

A DEATH IN THE FAMILY

Micah 1:8-16

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For this I will lament and wail; I will go stripped and naked; I will make lamentation like the jackals, and mourning like the ostriches (Mic. 1:8).

One of the most endearing moments of King David's life was his response to news of his rival King Saul's death. Given the way Saul had persecuted him, we might expect David to spew out bitter venom: "It's only what Saul deserved!" But instead David wept in lament for King Saul: "Your glory, O Israel, is slain on your high places! How the mighty have fallen!... You daughters of Israel, weep over Saul" (2 Sam. 1:19, 24). Despite all of his failings in life, it is no wonder that God called David "a man after his own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14). For while David suffered under Saul's sins, he always looked on him as what God had made him: the anointed king of the holy nation, a man of valor and might, with heroic potential – even if that potential was never achieved.

LAMENTATION FOR SAMARIA

A parallel to David's song of lament for King Saul is found in the prophet Micah's lament over fallen Samaria. His first oracle announced God's judgment on the northern kingdom of Israel and the demolition of its capital, Samaria. Since Judah and Israel were estranged, we might expect him to gloat over this development, but instead Micah takes up a funeral lament of the most violent intensity: "For this I will lament and wail; I will go stripped and naked; I will make lamentation like the jackals, and mourning like the ostriches" (Mic. 1:8). Jews are known for their intense and vocal mourning, and Micah enters into such grieving for the loss of

Samaria. Walter Kaiser comments: “As a sign of his grief, he goes about naked (v. 8). His wail is like the banshee cries of jackals and the gruesome screech of the ostrich (v. 8). The jackals and ostriches embody wildness and desolation.”¹ In this way, Micah vents the frustration and pain of his heart over “a nation that could have been saved if she had listened to the repeated warnings from God’s prophets.”²

Micah lists two reasons for this intense, public lament. First, he will lament and wail “for this” – that is, for the promised destruction of Samaria. Micah never forgot who they were, no matter how wayward they became or how hostile to God’s Word: Samaria was the capital of Israel, and Israel was the holy nation of God. John Calvin observes, “they were yet a part of the holy race, they were the children of Abraham, whom God had received into favour... The Prophet... shows the fraternal love which he entertained for the children of Israel, as they were his kindred, and a part of the chosen people.”³

Micah’s lament understands the conquest of Samaria and the exile of the ten northern tribes as a death in the family. Family members may have their differences, but when a brother or sister dies it is time to mourn and lament. Israel had lost forever that portion of the Promised Land assigned to them by God. They lost their identity as a people, their culture, and all ties to their God. The conquest and exile of Israel, completed by the Assyrians in 722 B.C., was the death of a people who were God’s covenant children, however wayward.

And it was God who put them to death. They had given their land over to idol worship, so after decades of patient warnings, God took their land away. They had debased their culture with immorality and saturated their religion with false worship and teaching, so God gave them over completely to the pagan idolatry they had come to love. The ten tribes disappeared from history and they will never be found, for God executed his penalty of death on their transgressions and sins. The judgment of Samaria was a foretaste of the final judgment of all the world for its sins. And for all his disgust with the sins of Israel, Micah rightly lamented and wailed.

¹ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Micah-Malachi*, The Communicator’s Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1992), 34.

² Ibid.

³ John Calvin, *A Commentary on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, 5 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1559, reprint 1986), 3:171.

It is apparent that Micah's funeral mourning took place before Samaria's fall, for he says "her wound is incurable" (Mic. 1:9). He knew that God's resolve to judge Samaria was final and that her hardness of heart made Israel beyond repentance. But he also laments for a second reason: "For... it has come to Judah; it has reached to the gate of my people Jerusalem" (Mic. 1:9). The kingdom of Judah, with the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, had been infected with Israel's disease of idolatry, and the prophet foretells that the disaster that befell Samaria will come to the very gates of Jerusalem. It is for the benefit of Jerusalem that he laments: clad only in a loin cloth, the prophet sounded the calls of jackals and ostriches in the streets of God's holy city, arousing Jerusalem to observe this death that threatened the whole family.

The reader of the New Testament cannot fail to compare Micah's actions with those of the Lord Jesus Christ during his final and fatal visit to Jerusalem. Jesus presented himself as the last and greatest of the prophets, crying out to arouse the Jews from their unbelief and lamenting the destruction that would result. Looking upon Jerusalem just days before his crucifixion, Jesus mournfully cried: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers who brood under her wings, and you would not! See, your house is left to you desolate" (Mt. 23:37-38).

Christians should look on a godless world through these same eyes of Christ. Do we weep over the lost state of the world? Are our hearts burdened over the judgment that family and friends are securing by their stubborn unbelief? Like Jesus and the prophets, we are to tell people the truth about the death awaits them in hell unless they repent of their sins. But notice the attitude with which we should announce God's judgment. People are offended by the Bible's prophetic message, but what if they saw tears in our eyes and a heart that is broken for them? And how heartless it is when Christians denounce the sins of the culture, but make little effort to point out the way to God's mercy through faith in the blood of Christ.

TELL IT NOT IN GATH

Micah seems deliberately to associate his prophetic grief with the earlier grief of David over fallen King Saul. From verse 10 to

verse 15, his oracle speaks of disaster befalling the cities of Judah. He bookends this section with two references to David's darkest hours. First, he says, "Tell it not in Gath" (Mic. 1:10). Gath was the hometown of the giant Goliath, to which David foolishly fled from King Saul and ended up disgracing himself before the Philistines. The last reference, in verse 15, is to Adullam. It was in the caves of Adullam that David found refuge from Saul's violent attempts on his life. This suggests that God's judgment on Samaria and Jerusalem meant the undoing of David's kingdom and a return to the time when David and his band were holed up in caves.

The words, "Tell it not in Gath," are also a direct quote from David's funeral dirge over Saul. The full citation reads: "Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon, lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised exult" (2 Sam. 1:20). David's point, picked up by Micah, is that the Jews should avoid exulting over Samaria's deserved judgment, because this will give the unbelieving world a cause to rejoice in Israel's downfall.

This teaches us that nothing so delights the unbelieving world as to see God's people falling under divine chastisement. Therefore, "Micah did not want the pagan people of Gath to have the pleasure of gloating over the downfall of God's people."⁴ David prayed that God would not allow his enemies to jeer on his account (Ps. 30:1; 89:49-51), and it should be our desire to live in obedience to God so that the world will not have reason to scoff. Micah was not only concerned for God's glory, but he also realized that the Gaths of the world had no hope of salvation so long as they disparaged God's holy name, but only if they came in faith to Israel's God. We, too, should be motivated evangelistically so as to seek God's blessing through our godly example before the world.

But it was too late for this when it came to downfall of Samaria and God's judgment on Jerusalem. Even though Micah urges the people, "weep not at all" (Mic. 1:10), what follows shows that the coming calamity was so great that weeping would be inevitable. He reminds us that believers in crisis should conduct themselves with an aim to the glory of God and the witness of his gospel in the world.

⁴ Kenneth L. Barker and Waylon Bailey, *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 57.

DISASTER AT THE GATES

After the Assyrian king Shalmaneser V captured Samaria in 722 B.C., his successor Sargon moved south to invade Philistia, along the seacoast directly to Judah's west. Then, in 701 B.C., his successor Sennacherib turned towards Jerusalem. While the city was spared by the divine intervention recorded by the prophet Isaiah, the outlying region known as the Shephelah was overrun. These were the agricultural communities in the valleys and foothills between Jerusalem and the sea, as well as the military fortresses that guarded the approaches to the capital. Both the Bible and secular history record that Sennacherib captured this entire region; according to his royal records, the Assyrian took into exile two hundred thousand Jewish slaves. While Jerusalem itself was spared, so great was the calamity that disaster literally came to the very gates of the city.

Micah foretells this by making puns from the names of ten cities in the Shephelah. For instance, the name Beth-le-aphrah meant "house of dust," so Micah says, "Beth-le-aphrah, roll yourselves in the dust" (Mic. 1:10). There is no sarcasm or mere word-play in this. Rather, the prophet takes the place names as omens of doom in God's judgment for their sin. For an English-language equivalent, imagine a Scottish preacher declaring, "Crieff will know grief. Forfar will forfeit. Craill will be frail. Wick will be burned. Stornaway will be blown away. Edinburgh will be no Eden. For Tain, there will only be pain."⁵

First, Micah directs his attention to Beth-le-aphrah, named "dust-town." He says, "In Beth-le-aphrah roll yourselves in the dust" (Mic. 1:10). This was the most intense mourning, by which the people would throw themselves on the ground and roll in the dust to express their grief.

The second city is Shaphir, which means "Beauty." To them he cries, "Pass on your way, inhabitants of Shaphir, in nakedness and shame" (Mic. 1:11). Depending on her attire, a beautiful woman may be either a delight or a disgrace. Micah foretells that Shaphir's sin will produce the latter. Third is Zaanan, meaning "going out." But just as

⁵ Cited from Peter Craigie, *The Twelve Minor Prophets, info.*

the beautiful city will be disgraced, the people of “Going-out town,” will be shut up behind their walls until their city falls.

Next is Beth-ezel, which probably means “standing place.” So Micah writes, “The lamentation of Beth-ezel shall take away from you its standing place” (Mic. 1:12). Just as the people of Zaanan “did not come forth to help the inhabitants of Shaphir, Beth-he-ezel offers no defense either because its mourning inhabitants have been deported.”⁶ Similarly, Micah predicts, “The inhabitants of Maroth wait anxiously for good, because disaster has come down from the LORD to the gate of Jerusalem” (Mic. 1:12). Maroth comes from the word for “bitter,” and though the people there seek the sweetness of peace and prosperity, their fate as slaves will be bitter indeed.

When Micah turns to his sixth city, Lachish, he makes an important note: “Harness the steeds to the chariots, inhabitants of Lachish; it was the beginning of sin to the daughter of Zion, for in you were found the transgressions of Israel” (Mic. 1:13). Lachish was one of King Solomon’s chariot cities and an important fortress. 1 Kings 10:26 states that Solomon recruited 1400 chariots and 12,000 horsemen, which he stationed in the chariot cities. But this violated God’s commands, since Israel was to rely not on military technology but on God alone. Psalm 20:7 says, “Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.” By recruiting his cutting-edge force of chariots, Solomon was hedging his reliance on God by appealing to worldly sources of security.

According to Micah, this is how a sinful lifestyle starts: by adopting secular priorities and resorting to worldly strategies for security and prosperity. “It was the beginning of sin to the daughter of Zion,” Micah says of Lachish. Secularism always fails, so Micah tells the people of Lachish to “harness the steeds to the chariots.” The word for *steeds* (Hebrew, *rekesh*) is that for race horses, not war-horses. When the Assyrians came, the chariots of Lachish would be used not for attack but for a hasty flight to safety. Sennacherib’s capture of this fortress was so significant that archaeologists have unearthed a relief from his palace in Nineveh that cites the capture of Lachish as one of his greatest triumphs.

⁶ Waltke, *Commentary on Micah*, 77.

This reminds us of the important principle that nothing of this world is a true source of safety. America has the words “In God We Trust” written on our coins, but the reality is that it is the coin itself that we really trust. Chariots were cutting-edge technology in Solomon’s day. But Bruce Waltke warns us: “People like those at Lachish, who trust the latest technology instead of God, will fall into all kinds of sins that spring from man’s autonomous, rebellious spirit. Their technology will prove worthless in the time of God’s judgment against sin.”⁷

What Judah’s kings should have done is purge from their midst the leaven of secularism in places like Lachish, for, Micah says, “in you were found the transgressions of Israel” (Mic. 1:13). We, too, will either purge the seedbeds of worldliness from our lives or be led by them into sin and judgment. For example, many Christians are practically addicted to television shows that advocate sexual promiscuity, crass speech, and a general self-centeredness. This secular influence leads them into these same sins. The same is true on a national level. Waltke comments, “Modern cities like Hollywood promote adultery, and like Reno or Las Vegas give impetus to easy divorce and gambling, and like San Francisco give status to homosexuals.”⁸ The influence of such places must inevitably spread, ultimately causing God to come in judgment for sin.

If Lachish was the source of Judah’s sin, the final four cities mentioned by Micah illustrate the wages of sin. First is Micah’s own hometown of Moresheth: “Therefore you shall give parting gifts to Moresheth-gath” (Mic. 1:14). Moresheth sounds like the Hebrew word for “bride,” and Moresheth will be offered as a bridal gift to the king of Assyria.

Achzib means “deceitful,” and it “shall be a deceitful thing to the kings of Israel” (Mic. 1:14). Any trust placed in this city by Jerusalem’s king will be betrayed when invasion comes. Likewise, Micah cries, “I will again bring a conqueror to you, inhabitants of Mareshah” (Mic. 1:15). This name sounds like the word for “possessions gained by conquest,” but instead Mareshah will be forfeited by conquest. As a result, Micah prophesies, “The glory of Israel shall come to Adullam” (Mic. 1:15). Adullam was the cave

⁷ Ibid., 90.

⁸ Ibid.

region 7 miles northeast of Mareshah, where David gathered an army from those dispossessed by King Saul. But now it will be “the glory of Israel” that is penned in and gathered for captivity; since David’s lament for King Saul referred to him as “your glory, O Israel,” this probably refers to the aristocratic families and their children. It is often said that “the children are our future,” and Judah’s future would be deported for slavery to the inner regions of Assyria.

Micah’s inventory of these calamities prompts some reflections. The first is that everything good that we have is granted to us by God. And just as God has given us all things, God is able to take them away – and if we fail to be thankful to God or if we put our trust in the gifts rather than in the divine Giver, we can expect God to take his blessings away. Are we trusting in retirement accounts or real estate holdings? God is perfectly able to cause the markets to crash and real estate values to plummet. Are we trusting in armed might? God is able to bring our armies to defeat. So it is with every worldly blessing: God’s people are to receive them thankfully and in stewardship to God. The only things worthy of our faith are the grace of God for those who trust in him and the promises of his Word.

Secondly, we should realize that sin often appeals to us as something that will give us pleasure, success, and security. But sin never works out this way. Paul writes, “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). One writer responds to Micah’s catalogue of judgment by asking, “In retrospect, I wonder if the sins of Israel and Judah were worth all the trouble that resulted?”⁹ The obvious answer is that they were not. Neither are the sins we cherish. John Calvin comments: “If ever there was a city that God wanted to spare, it was Jerusalem. Nevertheless, Micah proclaims that its downfall is coming. Hence, his purpose is to show that, wherever iniquity reigns, God’s judgment will come to pass. No place of sanctity or position of privilege will protect anyone, for our Lord judges with complete impartiality.”¹⁰

SORROW UNTO REPENTANCE

Micah began his message with his own intense lamenting over the fall of Samaria, which he saw as a death in God’s family, and he

⁹ Kaiser, *Micah – Malachi*, 37.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Sermons on the Book of Micah* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 55.

concludes by calling the people of Jerusalem to lament for deaths that would take place in their own families. He writes: “Make yourselves bald and cut off your hair, for the children of your delight; make yourselves as bald as the eagle, for they shall go from you into exile” (Mic. 1:16). The prophet refers the people to the practice of cutting the hair as an expression of grief. Micah cites the bald-appearing head of an eagle or vulture and urges that the people shave their heads to create a similar effect.

The calamity Micah predicts for the towns of the Shephelah was the greatest disaster known to the ancient world. Armies of the wicked would overrun the country, despoiling and destroying. Communities where children played in the street and neighbors gathered in friendship would be consumed in fire and blood. Worst of all, “the children of your delight... shall go from you into exile” (Mic. 1:6). Imagine being a parent who escaped behind the walls of Jerusalem, only to realize that your children have been captured and even now are bound in chains to be enslaved in a far land from which they will never return. Could anything be more grievous? Wake up from your sinful slumber, Micah cries! Realize what is coming and lament intensely for what your sins are bringing upon you!

The same cry needs to be sounded in our generation. In our own city, babies are slaughtered inside their mother’s womb, promising lives are destroyed in the insanity of drug abuse, and innocents are abused by men whose hearts are twisted by pornography. God will judge all these things. But if we can go about our comfortable lives, knowing all this, but saying nothing, doing nothing, and feeling nothing, then something is just as wrong with us as it was with Micah’s original audience. Even more pointedly, if we are ourselves participating in the sins that are consuming our society – including sins of materialism, racism, sexual impurity, and sensually hedonistic entertainment – our hearts should be mortified by the realization of what is being reaped from what we ourselves are sowing. Realizing also that one consequence of our worldliness may be the loss of our children to the bondage of sin – and ultimately, perhaps, to hell – we should wake up and lament before it is too late.

It has been said that those who forget the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them. Unless the ways of God have changed since the time of the Bible – and they have not – then our society is poised

on the brink of a judgment every bit as fierce as that which befell Judah. If God did not spare the towns listed by Micah, filled with his own covenant people, and if God ultimately did not spare the holy city of Jerusalem the judgment for its sins, he will most certainly not spare America or the other nations of the decadent West.

Micah called the people to bitterly lament the loss they would suffer for their sins. But his ultimate purpose was to seek a greater and deeper repentance. True repentance is not merely a grieving over sin's loss, but a grieving over sin itself and for the offense it has caused to a loving and holy God. The apostle Paul differentiates between worldly and godly grief. "Worldly grief produces death," he writes, meaning that sorrowing over the consequences of sin provides no remedy. But godly grief is different, he says: "For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret" (2 Cor. 7:10).

Godly grief is that which mourns over the sin itself and the alienation from God which results. Godly grief does not merely sorrow but repents: that is, it turns from sin and turns to God for mercy and grace. This is the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, that the same holy God who must punish all sin is also a loving God who delights in showing mercy to those who repent and believe. This is the message to which Micah is leading his readers. He says at the end: "Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? 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. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea" (Mic. 7:18-19).

Salvation could still be had by Jerusalem if it turned in faith to the God of all grace, the God whose temple stood in their city and whose Word had been entrusted to them. And salvation can be had by us today, no matter how great our sins, because that same God fulfilled his promises of old and sent his Son to bear our sins on the cross. With this in mind, let me conclude with words from the prayer given by John Calvin at the end of his sermon on this text:

Now, let us observe that what Micah was saying to his time applies also to ours. What must we do, then? Since our Lord graciously wishes to govern us, let us be subject to him in everything. Let us learn to place

ourselves again in his hand; and, since God declares that he cares for us [see I Peter 5:7], let us put our trust in his promise.¹¹

¹¹ Ibid., 59.