

God Challenges Israel (1-5) and What God Requires (6-8) (Cp Am 5.24)

- 6 Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice.
 2 Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD
 has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.
 3 “O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!
 4 For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before
 you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.
 5 O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him,
 and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the LORD.”
 6 “With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him
 with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?
 7 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my
 firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”
 8 He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love
 kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? ¹

In our scripture today there is the announcement of the lawsuit which the Lord will have with His people, the nation of Israel. The prophet summons to the courtroom the mountains and hills to hear God’s quarrel with His people. The mountains and hills will be witnesses on this occasion, because “who have seen what the Lord has done for Israel throughout the course of the ages,” and against Israel because of how they have rewarded God for all of God’s blessings and protection. The mountains have been spectators from time immemorial, and the hills are the foundations of the earth, being subject to no change on account of their strength and firmness.

In verses 3–5 the Lord opens the trial with the question, what has God done to the nation that Israel has become tired of God. The question is founded upon the fact that Israel has fallen away from God and broken the covenant. The words the prophet uses in speaking for God implies that the people had been made weary, more particularly it means to weary the patience of a person, either by demands of too great severity, or by failing to perform one’s promises. However God has done His people no harm, but has only poured blessings and benefits upon them. Then God just mentions a few of those blessings and

¹ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, S. Mic 6:1-8

benefits. First, the bringing up out of Egypt and the guidance through the Arabian Desert, as great manifestations of divine grace, to which Israel owes its freedom and nationhood. Secondly, the Lord had given His people prophets, men entrusted with God's counsels and enlightened by God's Spirit, as leaders into the promised land: Moses, with whom God talked mouth to mouth, as a friend; and Aaron, who was able to ascertain the counsel and will of the God for the sake of the congregation, but who also, along with Moses, represented the nation before God. Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, is also mentioned along with them, as she was a prophetess. Then God reminds them of the other great display of grace, when God frustrated the plan formed by the Moab king Balak to destroy Israel by means of the curses of Balaam. Remember that Balak wanted them cursed, but God would only allow Balaam to bless Israel three times. Moses explained in Deut. 23:5, 6, the Lord turned the intended curse into a blessing. Then they are reminded how God blessed them for 38 years from Shittim, Israel's last place of encampment beyond Jordan, in the steppes of Moab; to Gilgal, the first place of encampment in the land of Canaan. The period of Israel's journeying from Shittim to Gilgal included not only Balak's frustrated plan for the destruction of Israel, but also the defeat of the Midianites, who attempted to destroy Israel by seducing it to idolatry, the miraculous crossing of the Jordan, the entrance into the promised land, and the circumcision at Gilgal, by which the generation that had grown up in the desert was received into the covenant with God, and the whole nation reinstated in its normal relation to its God. These demonstrate that God had been working on their behalf and fulfilling His promise of salvation. These acts attested to God's faithfulness and righteousness. Clearly the evidence presented to the court substantiated the fact that whatever the reason for Israel's failure, it cannot be blamed on God. The remembrance of these acts calls to mind the base ingratitude with which it has repaid God by rebelling against Him.

The defendant then addressed the court. Israel did not dispute the crime of which it is guilty, nor the evidence that has been presented; the accused simply addresses a question to the court. "What must we do to set things right?" But the very phrasing of the question

betrays the fact that the defendant still did not really understand what is going on. Israel assumed that the solution to its crime is found in ritual activity. Would God perhaps like burnt offerings? Surely that should satisfy God's wounded dignity.

The people are willing and ready to come humbly before God enthroned in heaven. They knew from the scriptures that they could come with burnt-offerings, to restore fellowship. However they did not make reference to sin-offerings because the people had no true knowledge of their sin, but were still living under the delusion that they were standing firmly in the covenant with God, which they themselves had practically dissolved. As burnt-offerings, they would bring calves and rams, a year old, because they were regarded as the best. So they suggest offering thousands of rams; and also myriads of rivers of oil. Oil was part of the daily offering made by the priest on behalf of the people. Then they suggested the most precious thing they had, the sacrifice of their first-born sons, as payment for their sin. It is true that God wants the self-surrender of each person to God, and animals are no real substitute, but human sacrifices are an abomination, because the surrender which God desires is that of the spirit, not of the flesh. Israel could and should have learned this, not only from the sacrifice of Isaac required by God (Gen. 22), but also from the law concerning the consecration or sanctification of the first-born (Ex. 13:12, 13). So this offer of the nation shows that it has no true knowledge of the will of God, that it is still entangled in the heathen delusion, that the wrath of God can be expiated by human sacrifices (cf. 2 Kings 3:27; 16:3).

Micah perceived that his nation had lost the very essence of the faith. Ritual had become an end in itself, not an external manifestation of the nation's primary relationship with God. The whole sacrificial system and worship of the temple had been debased into a kind of national insurance policy: we can sin as we wish, the leaders thought, so long as we are up to date with our insurance premiums at the temple. With extraordinary nerve, the nation suggested to the court that the sins of hypocrisy could be atoned for by further hypocrisy on an even grander scale!

The prophet proceeds in the last verse to overthrow these outward means of reconciliation with God, and reminds the people of the moral demands of the law. Moses had told them in the God-given law what God required. God did not want outward sacrifices of any kind, but only the fulfillment of three duties: namely, above all things, doing righteousness and exercising love. These two embrace all the commandments of the second table, of whose fulfillment Israel thought so little, that it was addicted to the very opposite,—namely, injustice, oppression, and want of affection (vid., Mic. 2:1, 2, 8; 3:2, 3, 9 ff., 6:10 ff.). There is also a third: humble walk with God, i.e., in fellowship with God, as Israel, being a holy priestly nation, ought to walk. Without these moral virtues, sacrificial worship was a spiritless and meaningless act with which God had no pleasure (see at 1 Sam. 15:22 and Hos. 6:6).²

If God were to accuse us the answer would be the same. There is no mystery as to what God requires, and it has nothing to do with sacrifice and offering. God required three things of Israel, and the three are as pertinent today as they were in Micah's time.

(i) **Do justice.** No amount of frenzied temple or church activity could fill the vacuum of justice. While injustice ruled in Israel, every moment of temple worship was a mockery of Israel's faith. God is just and had always acted in justice with God's people; in return God required them to act and live in justice. And, as Micah had preached earlier in his prophecy, justice was notable by its absence in Israel. Yet justice is a paramount virtue, without which human beings cannot live together in the manner that God intended.

(ii) **Loving kindness,** is again one of the principal attributes of God in the Old Testament. In the same ways God always acted towards his people in loving-kindness, so too God required them to act the same toward one another. Loving-kindness, though intimately related to justice, goes beyond the first virtue; it gives, where no giving is required, it acts when no action is deserved, and it penetrates both attitudes and activities.

²Keil, Carl Friedrich ; Delitzsch, Franz: *Commentary on the Old Testament*. Peabody, MA : Hendrickson, 2002, S. 10:333-336

It is a part of the virtue extolled by Paul in his extraordinary hymn to love (1 Cor. 13:1–13).

(iii) **Walk humbly with your God.** It is the daily walk in relationship with God that lies at the heart of religion; the ritual of the temple could give expression to the vitality of that walk, but it could never replace it as the centre of Israel's faith. And the humble walk with God went hand in hand with the practice of justice and the loving kindness. This trio of virtue forms the foundations of the religious life; this was what God required of Israel.

When we sense ourselves, in moments of introspection, to be in God's court and wonder what he requires of us, it is to these three foundations that we must return. There is a human tendency within us, when faced as was Israel with the catalogue of our shortcomings, to turn to intense forms of religiosity. We should be in church more; we should spend hours in agonizing prayers of repentance; we should give all that we have to God; and so it goes on, until the fanatic is produced within us, but still without the heart of true religion. "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." At first it does not sound like much, but it is more than enough for one lifetime.³

As you are aware, Leroy and I went on vacation from January 16th through 23rd. Vacations are usually about all about me. But I met three people that lived their religion for all to see. On day at breakfast we met a woman and her husband. She was on her 81st cruise. But her husband explained that at every port of call his wife found some church or charity with which to leave her clothes for distribute to those who needed them. She always come back home with only the clothes on her back. I met another woman in the steam room that was traveling with a group of wounded veterans. They had called ahead to Belize and Honduras and rather that being tourist at those ports of call they brought school supplies and did work to support schools. They reminded me of a friend that is planning a trip to Hawaii, but he and his wife will go with members of their church and

³Craigie, Peter C.: *Twelve Prophets : Volume 2*. Louisville : Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, c1984 (The Daily Study Bible Series), S. 45

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Micah 6:1-8

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they will go to one of the remote islands and so mission work before relaxing. Tomorrow some of us will gather at Carriage Town to worship and serve. These are just a few examples of showing loving kindness. In the area of justice God is still calling us to give a decent tip for work well done, to not have others waiting on us hand and foot without saying thank you and showing true appreciation. To walk humbly with God does imply time with God in worship and pray. The list goes on of how we can do justice, show loving kindness and walk humbly with our God. This truly is a life-time endeavor. Let us strive to obey. Amen