

HERE COMES THE JUDGE

MESSAGES FROM MICAH

By

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1. MICAH OF MORESHETH

The word of the Lord that came to Micah of Moresheth during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah --the vision he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem. Hear, O peoples, all of you, listen, O earth and all who are in it, that the Sovereign Lord may witness against you, the Lord from his holy temple (Micah 1:1- 2).

“Micah”--the name stands for him as an individual. Everyone is someone. “Of Moresheth.” Other Micahs may exist; this is the one who lives in Moresheth. Every one lives somewhere. Each person is part of a community and a nation. “During the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah”—the chief politicians of Micah’s time and place. Everyone is subject to human leaders. Some are good, some are bad; some are wise, some are otherwise; they all influence their people for good or evil. They largely determine our political, cultural and moral environment. This is precisely our situation--we are persons living in a time, in a locality, under a government and with unchosen but influential neighbors. We cannot exist in vacuum. We are thrown together, by the mere fact of being alive, with others in a milieu created by still others.

“The Sovereign Lord”--the kings have a king. He is over all, with power that cannot be wrested from him by any leader, by any army or by any change of circumstances. He is there. He is here. That is a truth and a force beyond our control, whether we act as one or as one of many.

“The word of the Lord...came to Micah,” creating his office and function as a prophet, as a living transmitter of the word and will of the Sovereign Lord. “Hear, O peoples...O earth and all who are in it” --the message was to him but for others, all others, all earth-dwellers. It is a message for me, for you, for everyone. The Sovereign Lord has spoken; the citizens are addressed and become responsible. We had better listen closely and act accordingly. Our character, behavior and destiny is shaped by our response to “the word of the Lord.”

2. WHO CREATES YOUR VISION?

The word of the Lord that came to Micah...the vision he saw... (Micah 1:1).

Each of us has a vision of what we think our world and our lives within that world should be like. The important question relates, not to the fact of a vision, but to its source. Micah's vision was shaped by "the word of the Lord" that came to him, and by coming to him, it possessed and directed him, determining him to be a prophet, like it or not, succeed at it or not.

Some have chosen certain philosophers to be their vision-makers. Others have opted for a political leader or a political party. Some have gurus, mentors and teachers with strong personalities who set their sails and become their wind. Some wish to shape their lives and times by elements of history and heritage.

We who hear and believe "the word of the Lord," however, must place that word above all other words, for the Sovereign Lord is above all and over all and for all. Our vision for ourselves and for our world must conform to his demands and his promises. We must see and act from this single dominating compulsion: "The Lord's will be done." At any cost to us we must pray as Jesus taught us: "Father...Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We must pray as Jesus prayed: "Father...not my will, but yours be done."

The vision of a Christian will always differ from and contradict that of a non-Christian. Our vision will issue in a collision with the world as it now is and as those who reject the Lord's word would like it to become.

“The Lord is coming.” That truth must so compel and impel us that we will be repelled by the world’s values and maxims, willing to suffer at their hands until they suffer at his who is the righteous judge of all.

3. WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION

Hear, O peoples, all of you, listen, O earth and all who are in it, that the Sovereign Lord may witness against you (Micah 1:2).

Upon the witness of men and women, accused persons have been found guilty and imprisoned or executed. Sometimes witnesses have lied or have been mistaken and the sentences imposed have been unjust. The character of the witnesses usually determines the amount of credence that judges and juries place in their testimony.

When the Sovereign Lord witnesses against us, what chance will we have to escape justice? He cannot be mistaken; he cannot be bribed; his motives are pure; his words are true--and he knows the deepest things hidden in our hearts. He is perfectly just and holy and we have sinned against him who hates sin.

Our only hope of deliverance is to confess our sins and throw ourselves upon the mercy of the court. The witness against us is the judge who tries us. There is but one way to avoid his righteous wrath and consuming judgment. He became our savior when he died for our sins on the cross. Trusting him for promised mercy is our one exit from guilt and ruin. We can't hide the truth or cancel the judgment, but he will receive and forgive all who come to him with penitent and believing hearts.

4. LISTENING AND LOOKING

Hear, O peoples, all of you, listen, O earth and all who are in it.... Look! The LORD is coming from his dwelling place; he comes down and treads the high places of the earth. (Micah 1:2, 3).

The message of Micah is for all peoples, not just for Israel. The many nations of earth have one God, one maker, one savior and one judge. “The God of Israel” is “the God of all the earth.” Passing centuries and fluctuating national borders cannot alter this truth.

Micah proclaims a speaking and acting God. This God can and does involve himself with earth and its inhabitants. He is always saying something and doing something. His speech and action impose upon us a two-fold responsibility: we are to listen what God says and look at what God does.

We are to listen, because the prophet’s message does not have its origin in the prophet’s own mind and heart. He brings a given message, and the giver of the words is the Sovereign Lord. We are to look, for what the Lord is doing affects us directly and eternally. Divine action means salvation or destruction for us. We listen and look, not as uninvolved spectators but as creatures capable of and responsible for responding to the Lord’s words and deeds. What God says and does determines our character and destiny.

The Lord has come down to us and for us. The Lord has spoken in many ways by many persons to us. His words and deeds are freighted with destiny for us. We can deny them but we cannot escape them. It’s high time to listen and to look to the Lord who

knows us best and loves us most, but will not ignore or excuse our sins.

5. HERE COMES THE JUDGE

Look! The Lord is coming from his dwelling place; he comes down and treads the high places of the earth.... All this is because of Jacob's transgressions, because of the sins of the house of Israel (Micah 1:3, 5).

A famous entertainer made "Here comes the judge" a joking matter. When the Lord descends to bring judgment it won't be funny. His hatred for sin and his punishment of sin are not rib-ticklers. They are the tragic issues of the deliberate wrongdoing of his people.

He created us for himself. He entered into covenant with us in order to deliver us from sin and to unite us with himself. By turning from him to idols, by choosing to disobey his plain, direct commands, we foolishly make ourselves the targets of awesome judgment.

He only comes down as judge because of sin. He does not bring judgment upon the ignorance or weakness of his people, but upon their transgressions. If our problem was ignorance, education could save us. If it was weakness, body-building could save us. The problem is rebellion, and only the forgiveness of the offended Lord can save us.

Divine forgiveness requires atonement and repentance. The Lord came down in Jesus to make atonement for us. He came down in Jesus to provide a means of pardoning us without compromising his holiness or destroying our freedom. We chose to sin and we must choose to turn from sin and trust in Jesus as our deliverer. Otherwise, there is no escape from judgment--it becomes eternal.

Men joke about hell. No one ever joked his way out of hell. God is not mocked. We reap what we sow.

6. BROKEN IDOLS; BROKEN PERSONS

All her idols will be broken to pieces.... I will destroy all her images (Micah 1:7).

God is an image maker. He made man and woman in his own image. He is re-making sinners into the image of his one and only Son, Jesus Christ.

Men became image-makers. Not content with the God who made them, they made gods for themselves, gods in their own image. These gods were weak, wicked and worthless. Men had to save

these gods from theft or destruction but these gods were helpless to save men from trouble and disaster. Israel exchanged the true God for such false images. She adopted the idols and rituals of pagan nations. The idolatry opened the floodgates of immorality. Her worship incited her wickedness. Religion became the nation's ruin.

God was fed up with this evildoing. He "comes down" to bring fierce judgment upon false gods and their devotees. The image maker became an image breaker. Those images and their worshipers were utterly helpless against his holy wrath. The images could not save themselves or those who made them and were then shaped by them.

When Jesus was dying on the cross his enemies taunted him. They were heartless and he seemed helpless. "He cannot save himself," they exclaimed. He did not save himself from dying, but he saved himself from death. He had power to lay down his life and power to take it up again. He conquered death and is alive forever, possessing "all authority in heaven and on earth." He is the Father's appointed judge of all persons. We had better come to him as savior before he comes to us as judge!

7. AUDIBLE AND VISIBLE PROPHECY

Because of this I will weep and wail, I will go about barefoot and naked. I will howl like a jackal and moan like an owl. For her wound is incurable, it has come to Judah (Micah 1:8, 9).

The sins of the Northern Kingdom infected the Southern Kingdom. Israel borrowed idols and idolatry from its pagan neighbors. What they had accepted they transmitted to Judah, who in turn welcomed what they should have rejected. Nothing is more contagious than sin. Sin's nature is to spread from place to place, from person to person.

In Israel sin had become an incurable wound. Judgment could no longer be deferred. God said, "Enough," and readied a pagan army to defeat, despoil and disperse his people. As Judah had turned from God, she too would suffer a like fate. She had adopted Israel's evil; now she will taste God's judgment.

Micah saw it coming. To make his words of prophecy more attention-grabbing he would dress as a captive taken into bondage. He would dramatize his message by appearing in public stripped of clothing, broken in spirit, shedding tears and making the noises of stricken birds and beasts. He had called upon people to listen and look; now he would give them something to see that would reinforce what they had heard. The prophetic message would be visible as well as audible.

This should remind us that the church is to demonstrate in visible ways the transforming effect of obedience to the gospel. We

should put the gospel of God's grace into both words and deeds, driving deeply into the consciousness of others the grand truth that the God who hates sin and will not excuse it also loves the sinner and will forgive him. Just as the message of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus is dramatized in the ritual of the Lord's Supper, so it should also shine forth in the good works of his redeemed people.

8. OUTPLANNED

Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! At morning's light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it.... Therefore, the LORD says: "I am planning disaster against this people, from which you cannot save yourselves" (Micah 2:1, 3).

Planned evil is even worse than spontaneous evil. The element of intention strips the evildoer of all excuse. It is one thing to be suddenly and unexpectedly tempted to do wrong, and in weakness yield. It is another thing, and a baser thing, to lie awake plotting tomorrow's wrongs and get up at crack of dawn to do them.

Nothing so evidences the corruption of a person's heart than his or her deliberate plans to oppress or exploit others. You are far gone in sin when you can hardly wait for daylight to bring the opportunity of hurting or robbing another. You are totally depraved when all that would keep you from doing wrong is the lack of power to fulfill schemes of enriching yourself by destroying another.

There were people like that in Micah's day, some of them people who were supposed to be living in covenant with God, a covenant to love him supremely and to love one's neighbor unselfishly. The breed has not died out! Such planning and perpetration still goes on, and some of the plotters are card-carrying "Christians," men and women who profess to live for God but really live for greed. And those of us who are shocked and saddened by their covenant-breaking can only say, "But for the grace of God I could be such a planner myself."

God is a planner, too. He planned to bring “disaster” upon apostate Israel, a judgment they were helpless to save themselves from. A pagan army would defeat them and loss of lives and lands would advertise their depravity and God’s holiness. No evil escapes his notice and no evildoer can escape his judgment. What has been sown will be reaped. When his calls to repentance and his promises of forgiveness are ignored, his judgment is certain and overwhelming.

9. FALSE PROPHETS WELCOMED

If a liar and deceiver come and says, “I will prophecy for you plenty of wine and beer,” he would be just the prophet for this people (Micah 2:11).

Israel had filled the land with idols and idolatry. The political leaders were guilty of crimes against the poor, robbing them of land and clothing. Women and children were not protected but exploited. As a consequence, Micah prophesies the utter ruin of the nation. The pagans, whose helpless gods Israel had borrowed and served, would overrun the land and exile the population.

Angered by the truth of judgment proclaimed by true prophets, the “movers and shakers” in Israel had engaged and encouraged false prophets with a “prosperity gospel.” These hired prophets, bluntly called liars and deceivers by Micah, would be welcomed. Such a preacher was “just the prophet” for apostates. The people could not bear the truth that condemned them, so they readily adopted and applauded the messages of those “always positive” preachers who made them comfortable in their sins.

Micah, and others like him, refused to put their ministries on the auction block. They would proclaim the word of God at any cost to themselves, and that word included the stern notes of his righteous judgment upon a backslidden people.

Things are no different in our time and place. The most welcome of pastors and prophets are those who will mute the truth of judgment, not wishing to offend the people who love being told that sin doesn't matter and riches are proof of God's favor. God will bring

an awesome judgment upon our nation, for we have defied his word. Even worse, we have given the name of truth to a pack of lies. We have dissolved the truth of judgment in the acids of lust and greed. We have made sinners comfortable in our churches instead of calling them to repentance. What men have gained through distortion and compromise of gospel truth will one day be wrested from them as God's righteous wrath destroys their flaunted prosperity and security.

10. THE LORD PUNISHES AND PARDONS

I will surely gather all of you, O Jacob; I will surely bring together the remnant of Israel. I will bring them together like sheep in a pen, like a flock in its pasture; the place will throng with people. One who breaks open the way will go before them; they will break through the gate and go out. Their king will pass through before them, the Lord at their head (Micah 2:12, 13).

The Lord came down to visit judgment upon Israel for their idolatry and immorality. They had plotted evil and he planned punishment. The “disaster” God brought upon them was the Exile. The nation was conquered and the people deported to Babylon. The temple was destroyed and the rituals were abandoned. The helpless people endured a long and sorrowful period of captivity.

God delights in mercy. Judgment is what Luther called God’s “strange work.” So even as he witnesses against his people the Lord points to deliverance that will restore and refine them.

He will save them as a “flock,” not as isolated individuals. Freedom can be individually experienced and enjoyed, of course, but God created men and women to be persons-in-community. Salvation is personal but not private. The saved belong both to him and to one another. The Lord will be once more their shepherd, leading them to green pastures and good times. Their king would be the Lord.

The holy God hates sin and will punish it. He also loves the sinner and will forgive him or her when penitence and faith are in view. This is his provision for earthly life. When two lines are formed before him in final judgment they are not merged again. Mercy and

judgment become eternal. We may act upon his promise of salvation, but we must never presume upon it.

11. WHEN PRAYER GOES UNANSWERED

Then they will cry out to the Lord, but he will not answer them. At that time he will hide his face from them because of the evil they have done (Micah 3:4).

The speaking God warns of his coming silence. That should claim our attention, for we have life and peace and guidance through the word of the Lord. What would cause him, whose word is a lamp for our pathway, to no longer speak to us when we cry to him?

The answer is not sin, period. God speaks to expose sin and to condemn sin. He speaks to demand repentance and to promise forgiveness. When his commands and pledges are repeatedly heard but callously ignored he will bring judgment. From their misery the judged will cry out for mercy, not because they are sorry for sin but because they want deliverance from its consequences that only he can provide. Their prayers will be met with his silence.

Micah addresses this warning to “the leaders” but it also applies to those who are led morally and spiritually by these false leaders. Their sin is vividly described in terms of cannibalism. They peel the skin, tear the flesh and break the bones of their victims and toss them into cook-pots. Such horrible metaphors emphasize the exceeding wickedness, in God’s eyes, of those who prey upon others.

The Lord will judge them swiftly and severely. Their evil lives will boomerang. Out of the pit of anguish they will pray. They have exploited people and now they want to exploit God, not serve him but use him. Their cry is not penitential but self-serving, and God will not

be the servant of human pride and lust. His silence will abide until they have learned through judgment what they refused to learn through mercy. Talk about “tough love” and hard lessons! The Lord invented the process.

12. THE POWER FOR TRUTH

But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression, to Israel his sin (Micah 3:8).

We often speak and hear of the power of truth. Micah speaks of the power for truth. God's power is always given for God's purpose. His power is the Holy Spirit, and Spirit-filled men and women are given boldness to expose sin and to reprove sinners. The preacher God sends will not put a price tag on his ministry. He will proclaim the whole truth, the messages of both divine love and divine wrath, of both divine mercy and divine judgment. He will not forfeit God's power for the sake of gaining man's payoffs. His concern is not to be always popular and positive, but always truthful.

Micah blistered leaders who sold themselves to the highest bidders. "Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money." They sold their ministries to gain wealth and comfort. They avoided the "negative" truth of divine judgment. They created false hope by insisting that God was with wicked Israel, and no disaster would befall the chosen people. With lies in their ears and liars in their pockets the people boldly defied God and invited judgment.

A sin-hating, truth-loving God would come down to them in judgment. His human instrument would be a pagan army. "Zion will be plowed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets." The "people of the land" would become people without a land. Their storied capital

would collapse into ruins. The temple grounds would become a briar patch. The desolation Micah described would be a harsh witness against the apostate nation, a wordless message that soundlessly proclaimed the Lord's righteous and impartial judgment.

Divine grace is not a license for disgrace, wasn't then and isn't now. The Lord will destroy whom he has redeemed if they give their loyalty to idols and their lives to iniquity.

13. THE PATHS OF THE LORD

Many nations will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths (Micah 4:2).

Micah envisioned a day when Israel would be restored, Messiah would reign, and universal peace would result.

From a New Testament perspective, “the last days” culminate in the return of Jesus Christ and his acknowledged and everlasting rule over all nations of earth.

The prophets never blinked the truth of Israel’s sins and failures. However, they always saw beyond them to the victory of divine grace over human rebellion. They looked forward to a time when Jerusalem would be the moral and spiritual center of the world, because there the word of God would be taught to, and practiced by, global delegates. The Lord would teach them “his ways,” and they would walk in “his paths.”

The ways and paths of God became their clearest in the person and mission of Jesus. His fellowship with the Father was unbroken because he lived “by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” His way of life was dictated by the will of God and not by the wisdom of the world. He could say, “I always do what pleases him.” The life that Jesus lived and the purpose for which he lived are models for all who believe in him. They run their race with their eyes fixed on him, the pioneer, the pathfinder, the trailblazer for us.

The Psalmist prayed, “Lord, teach me your will,” and no wiser prayer ever fell from human lips. Jesus taught us to pray, “Our

Father...your will be done.” Micah saw the fulfillment of those prayers in the future.

Every human life comes to a choice between “his ways” and “my ways.” My ways will lead me to endless ruin. His ways will lead me to endless life, life marked by peace and filled with joy. Only sin makes the choice difficult; logic doesn’t.

14. THE GOLDEN AGE

Nation will not take up sword against nation nor will they train for war anymore (Micah 4:3).

When Jesus summed up world conditions in the period between his advents, he said, "Nation will rise against nation." Throughout history "wars and rumors of war" will persist. His words have been fulfilled. At no time have all nations been at peace with one another. Within my own lifetime the U. S. has fought five wars, and international peace remains a philosopher's dream.

Peace and prosperity, the Golden Age hoped for and written about, has remained out of reach until millions despair of it ever happening. The prophetic word of God holds it before us in passages like this one from Micah. Swords will be recycled into plowshares. Implements of warfare will become tools of farming. Individuals will have equal benefits and peaceful lives. "The Lord Almighty has spoken," and his words cannot be falsified.

As Micah forecasts, this Golden Age will not become a reality until the king-messiah is enthroned on earth and rules all nations. That king has proved his matchless power by conquering humankind's "last enemy"--namely, death. The risen Christ has "all authority in heaven and on earth," and when he returns to judge the nations he will inaugurate a visible and eternal reign over all people. His kingdom, purged of every evildoer and evil deed, will extend "from shore to shore" and endure forever more.

That is his promise and "the Scriptures cannot be broken." How much time will intervene, how many wars will bloody the earth

until he comes, no one can say. But he is coming, peace is coming, prosperity is coming, and righteousness will cover the earth as now oceans cover the sea-beds. The Golden Age will not result from human ingenuity or human effort. It will be the product of divine grace and power. It will be God's gift to the undeserving.

15. WALKWAY

All the nations may walk in the name of their gods; we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever (Micah 4:5).

Everyone is on a journey. Each person's walk is determined by that person's god. Every nation and person has a god or gods. The character of one's god or gods determines the quality one's walk. Your walk is never better than your god.

As people reflect their gods, so those gods reflect their people. The nations invented their gods and each generation inherited those gods. The gods of the nations lived by the same unholy passions and actions of their devotees.

In sharp contrast, Israel, when obedient to the covenant, had one God, a "true and living" God, the maker of heaven and earth, the redeemer and guardian of his chosen people. This God was holy and demanded holiness from his people.

To walk in the name of the Lord was to live as he commanded and to live by his example. His directions for life were clear and comprehensive, given in the Law of Moses which outlawed the worship of all other gods.

This living God had defeated the gods of Egypt in order to rescue Israel from slavery. He then defeated the gods of the nations that surrounded Israel, in order to sustain his chosen people. Tragically, Israel gave superstition priority over reason and adopted the inferior gods of other nations and became like them. For this folly they suffered the humiliation of capture and exile.

Micah looks beyond this wretched condition to a restored Israel, once again walking in the name of the Lord for ever. That still awaits fulfillment, but the same challenge confronts the church in the midst of a still-pagan world with its plethora of bestial gods. What is your walkway? In whose name do you walk?

16. RESCUED AND RULED

I will gather the lame; I will assemble the exiles and those I have brought to grief.

I will make the lame a remnant, those driven away a strong nation. The LORD will rule over them in Mount Zion from that day and forever (Micah 4:6-7).

The Lord had scattered his people in judgment, allowing them to languish in exile for seven decades. Now he was going to gather them in mercy, restoring them to their own land and national sovereignty. Their change of fortune will not be grounded upon human merit; it will be an act of divine grace. He will uphold and guide them on their homeward journey. “I will gather... I will make...” The phrases point to divine intervention, divine creativity and divine mercy.

They were “brought to grief” by the Lord and they will be restored to joy by him. His work for them, not their work for him, will teach them that he is their redeemer and ruler. He will “rule over them...forever.” From our time and place in history we know that Micah’s prophecy still awaits ultimate fulfillment. We know that Jesus, crucified in weakness and resurrected with power, is the Lord destined to rescue and create a believing remnant. He will be their forever king; they will be his loyal and eternal subjects.

Israel’s lameness and weakness emphasized their helplessness to save and secure themselves. Like miners trapped by underground explosions, their rescue had to come from the outside.

They were victims of “calamity” that left them helpless and ruined unless deliverance happened through the labors of one not trapped.

Of us all it is written, “All have sinned.” Of Jesus only could it be truthfully written, “He did no sin.” He alone is qualified to deliver us from sin and bring us home to God. In Jesus, God came, God died, God arose and God saves. The entire rescue operation is his doing, and the only acceptable response to his grace is our humble trust in him and thanks to him.

17. RESCUED AND REDEEMED

You will go to Babylon; there you will be rescued. There the LORD will redeem you out of the hand of your enemies (Micah 4:10).

Micah speaks in a single sentence of agony and ecstasy, the agony of captivity and the ecstasy of freedom. True to himself and true to his people the Lord will allow Israel to suffer the humiliation of capture and exile. They will be harshly judged for their sins, defeated and deported by a pagan army. But judgment will yield to mercy, and in God's time and way the scattered nation will be gathered and returned to their own land. The Lord delights in mercy; that is the only reason any person or nation can be spared from total destruction.

The Lord will be Israel's rescuer and redeemer. Redemption means freedom for those in bondage, and that freedom is not cheap and easy. It comes at a price.

The life of Jesus was the greatest rescue mission of all time. He came to save not one nation but all nations. To achieve his mission he gave his life, dying on the cross as an "atoning sacrifice." His resurrection signaled the acceptance and authority of that price. All who trust in him, which is an admission of guilt and a confession of helplessness by the believer, will be rescued from sin. They will be forgiven, cleansed and adopted as the people of the Lord. Their lives will be marked by new direction, new ambition and new goals.

The price of redemption is never our work for the Lord but always his work for us. We are saved by grace, by the sheer

undeserved action of the Lord who breaks the grip of sin upon our lives. The hand of a forgiving God is mightier than “the hand of [our] enemies.”

The hand that rescues will also be the hand that upholds and defends us. The Lord doesn't deliver us from our enemies and then leave us on our own. He walks with us, he holds our hands for the entire journey from here to home.

18. GOD'S PLAN IS WORKING

But they do not know the thoughts of the Lord; they do not understand his plan, he who gathers them like sheaves to the threshing floor (Micah 4:12).

Micah knows that other nations will jeer and taunt as Israel goes into exile, having forfeited land and homes and temple because of their sins. Their eyes will “gloat over Zion” for they will think Israel is forever doomed.

Their gloating is wasted emotion, for God's plan, of which they are ignorant, is one of ultimate grace. He will scatter his people in judgment, but he will also gather them in mercy. He will bring them like wheat to the threshing floor. Crops were not brought to threshing floors to be destroyed. They were beaten with flails and tossed from sheets to separate the wheat from the chaff. The winnowed grain was saved in order to feed the nation.

Judgment upon Israel secured mercy for the world. When deliverance came for Israel, a God-trusting, God-honoring, God-pleasing remnant carried on the plan of God to bring salvation to all nations, a plan fulfilled in Jesus. Periodically, Israel has suffered, but the plan now in place continues to unfold. With Jews and Gentiles, all saved by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, a new nation, a new Israel is being created--the church.

The church, too, suffers in this world and is promoted to glory for all worlds to come as they endure by faith “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” We don't know, we can't know, all the Lord's

thoughts, but we know enough to seek him, trust him, and follow him now and forever. We know enough about ourselves to know that we are helpless and hopeless apart from him. We know enough about him to treasure his presence and power as our salvation and security.

19. SMALL TOWN BOY

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times (Micah 5:2).

According to Micah, speaking for God, Israel's messiah would be a small-town lad who makes it big in the city. That is a familiar story plot to those who read widely. You can't judge a person's value by his or her environment. "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Jesus did, and he is the best thing that ever happened to our world.

He is the fulfillment of this passage in Micah's little book of prophecy. Though born in Bethlehem, he preceded his birth "from ancient times," for he was with God and was God from "the beginning." He is the Son of God and the savior of mankind, whose reign and fame extend throughout the earth and abide throughout all time.

He came from the Father to be ruler of the redeemed. He was rejected and slain, but he rose from the dead with "all authority in heaven and on earth." He is alive forever as the king of kings, as the ruler who assigns to every person his or her eternal destiny.

He is the greatest of the great, and his mission began in a hamlet scarcely known outside of a tiny nation. He has chosen to identify himself with the unknown and insignificant of earth, as well as those who have much and make headlines. He is messiah for everyone, and everyone is someone to him. We have an adage,

“Don’t judge a book by its cover.” Don’t judge Jesus by birthplace or birth race. He is eternal in being, powerful in time, and the arbiter of every person’s fate.

The place of his birth was regarded as insignificant. Across the ages it has remained easy to ignore though his birth put it on the map as a tourist attraction. The purpose of his birth, however, makes him the most significant of all persons who have ever lived. The Beatles crowed about being more popular than Jesus, but they were never as important. When they and all other VIPs have receded into the distant past Jesus will still be the one and only savior of mankind.

20. THE TRIUMPHANT REMNANT

The remnant of Jacob will be in the midst of many peoples like dew from the Lord, like showers on the grass, which do not wait for man or linger for mankind (Micah 5:7).

The remnant of re-gathered Israel would be small and frail. Nevertheless, they would survive and they would thrive, because the source of their life and strength is not “man” or “mankind.” They would be sustained and energized for growth by “the Lord” who refreshes and restores the grass with dew. The Lord can make invincible and successful those who otherwise would be quickly outnumbered and easily conquered. When he is involved one can chase a thousand and two can put ten thousand to flight. It has been well said that “one man with the Lord is a majority.”

The complete fulfillment of Micah’s words awaits the appearing of messiah and the destruction of Israel’s foes. Their hope, therefore, coalesces with that of the church--the return of Christ and final judgment upon his enemies. When that conquest has morphed from prophecy to history, the recurring dream of endless peace and prosperity will become experienced reality for all who chose to serve the Lord.

That hope will materialize, for its creator and producer is not the remnant but the remnant’s sovereign Lord. Like a lion among sheep, he cannot be outmatched and he cannot be denied.

We are never more secure than when our only hope is the Lord.

21. THOROUGH JUDGMENT

“In that day,” declares the Lord, “I will destroy...tear down...uproot...demolish ...take vengeance...” (Micah 5:10-15).

Man’s days of sin are followed by God’s day of judgment. He patiently allows our rebellion and degenerate lifestyles, but judgment finally descends upon the hapless architects and executives of our rejection of his goodness and mercy. Because the Lord is holy, judgment upon sin is inevitable.

The various terms used to describe his judgments indicate their depth. He tears down, he uproots and he demolishes as he takes “vengeance” upon disobedient nations. They have idolized the work of their hands, but they cannot protect and preserve what he chooses to toss on the scrap pile.

The various objects of his judgments indicate their breadth. Horses, chariots, cities, strongholds, witchcraft, carved images and sacred stones are targets of his righteous wrath. The entire culture of his enemies becomes the object of his wrath. He destroys the political, religious and social structures of sin-loving and God-hating people. His judgment is thorough.

“That day” is not marked or even acknowledged on the calendars of the nations, but it is an entry in the Lord’s list of appointments. As sure as sin continues, judgment is coming against it, and in that collision between sin and judgment the Lord will remain unchanged but earth and earthlings will be destroyed.

Men and women “bow down to the work of [their] hands.” They create their own gods; indeed, they play god over their own lives.

This is the ultimate result of rejecting the true creator and redeemer. The sin they will not renounce issues in a judgment they cannot escape. What God has made we can distort and pollute but cannot destroy. What we make in defiance of him, he can and will utterly destroy.

22. FLAWED LEADERS

I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam. My people, remember... (Micah 6:4).

God had “a charge against” Israel. They had forgotten the righteous acts by which they had been created and preserved as his people.

Their “journey” had begun with a miracle of deliverance and guidance. The Lord had redeemed them from slavery and led them through alien territory, with all its dangers, to a homeland which they inherited as his gift.

What began as miraculous continued as mundane under God-sent leaders. They were flawed leaders. Aaron and Miriam had rebelled against Moses, acting out of ambition shot through with jealousy. Moses was denied entrance into the promised land because he once exalted himself instead of giving glory to God. With rare exceptions aside, however, their leadership had honored God and benefited the people.

If God could not use flawed leaders how could he recruit anyone to guide and provide for his people? “All have sinned,” and leaders, like followers, from time to time misstep and misspeak. Their occasional failures do not excuse the people from loyally serving the Lord. People are not qualified to judge their leaders. Leaders are not qualified to judge their people. Both must answer to the God who says, “I redeemed you; I sent them; remember...”

It is a ruinous mistake to idolize leaders. They are flawed human beings, as much in need of saving grace as are their followers. It is also a mistake to demonize them, allowing their tragic failures to become our lame excuses for disobedience to God. God chosen and God appointed leaders may sometimes fail in their commitment and courage. They need rebuke and repentance, but the God who places them in their careers will not justify our rejection of flawed leadership. That's the only kind available.

24. WHAT IS GOOD

He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8).

The prophet does not say, “O Israel, but “O man.” What God defines as “good” is his will for every human life. It is what it means to be truly human, and should govern every relationship in life.

People cannot be trusted to define the good, for we are by nature selfish and sinful. Definitions reflect the nature and character of the definers. Only the Lord can be trusted with moral definitions, for he is perfectly good. He is “the Holy One” and what he demands of us he has modeled for us.

The good involves acting justly. Simply put, fair play toward everyone in our lives, whether they are family, friends or foes. Justice does not play favorites, and when we are not fair to all we are far from God.

The good includes loving mercy. God delights in mercy and demands that we show mercy to all who need our help, whether that need is for grace or for groceries. The good life is one of shared assets, both spiritual and material. To do good is to forgive those who have done wrong.

The good requires us to walk humbly with God. The Lord humbled himself and descended to our condition in order to save us. To be proud and arrogant is to pass evil judgment upon his character and behavior. Humility recognizes us as sinners and him as savior. Humility recognizes him as the source of our strength for living justly

and mercifully. We have abundant reasons for humility but none for pride.

The “good” that he shows us is not a philosophical or theological concept. It is a practical requirement for daily living. Apart from good lives, our religious rituals are empty and useless. So far from honoring God, empty rituals insult him. So far from assuring his mercy, they invite his judgment. Our religion must be real or it will be our ruin.