

ESCHATON

Psalm 125 • Micah 4:1–7 • Augsburg Confession, Article XVII

PSALM	Psalm 125:2 “As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, from this time forth and forevermore.”
READING	Micah 4:3 “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”
BOOK OF CONCORD	Augsburg Confession Article XVII: The Return of Christ to Judgment

The Texts

Micah 4 opens with a vision that has no human precedent: in the latter days the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and peoples shall flow to it. Nation shall not lift sword against nation; war shall not be learned. The lame shall become a remnant; the outcast, a strong nation. The Lord shall reign over them in Mount Zion from that time forth and forevermore. Every element of this vision is superlative and final. It does not describe a gradual improvement but a completed transformation at a specific eschatological moment, in the latter days. The question AC XVII answers is the question Micah 4 raises: when does this happen, and by what means does it come?

Psalm 125’s answer to the present age is different in kind but not in source. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds His people from this time forth and forevermore. The surrounding is real; the protection is real; the permanence is real. But it is the surrounding of a people still living under the cross, still subject to tribulation, still waiting for the latter days Micah envisions. Augsburg Confession Article XVII places Micah 4’s fullness at the Last Day, the bodily return of Christ, and assigns Psalm 125’s surrounding as the real but not yet final peace available to the Church in the present age. The two texts are not in tension; they describe the same Lord’s provision at two different moments in His saving work.

Discuss: *Micah 4 places its vision in the latter days and describes a final, completed transformation; Psalm 125 describes a real but present surrounding that is not yet the fullness. AC XVII places the plowshares moment at Christ’s return and assigns Psalm 125’s protection to the Church in the present age. How does holding that distinction change the way a congregation relates to political and social movements that promise to deliver Micah 4’s peace by human effort before the Last Day?*

Key Terms

Term	What It Means
Chiliasm / Jewish opinions	AC XVII’s condemnation of the teaching that the godly will take possession of the world’s kingdoms before the resurrection, suppressing the ungodly by force. The Confession condemns this as a misreading of eschatological prophecy that turns the Gospel into a political program.
Swords into plowshares: spiritual peace	Luther’s interpretation of Micah 4’s image. The Church does not advance its kingdom by physical weapons or political force. The present fulfillment is the spiritual peace of the justified conscience: believers lay down the swords of self-justification, revenge, and hatred.
The two kingdoms	AC XVII’s implicit doctrine: God rules the secular realm through the sword and law to restrain evil; God rules the spiritual realm through the Gospel to forgive sins. Collapsing the two turns the Gospel into a new law and breeds tyranny.
The Consummation	AC XVII’s term for the Last Day: the bodily return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the eternal life of the elect, and the everlasting punishment of the wicked. This is the only event at which the fullness of Micah 4’s vision becomes permanently real.

Discuss: *The two-kingdoms distinction prevents the Gospel from being turned into a political program, and AC XVII’s condemnation of Chiliasm guards against every attempt to establish the saints’ kingdom by force before the Last Day. The history of Anabaptist theocracy in the sixteenth century is one version of what that error produces. What are the contemporary forms of the same error, on both ends of the political spectrum, and what does AC XVII require to be said about all of them?*

The Rejection of an Earthly Utopia

Augsburg Confession Article XVII opens by confessing the future return of Christ to judge the living and the dead, and then immediately condemns a specific error about what that return implies for the present. The Confession uses the phrase *Jewish opinions* to identify the teaching that before the resurrection of the dead the godly shall take possession of the kingdoms of the world, the ungodly being everywhere suppressed. During the Reformation, this error was not merely theoretical; Anabaptist groups in Münster and elsewhere attempted to enact exactly this vision by force, killing those they regarded as ungodly in order to establish the kingdom of the saints. AC XVII condemns this as a fundamental misreading of eschatological prophecy.

The theological problem runs deeper than the violence. When the Church identifies its mission with the political transformation of the present age into the peace Micah 4 envisions, it collapses the eschatological into the historical, the eternal into the manageable. The result is always one of two disasters: a triumphalism that turns the cross into a strategy for earthly victory, or a despair when the expected transformation does not arrive on schedule. AC XVII's refusal to locate Micah 4's fullness in the present age is not a counsel of political indifference. It is the protection of the Church against the crushing disappointment that always follows the confusion of what God has promised for the end with what He has ordered for the present.

Discuss: *AC XVII condemns the expectation that the godly will take possession of the world's kingdoms before the resurrection. The Anabaptist theocracy at Münster was the sixteenth-century form of that error. Where does the contemporary church, in both its progressive and conservative forms, carry the same fundamental assumption: that the fullness of Micah 4's vision is achievable by the right combination of political effort and faithful action before the Last Day?*

Swords into Plowshares: A Spiritual Peace

Luther's refusal to read Micah 4's swords-into-plowshares as a promise of geopolitical peace is not an evasion of the text. It is a precise exegetical decision: the world has never had peace, will not have peace until the Last Day, and the vision must therefore describe something that is genuinely present in the Church without being present in the political order. His interpretation is that Micah 4 describes the spiritual peace of the justified conscience. Christ has reconciled us to the Father, which means the Church does not advance its kingdom by physical weapons or political force. The weapons of this knighthood, as Paul says, are not carnal but mighty before God.

The present fulfillment of swords into plowshares is the laying down of the inner weapons: the sword of self-justification by which the guilty conscience defends itself before God, the sword of revenge by which the injured person repays wrong with wrong, the sword of hatred by which the neighbor is transformed into an enemy. These are the swords the Gospel melts into plowshares in the present age. Psalm 125 describes the same reality from a different angle: the Lord surrounds His people not with a physical army but with His own protecting hand, and under that protection the Church possesses the only thing that cannot be taken away, the eternal Word. Every worldly empire eventually falls into dust; the Church that possesses the Word is a mountain raised above all others precisely because its foundation is not earthly.

Discuss: *Luther says the present fulfillment of swords into plowshares is the spiritual peace of the justified conscience: the laying down of self-justification, revenge, and hatred in exchange for the peace of forgiveness. Psalm 125's surrounding is real protection, but it is the protection of the Word and Sacraments rather than a military or political shield. How does a congregation that has absorbed this interpretation relate to its own experience of external threat, institutional decline, or cultural hostility in a way that is neither triumphalist nor despairing?*

Theological Honesty vs. Despair

AC XVII's restraint might appear, at first reading, to rob the Church of hope by deferring Micah 4's fullness to a moment beyond human history. The opposite is true. A theology that promises Micah 4's peace in the present age sets believers up for a crushing disappointment that is theologically unavoidable, because Christ Himself warned that in the world we will have tribulation. The Confessions are entirely honest that on this side of the Last Day the Church will always be subject to the cross. To expect otherwise is not faith but a failure of theological realism that the cross itself refutes.

The two-kingdoms doctrine that AC XVII implies is the structural form of this honesty. God rules the secular realm through the sword and the law to restrain raw evil and preserve order; this is a real and necessary work, but it is not the Gospel. God rules the spiritual realm through the Gospel to forgive sins and create faith; this is the Church's specific commission, and it cannot be performed by the tools of the secular realm without destroying itself. By placing our hope at the Consummation, the bodily return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the eternal life of the elect, AC XVII does not diminish hope. It purifies it of every counterfeit and directs it to the only horizon that is unshakeable: the Last Day on which Christ Himself will permanently end sin, death, and the devil and bring the fullness of Micah 4 into everlasting reality.

Discuss: *AC XVII places Micah 4's fullness at the Last Day and calls the cross the Church's present condition, which it says is not despair but theological honesty. How does a congregation that holds that horizon preach hope to its members who are suffering, aging, dying, or watching the culture move against everything they believe, in a way that neither collapses into worldly optimism nor retreats into passive fatalism?*

The Payoff

Psalm 125's mountains surrounding Jerusalem from this time forth and forevermore are not a metaphor for good feelings. They are the real, present, protective surrounding of the Lord Himself, who preserved His Word and Sacraments through every empire that tried to bury them, and who will continue to surround His people until the moment that Micah 4's in the latter days arrives: when the mountain of the Lord's house is established above all mountains, the lame are made a strong nation, and the One who reigns from Mount Zion comes again in glory to make every sword a plowshare, permanently and finally, without any human program to help Him.