

## **The Mountain of the Lord** Micah 4:1-5

We know the rulers & religious leaders of Judah did not take the prophet Micah seriously. They probably did what everyone does, back then and today – come up with many rationalizations for their ideas and actions. They were probably like the royal priest Amaziah, who attributed the prophet Amos' prophecies, that were like Micah's, to the fact that he was just a farmer from another country. (Amos 7:10-15) This gave the denounced leaders of Israel one reason to dismiss Micah. They could claim he was only working because he had the country jealousy and envy of the city and its enlightened leadership.

It is hard to hear bad news, isn't it? Imagine one day you get up and you just aren't feeling very well. You feel a bit sluggish. You think maybe you've put on a little extra weight. You just don't feel yourself, so you go to the doctor, hoping the doctor will look at you and say, "Oh, don't worry about it. Everything is fine. Keep doing exactly as you're doing. You are in good shape."

Instead, the doctor tells us that we must change our habits. We can not eat certain foods. We must get some more exercise. We have to do this, and we have to do that and not do that other thing. She says we may even be developing a disease. We could have cardiovascular problems or are on the edge of diabetes, & we really must watch ourselves now. We should be concerned.

**(Chapter 3:11)** That is kind of what it's like to hear Micah, because he brings us bad news that we need to hear. It doesn't help us to ignore it. We must understand the reality of the situation. But we are not good in facing and owning up to our guilt. We do our best to protect ourselves from accepting responsibility for our evil deeds. Our rationalizations to hold off our consciences only work to a certain extent.

**(Chapter 3:12)** In chapters 1 to 3, Micah is judgmental about the corruption & injustice that was found amongst God's people. The hypocrisy of the nation's leaders is obvious from what he says. But, in chapter 4, it is as if the windows of heaven have opened. There is light with a very

different message. It is so different, in fact, that many scholars are certain that Micah could never have written chapter 4. After all, if you are a prophet, your job is to preach about judgment, disaster, gloom, and doom. It is assumed you are not capable of preaching about mercy and grace.

Some say Micah & the prophet Isaiah were preaching at the same time & quoted each other, including these verses. What is wrong with that? It is possible God was revealing the same information to each. In my experience, often a person or congregation needs to hear the same message, from various people, to finally act. God kept sending prophets to Israel, because he loved them, although they did not change.

For example, in one congregation I pastored, they had participated in several assessments both internally & with outside consultants. And they were undertaking a fifth process. I was there simply to pastor for a while until they found their next regular pastor. But as I talked with leaders, I asked the awkward question – why do you keep doing assessments and not act on them?

This led them to send all the assessments to a denominational consultant I recommended, who offered a 2 page summary of all the introspection and self-evaluation they had done, along with the wisdom they had received from outside consultants. This resulted in changing my role to intentional interim. And they did some great work!

We know it is always better to learn quickly from experience, both good and bad. And we need to accept that judgement leads to change, if we listen. God does not want us to just hear his negative messages without hearing what follows. That is what Micah offers. Micah offers the Lord's assurance he intends to fulfil his promises. Including his positive ones. So, we have our holy scripture today and others like it in the Bible.

Chapter 4, **(verse 1)** begins with the phrase, "*In the last days.*" However, in many Bible translations of this verse, it actually begins with a little Hebrew word, really actually only one letter. It is a transitional word, in Hebrew that means, "and, or now, or but." This indicates the text is

connecting the story from what comes before it with what comes after it.

So, we move from Zion's condemnation to Zion's hope, light, and vision. Chapters 1 to 3 is not God's final word! However, just because our Creator gives us a message of hope and grace, we must not assume that God is not concerned with sin and wickedness. And we must not presume we, deserve the Almighty's favor without changing, believing, & following Jesus.

We see this dangerous tendency all the time in our world today. The visible church and people who call themselves Christians often reject the Bible and God's messengers – like the nation of Israel did. They reject Jesus as the way of salvation. They reject God as he has revealed himself in his Holy Word to be. They want no part of the true God, yet they claim the blessings that come from believing in the true God.

So, we must be careful. If we would have the blessing of God, we must obey God. We must trust God. We must place our belief in him. We must long to have a relationship with him. It's not just a matter of what we do; it is the relationship we have with God that is important.

The first phrase of the chapter, *In the last days*, points to an unknown time. This may mean at the end of the world. Or it may simply mean, at the end of the exile of the people of Israel. It may mean when the church, the Kingdom of God is established. It is a messianic term. So, we need to be careful as to what and when and who we pin this biblical phrase to.

Let's look at what will occur then. "*The mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains.*" The most visible aspect of God's kingdom in Micah's day was the temple mount. What is the best-known site in Vancouver? The most visible site in Toronto? My youngest daughter has picture of her and a friend, with the twin towers of New York in the background. Micah offers us the temple mount – the hill, as the picture of the kingdom of God. Think about what this means to people hearing this. He has just told the people that Jerusalem,

Zion, the kingdom, the temple will become a heap of rubble, a mound full of thickets.

But here he says the opposite. It will be chief of all the mountains. Hearing this we think at least 4 things. It will become the highest mountain in the world. It will be the most important mountain in the whole world. It will be the place from which the world is ruled. It is the symbol of true religion. Is this what the people building of the Tower of Babel were trying to accomplish – on their own power? Here it is totally God's doing.

And people will stream to it. Plus, the nations. We are offered a picture of a stream going uphill. This image is intentional. It is unnatural. River's flow down stream. But here Micah is stressing that this river of God's, the people, and nations, flows up to the mountain of God. I think God's living water of life comes from God's throne, but it also flows toward the Almighty's Mountain, through God's power. What a beautiful vision!

Psalm 22:27 and 28 offers this dream: "All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations."

The picture here is the higher the mountain, the closer we are to heaven, the closer we are to God. So, the bigger the mountain is, the higher the temple is, we are closer to God. It is not an accident, in many former colonies, that the Catholic Church built their cathedrals on the high points in many towns. And it's not an accident that most churches, Protestants ones included, have sanctuaries with high ceilings, higher than necessary, & roofs, that often point up to heaven.

What Micah is saying here is that the mountain of the temple of God is the one that is highest of all. It is the true religion. It is the one that is nearest to God and his heaven. It is the most important place. Micah is giving us is a picture of the glory of God for his people, and all people in the world. It is there to give the nations hope.

**(Verse 2)** One commentary says this means, the object of people's attraction to Jerusalem is to be

their desire for God's word that comes from the city. Micah saw a change in the hearts of all the people of the world, not just the Israelites, at this time when the law of the Lord would be received universally rather than by Judah and Israel alone.

People will be taught their Creator's ways and choose to live as God desires. The Almighty's law will be proclaimed, upheld, & followed. The terms "*law & word of the Lord*" are synonymous like Zion & Jerusalem. Plus, this is totally God's doing. Through his might. Not ours. And God does more and offers more than we can imagine!

And notice the couplets in these verses. They usually say the same thing twice, to emphasize their message, as well as give us a richer picture of what God is saying to us. It is a Hebrew way of communicating, especially in conveying information to non literates. Most of the psalms use this technique to help us remember.

The vision we are given is big. Much bigger and grander than anyone in Israel had back then. God does not think small time. As we talked with our Lent themes, God desires more for us than we can ever imagine. It is way more than we can see as we look at the world we are leaving for our grandchildren. This is also saying, even the sin of God's people can not destroy the Almighty's vision of a kingdom for all people. It is a kingdom where everyone is converted to God's thinking and values and actions. It is a kingdom of peace.

And what does this kingdom look like? **Verse 3** is one of the more well-known verses in the Bible. It is quoted often with great longing. In the last days, the day of the Lord is peace. Here we have a theocracy – a world government, with the divine rule of the Almighty. And like verse 2, we have three couplets, each saying the same thing, but conveying different details & images.

The *first* tells us that God, as part of his rule, would be judge among the nations, executing justice between them as he will come to rebuke and decide concerning even the strong nations. There will be no conflict when God arbitrates disputes. But there is more. God will make

things right! At the root of the word that is translated, "*decide disputes*," is the word *rebuke or chastise*, meaning – set right. God does not just end conflict – but everything is set right.

We wonder what this would look like today. The Almighty would subject all powers, with their disregard for creation, each other, and fairness that they have always had, as the cause for our problems. Imagine what that would look like! This is something we look forward to. Psalm 9, 67, 96 and 98 offers great descriptions of God fairly judging everyone with firmness and justice. Plus, no one can stop the Almighty.

The *second couplet* is the most brilliant call for disarmament in world history. It remains the classic of all time and has never been surpassed in its descriptive picture of peace. And better yet, instead of destructive tools, we have tools for feeding the world. As one commentator says, it effectively gives a vision of parasitical and non-productive implements of war giving way to the tools of well-being and construction. When this comes about, we would send construction and farm implements to Ukraine – not weapons!

The *third couplet* describes the reign of peace that will follow. War will be no more, and the arts of war will not be taught anymore. People's energies and wealth and thinking will be applied to building up people and society. This dream of peace is one of the most powerful concepts that humans have ever had. What a picture of hope! It seems so impossible. But all things are possible with Yahweh the Almighty Creator!

Our hope is not in armies or in geopolitics, or in culture or in wealth. Instead, our hope is in the Lord God Almighty. What is being described here is the impossible dream. But Micah is telling us it is possible, through God's power. This verse is so famous that people who do not know anything about the Bible know it. It is carved on the wall of the United Nations. It describes peace on earth. It is not heavenly peace, but will be reality here on earth. Why? Because the implements described are earthly.

After our Creator acts, (**verse 4**), we are given this bold description of what peace looks like. The verbs of people acting, of beating the swords into plowshares and turning the spears into pruning hooks, come after God has judged, after God decides disputes. After people and nations stream up to the mountain of God and God acts, then peace comes. Clearly God must intervene for peace to occur. Because it is a human heart issue. It is a worship issue. It is listening to God's ways, so the world walks in God's paths.

This poem of verses 1 to 4, about the conversion of the nations to the ways of godliness, is one of the most challenging passages in the Bible. It ends with a great description of what we wish daily life could be. *Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid, for the LORD Almighty has spoken.* These are symbols of peace and prosperity and orderly society for all.

This is not abstract, it is specific. It is not general – it is particular. Micah moves from a general idea of peace for the future for the nations, to what looks like peace for each individual person. It is important to notice this. Politicians and leaders talk about peace referring to the end of war, and in vague generalities about how things will get so much better. But they seldom offer any specifics, especially for each and every common citizen. In Micah's mind, this vision was a certainty, because God has spoken.

The scope of God's peace is huge. It includes all the nations and all people. But the benefit is described in a very particular way. This peace has gone throughout the world and comes to those who are outside of Israel. It goes throughout the whole world, but the stress of this peace is on each person. The specific Hebrew word for *man* is used in this verse, indicating each and every individual will be blessed by this peace.

The symbols for security and peace for Israel were the vine and fig tree, and no one being afraid. We could add, having your own cistern, your own water source. And it is not a symbol for laziness because every farmer knows you will not have a vine or fig tree if you sit around too

long. Most people, I think, think of real full peace, as the ability to pursue the ordinary work of living, without interruption or anxiety. I think most people in violent situations brought on by people and by nature, simply want to live their daily lives with safety, fun, and no sorrow and fear. Just leave us alone to live, I think is what most people desire. And this works well when we all worship & all follow & obey God's laws.

During the great depression it would be like saying, there would be a chicken in every pot. Today it would be like saying, "The stock market will never crash, and retirement investments will continue to grow, your job will be fulfilling and fun; you will have health and sustenance; and all relationships will prosper." With that kind of guarantee, of course we would not be afraid.

What God is doing here is telling us that in his kingdom we will be secure. This security is emphasized at the end of verse 4. "*...no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.*" There is no one or any situation to make us afraid. Why? Because the Lord of hosts has spoken, and that ends it.

Then we have **verse 5a**. It is one of the most puzzling phrases in the Bible. "*All the nations may walk in the name of their gods.*" Note the word God is not capitalized. Did some writer insert it as a way to refute the wonderful verses 1 to 4 & 6-8? Who knows? It describes a tolerance that is not matched anywhere else in the Bible.

Or is it setting up a contrast between the nations of the world who follow their gods, and "*those who will walk in the name of the Lord, our God forever and ever?*" I suspect it is another dig by Micah at the Jewish leaders who are walking in the name of their gods - wealth & power and not the name of the Lord. I think Micah deliberately sets up a contrast. You can follow your god, small g, but God with a capital G will win out. That is a certainty, whether we like it or not. So, are we living out a last day's lifestyle, values, and faith? Do we believe the false prophets or do we believe in Micah's multiple prophetic fulfillments? Come, join the stream of people, going up the mountain of the Lord.