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Micah 2:1-13

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JUDGMENT AND SALVATION

It is August, and many families are on their summer vacations. My family went on vacation earlier this year to Washington D.C. One of our favorite sights was the Library of Congress, home to a wealth of historic documents and books. All of this history is housed in a magnificent architecture, the most impressive of which is the Great Reading Room. Arranged in a circle around this great room are imposing statues representing Art, Science, Law, Philosophy, and other disciplines. One statue on the wall symbolizes Religion. Above it is a quote, which reads,

“What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.”

This one verse from the Old Testament is seen by millions of visitors each year. Its prominent display left a deep impression on me.

The verse comes from the Old Testament book of Micah, which is the source of other foundational verses of our Christian faith, many of which are known even in non-religious circles. Some other well-known verses from Micah include:

“They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.” (4:3)

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” (5:2)

With these verses in mind I was intrigued to explore biblical truths from this otherwise unfamiliar book. Today we will examine Micah to understand the exhortations this prophet offers and to find the relevance of his prophecies in today’s world.

What is a prophet, and what is the prophecy that he proclaims? If you ask anyone today, you’ll likely get the answer, “a prophet is one who foretells the future.” The accurate biblical description of a prophet, however, is as follows: a prophet is one who receives a message from God and proclaims this message to an intended audience. In this context, a prophet does not necessarily foretell the future but, rather, is focused on the *present*, to spur repentance and action *right now*. That is the goal for us as we study Micah. We want to be encouraged and convicted by the prophet right now, to be spurred to action and repentance in our own lives.

A prophecy, also known as an oracle, is God’s message to the people. The message comes in two “flavors,” as two sides of the same coin. One message delivers condemnation of sin with judgment; the other form offers salvation and redemption. These two themes go hand in hand: condemnation with pardon, judgment with consolation, punishment balanced by restoration.

As we study the judgment oracles we may be tempted to dismiss them as not applicable to ourselves. “Surely, we’re not evildoers!” may be our reaction. However, I want to challenge us to not be so comfortable or complacent but examine our own motives in light of the judgment prophecies.

Furthermore, as we examine the salvation oracles we ought to rejoice in the pardoning of sin and in the promise of restoration. We may have forgotten that joy of redemption, that exhilarating and freeing pardon that comes after humble confession of sin. This joy is for us as well.

Judgment creates tension for us while salvation resolves the tension. Judgment “afflicts the comfortable,” while salvation “comforts the afflicted.” My prayer is that Micah will afflict you and comfort you as it has done for me.

Let’s begin with the historical background of Micah. About 1000 B.C., Israel was a united kingdom. It was a nation under one king, beginning with Saul, followed by David and Solomon. About 930 B.C., the kingdom broke apart into two kingdoms: the Northern kingdom of Israel, and the Southern kingdom of Judah.

The Northern kingdom had a succession of bad kings who “did evil in the eyes of the Lord,” introducing idolatry and establishing false religions. The Northern kingdom struggled for 200 years until the fierce Assyrians captured the capital Samaria in 722 B.C. and dispersed the Israelites.

The kingdom of Judah in the south had a few good kings who “did right in the eyes of the Lord.” They restored the temple and got rid of pagan worship and altars. The majority of the kings in the South, however, committed the sins of idolatry, just as the Northern kings did. The Southern kingdom of Judah lasted another century and a half until Babylon conquered Jerusalem in 587 B.C. and exiled the leaders and people of Judah to Babylon for 70 years.

It was during the period from 735 to 710 B.C. in the kingdom of Judah that Micah prophesied to the people of both the Northern and Southern kingdoms.

With this brief overview of the historical context in mind, let’s now examine the book itself. Micah consists of several cycles of oracles that alternate between judgment and salvation prophecies. The first cycle consists of chapters 1 and 2. In Micah 1, God gives a judgment and punishment against the entire nation of his covenant people, charging them with breaking covenant with him and turning to idols and false religions. Chapter 2 includes an oracle of judgment against individual evildoers within the society, followed by a promise of salvation for the faithful remnant.

This morning, I'd like to focus our attention on Micah 2, the cycle of oracles that addresses the individual.

The judgment oracle of chapter 2 is proclaimed against the rich leaders who oppress the disadvantaged. The accusations and punishments are arranged in two parallel passages, carefully constructed as a double-barreled shotgun against evildoers. The pattern is accusation, punishment, and indictment against false prophets (vv 1-7), followed by another parallel sequence of accusation, punishment, and false prophets (vv 8-11).

First, let's examine the accusation sections in vv 1-2 and 8-9. Micah begins the accusation with a thunderous denouncement, "Woe to you!"

"Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! At morning's light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it. They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud a man of his home, a fellowman of his inheritance." (Micah 2:1-2)

And,

"Lately my people have risen up like an enemy. You strip off the rich robe from those who pass by without a care, like men returning from battle. You drive the women of my people from their pleasant homes. You take away my blessing from their children forever." (2:8-9)

Micah accuses the evildoers of methodically planning their evil deeds. This is a serious charge, for it addresses the heart itself. This crime is not done in a moment of passion, a temporary succumbing to temptations that cross their path. No, this is an intentional plotting of evil even as they lie in bed, devising and working schemes to defraud others. The dark intentions and attitude of the heart are exposed for what they are in v 2: covetousness and greed drive evildoers to their crimes. This covetousness is a violation of the 10th commandment, so foundational in the functioning of God's covenant people.

What are the results of their wicked schemes? First, the rich oppressors direct their attack upon the physical property of their own countryman. Verse 2 states that evildoers covet fields then seize them; they covet houses and take them; they defraud a fellowman of home and inheritance.

Verses 8 and 9 introduce a second accusation: the evildoers deprive the innocent of peace, security, and blessings. Of the two, I believe the more heinous crime is this second category. Losing the intangible security, peace of mind and blessings from God, is more devastating than losing physical items. Men without a care, returning home as if from war expect security, peace, and rest at home. Yet, when they least expect it they are robbed and stripped in their own homeland. This crime shatters their soul, destroying their sense of peace. Women, for whom the home and "nest" are so foundational and essential, are driven away from that security. And children, who are weak, innocent, and dependent, are ripped away forever from God's blessings, which may be family or a future in the society. These once lost are irreplaceable and permanently devastating.

This oracle was proclaimed to God's covenant people who were oppressing their own countrymen in Israel and Judah. In today's

world, an equivalent statement may refer to Christians who oppress or defraud other Christians. I believe we can extend this application to us. We are now God's covenant people, and we are bound by the New Covenant to him and to each other.

As individual Christians we may read these indictments and readily identify evil in the behavior of others. We can recall situations in which we have been cheated or dispossessed. It is easy for us to look outward and start naming evildoers who may have inflicted harm on us. I challenge us not to treat this oracle in only that way, however, but also examine ourselves in light of those charges.

Reflecting on these accusations, I wonder how I may be guilty of these crimes in my own life. As an engineer, I've seen an unhealthy work environment all around me. I've seen conference calls set up during dinner time just because it is convenient for the manager. I've seen business trips that displace vacation plans. I've experienced incredible pressures that deprive me of rest even when I'm at home, away from the office. Many of us have faced this pressure, and many of us are in the position to impose it on others. Look at verse 1, which says the evildoers carry out evil deeds because "it is in their power to do it." I realized that it was in my power to have my staff work long hours and on weekends, and I have imposed deadlines and pressure on my colleagues – on my own friends! I confess that I'm convicted of my own transgressions by this verse. Allow me challenge all of us with this question: Have we in our business practices robbed a man of his family life, his rest, and his peace?

I've heard neighborhood high school kids exclaim, "I hate my life!" Why? Because of the intense pressure they feel from their parents and peers to excel academically. Every summer they are locked up in SAT prep classes aiming for perfect scores. During the year they are tutored to gain an advantage in the next test. Are our kids missing out on relationships, memories, and God's intentions for them simply for academic excellence? Is it in our power to impose this on them or to make a difference for them? If so, then let's strive to restore the right balance into the lives of our children.

I've seen sports teams that demand so much out of the kids, forcing them to forgo family time, study, and church for practices and games. They deprive the kids of rest, and at times of self-esteem if they don't deliver in an athletic event.

How similar are these instances to those crimes of which Micah is accusing the evildoers in chapter 2? We must heed the prophet's accusation and reflect deeply on our own motives, priorities, and actions. That is the purpose of a prophecy: to awaken the audience from a moral stupor. The application of this oracle is to awaken us right now, before punishment comes.

The Lord promises in vv 3-5 and 10 that punishment will come. We see a punishment that fits the crime, "an eye for an eye" punishment for the evildoers.

Therefore, the LORD says: "I am planning disaster against this people, from which you cannot save yourselves. You will no longer walk proudly, for it will be a time of calamity. In that day men will ridicule you; they will taunt you with this mournful song: 'We are utterly ruined; my people's posses-

sion is divided up. He takes it from me! He assigns our fields to traitors.' Therefore you will have no one in the assembly of the LORD to divide the land by lot." (2:3-5)

"Get up, go away! For this is not your resting place, because it is defiled, it is ruined, beyond all remedy." (2:10)

Just as the evildoers plan their schemes, so too will God plan disaster against them. Just as the oppressors steal fields, so too will God assign the fields to traitors. As evildoers defraud others of their inheritance, so too will their own inheritance (divide the land by lot) be taken away. These punishments are just, appropriate, and fitting for the crimes. This is the concept of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." Micah is saying to evildoers, "Punishment is coming, so be aware! Do not be surprised!"

This oracle also predicts the dispersion of the nation and its eventual exile. Verse 5 says, "you will not have a lot in the assembly of the Lord"; v 10 says "Get up, go away! This is not your resting place." Both of these verses predict an exile, a removal of the nation from its covenant land and from the presence of God (the assembly of the Lord). These haunting prophecies were to be fulfilled 150 years later with the Babylonian conquest. The land did become divided, the people were exiled, and the covenant appeared to be broken forever.

This oracle of judgment and punishment is a hard one to proclaim as no one wants to give bad news. Micah's contemporary "priests" and "prophets" certainly did not faithfully proclaim the impending judgment to the peoples:

"Do not prophesy," their prophets say. "Do not prophesy about these things; disgrace will not overtake us." (2:6)

"If a liar and deceiver comes and says, 'I will prophesy for you plenty of wine and beer,' he would be just the prophet for this people!" (2:11)

Micah has some harsh words to say about these false religious leaders. In verse 11, he calls them "liars and deceivers" whose sermons talk only of "wine and beer." The prophet accuses them of preaching a false theology that God will not punish, that disgrace will not come. It is true that God is full of mercy and compassion, as it says in Exodus 34:6, "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness." However, these false preachers leave out the following verse, Exodus 34:7, "yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished." This is the danger of false theology based on only half the truth. Micah offers a stern warning for leaders to teach, proclaim, and uphold the entire biblical truth, both mercy and judgment, both compassion and punishment. This is why I decided to teach from Micah, despite the difficult message it has for me. We must learn of the entire truth of Scripture and not only preach a gospel of prosperity.

But all is not lost for Israel and Judah. This cycle of oracles ends on a hopeful and positive note. At the end of today's text, Micah's proclamation concludes with an oracle of salvation, of deliverance, and of hope. In Micah 2:12-13, God turns to his people and promises three things to them. These promises are absolute and emphatic; the Lord exclaims "surely" twice in v 12:

"I will surely gather all of you, O Jacob; I will surely bring together the remnant of Israel. I will bring them together like sheep in a pen, like a flock in its pasture; the place will throng with people." (2:12)

The first promise is a gathering of the lost. God will gather up the dispersed people, the remaining faithful children of Israel, and bring them back together as "sheep in a pen, as a flock in pasture." The exiled and dispersed will be delivered and regrouped. The promise was historically fulfilled after the Babylonian exile with Zerubbabel and Nehemiah.

The second promise is restoration of joy. God promises that the place of gathering will "throng" with people (other translations indicate "noisy with people"). This is a restoration of fellowship, merriment, family, and laughter among friends. This is much like the joyful bustle of noise and activity between our services during Community Café. It is a joyful gathering characterized by merriment and love.

The third promise is to me the most hopeful and significant promise. God promises a new leader:

"One who breaks open the way will go up before them; they will break through the gate and go out. Their king will pass through before them, the LORD at their head." (2:13)

In our age of the New Covenant we see this promise of a new leader refers to Christ himself who fulfills the prophecy completely! Who is a king that can break open the gates of death and pass through? Who can plunder Satan's domain to redeem and gather his people? Who can lead his people triumphantly out of gates of bondage? Of whom can it be said, "the Lord at their head"? Who can then turn from the role of a victorious king to the role of a shepherd who tenderly gathers his people as sheep in a pen, flock in a pasture? All of these prophecies point to the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ! In this oracle of salvation we have the wonderful and clear image of Christ in his dual role as king and shepherd redeeming his people. This is exactly who Christ is in my life! I marvel at the accuracy of this wonderful promise written 2700 years ago and yet so intimately applicable to my life today!

This is our text for this morning. How are we to apply it? Is there an example from the Bible from whom we can learn how to respond? Indeed we can learn from the example of David in the incident with Bathsheba, from 2 Samuel 11. David lusted after the beautiful Bathsheba. He lay with her, and she conceived. Then to cover up the crime and shame, David plotted to kill Bathsheba's husband Uriah, a righteous and loyal soldier. David's evil scheme brought about Uriah's death. Let's examine the aftermath of this crime, the passage in 2 Samuel 12 in which the Lord sent Nathan the prophet to confront David. We see that, just like Micah, Nathan did not mince words. He accused David of murder, lust, breaking covenant, and despising God.

Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites...you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own. (2 Sam 12:9-10)

Following the thunderous pronouncement of sin comes the oracle of punishment for David:

“This is what the LORD says: ‘Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity upon you. Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight. You did it in secret, but I will do this thing in broad daylight before all Israel.’” (2 Sam 12:11-12)

The language of accusation, judgment, and punishment is very similar to the language of Micah. What is David’s reaction, and what can we learn from it? David admits his sin, repents, and asks God earnestly for salvation and restoration. His prayer of repentance is beautifully captured in Psalm 51:

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. (Psalm 51:3-4)

David confesses his sin and acknowledges that God’s judgment is justified. He does not rationalize or trivialize his wrongdoing. David knows he has no choice but to repent before the Lord.

Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. (51:9-12)

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. (51:17)

David begs God for forgiveness. Even more, he begs God for a complete new creation of a pure heart. He desperately desires the joy of God’s salvation and the Spirit to live a life holy and blameless before God. This is a man whose heart is broken and contrite before the Almighty God.

Not often are we confronted by a prophet with God’s message exposing areas in our lives that need to change, as Nathan did to David. However, we do have God’s message for us from Scripture, from Micah chapter 2. And we do have the Holy Spirit who speaks truth to us if only we have contrite hearts to hear his prompting. Allow the Holy Spirit to stir your hearts this morning. What is he saying to you?

As David said in Psalm 51:3, our own sins are constantly before us, whether it’s covetousness or lust, defrauding or unfaithfulness, forsaking covenant or seeking idols. We must stop rationalizing our transgressions and see them for what they are: sins against God. We must then turn to him truly repentant and desperately seek forgiveness.

Unless we are convicted of our sin and need for our Savior we cannot truly experience the joy of salvation of which David speaks. This joy is what our hearts long for. Once we accept the free gift of salvation, joy will permeate our very being as nothing else can or will.

This joy of salvation certainly was real for my dear friend Philip. Philip worked very hard his whole life, earning wealth to provide for his family, to the exclusion of God. Two years ago, life as he knew it collapsed as he was diagnosed with cancer. His life was thrown into utter turmoil, yet through the ordeal, he repented and gave his heart to the Lord, as did his wife. They were both baptized last Easter. Cancer became only an “affliction” compared with the incredible joy within his soul. This past June, Philip got to see his son graduate from Lynbrook High School. What a proud celebration that was! Two weeks later, he died. My friend’s dying wish was that his family, brothers and sisters accept the free gift of salvation, experience pure joy, and be reunited in heaven. Nothing else mattered to him.

My friends, nothing else ought to matter to us. In the end, nothing can compare with a relationship to Christ that brings the joy of salvation. This relationship starts simply with an acknowledgement of sin and the need for a Savior. This is the gospel of grace for us, both Christian and non-Christian. It teaches the heart first, to fear, then, to repent, and finally, to believe and to receive. You have nothing to lose and you have everything to gain. This oracle of salvation is for me, it is for you, it is for all of us. Shall we receive it today?

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