

George Philip Bible Readings

Book of Micah

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1:1

We are introduced to the prophet Micah, told about his home town, the three kings of Judah during whose reign Micah preached, and the two nations to whom his ministry was directed. It is important to have a grasp of where the various prophets fit into the scheme of things in the Old Testament. We give dates in general terms. After the time of David and Solomon (1000 BC), the kingdom was divided. Samaria was the capital city of Israel, the northern kingdom of the Jews, set up after the death of Solomon, and Jerusalem was the capital city of the southern kingdom of Judah. Israel had a succession of evil kings but Judah generally had good kings. Around 760 BC Amos was preaching in the northern kingdom. His home town was in Judah and therefore he was a foreign missionary. Also in the North, Hosea, who belonged there, was exercising his ministry (750 BC). In 740 BC King Uzziah died (Isa. 6:1) and then there followed the sixty year ministry of the great evangelical prophet Isaiah, a ministry exercised right at the heart of the nation in the capital city, Jerusalem. Contemporary with Isaiah, but out in the country (the Borders rather than Edinburgh, Sussex rather than London) there was the prophet Micah. The prophets preached the messages that God gave them to their own generation, and they had a great sense of history. They reminded the people again and again that their past dealings with God in spiritual and moral issues had led to the present situations of difficulty. Ten years before Micah, Hosea, preaching in the northern kingdom, made plain that people and nations reap what they have sown and the harvest is greater than the sowing (Hos. 8:7a). God spoke through these men whom He raised up for that purpose, and God does not leave Himself without a witness (Acts 14:17a). But the witnesses were usually persecuted (Acts 7:51-53).

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1:1

A grasp of the international situation at the time of Micah will help us to understand this book. The political situation in the Middle East was one of turmoil, with fluctuation and competition among the main power blocks. To the west of Israel and Judah lay the Philistines. In the south-west lay Egypt. In the north and east lay Syria and Damascus, and in that area eventually the power of Assyria arose, at whose hands Israel (Samaria) fell around 722 BC, by which time the ministries of Isaiah and Micah were well established in Judah. In due time there rose the Babylonian or Chaldean empire, at whose hand Jerusalem fell; the Jews were led into captivity in Babylon, until the empire of Persia was dominant and Cyrus the Emperor decreed the return of the Jews to Jerusalem at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Politically and economically there was great uncertainty, and during that time one of the main trade routes from Asia came round the north of Israel, down the coast, past the south west of Judah to Egypt. On that road, in a commanding position, was the town of Moresheth where Micah stayed. He was therefore in a good position to know what was going on nationally and internationally, even though he was detached from the political centre, Jerusalem. Politically the nation was looking to Egypt in terms of treaties to bolster national prosperity and security. In relation to God the nation was complacent and casual, assuming that God would bless as He had done in the past. Micah, like Amos before him, called the people to prepare to meet their God (Amos 4:12), because in fact God was on His way to deal with them.

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1:1-4

We are told that the word of the Lord that came to Micah was something that he saw. This does not mean his message was simply the result of a wise and godly man's assessment of the international situation. He spoke by the Spirit of God the message God had given, but he was also a man who made it his business to be aware of and to consider the news bulletins of his day. This is an attitude that evangelical Christians need to cultivate with regard to national, international and denominational news. It is not spiritual to ignore such matters just because we feel they are not 'spiritual', as we regard spirituality. Micah did not hesitate in his preaching and he summoned the people to court to hear God's testimony against them, and his words apply very widely. The whole earth is summoned, because the earth belongs to the Lord (Ps. 24:1) and the stewardship of the earth is a serious responsibility. This is not just a matter of conservation and the ozone layer because pollution has a moral and spiritual element as well as a material one. In Jer. 3:1-3 the prophet spoke about how the sins of the people had polluted the land, and that indicates social and economic disease as well as deterioration of soil and

atmosphere. There are many forms of 'acid rain' that cause national devastation, and we need to recognise the effects of sexual indulgence and perversion, unlimited abortion, materialistic greed and the demand for unrestricted rights. Micah told the people that God was about to take a dealing with the whole situation, and the language of v.4 indicates that it would be a disturbing experience. God's displeasure is a solemn thing to contemplate. Read Gen. 6:5-7; Gen. 18:20-21; Isa. 26:20-21; Matt. 23:34-39. It is God who sets the time for the settling of accounts.

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1:5-7

The language of the prophets may sound strange to us but the people to whom the words were spoken would certainly have understood. Micah anticipated the question, 'Why is all this happening?' The answer is that the nation's troubles are the result of the nation's sins, sins persisted in spite of the voices of the prophets down through the years. Note that Micah focuses on the capital cities of both kingdoms as being the centre and source of the flood of sin that had spread through the nation. Big cities give the cover of anonymity so that all manner of evil can be indulged in. How we need to pray for the young and not so young when they must leave home in small communities for education or employment in cities. The bigger the city the greater the danger, because of the accumulation of evil influences and the concentration of seductive atmosphere. But Micah may also have been thinking of the capital cities as the seats of government and the prevalence of corruption and manipulation that can operate in such a way as to lead a whole nation in ways that are deliberately contrary to God. It seems from v.6-7 that the collapse of the northern kingdom at the hand of enemies was very near, perhaps the capital city was actually under siege. The prophet makes plain that it was God who was bringing the whole polluted situation to its day of judgment and all the profits made from the trade of moral and spiritual decadence would be reduced to nothing. All this may seem extreme and grim but history testifies that the fall of empires has had at its heart moral decay and the indulgence that usually accompanies material affluence and success. It is so easy when all goes well to fall prey to the idolatry of pleasure and carnal satisfaction. In that way of life, God is forgotten (Rom. 3:10-18). That is how it was in Samaria, and the description has great relevance to our own nation. What will God do with us?

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1:8-9

We ended yesterday's note with a question. In respect of Samaria the verdict is given that the situation was incurable. There was no possibility of betterment. It is easy to imagine how Micah and his preaching would be criticised, and how he would be reviled for being

pessimistic and defeatist. No doubt he would be told that people went to services (if in fact they did) to be encouraged and comforted. But there were no grounds for comfort. In v.8 there is a bleak and doleful portrayal of Micah and his ministry and the reason was two-fold. He could see that Samaria's judgment was necessary, right and inevitable, but he could also see that the conditions that brought down the northern kingdom were beginning to be all too manifest in the southern kingdom (9). Micah was aware that in his own nation there had grown such a spiritual complacency and casualness that the people believed that what was happening to Samaria would, of course, never happen to them, because they were 'spiritual'. Judah could recognise that long years (two centuries, in fact) of sin, idolatry and decadence in Samaria would inevitably bring God's judgment. But it is all too easy to be so preoccupied with other people's sins and failures that we are oblivious to our own. Micah declared that Judah was nearing the crisis point of judgment. Had he grounds for saying this? He will go on in this prophecy to state his case but we can at present turn to Isaiah, his contemporary, and get a vivid picture of his preaching in Jerusalem. Read Isa. 1:1-9, which describes the condition of God's chosen people, then read Isa. 1:10-17, where God says their religious services and ceremonials were an offence to Him because it was all hypocritical. In Isa. 28:1-8 we have a ghastly picture of the level of drunkenness in society. Should God remain indifferent?

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1:10-16

Micah grieved over the danger to Jerusalem, the gate of his people (9), but at the same time he seems to have been angry that the policies of the capital city had led to a situation that put in peril all the small villages of the territory he knew and loved so well. It may have been that already in the small communities gatherings for worship had declined almost to the point of extinction and Micah could see and sense the collapse that was coming. But in the big city (remember what we read in Isaiah yesterday) there were still the big congregations, giving the impression that religion was in good health. But why should we assume that big numbers signify spiritual blessing? If there is no obedience, no holiness of life, no true discipleship and commitment to God, what is the point of religion, even if it is biblical, fundamental in doctrine and evangelical? Does not the Epistle of James expose the fraud of faith without works (Jas. 1:22-23; 2:14-26)? It is easy for congregations near universities and colleges to rejoice in young people in their churches, but go to areas in the country districts, even to areas that once were citadels of living, evangelical faith, and the situation is different. Micah looked at the state of the church throughout the whole nation and he was heart-broken. His hometown was Moresheth-Gath, and nearby there was the Philistine town of Gath (home of Goliath, cf. 1 Sam. 17:4), still a Philistine community although now within the territory of Judah. The words, 'Tell it not in Gath' may be an appeal by Micah not to let Judah's shame and danger be known to these pagans who would mock and rejoice. Think how today so many voices deride the church and its message as if to say, 'If your religion leaves you in such a pathetic state, what use is it?' Read Jeremiah 22:8-9.

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1:10-16

This gloomy picture of the state of the nation, materially as well as spiritually, is portrayed in such words as dust (10), nakedness, shame and mourning (11), baldness and exile (16). All these terms refer to mourning and misery but there is another telling description in v.12. The people looked and longed for some items of good news, however small, that might suggest that the nation was going to come out of its misery, recession and declension. That has a contemporary ring about it! Of course, in that verse it is the prophet who declares that the whole situation has come from God as a rebuke for the nation's apostasy. A great many people, believers and unbelievers alike, would no doubt reject Micah's interpretation of the situation, and attitudes are much the same today. Why are so many people who say they believe in God so unwilling to recognise that God has the right to intervene in the world situation to deal with spiritual and moral wrong? God is not a spectator. 'He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment seat' (Howe) and we do well to be aware of Him. God is roused to action (Zech. 2:13). He is the God with whom we have to do and we are in His hands (Heb. 4:13; 10:31). Now, consider what is said of Lachish in v.13. Were they the first to throw over God's laws and ways, drawing others after them? Remember Jesus' words about causing others to stumble (Matt. 18:1-6) and Paul's words about how he was prepared to restrict his own personal liberty as a Christian lest he should hinder a younger or weaker believer (1 Cor. 8:7-13). The reference to Lachish may be to Judah's alliances with Egypt, trusting in the supply of chariots (an early form of military supplies) rather than trusting in God. The people of Lachish would have been the arms brokers, for profit, no doubt. The policies were those of the government but a people gets the government they deserve. They can protest. They can pray. But when adrift from God there is not much prayer in the nation or in the churches.

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2:1-5

When Micah speaks sternly and specifically against the social wrongs of the nation he does so recognising clearly that the root of the problem is spiritual. The people are not right with God and therefore the social wrongs can be righted only when the people get right with God. The things that scourge the nation are the results of backsliding, and to try to remedy the fruit without curing the root is a policy for disaster. This is the error of those who ignore the 'salvation Gospel' and preach the 'social Gospel'. But the prophets of every generation must speak out in God's name against the wrongs that blight the nation's life. This is what Micah is doing here, warning those whose deliberate policies are based on greed and which go for profits regardless of how much suffering that causes to others (1-2). He declares that God is taking a hand in the situation to exercise discipline and retribution (3). The end of that discipline is that the wrongdoers will have no place in the

assembly of the Lord (5). The picture in these verses seems to be that of the countryside rather than the cities. The landowners were buying up the smallholdings (Isa. 5:8) and were the landlords of the houses as well as the employers. People could not protest or they would lose houses as well as jobs. For a long time, during the reign of King Uzziah, the nation had prospered: they 'had never had it so good', and there had grown up a rich and powerful class who, having the money, had the power. But the love of money breeds all manner of evil and distorts spiritual and moral standards and attitudes. Of course, poverty as well as riches can turn the heart away from God. It is the heart set on God that learns to be content (Phil. 4:11; 1 Tim. 6:6-10).

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2:1-5

We must recognise that in v.3-4 God says that He will intervene personally and turn the tables on these people who have misused their power and opportunity in order to advance themselves. The time will come, says God, when these land-stealers will whine in complaint because the invaders have stolen their land. Those who have grown accustomed to being rich and getting richer will find themselves bankrupt, and this will not be simply because of the change in the economic situation. It is the intervention of God, who makes the punishment fit the crime! The evildoers will not escape. The Bible speaks very sternly about those employers who do not deal rightly with their workers (Mal. 3:5; James 5:1-6; Jer. 22:13-14). Of course, there are various forms of greed. Some people have an attitude of taking everything others will give in terms of care, help, encouragement and support and give nothing in return. It is so easy to become selfish to the point of cruelty. When Micah speaks in defence of the poor and the manipulated, he does not think the poor are virtuous simply because they are poor. Some are indeed victims of society's attitudes but some have created their own poverty by wilful foolishness. It is also a fact of life that when some who began poor become rich and powerful they can become the most ruthless and unfeeling tyrants. What we all have to remember is that we are answerable to God, who always knows all the facts and all the circumstances and pressures. The truth that God acts in judgment can be a comfort as well as a warning. Of course, it often seems that evildoers are getting off and prospering. Read Ps. 73:1-17. Leave it to God and do not jump to conclusions (1 Cor. 4:5). For ourselves, we need the prayer in Prov. 30: 7-9. That is an attitude of faith.

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2:6-11

The reaction of the people to Micah's stern sermons was resentment, rejection and a ridiculing of the prophet. They told him to his face that no real prophet would preach such a message and that his doctrine of God was defective. They insisted that God was a God of love and would never rebuke His people in the way Micah suggested (6). There was a spirit of complacency in the land: that seems to be the significance of the reference to 'beds' (2:1); and there was a false sense of security, as the phrase 'no thought of war' (RSV) indicates (8). The attitude of those who viewed the land from a worldly point of view was that there was no cause for concern. How blind and insensitive people can be! There were plenty signs of moral and spiritual decline but these were regarded as insignificant and irrelevant with regard to the nation's future. The whole picture has a contemporary ring about it. Of course, Micah had already said that the crunch point was still some way in the future (4). But that day will come (2 Pet. 3:8-10). The people found Micah's sermons wearisome and they told him to his face that their idea of God was different from his. But we are not allowed to have our own ideas of God. God has made Himself known, and that revelation for us is in Scripture. It is the God of the Bible all men and nations have to deal with. In v.7 it is difficult to decide whether the words are spoken by the people protesting their innocence of Micah's charges, or words from God through the prophet saying that His words do good to those who live rightly. The complacency of the godless is astonishing. Their minds are blinded, their hearts darkened, and their consciences so insensitive that nothing from God registers (Rom. 1:21, 28). Sin brings a spiritual and moral blindness. The Devil sees to that (2 Cor. 4:4).

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2:6-11

Whatever meaning we take from v.7, the meaning of v.8-10 is very clear. The heartless materialists are told they are the enemy of the remnant of God's faithful people. The whole people are accused of rising up against God,

living and working contrary to God. The message is clear. The spiritual future of the children is being put in peril (9b). God tells the people to clear out because they have made the land so unclean by their sins that there is neither peace nor rest. The situation had gone beyond remedy. These are solemn thoughts, especially when we apply them to the situation in our own nation. Have we any real grounds for expecting the future to be better? There is always the challenge and promise in 2 Chron. 7: 12-14. There is no other way of hope for the future. It is righteousness alone that exalts a nation and sin brings only reproach (Prov. 14:34). Now we must consider v.11. There was then, there always has been, and there always will be a demand from religious people whose mind-set is worldly that ministers should preach 'nice' sermons, so that everyone will go home from church feeling reassured., even though their plans for the week ahead are contrary to God and forgetful of God. The great temptation for all preachers is to have enough of the Bible in the sermon to gain the reputation of being evangelical but never enough of the Bible to disturb and challenge worldly Christians. If the preacher says, 'You are great folk; have a marvellous time,' the people will be pleased. It is doubtful if they will respect the preacher. If he preaches that believers must die to sin, deny self and follow Christ to the death, he will be branded extreme. Preachers should read Acts 20: 17-21,27, and all of us should read 2 Tim. 4:1-5 to check on our thinking! God already knows.

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2:12-13

These are truly wonderful verses of hope and blessing after the solemn words of the rest of the chapter. Micah is not withdrawing the earlier part of his preaching but may be recognising that, even in the darkest times of spiritual backsliding among the people of God, there is always a remnant of faith, the few, comparatively speaking, who have not gone the way of worldliness and idolatry (1 Kings 19:14,18). Think of this in terms of the Christmas story where in grim days we find Zechariah, Elizabeth, Joseph, Mary, Simeon and Anna (Luke 1:5-7, 26-31; 2:25-28,36-38). It is also suggested that these verses look right forward to the days beyond the exile in Babylon, to the future of the restored people, and the further future when the promised Shepherd King would come to His people. These verses also tell us that the Lord always knows His people and marks their whereabouts (2 Tim. 2:19). The Lord is always engaged in the business of gathering His sheep like a Shepherd (Ps. 23; Isa. 40:10-11; John 10:1-15). The Shepherd leads His flock, breaking open the way before them, because He knows where He is leading them. And the Shepherd is none other than the King. The phrase 'a noisy multitude' (RSV) indicates a throng of people and reminds us that we must not slip into the attitude of thinking of the true church of Jesus Christ as a tiny bedraggled group. Wherever we are and whatever our statistical status, we are in fact 'together with all those everywhere who call on the name of the Lord' (1 Cor. 1:2). What a thrill it is to think of going into an unknown and demanding future with the Lord leading the way? God has His people. He knows them and keeps them. He has His purposes which are sure and His provision is sufficient day by day (Deut. 33:25, 27).

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3:1-4

The prophets of God declared their message without fear or favour, directing the Word to even the highest in the land. We can only hope that Micah had some faithful people who told him of their prayers and their support. These verses make plain to the nation's rulers that they have God to deal with, and that the day of judgment is not just some far off event but also here and now. There were clear signs that the nation was heading for disaster and the ruthlessness of the ruling classes was at the heart of the problem. These rulers were reminded that the position and power they had were delegated to them by God in the interest of justice. But their whole way of life was contrary to justice and is described in the most lurid terms. The picture is of the rich squeezing every possible profit out of the poor; God is against such a system. So much is God against the people who maintain and operate the system of injustice that, when the national situation begins to be unbearable and the thought of disaster makes them begin to pray, God says He will not hear them. God will be silent and will withdraw all sense of His presence to such an extent that ominous apprehension will begin to grip the minds and hearts of all. Micah spoke out specifically against the sins of society in his day and we should be doing the same, focusing not just on the popular themes of apartheid and world poverty, but also on pornography, immorality, debt, and

indulgence of ourselves and our children, whereby a generation is growing up with no sense of values and with unrestrained greed. Do we speak out about abortion, co-habiting, easy divorce, tax-evasion, stealing and a permissive attitude to those whose life-styles endanger society with disease? If, to ease the suffering and privation of the poor, our income tax was raised significantly, or our wages were held at the same level for a few years, would we be the first to protest about the lowering of our standard of living? If so, we would be like Micah's rich rulers.

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3:1-4

Consider these verses again and read also James 2:1-9; 4:13-17, accepting the fact that when we live for riches (of various kinds) we are choosing a very unsure way of life. Remember Jesus' story of the man so obsessed with business profits that he forgot he had a soul that needed to be saved (Lk. 12:13-21). Who are the rulers who are being castigated? We must not answer according to party political allegiance, which is often emotional rather than rational. The powers that be are ordained by God, and it is God who sets even unworthy people in places of power (Ps. 62:11 RSV; Dan. 4:17). They are there in the providence of God to serve God's purpose, which they do even though they act in unbelief and injustice. A nation or a city can be rebuked by those whom God has allowed to hold office. But remember, in our society the rulers are those the people have elected and no power group can go on doing what public opinion resents and rejects. Who are the rich? Are they simply those who have more than we have in terms of cash and opportunities? Who are the powerful? Are they not the young executives of the mass media who indoctrinate minds with repetition, and also the popular music world with its hypnotic throb and its doubtful lyrics? We raise these questions not from social or political philosophy but in recognition of the fact that God does deal with nations because of their sins. We need to make it our business to discern the roots of the evil that blights our land so that we may at least begin to pray for the nation and its rulers as Scripture commands. We must do so before it is too late (4).

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3:5-8

We like to think of God standing by to bale out both nation and church, but we were left thinking about a silent God (4): silent because there was no repentance. The reason why there was no repentance, no sense of spiritual urgency, and no seeking after God was that the religious leaders were not faithful to their calling and message. The false prophets were tactful in their preaching, careful not to offend the rich whose donations provided their salaries (5); those who did not contribute would feel the lash of the preacher's tongue and no doubt the 'poor' knew all about that. But we must be careful. It is easy to set standards for prophets, ministers and missionaries and to criticise them when they are not bold. Would we speak up for Christ and the Gospel if it cost us our popularity, let alone our jobs? Do we in fact speak up in the right way at the right time and in the right spirit, not railing but speaking with grace (Eph. 4:29; Col. 4:6)? It is easy in a committee or convention to speak boldly for God and the Gospel because everyone will nod favourably and say Amen. But do we speak up in situations where we sense that we will be a voice crying in a very critical wilderness? In the religious context it is not easy to preach faithfully and graciously about sin, nor is it easy or comfortable to listen to such sermons. But Micah, in v.8, testified that with the enabling power of the Holy Spirit he was determined to be faithful in this matter. His objective and his desire were, of course, not to condemn but to awaken to repentance and faith. On the face of it Micah's words could look like spiritual pride but there is a feeling in them of Paul's words in Rom. 1:14-15; 1 Cor. 9:16; and Acts 20:20, 27.

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3:5-8

When those who are called and appointed to preach and teach God's Word are not faithful in their task and allow influences such as popularity or fear to qualify and distort their preaching, there are serious consequences for both preachers and people. It is also true that when a congregation has from God the privilege of sitting under true and faithful ministry and does not respond in faith and obedience, there are also serious consequences (Heb. 2:1-3a; 3:7-19; 4:2). In v.6 we are told of a situation developing in which the light of God's truth wanes and disappears and spiritual darkness will

cover the land. Micah was not the only prophet to speak such solemn warning. Read Amos 8:11-14 where the picture is of people travelling far and wide, hungry for God's Word to be ministered and finding nothing. There was to be a famine of God's Word and in that situation it seems that the younger generation will turn to the 'occult' to seek for some element of the 'spiritual' in a dark and degenerate nation. How sad it is when people look anywhere and everywhere except in the churches for some word from God and some assurance about the world to come. Micah, having spoken of this dark, vision-less situation, went on to declare that the unfaithful prophets and preachers will themselves be devalued and put to shame because they bring no word from God (7). There may be many reasons why ministers and ministry are devalued in our own day but one of the reasons is the sheer lack of biblical substance in so much of the preaching. Is it not tragic that people can go to church for a life-time and still be virtually ignorant of the Scriptures except for the familiar Sunday School stories? How we need to pray that God will send forth His light and truth (Ps. 43:3-5). If He does raise up true prophets we must see to it that they are prayed for and supported and not left to go it alone.

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3:9-12

These verses are about false confidence. Micah declares that the whole system of society was corrupt, including the courts of law, the officers of the law, and the priests and prophets of religion. No one could be trusted and very possibly no-one trusted anyone else. People would say what was convenient in order to gain their objective. In a situation like that the weak went to the wall and no-one cared very much. The powerful ruled. Bribery was rife, virtually a way of life. But there were, superficially at least, evidences of prosperity. It is strange that there is no mention of the king at this point, and we are not sure if the king was Jotham, who did right by God, Ahaz who did wrong by God, or Hezekiah, who did right by God. Something of the story of these kings and an assessment of their life's work is found in 2 Chron. Chaps.27-32. It is clear from Micah's words that whoever was on the throne was powerless to curb, let alone prevent, the corrupt practices of the powerful leaders of commerce. Within this situation the religious establishment continued its observances, complete with sermons, and possibly with large attendances. The nation (or at least part of it) was prospering and the 'church' (or at least part of it) was prospering and the conclusion reached was that all was well, that God was with them, and that the future was secure. 'God is in His heaven; all's well with the world.' (Browning)

No thunderbolts from heaven were shaking society. God was strangely silent, apart from the sermons from prophets like Micah who were, of course scorned and considered fundamentalist and extreme. The truth was that God had already begun to dismantle the nation and all its religious structure. The final end was described in the vivid terms of v.12. However, that final collapse was still about 150 years away. The process of national disintegration would take a long time, but already the point of no return had been passed. What is the truth about our own nation in relation to God? It calls for thought and prayer.

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4:1-5

This passage is very similar to that in Isaiah 2:1-5, with an interesting difference in the last two verses. The brightness of prospect described here is in total contrast to the gloom at the end of the previous chapter. The prophet is clearly looking far beyond his present situation and the developments over the next decades to what he calls the latter days. Since Isaiah was an older contemporary of Micah's it is possible that, having recognised the authentic inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the younger man echoed the words of the older man. Young prophets should at times listen to older prophets whose lives and ministry have been authenticated over the years! But what do the words mean, whether spoken in the capital city by Isaiah or in the country districts by Micah? Both men seem to have had from God an unshakeable hope and confidence regarding the final outcome of the dark work of judgment that seemed already to be operating. The turmoil of history and the collapse of nations are not out of God's control and are part of the outworking of His will rather than a frustration of it. If we say that we cannot see how this can be part of God's working because it involves so much suffering, then we are simply confessing that our understanding and perception are narrower, shallower and less accurate than God's. We are usually very short-sighted regarding the understanding of our own little lives and often we have had to admit that our first assessments have proved wrong. This is why we must learn to wait upon God. His ways are past finding out (Rom. 11:33). His methods are often baffling but always effective (Phil. 1:12-14).

Crises seem disastrous until God, at the right moment, shows who is Master (Ps. 2:1-6; 2 Thess. 2:1-8). Those who believe have every reason to look forward with hope.

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4:1-5

Many have sung the paraphrase of this passage, 'Behold the mountain of the Lord', understanding it in terms of a day coming soon, when, because of the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man, all the world's problems would disappear and everyone would live happily ever after in a worldly Utopia. Because this manifestly has not happened many have abandoned the Christian faith and turned to Marxism (whose total failure is now manifest), or to hopeless fatalism that says, 'Let us eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die' (Isa. 22:13; Lk. 12:19). Micah is obviously looking forward to a great day coming and to the establishing of an ideal 'Jerusalem', a situation in which God is exalted among His people. Micah says this will come in the 'latter' days (RSV) or the 'last' days (NIV) or 'in the issue of days' (G. A. Smith) or 'in the after days' (Moffat). When the travail has worked its course, there will emerge what God has planned from the beginning. We could go to Rev. 21:1-7; 22:1-5 and read the description of the new heavens and earth, the new order of things after this weary world has finally disintegrated (2 Pet. 3:11-13). But Micah speaks of a time when there will be a great out-going of evangelical ministry as well as a gathering in from the nations. He speaks of a great hungering after God, and this seems to take place because the House of the Lord is established in Jerusalem and, fulfilling what is her God-ordained calling, she is His instrument in gathering in the people from all the nations. We could well say that when the church has the marks of God upon her life, and when God's Word goes out from her, then the world situation will be changed. Did not Jesus say that if He was lifted up He would draw all peoples to Himself (John 12:32)? We return to this passage again tomorrow, but think of what Micah's reassuring words must have meant to the remnant of faith who were no doubt the intercessors for the nation. Don't lose your confidence in God.

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4:1-5

These verses do not speak of an earthly Utopia brought about by human effort, nor of the prospect of voluntary disarmament, nor of the idea of every family with its own small-holding (which picture Isaiah 2:1-5 did not give to the city dwellers). But the verses do speak of the time coming when the triumph of God's purposes will be manifest in ways beyond all expectation. But how far ahead was Micah looking? Perhaps even Micah was not sure and we must never be preoccupied with, or too dogmatic about, the timetable of events (Acts 1:7). When viewing a range of hills, peaks may seem very close together when in fact there are long, deep valleys between them. There was an establishing of the House of the Lord in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, when the prophets declared that the glory of the latter house would be greater than that of the former (Haggai 2:9), and that this would, as Micah says (2,) draw in many people from many places (Zech. 8:20-23). Micah also looked ahead to the time of Bethlehem (5:2), and we must remember that the coming of the Saviour is spoken of in the New Testament as the beginning of the 'last days' (Heb. 1:1-2; Acts 2:14-21). The prophet Joel spoke of 'afterwards' (Joel 2:28). There was confidence as to the issue of history without being specific about times and details. This must be our attitude too. God's purposes will not fail. The kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our God (Rev. 11:15; 1 Cor. 15:24-25; Isa. 11:9). Because we so believe, we are resolved in the midst of a generation when standards are collapsing, faith being abandoned, and the clouds of judgment are gathering, that we will walk in obedience to our God, no matter the cost (5). Whether the victory is 'just round the corner' or 'after many days', we will believe God and trust Him, not only for the final issue but for all the process of its outworking.

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4:6-7

Keep in mind that we are reading of the experiences of the nation Israel at a certain significant time in its history. This was God's nation, chosen and blessed down its history in order to be a light and a witness to the world, but now, in Micah's day, fallen away from God, indifferent and impenitent. Something of the atmosphere of Israel in that day and the similarity to Israel in the present time was expressed in the second Note on

chap.1:1. A chosen people can lose God's blessing and the privilege of service because of unbelief and disobedience, and it can go into and through terrible experiences under the discipline of God, even though God, faithful to His promises, does not fully or finally cast away His people (Rom. 11:1-2). In today's verses there may be a reference to the remnant of faith that is found at all stages of God's work, no matter how derelict the spiritual situation may be. That remnant may be battered and bruised because God's people share in the brokenness and disciplines of the nation. But that remnant of faith has a significant role to play in terms of the future. They are the bridge or the continuing link in the chain of God's purposes, bringing the work forward into the future. The language in today's verses describes vividly the sufferings of the remnant. They may be small in number, limited in capacity, regarded as of little value, and no doubt very aware of their failures and brokenness. But in God's mercy and providence that little spark of faith will be fanned into life by the work of the Holy Spirit and these people will be drawn back into fellowship with God and given a future of service from God. There are so many thoughts here to help us understand God's ways with us. Read Hosea 14:1-7; Isa. 1:18-20; Jer. 18:1-4; 29:10-14. God is always working to the future.

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4:8-10

The vision of the future with all its hope, kindled by God's promises, is of necessity set in the realistic situation of history. Politically, as well as spiritually and morally, the nation was in turmoil and facing all manner of pressures which threatened its sovereignty and indeed its survival. The remnant of faith would cling to God's promise of a future of blessing, but the way to that future was through the stormy and costly waters of political turmoil, invasion, defeat and exile. There would be many struggles and tears before God's future was reached and, in the process, God's people had to learn deeply the lesson of faith and obedience. The way ahead to restoration and blessing was through the valley of weeping (Hos. 2:6, 11, 13-15, 18-20). The way back to God from wasteful disobedience can be very costly, not least because God in His grace has to work in His people the desire to return. It took the prodigal son a long time of misery before he came to himself and began the return journey (Lk. 15: 14-19). Of course, the gracious disciplines of God, no matter how gentle or stern, do not always bring His people back. Experience can make people even more bitter, unless they have allowed God's ordered and careful dealings to teach them (Heb. 12:5-11). Always remember that God's ways with us are designed to restore, not to crush (Isa. 42:3). It is not easy to believe this when the whole situation seems to be disintegrating and taking us with it. It is not easy to believe in God's future when we are waiting for guidance and the decisions seem to be in the hand of those whom we feel we cannot trust. We forget that there is a king! We forget there is a wonderful counsellor (Isa. 9:6). Micah tells the people that the worst is going to happen - captivity in Babylon - but the issue will be rescue. Yes, God does move in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform. We are the ones who find it mysterious. God is always quite clear in His own mind.

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4:11-5:1

There is profound spiritual and practical truth in these verses. Take time to ponder them. The over-all picture is clear in v.11. There was a confederacy of enemy nations surrounding Jerusalem, determined to finish off this nation and people. It has a contemporary ring about it. But we have already learned in our studies that it was God who was empowering these nations to be the rod of His rebuke on His sinful people. The nations, in their hatred of Jerusalem, were oblivious of the fact that they were in the hand of Jerusalem's God to do His will for the future blessing of the people they hated and wanted to destroy. They did not know God's thoughts in this aspect of the situation nor in another aspect that involved them. Yes, they were gathered to be God's rebuke to His people, but they were also gathered to the place of their own judgment because of their own sins and rebellions. This is not a superficial assessment of world history but an indication that we must recognise that in all generations and down the centuries God is working both salvation and judgment, and in all His ways He is both sure and righteous. We must learn not to jump to conclusions, because that leads to precipitate and unbalanced actions: actions that are really reactions rather than actions of faith. In today's verses it seems that there is a reverse to the enemies and Jerusalem becomes the 'judgment' instrument. It is suggested by some that we are dealing here with one of the sieges of Jerusalem and divine deliverance, rather than the final fall of Jerusalem leading to the captivity in Babylon. We leave that aside. Keep clearly in mind that nations as well as

individuals have to deal with God. Read Habakkuk 1:1-11; 2:20; Zech. 2:13; 1 Pet. 5:6-11. God is at work. He always is. In 5:1 His hand is heavy on His own people.

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5:2-4

In the situation we have been describing, a grim future with many perplexities and trials, it is natural that the remnant of faith would look and long for someone, a leader, to lead them forward through all difficulties into God's promised future of blessing. Of course, down the ages of history, from the Garden of Eden onwards, there has been the promise from God of a Saviour, a Deliverer, and it is that God-promised Saviour who is spoken of here. He was not to emerge from among the high and mighty of Jerusalem but from the lowly, despised, unrecognised township of Bethlehem. This fact alone would cause many to 'write off' both the promise and the person, because the world of unbelief and the worldly attitudes all too often found in the church seem incapable of recognising spiritual values and significance. Too often the 'day of small things' is despised (Zech. 4:10) and the 'big' statistic is assumed to be significant. The one who is to come forth, that is, to emerge on the world scene, is 'for me', that is, for God. He is God's man, for God's time (Gal. 4:4), for God's purpose and for God's people, and therefore for us. To Micah's country congregations this would signify that the coming One was in fact one of themselves, one who understood, and he is described not just in gloriously kingly terms (2) but in terms of a shepherd. But even the shepherd is spoken of in terms of majesty and divinity. There seems to be something of an echo of the description in Isa. 40:1-4, 9-11, 25-31. The identity of the promised one is clear. He is not just someone from a 'big' family with a long pedigree. We are taken right back to the 'ancient of days' or 'days of eternity'. The marvel and the mystery and the thrill of it all are sensed in the words of Jesus in John 17:5; cf. John 1:1-3, 14. The Christmas carol says it well: 'Thus to come from highest bliss, down to such a world as this'.(Caswall)

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5:2-4

Before considering several glorious aspects of the Promised One, we must look at the difficult third verse. The coming of the Saviour was 'timed' and in the generations between Micah's ministry and the promised birth in Bethlehem there had to be worked out the disintegration and collapse of Jerusalem and all that the city stood for. Because the Saviour was to be born from among God's chosen race, that people had to be prepared by God's disciplinary judgments. This explains the experience of the people soon to be taken into captivity. J B Phillips entitles this verse, 'God's apparent neglect', and others speak of the need for the house of David to have been brought so low that recovery and salvation would be seen to come from God alone and not from man. The reference to the travailing woman points to the virgin mother whose child was not 'fathered' by man but by the Holy Spirit (Isa. 7:14; Lk. 1:31-35). In v.3b we are again puzzled. The coming of the Saviour is linked to a returning to God by the rest of the people. But when Jesus came He was not received by His own (John 1:11). And yet, many did believe and Jesus Himself spoke of others who were not of the Jewish fold who had to be brought in (John 10:16). The Jews rejected their king and crucified the Lord of glory (1 Cor. 2:8), and the reference to their being given up until a time of future ingathering may point forward to the coming again of the Saviour at the final culmination of history. In spite of the difficulties of the verse there shines through the gospel truth that the coming of the Saviour means hope and restoration for the failures, the broken, the dispersed and the disciplined. This Gospel is for all the world and we must think of 'Gentiles and Jews in Jesus' fold'. (Shrubbole)

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5:2-4

We must grasp the wonderful encouragement in these verses concerning the promised Saviour. For us, there is One who stands in the presence of God and who is the key to the whole of history and the whole of salvation (Rev. 1:17-18; 3:7; Titus 2:13; Heb. 9:24). For us there is One who stands as the Shepherd (John 10:11, 14) who feeds His flock and who rules as King. Note that the majesty of the Shepherd and the greatness of His power (as well as His gentleness) are linked to the safety and security of His people. This must always be a

conscious element in our worship. Many in our congregation were blessed when we came in our Sunday studies to Rev. 7:15(RSV). What a thought it is to be sheltered by the presence of Him who sits on the throne! Think of the Catechism's words about Christ the Shepherd King, subduing us to Himself, ruling and defending us, and restraining and conquering all His and our enemies. Think of how we sing words from Psalm 90 in the hymn, 'O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come.' Do we really grasp the truth? Do the words we sing really draw out our hearts in worship? Do we really think of our Saviour God as the safe shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home? This is the God who has come to us in the Person of His Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Have we begun to forget about Christmas? GOD WITH US.

'Under the shadow of Thy throne
Thy saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is Thine arm alone,
And our defence is sure.'

(Watts)

The Lord, who is from everlasting to everlasting, is my Shepherd: I shall not want.

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5:5-6

The One who stands in the presence of God and who stands as Shepherd, stands also as our peace. In His person and work He is our peace (Eph. 2:13-16), having made peace by the blood of His Cross (Col. 1:20). He is our peace also in that He stands between us and the pressures of our circumstances, giving us His peace (John 14:27; 16:33), and causing His peace, which passes understanding, to stand guard over heart and mind (Phil. 4:6-7). It is peace beyond human explanation because circumstances can be such that we should, humanly speaking, be tense and anxious. But the presence of the Prince of Peace, the Jesus who rebuked and stilled the wind and waves (Mk.4:35-41), causes all the currents of restless fear to subside. The reference to Assyria would, to Micah's generation, signify the main source of world danger, and for us it signifies the whole world system that is always contrary to God and to faith (1John 5:19). The reference to seven shepherds and eight leaders seems to suggest that God's provision in the Saviour will be enough and more than enough to meet the need. In the life of faith, obedience and service we will never be free from conflict but we are taught again and again that we are more than conquerors, conquerors by a clear, decisive margin in face of all that may assail us (Rom. 8:37). The reference to the one who will deal with the invader pointed Micah's generation to the future and to the coming of the promised Saviour Shepherd. It points us to the coming again of our Lord Jesus Christ. But there is also the emphasis of God being consciously thought of and sought after in the business of the political life of the nation. In Micah's day the materialism of the nation had led to God being forgotten and ignored, and the results were disastrous. How we need to pray for the nation, and for men and women of God to lead us (1 Tim. 2:1-3).

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5:7-9

The emphasis here is on the remnant, the company of believing people whom God holds fast for Himself and His service, no matter how dark and grim circumstances may be. This must be remembered especially when numbers are small, at least as far as we can see (cf. 1 Kings 19:18). The remnant can be those in Micah's days and may point also to those such as Daniel and his friends who stood firm even when the final collapse came. The remnant may be that small group of believing people who feature so significantly in the Bethlehem story. It may also refer to God's believing people in all places at all times in history. Some suggest there is reference to the part that Israel as a people will play right to the end of God's plan of redemption. But we take the lesson of v.7 to refer to the witness and influence of believers wherever they are. They make their impact, not in any boisterous, self-conscious or belligerent way, but as dew (so silent) and as showers (so gentle). Jesus declared that believers are salt and light. That is their nature, because Christ lives in them by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 3:14-19). We do not have to *try* to be light or salt or dew or showers, because that would tend to draw attention to ourselves instead of to Christ. Read Acts 4:13, 33. Keeping company with Jesus causes something of His grace, His 'flavour' to attach itself to us. Read 2 Cor. 2:14-16 and see how important it is not to let worldly and sinful 'scents' so influence us that our witness is blotted out. The meaning of v. 8-9 is by no means clear. The lion may

signify the people of God as the instruments of God's judgment among the nations, and that is a very different picture from dew and showers. But remember that in the Christmas story the child born is said to be set for the fall as well as the rising of many (Lk. 2:34).

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5:10-15

Throughout this whole chapter it is unclear whether the references are to the first coming of Christ at Bethlehem or to His final coming again in glory at the end of the age. The phrase 'In that day' may refer to any time when God in sovereign grace works for the blessing of His people and uses them for the blessing of the nations. In order that they might be God's instruments, God will demolish all their trust in horses and chariots so that they will look to Him and to Him alone. This is a lesson we always need in the work of the Gospel, because there is always the temptation to trust in worldly methods and weapons (2 Cor. 10:4; Isa. 31:1). But the Lord must also separate His people from their idolatries and their trifling with and commitment to things and practices which should have no place in the life of a believer. Is it not true that there is little preaching these days that challenges believers to sanctification of life and to separation from all moral wrong and compromise? There are many calls to holiness of life in Old and New Testaments alike (Lev. 11:44-45; 1 Pet. 1:14-15; 2:11-12; 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1). Our passage is full of challenge and yet the emphasis again and again is on God's words, 'I will'. It is as if He is saying 'I have redeemed you; you are mine. I have blessed you because you are mine. I will work in you until I see of the travail of my soul and will be satisfied.' It is one thing to pray that the Lord will purge the land of evil and bring healing to it (2 Chron. 7:14) but we need to pray also, 'Lord, do it in me, in us, and in the church.' That this should be our attitude is clear from what we read in the next chapter.

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6:1-2

When studying the prophets, and indeed the epistles of the New Testament, we must be quite clear that God is speaking to a people He has redeemed and saved, a people who would have had no life, identity or destiny apart from His saving grace. We say this in advance of coming to v.8, which is so often understood in terms of being right with God and getting to Heaven on the basis of personal and social morality. We must first grasp clearly the opening section of the chapter. God is stating His case against His people and He calls the whole of creation to be witness, because there is a moral order of righteousness in the constitution of the world. There is an echo here of Jesus' words in Lk. 19:36-40, regarding the stones crying out in testimony against the unbelief of the people and in confirmation of the person and work of the Saviour. There is an echo also in Rom. 8:19-23, where the final deliverance of creation from its bondage and brokenness because of the Fall is bound up with the final salvation of God's redeemed people. The whole of creation from its foundation agrees with the purposes of God and the principles of His actions. Everything God does constitutes a glorious harmony, and therefore we must see in so called 'natural' disasters and in historical turmoil evidences of the disorder of fallen nature and its protest against the incursion of sin. The mountains and hills will witness God's case against the sins of His people and will agree that the people are guilty and responsible for the chaos that has come. It is a solemn thought that God declares so clearly that He has a controversy with His people. It is a solemn thought when God says it is time to take the case to court. It should disturb us if our lives are not right (Heb. 4:12-13; 10:31).

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6:3-5

There is a searching humility about the Lord God Almighty as He asks His people why they have 'gone off Him'. Isaiah records the same kind of complaint ' (Isa. 43:20-25). Jeremiah speaks in the same way (Jer. 2: 4-9). Why is it that, when God blesses His people in so many ways right to this day, His people are so slow to express their gratitude and to respond to Him in glad and willing service? It is not a good sign when Christians take all the blessing that comes to them through God's Word and never express their gratitude to God or to God's messengers through whom the Word came. Three levels of God's gracious activity are spoken of. God redeemed them out of their bondage in Egypt by the blood of the Passover lamb (Ex. 12:1-13; 1 Cor. 5:7b; 1 Pet. 1:18-20). God's providence attended them in their leader, shepherd and lawgiver, Moses (Ex. 33:7-11), and in their High Priest, Aaron, who ministered to them in holy things (Ex. 28:1-3,12) and in Miriam ,mentioned because she was

a prophet (Ex. 15: 20-21). God's sovereign and gracious power intervened for their protection when He frustrated the designs of evil at the time of Balaam (Num. Chaps. 22-24). The reference to Shittim and Gilgal seems to point to the time after the death of Moses when Joshua led the people over Jordan to possess the land of promise (Josh. 4:19-24). We are being urged in these verses to look back over the history of Israel, over our own personal history and the history of our churches to recognise the immensity of the debt we owe to God. Apart from His grace and mercy where would we be and what would we be? How we need to 'bless the hand that guided and bless the heart that planned.' More than we will ever know this side of Heaven we have been protected and delivered. We need to remember. It will deliver us from spiritual pride and help us to walk humbly.

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6:6-8

Note carefully that in the first two verses we are shown what was Israel's reaction to God's summons and rebuke. They indulged in a bout of superficial, religious spirituality. They held sacrifices, multiplying their offerings. They were extravagant in their acts of dedication, forgetting that acts that do not carry the heart and life with them are of no value, being simply a 'cover-up' for wrong lives. To show just how holy their response to God was, they went beyond the bounds and, like the pagans, thought of human sacrifices. Everything they did was on a big scale, but none of it was real. Think how easy it is to have 'special' events, Days of Prayer and Festivals of Dedication, all of which give the impression of spiritual activity. But verbal spirituality is empty and unacceptable to God (Isa. 29:13; Matt. 6:1-8,16-18; 15:7-9). If Micah was thundering against empty, formal religion in the country villages, Isaiah was sounding the same note in Jerusalem (Isa. 1:10-17). A clean heart and a right life are the indispensable elements in true worship and no amount of fine words, even though they may be biblical and doctrinally accurate, and no amount of splendid ceremonial, music and movement can ever be a substitute. God looks on the heart. The Epistle of James makes it very plain that the believing and behaving sides of the Gospel belong together and must never be separated (Jas. 1:22-27; 2: 14-18,26). This is how we must now consider the last verse of today's passage.

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6:6-8

People who say that v.8 and the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is their idea of true religion and that they will deal with God on this basis show a complete misunderstanding of Scripture. We are dealing with the *expression* of saving faith, not with the ground or basis of salvation. It is by faith alone that we are justified and put right with God (Rom. 5:1-2; Eph. 2:4-5.8). Without faith it is impossible to please God, no matter how hard we try (Heb. 11:6). Micah's words do not mean that if we do right by others, show kindness and show a religious side to life then we will be accepted by God and go to Heaven. That is to say salvation is by works, by human effort, and the Bible says that by works no-one can be justified in God's sight (Rom. 3:20). What is more, no-one can walk with God unless they are reconciled to God, and that can only be through a Saviour whose name is Jesus (John 14:6). Micah is speaking of the way of life that declares and confirms that a person has saving faith. Jesus said, 'By their fruits you shall know them' (Matt. 7:16-20). There are certain things, certain attitudes and practices in life, that are the fruit of salvation in the lives of believers. To do justly is to deal rightly with all people in every area of life. It is to live life to please God. Jesus said, 'If you love Me you will keep My commandments' (John 14:15). We must be men and women whose word can be trusted; who walk out in the open with God and with men (1 John 1:5-7). If we love kindness or steadfast love then we will be the kind of people who show in all their relationships the loyalty of covenant love. There will be gentleness not harshness, self-giving not selfishness; and patience not impatience and quick criticism. To walk humbly with God means there will be an absence of overconfidence; a secret heart of dependence on God; a life lived to please God. The last phrase of our verse is quoted in part from Deut. 10:12-15. We set our hearts on God because He has first set His heart on us. (1John 4:19).

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6:9-16

Micah's charge in v.8 regarding right conduct, justice, grace and kindness towards others, and a life of humble submission to God and His will (walk humbly) pre-supposes that God has in fact made Himself and His will known to the people. This had been done through the law and the prophets, and for us has been fully done in the words and works of Jesus and in the teaching of the whole of the New Testament. No-one can plead ignorance. No-one can plead weakness, because in Christ we have been given the life and power we need. But individuals and nations can drift from God's ways and can rebel against God's ways. When this happens the whole way of life begins to degenerate and society becomes what Micah describes in these verses. The tragic and alarming thing is that the deterioration in standards and practices tends to become accepted. Public opinion is made up of the opinion of individuals and it is difficult to say whether the lowering of standards starts first in individuals and families and spreads to society at large, or whether it is the declining atmosphere in society that infects, debilitates and eventually destroys individual standards. If an easy-going spirit infiltrates the church, causing spiritual and moral standards to be lowered, then the restraining influence of Christian truth and principle declines and society is left at the mercy of its own fallen inclinations and passions. This is a tremendous challenge to all of us. The 'salt' must not lose its saltiness (Matt. 5:13). We are to shine as lights in a crooked and depraved generation (Phil. 2:15). We are to stand in the gap for the nation (Ezek. 22:30) and if we fail, not least in prayer, what hope is there?

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6:9-16

These verses put our practices of life under the microscope and we are best to examine ourselves rather than others, to challenge ourselves before governments or political groups. Since it is God who issues the challenge it is wise to take Him seriously (9). The city is challenged: both financial institutions and government administration. Gain by dishonest means and short measure is challenged. Late arrival at work, shoddy work, leaving early, absence on the slightest excuse are all included. Scant measure may include holding back friendship, care and help from others (10). Business practice that 'sails near the wind' and when convenient transgresses the law is the theme of v.11. Getting your own way because you have financial power and eloquence in argument is the message in v.12. We do well to read Jas. 3:3-12. Micah may have been referring to those who speak half-truths and who speak behind people's backs. That is the way of deceivers. When a nation lives like this, God's hand begins to be against that nation, but people who forget God never seem to consider, for example, that what we mean by recession and social disintegration has a spiritual cause. It is only righteousness that can establish a nation, and sin, in all its forms, is a reproach: not just a rebuke or disgrace, but an evil cancer eating away the life (Prov.13:34). There is something very contemporary about v.14a. Is there not a manifest lack of satisfaction in society, a discontent, a spirit of complaining, and a deep-seated hunger in the human spirit that cries out for an answer? Read Eccles. 2:1-11; 3:10-11. 'My heart is pained, nor can it be at rest till it finds rest in Thee.' (Tersteegen)

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6:9-16

Lest we tend to criticise the 'world' and forget to look in the mirror of God's Word so that we can see ourselves, read along with today's passage Rom. 2:17-24. God's challenge through Micah is to those who regard themselves as God's chosen people. Spiritual pride and self-confidence along with wrong lives are a very dangerous mixture. In v.14-15 we see lack of satisfaction, savings eaten away by inflation, unexpected losses and economic stagnation. Any recovery would at best be temporary. In v.15 there is reference to working hard and having little to show for it. If we think of life on a human level never 'getting out of the bit', we may also think of some Christians who never seem to progress and who always seem enveloped in problems. The point made by Micah is simply that the nation's problems stemmed from the fact that the people were not dealing rightly with God. Read Haggai 1:2-9. The prophets were very blunt at times but they were not harsh. There is neither remedy nor restoration if we are dealing with the wrong problem. If the problem is spiritual, our relation to God, our obedience to God, there is no point in simply trying to remedy the fruit, the result, the consequences, without first dealing with the root. In spite of all the preaching, warnings and encouragements of the prophets the people had chosen to go the way of Omri and Ahab (1 Kings 16:25-34). The beginning of

v.16b should read, 'Therefore I make you a desolation' or 'therefore I will give you over to ruin.' The lesson is one of cause and effect. Read Rom. 1:20-32; Gal. 6:7 and Hosea 8:7. It is all very serious but very practical.

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7:1-7

Whether the speaker is Jerusalem or Micah, the words make plain that at long last, too late for remedy, the nation has realised the terrible predicament that sin has brought about. Society and individuals tend to forget that there is an entail or consequence that follows inevitably from sin. We do well to count the cost before we set out on some course of action, especially if we are unsure whether or not God approves of what we are planning. We are told in James 1:13-15 that sin, when full grown or when it has finished its devastating work, brings forth death. But sin can ravage lives and, even when we fly to God for forgiveness and are assured of forgiveness, there can still be after-effects to be lived with in our persons, relationships and society. The picture of society in these verses is one of man's ruthless selfishness, cruelty and dishonesty, so that no one can be trusted. Even within the family there is neither trust nor respect (5-6). There is a significant scarcity of godly men and women and that would mean that those who gathered for worship would largely be the older generation, whose nurture in spiritual things in their youth still held them steady. The picture is very bleak and it is little wonder that the cry was, 'Woe is me!'(RSV). They did not like the situation they had to live in. Isaiah was saying the same kind of thing (Isa. 59:1-13). It must have come home to the people who had always assumed that they had a special place in God's favour and in God's plans that it had happened to them as it had happened to their fathers in the past. The glory had departed. The presence of God was no longer with them as it had once been (1 Sam. 4:21-22; Judges 16:20). They were shattered by the realisation. They were miserable. But there is great difference between remorse and repentance (2 Cor. 7:8-11).

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7:1-7

The only hope for the backslider is to recognise that he has been backsliding and to make no excuses. If the grace of true repentance is at work he will not only say, 'I will arise and go to my father' (Lk. 15: 17-20), he will begin to put right the wrongs in his life. The words of v.7 are very personal. Speaking for himself and for the faithful remnant, the prophet looks to the God who restores the backslider (Hos. 14:4 AV). In the midst of decaying, godless society he would say, as Joshua said, 'As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord' (Joshua 24: 14-15). The faithful will wait upon God in trust, in hope, and with patience, accepting that deliverance may not come swiftly (Ps. 40:1-5,13,16-17). We do well today to consider just where we are spiritually and if we feel we have drifted or rebelled, if we find ourselves saying, 'Where is the blessedness I knew, when first I saw the Lord? Where is the soul refreshing view of Jesus and His word?'(Cowper), if we find a longing in our soul to be right with God again and to know His smile and His peace, then let Wesley's words be our prayer:

'O Jesus, full of pardoning grace,
More full of grace than I of sin,
Yet once again I seek Thy face;
Open Thine arms and take me in,
And freely my backslidings heal,
And love the faithless sinner still.

'Thou know'st the way to bring me back,
My fallen spirit to restore;
O, for Thy truth and mercy's sake,
Forgive, and bid me sin no more;
The ruins of my soul repair,
And make my heart a house of prayer.'

If you feel you do not need that prayer, then pray with gentle care for those who do.

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7:8-10

Those who are determined to be right with God, to walk with God and to serve God in a godless generation will know plenty about the enemy. Who is the prophet referring to? Is it some individual critic or opponent who was quick to point to the prophet's failures? There are always plenty people like that, and some of them are Christians! Was he thinking of the powers and pressures of society, political or ideological groups? Was he feeling the stabs of those who openly deride spiritual convictions and devalue spiritual work? Or is the prophet seeing behind all these forms of enmity the arch-enemy, Satan himself? If we are to stand, continue and prevail in Christian life and service, we must never forget that we do not fight against mere flesh and blood, our own or that of others, but against the principalities and powers that are always arrayed against God and His Christ (Eph. 6:10-20). Of course we must also stand in the fact declared in Scripture that Satan and his kingdom are defeated (Col. 2:15). We must also recognise that even when it seems that the Devil has carried all before him and has accomplished his evil design (as it seemed to be at the Cross) the truth is that all the hosts of Hell, human and spirit, have in fact served the sovereign plan and purpose of God (Acts 2: 22-24; 4:23-28). Note in today's verses that, although we rightly regard Micah as a spiritual giant, he is altogether human. He accepts that he falls and sins. He admits that at times, in the course of true spiritual service, he sits in darkness, perhaps knowing the bleak desolation that the fiery Elijah knew (1 Kings 19:4) and that our Lord knew in Gethsemane and on the Cross (Lk. 22:44; Matt. 27:45-46). Think of the prolonged darkness that saintly Job knew and how in it he was criticised by his so-called friends who felt sure his sufferings were the result of sins when, in fact, they were because of the depth and significance of his spiritual service. It is hard and dark to be misunderstood by those from whom you expect encouragement.

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7:8-10

Read v.7 as well as today's verses and see just how personal a relationship Micah has with his God. The disposition of his life is that he looks to God (Ps. 16:8-9; 27:1-5,14). His heart is fixed (Ps. 57:7 AV). He is confident that the Lord will hear his prayers (Ps. 66: 16-20). He seems to speak in v.8 of the Lord carrying a light and coming to look for him in his darkness. I wonder if any of Micah's people who had been blessed and enabled by his ministry were aware of his being in darkness. Did they pray for him and did some of them, or one of them, seek him out to strengthen him in the Lord with words of human care? Our Lord's friends failed Him in the darkness of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36-46), but some of Paul's friends encouraged him in prison and in his journeys (2 Tim. 1:15-18; Acts 28:11-15). In v.9 Micah may be acknowledging God's rebuke on himself personally because of wrongs in his life and yet testifying his assurance that while God disciplines his servants He does not abandon them. Micah may also be identifying himself with his people as the nation experiences God's rebuke. Some of the great intercessory prayers for the nation are expressed in terms, 'We have sinned,' not 'Lord, *they* have sinned' (Dan. 9:1-5ff). In v.10 Micah is assured that the day would come when his enemies would be confounded and they would see that they had held in contempt God's faithful servant. Note the word 'gloat'. The downfall of the bitter enemy would be seen, but if Micah shared the heart of God he would have no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek. 33:11). Remember that Jesus wept over the city that crucified Him (Lk. 19:41).

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7:11-17

Even in the days of decline and darkness in the nation Micah looks to the day when the walls of Jerusalem will be rebuilt and when the work of God will be more far-reaching than it has ever been. In 4:1 he spoke about the last days, and faith always looks to the future. We do not know to what extent Micah had clear thoughts about the time far distant when the nation would collapse and seventy years afterwards would be restored. He certainly spoke of the child to be born in Bethlehem (5:2), whether or not he realised the full significance of the event. What shines through here is the hope Micah had for the future because he believed that the future belongs to God. No matter the grim circumstances that prevailed he believed and he looked forward to the ever

increasing fulfilment of God's purposes of salvation. He speaks of a day when people would come from near and far to Zion. In v.13 there seems to be a shadow on Micah's expectation but we need to remember that the work of the enemy and the work of God go on together until the time of final harvest (Matt. 13:24-30). Micah's faith and hope merge into prayer in v.14 and that prayer is grounded in the promise of God (15) and in the power of God (16-17). When you read v.15 and think of the need of our own generation, do you think of the words, 'Is anything too hard for the Lord?' (Gen. 18:14)? Verses 16-17 seem to speak of a great, sobering conviction of sin and awareness of God coming upon the nations. Only the Spirit of God can accomplish this. It is His work to convict of sin, righteousness and judgment to come, and to draw men and women to faith in Christ (John 16:8-11). The sword of the Spirit used to do this is the Word of God and we all need to pray far more than we do for the preaching of the Word (Eph. 6:18-19; Col. 4:2-4; 2 Thess. 3:1). An older generation used to pray, 'Follow with Thy blessing the preaching of Thy word'.

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7:18-20

Micah's prophecy ends on a glorious note which is really a doxology of praise. He gives a description of God and makes a wonderful affirmation of faith. Here is a man who truly thrills to the thought of God, and this lies at the heart of worship. In 6:8 we were shown what God requires and here we are told what God gives. He is the God who saves, who forgives, who perseveres with His people, who is faithful to His promises, and who completes what He has begun (Phil. 1:6). Micah was a man of God who was obviously steeped in the Scriptures of the story of God, and this is true of all God's fruitful servants. They have learned what God is like and the whole pattern of their thinking is informed and moulded by the Scriptures. They think about God in the way that God has revealed Himself and they refuse to let their thinking be squeezed into the mould of the world's ideas and standards (Rom. 12:1-2). Micah did not think of his ministry as an isolated episode but as part of the ongoing purposes of the unchanging God. He would no doubt look back to the revelation of God in Ex. 33:18-19; 34:5-9 and be assured that God had not changed. He never does change (Jas. 1:17). Micah may well have known Hosea 11: 7-9, God's testimony of how He simply cannot give up His people, in spite of all their sins. Micah would know the story of the promises of the God of glory to Abraham (Gen.12:1-3; Acts 7:2-3) and the story of the wonderful promise to Jacob in Gen. 28:15. We cannot emphasise too strongly the need for Christians to know their Bibles, to range through the Bible and to study it in detail because this is how we begin to learn what God is like. Think of the words of the Shorter Catechism: 'God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.' No wonder Micah cries out, 'Who is a God like Thee?'

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7:18-20

How big is your God? How well do you know Him? Do you admire Him? Do you ever get excited about Him to the extent that you feel you must speak to people about Him? He is of purer eyes than to look on iniquity (Hab. 1:13). He speaks and it is done; He works and no one can hinder Him (Gen. 1:3; Isa., 43:11-13). He is the God who spared not even His own Son but gave Him up for us all, laying on Him the burden, guilt and judgment of our sins (Rom. 8:32; Isa. 53:4-6). It is this last aspect, the saving grace of God, rather than His power and glory that Micah speaks of here. Perhaps only those who have known the guilt and shame of sin and failure can really understand the wonder of these verses. It is not just that God forgives and cleanses, wonderful as that is; not just that He breaks the power of cancelled sin; it is that God passes over or passes by the transgressions of His people. God, in His grace and redeeming love, refuses to allow forgiven sin to be a barrier to blessing or peace or service. Too many Christians allow the past to torment them and to keep them back from wholehearted service. Too many Christians, who believe in forgiveness, allow the past so to inhibit their personalities and lives that God is deprived of the pleasure of their company. Their heads are hanging down and they never really look up into the face of the God who loves and wants them. Never forget that it was at the very point of Peter's denial that the Lord turned and looked at him, not in rebuke and rejection, but in assurance of love that would not let him go. It is the God of love who forgives. The stern judge no longer passes sentence because the price has been paid. Scripture is clear. God blots out our sins (Isa. 43:25). God refuses to remember

sins that have been forgiven (Jer. 31:33-34; Heb. 10:16-17); not one will be remembered. Micah's words about our sins being cast into the depth of the sea call for a 'Hallelujah' of relief.

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7:18-20

There is no denial of God's anger and displeasure in these verses, and Scripture testifies that in righteousness God rebukes, challenges and disciplines both sin and the sinner. There are times when God puts His own people under clear tokens of His displeasure, even to the point of declaring that He will neither listen to nor answer their prayers (Zech. 7:13). Think of what such rebuke means in terms of lost fellowship and barren service. It is those who walk with God who know fellowship with Him and with other believers (1 John 1:5-10). But none of this contradicts the fact that God delights in steadfast love and mercy. Even when he is still far off, the Father sees and runs to meet the returning prodigal. Whom God loves He chastens (Heb. 12:5-8). All manner of trials come to us in order to bring us blessing (Jas. 1:2-4). But we must never forget the gracious healing purpose behind all God's dealing with us. He wounds, like a surgeon, in order to heal (Job 5:17-18). Think of the words of Psalm 103:1-5. Again and again God deals with us in the strength and tenderness of His unchanging love. What a God He is! There is so much that could be said of how, over the years, by the gracious ministry of His word in the context of a people at worship and prayer, and at times through the patient pastoral care of someone who really knows their God, even the deep hurts of life and personality are healed. But more, and this is a word to those who have blundered and failed in Christian service: God so restores that that life will show no signs at all of the wasted years. That is the meaning of Joel 2:25 (RSV).

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7:18-20

God will tread our iniquities under His feet, breaking the power of sin in our lives and in our circumstances. The promise is that sin will not have dominion over us (Rom. 6:12-14). In a sermon on v.19, C.H. Spurgeon speaks of sin in the brain, heart, feelings, bodies and circumstances, and goes on to speak of sin as a fascinating, depressing, domineering, clamouring, defiling and hampering power, not least in Christian service. But the promise is that God will subdue sin in its every form and activity. Spurgeon went on to say, 'omnipotence has marched into our hearts to trample down the power of sin,' and he finished the sermon quoting 1 Cor. 15:57: 'Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ'. We need to realise that we are conquerors by a clear margin, in Christ (Rom. 8:37). The Saviour we have is able to keep us from falling (Jude 24-25). He is able to subdue all things to Himself, so that in our lowly human lives He will be glorified and we will be blessed (Phil. 3:21). How we need to claim and to stand in the glorious liberty from the power of sin that is our rightful inheritance in Christ (Gal. 5:1). Micah's last statement is to assure us that God will be as good as His word. He will never fail or forsake His people and, as He was with Moses, and with all His people down the ages of history, so He will be with us (Josh. 1:1-6). He is indeed a God to be trusted. When we take time to think, as opposed to being carried away with our feelings, is there any reason at all why we should not trust God? There are so many promises from God recorded in Scripture that we should learn them, know where they are to be found, and stand on them. Read Acts 20:32, 'I commend you to God (or, I lay you down beside God) and to the word of His grace'. What a safe and happy place to rest! Now read 1 Thess. 5:23-24. Faithful is He who called you, who also will do it.

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George Philip Bible Reading In Micah