

# Swords Into Ploughshares

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Davis

[ 0 : 0 0 ] This evening I'd like us to turn back together to Micah chapter 4. Let me just read a couple of verses again from the beginning. It says, The title comes from the words found in verse 3 where Micah speaks of swords being beaten into plowshares. And the reason I wanted to think about this passage tonight is because it ties in with something that Jesus said in the passage we looked at this morning. In John chapter 18, whilst Jesus was being questioned by Pilate, he makes the following statement. Pilate asks him,

Are you a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done? Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting that I might not be delivered over to the Jews.

But my kingdom is not of this world. In John 18, which we looked at this morning, Jesus is on trial. He's been dragged before Pilate. He's been questioned about who he really is. He's been confronted by numerous enemies and he's about to be condemned to death. And in it all, he doesn't fight back. He doesn't engage in conflict. He doesn't defend himself. He doesn't fight back.

In fact, he rebukes those who attempt to fight back. You see that in the incident with Peter in Matthew 26. We know from John's Gospel that this was Peter, who's stretched out his hand and threw his sword and struck the servant of the high priest who had come to arrest Jesus. And Jesus had put your sword back into its place for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you not think that I cannot appeal to my father and at once he'll send me more than 12 legions of angels?

He, Jesus, rebukes any attempt to fight back. All of this is teaching us that the kingdom of God, the mission of the church and the great plan of salvation that God is outworking, is not accomplished through military action or through violent force. Now, you might be thinking, I knew that and I'm not planning any military action anytime soon. And if so, that's good because we don't want that to happen. But because of that, you might be thinking, well, why do we need to think about this? Well, I want us to, what I hope we're going to see tonight is that it's an important thing for us to think about for lots of reasons. It's important because it helps us to understand how we are to read the Bible, particularly things that we read in the Old Testament. It's also important because it helps us understand the mission of the church that we're all part of. And it's important because it helps shape our posture as individual disciples and as a church community. So we're going to think all about this together for a wee while tonight and we're asking two simple questions. Why are swords being turned into plowshares?

[ 3 : 4 9 ] Why is this important for us? So, thinking for a week while first about this question. If you go back into the Old Testament, one of the things that becomes very clear is that there is frequent military conflict. In fact, you see that in almost all of the famous heroes of the Old Testament, Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Samson, David, they were all military heroes.

And the opposite of that is also true, that the low points in Old Testament history are frequently connected to either military threats or even military defeats experienced by God's people.

And that reality of a military threat is the context of the prophecy of Micah that Thol read from. That's exactly what's happening as he writes these words of Micah 4, 1 to 4. Micah was a prophet around 740-ish to 690 BC. So it extends over a fairly extensive period of time. And during that period, Assyria was the dominant empire, the global superpower, if you like, kind of in the area of like Syria, Turkey, Iraq, kind of area that we would describe today. At the same time, the nation of Israel was divided into two. There was the northern kingdom, which retained the name Israel, and then the southern kingdom of Judah. And during Micah's lifetime in about 722 BC, that northern kingdom was crushed by the Assyrian empire. And in the aftermath of coming, moving south, crushing the northern kingdom of Israel, the Assyrians moved further south with the intention of attacking Judah. But the king of Judah at the time, Hezekiah, cried out to God, and the nation was delivered from that massive military threat. And if you want to read all about the details, you can go to 2 Kings chapter 18 and 19. It tells you all about it. The key point I want to highlight just now is that Micah prophesied at a time when an external military threat was right on Judah's doorstep. And so the need for military security was urgent, and the reality of violence, war, and conflict was inescapable. So all of that meant that at that time, and at many other times in the Old Testament history of God's people, if they were going to be preserved, and if God's purposes were going to be fulfilled, then there was an urgent need for strong military leadership.

But the interesting thing is that as Micah prophesies into that period, as he warns people about God's judgment for their sins, and as he gives hope for a future where God's salvation is going to come later days, as he has in verse 1, as he talks about the future, when God's great plan of salvation is going to be fulfilled, he says that in those days, they will beat their swords into plowshares. In other words, the great climax of God's plan of salvation, the new covenant that the Old Covenant, the Old Testament is pointing towards the messianic age when God's King finally comes, none of that is going to be about military conquest. And yet military conquest is exactly what so many people expected. For God's people in the Old Testament, the reality of a foreign superpower either on their doorstep or flooding through their streets was going to become the norm. In Micah's lifetime, it was the Assyrians. 200 years later, they were overtaken by the

Babylonians. The Babylonians were the ones who did finally conquer Judah and Jerusalem and took the people into exile, destroying the city, destroying the temple. It wasn't long before they were replaced by the Persians. The Persians were replaced by the Greeks. The Greeks were replaced by the Romans. For God's people, they were constantly facing either the threat or the reality of being conquered by a massive military superpower. And that meant that as you get towards the end of the Old Testament, as you come to the bit in between the Old and New Testament, and as you come into the New Testament itself, so much of the national identity, so much of the community hopes, so much of the religious convictions were bound up with the idea that they could fight off these enemies and finally get their freedom back. In that period between the Old and New Testament, the Inter-Testamental period, as we call it, that's like from 400 to around, well, where Jesus was born, 4 BC. In that period, the Jews had some success in fighting off the Greeks, but yet they also experienced devastating defeats. And by the time the New Testament begins, they are firmly under the control of the Roman Empire. And what that meant was that as they longed for the Messiah to come, they were full of hope that he was going to be the greatest military leader of all. He was going to be the one who would defeat the superpower, the one that would destroy their enemies, the one that would finally, finally set them free. And then Jesus comes and he says,

[ 9 : 59 ] I'm not doing that. I'm not doing that at all. And so Jesus has come as the Messiah. He's come to fulfill all the promises that the Old Testament has given, but it quickly becomes clear that he is not going to do that through military force.

And that explains some of the patterns that you see in the Gospels. It explains why early in Jesus' ministry, when he performed some of his early miracles, he did not want people to talk about it or to spread news about what he was doing. You see that in Mark chapter one, he heals a leper and then says, don't broadcast what's happened. Same after he fed the 5,000, the people saw this miracle and they wanted to come and make him king by force. And as they do that, they're wanting to make him that military leader that's going to fight off Rome and Jesus withdraws immediately.

Same as we come to Luke chapter nine, there's Samaritan villages who did not welcome Jesus, and James and John says, let's call it an airstrike from heaven. And Jesus turns and rebukes them.

And as we saw in Gethsemane, when Peter tries to fight off the soldiers, he is immediately rebuked by Jesus. So Jesus has not come to engage in military action.

Now two important points arise here. One, although we're saying that Jesus did not come to engage in military action, that does not mean for one second that he didn't come to fight.

[ 11 : 34 ] He did come to fight. He came to engage in battle. He came to confront an enemy. He came to conquer.

But that enemy was not the Romans, not the Greeks, not the Babylonians, not any other military opposition. The enemy was sin and death and Satan's kingdom. In other words, the battle was not military. The battle was spiritual. And that becomes so obvious as you read the gospels, whilst the crowds are saying, I wonder if he's going to fight off the Romans. Jesus is confronting demons. Jesus is resisting the devil's temptations. Jesus is healing people, giving signs, showing that he has come to bring healing and restoration from all the damage that sin has caused. He's come to conquer, but not another nation. He's come to conquer sin and the kingdom of evil.

And that highlights the second key point that arises here, the fact that Jesus has come to bring peace. The kingdom of God that Jesus inaugurates is a kingdom of peace. That's why we read from the very start in Isaiah 9, Jesus himself is the prince of peace. And as he sets out his standards for his kingdom in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 to 7, he doesn't say, blessed are the warriors. He says, blessed are the peacemakers. Not only that, as you can see in those verses on the screen, he says that the citizens of his kingdom are blessed not when they attack, but when they get attacked, when they're persecuted for righteousness sake. Now, there's so many things we could say about this. The thing I want to just highlight is that this is exactly what the Old Testament prophesied. Swords are getting beaten into plowshares. And they're beaten into plowshares because they're not needed. The latter days, when God's king comes are not going to be days of military conquest. God's kingdom is not going to be advanced through violence or force. Jesus has not come to bring war and aggression and death. He's come to bring peace and compassion and life.

And that's why swords are being turned into plowshares. But why is this important for us? I want to suggest that it's important for at least three reasons. As I said at the start, it helps us understand how to read the Bible, especially the Old Testament. It's crucial for understanding the mission of the church. And it's very important for shaping our posture as individual disciples and as a church community. And I want to look at these just one by one in turn. So first of all, this all helps us to understand how to read the Bible, especially what we come across when we read the Old Testament. The whole question of military force can create attention for us as we look at the Bible because we read about Jesus and we see this great non-military emphasis. And then we go back into the Old Testament and you see tons of conflict. And at times you see God's purposes being accomplished through these conflicts. The Psalms, for example, are full of references to enemies being defeated in military conflict. So the New Testament might prefer plowshares. The Old Testament seems pretty keen on swords. And so you think, how do we understand that? How do we resolve that tension? Well, this is where we have to remember that the events and patterns that you see in the Old Testament always serve as a shadow of what is going to come in the new. The Old Testament is always a shadow of the New Testament. And that means that as we read events in the Old Testament, two things are happening. The Old Testament is pointing to a reality and it's highlighting an inadequacy. It's pointing to a reality and it's highlighting an inadequacy. And that balance of reality and inadequacy is so crucial for us to recognize. So in terms of military conflicts, the Old Testament is a shadow pointing to a reality. And that reality is, of course, the reality of spiritual conflict. The whole Bible from Genesis 3 onwards is set in the context of a conflict, a battle between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, battle between the spiritual powers of good against the spiritual forces of darkness. That's the ultimate conflict. That's the real battle. That is our biggest problem.

And the military conflicts of the Old Testament are pointing us to that reality. And coupled to that is the reality of judgment, the fact that evil is going to be judged. And there are times in the Old Testament when people who have utterly rejected God and who have wholly embraced idolatry, they are judged through military conquest. All of that's pointing us to the bigger reality that one day all evil will be called to account and judged by God. The Old Testament is pointing us to that bigger spiritual reality. At the same time, though, the military conflicts of the Old Testament are highlighting an inadequacy. Now, what do I mean by that? Well, what I mean is that ultimately all the military action in the Old Testament doesn't work. So yes, at times there's military success for God's people. At times they enjoy peace. At times they celebrate great victory, but ultimately it doesn't work. It's inadequate. The Old Testament is not a success story.

[18:00] It's a story of failure. And in military terms, the Old Testament ends with God's people crushed and conquered. The military conflicts of the Old Testament point to a reality and highlight an inadequacy. And the key point is that that is exactly what the Old Testament is seeking to do.

And it's the same with everything else you see in the Old Testament. So the temple in the Old Testament points to the spiritual reality that sin needs to be atoned for. But all the sacrifices of bulls and calves and goats and sheep are inadequate. They don't ultimately work. The king reigning in Jerusalem points to the reality of God's kingdom. But all the kings are inadequate.

Even David, who was the best of them all, has moments of colossal failure. The nation of Israel points to the spiritual reality of God's covenant people, God's community, his church. But it's inadequate. The nation of Israel argues and fights and eventually falls apart. The prophets, like Micah, point to the reality of God revealing himself to us. But even these prophets are inadequate. They cannot fully reveal God. And the people don't listen to them. The Old Testament points to reality, highlights inadequacy. And this helps us to see why the Old Testament is so important, but it's not the final story. It's pointing us to spiritual realities that we have to reckon with. But it's also showing us what not to do. It's showing us that the solution does not lie in the military fighting or the temple sacrifices or the geopolitical success or otherwise of the nation of Israel. The solution doesn't lie in these things. The solution lies in what's coming.

The solution lies in Jesus. And what I hope is that that's a helpful thing for you to remember when you read the Old Testament. Anything you're reading about in the Old Testament, you have to remember this is pointing me to a spiritual reality. It's pointing me to something that I've got to think about. But at the same time, you have to remember that what I'm reading here is highlighting an inadequacy. And it's doing that deliberately, because it's telling us again and again and again that the thing that we need has not come. The thing that we need is Jesus.

And the Old Testament is constantly pointing us towards him. And so all of that's helpful for us as we seek to understand how to read the Old Testament and how we see how the whole Bible fits together.

[ 20 : 49 ] Second reason why this is important for us to think about is because it helps us to understand the church's mission. And this is really crucial because it's something that the church has got wrong many times throughout history. We have to be very, very clear when we say that God's kingdom is a kingdom of peace. And we have to always, always bear that in mind. Jesus has come as the Prince of Peace. But at the same time, when we say that the gospel is not advanced through military conquest, not for one second are we saying that we don't have an enemy. The truth is we do have an enemy. We have an enemy that's far greater than we ever realized. The Old Testament, Israelite, faced a global superpower. We faced the opposition of an even greater superpower, the power of sin and death. A brutal empire like the Assyrians in the Old Testament killed millions.

The empire of sin and death kills everyone. And that is the enemy that Jesus has come to conquer.

And that is what makes the gospel such good news. That's why the New Testament is full of amazing passages like this one in 1 Corinthians 15:51. Behold, I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall be changed in a moment in the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet for the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable and we shall be changed for this perishable body must put on the imperishable and this mortal body must put on immortality.

When the perishable puts on the imperishable and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that's written death is swallowed up in victory. Oh death, where is your victory?

Oh death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin. The power of sin is the law, but thanks be to God who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ. Jesus has come to defeat death and he does that by tasting death on the cross in our place. And his resurrection means that he is now totally victorious. He's conquered the enemy that he came to defeat. And through our union with Christ, through trusting in him, we share in that victory and now he is calling all people from all nations to trust in him and to share in that victory as well. And our mission as a church is to spread that news, to communicate that message and to call people to come to trust in Jesus. That's our mission, but we do not do that with swords. And we do not do that by trying to force people in with military threats or any other violence like that. We do that by sharing the message of the gospel and we share that message through what we say and through how we live.

[ 24 : 07 ] We model the new humanity that Jesus is establishing. We extend his message of love and mercy and peace to everyone around us. And it's all bringing us back to the fact that we must never forget that in a world full of so many problems, the biggest problem we have is the problem of sin and death. If you ask an Israelite in Micah's day, what's your biggest problem? He just said Assyria. If you asked a Jew in the first century, what's your biggest problem? He said Rome. They're wrong. They were all wrong. And when we think that our biggest problem is the thing on our doorstep, whether it's uncertainty about our job or financial worries or anxiety about what's going on in the world around us, these things are big problems, but they're never our biggest problem. The biggest problem is the problem of sin. That's what Jesus has come to save us from.

And the mission of the church is to spread the news of his victory, of the healing and restoration that only he can bring. And all of that means that we are in a battle, but not a military one.

We're in a spiritual one. That's why Paul can speak of putting on the whole armor of God. I won't read it out, but you can see it there in Ephesians 6. The fact that we put on armor for that spiritual battle that we have as we seek to take forward the work of the gospel as we seek to press on with the mission of the church. And in so many other places in the New Testament, that military language is used as a metaphor to speak of our mission. And it's so, so important that we highlight this, because maybe everybody here is thinking, well, I know that, but there are so many times in the history of the church where Christians have got this wrong. And the tragic reality of history is that there have been many, many times when Christians thought that they could spread the gospel, advance the mission of the church through military force. It didn't work then. It will never work, because it's not what Jesus wanted his church to do. And it's always reminding us that, you know, there are times when, when maybe war is justified, there are times when nations need to defend themselves. That does happen, but that's the responsibility of the government. And the government is established by God to carry that responsibility. It's never the responsibility of our church, of the church. That's not our mission. We have a different job to do. And so it helps us to remember that, yes, we have a battle, we have an enemy, but it's a spiritual battle. And our mission is to share the news of Jesus' victory. And all of that takes us to the third point, that remembering this helps to shape our posture as individual Christians and as a church community.

Remember, Jesus said that we're called to be peacemakers, but that doesn't mean that our lives are full of peace. It means that at times we will face conflict. Sometimes we will be persecuted.

Sometimes that's physical persecution, sometimes verbal or social persecution. But as that happens, our posture must never, ever be one of aggression. We must never initiate conflict. And when it happens, we must never retaliate. In fact, Jesus said to love your enemies, to pray for those who persecute you. And that teaches us two final points, and I want to close with these. Number one, it's reminding us that other people are not your enemy. Other people are not your enemy. And that applies to everything, to other nations, to other races, to other religions, to other ideologies, to other colleagues, to other churches. These people might be very different to us. Maybe they might be a they might be a hostile towards us or suspicious of us. But they're not our enemy.

[ 28 : 42 ] They're our mission field. They're our prayer list. They are the next in line to be recipients of grace. We've got to understand who the enemy really is. The enemy is Satan, sin and death.

That's who Jesus came to oppose. That's who Jesus conquered. Sometimes we can get so angry with people, we can feel threatened by them. They hurt us. We never want to forgive them. And we just want to have a perpetual hostility towards the people that have treated us in a way that we don't feel is fair. They become enemies for life. We've got to remember that you can only have that kind of enemy by allowing sin to come into your heart and be your friend. In the gospel, people are not our enemy. They're the people that we need to reach with the good news of Jesus. And then the second thing this all reminds us of is that a life shaped by the gospel is a life where the destructive power of sin is no longer in charge. And this takes us back to the imagery that Micah uses, that imagery of swords being turned into plowshares. I think that's such a beautiful image because it doesn't just speak of an end of violence. It also speaks of a better use of resources. You just imagine the steel that people have used for a sword is being repurposed. The resources they have are being put to a far better use. And a plowshare instead of speaking of violence and destruction and death, it's speaking of cultivation, of sowing, of harvesting, of feeding, of work, of purpose, of progress. And it's reminding us of a crucial point. War accomplishes its purposes through destruction. The gospel accomplishes its purposes through renewal. And that's why as we seek to follow Jesus, as we seek to apply the gospel to every part of our lives, as we seek to live every day in light of the realities, the fact that Jesus is risen and that he has conquered the ultimate enemy of death, as we live each day in light of these truths, it has such a wonderfully positive impact on our day-to-day lives. We don't need to conquer evil and sin and death because Jesus already has. We don't need to find a victory because Jesus has already won it. We don't need to wait for a Savior because Jesus has already come. And instead of seeking to conquer or overcome, we can cultivate. We can live out lives that are shaped by the healing and restoring and renewing power of the gospel. Lives that are characterised by love and peace and hope and mercy and compassion and indescribable joy. And as people look at us as a church community, that's what we want them to see. That's what we want our posture to be. Because we live in a day today where military conflict is a tragic reality. We live in a day where hostility between people is real, whether that's between nations or even between colleagues in the office or between children in school.

We live in a day where the power of sin and death is still wrecking people's lives. And that world, living in the shadow of all that sorrow, desperately needs hope, desperately needs to hear about Jesus, desperately needs to see the amazing difference that He makes. And they can see it in you this week. As we go into a Monday morning tomorrow, as we interact with people, they can see the amazing difference that Jesus has made. That we're not confrontational, we're not sharp and cold and harsh. We don't have half a hand on our sword ready to fight off people who come too close. But instead, we are cultivating all the beauty and joy that God wants us to have. We are building the new humanity that Jesus has come to inaugurate now, that He will consummate when He returns. It's all pointing us to the amazing purposes that God has for us, for all His people.

And we want that to be seen in the way that we live our lives this week and for the rest of our lives. The gospel is amazing because in the gospel, swords are turned into plowshares. Amen.