

NOW AND THEN

Micah 4:9-5:1

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The lame I will make the remnant, and those who were cast off, a strong nation; and the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion from this time forth and forevermore (Mic. 4:7).

A complaint that some level against Christians is that our faith represents “pie-in-the-sky” religion. In other words, Christians are people who place their hopes in heaven because we cannot cope with life on earth. History disproves this claim, of course, since Christianity has had a most profound this-worldly effect for good. The spread of Christianity is typically accompanied by improved standards of education, health, government, and civil liberties.

The “pie-in-the-sky” complaint also misreads the Bible. An example is Micah’s preaching at the end of chapter 4. Here we encounter the word “now” four times in six verses. Micah has given his hearers a hope for the future – and Christians make no excuse for this – promising that the time will come when God assembles his scattered people in strength and when royal dignity returns to Jerusalem. But does a hope for the future lead believers to avoid present realities? Not if Micah can help it. David Prior comments: “He drags himself and his listeners back into the harsh realities of their present situation. He faces up to this present darkness in the light of the glorious future just described.”¹ Micah is determined for the present attitude of God’s people to be profoundly shaped by his vision of a future hope.

¹ David Prior, *The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998), 154.

THIS PRESENT DARKNESS

It is not possible to pinpoint the exact time of Micah's preaching, but it seems that this message was one of many given around the time of Sennacherib's devastating invasion, in 701 BC. Much of the Jewish nation was conquered by the Assyrians and a large portion of the population was carted off into exile. God destroyed the Assyrian army in one of the great, miraculous deliverances of the Old Testament, with 185,000 enemy soldiers struck down in a single night by the angel of the Lord (cf. Isa. 37:36). But, even in victory, the people must have been horrified by the aftermath. Death and ruin were all around them, and the threat of continued danger still loomed. In order to raise their spirits, God commissioned Micah with the salvation promises of chapters 4 and 5. God would glorify his city in the age to come, and he would restore and strengthen his people.

With this having been said, the prophet addresses the peoples' present situation: "Now why do you cry aloud?" he asks. "Is there no king in you? Has your counselor perished, that pain seized you like a woman in labor?" (Mic. 4:9). The torment of Jerusalem was so intense that Micah compared it to a woman's labor in childbirth, which in times prior to modern pain-killers was a very great physical anguish.

Micah may have been challenging the peoples' shaken confidence in King Hezekiah, whose reckless policies had brought about the invasion. But the text makes it clear Micah is also speaking of the near future, when the house of David would be overthrown. This took place a hundred years later, when the Babylonians captured Jerusalem, put the king to death, and led the people off in chains. Micah anticipates the great outpouring of grief over this loss because, C. F. Keil writes, "such glorious promises were attached to the throne, the king being the visible representative of the grace of God, and his removal a sign of the wrath of God and of the abolition of all the blessings of salvation."² This was part of the "now" set before the Jews by God.

The second part of the dreadful "now" they faced involved the travail of captivity and exile. Micah preaches: "Write and groan, O daughter

² C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 10 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 10: 315.

of Zion, like a woman in labor, for now you shall go out from the city and dwell in the open country; you shall go to Babylon” (Mic. 4:10).

This was a most specific and remarkable prophecy, given at a time when Babylon was not yet a world power capable of such a distant conquest. But Micah speaks from God, who foreknows and foreordains all things. Beginning in 605 BC, the Babylonian deportation of the Jews began, following the precise pattern Micah laid out. They first would be forced to “go out from the city.” Then they were kept in deportation camps “in the open country.” Finally, the Jews were taken into wicked Babylon for their captivity. The Babylonians were certainly known in Micah’s time; Hezekiah received envoys from Babylon and courted their favor (cf. Isa. 39:1-8). But Micah’s specific prophecy “goes so beyond the bounds of the political horizon of Micah’s time, that it cannot be accounted for from any natural presentiment.”³ The only explanation for so remarkable a prophecy is that its origin was in God’s plan for future history.

What a chilling prospect Micah held before the Jews! Micah is not merely warning them of the possibility of divine judgment: he assures them of its certainty. This was the “now” of which he was writing. They will cry aloud for the loss of their kingship and they will be taken from the city to Babylon. Micah wrote to prepare them for this great hardship. Calvin paraphrases the prophet’s message: “For God has decided that the city of Jerusalem must be razed and that you shall be banished from the inheritance that he had assigned you. It shall come to pass. Thus resolve yourself to receive the punishment and to endure the chastisement.”⁴

Not much comfort, is it? Yet all believers are told plainly by God’s Word that we must prepare to endure hardship. This was a point the apostle Paul tried to make with the earliest Christians. An example comes from his first letter to the Thessalonians. He sent his helper Timothy, “to establish and exhort you in your faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this” (1 Thess. 3:2-3). According to Jesus, this would be in part because of the world’s hatred of him: “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the

³ Ibid.

⁴ John Calvin, *Sermons on the Book of Micah* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 242.

world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (Jn. 15:18-19). Everyone can expect hostility because of his vices, but Christians alone can expect opposition because of our virtues, which testify to the Savior whom the world hates.

This is the reality of our present, just as loss of kingship and coming exile was the present reality facing Jerusalem. How are God’s people to face such daunting challenges? The answer to “now”, Micah says, is “then”. The key to persevering with joy in present difficulty is the knowledge of a certain and glorious salvation to come. With this in mind, he turns back to the future: “There you shall be rescued; there the LORD will redeem you from the hand of your enemies” (Mic. 4:10). Yes, they would be taken off in chains into pagan darkness, and it is precisely there that they would see God’s salvation.

There are important lessons for us to learn from this prophecy. The first lesson is that God’s people are never without a saving king. Micah’s statement in verse 9 is highly suggestive of the promise given by his contemporary, Isaiah: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6). This unquestionably directs us to the Lord Jesus Christ, God’s own Son, whom God has made king forever for his people. Of his reign, “there will be no end,” and he will sit on the throne of David “from this time forth and forevermore” (Isa. 9:7). Moreover, Jesus upholds his reign “with justice and with righteousness” (Isa. 9:7), so that the people of Christ need never fear God’s wrath.

Expecting the people to know that the Lord is their true king, Micah speaks with sarcasm to his afflicted people: “Now why do you cry aloud? Is there no king in you?” (Mic. 4:9). Yes, their earthly king would be taken away, but not their true Sovereign. In this light, the removal of Judah’s kings was a step forward in salvation, so that the people would be prepared for the true King, who faithfully performs God’s will and brings his saving plans to loving fulfillment. We, likewise, need to have our false supports removed, so that we will trust the only true Savior. Ever ruling for us, Christ the King works in us by God’s Holy Spirit to bolster our flagging strength and encourage our weary hearts.

Second, note the manner by which God's people will be delivered: by redemption. "There you shall be rescued," Micah insists; "there the LORD will redeem you from the hand of your enemies" (Mic. 4:10). This means that God will deliver his people from their strong foe by the power of his own might. Micah's language would remind his hearers of the exodus from Egypt. Israel was redeemed from bondage to Pharaoh by God's might and by the blood of the Passover lamb, which protected them from the angel of God's wrath.

Ultimately, the Israelites' redemption is not merely from the might of Babylon but from the guilt and power of their sins. This is why in the fullest sense, the redemption of God's people has always been through the cross of their promised Messiah. Paul writes: "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses" (Eph. 1:7). As the hymn puts it:

He breaks the power of reigning sin; he sets the prisoners free
His blood can make the foulest clean; his blood availed for me.⁵

Looking forward to the same deliverance as Micah, and through it to our true redemption from sin, Isaiah spoke of the Servant-King to come: "he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:5-6). Our true bondage is to sin and its guilt, so the true redemption is by the death of Christ, whose blood paid the penalty our sins deserve.

Third, throughout the Bible, God's people find the light of salvation in the darkness of trial and loss. Another way to say this is that God designed for Israel to find its salvation through death and resurrection in Christ. Just as Jonah was swallowed by the great fish, there to cry out to God and find life, Israel required the purging of being swallowed up inside the utter paganism of Babylon in order to see the light of God's grace. Their characteristic sin prior to the exile was idolatry, so into the deepest hell of idolatry they would go. There, they would experience both punishment and liberation; for when they cried out to God, he rescued them. Bruce Waltke writes: "This

⁵ Charles Wesley, *O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing*, 1739; alt. 1961.

theological truth... finds fulfillment in the death of our Lord, who through the sufferings of the cross brought salvation to the earth.”⁶

The same pattern will hold true for us, for only by dying to idols, to sin, and to self can we lay hold of the redeeming blood of Christ as our rescue. The death that is conviction of sin becomes for us the place of liberation and redemption. When we, like the Jews in Babylon, are helpless and beyond human hope, God intervenes to rescue us by the grace of the cross of Christ.

DARKENED IN UNDERSTANDING

With that hope for the future in their minds, Micah returns to the present. “Then” is the time of their salvation, but “now” is the difficult time in which they must exercise their faith. Micah has assured them that God had ordained the end to their earthly kingship and even the end of their security in Jerusalem. The reality was that, as anyone could see, Judah’s political and military situation was fundamentally compromised. The violent empires of their world were on the rise, with mighty armies constantly on the march. Micah summarizes, “Now many nations are assembled against you, saying, ‘Let her be defiled, and let our eyes gaze upon Zion’” (Mic. 4:11).

The imperial powers were well aware of the holy city on Mount Zion; they were all too eager to overthrow the strange God who had disrupted so many of their evil plans. They hungered to defile the sacred precincts of the God of Israel. David Prior observes, “Godless people always take a perverse delight in the downfall of those who have been held up as God-fearing and distinctive.”⁷ Kenneth Barker notes, “Those who are unholy desire to render the holy also unholy, like themselves, then to gloat over it.”⁸ This is a present reality in our world, just as it was in Micah’s.

How important it is, then, for God’s people to have a divine perspective not only on the future, but also on the present. Micah highlights one key piece of information: for all their clever schemes, there is something essential that the nations do not know. Micah

⁶ Bruce Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 38.

⁷ David Prior, *The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998), 156.

⁸ Kenneth L. Barker and Waylon Bailey, *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 93.

writes: “they do not know the thoughts of the LORD; they do not understand his plan” (Mic. 4:12).

However determined and equipped the wicked may be to assail God’s people of faith, they are nonetheless ignorant of God’s working in history. They do not realize that the God of the Bible is sovereign over all things, with a plan to glorify himself by saving his people. This ignorance about God and his plan is one of the worst byproducts of unbelief. Paul says: “They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart” (Eph. 4:18). For this reason, all their plotting is utterly in vain, as Psalm 2 celebrates:

Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and against his anointed, saying,
"Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us."
He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.
Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury (Ps.
2:1-5).

The New Testament applies this text to the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 4:25-26). Paul writes: “We impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor. 2:7-8).

Believers are to rely on God’s plan, revealed to us in the Bible, especially in times of darkness. Thus it was at the beginning of their captivity that Jeremiah wrote on God’s behalf to the exiles in Babylon: “I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jer. 29:11).

But what of the unbelieving nations, who assemble in lust against God’s city? What is God’s plan for them? Micah continues: “he has gathered them as sheaves to the threshing floor” (Mic. 4:12). The ungodly exult in defying God’s will, when in fact it is God who has gathered them for destruction.

We remember that the land on which the temple was built, purchased by King David, was previously a threshing floor (2 Sam. 24:24). This was a place where wheat was first ground into small bits and then separated from the chaff. Not knowing this, the nations conspired to

bring themselves to this very place. But God remembered; indeed, his design was set in place from eternity past. Bruce Waltke comments:

The pagan throng do not understand that they are in [the Lord's] hands the unwitting tools of their own destruction... They willfully conspired to break into the temple precincts, but in [the Lord's] comprehensive will they brought themselves of their own accord to his threshing floor where they are about to be pulverized; they came to Jerusalem to strip its temple, but precisely there they will be stripped; where they conspired to desecrate [the Lord's] name and sanctuary, their filthy loot will be consecrated to [the Lord] for destruction; where they hoped to rid the earth of the transcendent and holy God, the Lord of all the earth will rid the earth of them.⁹

This was precisely what happened during Sennacherib's invasion in Micah's day. The Assyrians assembled before God's city and God destroyed them there. But the principle finds its chief fulfillment at the cross of Christ. It is obvious that behind the pagan nations was the will of the devil. And at the cross, the greatest triumph of Satan's will resulted in the overthrow of his kingdom. The same principle operates whenever the world assails the church and the ungodly afflict individual Christians. Through our faith in God and his saving plan, not only do we find deliverance but the wicked are overthrown.

GOD'S THRESHER-CHURCH

Finally, Micah prophesies that God will use his church as his instrument for overthrowing the powers of the world. He concludes: "Arise and thresh, O daughter of Zion, for I will make your horn iron, and I will make your hoofs bronze; you shall beat in pieces many peoples; and shall devote their gain to the LORD, their wealth to the Lord of the whole earth" (Mic. 4:13).

First, God summons and equips his people. So it is today, that Jesus calls his own out of the world and strengthens them with the bread of his Word. Matthew was sitting in the sin of his tax collector's booth, but Jesus called him, saying, "Follow me," and the new disciple "rose and followed him" (Mt. 9:9). Equipped by the Spirit to declare God's Word, Matthew became one of the twelve apostles whose gospel preaching overturned the world. Likewise, every Christian is not only called to salvation through faith in Jesus, but is also called to grow strong through the Word and prayer. "Arise and thresh," God calls us,

⁹ Bruce Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah*, 259.

and in the power of truth and love, with the gospel message of God's grace, "We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Cor. 10:4-5).

Second, the church is used by God as an instrument for judging the world. The gospel witness of Christians is the means by which God separates the wheat from the chaff, as the word of Christ is either accepted or rejected. At the threshing floor, bulls and heifers stamped the wheat into fine pieces, so that the harvester could take the threshing fork, cast the bits into the wind, and separate the wheat from the chaff. God's people are equipped with bronze hooves for this work of threshing and iron horns, correlating to what Paul called "the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God" (Eph. 6:17). Thus the Book of Revelation celebrates the victory of the redeemed over Satan and his powers: "they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death" (Rev. 12:11).

Third, the victory of God's people delivers the wealth of the world into their hands. When the exodus generation departed from Egypt, they took with them the spoils of the Nile. And when Joshua conquered Jericho, its great riches came into the Israelites' possession. All this was dedicated to the Lord for the display of his glory. And what is the true wealth of the world, but the precious souls of men and women? We have the privilege of living in the days foreseen by the prophets, when the spoil of the earth is gathered in by the preaching and witness of the gospel, as pagans like you and me are converted by the Word of God's power, to display the triumph of the God who is Lord of all the earth. Thus the aim of our labor is never the accumulation of power for our own purposes or for the glory of our churches and ministries, but always for the display of the glory of God.

This was the future, the "then", of which Micah's generation was to be aware. So what did this mean for the "now"? Micah concludes his oracle with a call to arms: "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" (Mic. 5:1). Now is the time for readiness to enter spiritual battle. God's people must be made aware of what God was bringing: their city would fall and their king would be removed. But

this was only the opening stage of a greater spiritual contest. They were to trust the Lord's plan for their salvation and for the overthrow of evil, all for the display of the manifold glories of God.

This is our calling in the midst of today's present darkness. Having been called to faith by the Word of Christ, we are to equip ourselves what Paul described as "the armor of God" (Eph. 6:13): with the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, shoes shod with gospel peace, the shield of faith, the sword of God's Word, and, not least, the mighty power of prayer (Eph. 6:14-18).

THE COST OF VICTORY

In every great battle, the cost is great even to the victors. And how great is the cost in God's triumph over the evil powers in history.

The cost to God is immeasurably great, in giving his only Son to die for our sins. The cost to Jesus, our Savior-King, is beyond comprehension: "the precious blood of Christ" (1 Pet. 1:19). And while we receive our salvation by faith alone, as a free gift of God's grace, still it costs us everything else. We surrender our self-righteousness, confessing our sins and need of forgiveness. We cede lordship over our lives, yielding to Christ. He calls us to take up the cross, the instrument of death where he died for our sins. He insists, "Any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple" (Lk. 14:33).

This means that the Christian life cannot be lived at leisure under peaceful skies. Christianity is the farthest thing from pie-in-the-sky escapism. It is life in the storm, bearing the peace of God; a battle in the darkness, shining the light of Christ. Now is the time for warfare in our hearts to remove the vestiges of sin, for labor in God's Word for the renewing of our minds, and for ministry in the wicked world with the love and truth of Christ. "Now muster your troops" (Mic. 5:1), God calls to his daughter-church, the warrior-bride of his royal Son. Now is the time of our struggle, strife, and pain for the gospel. But then, when Christ returns in the glory of the everlasting age, the joy of our redemption will remove even the memory of pain, just as the delivery of the child makes the laboring mother forget her birthing struggle. "For this slight momentary affliction," Paul writes, "is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17).