

Micah 5.1-15

God's Future

Christ Church Selly Park

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Micah: Life through Judgement [4]

The future

How confident do you feel about the future? I confess I'm getting increasingly nervous about the next couple of months.

Science fiction is famous for its predictions of the future – like HG Wells predicting nuclear weapons, Arthur C Clark geo-stationary satellites, Isaac Asimov big data, Aldous Huxley the decline of privacy, and so on. It's also famous for getting things wrong, like jumpsuits and jetpacks.

For all its predictions, the best science fiction uses the future to illuminate and teach us about what's happening *today* – and I think that's a trick learned from the Old Testament prophets.

Let's dive in to see what Micah has for us today.

God's ruler (1-2)

We begin with the words made famous by Christmas carol services: **But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel** (2).

The words are so familiar that it's easy to miss the ominous note. God promises to raise a **ruler** for his people, from **Bethlehem** – the ancestral home of Israel's greatest king, David the son of Jesse. Except, God's people already *had* a king, who was the great great great great great great great grandson of David. This prophecy is a bit like a film company rebooting a struggling film franchise: verse 1 hints at the demise of Israel's current line of kings; verse 2 shows God needs to go back the origin story, to start again with a fresh branch from the stump of Jesse. That's not great news for the current king!

More familiar to us is the size of **Bethlehem**; its **significance is its very insignificance**.ⁱ It isn't even named in the list of over 100 towns given to the tribe of Judah in Joshua 15, it was that small. One of the most common themes in the Bible is the way God chooses the smallest, the least, the weakest, the common, the unseen, and uses them – uses *us* – to display his power and glory.

Also notice two little words that make a big difference: **out of you will come for me** (2). The ruler is God's, the kingdom is God's.

It sounds a bit obvious to say that the kingdom of God belongs to God – but how often do we act as though the kingdom is *ours*, as though it is for *us*, as though *we* get to decide how to live as God's people. Paul makes the same point in 1 Corinthians 8.6: **for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live.**ⁱⁱ And again in 6.19: **You are not your own; you were bought at a price.**

Evidently this was something God's people – including their kings – had lost sight of in Micah's day. So God would provide a new ruler, with **ancient origins** (2), from David's line, to keep them facing in the right direction: facing and living for God.

Messiah's rule (3-9)

Three friends were exploring an abandoned theme park when they came across a mysterious water slide. At the top, a sign read, 'As you descend, shout your wish and it will be granted.'

The first friend went down the slide and shouted, 'Gold!' – and sure enough at the bottom she landed on a huge pile of gold coins.

The second friend saw this, and so as she went down the slide she shouted, 'Microsoft shares!' This time, she landed on a huge pile of share certificates.

By this point, the third friend was super excited, so she slung her legs over the edge, pushed herself down the slide, and shouted, 'Wheeeeeee!'

What future would you shout for on your way down the slide? What do you long for? Through Micah, God promises this:

He – *God's ruler* – will stand and shepherd his flock
in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they will live securely, for then his greatness
will reach to the ends of the earth.
And he will be our peace.

Micah 5.4-5a (NIV)

He will be our **shepherd**, we will **live securely**, **he will be our peace** – what wonderful promises. God's ruler will be strong like a shepherd caring for and protecting his sheep. God's ruler **will stand**, and his people sit – that's what the word for **live securely** means. God's ruler **will be our peace** – the word is *shalom*.

In the Bible ‘shalom’ is not only about the absence of conflict, but the presence of wholeness and completeness. Solomon brings ‘shalom’ to the temple when he finishes building it (1 Kings 9.25); Job announces ‘shalom’ when he counts his flock and finds no animals are missing (Job 5.24).ⁱⁱⁱ

(There’s a great video by the Bible Project about the word ‘Peace’ – I encourage you to look it up this week and see what they say.)

That’s great – but there’s a rather large question mark here: what’s verse 3 all about? **Israel will be abandoned?** What’s that doing sandwiched between the wonderful promise of a new ruler from God, and the beautiful picture of what his rule will look like?

Friends, this is one of the reasons why I love the Bible. It’s not always easy to read, and it often makes us uncomfortable – *but it’s real*. How many of us have felt – *or are feeling today* – abandoned by God? How many of us feel as if God is so close to everyone else, but is far from you?

The Bible doesn’t pretend that God’s people are always on top of the mountain, enjoying the glorious views and feeling close to God, full of his Spirit and power. Sometimes we are, praise God.

But the truth is, sometimes we feel abandoned. The *harder* truth, is sometimes God doesn't do the thing we long for him to do *even when it's a good thing*. That's where the rubber of faith hits the road of life. That's why passages like this are important: they warn us so when afflictions come – and they will – we don't lose heart. We trust they will not last forever; that there is a limit, an **until** – **Israel will be abandoned until** (3). The warning itself contains the promise of an end, of a limit to our afflictions.

One day, God says through Micah, there will be peace, there will be *shalom*, there will be wholeness, completeness, there will be an end to the struggle, and God's chosen ruler will bring us the life we long for. Amen to that!

Now, earlier on I read some of the words from verse 5, except I stopped halfway through the sentence.

And he will be our peace – *lovely* –
 when the Assyrians invade our land
 and march through our fortresses...

He – *God's ruler* – will deliver us from the Assyrians
 when they invade our land
 and march across our borders.

Micah 5.5-6 (NIV)

Now, the Assyrians aren't much threat to us now, although they were back in Micah's day. They were the scourge of his time, the all-conquering armies that preceded the might of Babylon.

So this prophecy about a ruler from Bethlehem – is it *really* about geopolitics in Micah's day? But surely it's about Jesus? And then again, it hasn't all happened yet – so it is still to come?

The answer is yes – it is all of those things.

This is my camera. Don't worry, the lens cap is on. If I look through the camera – what am I looking at? I'm looking at you, of course.

Except, I'm not *actually* looking at you. I'm actually looking at a little screen in here. And that screen shows an image that's created by focusing light through lenses onto a sensor.

So when I'm looking through my camera at you, I'm really looking at a little screen, a sensor, various lenses, and then you; I'm looking at all those things *at the same time*.

Old Testament prophecy is a little bit like that. In their visions, and the words they heard from God, the prophets spoke truth into their current situation. But often – like here – those words *also* spoke about Jesus, and sometimes even God's people today.

So here, in this passage, Micah was prophesying about how God would deliver his people from the Assyrians a few years later, *and* the birth of Jesus several hundred years later, *and* the life of God's people through the ages, *and* Jesus' return.

The fact that God has already shown himself faithful in the first two parts of that, means we can trust him for the rest: Jesus *will* return, and his perfect rule which has already begun *will* be made perfect and complete and whole – there *will* be *shalom*.

God's people (10-15)

I find Micah's vision of the future inspiring – and I long for it to be fulfilled. I long for the day when we can know the fullness of Jesus' peace that we know now, but only in part.

Micah's vision is inspiring – and yet like so often with these pesky prophets, he brings us back down to earth with a bump. He doesn't want us to get lost in our longing for God's future. He wants us to know that the life God promises does not come easily and it is not cheap; he wants us to know that life can only come through judgement.

Let's look at what God has to do before his people can know the perfect peace of his future rule.

I will destroy, God says: your **horses** and your **chariots** (10), your **cities** and your **strongholds** (11), your **witchcraft** (12), your **idols** and **sacred stones** (13), your **Asherah poles** (14).

I will cut you off from your worldly **securities** and your **religious substitutes**, God says.^{iv} He will cut us off from all things that lead us away from him, that distract and divert us from God's way. The world and our hearts are full of things that tempt us away from God, full of things that we worship instead of God, full of things that pretend to satisfy but leave us hollow. How easily we chase after those things! Jesus said, '**wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction**' (Matthew 7.13).

As well as the Assyrian invasion, Micah's prophecy sees what God would do in Jesus: on the cross, in the future, and today.

First, he sees the cross. On the cross Jesus stood in our place, as if *he* were the rebellious one, as if *he* worshipped things that aren't God. On the cross Jesus allowed himself to be **destroyed**, he took our sin and the stuff in our lives that needs to be **destroyed**, and **demolished** it as he died – so we could live. When God says, '**In that day I will destroy**,' (10), he is thinking first of the cross and his own Son. God doesn't speak these words with glee but with deep sadness at how far he has to go to bring his people home.

Second, Micah's prophecy sees Jesus' return. On the cross Jesus won the victory; when he returns, **'In that day,'** he will complete that victory, finish off every enemy and wipe away every tear. Temptation and distraction will be no more. I long for that day. These first two lenses are the foundation and the goal of the life of God's people. They are God's unshakeable and unbreakable promise in Jesus.

The third lens is where God's people live now: **'in that day,'** or rather **'in [this] day'**. It's where we need to hear the challenge of Micah, because it's where we wrestle with our bruised and broken hearts, with our sinful desires, worshipping creature not Creator. Seeing what God will remove fully and finally *then* tells us where we need to focus our efforts *now*, where we need to be changed and transformed to become the people God has made us to be.

It's like a combination of a caterpillar becoming a butterfly, and a gardener pruning a rose bush – some transformation 'just happens' by God's Spirit, some transformation is painful and requires hard work and pruning.

Paul puts it like this: **work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you** (Philippians 2.12-13).

It's a partnership, a dance, as we **work out** God's gift and he **works in** us. Sometimes it hurts: **put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature** Paul says (Colossians 3.5). But the goal is *shalom*: a transformed and holy people, complete and whole.

Don't get me wrong: Jesus has made the sacrifice, he has paid the price in full, wiped away our sins so in God's eyes we are pure like snow, he has won the victory over sin and death and evil. That is his gift, it is already done, it can never be taken away or changed.

What I'm talking about is making the most of that gift, living out the life Jesus has already won for us. How can we do anything *but* be transformed before the wonderful love of God for us in Jesus? His life is so powerful that it carries us *through* judgement into life that is stronger even than death, into everlasting *shalom*.

That is the picture of life through judgement that Micah saw nearly 3,000 years ago. It is God's vision for his people today. It is the future he is calling us into: it is glorious, it is challenging, and it is God's unshakeable and unbreakable promise in Jesus.

ⁱ Dale Ralph Davis, *Micah* (EP Books: Durham, 2015), 105.

ⁱⁱ Davis, *Micah*, 106.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Bible Project 'Shalom', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLYORLZOaZE>.

^{iv} Davis, *Micah*, 119.