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FROM THE UNEXPECTED TO THE EXCEPTIONAL!

Today's Text: Micah: Chap. 5

Extracts:

"Bethlehem Ephrathah, you are too little to be among the family groups of Judah. But from you One will come who will rule for Me in Israel. His coming was planned long ago, from the beginning." He will give them up until the time when the woman in pain gives birth to a child. Then the rest of His brothers will return to the people of Israel. And He will come and feed His flock in the strength of the Lord, in the great power of the name of the Lord His God. His people will live there and be safe, because at that time He will be great to the ends of the earth. And He will be their peace [Mic. 5: 2-5]

Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, USA, is a historically black university that is most notable for producing successful black leaders, such as Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.¹ It is 141 years old. But at the commencement ceremony held on Sunday, 18 May 2008, Joshua Packwood, a white man, was quite unexpectedly the valedictorian. To study at Morehouse, Joshua turned down a scholarship to Columbia University, an Ivy League university in New York While at Morehouse, he had maintained a 4.0 grade point average and served as dom president during his freshmen year. Asked why he preferred to come to a predominantly black college, Joshua said that in his difficult childhood, he had been raised by his best friend's family that were black and middle-class. That experience had had a profound effect on him and he came to see "a different side of black America." Already, Joshua is enjoying fame. This week, he begins his first job with the prestigious investment banking firm Goldman Sachs on Wall Street, New York. Interestingly, Joshua's younger brother, John, is coming to Morehouse next year.

Joshua's story has touched many lives in a racially divided America. Coming at a time that the country is on the verge of possibly electing a black President, Barack Obama (who was himself raised by his maternal white grand parents), we may be seeing the beginning of a major revolution in race relations in America. We can learn something from that story . It is that the starting point on our spiritual journey, no matter how insurmountable it may look, could be the trigger for an exceptionally rewarding drive for future success, especially eternal salvation. Let us find that out from today's study.

¹ Based on Dana Rosenblait and Don Lemon, "White valedictorian: A first for historically black Morehouse," www.cnn.com/2008/US/05/16/white.valedictorian/index.html

1. Background: Bethlehem-Christ's birthplace

Imagine that the government was planning to set up an environmentally-friendly project in the region of the country where you reside. In recent times, the place had suffered severe economic hardships, leading to high youth unemployment . Abandoned buildings littered downtown which used to be a beehive of economic activities. However, the government had not yet decided on the exact location for the project, but you have heard from your usually reliable sources that the location could be politically influenced. What would you do? The likelihood is that you would lobby hard to get the project located in your district because you knew the numerous economic benefits that would follow.

In ancient Israel, prophets had foretold the coming of the Messiah, right from the time of Moses [**Deut. 18: 15**]. He would be born of a virgin [**Is. 7: 14**], suffer and be crucified [**Ps. 22: 16; Is. 53: 1-9**] and rise again from the dead [**Ps. 16: 10**]. He would come out of the root of Jesse [**Is. 11: 1**], of the tribe of Judah. However, it was through the prophet Micah that God specifically mentioned His place of birth, namely [**Mic. 5: 2**]:

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting.”

Of special interest to us today is the status of Bethlehem among the cities of Judah. We are told it was “*little among thousands of Judah.*” That would make it a most unlikely choice if it were a political decision. Yet, it was chosen as the Lord's hometown!

For background, Bethlehem (meaning house of bread) was originally called Ephrath [**Gen. 25: 16; Ruth 1: 1-2**]. There was a time that it was ravaged by famine that forced Naomi and her family to migrate abroad to Moab. After ten years' sojourn there, following the death of her husband, Elimelech, and her two sons, Naomi returned with one of her daughters-in-law, Ruth, who ultimately married Boaz, David's great grandfather [**Ruth 2: 3, 9; 4: 17**]. Jesus was of the lineage of David whose throne He has now occupied forever [**Lk 1: 32-33**]. Therefore, God chose Bethlehem as Christ's birthplace so as to establish His authentic link to David by birth and inheritance. On that account, Bethlehem moved from the unlikely to the exceptional.

There are more unlikely things to note about Jesus' Bethlehem connections. David was the last born son of his father, Jesse [**1 Sam. 16: 1-11**]. At the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, there was no room for Him in the inns. So, He had to be born in a manger [**Lk 2: 7**]. The King of kings was born in an unlikely place in an unlikely city! Could your situation be any worse than that?

2. How does it apply to you?

Right now, some of us are in a hole that they dug for themselves or that others dug for them. Some of us were born with silver spoons in their mouths but do not know what to do with them. Some of us have by dint of hard work come to success but have been unable to handle it. In a way, therefore, we are all somewhere on the way to the end of life on earth. Do you know where you are heading? Find out where you stand from among the following situations:

a) *You may be an Ingrate*

Some people came to success from hardship, poverty or parental neglect. By God's mercy and hard work, they have come to success which has gone into their heads. They become proud and squander the blessings that God had showered on them. So, instead of converting their unexpected backgrounds into exceptional success, they behave as ingrates to God and their benefactors/mentors. In the end, they are in a worse state than their beginning.

Take the story of Tim Montgomery, an Olympic gold medalist and track star who retired in 2005, after he had been banned from track and field for doping.² In 2007, he was indicted for conspiracy in a bank fraud scheme, involving depositing bogus cheques (checks) worth \$1.7 million. Recently, he was found guilty and sentenced to prison for 46 months. At his sentence, he told the judge, "I've had everything I ever wanted in life; I've stood on the top of the mountain. But now, the gold medal, all those people cheering, that was part of another world... In jail, my status is gone." His life story could not be exceptional because he had squandered his humble beginnings.

Do you know how many young and rising stars have been dimmed in the prime of their careers on account of pride or immorality? They are unable to handle success. They disregard and disrespect those who have contributed to their success. They use their success to do evil and thereby sin against God. They do not mentor their successors or help the needy. They do charity at their convenience and behave as if they themselves would never ever be in need. One day, their cups become full. They fall as easily as they have climbed. Ingrates can never produce exceptional outcomes.

b) *You are a Usurper*

By birth or circumstance, some of us are kings and queens in waiting. However, they never get to ascend the throne because they are impatient to take their turns. They rebel or seize power before they are ready for it. They are always plotting the downfall of authorities over them so that they

² 'Montgomery gets 46 months in prison,' <http://msn.sports.com/olympics/story/8147074/Montgomery-gets-46-months-in-prison>, May 16, 2008

can take over. In the end, they also fail. The silver spoons that they have inherited fall off their mouths and melt in the heat of their disgrace.

A good example is Absalom, the son of King David.. Absalom was the third son of David. His mother, Maachar, was the daughter of Talmai, king of Geshur [**1 Chron. 3: 1-2**]. Therefore, royalty oozed all over him. Understandably, his father loved him very dearly [**2 Sam. 14: 33**]. However, he could not wait to upstage his father. He provided himself chariots and horses and fifty men to run before him. Each morning, he would come before the palace gates to intercept people who brought cases for adjudication before David. He would say to such people, “Look, your case is good and right, but there is no deputy of the king to hear you...Oh, that I were made judge in the land, and everyone who has any suit or cause would come to me, then I would give him justice” [**2 Sam. 15: 1-4**]. That way, he stole the hearts of the people. In no time, he staged a coup against his father who had to escape into exile across the Jordan . It was only after his rebellion had been put down and he killed in battle that David was restored to the throne [**2 Sam. Chaps 18-19**].

When you misapply your unexpected fortunes to pursue rebellion against God or your mentors, when you sinfully upstage your spiritual leaders to take their place before your time, you cannot attain to exceptional heights of success or victory. You are a usurper .

c) *You are Complacent*

You know the humble background that you have come from. You appreciate the distance that you have travelled to attain your current position. You know that you now owe God the duty to use what He has given you to bless others, especially the needy. You actually begin to do so and make exceptional strides in your chosen field of human endeavour. Sooner or later, however, you become complacent. You no longer have or show the old zeal in your relationship with God, family, friends or colleagues. You once in a while backslide to do things that you have long renounced. Unless you can quickly recover, you may soon find yourself in an uncomfortable pit of shame and disgrace.

Take the case of King Solomon. He was born to David and Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite that David had got killed in battle so as to be able to marry his wife [**2 Sam. Chaps. 11-12**]. Solomon was made king in succession to his father over all his other (and older brothers) by the will of God. In recognition of his unexpected coronation, Solomon prayed to God for wisdom to administer the kingdom. God granted him his heart’s desire and added wealth, fame and honour such that there would not be anyone like him “among the kings all your days” [**1 Kgs 3: 3-13**]. That was an exceptional promise which God hinged on Solomon’s *continued*

obedience [v. 14]. In due course, however, Solomon became complacent. Material wealth got to him and he married pagan wives and served their idols. Solomon the wise king ended as a fool and, on his death, his kingdom was split into two with the greater part going to his servant [1 **Kgs 11: 1-13**]. There was nothing exceptional any longer in his rise to fame. He had been complacent.

Examine your relationship with God and determine how much you have taken Him for granted these days. Have you pumped too much energy and time into the spectacular aspects of your ministry, such as the crusades and TV appearances without any or enough time to even pray? Have you neglected your family all in the name of doing God's work? Why are you giving the devil fertile opportunities to scandalize your work and household and give the enemy the privilege to blaspheme God Himself? Get out of that lethargy!

d) *You are Beloved*

The beloved is the one who is able to turn unexpected situations into exceptional success on an *ongoing basis*. One underlying strength they have is humility. They know where they are coming from and they are grateful to God and mentors for the privileges extended to them. They then go on to use the privileges thrown at them to help others to get better. Therefore, they never lack help along their routes.

Let us go back to the story of Joshua Packwood, the first white valedictorian in the historically black university, Morehouse College, Atlanta, Georgia. He grew up in a poor neighbourhood in Kansas City, Missouri, that brought him close to the black community at a young age. His mother's second marriage was to a black man. When it ended in a divorce, he faced a rough adolescence. He could have gone into crimes and drugs, like most distressed urban youths. Instead, he sought and obtained refuge in the home of his best friend's family, a middle-class black family. It was there that he was raised, attending a predominantly black high school, moving with predominantly black friends. Summing up his attitude to life, he says that he does not see himself as a white man or a black man but a "Morehouse Man."³ Today, he is using his experience to heal racial divisions in America.

Jesus has given us the best example to follow. It was already a humiliating experience for Him to take human form when you know that all things were created by and through Him [Jn 1: 1-3; Col. 1: 16]. He was born in a manger in Bethlehem. He lived as a carpenter in Galilee. At age 30, when He was about to start His earthly ministry, He received water baptism from John the Baptist even when He was sinless. When the Holy Spirit

³ Dana Roenblatt and Don Lemon, "White valedictorian: A first for historically black Morehouse," *Op. cit.*

descended on Him in the form of a dove, His Father said from heaven, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” [Matt. 3: 13-17]. Paul eloquently summarizes the exceptional example of Jesus’ humility as follows [Phil. 2: 5-11]:

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God did not consider it robbery to be equal with God; but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bond servant, and coming in the likeness of men, and being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore, God also has highly exalted Him, and given Him the name, which is above every name; that, at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow... and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

3. Conclusion: The crown is at the end!

Speaking of the coming Messiah, the prophet Micah wrote, “He shall stand and feed His flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord His God; and they shall abide; *for now He shall be great to the ends of the earth; and this One shall be peace*” [Mic. 5: 4-5]. The man who was born in an unexpected place would set up an exceptional kingdom of peace and prosperity. We know that that kingdom is in the future, on Christ’s return. When He first came as the suffering Servant, it was to demonstrate His humility and obedience, and to pave us the way to His Father. He remains with us always even to the end of the age [Matt. 28: 20]. Therefore, we no longer have any excuses.

It does not matter where you currently are on Salvation Avenue. Keep your faith to the end so that your life journey will not be a huge waste. *The crown of life is at the end.* That is why the word of God says that the day of death is better than the day of birth [Eccl. 7: 1].

Turn the unexpected into the exceptional!