

The Glory of the New Israel

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Date: 18 May 2003

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[0 : 00] Let's bow our heads for prayer. Almighty God, you alone can order our unruly wills and affections.

Grant to us that we may love what you command and desire what you promise, so that among the many things in this world that change, our hearts might be fixed where true joys are found.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Now if you would open your Bibles please to Micah chapter 4, page 819.

And as you do that, page 819, the latest census figures indicate that God is losing popularity in Canada.

You'll be disappointed to know. Some of the headlines this week have included atheism growing in Canada, Christianity in decline, fringe religions on the rise. And the Vancouver Sun editorial yesterday most helpfully told us that God seems to be taking a beating, quote unquote.

[1 : 21] And this is the evidence that 35% of people in British Columbia have no religious affiliation. Although I noticed that the percentage of people who attend weekly worship has risen in the last 10 years.

My favourite figure was that there are now 20,000 Jedi Knights in Canada, which should make us feel very safe and secure against the dark forces.

Although much more secure in England, there are 400,000 in the UK. But figures of course can be deceiving.

35% of teenagers who say they have no religion say that they believe in a God who cares for them. And if you place all non-Christian religions together, interestingly they have doubled since 1991.

And they now make up as a percentage of Canadian population 6%. But when census started in 1871, do you know what the figure was then?

[2 : 28] It was 3%. So that's just an interesting fact. And still the tone of the editorial was trying to set us at ease. If you read it, you know the argument went like this.

As long as you have some kind of religious expression, everything will be fine in the end. It's kind of like saying, as long as you are swallowing something, you will be healthy. And it's a common sentiment in a world that is deluged with evil.

In that same paper yesterday, we read about 41 people massacred by a car bomb in Morocco. The discovery of a mass grave of Kuwaitis near Baghdad.

The torture and execution of hundreds of people in Liberia and the Congo. And the search for the killer of 10-year-old Holly Jones in Toronto. And newspaper editors like the rest of us understand that evil seems to function effortlessly in this world.

That evil seems to be able to implement itself with such exquisite ease. Whereas goodness seems so fragile and haphazard and almost accidental.

[3 : 40] And I think for those of us who want to believe the Bible, the idea of God's promises come to us seeming so unrealistic from time to time.

And the idea of a shepherd king who's going to come and establish peace and the kingdom of righteousness. I mean it seems like idealistic. And from time to time I think we feel gullible and escapist and weak.

And what made it worse for the people in Micah's day is that the official clergy and teachers had abandoned the word of God for their word.

They had substituted the commands of God for their own opinions. And their vision of faith focused on the good life now, not on the life to come.

And they had replaced faith with sight. And theirs was a message, as I said two weeks ago, of love without holiness. Of acceptance without repentance.

[4 : 42] Of salvation without judgment. And God has been warning his people. The remarkable thing when we come to chapter 4 is that God still yearns for his people. And in chapter 4 gives us a magnificent vision of salvation that he still is committed to bringing to his world.

In fact, the first five verses of chapter 4 of Micah are one of the most remarkable statements of God's purposes for all of creation, including his people.

It's a magnificent vision which has two supporting arguments, which we'll look at in just a minute, which demonstrate that the salvation that God is bringing is not a sentimental and empty optimism. But the way that God is going to bring his salvation is by dealing with evil. There will be salvation, but it will be through judgment. So let's get the flavor of this.

If you look at the last verse in chapter 3, verse 12, we read. God says, And that's what makes chapter 4 so remarkable.

[6 : 15] Look at the first two verses. It shall come to pass in the latter days, The city that had been desecrated with lies and idolatry.

God is going to raise up above every other city. That place that had been desecrated by disobedience would become the highest, the most beautiful, the most attractive, the center of the desires and affections of the hearts of all people throughout the world.

And Micah tells us that the city of God, which is going to be lifted up, has a river that is flowing into it. And the river is made up of people from every nation on the planet, hungry pilgrims.

And Micah allows us to overhear the conversation of the pilgrims as they go up to the mountain.

They say to each other, come, let's go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, so that we may hear God teach us and we may walk in his ways.

What electrifies those who come is that they'll hear the word of God from God and they'll have the opportunity to obey God's word completely.

[7 : 53] And it's very difficult for us to understand what a contrast that is for Micah's first hearers. Do you remember back in chapter 2, verse 6, The preachers in Jerusalem, the official preachers, wanted to silence God's voice.

They told Micah, shut up, don't preach anymore of God's judgment, because they were fiercely intolerant of hearing the word of God. In chapter 2, verse 11, what they wanted to hear was entertainment.

It's a wonderful picture of salvation here, because the people who come, the people who God draws to himself in Zion, are those who desperately crave to hear the word of God.

They are willing to walk from the ends of the planet to hear God's word. And not only that, they wish with all their hearts to walk in God's ways, to be completely transformed by the power of God's word.

And then halfway through verse 2, the river changes direction. Instead of flowing into Zion, it now begins to flow out. Look at verse 2, the second half.

[9 : 02] For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. The city of God which drew people in, now becomes the source of the transformation of all the world.

As God's people radiate out from Jerusalem, taking his word, they take his transforming grace. And now we have the picture of salvation, transformation of all the world.

Look at verses 3 and 4. He shall judge between many peoples. He shall decide for strong nations afar off. And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks.

They shall not lift up sword against each other, neither shall they learn war any more. But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree. None shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.

It's a brilliant picture. And it is the biblical picture of salvation, of shalom, of peace. And it is universal, and it is everlasting.

[10 : 09] And everything that is good, and everything that is beautiful is here, because now the city is made up of those whose hearts submit to the word of God.

This is wonderful stuff for us. You see, weapons of mass destruction become weapons of mass construction. Tools and instruments, armaments, training camps, not only are obsolete, but they are now transformed into tools that make the earth into a garden of delight, a vineyard with fig trees. All the metal and machinery and intellectual might that has been wasted on designing and delivering devastation to this world will be used for peace and prosperity and kindness and love.

And work itself will have meaning, because the creativity that God has given us is not going to be used for building a Babel, but will be used for transforming the world around us for the sake of our neighbours and the sake of our families and the sake of ourselves.

You see, the biblical picture of salvation and peace is not just a negative picture. It's not just the absence of war and hostility. It is profoundly positive and profoundly good.

[11 : 31] It's a picture of fulfilment, of family, of friendship, of fullness, enjoying the fruits of our labour.

Again, the transformation involved in this is very difficult to imagine. In lives that were controlled by evil and greed, lives that measured other people by outward wealth, lives that were committed to the accumulation of stuff and things are now given to hospitality and simplicity and generosity and fullness and the simple pleasure of eating figs under the vine.

Freedom from hunger, freedom from oppression, freedom from meaninglessness, honest work with honest fruits. Brilliant. Compassion replaces comparison and contentment replaces covetousness. It's almost too difficult to believe. This is the hope that the Bible puts before us. And because it is difficult to believe, that last phrase in verse 4 tells us, the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken, which is a powerful reminder to us.

This is not a political manifesto for us to organise and manage. Peace and salvation do not arise from us, but they require the might of the Lord of the armies of heaven because his peace and his word and his salvation always receive massive resistance, even from us.

[13 : 09] It is not our doing. It's the gift of God. And this is the vision that dominates this chapter. It's a wonderful vision, but it stands on two legs.

There are two explanations. And I want to take them in reverse order just so that we stay awake. I want to take the second one, which is in verses 9 to 13, which tells us this, that rescue will come by means of the exile.

9 to 10. Now why do you cry aloud? Is there no king in you? I mean, God was their king. Has your counsellor perished, the mighty counsellor God?

The pangs have seized you like a woman in travail? Writhe and groan, O daughter of Zion, like a woman in travail. For now you shall go forth from the city, dwell in the open country.

You shall go to Babylon. There you shall be rescued. There the Lord will redeem you from the hands of your enemies. See, God treats us with massive dignity.

[14 : 14] The people who had rejected him and refused him, God still warns them and urges them to turn back to him. And if they refuse his counsel, they will lose their city and they will lose their nation.

And you know that the story of the Old Testament is that God's people turned a deaf ear to his word and that they did lose their city. The thing that they imagined was their eternal security.

The city of Jerusalem was ripped away from them, first by the Assyrians in the north and then by the Babylonians in the south. And they were taken into open fields and they were deported to Assyria and to Babylon.

But here is the secret plan of God in verse 10. Twice we read the word there. It is there in exile where God will rescue. It is there that God will act.

It is through judgment that he will redeem. This is the way God works. This is the way God still works. You see, the storm that has been created by my own sin and my own disobedience, God doesn't just step into it and say, peace be still.

[15 : 22] What he does is he places a rock under our feet. Or he sends along a whale to swallow us up and spit us out on the beach somewhere. Or take us into the hollow of his hand.

See, there is no instantaneous and automatic deliverance because our ease and our comfort are not God's first concern or his second or his third. And the blessing of God in this life is not so much freedom from strife but freedom through strife.

That is why the Bible teaches that salvation and judgment are the two sides of the one coin. You cannot have the one without the other because the salvation of God means dealing with evil and dealing with sin.

Establishing peace means dealing with war. That is why in verse 11 we get this picture of what sin really is. You see in verse 11, let her be profaned and let our eyes gaze upon Zion because at the heart of sin it's directed against God.

Let's take the city of God and let's kick God out. Let's take the holy city and make it a place of unholiness. Let us rid ourselves of the word of God so that we can hear our own words.

[16:40] And verse 12 tells us that even this is the plan of God. Do you remember that in the cross of Jesus Christ God is working both judgment and salvation?

You see if you ask the question what was it that caused the cross of Jesus Christ? Was it the sinful actions of sinful human beings? Or was it the will of God? The answer is both.

In the cross of Jesus Christ God was defeated and sinful humanity had victory. And in the cross of Christ sinful humanity was defeated and God had the victory.

It is both together. And so it is with the promises of Micah that rescue and redemption come through exile. Salvation will come through judgment. That is one leg of explanation.

There is another leg in verses 6 to 8 where we read that the kingdom will come by means of the lame. In that day, verse 6 says the Lord I will assemble the lame I will gather those who have been driven away and those whom I have afflicted the lame I will make the remnant and those who have cast off a strong nation and the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion from this time forth forevermore.

[18:04] And you, O daughter of the flock sorry, O tower of the flock sheep tower hill of the daughter of Zion to you it shall come the former dominion shall come the kingdom of the daughter of Jerusalem.

Verse 6 God gets very personal and speaks in the first person to his people and he reminds us of the end of chapter 2 where he put himself before us as our shepherd king eager to gather us as a remnant to himself.

And do you notice God will not flatter us. You see how we are described in verses 6 and 7 we are described as those who are lame those who are driven away those whom God has afflicted a second time lame.

And this word lame is a very rare word in the Old Testament and it is a pivotal word it's a very important word it goes to the heart of understanding who we are as God's people.

It comes from the night when Jacob wrestled with God in Genesis. Do you remember Jacob? An unsavoury character nothing attractive about Jacob he was a liar he was a cheat he was a coward and all his life he struggled with God until God finally met him in the night and wrestled him to the ground and placed his finger on his hip and when the sun came up Jacob limped Jacob was lame.

[19:36] And when God speaks about his people being lame he means those people who know that their arms are too short to wrestle with God. And the stunning thing about this chapter is it is around these limping sheep that God is building his eternal kingdom.

The Lord will reign the kingdom will come to the lame. This is very important for us. God establishes his rule not despite the weaknesses of his people but through the weaknesses of his people.

God's power is demonstrated in our powerlessness that's why we are people who pray. His strength is made perfect in our weakness. God does not build his kingdom on our brilliance on our gifts and on our abilities.

He doesn't build his rule on our great strategies and our brilliant plans. He builds his kingdom on the simple obedience of limping sheep.

And that is why the church will always be a pitiful spectacle in this world. And that is why any number of censuses whatever the plural of that is censai can't tell us the truth.

[21:11] They'll tell us one truth. Because we are lame sheep you see to the world bleating to each other the promises of God. But it is this church through which God is working his purposes.

It's this church that Jesus said the very gates of hell itself cannot prevail against it. It is through the limping sheep God establishes his eternal king. So here is Micah 4 and it tells us of a new Jerusalem that God is lifting up building up.

And what this chapter tells us is that the thing that draws people into the new Jerusalem is that they very much want to hear the word of God from God and that they very much want to walk in his paths.

And that the transforming power that goes out from Jerusalem is nothing other than his word. That's right. The force that is at work in this world bringing transformation bringing peace is the word of God.

Because when we hear God's word we taste God himself. It is through his word that God calls us away from our idols and away from our sin.

[22 : 23] It's through his word that God transforms us from war loving envious adulterous idolaters into those who are made in the image of his son.

And I want to say this as I finish this vision of the new city and the new Jerusalem it's not just an Old Testament promise but it is the vision that fuels the New Testament as well.

And as we finish I want you to turn to the very last book of the Bible and to the second last chapter Revelation 21 Revelation 21 and verse 10 And in the spirit he carried me away to a great high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven having the glory of God.

And verse 22 And I saw no temple in the city for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb and the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it for the glory of the Lord is its light and its lamp is the Lamb.

This is our hope By its light shall the nations walk the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it its gate shall never be shut by day and there shall be no night there they shall bring into it the glory and the honour of the nations but nothing unclean shall enter it nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood but only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

[24 : 09] Well now we're going to stand and sing and I wonder if you would take out the hymn sheet This hymn tune of this hymn is called Jerusalem and it has a very short introduction so when when Terry begins playing let's all leap to our feet and take it from there.

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