

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MAY 3

ISAIAH 55:1–66:24

THE BACKGROUND

The Lord invited people to come to Him and find true life. They were to seek the Lord, turn from their evil ways, and return to Him. Because the Lord possesses complete power and authority, everything He spoke or planned would accomplish His purposes. The Lord emphasized His invitation and promises included everyone. Foreigners and eunuchs, who once had been excluded, could be included if they turned to the Lord. The Lord emphasized that His house was to be a house of prayer for people of all nations (Isa. 55:1–56:8).

The nation's leaders, however, continued to seek their own pleasure at the expense of others. Many of the people continued to worship false gods, which included participation in various immoral and senseless practices. The Lord promised healing for those who would turn to Him. Those who rejected the Lord would face the consequences of their evil ways (56:9–57:21).

The people Isaiah addressed had kept religious rituals, but they refused to be changed and directed by the Lord. When they asked the Lord why He had not been impressed with their fasting, He responded that their motives and lifestyles were all wrong. What He desired was a constant fast from oppression and unconcern for those who were poor and suffering. The people claimed to love the Sabbath, but they used the day to seek their own pleasure rather than to worship the Lord. The Lord refused to answer the prayers of such self-centered persons. The Lord promised to come to the people as Redeemer, but He would do so only to those who would repent of their sins (58:1–59:21).

The Lord described the wonderful future He would provide for those who trusted Him. The exiled population of Jerusalem would return, and the wealth of the nations would provide financing and labor to rebuild Jerusalem to a glorious state. With no enemies to fear, Jerusalem's gates would remain perpetually open. The Lord would completely reverse His people's fortunes and serve as their Light and Guide but judge and destroy those opposed to Him.

The Lord's words would lead His people to recall His past actions on their behalf and their disobedience and to plead with the Lord to deliver them. Acknowledging their sins, they would ask for forgiveness. The Lord declared He had

waited for His people to come to Him, but instead they followed their own rebellious ways. The Lord in His grace would restore those who sought Him. He would judge the nation but preserve a righteous remnant. Those who followed the Lord would enjoy a new creation filled with joy, security, and wholeness. Those who rejected Him would experience His fiery judgment. The Lord issued a final call to follow Him and find life or to reject Him and experience the judgment He has reserved for the wicked (60:1–66:24).

1. WONDROUS INVITATION (ISA. 55:1–56:8)

Verse 1: *“Come, everyone who is thirsty, come to the waters; and you without money, come, buy, and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost!”*

Our generation is not the first to be bombarded by sales pitches. Israel, Judah, and other nations in the ancient Near East had street vendors who competed for the attention of customers. Speaking for the Lord, Isaiah used the language of the street vendors to issue a sweeping invitation to come to the waters.

The Lord's product was not a frivolous luxury but the basic necessity of life. The designation waters referred to more than merely the liquid that quenches physical thirst. It denoted the Lord's life-giving Spirit (see Isa. 44:3; John 7:37-39). The word translated buy specifically designated the purchase of grain for baking bread, another necessity of the ancient Near Eastern diet. While people needed food to survive, the sustaining power of God's Word is probably what is in mind here (see Deut. 8:3; John 6:35).

The life the Lord offered is free, yet He commanded the people to buy. The purchase price, however, was not monetary. Instead, the people needed to turn to Him from their sins.

Verse 2: *“Why do you spend money on what is not food, and your wages on what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and you will enjoy the choicest of foods.”*

Others offered alternatives to the Lord's way, and many people accepted those offers rather than the Lord's bargain. Instead of accepting the Lord's free offer, people spent money on what could never satisfy. The phrase spend money translates a Hebrew phrase literally meaning “weigh out silver.” Before coins became the common means of payment, people weighed out precious metals to pay for purchases. Consumers were carefully but foolishly weighing

out their hard-earned silver to purchase faulty merchandise. They squandered their money hoping to satisfy their spiritual hunger.

The Lord called the people to stop paying for that which did not provide genuine sustenance. He urged them to listen carefully. The word rendered listen referred not just to hearing and comprehending but also to acting on what was heard or obeying. Only through obedience could the people enjoy the Lord's presence and genuine life.

Verse 3: *“Pay attention and come to Me; listen, so that you will live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, the promises assured to David.”*

Finding life required then and still requires paying attention to and coming to the Lord. Although the world offers many avenues to what it falsely claims to be “life,” those who follow worldly paths remain spiritually empty. Only a right relationship with the Lord results in a full, satisfying life.

As a guarantee the Lord would keep His promise to provide life, He stated He would make an everlasting covenant with His people like the eternal covenant He made with David (see 2 Sam. 7:8-17). All the people needed to do to experience the Lord's unchanging covenant love was to accept His invitation. Just as the Lord's promise to David reached fulfillment in Jesus, the Messiah from the lineage of David, so also the Lord's promise of eternal life is fulfilled for all who accept Christ as Savior and Lord.

Verse 4: *“Since I have made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples,”*

The description of David as leader and commander fits our typical perception of him as king. Ruling under the Lord, the king of Israel had the duty and authority to lead the Lord's people in obeying Him. While the Scripture does not typically portray David as a witness, the Lord intended David's service as a leader and commander to bear witness to Him so all people would recognize His uniqueness, power, and authority and come to Him in faith.

Verse 5: *“So you will summon a nation you do not know, and nations who do not know you will run to you. For the LORD your God, even the Holy One of Israel, has glorified you.”*

The Lord called His people to assume the role once given to David to be a witness to the world. The word translated nations usually referred to non-Israelite peoples and lands. Thus the Lord called His people to engage in missions. The Lord's people needed to be a positive witness for Him in

all they said and did with the intention of leading others to Him. The Lord would bless their faithful efforts by sending nations running to His people to accept, worship, and follow the Lord.

Two titles appear in this verse in reference to God the Father. The phrase *the LORD your God* underscored Israel's special relationship to the Lord. The Lord had chosen Abraham and his descendants not to bless them exclusively but also to work through them to bring all people to Him (see Gen. 12:3). The Lord wanted to use His people to help those who suffered from spiritual hunger find fullness of life in Him. The title the Holy One of Israel was one of Isaiah's favorite designations for the Lord (see Isa. 5:24; 10:20; 12:6; 48:17; 54:5) and emphasized the Lord's otherness and perfect purity. The Lord's holy nature demanded obedience and worship. The Lord's people needed to serve as His witnesses because He had glorified them. He would deliver them from their future Babylonian exile and thus demonstrate His authority and power to the world. Out of gratitude the Lord's people needed to tell others about Him and live as those who belonged to Him.

Verse 6: *Seek the LORD while He may be found; call to Him while He is near.*

Isaiah encouraged his people to seek the Lord. The term seek usually referred to going to the temple to worship or to inquiring of the Lord through priests or prophets, but eighth-century-B.C. prophets had given the term new meaning (see Isa. 9:13; Amos 5:4-6). Seeking the Lord did not mean discovering information about Him but living in His presence and obeying Him, which often involved repentance.

The phrases *while He may be found* and *while He is near* do not imply the Lord extends His offer of salvation and life only at certain times.

Verse 7: *Let the wicked one abandon his way, and the sinful one his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, so He may have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will freely forgive.*

The issue dealt with in this verse is that of human rebellion against the Lord. How can sinful people experience a right relationship with the Lord who is the Holy One. Isaiah encouraged those who are separated from the Lord by their rebellion—all of us—to turn to Him.

Verse 8: *“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not My ways.” This is the LORD's declaration.*

Bible students have offered varying interpretations of the

Lord's statement that His ways and thoughts are higher than ours. One interpretation is that our finite minds simply cannot understand the infinite God. Another interpretation suggests that although human thoughts would think forgiveness impossible, the Lord forgives and restores because He does not think or act as we do. Yet another view focuses on Israel by emphasizing that when the people of Israel broke the Lord's covenant through their sins, the Lord graciously kept His promises anyway. Finally, some Bible students suggest the Lord's statement indicates how far short humans fall from meeting His standards. Our best attempts to be holy do not begin to measure up to His holiness.

All four interpretations express truth. The Lord's forgiveness of Israel's sins and His faithfulness to His promises go far beyond our limits of patience and love. God's sending His Son Jesus Christ to live on earth, die, and rise again so we might have forgiveness of sin and eternal life goes far beyond what we could imagine ourselves doing. The Lord acts as He does because He is different from humans. He is holy and we are sinful people. He overflows with love for all while we typically reserve our love for a few. We cannot comprehend the limitless love and commitment the Lord has for His creation and the wonderful plans He has for us and His world.

Verse 9: *“For as heaven is higher than earth, so My ways are higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.”*

The Lord's ways and thoughts remain infinitely higher than ours. Our holiness on our best days as believers pales immeasurably in contrast to the Lord's holy nature. Still the Lord blesses and uses us to bless others and call them to Him. His ways and thoughts lead Him not to condemn, but to offer forgiveness and to give eternal, abundant life to those who receive Him.

Verse 10: *For just as rain and snow fall from heaven, and do not return there without saturating the earth, and making it germinate and sprout, and providing seed to sow and food to eat,*

Israel and Judah, like other nations in the ancient world, depended on rain for life. If the rains came on time, the crops grew and people had food for the coming year and seed for next year's planting. If the rains failed to come, the people faced famine and no seed for the next planting season. The Lord sends the rains to nourish the earth and provide people's needs. Rain accomplishes its purpose of

sustaining life.

Verse 11: *so My word that comes from My mouth will not return to Me empty, but it will accomplish what I please, and will prosper in what I send it to do.”*

In the ancient Near East rain often was the difference between life and death. As rain accomplishes its purpose of giving physical life, so God's Word accomplishes its purpose of providing spiritual life. God's Word confronts us with our sins and calls us to reject our sinful lifestyles and turn to Him in faith. Through Christ we experience true satisfaction and meaning. Throughout life God's Word sustains us as believers in difficult times, encourages us to live more as He desires, and provides contentment and joy.

Verse 12: *You will indeed go out with joy and be peacefully guided; the mountains and the hills will break into singing before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.*

After emphasizing the complete dependability of His Word, the Lord declared what lay in store for His people after their future exile. They would go out with joy. The phrase go out may call to mind the exodus from Egypt. The word joy refers to the deep satisfaction one finds in relationship with the Lord. The Lord further promised His people would be peacefully guided. Peace refers to wholeness in all areas of life and relationships. The singing of the mountains and hills and the clapping of the trees poetically indicate the joy all creation would share in the repentance of the Lord's people and His restoration of them.

Verse 13: *Instead of the thornbush, a cypress will come up, and instead of the brier, a myrtle will come up; it will make a name for the LORD as an everlasting sign that will not be destroyed.*

The words thornbush and brier graphically describe the future condition of the conquered nation (Isa. 5:6; 7:24-25). The Lord promised that the devastated land would become fertile again. Death would give way to life. The transformed landscape and the transformed lives of the Lord's people would provide an eternal witness to the love and grace of the holy God so others could find life in Him.

The people were not simply to rest in the Lord's salvation. They needed to act justly and live righteously. The Lord also challenged the people to open the temple and community to people who had previously been excluded. The Lord welcomed all who would come to Him and walk in His ways (Isa. 56:1-8).

2. WOEFUL SINS (ISA. 56:9–57:21)

Isaiah 56:9–57:2 deals with the problem of unrighteous leadership. When righteous individuals suffered, the leaders showed no concern. The Lord declared He would care for the righteous, while wicked leaders would reap the consequences their sins (Isa. 56:9–57:2).

The Lord would expose the foolishness of His people who had turned to idolatry. When trouble came, their false gods would fail them (57:3-13). Despite His people's continued sins, the Lord would heal them. Those who refused to give up their wicked ways, however, would face His judgment (57:14-21).

3. WRETCHED RELIGION (ISA. 58:1–59:21)

The people sought to please the Lord by precisely carrying out religious rituals. When their scrupulous performance failed to produce the results they desired, they complained to the Lord. In chapter 58 the Lord described the kind of fasting that pleases Him. Such fasting involves sharing our food with the hungry and inviting poor and homeless people into our homes. When we act in such ways, we experience the Lord's blessing (58:1-14).

The Lord wanted to save and lead His people, but their sins prevented Him from doing so. After hearing a confession of the nation's many sins, the Lord responded with a promise of salvation (59:1-21).

4. WELCOME FUTURE (ISA. 60:1–66:24)

Rebuilding would not be easy for those who initially would return to Judah from Babylonian exile. Their slow progress would lead them to feel discouraged. The Lord, however, offered the people hope and encouragement. The Lord's people would experience a wonderful new future if they committed themselves to Him (60:1–62:12). As Jesus began His public ministry, He read from Isaiah 61:1-3 and declared those words fulfilled in Him (Luke 4:16-21).

Chapters 63 and 64 consist of a description of the Lord's judgment and a prayer for deliverance. Chapter 65 and 66 contrast the different character of the righteous and the wicked and their respective destinies. The Book of Isaiah began with the Lord's reference to His rebellious children (Isa. 1:2-3). It ends with a description of the final destruction of those who rebel (66:24).

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MAY 10

MICAH 1:1–2:13

THE BACKGROUND

During the uncertain, threatening days of Assyria's move into biblical Palestine, the Lord spoke through His prophet Micah [MIGH kuh] in an effort to turn His rebellious people back to Him. Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah, spoke as the Lord directed Him against the disobedient people of Israel's capital Samaria and Judah's capital Jerusalem. The prophet knew the sins of the residents of both capital cities represented the sins of all the people in both nations. The prophet hoped the Lord's people would respond to His warnings and return to Him (Mic. 1:1).

Although Micah specifically addressed Israel and Judah, the opening verses of the book make clear the universal application of his message. The Lord called all peoples to account. Micah declared the Lord was leaving His heavenly temple and coming to earth to judge sin. Since the most permanent aspects of creation would melt before Him, human beings could not expect to escape His holy judgment. Micah declared the nature and extent of Israel's and Judah's rebellion demanded the Lord's judgment. In particular, the people had exchanged worship of their holy, loving Lord for the unholy worship of worthless idols. Therefore, the Lord would chastise them for their sins (1:2-5).

The Lord announced devastating judgment because of the rebellion of the people of Israel. The capital city of Samaria would become a heap of ruins. Farmers would cultivate vineyards where buildings and walls once stood. The idols Samaria's inhabitants worshiped would be utterly smashed. The Assyrians would take the gifts the people of Samaria had paid to temple prostitutes and use them to pay their own temple prostitutes. The folly of rebellion from the Lord would become painfully clear (1:6-7).

Micah responded to the Lord's message of judgment by mourning for his people. He knew rebellion was not confined to Samaria. His people of Judah would also face the Lord's judgment for their rebellion. Micah named towns along the southwestern approach to Jerusalem that would fall to the conquering army. The wealthy of Jerusalem who gained their riches at the expense of others would discover their wealth and prestige could save neither them nor their possessions. Upon hearing Micah's preaching, the people

demanded he stop. They did not want to hear his condemning words. Micah then announced the Lord's words that the people needed to hear the truth and change accordingly rather than being lulled into a false sense of security. Before judgment even occurred, however, the Lord looked beyond punishment. He would gather a remnant of His people and restore them (1:8–2:13).

1. TIMELESS REVELATION (MIC. 1:1)

Verse 1: *The word of the LORD that came to Micah the Moreshite—what he saw regarding Samaria and Jerusalem in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.*

The Book of Micah, like most other Old Testament prophetic books, begins with a superscription, an introductory verse or verses that provide basic information about the prophet and his historical context. The superscription in Micah 1:1 emphasized the Divine source of Micah's preaching and identified the prophet, the audience for whom his message was intended, and the period of his ministry.

The verbs *came* and *saw* emphasize the Lord's message came from outside the prophet. As a prophet Micah certainly was spiritually sensitive and he may well have been perceptive regarding the events of his time period and what those events might mean for his nation Judah. Yet his book contains not his reflections and perspectives, but the Lord's message to His people. In the ancient Near East people believed that words possessed power. Words did not simply convey information but set in motion the fulfillment of the purpose behind those words. Since a divine word's power rested on the power of the god behind the word, the words of false gods accomplished nothing because idols possessed no power or authority. The word of the one true God, however, always accomplished its purpose because the sovereign Lord possessed all authority.

The name *Micah* means "Who is like the Lord?" and emphasized the Lord's uniqueness, power, and authority. Often in biblical times a person was identified in part by reference to his father, as in David, the son of Jesse. An individual's hometown also might serve to identify the individual, as in Micah the Moreshite [MOH reh shight]. Most Bible students identify Moresheth [MOH reh sheth] with Moresheth-Gath, a town about 25 miles southwest of Jerusalem. Moresheth-Gath lay only six miles from the important defensive city of Lachish [LAY kish]. Micah apparently moved from Moresheth-Gath to preach the Lord's message in Jerusalem. Not being

acquainted with his father, Jerusalem's inhabitants there-fore referred to him by his hometown.

The Lord called Micah to address the sins of Samaria and Jerusalem. As capitals, Samaria and Jerusalem represented well the rebellion and sins of their respective nations Israel and Judah. Micah may have mentioned Samaria before Jerusalem because he addressed his first prophetic message against Israel and its capital (Mic. 1:5-7). Micah also may have hoped what would happen to Samaria and the Northern Kingdom of Israel would serve as a warning to his people in the Southern Kingdom of Judah and encourage them to repent, obey the Lord, and escape similar judgment.

As did Isaiah, Micah prophesied during the reigns of the following kings of Judah: Jotham [JOH thuhm], Ahaz [AY haz], and Hezekiah [HEZ ih kigh uh], which helps explain why we are studying these two prophetic books together this quarter. Micah served the Lord as a faithful prophet from about 740 to 700 B.C.

2. TERRIBLE REBELLION (MIC. 1:2-5)

Verse 2: *Listen, all you peoples; pay attention, earth and everyone in it! The Lord God will be a witness against you, the Lord, from His holy temple.*

Micah's initial prophecy began with the Lord's summoning every nation to His divine courtroom. Perhaps the Lord intended the nations to serve as witnesses of His charges against Israel and Judah. In any case, the Lord's summons clearly demonstrated His sovereignty over all nations, and it is more likely that He is bringing charges against all of them. The Lord possesses authority over and is actively involved in the affairs of every nation. His indictment of His people for their rebellion meant every other nation stood indicted as well for their refusal to acknowledge and follow Him. Since the Lord's authority and activity extend throughout time, every nation today needs to pay attention to God's Word and follow Him.

The Lord summoned the nations to listen. The Hebrew word translated *listen* often conveys the idea of obeying as well as hearing. The people needed to hear and understand the Lord's words and then respond with repentance and obedience.

Verse 3: *Look, the LORD is leaving His place and coming down to trample the heights of the earth.*

The Hebrew verb form translated *is leaving* probably indi-

cates action that will soon occur. The Lord's words served as a warning to His people. They were running out of time. They needed to repent in order to avoid His judgment. Because He was moving, they had better act quickly.

Unlike some previous occasions when the Lord came to deliver His people, He came this time to bring judgment on them for their sins. The word *heights* referred to the tops of mountains but also to the high places where people, including the inhabitants of Israel and Judah, worshiped false gods. The Lord's judgment of His people would include the destruction of the high places where they practiced idolatry.

Verse 4: *The mountains will melt beneath Him, and the valleys will split apart, like wax near a fire, like water cascading down a mountainside.*

The Lord's appearance would shake the very foundations of the earth. Just as wax melts when placed too close to a fire, so the mighty mountains would melt. Just as cascading water carves out channels in the earth, the Lord's coming would split valleys apart. Except for the seasonal rains, Micah's hometown was basically arid. When rain did come, the claylike soil could not absorb the water and the water turned gullies into roaring streams that carved out new channels and moved boulders. If the most impressive, permanent structures on earth crumbled at the Lord's coming, no human could withstand His coming in judgment.

Bible scholars have understood the description of mountains melting and valleys splitting in four ways. Some believe the verse literally described what would happen when the Lord with His almighty power came to judge the earth. Others suggest the imagery referred to the destructiveness of the Assyrian army when it swept through Israel and Judah. Still other Bible scholars believe the imagery represented human powerlessness in the face of the Lord's judgment. Finally, some suggest Micah had all three understandings in mind.

Verse 5: *All this will happen because of Jacob's rebellion and the sins of the house of Israel. What is the rebellion of Jacob? Isn't it Samaria? And what is the high place of Judah? Isn't it Jerusalem?*

Israel's and Judah's rebellion and sins resulted in the Lord's coming in judgment. The Hebrew word translated *rebellion* referred to disobedience to an authority. As conquered nations that rebelled against their conquerors faced swift punishment to bring them back in line, so the Lord's rebellious people faced His judgment. The Hebrew word translated *sins* referred to missing a mark or target or falling

short of a desired goal. The Lord's people had consistently fallen short of His standards and failed to live as He desired. Their intentional disobedience and failure brought the Lord's judgment. Micah wanted all the people to understand their sins were bringing judgment. Both Israel in the north and Judah in the south had become characterized by rebellion.

To find evidence of their nation's sins, the inhabitants of Israel and Judah had only to look at their capital cities. The power and prestige of corrupt national officials encouraged local officials to seek advantage over those they governed. The idolatry practiced in Samaria and Jerusalem encouraged those in outlying villages to ignore the Lord and worship idols. The sins of Samaria and Jerusalem represented the rebellion rampant throughout both nations.

The Lord had demonstrated incredible patience in dealing with His people. From the beginning His people had rebelled and sinned. Perhaps the Israelites believed the Lord no longer cared how they lived since He had not brought judgment on them. Micah declared his people would soon discover rebellion and sins bring sure, disastrous consequences. Eventually the Lord can no longer tolerate people's disobedience or postpone judgment. In love and grace, the Lord provides warnings, guidance, and opportunities to repent, but nations and individuals cannot wait forever to decide to follow Him.

3. TUMULTUOUS RESULTS (MIC. 1:6-7)

Verse 6: *Therefore, I will make Samaria a heap of ruins in the countryside, a planting area for a vineyard. I will roll her stones into the valley and expose her foundations.*

King Omri [AHM righ] of the Northern Kingdom of Israel purchased the hill on which he built the capital city and named it Samaria after the previous owner Shemer [SHEE muhr] (1 Kings 16:23-24). The hill rose approximately 300 feet above the surrounding valleys and provided excellent defense from invading armies.

As judgment for its rebellion and sins, Samaria, the seemingly impregnable capital city, would suffer utter destruction. The hill would be emptied of its buildings and human population and restored to its natural state, a location suitable for planting vineyards. Walls and buildings would crumble. The building stones would roll down the hill and leave exposed the foundations of the previous structures. Micah's prophecy described the typical result of an enemy army's conquest. Rather than preserve a captured city, conquerors

often destroyed it as a warning to other nations or to crush the spirits of the conquered people.

Assyria captured Samaria in 722 B.C. Although the Assyrian army did not completely destroy the city, Samaria lost all political power and influence. Centuries later the ruler John Hyrcanus [huhr KAY nuhs] utterly destroyed Samaria around the end of the second century B.C. Herod the Great rebuilt the city and named it Sebaste [see BASS tih] in honor of Caesar Augustus. Today a tourist at the site sees only rubble, a grim witness to the reality of the Lord's judgment.

Verse 7: *All her carved images will be smashed to pieces, all her wages will be burned in the fire, and I will destroy all her idols. Since she collected the wages of a prostitute, they will be used again for a prostitute.*

Samaria and the Northern Kingdom's rebellion against the Lord indicated the people had turned to other gods. Archaeologists have recovered a variety of ostraca, broken pieces of pottery containing writing, from Samaria dating to the reign of Jeroboam II, the northern Israelite king who ruled shortly before Assyria's conquest of Israel. These ostraca are business receipts that contain the names of individuals involved in the transactions. The presence of the name of the Canaanite fertility god Baal in the names of many of the individuals indicates the widespread practice of idolatry in Samaria and Israel in the eighth century B.C., the time of Micah's ministry.

The Lord declared He would destroy the idols to which His people bowed down. The people had placed their trust in false gods and powers rather than in the true God, the living Lord. The conquest of the nation and the destruction of their idols would clearly demonstrate the consequences of rebellion and call the people back to faith in the Lord.

The Israelites prostituted themselves before the fertility gods and lavished their idols with wealth. Bible scholars understand the reference to the wages of a prostitute being used again for a prostitute as indicating two sins of Samaria and the Northern Kingdom of Israel. First, the need to secure trade agreements and military alliances with surrounding nations may have motivated Israel's leaders to introduce the gods of those nations into Israelite worship. As a result of the Lord's judgment, a more powerful nation would profit economically from the gold and silver in the idols Israel had originally adopted in order to enhance itself economically. Second, the gold and silver plating that covered the images came from offerings given by worshipers who engaged in the

ritual prostitution of fertility worship. The Assyrians would strip away the gold and silver and use it in the idolatrous and immoral worship of their own gods.

4. TRAGIC RUIN (MIC. 1:8–2:13)

Verse 8: *Because of this I will lament and wail; I will walk barefoot and naked. I will howl like the jackals and mourn like ostriches.*

Micah realized the Lord's judgment on Samaria and Israel would have repercussions for his own nation of Judah. The prophet responded by publicly mourning. Mourners went barefoot and sometimes wore only a loincloth, but so did captives taken in war. Micah's actions symbolized his mourning and the coming conquest and captivity of his people.

Verse 9: *For her wound is incurable and has reached even Judah; it has approached the gate of my people, as far as Jerusalem.*

Samaria's wound referred to the Lord's coming judgment. Since Samaria refused to repent, the Lord's judgment was certain and thus incurable. Samaria's sins already had affected Judah and reached the gates of Jerusalem for the people of Judah also were living lives steeped in sin. The gates represented not just the entry points into the city but also the places where judgments were rendered and business was conducted. The sins that permeated Samaria had invaded Jerusalem. Judah could not hope to ultimately escape judgment if it continued on the same sinful course.

Micah pleaded that Jerusalem's conquest not be announced in Gath (Mic. 1:10), just as David had pleaded Saul's defeat not be announced there (2 Sam. 1:20). Gath constituted the closest Philistine city to Judah. Micah did not want the Philistines to gloat over the downfall of the Lord's people.

The cities Micah mentioned in 1:10-16 were located in the foothills of Judah. When King Sennacherib of Assyria marched against Jerusalem in 701 B.C., he captured these cities and others. Micah made powerful wordplays on the names of the cities to indicate their coming fate. For example, the inhabitants of Beth-leaphrah [BETH-lih AF ruh], "the house of dust," would roll in the dust with sorrow and mourning. In Shaphir [SHAY fuhr], meaning "pleasant," life would become far from pleasant. Beth-ezel [beth-EE zuhl], "the house of protection," would fail to provide protection. The name Moresheth [MOH reh sheth] suggested the Hebrew word "inheritance." Micah's hometown would become an inheritance for a conquering nation. Finally, Adullam [uh

DUHL uhm] where David fled for refuge from Saul (1 Sam. 22:1) would become the last refuge for Jerusalem's nobility fleeing from the invading army.

Micah singled out Lachish [LAY kish] for special attention. Lachish constituted one of the largest cities in Judah and lay about 30 miles southwest of Jerusalem. Lachish guarded the southwest approach to Jerusalem and was heavily fortified. The name Lachish sounded like the Hebrew word for "team." Lachish's teams of horses and chariots would not withstand the enemy army's onslaught. Micah also traced Jerusalem's (Daughter Zion's) sins to Lachish, a reference either to Judah's false trust in military might and alliances rather than in the Lord or to Judah's worship of idols (Mic. 1:13).

Micah invited the inhabitants of Jerusalem to join him in intense mourning over their coming conquest and exile (1:16). He hoped his words would penetrate the sinful hearts of his people and motivate them to repent.

Chapter 2. Verse 1: *Woe to those who dream up wickedness and prepare evil plans on their beds! At morning light they accomplish it because the power is in their hands.*

The Old Testament prophets used the word *woe*, a term used in funeral laments, to pronounce doom on a group or nation (see Isa. 10:1; Amos 6:1). Micah announced the imminent judgment of those who invested time in developing evil plans to benefit themselves and hurt others. Instead of sleeping, these sinful individuals imagined new ways to rebel against the Lord, harm others, and benefit themselves and then waited eagerly for dawn so they could carry out their plans. These people were not idle dreamers, but powerful individuals able to do and get what they wanted. They abused their power to accomplish their goals at the expense of others. Micah condemned those who blatantly disobeyed the Lord and gave no thought to others in order to benefit themselves.

Verse 2: *They covet fields and seize them; they also take houses. They deprive a man of his home, a person of his inheritance.*

Micah specifically condemned the rebellious people for coveting. During the long reign of King Uzziah [uh ZIGH uh], a new prosperity came to Judah. Unfortunately, everyone did not prosper equally. The small wealthy class profited most, while the lot of peasant farmers changed little. The wealthy class sought to increasingly enrich themselves at the expense of poor people. When difficult times forced poor farmers into debt, wealthy individuals loaned them money.

When the farmers defaulted on the loans, the wealthy landowners seized their lands. Since the wealthy class controlled the corrupt courts and government, they could get what they wanted.

In ancient Israelite and Judean society, land constituted an individual's God-given inheritance and provided the individual with rights, status, and a means of making a living. When an individual's land was taken, the person lost standing and place in the community as well as a means of support. All the land belonged to the Lord (Lev. 25:23), and the Lord gave His people laws designed to maintain each family's right to the land given them by the Lord (25:10-34). Covetous wealthy people rebelled against the Lord's laws, however, and used their influence and power to take from the poor farmer and enrich themselves. As someone from the small town of Moresheth-gath, Micah had observed how the wealthy class's covetousness had destroyed communities and individuals.

Verse 3: *Therefore, the LORD says: I am now planning a disaster against this nation; you cannot free your necks from it. Then you will not walk so proudly because it will be an evil time.*

The Lord decreed the proper punishment for the covetous people. Just as the covetous individuals had dreamed up plans to achieve their evil, selfish goals (Mic. 2:1), so the Lord would plan a disastrous outcome for them. Like an animal harnessed with a yoke around its neck, the rebellious people would be yoked to their punishment, unable to escape.

Verse 4a: *In that day one will take up a taunt against you, and lament mournfully, saying: We are totally ruined!*

Those who ruined others by taking their lands would find themselves completely ruined. Since they depended on what they possessed rather than on the Lord, their gods would utterly fail them. Those who had accumulated land at the expense of others would have their lands and status in the community taken away just as they had taken the lands and status of others (Mic. 2:4b-5). Micah's audience ordered him to stop preaching doom. They believed the Lord would never punish them. Micah's response included a partial list of the people's sins. The Lord would punish their sins with loss and exile (2:6-11). Judgment did not constitute the Lord's last word to His people, however. Like a shepherd He would gather the remnant of His people and lead them home (2:12-13).

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MAY 17

MICAH 3:1-12

THE BACKGROUND

Micah addressed the leaders of Israel in this passage. The term *Israel* originally referred to the whole nation. After the nation split the Northern Kingdom typically was identified as Israel and the Southern Kingdom as Judah. In the context of Micah 3:1 the designation is applied to Judah (see Mic. 3:9-12) but also included people from the Northern Kingdom who had fled to Judah. Micah accused the leaders of ignoring justice and profiting at the expense of others.

The Lord expected the leaders of His people to know His commandments, obey them, and enforce them in order to establish a godly society. However, the leaders consistently disobeyed the Lord's commandments. They deliberately preferred what was evil over that which was good. They abused powerless individuals in order to satisfy their selfish desires as though they were satisfying their physical appetites by tearing meat from the bones of an animal prepared for a meal. Micah declared the leaders would one day cry out for the Lord's help, but the Lord would refuse to answer them (3:1-4).

Like Israel's government leaders, Israel's prophets also should have known and obeyed the Lord's commands. Instead they proclaimed messages based on the payment they received. For those who paid them well, the prophets proclaimed peace or well-being. The Lord's judgment on these prophets would consist of darkness instead of the light of the Lord's revelation. When they sought a true word from Him, they would experience only silence. In contrast, Micah stated his preaching against the people's rebellion identified him as a true prophet. He spoke powerfully and courageously for the Lord because He was filled with the Spirit's power. His message convicted people of their sins and urged them to repent and return to the Lord (3:5-8).

Micah concluded his prophetic message in chapter 3 by condemning the actions of all Israel's corrupt leaders. Judges accepted bribes while priests and prophets showed more concern for receiving monetary payment for services than for helping individuals mature in their relationship with the Lord. Having been lulled into a sense of false security, the leaders firmly believed the Lord remained present with them and would protect them from harm despite their persistent

disobedience. Micah declared the leaders' sins would bring disaster upon the entire nation. In the future the holy city of Jerusalem or Zion would lie crumbled in ruins and choked with thickets (3:9-12).

1. ACT ON BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES (MIC. 3:1-4)

Verse 1: *Then I said: "Now listen, leaders of Jacob, you rulers of the house of Israel. Aren't you supposed to know what is just?"*

Micah invited the leaders and rulers to listen to the Lord's message to them. To *listen* meant not just to hear and mentally comprehend words but also to act on what the speaker said. The Lord's condemnation of the leaders and rulers was designed to lead them to repentance.

The word *leaders* translates a Hebrew word literally meaning "heads." The same Hebrew word is used to designate the individuals Moses selected to resolve disputes among the people (Ex. 18:25). Those individuals took care of minor cases and sent only the more difficult cases to Moses. After the people of Israel moved into Canaan, elders or heads of extended families heard and decided disputes. When kings began to rule in Israel, the king became the chief judicial official. Because most kings lacked the time for and perhaps an interest in deciding cases, they appointed judicial officials to administer justice (see 2 Chron. 19:4-7). The term rendered *rulers* originally referred to military leaders although by Micah's time the designation was used in a more general sense.

The leaders and rulers had the responsibility of administering justice according to the Lord's laws and will. Every decision, whether given by government official or priest, constituted a sacred responsibility to act justly according to the Lord's law and to provide an example of righteousness to all.

Micah's question regarding the leaders' and rulers' knowledge of justice assumed a positive response. Of course, they were supposed to know what was just! They knew the Lord's standards and had certainly heard that maintaining the covenant relationship with the Lord necessitated following and obeying Him. They knew the Lord's law formed the basis for a stable, good society. Unfortunately, the leaders and rulers ignored the Lord. They were openly abusing their power for their own personal advantage.

Verse 2: *You hate good and love evil. You tear off the skin of people and strip their flesh from their bones.*

Instead of treasuring and consistently making decisions according to the Lord's law, the leaders and rulers ignored His standards and administered injustice rather than justice. The form of the verb translated *hate* implies the leaders and rulers continuously rejected the Lord's law, refused to protect the rights of the people, and issued unfair, unrighteous decisions. Knowing what the Lord expected, they acted with no regard for His law or for the people's welfare.

Rather than enforcing justice, these leaders acted with brutal injustice. Those charged with shepherding the Lord's sheep turned on them. These ungodly leaders exploited and abused the people to satisfy their own desires. Like wild animals or starving humans ripping into an animal to satisfy their hunger, the leaders and rulers used their positions of leadership to take what they wanted to appease their selfish desires.

Micah portrayed the leaders and rulers as savage butchers preparing a meal from animal carcasses. After stripping the skin from the bones and breaking up the meat and bones, the officials cooked and feasted on a sumptuous stew consisting of the livelihood and rights they had stolen from others through corrupt legal decisions (Mic. 3:3).

When the time for the Lord's judgment arrived, the leaders and rulers would cry out to the Lord to deliver them, but the Lord would not respond to their cries. Their punishment would fit their crime. The officials who had ignored the cries of the poor and needy for justice would discover the Lord would ignore their cries for deliverance (see Prov. 21:13). Instead of seeing the Lord at work to deliver them, He would hide His favor and blessings from them and allow them to experience the consequences of their corrupt, rebellious actions (Mic. 3:4).

2. LEAD IN GODLY PATHS (MIC. 3:5-8)

Verse 5: *This is what the LORD says concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who proclaim peace when they have food to sink their teeth into but declare war against the one who puts nothing in their mouths.*

The true prophets of the Lord often began their messages with the phrase: *This is what the LORD says* (see Jer. 8:4; Amos 7:17). The false prophets deceptively claimed their words also originated with the Lord. Micah accused the false prophets of leading the people astray. His use of the phrase *my people* indicated the deep love he had for his people. Micah did not want to see them led astray by false words. He

identified with his people and wanted them to experience life and security in the Lord.

Micah accused the false prophets of basing their prophecies on the gifts they received. It was customary to give prophets gifts in return for their help in understanding the Lord's will and direction (1 Sam. 9:7; Amos 7:12). The false prophets of Micah's time focused on the gifts and adjusted the prophecy to match the size or value of the payment they received. To the individual who provided them with a substantial gift, they delivered a message of peace and prosperity (see Jer. 6:14). They promised such a worshiper security and well-being. Against the person who gave them a meager gift or no gift at all, they declared war and proclaimed misfortune and disaster. The false prophets listened to their own greedy desires rather than to the Lord.

Verse 6: *Therefore, it will be night for you—without visions; it will grow dark for you—without divination. The sun will set on these prophets, and the daylight will turn black over them.*

Just as the leaders' punishment fit their crime, so the prophets' punishment would fit their crime. If they genuinely tried to hear the Lord's voice, the Lord would remain silent. If they sought the Lord's will, He would not respond. Some of these prophets had been called by the Lord but had rejected His call and sought to use their position of power to benefit themselves. The Lord would deprive them of the spiritual gifts He had given them. The brightness of the Lord's presence and the clarity of His Word would fade into a darkness of spiritual night.

Verse 7: *Then the seers will be ashamed and the diviners disappointed. They will all cover their mouths because there will be no answer from God.*

Having mentioned visions and divination in verse 6, Micah turned to those who used such methods to determine God's will. The designation seers referred to individuals who received the Lord's message through visions. Seers could see and comprehend what others did not. The prophetic tradition in Israel traced itself back to seers (1 Sam. 9:9) indicating the early importance of visions as channels of the Lord's message.

The term *diviners* referred to individuals who consulted signs and omens in their attempts to determine the divine will. Diviners used a variety of methods. Arrows might be placed in a quiver, shaken, and then either poured or drawn out. The diviner then interpreted how the arrows landed or

which arrow was drawn to make his determination. Sometimes diviners examined the liver of a dead animal with the size, shape, position, and color of the liver indicating the divine answer.

Many foreign nations regularly used diviners to consult their gods. Israel had no need to consult diviners since the Lord spoke through true prophets. In fact, the Lord condemned the use of divination and magic in every form (see Ex. 22:18; Lev. 19:26; 20:27; Deut. 18:9-14; 2 Kings 9:22; Isa. 2:6; Jer. 27:9-10).

Micah declared the seers would be ashamed and the diviners would be disappointed. Since the Lord would not speak to them in visions or through the manipulation of objects, they would have nothing to say to those who came to consult them. If they dared to speak falsely in the Lord's name, their words would not come true. Their reputations would be ruined, and people would no longer consult them.

Covering the mouth could indicate uncleanness (Lev. 13:45) but more often expressed grief (Ezek. 24:17). The seers and diviners would grieve for their lost prestige. In addition, they would cover their mouths because they had no word from the Lord to speak.

Micah distinguished himself from the false prophets. They prophesied based on the payment they received. Micah received his power and messages from the Lord. He spoke with justice, understood the Lord's desires for righteous and just living, and challenged his people to abandon corrupt practices. He also spoke with the kind of courage that enabled him to deal with any danger he might face in delivering the Lord's message. Micah needed power, justice, and courage to accomplish his God-appointed task of pointing out his nation's sins. Despite the unpopularity of his message, he faithfully spoke the Lord's message (Mic. 3:8).

3. AVOID FOOLISH PRESUMPTION (MIC. 3:9-12)

Verse 9: *Listen to this, leaders of the house of Jacob, you rulers of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert everything that is right,*

Micah demonstrated his God-given courage by again condemning his nation's leaders and rulers. Instead of enforcing policies and rendering decisions that maintained justice among the people, they acted for their own benefit and seemed unaffected by how others suffered.

The word translated *pervert* means to twist what should be straight so it becomes crooked. The leaders and rulers

redefined justice and righteousness to accommodate their selfish desires. They developed their own system of justice based on what benefited them and administered their brand of justice in their leadership roles. They knew the Lord's laws and standards but rejected them. In their perverted thinking, right became wrong and wrong became right.

Verse 10: *who build Zion with bloodshed and Jerusalem with injustice.*

Micah accused the leaders and rulers of building Zion with bloodshed and Jerusalem with injustice. The designation *Zion* originally referred to the fortified hill on which Jerusalem stood. Micah used *Zion* in parallel with Jerusalem to refer to Judah's capital city. The sins of the leaders and rulers in Jerusalem supported Micah's contention that the sins in the capital city vividly represented the sins of Judah (see Mic. 1:5).

This verse probably refers specifically to the extensive building projects in Jerusalem during Micah's ministry. King Hezekiah had extended the city's walls and constructed the Siloam tunnel (see 2 Chron. 32:27-30). The wealthy leaders of society also had constructed lavish homes for themselves and luxurious buildings in which they dispensed their brand of justice. They used their positions of power to squeeze everything they could from those they considered beneath them. Their treatment of the poorer members of society showed their contempt for them. Such leaders viewed the common people as things they could use to accomplish their goals, and they demonstrated no desire to care for those they were supposed to shepherd. These pillars of society built their homes, workplaces, wealth, and careers on unjust treatment of others.

Verse 11: *Her leaders issue rulings for a bribe, her priests teach for payment, and her prophets practice divination for money. Yet they lean on the LORD, saying, "Isn't the LORD among us? No calamity will overtake us."*

Having previously condemned the actions of particular leaders, Micah spoke to all of them as a group united by their betrayal of their God-given responsibilities. The leaders charged with executing justice had betrayed their responsibility by placing a price on justice. Only those willing and able to bribe the leaders received decisions in their favor. Like Samuel's sons, the leaders perverted justice by rendering their decisions based on the payment they received (see 1 Sam. 8:3). They knew the Lord had expressly forbidden bribery (Ex. 23:8; Deut. 16:19), but they did not care.

Just as the leaders rendered favorable decisions for money, so the priests taught for payment. The priests had the responsibility of serving in the temple, teaching the Lord's law, and deciding disputes brought to them (Lev. 10:8-11; Deut. 17:8-9). The tithes and offerings of the people supported the priests and their families. Dissatisfied with the Lord's provision for them, the priests of Micah's time willingly taught and resolved disputes but only for those who could pay their price. After receiving payment, the priests taught what the people wanted to hear. Instead of challenging them to a deeper spiritual life, the priests lulled the people into a false sense of security and blessing. The priests had rejected their obligation to the Lord as spiritual leaders in favor of personal wealth.

The false prophets joined with the leaders and priests in offering their services only to those who agreed to pay their price. True prophets sought a word from the Lord on behalf of an individual without demanding a fee. They accepted whatever gift individuals could give in the knowledge that the Lord had called them not to be wealthy but to serve Him faithfully. The false prophets of Micah's time attempted to consult the Lord only when individuals could pay. Since the prophets were only interested in money, they spoke whatever the person who paid them wished to hear. Instead of challenging individuals with the Lord's message, they offered words of false comfort and security.

While acting corruptly, the leaders, priests, and prophets claimed to lean on the LORD. The verb rendered *lean* denoted trust for the Hebrews just as leaning conveys the concept of trust to us. In times of crisis we lean on family and friends for support. All the leaders of Micah's time claimed to trust in the Lord. They knew how to use holy language to make themselves appear holy, but their claim to trust in the Lord was a lie. They trusted in wealth, not in the Lord, and willingly abandoned their God-given responsibilities to enrich themselves.

The leaders, priests, and prophets believed the presence of the temple in Jerusalem guaranteed the Lord's presence with them. They believed the Lord would never allow His temple to be destroyed and His city to fall to an enemy army. As long as the priests and people performed the religious rituals, they falsely believed they remained safe and secure. The temple had become a magic charm to them rather than a reminder of the Lord's presence and His call to right living. A century later Jeremiah faced the same erroneous belief

(see Jer. 7:1-15).

The leaders, priests, and prophets felt they could use their power and influence to do whatever they wanted. They still performed their assigned tasks of rendering judgments, teaching the law, and inquiring of the Lord. They simply performed those tasks for extra money. Apparently, the people accepted their behavior as the status quo. Unfortunately their and the people's acceptance of such behavior did not make their actions acceptable to the Lord. Their unethical, immoral behavior ran directly counter to the Lord's law and expectations.

Verse 12: *Therefore, because of you, Zion will be plowed like a field, Jerusalem will become ruins, and the hill of the temple mount will be a thicket.*

The corruption of the leaders, priests, and prophets would result in the destruction of Jerusalem. Micah graphically depicted the appearance of the devastated city. A place where children once played and merchants conducted business would become devoid of human life. The former inhabitants would either have been killed or taken captive. City walls and buildings would lie in ruins. The temple the leaders believed guaranteed their safety would be overgrown with weeds and shrubs and inhabited only by wild animals.

Roughly a century later, Jeremiah delivered a similar prophecy against Jerusalem. When his audience called for Jeremiah's death, some of the elders remembered that these words of Micah had led King Hezekiah to turn to the Lord and avert the disaster (Jer. 26:1-19). Although Jeremiah escaped death, his prophecy came true when the Babylonian army destroyed Jerusalem in 587 B.C. While Hezekiah's faithful response saved Jerusalem in Micah's time, the corrupt actions of later leaders condemned Jerusalem as Micah had prophesied.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MAY 24

MICAH 4:1–6:16

THE BACKGROUND

After prophesying Jerusalem's destruction (Mic. 3:12), Micah declared Jerusalem's future restoration and the dawn of an era of peace and prosperity. In that future time people from around the world would stream to Jerusalem to worship, to learn the Lord's ways, and to seek the Lord's just decisions in disputes. With fear of war gone, blacksmiths would hammer instruments of war into agricultural implements, and all people could enjoy security. The Lord would gather His scattered people and bring them to Jerusalem. The Lord would restore His conquered city, execute judgment on ungodly nations, and use the spoils of victory for His glory (4:1-13).

As Micah preached the message recorded in chapter 5, Jerusalem lay under siege. The prophet pointed his people beyond the present threat to a wonderful future. The Lord would raise a new Ruler from David's hometown of Bethlehem. The Ruler would care for the people and protect them from all external threats. The Lord would restore the remnant of His people and remove their enemies. The Lord would destroy the military might and idols in which both His people and ungodly nations trusted (5:1-15).

Micah announced a lawsuit brought by the Lord against His sinful people. The Lord had delivered His people and provided able, dedicated leaders to guide them. However, they had failed to do what the Lord required—to act with justice, demonstrate loyalty, and walk humbly with Him. The Lord would bring judgment on His people for their sinful behavior in business dealings and community relationships. The people would work to satisfy their desires, but their efforts would fail. For rejecting His commandments and following the practices of their worst kings, the Lord's people would experience destruction and become an object of scorn (6:1-16).

1. BEYOND THE BLEAK FUTURE (MIC. 4:1-13)

Verse 1: *In the last days the mountain of the LORD's house will be established at the top of the mountains and will be raised above the hills. Peoples will stream to it,*

The fact that Micah 4:1-3 is almost identical to Isaiah 2:2-4 has been explained in several ways. Some believe Micah quoted the words from Isaiah, while others think Isaiah

quoted the prophecy from Micah. However, nothing prohibits the Lord from having inspired both prophets separately at different times to write these similar words of hope.

Micah had announced the Lord's judgment on Jerusalem (Mic. 3:12), but the prophet knew judgment did not constitute the Lord's final word. The phrase *the last days* can refer to a time in the distant future, to a major turning point in history, or to the end times. Micah's prophecy certainly began to be fulfilled with the restoration of the Jews to their land following the Babylonian exile. Yet the restoration was only a foretaste of what the Lord planned for His people. Only Christ's first and second comings would and will completely fulfill Micah's prophecy. Rather than trying to figure out how close we may be to Jesus' second coming, the precise timing of which is beyond our human limitations of knowledge (Matt. 24:36), we need to apply the hope Micah offered to our daily lives. The Lord kept His promises by restoring His people to their land after the Babylonian exile and by sending His Son Jesus Christ to provide salvation. Knowing what the Lord has done in keeping His promises in the past, we can live with confident hope in the present as we anticipate His promised future blessings.

The phrase *the mountain of the LORD's house* referred to the temple hill the Lord would destroy because of Judah's sin (Mic. 3:12). Micah prophesied the Lord would establish the site again as a place of worship. David had brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem and made the location the center of worship. Solomon had built a glorious temple for the Lord on the site. As judgment for Judah's sins, the temple would be razed by the Babylonians in the sixth century B.C. but then raised by the Lord above every mountain and hill. Many Bible scholars believe the Lord will not physically raise the hill on which the temple stood but that He will raise the temple in prominence in the eyes of all peoples so they will turn to and follow the Lord. Nothing, however, prevents us from understanding that the Lord will raise the temple mount physically as well as in the estimation of all nations.

The temple hill in Jerusalem stands about 2,400 feet above sea level. To raise it above the highest mountain would require a miracle. To change the attitudes of people from rejecting the Lord to recognizing Him also would require a miracle. The Lord possesses the power to accomplish both miracles.

Micah declared people would stream to the temple. As water in a river rushes along toward its destination, so the

peoples of the world would rush to the temple, not to destroy it but to worship.

Verse 2: *and many nations will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us about His ways so we may walk in His paths." For instruction will go out of Zion and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.*

Nations before, during, and after Micah's time attempted to conquer the Lord's people and many succeeded. Thus the image of people of many nations ascending on Jerusalem could be a frightening one. Under the Lord's inspiration, Micah envisioned the nations coming not to conquer but to seek and worship the Lord. Both Micah and Isaiah knew that someday people of many nations as well as the Lord's own rebellious people would recognize His sovereignty and make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship Him (see Isa. 11:10; 55:5).

The Lord's people came to the temple to worship, but they also came to discover how the Lord wanted them to act toward Him and others. The nations would come to sing the Lord's praises, but also they would come to seek the Lord's instruction and guidance for daily living. The nations would not only want to know about the Lord but also to know Him in a personal relationship. The peoples of the world would realize that only through faith in the Lord and obedience to His ways could they experience meaningful living. To experience life in the Lord, they would readily make the long journey to Jerusalem. The nations' desire to know and follow the Lord constitutes a wonderful miracle of the Lord made even more wonderful by the fact that the Lord would remove any obstacle that would impede them from knowing Him.

Verse 3: *He will settle disputes among many peoples and provide arbitration for strong nations that are far away. They will beat their swords into plows, and their spears into pruning knives. Nation will not take up the sword against nation, and they will never again train for war.*

Village elders dispensed justice among the Lord's people. The king and priests also possessed judicial authority. Everyone who judged cases was to render decisions fairly according to the Lord's law. Unfortunately, as Micah pointed out, many judges based their verdicts on who could pay them the highest bribe (Mic. 3:1-3). That unethical process would no longer exist in the world the Lord revealed to Micah. Since everyone would acknowledge God as Lord and His ways as just, nations and peoples would bring their disputes to Him

for His perfect judgment and all sides would recognize and accept His decision.

Nations throughout history have typically attempted to settle their disputes on the battlefield. With the Lord recognized and obeyed by all people as the final, just authority in all matters, war would become unnecessary. Soldiers who asked blacksmiths to forge metal into swords and spearheads would return their weapons to the smiths to be converted into agricultural tools. Destructive weapons would become constructive farming implements used to give life rather than to take life. Citizens would no longer need to leave their homes and families to train for war.

Verse 4: *But each man will sit under his grapevine and under his fig tree with no one to frighten him. For the mouth of the LORD of Hosts has promised this.*

Sitting under a grapevine or fig tree with nothing to fear constituted the description of a peaceful, secure life for the Lord's people (see 1 Kings 4:25; Zech. 3:10). Individuals could enjoy the land the Lord had given them and the fruits of their labors without fear of attack, loss, hunger, or call to arms.

Micah turned from looking at the Lord's wonderful future to focus on the present situation. The nations still worshiped their false gods instead of the one true God. In contrast, the faithful remnant of the Lord's people committed themselves to worship and follow the Lord (Mic. 4:5).

Before the Lord would restore His people and ultimately bring in a new future, they would experience His judgment for their disobedience. While severe, the judgment would be relatively brief. Then the Lord would gather His weak people, strengthen them, and restore them to their land. The people of Judah would experience defeat, and the Babylonians would take many of them into exile, but the Lord would eventually bring His people back to their homeland. Verse 13 is a reminder that the Lord's sovereignty extends throughout the earth (Mic. 4:6-13).

2. BEYOND THE PRESENT THREAT (MIC. 5:1-15)

Verse 1: *Now daughter who is under attack, you slash yourself in grief; a siege is set against us! They are striking the judge of Israel on the cheek with a rod.*

Micah 4:9-5:1 consists of a prophecy of Jerusalem's future judgment at the hands of the Babylonians, the Babylonian exile of some of Judah's citizens, and a promise of restoration. Micah 5:1 includes the present threat Assyria posed to

the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Worshipers in the fertility cult of Baal sometimes slashed themselves in an effort to get Baal's attention that was doomed to fail (see 1 Kings 18:28). Mourners sometimes cut themselves as they mourned the dead (Deut. 14:1). Although the Lord had instructed His people not to engage in such pagan practices, they rejected His command. Perhaps they slashed themselves in the hope that the Lord might appreciate their sincerity and come to help them. Maybe they slashed themselves in mourning for the deaths the anticipated conquest would bring. In any case, their pagan actions did not impress the Lord.

Bible scholars hold different opinions regarding the siege Micah had in mind in Micah 5:1. Some think he prophesied of Nebuchadnezzar [NEB yoo kad NEZ uhr] the Babylonian's siege of Jerusalem in 588-586 B.C. Micah's prophecy of the Babylonian exile (Mic. 4:10) supports that understanding. Other Bible scholars suggest Micah referred to Sennacherib [suh NAKuh rib] the Assyrian's siege of Jerusalem in 701 B.C. when Hezekiah reigned over Judah. Micah's later mention of Assyria's invasion of Judah and the Lord's saving Judah from Assyria (5:5-6) support the siege as that of Sennacherib. The Lord would spare Jerusalem from conquest in 701 B.C. with the desire that the people repent and follow Him. When they refused and continued their disobedient ways, the Lord would ultimately judge them with conquest by Babylonia and the exile of many of the nation's inhabitants.

The term *judge* in this context designated the king. What is the meaning of the expression *they are striking the judge of Israel on the cheek with a rod*. Some Bible students interpret Micah's prophecy to refer to the beating of Jesus before His crucifixion (see John 19:3). Others suggest the prophet referred to a king being struck with a rod and view the passage as a prophecy of the Babylonians or Chaldeans putting out King Zedekiah's eyes when he tried to escape during Babylonia's siege of Jerusalem (see 2 Kings 25:3-7). A third view is that because a slap on the cheek was a sign of humiliation and defeat, the language indicated the king's (Hezekiah's or Zedekiah's) inability to deliver either himself or his people.

Verse 2: *Bethlehem Ephrathah, you are small among the clans of Judah; One will come from you to be ruler over Israel for Me. His origin is from antiquity, from eternity.*

During Micah's ministry, the Assyrian army besieged Jerusalem and humiliated Judah's king (5:1). Over a century later Babylonia would completely conquer Judah and its weak king and take many of its citizens into exile (4:10). The Lord

revealed to Micah, however, that His people were not destined always to be ruled by a line of ineffective, weak kings. Someday the Lord would raise a new King who would reign in power and with righteousness.

The Lord would raise this King not from the palace in Jerusalem but from Bethlehem Ephrathah [BETH lih hem-EF ruh thuh]. Bethlehem, David's hometown, lay about five miles southwest of Jerusalem. Ephrathah evidently originally referred to a specific clan in Judah (see Ruth 1:2) but became a synonym for Bethlehem or a reference to the district in which Bethlehem was located (see Ruth 4:11). The use of both names distinguished Bethlehem Ephrathah from Bethlehem of Zebulun (Josh. 19:14-16).

The people expected the new King to be born in the large capital city of Jerusalem, the center of government and power. Instead, the Lord would raise the new Ruler from Bethlehem, David's hometown. As the Lord raised David from Bethlehem to lead His people, so He would raise His new Ruler from Bethlehem to govern with complete justice and righteousness. The new King's origin is older than time itself. It is from antiquity, from eternity. He has always existed. Of course, this new Ruler is none other than the Messiah!

Verse 3: *Therefore, He will abandon them until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of His brothers will return to the people of Israel.*

Before the Lord sent the new Ruler, His people would experience the Lord's judgment for their disobedience and rebellion. The Lord would hand His people over to their enemies but only for a limited time. Bible scholars have offered three different identifications of the phrase *she who is in labor*. Some believe the phrase referred to Mary, Jesus' mother. Others think the phrase referred to Bethlehem, the village in which the Ruler would be born. Still others believe it is a reference to Judah, perhaps more specifically to Jerusalem. In any case, the messianic Ruler would come from the Lord's chosen people.

Verse 4: *He will stand and shepherd them in the strength of Yahweh, in the majestic name of Yahweh His God. They will live securely, for then His greatness will extend to the ends of the earth.*

Rulers in the ancient Near East were supposed to shepherd their people by caring for, nurturing, and protecting them. David had worked as a shepherd early in life and after becoming king, he served ably, although not perfectly, as the shepherd of his people. The Lord's promised Ruler would

perfectly shepherd His people and lead them to peaceful, secure, abundant life.

The Lord would strengthen the new Ruler so He could accomplish His task. He would rule in the Lord's majestic name. The term *majestic* referred to regal power and authority. The Lord would grant the new Ruler royal power, and He would rule in the Lord's name or according to the Lord's character. He would not use His power to oppress and satisfy selfish desires. Instead, He would rule as the Lord's faithful representative for the benefit of His purposes and His people. The new Ruler's intimate relationship with His God ensured He would know the Lord's will and follow His purposes. The Ruler's work would result in people everywhere seeing and acknowledging the Lord's greatness.

Micah referred both to Jesus' first coming as an infant born in Bethlehem to teach, minister, die, and rise again and to His second coming as sovereign Lord and Judge over all the world. Often Old Testament prophecies regarding the Messiah did not distinguish between His first and second comings.

After the Lord's judgment on His people, He would restore a faithful remnant. The remnant would bless surrounding nations and nurture faith in the Lord. The Lord and His people would triumph over all their enemies (Mic. 5:5-9). Finally, the Lord would remove all temptations that hindered His people from serving Him. He would remove the military in which His people trusted and destroy all traces of idolatry. He would destroy cities that served as centers of idolatry and nations that had rejected Him and led His people astray. With all temptations and barriers to faith removed, the Lord's people could depend solely on Him, not on military might or religious objects (5:10-15).

3. BEYOND THE CURRENT WRONGDOING (MIC. 6:1-16)

In one of the better-known Old Testament passages, the Lord summoned His people to court and commanded them to defend their actions. As witnesses the Lord called the mountains and hills, His enduring creations that had seen generation after generation of His people sin against Him. The Lord recited His past actions on His people's behalf. Despite His compassionate care, His people continued to disobey Him and even believed the performance of child sacrifice satisfied the Lord. The Lord declared He desired people "to act justly, to love faithfulness, and to walk humbly" with Him (Mic. 6:1-8).

Unfortunately, the people to whom Micah preached did not live as the Lord required. The Lord confronted them again by listing their sins in business dealings and community relations. Their sins would bring the Lord's judgment, first through Assyrian invasions and eventually through conquest by Babylonia. But beyond the Lord's discipline, lay a hopeful future.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MAY 31

MICAH 7:1-20

THE BACKGROUND

Micah felt all alone. Though he looked high and low, he could find no one in Judah who trusted and followed the Lord. Instead of behaving righteously, people pushed others aside. Judges demanded bribes before they rendered decisions. Evil constituted the only thing at which people excelled. An individual could not even trust a close family member. Micah announced the Lord's judgment would fall on his people. In the meantime, the prophet declared he would make the right choice of committing to hope in and obey the Lord (Mic. 7:1-7).

Speaking for Jerusalem, Micah instructed the city's enemies not to rejoice over Judah's destruction. Although the Lord would judge His people for their sins, after the judgment He would deliver and restore His people. Then the nations who opposed the Lord's people would suffer His judgment. The Lord's people would rebuild Jerusalem's walls and expand the nation's borders. Then people would come to Jerusalem from throughout the world to worship the Lord. The rest of the world will become a desolation because of its inhabitants' evil deeds (7:8-13).

Micah appealed to the Lord to serve as a Shepherd to His people and allow them to live in peace and security. The Lord declared He would act as He had in the past and deliver His people from their enemies. The nations who oppressed His people and mocked Him would tremble in fear and awe before the Lord. The Lord would forgive His people's sins and keep His promises to Abraham because of His steadfast love (7:14-20).

1. DEPRESSING CULTURE (MIC. 7:1-6)

Verse 1: *How sad for me! For I am like one who—when the summer fruit has been gathered after the gleaning of the grape harvest—finds no grape cluster to eat, no early fig, which I crave.*

Previously Micah had presented the Lord's lawsuit against His people (Mic. 6:1-8) and declared the Lord's guilty verdict and its consequences (6:9-16). Micah lamented the fact that he lived in a nation that had turned so far from the Lord. His exclamation "How sad for me!" may appear self-centered on the surface, but in actuality that cry described his deep per-

sonal grief because of his people's sins. Micah could find no one to join him in living for the Lord (see 7:2). People ignored his preaching. His faithful ministry for the Lord had resulted not in repentance by the people but continued rebellion. He had failed to motivate a decadent society to return to the Lord.

Micah felt like a person who goes into a vineyard hoping to glean some remaining fruit after the harvest only to discover that no fruit remains. Likewise the early figs, which were delicious fruits, have been stripped from the trees. The grapevines and fig-tree branches are bare. Like Isaiah (see Isa. 5:1-7), Micah probably intended the vineyard to represent Judah. The Lord had planted and cared for His people, but they had persistently rebelled against Him and pursued their own selfish interests. Micah craved the company of other people committed to the Lord, but his cravings went unsatisfied. He felt completely alone.

Verse 2: *Godly people have vanished from the land; there is no one upright among the people. All of them wait in ambush to shed blood; they hunt each other with a net.*

Abraham pleaded for the Lord to spare Sodom, but 10 righteous people could not be found in the city (Gen. 18:23-33). Jeremiah searched for a person who acted justly but could find no one (Jer. 5:1-5). The Lord told Ezekiel He had searched for people of faith and integrity, but none existed (Ezek. 22:30). Although Micah lived in a different time from the times of Abraham, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, he too failed to find a person who acted faithfully and lived righteously.

The Hebrew word translated *godly* comes from the same verbal root as the word rendered "faithfulness," a characteristic the Lord declared He desires (Mic. 6:8). Godly people practice the Lord's love toward Him and others. They live faithfully each day in an effort to strengthen others and serve the Lord. The Hebrew word translated *upright* also identified Job as a person of integrity (Job 1:1,8). Upright people act honorably and honestly in all their dealings. The Lord desires obedience that demonstrates itself in compassionate and righteous dealings with others.

In the place of godly, upright people, Micah found people focused on themselves who sought to eliminate or abuse those in their way. Some committed murder, but all sought their own advantage by ruthlessly finding ways to remove competition or threats. Micah's society had become morally bankrupt.

Verse 3: *Both hands are good at accomplishing evil: the*

official and the judge demand a bribe; when the powerful man communicates his evil desire, they plot it together.

The phrase *both hands* indicated the people invested all their energy in doing evil. The word *good* usually referred to godly actions as opposed to evil deeds (see Isa. 1:16-17; Jer. 4:22) but could also refer to skill. Micah's generation had become exceptionally skilled and efficient at defrauding and taking advantage of others. The king had the responsibility of maintaining justice. Instead, he had appointed unjust men who had joined together and abused their power to enrich themselves at the expense of others. Officials and judges demanded bribes. Power had corrupted them and turned them from shepherds into butchers.

Verse 4: *The best of them is like a brier; the most upright is worse than a hedge of thorns. The day of your watchmen, the day of your punishment, is coming; at this time their panic is here.*

Justice appeared virtually nonexistent in Micah's society. Instead of providing relief, judges inflicted wounds like briars stabbing or tearing into the skins of those whom they sentenced. Instead of destroying barriers to justice, judges created barriers. Fighting through the barriers erected by officials was worse than moving through a thick hedge of prickly thorns. Progress was painful and slow. Poor people gave up on justice because they could not afford to pay the bribes. Those with financial resources bought justice instead of receiving it. Those in power had the responsibility of maintaining a just society. Instead, they victimized the citizens who came to them.

Briars and thorns cause pain, but they also burn quickly. Micah announced the coming judgment of those who abused power, failed to provide justice, and preyed on their people. Bible scholars interpret the reference to *watchmen* in two different ways. Some understand the term to refer to false prophets who promised peace and security and disagreed with Micah regarding the Lord's expectation of obedience. Those watchmen would perish along with the people whom they failed to warn. Other Bible scholars believe the designation refers to the true prophets who tried to warn the people but to whom the people refused to listen (see Jer. 6:17). The Lord specifically appointed Ezekiel to serve as a watchman (see Ezek. 3:17-21). Micah also served as a watchman to warn his people of the Lord's coming judgment for their persistence in sin. The day the true prophets had prophesied would come, and the people would suffer the

consequences of their disobedience.

The phrase *your punishment* translates a Hebrew word literally meaning “your visitation.” The Lord sometimes visited His people with salvation and sometimes with judgment. Micah prophesied the Lord on this occasion would visit to punish rather than to save.

Micah’s words began to be fulfilled in 722 B.C. when Assyria conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel and made the Southern Kingdom of Judah its vassal. When Sennacherib [suh NAK uh rib] of Assyria invaded Judah in 701 B.C. destroying cities and besieging Jerusalem, Micah’s prophecy continued toward fulfillment. The Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar’s [NEB yoo kad NEZ uhrz] conquest of Judah and destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. marked the end of the Southern Kingdom. Micah’s words remind us that the Lord judges sin. If we insist on rebelling against Him, we will ultimately suffer the consequences.

Verse 5: *Do not rely on a friend; don’t trust in a close companion. Seal your mouth from the woman who lies in your arms.*

The entire society of Micah’s day was sick. People could not trust officials to dispense justice nor could they trust those closest to them. As Micah discussed personal relationships, he moved from friendships to close friendships and finally to the intimate relationship with one’s spouse in this verse. For a society to remain strong and stable, people must have those whom they can trust and in whom they can confide their dreams, problems, and thoughts. Individuals in Micah’s time could trust no one. Friends only pretended to be friends. Even best friends could not be trusted. A spouse could not keep a secret. People sought only their own interests. Such a society was doomed.

Verse 6: *For a son considers his father a fool, a daughter opposes her mother, and a daughter-in-law is against her mother in law; a person’s enemies are the people in his own home.*

The Fifth of the Ten Commandments is to honor one’s parents. To do so includes the ideas of valuing them as extremely important, respecting them as persons and authority figures, and obeying them. The honoring of parents comprised a crucial part of the foundation of Israelite society. The Lord expected parents to guide their children into a deeper relationship with the Lord and into a good life characterized by compassion and righteousness. The Lord expected children of all ages to respect their parents and follow their

godly guidance, thereby bringing honor to their parents and to the Lord. When parents and children disobeyed the Lord, society began to collapse.

Micah provided three examples to indicate the failure of children to honor their parents. First, sons considered their fathers fools. While we may use the word *fool* to refer to an individual who makes bad decisions by failing to seek advice or to consider all aspects of a situation, the Hebrew word *fool* carried other connotations. Since wisdom began with fearing and respecting the Lord (Prov. 1:7), foolishness resulted from failing to respect and honor the Lord. Thus, a fool was one who rejected a personal relationship with the Lord and rebelled against the Lord’s expectations for right living. Micah’s society had become so corrupt, most fathers may have acted like fools. Yet, children who called their fathers fools also demonstrated disregard for the Lord, parents, and society.

Second, Micah declared that a daughter willfully disobeyed her mother. Micah probably did not mean the daughters were righteous individuals who refused to follow their mothers’ unrighteous guidance. Rather, daughters rebelled against their mothers’ authority.

Finally, Micah stated a daughter-in-law refused to respect and honor her mother-in-law. In Israelite society when a woman married, she became part of her husband’s extended family. His parents became her parents, and she was expected to honor them. Daughters-in-law rejected society’s expectations and disobeyed the Lord’s command.

Jesus quoted Micah 7:6 and stated that following Him would create conflict and divisions between parents and children (Matt. 10:35-36; Luke 12:53). Jesus did not mean He had come to establish a society like that of Micah’s time. Rather, He quoted from Micah to emphasize the cost of following Him. Jesus wanted to prepare His followers for the reality that when they accepted and followed Him, other members of their families who did not believe in Him might reject them.

2. DETERMINED CHOICE (MIC. 7:7)

Verse 7: *But as for me, I will look to the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me.*

Micah determined to live differently from others in his society. Surrounded by people who pursued their selfish desires and consciously rebelled against the Lord, he set aside any desires he might have for comfort and personal

power in order to follow the Lord and to allow the Lord to work through him.

Micah declared he would *look* to the Lord. The Hebrew verb translated look also occurred in another form translated “watchmen” in Micah 7:4. The false prophets had failed in their duty as watchmen. Instead of warning their people of the Lord’s coming judgment on their sins, the false prophets had encouraged the people’s disobedience. Micah served as a good watchman trying to call his people back to the Lord. The people had made their choice and so had Micah. They chose to disobey the Lord and experience His judgment. Micah chose to commit himself to the Lord and follow Him no matter how much his society discouraged him.

Micah’s statement that he would *wait* indicated he had resolved to wait in confident hope the Lord would vindicate his decision to follow Him. Waiting does not mean doing nothing in the interim or giving up. Micah actively waited in the knowledge that he could trust the Lord completely to bring salvation. Micah’s hope in the Lord allowed Him to wait with full confidence that the Lord would act to accomplish His purposes in and through him.

3. DISTINCT CONFIDENCE (MIC. 7:18-20)

Micah asked the Lord to shepherd His people. The Assyrians had commandeered the best land for themselves and left the Lord’s people with restricted territory. In essence Micah asked the Lord to lead His people beyond His judgment and into His salvation (7:14).

The Lord answered Micah’s prayer. He declared He would save His people through a new exodus and lead them back home. The nations thought they possessed power far greater than the Lord’s since they had subdued His people. When the nations saw the Lord’s deliverance of His people, however, they would know the Lord’s power and cover their mouths in amazement (7:15-17).

Verse 18: *Who is a God like You, removing iniquity and passing over rebellion for the remnant of His inheritance? He does not hold on to His anger forever, because He delights in faithful love.*

Micah’s question *Who is a God like You* served not only as a profession of faith but also as a play on his name. Micah’s name means “Who is like the Lord?” The prophet knew the answer to the question was a strong “No one!” No one and no thing is remotely like the Lord. The Lord has no competition. He is incomparable.

The Lord has demonstrated His incomparability in His forgiveness and steadfast love. The term *iniquity* referred to sin as that which is twisted, crooked, or perverse. The term *rebellion* referred to deliberate actions directly opposed to the Lord's commands. Those who turned to the Lord in repentance, however, could be forgiven of all sins. The word *removing* translates a Hebrew verb meaning "to lift up." The Lord would lift up the burden of sin, so the people would no longer need to carry it or be overwhelmed by it. The Hebrew word translated *passing over* indicated the Lord would not stop and dwell on sin, but would forgive.

Verse 19: *He will again have compassion on us; He will vanquish our iniquities. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.*

The Hebrew verb translated *will. . . have compassion* is related to the Hebrew word rendered "womb." Thus the verb refers specifically to the deep, caring love of a mother for her child. Since the Lord's love for His children surpasses even a mother's love for her child, the Lord's people could depend on Him to always act in their best interests.

The Lord also would *vanquish* His people's iniquities. The verb referred to treading or trampling underfoot. It can also be translated "subdue." As the Lord vanquished Pharaoh's army when He brought His people out of Egypt, so He would vanquish the burden of sin His people carried. The Lord also would *cast all their sins into the depths of the sea* just as He had destroyed Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea (see Ex. 15:4-5). Micah had prophesied a new exodus (Mic. 7:15) and the Lord would act in His steadfast love to deliver His people from slavery to sin. The Lord takes sin seriously, but He also provides a way to experience forgiveness through His Son Jesus Christ.

Verse 20: *You will show loyalty to Jacob and faithful love to Abraham, as You swore to our fathers from days long ago.*

In spite of His people's unfaithfulness, the Lord would continue to keep His covenant with them (see Gen. 12:1-3; Ex. 19:1-6). Although Micah knew his nation would experience the Lord's judgment, the prophet confidently praised the Lord for the mercy, love, compassion, and faithfulness He would shower on His covenant people. Micah's confidence was based on the Lord's character demonstrated in His actions.