifying world to end.

Fix your eyes on Jesus. Remember what he has done. Recall his certain promises. Realize that you know how the ride will ultimately end.

We wait, by living holy and godly lives. We wait, by looking forward to the day of God. We wait, by speeding his coming.

How can that be? This is one of those places where we run into the mystery of divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

God has ordained the day of Jesus' second coming. Yet Peter writes that somehow we can speed his coming.

How? Just before these words, Peter writes of God's patience, and his desire for people to come to repentance.

We speed his coming, as we live actively for his kingdom, where people turn from their sin, and turn to Jesus, so they may know the good God.

Our hearts cry and our lives proclaim, "Your kingdom come."

As parents, we live not to give our kids more stuff, but to give them more of a heart for God's kingdom.

As workers, we work not simply to earn a paycheck, but to show Jesus goodness in our workplaces.

As spouses, we strive not just to get what we want out of marriage, but to reflect the beauty and glory of Jesus as we love and respect each other.

As consumers, we seek not to get more and more, but to give more and more, because we know our possessions will end up in the landfill, but our tithes and offerings will endure to eternity.

As young people, you reject the meaninglessness and hopelessness of your peers, and live with strength, purpose and conviction, in following Jesus.

As neighbors, we allow God's kingdom to burst through our lives, as we forgive those who have sinned against us.

As witnesses, we pray for opportunities to show Jesus to others, and we are bold to speak of Jesus, when God gives the opportunity.

As needy people, we seek God's grace not only for our daily needs, but for the needs of the kingdom, so that the glory of Jesus might reach to the ends of the earth.

As blessed people, we use this reflective time of the year to reshape our lives, so that we can do our part in God's kingdom, in this place.

As you can tell by now, waiting is not a passive act! We wait patiently, but as we wait, we grow in godliness and holiness, we look forward to that glorious day, and we work to hasten its coming.

Even 20-thousand dollar watches don't always work. Even with huge satellites that can beam the correct time to our cell phones, we do wonder what time it really is, and where time is going.

Micah and his people wondered, too. But then this child was born in Bethlehem. He did all that had been promised, and promised to return.

We look forward to that day, growing in holiness and godliness, and speeding the day as we live for the kingdom of this Ruler.

His time is not our time, but he will be on time.

May God enable us to wait faithfully, until the time.