

Devastation for the Nation

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[0 : 00] We're going to turn to our Bibles now, and Stephen Ballingle, one of our ministers in training, will be preaching this week and next on the first couple of chapters of the prophet Micah.

So we're going to read this evening Micah chapter 1. If you're struggling to find that, it's after Jonah and before Nahum, or if you're using a church Bible, that is page 776.

Micah chapter 1. The word of the Lord that came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem.

Hear, you peoples, all of you. Pay attention, O earth and all that is in it, and let the Lord God be a witness against you, the Lord from His holy temple.

For behold, the Lord is coming out of His place, and He will come down and tread upon the high places of the earth. And the mountains will melt under Him, and the valleys will split open like wax before the fire, like waters poured down a steep place.

[1 : 24] All this is for the transgression of Jacob and for the sins of the house of Israel. What is the transgression of Jacob? Jacob? Is it not Samaria?

What is the high place of Judah? Is it not Jerusalem? Therefore, I will make Samaria a heap in the open country, a place for planting vineyards, and I will pour down her stones into the valley and uncover her foundations.

All her carved images shall be beaten to pieces, all her wages shall be burned with fire, and all her idols I will lay waste. For from the fee of a prostitute she gathered them, and to the fee of a prostitute they shall return.

For this I will lament and weal. I will go stripped and naked. I will make lamentation like the jackals and mourning like the ostriches. For her wound is incurable, and it has come to Judah.

It has reached to the gate of my people, to Jerusalem. Tell it not in Gath. Weep not at all. In Bethlephra, roll yourselves in the dust.

[2 : 42] Pass on your way, inhabitants of Shaphir, in nakedness and shame. The inhabitants of Zanan do not come out. The lamentation of Bethazel shall take away from you its standing place.

For the inhabitants of Maroth wait anxiously for good, because disaster has come down from the Lord to the gate of Jerusalem. Harness the steeds to the chariots, inhabitants of Lachish.

It was the beginning of sin to the daughter of Zion. For in you were found the transgressions of Israel. Therefore, you shall give parting gifts to Moresheth Gath.

The houses of Aksib shall be a deceitful thing to the kings of Israel. I will again bring a conqueror to you, inhabitants of Marisha. The glory of Israel shall come to Adullam.

Make yourselves bold and cut off your hair for the children of your delight. Make yourselves as bold as the eagle, for they shall go from you into exile.

[3 : 53] Amen. This is God's word. Good evening all. Please do have Micah chapter 1 open in front of you.

It's on page 776 of the Pew Bibles if you have one. Australia has been ravaged by bushfires recently.

I'm sure you all have seen or heard of it happening. The country's been in a state of emergency, with devastation being caused as fires have torn right through it, destroying everything in their path.

Here's one family's story of the blazes. On New Year's Eve morning at 5.30am, I was woken by a single thunderclap, the loudest I've ever heard, that echoed and rumbled on for minutes.

Half asleep, I wondered if there'd been a volcanic eruption. At 9am, our son came running in to wake us, saying there was something weird and wrong outside. Outside, in our caravan park near Naruma, it was still dark.

[5 : 01] The sky was low in a strange orange, burnt colour. All around us, people were leaving or hosing down their caravans. The power was gone, ash was falling, and the air was thick with smoke.

We tried to find out what was going on, and we're told fires were closing in. If we left, we couldn't return. If we stayed, we were trapped and wouldn't escape the blaze.

All across Australia right now, people are facing real devastation and death, and feel like there's no way of escape. Many of them have been forced out to beaches as being the only safe place they can stay to avoid the fire.

And sadly, these bushfires have taken lives. They've burned down people's homes, and they've affected millions of people. For those who live there, they know that as soon as they see the first sign of fire, they've got to evacuate then and there.

They've got to get out of there. It's that serious. You'd be an absolute fool if you were sat in Australia right now, with the sky turning orange, the forest on fire, smoke filling the air, fire constantly getting closer to your home, and you're just sat there with your cup of tea, saying, I don't think I'm going to bother escaping.

[6 : 25] Everything's going to be fine. No big deal. Let's get on with the day. Real danger means real action has to be taken to avoid it.

The people Micah were preaching to were in a situation where they were about to witness total devastation before their eyes, knowing that it would be their fate if they didn't take immediate evasive action to avoid suffering it.

Micah preached, as we see in verse 1, during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, about the year 735 to 700 BC. These kings were mixed, but through these years, which you can read about in 2 Kings 15 to 20, God's people were constantly serving idols.

They were sacrificing and offering at the high places the shrines for the false gods, which the kings, for all the good they did, failed to get rid of. The people had bought into idolatry and showed no signs of cashing out now.

But as important as these kings were, there's another significant player not mentioned in the introduction who dominated these years. These three reigns all had the great threat of the Assyrian army hanging over them.

[7 : 42] The military superpower of the day destroying anything in its path. They were menacingly waiting to pounce on God's people, ready to strike at any moment and ready to crush them.

But as threatening as this army was, there's one thing it wasn't threatening, and that was God's plans. The army were actually being raised up by God to judge his people for their sin.

God was using this enemy army to do his work. God's people had split into two different kingdoms at this point. The northern kingdom, Israel, and the southern kingdom, Judah.

They were quite often known just by their capital cities. Samaria in Israel in the north, and Jerusalem in Judah in the south. And Micah is preaching to Judah, the southern kingdom.

They are his primary audience. They are the ones he's aiming at with his message. And his message is that Judah are going to have front row seats looking on as Samaria is destroyed.

[8 : 44] And her people are exiled, ripped away from the land of promise, ripped away from their homes as punishment for their sin. He wants Judah to look at that, to see those people hurt and exiled before their very eyes, and take any action necessary to avoid the same fate.

And Micah does that by preaching judgment first, and then hope. His message splits into three sections, starting in chapter 1, 3, and 6. All starting with the word here. And all these sections begin with judgment, but end in hope of restoration.

There is real devastating judgment coming for the sin of the people. But the Lord is still near God, and he will keep his promises to those who repent towards him. That's the heartbeat of Micah.

How will God deal with his covenant people breaking the covenant? And Micah's name helps us see how the Lord is going to do that.

In this chapter in particular, names mean a great deal. And Micah's name literally means, who is like God. And that bookends Micah's message. It's mentioned in verse 1.

[9 : 59] And right at the end of the book, if you flick forward to chapter 7, a couple of pages, and look at verses 18 to 20, Micah finishes his preaching like this. Verse 18.

Who is a God like you? Pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance. He does not retain his anger forever because he delights in steadfast love.

He will again have compassion on us. He will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old.

The Lord is a God who will judge the sin of his people, but will still provide means of salvation, of restoration for them because of the covenant.

His promises that he made with the many generations before, from days of old. Because God has made his covenant with Abraham and Jacob, he will protect and guard his people despite their sin.

[11:14] Well, let's dig into these verses we read earlier. We're going to look at our passage in two sections. Firstly, looking at verses 1 to 9, where we see God's devastating arrival.

And here we see the sheer devastation that the covenant God brings to his covenant-breaking people. Micah starts with a court case summons. All the world is called to witness this case.

Verse 2. Hear you peoples, all of you. Pay attention, O earth, and all that is in it. And let the Lord God be a witness against you.

The Lord from his holy temple. The whole of creation is being called together to witness this case, to see the Lord's judgment in action. And he's speaking against you and the world.

He's coming to judge his enemies on the world. And as we see what will happen as the Lord comes down in verse 3, we're given a hint of his majesty. He's coming to see the high places.

[12:16] And this phrase isn't just used to mean the mountaintops. It's not just the tallest place in the country. These are the places of worship that idol worshippers had placed on top of those mountains, fooling themselves into thinking they were getting closer to their false gods by building them as high as they could.

But we see the Lord's majesty in how he treads on these high places. They were as tall as the people could get to build them, to get closer to the false gods.

But the Lord himself has to come down, to even tread on them under his foot. He's got to descend to their level, to tread on them.

And when he does that, he will bring total devastation. Verse 4. And the mountains will melt under him.

And the valleys will split open like wax before the fire, like waters poured down a steep place. The exact imagery and what it means is hard to pin down here.

[13:20] But the main message is clear. When the Lord comes, you will not miss it. He will bring destruction to even the things you can't even hope to lay a finger on.

The Lord's coming is not a friendly chat. He's not coming around for a cuppa, telling you to put the kettle on, get ready for a chinwag. He's coming to judge. And it's terrifying.

The world will melt like wax before fire. Valleys will split right open. The ground itself will break, unable to put up any fight against what's happening.

This picture is designed to give a proper fear of the Lord. A right fear of him and his power. These verses about the Lord's coming are not meant to encourage us.

They're not meant to warm our hearts. But they're meant to give us a right fear of who the Lord is and what he is capable of. These verses should shake us to our core.

[14:23] I'd like you to put yourselves in the shoes of Micah's hearers right now. The people in Judah, in the southern kingdom, in Jerusalem. What would they be thinking right now?

Who's God coming to destroy? Do they have to be worried? They'd be thinking, we're all right.

We're in Jerusalem. We're God's people. We've got the temple. We're the good guys. He made promises to us, remember?

God's enemies better watch themselves. I'm glad I'm not one of them. It's probably those Assyrians he's talking about. And they deserve everything that's coming to them. I can't wait to see the look on their faces when God destroys them.

But it's not the Assyrians. They're not the focus of God's judgment here. It's Israel themselves. The northern kingdom.

Judah's noisy neighbors. They're being punished for their transgression. They're law-breaking.

They're covenant-breaking. But it's not just the northern kingdom. It's not just up there.

[15:24] It's not just Samaria. Verse 5. All this, this devastation, is for the transgression of Jacob and for the sins in the house of Israel.

What is the transgression of Jacob? Is it not Samaria? And what is the high place of Judah? Is it not Jerusalem? God's judgment was coming to the front door of Micah's hearers, Judah themselves.

To Jerusalem even. The holy place. That's where his anger is focused. The reason for God's coming is his own people's sin. Their denial of him. And their failure to worship him alone. Micah even goes as far as to equate Jerusalem itself as being like one big high place. So he's saying that all of Jerusalem, every foot of land you stepped on, is dirty. It's defiled. It's not fit for worship. It's only fit for an idol. But Judah isn't being destroyed just yet. They still have some time.

[16:30] Because as verses 6 and 7 show us, they're going to have front row seats to witness what happens to covenant breakers like themselves. To people who turn their land into a place of idolatry.

They're going to see what will happen to their neighbors, the Samaritans, because of their sin. All of this is going to happen to Samaria with Judah looking on.

Knowing that they will have the same fate if they continue with what they're doing. Samaria, this great city with all its people, its wealth and its power would be, verse 6, turned into a heap.

Its land is only good for farming. And its precious walls, its defenses, which are relied on so heavily and were so proud of, would be reduced to rubble. Total decimation.

Her carved images, her wages funded by idolatry and their idols themselves will be crushed. The Lord is zoning in on the heart of the matter here.

[17:30] Samaria's idolatry. As she whored after other gods. She made herself a prostitute by whoring after and worshipping other gods. And all of them, all those gods, those false gods, those idols, would be destroyed by the Lord.

Micah said that all of this was going to happen to Samaria. And it did. In 722 BC, just a few years after Micah preached this, Assyria ravaged Samaria.

Plundering it for its goods. Taking the people and exiling them from their own land. And all the while, Judah watched.

As they saw the Assyrian army march the people out, away from their home, being exiled into a foreign land, they were to look at that and be warned that if they continued their worship of false idols, that it would be them next.

They would be the ones being led out of their land in chains. They would be the ones being led out of their homes. They would be the ones being led out of their homes. They would be the ones being led out of their homes. And Micah grieves this.

[18:47] He doesn't look on and laugh at Samaria. He doesn't mock them. But he mourns them. Micah grieves what's happened. Look at verse 8. He's not grieving like we do culturally.

Quietly and solemnly trying to keep some of our dignity. But this is raw. It's an outpouring of his emotion. He's crying out like the jackal whose cry pierces the night sky.

It's a haunting sound. It's animalistic. One which expresses the deep pain that Micah's feeling. But he's not only mourning over Samaria.

Verse 9. Samaria's wound is incurable. And it has come to Judah. It has reached to the gate of my people.

To Jerusalem. Samaria's wound is incurable. There's no turning back for her. But the disease of their idolatry has spread.

[19:58] Traveling south like a cancer. Spreading to Judah. Even Jerusalem herself. To Micah's own people. It's like falling ill and being admitted to hospital.

Judah's being diagnosed with a serious condition. And are put in a ward with people who have the same condition as them. And all the while you're lying in your hospital bed. You're looking across the ward.

Across the way. And you see people who have the same condition as you. But they were diagnosed a few years earlier. They're a few years further on in the cycle. And it shows. You look at them in their sickness.

And see what's going to come of you. Unless something miraculous happens. Judah are looking across the ward at Samaria. With the look of death. On their face.

And they're looking into their own future. As they share the same disease. As Samaria's people are carted off into exile. Judah's being warned that they will receive the same fate as Samaria.

[20:59] Because they are both gravely ill with the same condition. Complacency. As they break the covenant God made with them. And we today need to take note of this.

God doesn't let his own people off the hook. Just because they're in the right place. And in the right crowd. He's a God of real justice. Who will punish those who disobey and dishonor him. How will God deal with his covenant people breaking the covenant?

With judgment. It's clear that being in the right place. And looking like you're part of the covenant people. Isn't enough. God's not making a covenant with people.

Who just look like they've got it sorted on the outside. Over the years. Judah became deeply complacent. In how they served and worshipped God. They rejected him in his ways.

And little by little. Moved further and further away from him. And this is a stark warning to us. That if we are or if we become complacent in our sin.

[22 : 04] We can't just rest in our laurels. Because we're part of a good church. And we're not as bad as others who call themselves Christians. We might even be tempted to look at the national church today.

Which has rejected God's rule over them. We see it dwindle. We see it hemorrhaging money and people. And we can feel quite smug about it. Serves them right we'll think.

Because of how they've rejected God. And how they treated us so horribly. Serves them right. We might not say it out loud. But I think we're tempted to think it.

But Micah wants us to see that God's judgment on others within the covenant community. Is not something we're meant to look at and revel in. We're meant to mourn. To feel the pain of it.

And to do everything we can to avoid falling into the same trap. In the second half of our passage. In verses 10 to 16. We are presented with a despairing deep picture of grief.

[23 : 05] Where we see Micah's anguish. Here we see the real anguish brought on by breaking the covenant. Micah now shares how he feels about what the Lord has revealed through him.

And he's not just sharing his thoughts on the matter. It's an outpouring of a soul that is genuinely grieved by what's happening. And what will happen if Judah continues in her sin.

And this anguish is played out geographically. Micah takes us on a whistle-stop tour of Judah.

Taking us to towns that were prime targets for the Assyrian army to attack. Through these verses Micah constantly turns the names of these towns on their head.

Names are important. All of these town names meant something that mattered to the town. And Micah reverses the names to show the reversal in fortunes. Coming to them if they don't repent.

The word play is lost on us because we're not reading it in the original Hebrew. But the first heroes of this message would have instantly known what was going on. They would get it in a second.

[24 : 08] Here's how one commentator helpfully rewrites it. So that we can feel the force of what's being said here. Follow along these verses with me. Starting at verse 10. Don't gab about it in Gath.

Don't go weeping at all. In Dust Town, roll yourselves in the dust. Pass on for yourselves residents of Beautysburg in shameful nakedness. The residents of Marchville do not march forth.

Lamentation in Beth-a-ez-el. Your standing place will be taken from you. To be sure, the residents of Better Town long for good. But disaster has come down from the Lord to the gates of Jerusalem. Hitch up the chariots to the horses, residents of Lachish. It was the beginning of sin to the daughter of Zion. For in you are found the transgressions of Israel. Therefore you will give parting gifts to Moresbeth Gath.

Where Micah was from. Really bringing this home. The houses of Deceitville have proven deceitful to the kings of Israel. I will again bring a conqueror to you, residents of Conquest.

[25 : 14] The glory of the Lord will come all the way to Adullam. And as you go through these, you see the grief and anguish that Micah speaks of in verse 8.

Fleshed out in full-bodied form. He's saying that everything good in Judah will be turned on its head. There will be great judgment because of the people's sin against the Lord.

Because of their breaking of the covenant. I'm no wordsmith, but if Micah were preaching in Scotland, I think he'd be saying something like this. Dundee will be done for.

Aberdeen, the city of granite, will be reduced to rubble. Livingston will be a place of death. Burnside will be burned to the ground. Woodlands will be chopped down.

Kelvin Grove will be an open grave. Micah wants to drive home his pain here. He is pouring out his heart, grieving over what Judah deserves, her devastation.

[26 : 14] He wants to bring home the pain there is over God's people breaking his covenant. He's not standing watching this happen saying, well I told you so. I warned you that was going to happen.

But he's sharing his real anguish over Judah's disobedience and her devastation. But in the middle of all this pain, there is still hope.

Verse 16. Make yourselves bald and cut off your hair for the children of your delight. Make yourselves as bald as the eagle. For they shall go from you into exile.

Micah finishes by speaking directly to his hearers. Those in Judah who are facing the fate of exile. Of being vomited out of their own land. He tells them that there is a way of avoiding this fate.

Through the real repentance of grieving over their sin. They're to shave their heads. A mourning ritual. And hope that it may lead to restoration.

[27 : 16] Only humbling themselves in repentance and asking the Lord for mercy will do. God can't be bought with more frenzied offerings. At the high places or the altar.

They can't avoid this fate by saying that since they're living in Jerusalem. Since they're the good guys, they're going to be fine. The Lord of all sees right through that. He desires repentance.

Of the heart. That's why Micah gives them the prospect of exile. Exile was one of the covenant curses that God's people would face. If they were disobedient.

If they broke his covenant. And the act of exile was the most severe curse God would bring on his people. But in that curse, there was always hope. Because it was designed to shake the people back to reality.

Make the people realize their mistake. And turn back to him. There was kindness in his severity. The Lord wanted Judah to look at Samaria.

[28 : 17] At all they were experiencing. And to repent. So that they could be saved from that fate. Finding redemption in him. Judah could still return to the Lord.

But only through repentance. Through taking their own sin seriously. Only through repentance may they be a part of his covenant blessing once again. And we are to look at this situation.

And learn from Micah. Very simply. We are to have real anguish. Over sin. Over breaking the covenant.

This applies to us both internally and externally. Internally, we're not to let our own sin fester. And become something that will lead us towards complacency and devastation.

We do all need to repent. You know, there's a reason that week after week. Sunday after Sunday. We hear some variation of you need to repent in our sermons.

[29 : 24] You come to church. Week after week. We're told we need to repent. And it's so easy for us to just tune out when we hear that. We've heard it before. We've repented before.

Yeah, yeah. We've got that sorted. We're fine. But if that's what you're tempted to do. And that's what I'm tempted to do. Then it only leads to complacency. And presuming on God's covenant kindness.

Taking him for granted. Because we might not be facing exile ourselves. But that exile was a foretaste of what is to come for everyone who stands against the Lord's covenant.

Who rejects him. If we are part of the church. Convincing ourselves that we are on the right side. But living in a way we know is against him. Then we need to repent right here and right now.

It could be a wrong relationship that we know is unbiblical. Or a sinful practice that we keep to ourselves and don't want to shake. Or just generally being indifferent to what we hear on a Sunday.

[30 : 28] But all of this expresses our complete presumption on God's covenant kindness. We need to be taking our own sin seriously and repenting of it day by day.

And encouraging our brothers and sisters to do the same week by week. So repent. Turn to him. Don't act like everything is fine when you know it's not.

Repent of your sin against him. There is a fire coming that is far more deadly than any bushfire the world has ever seen. So what action will you take?

What will you do about the Lord's judgment? We also need to think wider than just ourselves and our church family. We need to think externally. Because disaster and devastation are coming.

God's judgment is a terrifying and unstoppable thing. He is the Lord and judge of all. And he must be true to himself as we like to say. He must judge the world in his perfect holy justice.

[31 : 34] And we have to look at his justice. See the danger. And call out to people to find rescue in the only place possible.

In the Lord Jesus himself. We see Micah bare his soul. Pouring out his grief over the devastation coming. But he does that because he's got a purpose in mind as he's preaching.

He wants everyone to see this devastation coming. And to do everything they can to help others avoid it. His hearers weren't meant to hear this message and then keep it all to themselves. Keep it bottled up inside. But to share the news with everyone that was at risk of exile. Warning each other of the deadly danger coming their way. And pointing them to safety. Only found in the Lord God.

In his covenant kindness. Tim Holmes is a 62 year old British guy who lives in Australia. And whose home was burned down in the bushfires. Here's his story.

[32 : 36] We were looking after our grandchildren. And noticed some smoke rising from a ridge the next time along. Not long afterwards we saw tornadoes of fire just coming across towards us.

The next thing we knew. Everything around us was on fire. So I got my wife. I got my grandchildren. I got my daughter and I told her we were all getting out of there. We were all evacuating as fast as we could. He saw the danger.

He saw the devastation. So he got everyone away from it. He knew that his family were going to die if he did nothing. So he got them out of there as fast as he could.

God's judgment might not seem as real to us as these bushfires we see pictures of and videos of in the news. We might read about this and not take much action. Thinking that they're a bit of an empty threat and that things are going to be fine.

[33 : 38] But what God's doing in the future. What he's promised to do. Changes everything but how we live today. The Lord wasn't revealing a future exile to Judah.

So that they would have 30 years of dread before it happened. He wanted them to take action. To find salvation in him. So that they weren't exiled themselves.

They were told what was coming so that they could avoid the fate. And we are the people who know today that devastation is coming. But it's not just for one city.

Or for one nation. It's for the whole world. And because we know the devastation coming. We must be the people reaching out to make sure everyone knows how to avoid their destruction.

They're not all going to be happy about you warning them about what's coming. Some will think that well. It's just not coming. Or that it's 2020 and you're stupid to believe such rubbish now.

[34 : 41] Or they might just not want to hear it. We all experience that when we tell people of the news. There are always people who don't think it's real.

People. Loved ones. Neighbors. Families. Will all reject the Lord's offer of salvation.

But the devastation is still coming. And there's only hope in repenting towards the Lord. So that is what we need to be pointing people towards.

Because he's merciful. He's full of loving kindness. And will save and restore the repentant sinner. If we have love for people.

If we feel anguish at what they are facing. Then we will be the ones holding out hope to them.

Holding out the only way of escape. From the unstoppable devastation hurtling towards them.

[35 : 48] And let's not lose sight of this devastation. I know this is massively grim. Thinking about this is not what you want to be doing in the new year.

But if we lose sight of this. We lose sight of what makes the gospel so good. The reality and severity of the devastation we deserve.

Makes the salvation found in Jesus. All the more joyous and worth celebrating. Because we've been saved. From real death. That's our hope.

And that is the hope that we hold out to the world. Let's pray together. Our Heavenly Father.

Who is a God like you? We praise you for who you are. That you are a God of immense majesty. Perfect justice.

[36 : 56] And real salvation. Please Father. Help us to feel Micah's anguish. Over sin. Help us to treat our own sins seriously.

To heed this warning. So that we don't become complacent in our faith. So that we don't take you for granted. And help us to reach out with your message of salvation.

That in a world which will all burn one day. Only your son will save. In his name we pray. Amen.