

HEAR, YOU PEOPLES!

Micah 1:2-7

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Hear, you peoples, all of you; pay attention, O earth, and all that is in it, and let the Lord GOD be a witness against you, the Lord from his holy temple (Mic. 1:2).

Micah is a book of prophecy. A prophet both forthtold – speaking from God about the present – and foretold – speaking from God about the future. Typically, a prophet preached in the form of an oracle – that is, a divine utterance. There are oracles of judgment, condemning sin and foretelling divine wrath, and there are oracles of salvation, which promise redemption for God’s people. The book of Micah is composed of these two kinds of oracles, encapsulating the prophet’s preaching in Jerusalem in the late 8th and early 7th centuries B.C. Each of the oracles may be seen as a sermon outline. David Prior describes the book of Micah as “a distillation of what must have been a costly, demanding and... extremely unpopular ministry.”¹

Micah presents his oracles of judgment and salvation in three cycles, each of which begins with a call to hear the Word of God (1:2; 3:1; 6:1). The first cycle begins with the oracle of judgment in 1:2-7, probably preached in the early days of Micah’s ministry, during the reign of Jotham. Judah had enjoyed a reign of peace and prosperity during the fifty-two years of Uzziah’s kingship (792-740). Overall, affairs were not perfect, but the times were not too bad. To the north, Samaria, the capital of Israel, had grown rich and decadent and troubling noises were heard from a resurgent Assyria. If trouble was

¹ David Prior, *The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1998), 103.

coming, it seemed far off. If there was a need for reformation, there seemed to be plenty of time, with no immediate worries. Into this scene, the prophet Micah began his ministry by calling the people to listen to the accusations of God.

A CALL TO HEAR

Micah's first oracle thus began with a call for the people to listen to God: "Hear, you peoples, all of you; pay attention, O earth, and all that is in it, and let the Lord GOD be a witness against you, the Lord from his holy temple" (Mic. 1:2).

The great need of every generation is to pay attention to God. Yet the recurrent theme of history is that people tend to forget God, especially when times are good. But we forget God at our peril, as we are easily lulled into a false security. Grave danger may be right around the corner, but we don't know it. The causes of this danger are in our midst, but we don't recognize them. "Hear, you peoples," then, is the message we always need. God speaks to us today in the Bible, and if we are too fixed in our ways to listen to God we will pay a high price for our folly.

Micah's first oracle is deliberately universal: he calls not merely Jerusalem but all the earth to attend to God's Word. This asserts the sovereignty of God over all the earth, as stated in Micah's expression, "the Lord GOD," which translates literally as "sovereign Yahweh" (Mic. 1:2). Micah is about to describe the great political and military affairs of their time as acts of divine sovereignty; he insists that the explanation for all history is theological.

But God also summons the nations to teach them a vital lesson. For God's dealings with his people always have a universal importance, speaking to everyone at all times. The great events of their time resulted from God's anger over his peoples' sins, and the Lord's punishment of Samaria and Jerusalem, announced by Micah, served as a model for his future judgment of all the earth.

FIRE ON THE MOUNTAINS

A false security was the hallmark of God's people during the reign of Jotham. They wrongly expected Assyria to remain quiet, but even more wrongly expected the Lord to tolerate their sins. Were

they not, after all, the people of God? And was not Jerusalem the place where God's temple dwelt? How could God judge them? This was the presumption in which Jerusalem justified its decadence and idolatry. But Micah reminds them that the temple is home to a holy God: "Behold, the Lord is coming out of his place, and will come down and tread upon the high places of the earth" (Mic. 1:3).

The religious leaders serving in Jerusalem's temple might speak lightly about sin, but the Lord who dwells in the heavenly temple will come to "tread the high places of the earth." High places were strategic military fortresses, and mountain peaks symbolize unassailable might. Micah probably refers to Samaria and Jerusalem, both of which were built on mounts – Jerusalem especially resting in seeming security on its high terrain. Moreover, this expression may refer to the ruling classes – those who are high and mighty among God's people. Jerusalem on high was the source of Judah's mounting sinfulness, and its leaders promoted this new decadence. Lastly, "high places" is biblical terminology for the mounts on which pagan worship was offered to false gods like Baal and Asherah. God would come from his holy temple and tread upon such high places.

More threatening still is the effect of God's coming: "And the mountains will melt under him, and the valleys will split open, like wax before the fire, like waters poured down a steep place" (Mic. 1:4). This is classic prophetic language, describing the coming of God in terms of natural cataclysm. The point of this description of mountains melting and valleys split is not just to show God's power over nature, but to emphasize his terrifying might against rebellious mankind. The ancient church scholar Jerome said: "As wax cannot endure the nearness of the fire, and as the waters are carried headlong, so all of the ungodly, when the Lord comes, shall be dissolved and disappear."² John Calvin writes: "Such figures of speech symbolize how defenseless we are, how totally unable to resist God. For if God should suddenly appear, who could withstand his furor?"³ Ultimately, the scene of creation melting at God's approach belongs to the last

² Alberto Ferreiro, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament XIV: The Twelve Prophets* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2003), 152.

³ John Calvin, *Sermons on the Book of Micah* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 25.

day, but that final judgment “is anticipated in every prior intervention of God in judgment in the affairs of men.”⁴

With this prophetic language, Micah foretold the coming of Assyria’s armies to invade and conquer Samaria, and to threaten Jerusalem. Bruce Waltke explains: “The blind eyes of unbelievers saw only the immediate cause of Samaria’s fall, the inexorable march of Assyria’s crack international army under the leadership of its brilliant kings. But Micah’s open eyes saw behind the juggernaut the invincible march of God.”⁵ The same situation exists today, as secular humanists look upon the increasingly tenuous state of Western civilization, yet never dream that God might be acting to judge their sins. In that ancient world God sent forth his prophets to denounce false worship, societal injustice, sexual defilement, and decadent materialism. In our world God calls for his church to speak out against exactly the same evils. Unless the people repent, Micah says, “The Lord is coming out of his place and will... tread the high places of the earth” (Mic. 1:3).

JUDGMENT ON THE HOUSE OF GOD

One common feature of prophetic literature is irony. It fell to the prophets to declare what the people never imagined possible.

This is probably the case in Micah’s first oracle. Up until this time in the Bible, the vision of God coming from heaven was a welcome one, signalling the overthrow of Israel’s enemies. Recall the exodus from Egypt: it was through cataclysmic judgments on Pharaoh that the people of God were set free. The same was true during the days of Joshua, when God caused the sun to stand still to allow the Israelites to complete their victory over the Canaanites (Jos. 10:13-14).

So up to this point in his sermon, Micah may have been cheered by his listeners. God was coming to judge the wicked – surely that meant nations like Assyria. But Micah gets more specific: “All this is for the transgression of Jacob and for the sins of the house of Israel. What is the transgression of Jacob? Is it not Samaria?” (Mic. 1:5). In

⁴ John L. Mackay, *Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 1998), 64.

⁵ Bruce Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 58.

speaking of Jacob and the house of Israel, Micah refers to the northern kingdom whose capital was Samaria. It is their judgment that God comes to bring. This, too, would have won approval in Jerusalem. Had not the ten northern tribes rebelled against the Davidic throne? Had they not set up false rivals to the true temple in Jerusalem? Was not Samaria a veritable snake pit of sensuality, greed, and idolatry? How appropriate for God to judge Samaria!

It is true that Micah's oracle directly concerns the destruction of Samaria, which God engineered at the hands of the Assyrian kings Shalmaneser V and his son Sargon. Yet the target of this oracle is the people of Jerusalem. Therefore, Micah continues: "And what is the high place of Judah? Is it not Jerusalem?" (Mic. 1:5).

This is the turning point in Micah's sermon. Up to this point, the people would have been relieved. God will destroy Samaria: how fitting! But then the knife comes home. Has not Jerusalem become like Samaria? Are not the sins of Samaria the very sins currently cherished in Jerusalem? God is coming to trample the high places: but look around you and notice that Judah's capital is one such very high place in its arrogance and idolatry.

What a shock this must have been to Micah's hearers. They were Abraham's heirs, Moses' heirs, and King David's heirs, the people who possessed the Bible and worshiped at God's true temple. And yet corruption had set in. False worship was tolerated. Sexual promiscuity became common. Greed dominated civic government, injustice grew rife, and the ruling class oppressed those beneath them. God had warned Jerusalem through the prophet Amos, but few listened. Now, under the weak leadership of King Jotham, God was setting up Jerusalem for fire and destruction. God would come to judge, for, as the apostle Peter wrote, "It is time for judgment to begin at the household of God" (1 Pet. 4:17).

Do we see how similar this situation is to that of the Christian church in the West today? We are the heirs of faithful generations, but presuming on God's kindness, the Christian church has tolerated man-centered worship, false doctrine, and unholy living. Like Jerusalem of old, Christians in the West look out and see a culture awash in moral depravity. In comparison, we think we are doing pretty well. But the Lord says, "No, I am coming to cleanse *you*, my people. The problem

is not how the world is living but how the church is living. Your loose sexuality, your lack of interest in my Word, your self-absorbed approach to worship, your lack of mercy for the needy and poor, your poor motivation for evangelism: for these I am causing your labors to fail, permitting your children to stray, and allowing the wicked to trounce you in the culture war.” This is how Micah’s message relates to the church today. We see what is happening in the world and affirm God’s judgment on it. But God applies his Word to us, saying, “Hasn’t the church become so much like the world?”

In this way, the judgment promised for Samaria was being threatened upon Jerusalem. Micah’s says that God would come to judge two things: transgression and sin. “All this is for the transgression of Jacob and for the sins of the house of Israel” (Mic. 1:5).

“Transgression” is the Hebrew word *peshah*, meaning rebellion against God’s commands. It encompasses both the actions that violate God’s Word and the rebellious heart that wills them. The word for “sin” is *hattat*, meaning to be wayward and to fall short. Put together, transgressions and sin spelled Israel’s comprehensive breaking of God’s covenant, especially in Samaria’s rampant idolatry.

The story of Samaria’s fall is recorded in 2 Kings 17, which tells of Shalmaneser’s siege and the city’s subsequent fall. But the explanation is theological and covenantal:

This occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God... and had feared other gods and walked in the customs of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel... They built for themselves high places in all their towns, from watchtower to fortified city. They set up for themselves pillars and Asherim on every high hill and under every green tree, and there they made offerings on all the high places, as the nations did whom the LORD carried away before them...., of which the LORD had said to them, "You shall not do this." Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes"... But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the LORD their God. They despised his statutes and his covenant that he made with their fathers and the warnings that he gave them (2 Ki. 17:7-15).

The passage goes on to cite the most abominable sins, including the burning of their children in idol worship. For these transgressions and sins, “the Lord was very angry with Israel and removed them out of

his sight. None was left but the tribe of Judah only” (2 Ki. 17:18). But the writer of Kings adds this note, which was Micah’s particular point: “Judah also did not keep the commandments of the LORD their God, but walked in the customs that Israel had introduced” (2 Ki. 17:19). Therefore Jerusalem, along with all the world, including the Bible’s readers today, should take heed of God’s judgment on the transgressions and sins of Samaria. “Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted,” warns the apostle Paul. “God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap” (Gal. 6:1, 7).

JUDGMENT EXPERIENCED

Micah’s first oracle concludes with a two-pointed description of Samaria’s experience of God’s judgment. First, all that Israel had built in rebellion to God would be cast down: “Therefore I will make Samaria a heap in the open country, a place for planting vineyards, and I will pour down her stones into the valley and uncover her foundations” (Mic. 1:6).

The city of Samaria was founded by Israel’s king Omri and completed by his son, Ahab. They were brilliant and wicked statesmen/ empire builders, with Samaria as their crown jewel. The city was constructed of “exquisitely dressed stone – a style of masonry dressing which was not equaled in Palestine, or indeed anywhere else in the Near East.”⁶ Ahab added a gorgeous palace, built in the highest luxury. Instead of being a light in the darkness, Samaria became a den of sexual indulgence and idolatry. The prophet Amos rebuked Samaria for its decadent affluence: “Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches” (Amos. 6:4).

But God would utterly cast it down: “[The Lord] used the battering rams of the Assyrian army under Shalmaneser V to carry out his sentence against... the proud stones of her retaining walls and royal residence.”⁷ The haughty city would become “a heap in the open country,” like a pile of stones a farmer tosses up beside his fields. It would be “a place for planting vineyards.” This meant a complete undoing of all that Israel had built, since Samaria had previously been a land of vines. “And I will pour down her stones into the valley and

⁶ K. M. Kenyon, cited in Waltke, *Commentary on Micah*, 58.

⁷ Waltke, *Commentary on Micah*, 52.

uncover her foundations” (Mic. 1:6). The whole site would be leveled in shame. In fact, the Assyrians did not demolish Samaria in this way; Shalmaneser’s successor, Sargon, rebuilt the city for his own use. But the words did come true in time, when Judah’s John Hyrcanus completed Samaria’s demolition in 107 B.C.

God’s judgment not only tore down all that the idolaters had built, but he also smashed and disgraced the idols that they served: “All her carved images shall be beaten to pieces, all her wages shall be burned with fire, and all her idols I will lay waste, for from the fee of a prostitute she gathered them, and to the fee of a prostitute they shall return” (Mic. 1:7). We should note well the link between sexual sin and idolatry, because pagan worship typically involved a sex-offering to the gods. The luxurious art works that fill today’s museums were paid for by offerings to the cultic prostitutes at the high places, in the belief that through ritual sex “the forces of life in nature... were revived... ensuring fertility of the crops and of the wombs.”⁸ David Prior warns that this union of magic and sexual promiscuity is replicated in the New Age practices of our time. One need only read Dan Brown’s mega-best-selling novel *The Da Vinci Code* to see the worship of Samaria being revived today. Whether under the guise of mother-earth Gaia, sophisticated talk of ying and yang, or explicit references to Isis and Osiris, “they all turn out to be another recycling of pagan beliefs which place no moral obligations or boundaries on their adherents, pander to our naturally self-centred desires, and constitute a direct rejection of our creator God.”⁹

God’s judgment typically involves the handing over of such idolaters into total bondage to the idols they worshiped (see Rom. 1:24). Such was the case as the northern kingdom of Israel was marched off in chains to inner Assyria. There, the spoils of their city would be offered in payment to other cultic prostitutes and would adorn pagan temples far away. Micah explains: “for from the fee of a prostitute she gathered them, and to the fee of a prostitute they shall return” (Mic. 1:7).

This is a prefigure of a greater judgment that will occur at the end of history in the return of Jesus Christ. Then, God will act not merely

⁸ Prior, *The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk*, 116.

⁹ Ibid.

through surrogate armies like that of Assyria, but the Lord Jesus will come with wrath and divine war. In the book of Revelation, the apostle John records seeing heaven open and the Lord appearing on a white horse: “In righteousness he judges and makes war... From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty” (Rev. 19:11, 15). Christ will then establish his own eternal city. The angel said to John: “Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood” (Rev. 22:14-15).

This raises questions. What are you building in this life? Are you living for the glory of God and the advance of his kingdom? Or are you piling up the luxuries of the world so as to enjoy the lifestyle of idolatry? The Bible says, “Each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done” (1 Cor. 3:13). All that is built for the praise of man and the service of sin will be destroyed in God's coming judgment. And then there is an even more important question: What god do you worship and serve? In what do you trust for your life and lifestyle? The only true God is the God of the Bible, and the only true Savior is the Lord Jesus Christ, who gained our forgiveness with his own blood on the cross. When he returns, all false gods and those who trust them will be put to the sword of divine wrath, but those who trust in Jesus Christ will be saved.

A SIMPLE WAY TO ESCAPE JUDGMENT

Micah presents us with a fearful message of divine wrath. But he also offers us a simple way to escape God's judgment. It comes in the very first word of Micah's first oracle: “Hear.” It was a failure to hear that ultimately caused Samaria's demise and threatened Jerusalem with the same. God sent his prophets, but his wicked people would not listen. Micah's prophecy still speaks to our world today. God's Word speaks to you. If you will hear and listen, then you will fear the Lord and turn from your transgressions and sins.

Fortunately, God did not stop speaking to the world with the prophets. In time, he sent the Great Prophet, his own Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus called out to the world with a message of mercy and grace, a call of forgiveness and new life through faith in him. The Bible says, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn. 3:16). Jesus will deliver you from God’s judgment on your sins. “Truly, truly, I say to you,” Jesus declares, “whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (Jn. 5:24). Hear, listen, and believe on Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.

Finally, Jesus calls on his people in the church to hear his Word and follow him in paths of righteousness. “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn. 8:12). Are you walking in the light of Christ, or are you dabbling in the darkness of sin and worldliness? If you are not following Jesus in a holy life, then remember God’s threat to chastise Jerusalem. Yes, God will destroy Samaria – but what of Jerusalem and its very same sins? Begin following Jesus, no longer walking in darkness, and you will have the light of his life.