

3. A message for the entire leadership of the nation (3:9–12)

Micah draws his denunciation of the nation's leadership to a close in a string of pithy statements summarizing the national crisis. Leaders responsible for administering the law *abhor justice and pervert all equity* (9) and *give judgment for a bribe* (11). Leaders operating in property and business *build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong* (10). Religious leaders are in it up to their necks: *its priests teach for hire, its prophets divine for money* (11).

The entire leadership of the nation was corrupt, and the common denominator was a love of money. They 'all played the game "The Price is Right"'.²⁹ The god Mammon had got a stranglehold on Jerusalem, with the inevitable result that venality and violence ruled the city. It is not surprising that Paul, who had his fair share of encounters with the wealthy and the powerful, warns Timothy that 'the love of money is the root of all evils' (1 Tim. 6:10).

Micah's description of Jerusalem is vivid and frightening, but it is important to remind ourselves that the picture he is painting bears little or no resemblance to the generally perceived reality of the city's life. Its buildings were impressive; its prosperity was massive; its past was a source of pride—and its temple dominated the whole vista. That is why Micah's next remark is so crucial:

*yet they lean upon the LORD and say,
'Is not the LORD in the midst of us?
No evil shall come upon us' (11).*

The leaders of the nation honestly believed that they were both religious and impregnable. They simply could not see any discrepancy between their acts of worship and their acts of wickedness. Yet these are people who ought to 'know justice' (1), but who now *abhor justice* (9). 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?' (Je. 17:9). The core of the deceit is self-deception; there are none so blind as those who will not see.

This blindness in the face of overwhelming evidence came from a selective approach to God's word, particularly to his commitment to the temple in Jerusalem. *'Is not the LORD in the midst of us?'* they cried, referring to the dominating presence of God's house on God's 'holy hill', Mount Zion. That Jerusalem's existence and identity revolved around the temple is epitomized by the way the city was frequently called *Zion*.³⁰ The leadership imagined that God's commitment to his house, his hill and his city was irrevocable.

Such reliance was understandable but faulty. From the outset, when Solomon built the house of the LORD, the conditions were clear: 'Concerning this house which you are building, if you will walk in my statutes and obey my ordinances and keep all my commandments and walk in them, then I will establish my word with you, which I spoke to David your father. And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will not forsake my people Israel' (1 Ki. 6:12–13).

When Solomon finished building the temple, 'the LORD appeared' to him in distinctive fashion and spoke very plainly about the blessings of obedience and the consequences of disobedience, concluding

²⁹ Kaiser, p. 52.

³⁰ In Micah alone it occurs at 3:10, 12; 4:2. The people collectively are called 'the daughter of Zion' (4:8, 10, 13).

with these words: ‘... if you turn aside from following me, you or your children, and do not keep my commandments and my statutes which I have set before you ... then I will cut off Israel from the land which I have given them; and the house which I have consecrated for my name I will cast out of my sight ... And this house will become a heap of ruins; every one passing by it will be astonished, and will hiss; and they will say, “Why has the LORD done thus to this land and to this house?”’ (1 Ki. 9:1, 6–8).

Micah has been rehearsing God’s commandments and statutes in front of the city’s leadership for some time. He had underlined the perils of continuing to defy the LORD and trample on his word. He has forced them to face up to the issues of justice and mercy. Still they chose to block out the warnings and tune in religiously to the promises—and ‘religiously’ is the word, because their piety was a combination of the mechanical and the magical, repeating religious practices and phrases in some kind of mantra to ward off all *evil* (11). ‘They had inured themselves against repentance.’³¹

This kind of piety remains a danger whenever we drive a wedge between our working lives and our worshipping lives. The workplace then becomes a hermetically sealed compartment, from which we routinely exclude any recognition of the presence of God by reserving worship for the holy place. Spiritual and moral perspectives are not considered relevant or practical in such secular space. Much local church life buys into this dichotomy, simply by failing to address the realities of the workplace and thus giving tacit endorsement to a Sundays-only faith.

At the heart of this ‘double life’ is our view of God and attitude to him. Instead of choosing to humble ourselves and bow the knee to him as Lord and Master, we want to have him endorse and bless what we are doing and want to do. Religious actions and words become tools to keep God favourably disposed towards us, to keep him ‘on our side’, and to make use of him in times of need. We imagine that such regular acknowledgment of God will be a safeguard for this life and an insurance policy for the next. In a word, it is an attempt to control God and make him play along with us, instead of gladly submitting to his control. God’s response is tersely summed up by Isaiah: ‘I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly’ (Is. 1:13).

In the end God gets tired of our playing games with him. If we are not prepared to listen to him and do what he requires, he has to call it a day. He can in no way be said to lose patience with us (*cf.* 2:7, ‘Is the Spirit of the LORD impatient?’). He is the LORD God Almighty and will not be presumptuously leaned on. We lean on him for mercy and forgiveness, for strength and guidance—or we lean on him at our peril. Micah’s contemporary Isaiah spoke to the people of Jerusalem about appropriate and inappropriate leaning, when he described the time when those who survived the Assyrian and Babylonian onslaughts would ‘lean upon the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, in truth’ (Is. 10:20).³² The psalmist describes such leaning perfectly:

... thou, O LORD, art my hope,
my trust, O LORD, from my youth.
Upon thee have I leaned from my birth;

³¹ Waltke, p. 672.

³² *Cf.* Is. 48:1–2; Je. 7:1–11.

thou art he who took me from my mother's womb.
My praise is continually of thee (Ps. 71:5–6).

Jerusalem's leadership had exhausted God's patience by continuous and arrogant wickedness:

*Therefore because of you
Zion shall be ploughed as a field;
Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,
and the mountain of the house a wooded height (12).*

The unthinkable would take place *because of you*. The city would be reduced to rubble, including the temple. The 'holy hill' would become a haunt for wild animals and thus become unclean, unholy.

No mere individual among the people of Israel would have dared even think such wild thoughts, let alone declare them in public and address them directly to the nation's leaders. Such language was tantamount to high treason, as Jeremiah in particular was later to discover. But Micah's logic had been impeccable. He had argued from the basis of God's own word to the only conclusion possible in the face of such pervasive wickedness in high places. His conclusion crashes like a thunderclap on the city and its leadership: *Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and it is all because of you*.

In the time of Jeremiah, these words of Micah were given more than the authority of a courageous and truthful prophet. Speaking to the religious leadership who were baying for Jeremiah's blood because he brought a message virtually identical to Micah's, 'certain elders of the land' quoted these words of Micah to the assembled people with the preface, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts ...' (Je. 26:18).³³ These leaders, nearly a century later, were quite clear where Micah's message originated. Their intervention at that stage saved Jeremiah's life at the hands of king Jehoiakim. The account also records that Micah's preaching brought king Hezekiah to his knees, even if the leadership addressed in chapters 2 and 3 remained unmoved: 'Did he not fear the LORD and entreat the favour of the LORD, and did not the LORD repent of the evil which he had pronounced against them?' (Je. 26:19).

If the entire leadership of Judah and Jerusalem could, by their wickedness, cause the collapse and ruin of that country and that city nearly ̣ three thousand years ago, there seems no sound theological reason why the same disaster could not happen again today. Cities and nations may look secure and actually be prosperous. Leaders may be religious in their acts of worship. But God's keyword is *justice*, not prosperity or piety. Without justice a city will be dismantled as thoroughly as the LORD was to dismantle Jerusalem.

³³ See the whole chapter. Micah 3:12 is the only Old Testament verse quoted verbatim by another Old Testament writer.