

THE MOUNTAIN OF THE LORD

Micah 4:1-5

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, February 10, 2008

“It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and it shall be lifted up above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it” (Mic. 4:1).

The fourth chapter of Micah’s prophecy presents us with one of the most striking contrasts in all the Bible. The previous chapter concluded with a warning that Jerusalem “shall be plowed as a field” (Mic. 3:12). There could hardly be a more depressing picture of what would in fact become of Mount Zion. Yet chapter four looks beyond the judgment to a more glorious restoration. The mount would be laid low by God’s judgment, but God’s grace would have the final word: “It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains” (Mic. 4:1).

This will happen, Micah says, in “the latter days”, or as some versions put it, in “the last days.” Because of the emphasis of much popular literature, many Christians think this phrase refers only to a narrow slice of time immediately before the return of Christ. But a careful study of the Bible shows that the prophets used this expression to denote a variety of future interventions when God would set things right and restore his people. Included in such “latter days” are the restoration of the Jews from their Babylonian captivity, the birth of Jesus the Messiah, and the final judgment followed by the eternal state of glory when Christ returns.

HIGHEST OF THE MOUNTAINS

Even though Israel's sin ensured that Mount Zion would be devastated, nonetheless it was not just their mountain. It was also "the mountain of the house of the LORD." It was not just their name that was at stake in Jerusalem, but also God's name. Thus, God's saving work would not be thwarted even by human sin. Micah thus declares, "It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and it shall be lifted up above the hills" (Mic. 4:1).

In the ancient world, temples were either built atop mountains or else they were themselves designed to look like mountains. Temples were where heaven met with earth; Babylonian ziggurats were thus conceived as stairways to heaven. A temple was where a god's presence was on earth and from high up on the mountain the god exercised his rule over the region. The idea would therefore be that the higher the mountain the greater the god. Though Israel's temple was on a comparatively small mountain, only 2400 feet above sea level, history would show Israel's God to be the great and true God, exalted above all pretenders to deity. So important was this prophecy that it was repeated practically verbatim by Micah's contemporary, Isaiah. The prophets were asserting that, as John Oswalt writes, "One day it would become clear that Israel's religion was *the* religion; that her God was *the* God."¹ As a cataclysmic earthquake is to the physical realm, the victory of God's saving plan will cause a sudden and shocking reordering of apparent spiritual realities.

The highest peak always draws people, not merely to see it but to climb it. So it will be for Mount Zion, Micah foretells, that "peoples shall flow to it" (Mic. 4:1). This river of peoples flowing up to the exalted mountain of God is remarkable in that it flows uphill. It is the result of a supernatural working, contrary to the normal flow of nature. So it is when God's Word is lifted up among the people that God draws them by the irresistible power of his grace. Jesus spoke this way specifically of his cross: "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (Jn. 12:32).

¹ John Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, ?), 117.

One thing this prophecy makes clear is that the religion of the Bible is not compatible with other religions. Michael Bentley observes, “How foolish it is, then, for ‘the church’ to hold multi-faith services, because all those who seek God through any means other than by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ are deluded. There is no other way to God.”²

Christians are not to synthesize their faith with other faiths, but to advance their faith through the spread of the gospel. For the true God would have his mountain lifted up above the hills, his true faith neither corrupted nor diminished by mixture with other false faiths.

The subsequent history of Jerusalem does not encourage us to expect a literal fulfillment of this prophecy in the physical elevation of Mount Zion. The Bible records that after the Babylonian exile, God restored a remnant of his people to Jerusalem to rebuild his temple. But so greatly did the second temple pale in comparison to the glory of the first that the oldest men, who had seen Solomon’s original in their childhood, wept with sorrow. Today, an Islamic mosque sits atop Israel’s holy mountain. So should we look for some future event in which God will cause the Jewish temple to be rebuilt and in which Mount Zion is raised up above Mount Everest?

The answer to this question was given by Jesus on the very day of his resurrection from the grave. Walking alongside some forlorn disciples on the way to Emmaus, Jesus opened up the Scriptures and, Luke records, “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Lk. 24:27). Those who do not foresee a literal fulfillment of prophecies like Micah’s are often criticized for “spiritualizing” biblical truth. But it would be more accurate to speak of a Christ-centered fulfillment of the Old Testament. According to Jesus himself, the Old Testament, from Moses through the prophets – that is, the whole of it – is fulfilled in his own coming. Therefore, writes John Calvin:

The real meaning of the Temple’s grandeur and glory lies in its connection with the coming of our Lord Jesus. For that is when God would be revealed to all the world, resulting in a common assent and a common accord of faith... The truth, which had previously been known only in the country of Judah, would now be published everywhere, that Christ might be manifested to the ends of the earth and the world called to the knowledge of salvation.

² Michael Bentley, *Balancing the Books: Micah and Nahum Simply Explained* (Durham: Evangelical Press, 1994), 53.

That is how our Lord “magnifies” the mountain of Zion, since it is the source of our doctrine of truth and salvation.³

The fulfillment of Micah’s prophecy therefore began when Jesus came into the world. It advanced dramatically when he rose from the grave, ascended into heaven, and poured out his Spirit on the church. It is not without significance that the church age began with representatives from a multitude of nations united as one in the Spirit of Christ, including, Luke records: “Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians” (Acts 2:9-11). The fulfillment of Micah’s prophecy continues today through Christian missions, as the flowing river grows stronger, with more and more nations brought to Christ.

LEARNING GOD’S LAW

The converts in Micah’s vision are drawn not by any outward compulsion but by a powerful inward motivation. Micah writes: “Many nations shall come, and say: ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths’” (Mic. 4:2). Not only do the new converts come willingly, but they call on others to join them in the ascent to God’s house. This confirms that one of the surest signs of a truly converted heart is the desire to bring as many others along to salvation as possible.

Whereas in the old covenant it was only the Jews who went up Mount Zion singing joyful psalms, in the new age to come people from all over the world will take up the pilgrimage to God. Here we see the power of sin broken in the world. Whereas rebellious men built the Tower of Babel in a vain attempt to usurp God, so that God judged them with confusion and division, now God raises up his own mountain and draws people of all kinds together in humble adoration.

It is of special importance that we note the purpose for which God is drawing peoples and nations to himself in the age of Christ: “that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” This is

³ John Calvin, *Sermons on the Book of Micah* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 190.

why we are to come eagerly to church not only to bring praise to God but to be taught of God. Is each of us willing to have our ideas about God, ourselves, and the priorities of life changed and molded by the Bible? Are we seeking revelation simply for the sake of our doctrinal correctness, or do we realize, as Micah did, that the ultimate purpose of biblical teaching is “that we may walk in his paths”? (Mic. 4:2).

This prophecy was an implied rebuke to the Jerusalem of Micah’s time. How they loved to attend the temple services. But they did not come humbly to be taught of God, nor did they depart resolved to walk in God’s ways. It was precisely because of their presumptuous misuse of God’s ordinances that the temple building was taken from them. Likewise, if Christians today who venerate the Bible do not learn truth from it and do not walk according to it, they should not be surprised when God removes it from them by giving unfaithful teachers. David Prior comments, “Unless worship involves teachability and issues in practical obedience, it is not worship at all; this was exactly the condemnation leveled by Micah at the current leadership of the city and the nation.”⁴

Micah’s vision of the exaltation of God’s mountain is closely tied to the going forth of God’s Word: “For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem” (Mic. 4:2). By God’s law, he does not restrict the message to the Ten Commandments or even to the Old Testament law generally. Rather, he means, “The law as the rule of a godly life... or the word of revelation as the source of salvation.”⁵ No longer would Israel alone possess the oracles of God, for the teaching of the Scriptures would be published worldwide. This is the work of the Christian church and, indeed, of every Christian: to be taught of God’s Word and to declare God’s Word to the world.

It was the special delight of the early Christians to point out how this prophecy was fulfilled through the work of Christ’s apostles. Justin Martyr wrote in the second century: “We can show you that this has really happened. For a band of twelve men went forth from Jerusalem, and they were common men, not trained in speaking. But by the power of God they testified to every race of humankind that they were

⁴ David Prior, *The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998), 150.

⁵ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 10 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 10:310.

sent by Christ to teach to all the Word of God.”⁶ Theodoret of Cyr added, “This evangelical law and apostolic preaching began with Jerusalem as with a fountain and traveled across the whole world, offering irrigation to those who made their approach with faith.”⁷

When the nations come to the house of God and the Word of the Lord goes forth, the effect is revolutionary. Micah declares: “He shall judge between many peoples, and shall decide for strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (Mic. 4:3). With God as their ruler, the nations will not only sign the temporary peace treaties familiar today, but will actually find it best to destroy their weapons and transform them into instruments of agriculture. Oswalt writes, “From whence comes this peace? From the recognition that God is the source of all good, that our needs and destiny can be submitted to his judgment, and from the knowledge that he does all things well.”⁸

This is a famous prophecy, oft-quoted by those who long for peace. The United Nations building in New York bears this verse on a wall mounting, expressing the hope that diplomacy may bring this promised peace. Yet Micah does not envision any such peace among people until they first come humbly in faith to the Lord. The only basis for true peace in the home, society, and world is a shared bond in the rule of God through his Word. It is only when former enemies become brothers and sisters in Christ, having their sins put away at the cross and their hearts transformed by God’s Spirit, that the motivations for conflict are done away. As Oswalt says, “Until persons and nations have come to God to learn his ways and walk in them, peace is an illusion.”⁹ This is why the church best serves the cause of peace not through political agitation, but by preaching God’s Word so that sinners may be reconciled to God through Christ.

The power of the gospel brings peace to the hearts of hate-filled men. One example is Jacob DeShazer, an airman in the Doolittle bombing raid of Japan in April 1942. The plan was to take off from an aircraft

⁶ Cited from Alberto Ferreiro, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament XIV: The Twelve Prophets* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2003), 160.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁸ Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 118.

⁹ *Ibid.*

carrier, fly briefly over Tokyo dropping bombs, and then ditch their planes over neutral China. But two of the planes, including DeShazer's, ended up in Japanese occupied lands. Along with seven other airmen, DeShazer was captured and taken to Tokyo, where they subjected to public scorn and intense torture. This was followed by the long years of the war spent in the most deplorable conditions.

In May 1944, DeShazer was in solitary confinement, with only a sliver light sneaking in through an air vent. But a guard had provided him with a Bible, and by that dim light DeShazer eagerly read. First he read the Old Testament, and when he arrived in the New Testament, he recalls, "I... read of the birth of Jesus Christ, the one who actually fulfilled the very prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah and the other Old Testament writers. My heart rejoiced as I found confirmed in Acts 10:43: 'To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name, whosoever believeth on him shall receive remission of sins.'" His heart changed by the Word of the Lord, his entire attitude was transformed. "I discovered that God had given me new spiritual eyes," he later wrote, "and that when I looked at the Japanese officers and guards who had starved and beaten me... I found my bitter hatred for them changed to loving pity... I read in my Bible that while those who crucified Jesus on the cross had beaten him and spit upon him... he tenderly prayed in his moment of excruciating suffering, 'Father, forgiven them for they know not what they do.' And now from the depths of my heart, I too prayed for God to forgive my torturers."

Another example of the peace of Christ is Mitsuo Fuchida. He was the commander of Japanese air forces in the attack on Pearl Harbor, giving the famous assault order, "Tora, Tora, Tora". Fuchida fought valiantly throughout the war, narrowly escaping death, and was present for the Japanese surrender about the USS Missouri. With most of his friends dead and his nation humiliated, he fell into depression and heavy drinking. But in 1948, a Christian missionary handed Fuchida a tract at the Tokyo rail station. It was about how Jacob DeShazer found grace to forgive his Japanese tormentors by receiving Jesus as his Savior. As a result, Fuchida bought a New Testament and began reading it. In Luke's Gospel, he encountered Christ praying from the cross, "Father, forgiven them" (Lk. 23:34). He later wrote, "Right at the moment I read that prayer, I seemed to

meet Jesus for the first time. I understood the meaning of his death as a substitute for my wickedness, and so, in prayer I requested him to forgive my sins and change me from a bitter disillusioned ex-pilot into a well-balanced Christian with purpose in living.”

Because of his notoriety and anti-American feelings among former soldiers, Fuchida was at first persecuted for his faith. Later, Japan offered Fuchida the command of their post-war Self-Defence Air Force, but he turned it down to launch a worldwide ministry of evangelism. He especially delighted in preaching the gospel at Pearl Harbor, where his leadership had resulted in so many deaths. Once, when Jacob DeShazer was in Japan, they arranged to meet for prayer, rejoicing in the bond of love that had replaced their former enmity. Agreeing to join together in evangelism, their swords were truly beaten into plowshares for the kingdom of God.¹⁰

THE SHALOM OF THE FIG TREE

The name, Jerusalem, means “City of Peace.” But, as Micah has lamented, the city was anything but that in his time. It was a place of oppression and injustice, so that hardly anyone possessed the blessings of abundance and security. But he foresees that when God’s Word has gone forth and the nations have come to learn, then there would be peace with all its blessings. He expresses this with a classic expression of the full-orbed *shalom* (the Hebrew word for peace and well-being) that would come to everyone: “They shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken” (Mic. 4:4).

Fig trees were prized in Israel for their fruit and shade; along with the vine, the fig tree was a symbol of the blessings of prosperity and security. No longer, Micah writes, would the greedy land barons gather all wealth to themselves, leaving others in poverty and subjecting everyone to fear. With God’s blessing on the people, the land would burst forth in abundance. In the place of the insatiable craving for more, each will be content with God’s good provision. Bruce Waltke sums up the picture as depicting “the full enjoyment of

¹⁰ The stories of Jacob DeShazer and Mitsuo Fuchida are told in Don Stephens, *War and Grace* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2005), 117-152.

God's abiding peace and prosperity without fear or danger."¹¹ Such blessing is the end result of Micah's prophecy: satisfaction of soul arising from peace with God and man, resulting from the Word of the Lord going out from his church, and all this because God has exalted his gospel with the coming of the Savior Jesus Christ. Waltke comments, "Those who live by war will die in war (Matt. 26:52), and those with 'swollen appetites' cannot anticipate peace."¹² But those who learn contentment in the peace of God will know the *shalom* of the fig tree, with nothing to covet and no one to fear.

So certain is this future that Micah adds, "for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken." This peace shall come to God's people despite the scheming of unjust rulers and the threat of foreign armies, for the Lord of hosts will secure it. But when should we anticipate its coming?

Again, there is a temptation to a literal reading of these verses, so that we look for a coming age when Old Testament Jerusalem will be achieved in its perfect form. Thus those committed to a pre-millennial view of Christ's Second Coming look on this verse as a simple proof text. When Christ comes again, they say, he will establish a thousand year epoch when the faithful will literally rest beneath the fig trees of Israel. John Sailhammer writes, "It is hard to understand Israel's prophets any other way than that they longed for a physical, that is, earthly, reestablishment of the Davidic monarchy."¹³

But this fails to appreciate the teaching of both the Old and New Testaments. As for the Old Testament, it was typical for the prophets to "represent the New Age under the symbols of the Old."¹⁴ In other words, they presented future blessings in the terms of present realities their hearers could understand. And as for the New Testament, Jesus insisted that his coming has effected a permanent change, so "neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father," but we worship God everywhere "in spirit and truth" (Jn. 4:20, 23). For Jesus to return and reestablish the old covenant Davidic arrangement would be to overturn his own teaching.

¹¹ Bruce Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 213.

¹² *Ibid.*, 212.

¹³ Cited in Kenneth L. Barker and Waylon Bailey, *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 87.

¹⁴ Waltke, *Commentary on Micah*, 206.

So when will the mountain of God be exalted and the *shalom* of the fig tree come to earth? The answer is that it arrived with the coming of Jesus Christ. It was with God's peace that Jesus stilled the winds and the waves upon the sea and with God's plenty that he fed the five thousand with only a few loaves and fish. And it was with the words of Christ, which he brought from the mount of God's heavenly throne, that he brought peace to the souls of sinful men and women.

Another answer is that Micah's promise, having arrived with the coming of Christ, is being fulfilled now, in the age of the gospel, as his word of grace spreads throughout the world. Jesus brings peace to hearts, peace to homes, and peace to nations that come under the reign of his gospel. He brings an end to the bitterness, hatred, and greed that are the cause of our strife. And while we live amidst trials in a world enflamed in unholy passions, we yet possess what Paul described as "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding," which guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7).

But Micah's prophecy of God's perfect *shalom* will be fully realized when Christ returns to usher in the eternal age of glory and of peace, for which we patiently wait. The Book of Revelation tells us:

Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore (Rev. 21:3-4).

Believing this promise, how should we resolve to conduct our lives? Micah tells us, setting before his own generation a holy resolve to live in the light of the day that is sure to come: "For all the peoples walk each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God forever and ever" (Mic. 4:5). As God's Word dwells in us and as we live our lives according to our faith in his promise and in obedience to his teaching, our hearts are made secure and our souls are filled with his grace.

THESE LAST DAYS

The words of Micah's prophecy are among the most exciting that a Christian can ever read. And they remind me of some of the most thrilling times I have had as a Christian. One took place on a red clay hill outside the city of Kampala, Uganda, where I had gone to teach at the African Bible College. One evening, the principal of the

college, Dr. O. Palmer Robertson, invited us over for a Bible study. The text was Micah 4:1-5. As he read the prophet's words describing the lifting up of God's reign over all the world's false gods and the in-bringing of all peoples to the house of the Lord, I felt my skin almost tingling. We had spent that very day in African villages spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. Men and women from Muslim, animist, and irreligious backgrounds had professed their faith in the gospel of God's grace. What the prophet had written was happening right before us and even through our preaching: the mountain of the house of the Lord was lifted up above the nations.

This passage also came to my mind last Sunday evening after I had preached in a small Presbyterian church in the village of Messailler, Haiti. Here were people from yet another distant land streaming up to the heavenly mount as God's Word was going forth. Meeting for prayer afterwards, we reflected on these verses and marveled that God should use us to send forth his Word among the nations.

The thrill is that we are living in the latter days spoken of by the prophet Micah. Indeed, the ingathering of the nations that he spoke of – the work of gospel missions and the spread of Christ's blessing around the world – is the great work of our age. The latter days Micah foresaw are *these days* in which we live. God will use your voice, your prayers, and your witness so that many people – one at a time or many together – will see the glory of the Lord exalted in Jesus Christ, will come to God through faith in the gospel, will learn of his ways, and will in turn say to their fellows: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths" (Mic. 4:2).