

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Micah I:I

Rev. Richard D. Phillips

Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, November 4, 2007

The word of the Lord that came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem (Mic. I:I).

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.”¹

So begins Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, considered by many to be the finest novel ever written in English. Dickens sought to chronicle the spirit of the French Revolution in the late 18th century A.D., but he may equally have been writing of another time long before: the late 8th century B.C. in Israel and Judea. For what Dickens wrote about the cities of London and Paris is similar to what the prophet Micah had to say to Samaria and Jerusalem; the themes of Micah are precisely those cited by Dickens: wisdom and folly, belief and unbelief, light and darkness, hope and despair, heaven and hell.

MICAH OF MORESHETH

Who was the prophet Micah? While the name is fairly common in the Old Testament (fourteen different men are named Micah), there are only two Bible references to this Micah who prophesied in Jerusalem during the late 8th and early 7th centuries.

¹ Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (New York: Nelson Doubleday, n. d.), 9.

One of these is in the opening verse of Micah's book, which states, "The Word of the Lord that came to Micah of Moresheth" (Mic. 1:1). The other reference is found in the book of Jeremiah, written a hundred years later. Jeremiah identifies Micah as the prophet whose warnings of judgment persuaded King Hezekiah to repent and seek the Lord (Jer. 26:18).

Reflection on these two verses will provide at least some clues about the identity and personality of this prophet. First, we should note that his name has theological significance. "Micah" means "who is like the LORD?" Bruce Waltke comments, "It reveals the essence of his parents' faith, who wished above all to praise [Yahweh], and it portends our prophet's message."² Because Micah employs his own name at the book's end, praising the Lord with the words, "Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance?" (Mic. 7:18). This indicates that Micah identified with his name, and it shows that for all his oracles of judgment, at the heart of his faith was joy for the saving grace of God.

In addition to his name, we are also told Micah's town of origin. He is known as "Micah of Moresheth". This was an agricultural town in the lower lands to the west of Jerusalem, about half-way to the sea. It was the kind of place whose traditional values were being undermined by the decadent rich from the capital city, and therefore an ideal place to produce a reforming prophet like Micah. David Prior writes: "His instinctive empathies were with the farmers, shepherds and small holders of the [agricultural region]... He was not lured away by the glittering façade of the new culture – fine houses, advanced fashions, get-rich-quickly businesses – but kept a firm grip on the moral realities that make for true national greatness."³

A SEASON OF DARKNESS AND LIGHT

Just as important as who Micah was is when he lived and served. He says that he prophesied "in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah" (Mic. 1:1). This follows the normal Old Testament way of keeping time by means of the kings. Micah preached during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, which places his ministry

² Bruce Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 38.

³ David Prior, *The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998), 107.

between the years 740 and 687 B.C., a period of 53 years. Micah therefore followed the prophetic ministries of Hosea and Amos, and served in Jerusalem alongside the better known prophet Isaiah.

Two great concerns dominate this period of Israel's history, one external and one internal. The external concern was the spreading power of the Assyrian empire: the same Assyria whose capital had been brought to repentance by the preaching of Jonah about a generation earlier. By now Assyria had returned to its formerly rapacious ways. As the super-power of its time, and under these new and vigorous leadership, Assyria cast its shadow far and wide. Assyria's policy was to recruit a vast standing, mercenary army that was practically invincible in battle. To pay for these forces, they intimidated their surrounding kingdoms to extract crushingly high tributes. Waltke writes, "In other words, the conquered nations supported the international army that raped them."⁴ The political history of this era consisted mainly of rebellions small and large against this policy, to which Assyria would respond with overwhelming and savage force. Conquered peoples would be relocated en masse into the vast Assyrian domains, and conquered lands would be organized as permanent Assyrian provinces.

This was the backdrop for the great crises that dominated the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, during which Micah prophesied. Through our studies of Micah, we will learn much about the power and depredations of such Assyrian conquerors as Tiglath-Pileser III, Shalmaneser V, Sargon, and Sennacherib. We will also learn about the weakness of Judah's king Jotham, the perfidy of Ahaz, and the triumphant faith of Hezekiah.

As the prophets saw it, the political and military problems were mere symptoms of a greater and deeper problem. This was the moral and spiritual condition of Jerusalem. Just as Western civilization has abandoned its Christian foundations in our time, "Judah had abandoned its religious heritage."⁵ Despite an outward embrace of biblical religion, Jerusalem had turned its heart away from the Lord and the fruit of its unbelief was rampant corruption and vice.

⁴ Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah*, 5.

⁵ John L. Mackay, *Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 1998), 58.

The Old Testament prophets as a group were greatly concerned with societal standards of justice and mercy. But Micah is particularly pronounced in his concern for civic godliness. In his day the rich got richer and the poor got poorer, often by the most violent and ungodly means. Micah is sometimes considered a defender of the poor, but it really was what we today call the middle class that he particularly defended. Their land was unlawfully seized (Mic. 2:2); deceitful business practices were rife (6:10-12); community and family life had broken down (7:5-6). Above all, Micah denounced the corrupt leaders and false prophets. “Leslie Allen writes: “Even religious leaders – priests and prophets – did little more than echo the spirit of the period, buttressing the society that gave them their livelihood.”⁶

In both of these respects – our attitude towards outside threats and the reality of our inward spiritual state – the prophet Micah speaks powerfully to our time. For just as Judah’s kings had to respond to danger, we too live in a threatening world, and Micah calls us to a calm reliance on our faithful God. And just as Jerusalem’s true religion was revealed by its outward conduct, our profession of faith is likewise tested by our obedience to God’s Word.

THE WORD OF THE LORD

Perhaps the most important words in this opening verse are the very first: “The word of the Lord that came to Micah” (Mic. 1:1). This makes the essential statement, common to all the biblical writers, that what Micah wrote did not originate in himself. John Mackay writes: “The message that follows is not to be attributed to the insight of human genius. It is rather a word *that came*. This message was revealed by divine initiative. Micah does not ask for any credit for having thought it up. What he claims is that it is the *vision he saw*.”⁷ Notice that the prophet is passive in this action: Micah is the recipient, the action of revelation having been taken by the Lord (Yahweh, the covenant name of Israel’s God, which appears in our English Bibles as LORD, with small caps).

The divine authorship of this book of Scripture, as with the rest of the Bible, carries several key implications. One of them is that it is

⁶ Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 240.

⁷ Mackay, *Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 59.

inerrant. Certainly, the prophet himself was subject to error, as well as to bias and sin. But because the all-knowing God of truth is the ultimate author, we may be assured that everything contained in this book – its history, its ethics, and its message of salvation – is true and without error, and thus is completely trustworthy. Secondly, because of its divine authorship, we may interpret Micah in light of the entire Bible. Divine authorship is the basis of the unity of the Bible and all its books. What Bruce Waltke says of Micah may be said of the Bible as a whole: “In this book the invisible God becomes audible.”⁸

Most importantly, since Micah’s message came “from the Lord,” it carries the very authority of God, and is to be believed and obeyed by us today. John Calvin therefore comments: “We owe to the Scripture the same reverence which we owe to God, because it has proceeded from Him alone.”⁹ For the same reason, the message of the prophet Micah is completely relevant to us, since God and his ways ever change. This is why when New Testament authors cited the Old Testament, they typically described it speaking in the present tense: “As the Holy Spirit says,” says Hebrews 3:7; “for the Scripture says,” writes Paul (1 Tim. 5:18)..

To be sure, we must interpret in light of his own historical context. But we must not stop there. We must ultimately interpret it in light of the completed revelation of the whole canon of Scripture, with its focus on the saving work of Jesus Christ. Micah’s ministry played a role in the unfolding drama of Christ and his gospel, and its most important message is in anticipating, revealing, and, in some of Micah’s prophecies, foretelling the coming of Jesus.

Lastly, because of the divine authorship of Scripture, it must be precious to all of God’s people. An example is seen in the coronation service of a king or queen of England. The moderator of the Church of Scotland presents the new monarch with a Bible and utters these words: “The most precious thing this world affords, the most precious thing that this world knows, God’s living Word.”¹⁰ So it is, in all its parts, including the Word of the Lord that came to Micah.

⁸ Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah*, 37.

⁹ John Calvin, cf. Packer, *Calvin the Theologian*, 162, cf. John Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy*, 137.

¹⁰ James M. Boice, *Genesis*, 3 vols, 2:740.

The doctrine of biblical inspiration does not depend on any passage, since all its writers insist that their message was given to them by the Lord. But there are especially insightful passages. One is Paul's teaching in 2 Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." This helpfully states that while we talk about the *inspiration* of Scripture, a more accurate term would be the *expiration* of Scripture. God's Word is literally breathed out from his mouth as he communicates to his servants. Revelation might come by various means, including verbal dictation, inward promptings, and vision. Micah specifies that his were revelations "which he saw" (Mic.1:1); this suggests that at least some of his revelations came by visions.

A second helpful passage is 2 Peter 1:21: "For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." The human writers are not the originators of the Bible's teaching, though they were fully involved: all their personality and experience is incorporated by God. However, in penning Scripture, they were "carried along" by the Holy Spirit. It is because of the sovereign working of the Holy Spirit in and through the human writers that the Bible can give its definition of biblical inspiration: "men spoke from God."

THE PROPHETIC MESSAGE OF JUDGMENT

The final statement of verse one tells us that, like Dickens' novel, the message of Micah is a tale of two cities: "The word of the LORD that came to Micah of Moresheth... which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem" (Mic. 1:1). Samaria was the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which broke off from Jerusalem during the days of Solomon's son Rehoboam, with ten of Israel's twelve tribes. The history of this kingdom is an unbroken record of evil, idolatry, and apostasy. During Micah's lifetime, the Assyrians would utterly destroy Samaria and deport the ten tribes off into historical oblivion. Micah's concern is primarily over Jerusalem: he sees the judgment of Samaria as a dire warning that Jerusalem must heed to avoid divine wrath. Samaria's wound, he says, "is incurable, and it has come to Judah, it has reached to the gate of my people, to Jerusalem" (Mic. 1:9).

With this in mind, Micah is rightly identified as a prophet of doom. His message of divine wrath on sin is in keeping with that of the prophets as a whole; one of the prophets' chief functions was to deliver God's warning of judgment against his faithless people. Yet this judgment was a precursor to an even greater salvation. Harry Ironside therefore counsels us not to resent the Bible's condemnation of our sin: "It is a great thing to bow to the whole Word of God, even when it judges me and condemns my ways. To do so is the precursor to something better, but to excuse myself at the expense of God's truth is a process most hardening to the conscience."¹¹

Therefore, prophetic message of judgment is one of the Bible's most important themes. We can summarize it by asking four key questions. The first is: Does God have expectations and demands of people? This is an important question to ask because so many people assume that God really doesn't care how we conduct our individual lives, not to mention our corporate behavior in society.

Does God demand anything of us? The answer of the prophets, and of Micah, is a resounding Yes! Micah's very first message says: "Hear, you peoples, all of you; pay attention, O earth, and all that is in it, and let the Lord God be a witness" (Mic. 1:2). Micah's own summary of God's demands declares: "He has told you, O man, 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?" (Mic. 6:8). God demands reverent holiness, and Micah preached God would come to Jerusalem in judgment for sin: "For behold, the Lord is coming out of his place, and will come down and tread upon the high places of the earth... All this is for the transgression of Jacob and for the sins of the house of Israel" (Mic. 1:3-5).

One of the danger of reading this is to assume that God is talking about someone other than you. James Boice rightly warns:

When we read of judgment on others we almost sigh in relief, assuming wrongly that if judgment is spoken against them, it is therefore not spoken against us. But this is wrong. God is no respecter of persons. Consequently, if we are going our way and not God's way, as the people

¹¹ H. A. Ironside, *The Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1904, reprint 2004), 150.

of Jerusalem were doing, then we must do as they eventually did and turn back to God. It is the way we ourselves will escape God's judgment.¹²

Secondly, should sin be rebuked? This is a sensitive topic, because our society believes that one should mind his own business. But Micah clearly shows that sin is to be exposed and rebuked. There is something wrong with a society that stands by while the innocent are injured and the weak are oppressed. There is something wrong with leaders who make excuses for violence, greed, and hatred. And there is something wrong with individuals who stand by doing nothing and saying nothing while evil is openly worked around them. Micah set a good example for all of us, and especially for preachers, when he denounced on God's behalf the sinful ways of the people. He cries in 2:1: "Woe to those who devise wickedness and work evil on their beds!" God's judgment on sin has been declared in the Bible, and the only loving thing for Christians to do is to speak out against sin and warn people against God's coming judgment.

Thirdly, we should ask, "What are the effects of sin?" This, too, is an important question for our times, because it is popularly believed that a happy life is an uninhibited life. But is this true? Not according to Micah, who carefully chronicles not only the sin of Jerusalem but also its misery: "You shall eat, but not be satisfied, and there shall be hunger within you; you shall put away, but not preserve, and what you preserve I will give to the sword. You shall sow, but not reap; you shall tread olives, but not anoint yourselves with oil; you shall tread grapes, but not drink wine." (Mic. 6:14-15). Those warnings pertain not just to ancient Jerusalem: they simply declare that the sinful life is unsatisfying, unsafe, and unsavory. And it is God himself who makes the sinful life that way. Mark Dever applies this directly to our times:

We humans have mastered the art of caring about ourselves more than we care about others as well as about God. Yet learning to cultivate our selfish desires by getting drunk, lying, sleeping with someone who is not our spouse, stealing, or murdering both embitters life and belittles our experience of it.¹³

Not only does sin bring misery, but it leads to a final judgment from God that is furious, deadly, and eternal. God's judgment meant death for Samaria, as the people simply disappeared into slavery and the

¹² James M. Boice, *The Minor Prophets*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 2:316.

¹³ Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 795.

nation vanished from history. This would happen to Jerusalem unless she repented, and the same is true for us all. Paul writes of those who are judged in the end: “They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thess. 1:9). Jesus speaks even more fearfully, rehearsing the words that multitudes will hear at the end: “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Mt. 25:41). This warning of divine wrath is the message Micah delivered to Jerusalem. He warned of death for the nation and its people, delivering God’s uncompromising message, “I strike you with a grievous blow, making you desolate because of your sins” (Mic. 6:13).

THE PROPHETIC MESSAGE OF SALVATION

This leaves a fourth and all-important question: Does God offer a way for sinners to escape this judgment? The good news of the prophet Micah – Micah’s gospel, we might say – is that the answer is Yes! In fact, Micah stands out among the prophets in the sheer beauty and intensity of his message of salvation hope.

Micah’s message of salvation contains three main points. The first is a call to repentance. Here is Micah’s good news: Jerusalem can be saved by turning from her evil ways and calling on the Lord. In fact, Micah’s first section concludes with a promise that God will lead his people to repentance: “I will surely assemble all of you, O Jacob; I will gather the remnant of Israel; I will set them together like sheep in a fold, like a flock in its pasture, a noisy multitude of men” (Mic. 2:12). Micah would live to see this happen when King Hezekiah repented and prayed to God so that the city was delivered. But so deeply ingrained were the habits of sin that a hundred years later Jerusalem was destroyed at God’s hand for its persistent idolatry and unbelief.

Micah’s second encouraging message of salvation pertains to the gracious character of God. It turns out that God does not desire to destroy his people, but instead he delights in showing mercy. This is how Micah’s third and final section ends, with a celebration of God’s marvelous grace: “Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression...? He does not retain his anger forever,

because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities under foot” (Mic. 7:18-19).

This offers a compelling reason for us to seek salvation from God today. His character has not changed and his promises cannot be broken. If we come to him seeking forgiveness, we will find him ready to offer us mercy and love.

But how can a holy God forgive sinners? The answer is the third point of Micah’s salvation message: God will send a Savior to deliver us from his own judgment on our sin. This message forms the heart of the book, occurring in its center, at the end of his second section. Here we find Micah’s most famous prophecy, announcing the birth of the Savior Jesus Christ:

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days... And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And he shall be their peace (Mic. 5:2-5).

Micah foresaw that Jerusalem would eventually be judged for its sins; God’s people would suffer death as a nation, trudging off into the Babylonian captivity. So how could those consigned to death end up with life? Micah’s answer was the coming of a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, the good shepherd who would lay down his life for his sheep (Jn. 10:15). Israel would receive a Messiah, who alone deserved to live and yet would die for the sins of his people. Yet he would rise from the grave, and through union with him in faith, the people of God would receive everlasting life. The words Micah spoke to his foes might be more fitly spoken by the promised Savior: “Rejoice not over me, O my enemy; when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, the LORD will be a light to me” (Mic. 7:8).

Does God offer sinners a way of salvation? Micah’s answer is Yes, and God’s answer through him is his promised Son, Jesus Christ. In Christ’s fall into death on the cross and then his rise into resurrection life, God’s people are delivered from the death we deserve and enter into the eternal life God desires to give. If you believe in Jesus the Savior, his blood will cleanse you of your sins and he will lead you to walk humbly and righteously with your God forever.