

WOLVES IN SHEPHERDS' CLOTHING

Micah 3:1-4

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“Then they will cry to the Lord, but he will not answer them; he will hide his face from them at that time, because they have made their deeds evil” (Mic. 3:4).

People often picture religious zealots as wild-eyed fanatics, holding up signs declaring, “God’s Judgment Is at Hand!” We see this image in cartoons and religious lampoons. It is, in fact, a fairly accurate portrait of the prophet Micah, perhaps more so than any other Old Testament figure. In chapter 1, Micah records his going about Jerusalem practically naked, loudly lamenting God’s coming judgment with sounds like that of jackals and ostriches (1:8). As we begin Micah chapter 3, which opens his second cycle of sermons, Micah returns to form, warning the false prophets and especially targeting the governing magistrates: “Hear, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel!” (Mic. 3:1).

The middle section of Micah’s prophecy, consisting of the oracles or sermons in chapters three to five, continue his pattern of preaching judgment followed by grace. Chapter 3 delivers severe denunciations on sin, and chapters 4 and 5 present soaring promises of salvation. Through these messages, Micah sought to spark the peoples’ consciences so they would repent and turn back to the Lord.

The question might be raised, “Does such preaching make any difference? Is there any point to warning people against the perils of sin and reminding them of God’s gracious promises? According to the prophet Jeremiah, such preaching can have a powerful, redeeming effect. Writing a hundred years later, Jeremiah reminded his

generation of Micah's preaching. Hezekiah, Judah's king during this period of Micah's ministry, responded by repenting, turning to the Lord, and leading the people in a national reformation, with the result that disaster was averted (see Jer. 26:18-19). This encourages us that by preaching the Bible's warnings against sin and heralding the gospel promises of God's grace, we may hope for reformation and revival in our own time.

TO THE HEADS AND RULERS

Micah addresses himself to "the heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel" (Mic. 3:1). Originally, each tribe and clan was overseen by its elder men and by those of proven ability (see Ex. 18:25). During the kingship, Jehoshaphat had appointed his own officials to judge over the affairs of the cities and towns. It is probably these royal officials to whom Micah refers. The word "rulers" literally means "deciders," so these were the magistrates who ruled the local and national courts in the name of the king.

Micah has a question for these heads and rulers, intended as a challenge to their conduct: "Is it not for you to know justice?" (Mic. 3:1). Above all others in Israel, the ruling officials should know what constitutes justice, he argues. His point is not merely that they should know the laws, but that they should operate with the law in their hearts. Bernard Renaud comments that Micah's idea of knowing justice "implies a power of discerning and of making judgment, even a sympathy for the outcasts of fortune... In short, 'to know the law' is to let reign inside the community a climate of justice and brotherhood."¹ Isaiah made a similar plea to the leaders of Jerusalem, urging them to "learn to do good" and "seek justice." Isaiah also gives the Bible's definition of justice: "correct oppression, bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause" (Isa. 1:17).

According to the Bible, this mandate for justice pertains not merely to Old Testament officials, but to all civil leaders even today. The apostle Paul made this clear when he taught Christians to submit to civil authority: "For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (Rom. 13:1). All authority is derived from God, and every ruler has been put in place by God's

¹ Cited from Bruce Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 155.

providence. Therefore God holds all rulers to account for the exercise of moral and social justice. Paul says, “He is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” (Rom. 13:4), and thus civil authorities are accountable to God for their rule. This is in keeping with Jehoshaphat’s instructions to the officials of his kingdom: “Consider what you do, for you judge not for man but for the LORD... Now, then, let the fear of the Lord be upon you. Be careful what you do, for there is no injustice with the LORD our God, or partiality or taking bribes” (2 Chron. 19:6-7).

In a nation like ours, where rulers are elected, these instructions are valuable for those entrusted with casting votes. If God calls all rulers to enforce sound morals and equitable justice, then the first qualification for any candidate must always be that of personal character and discernment. When Moses sought rulers, these were his priorities: “Look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe” (Ex. 18:21).

We are constantly told today that character doesn’t matter, only competence. But the Bible condemns such thinking as sheer madness. For one thing, a candidate for high office can seldom predict the challenges he or she will actually face in office, so wisdom and moral courage are at a premium. Moreover, given the great power invested in civil officials, especially at the national level, the first prerequisite should always be a demonstrated trustworthiness to wield such authority. Therefore, Moses’ priorities were that leaders be proven in ability, reverent before God and his Word, and possessed of a high personal integrity. We should select our leaders by these same priorities, both in society and especially in the church.

Micah’s point in asking his question, “Is it not for you to know justice?” was to point out the fact that they did not. The ancient church preacher Theodoret of Cyr paraphrases: “Was it not you who had responsibility for judging, for punishing the guilty and let the innocent go free without blame? How did you, then who were entrusted with administering the law, turn from the practice of good works and ardently support evil?”²

² Alberto Ferreiro, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament XIV: The Twelve Prophets* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2003), 156.

Such was the crisis of leadership in Micah's day, that he could honestly condemn the Jewish officials, saying, "You who hate the good and love the evil" (Mic. 3:2). This is not the kind of thing the judges would readily have admitted. It was their actions and their rulings that proved Micah's accusation. Jesus said, "the tree is known by its fruit" (Mt. 12:33), and the character of one who wields authority is revealed by the decisions he makes. Micah's language is colorful: these rulers found the good to be repulsive and disgusting, while their wicked hearts delighted in upholding evil. Given the accusations of chapter 2, much of this probably had to do with collaborating and profiting with those who oppressed and despoiled the common people for the sake of gorging themselves with riches and land.

We are plagued today by a similar calamity of ruling authorities who delight in evil and hate the good. Men and women seated as judges over our courts and trusted with determining our laws have shown themselves to delight in overthrowing every standard of justice and decency. They delight in preserving the "right" of mothers to have their unborn children killed for the sake of their mere lifestyle freedom. Under the authority of our courts, Bibles are ripped from the hands of boys and girls in the public schools. Standards of sexual decency and family order upheld since the dawn of civilization are violently overturned. All the while, the greatest delight is taken in money raised through the gambling addictions fostered by our state lotteries, tolerance is shown for the oppression of women and the degradation of men by pornography, and many in power exult in the opulent lifestyles financed by those who purchase their influence.

Through Micah, God called the heads and rulers of Judah to account, and he will hold our leaders to account as well. If anything, the condemnation on America and other free countries is much greater than that of the people of Judah, since our wicked rulers sit in power by the authority of our freely cast ballots.

SHEEP-EATING WOLVES

Micah does not settle for a general condemnation of evil, however. He proceeds to describe these rulers who were established to shepherd the flock of God's people as ruthless wolves who instead rip them apart. Micah sees them "tear[ing] the skin off my people and their flesh off their bones" (Mic. 3:2). They then "eat the

flesh of my people, and flay their skin from off them, and break their bones in pieces and chop them up like meat in a pot, like flesh in a cauldron” (Mic. 3:3).

Here is a blood-curdling depiction of indifference to human suffering and exploitation of the weak. In utmost outrage, God charges that “these leaders... tear, eat, flay, break, and chop ‘my people’ as one would slaughter an animal to be eaten.”³ Peter Craigie summarizes: “They were hungry butchers, skinning the flesh of the weak for a tasty morsel to eat, breaking their bones and popping them into the stock pot to prepare a tasty soup. The officers of the court had no concern for others, no passion for justice; the horizon of their ambitions was merely to fulfil their own hungers and desires.”⁴

Of course, Micah did not mean that Judah’s wicked rulers were literally eating the people: he employs this gruesome metaphor to depict the severity of the violent injustice they perpetrated. How else could he describe the casting of widows and their children from their homes, the wrongful seizure of lands bequeathed by God to families and their heirs, and the deploying of bully squads to intimidate and crush all who opposed their will? Undoubtedly, Micah’s outrage is fueled by faces in his mind of people he knew from back home in Moresheth who were so victimized, and from personal encounters with the poor victims who came to Jerusalem.

I would imagine that the magistrates resented Micah’s scathing description. Micah was being melodramatic, they would have argued. Jewish society was merely undergoing a long-awaited updating according to the latest economic theory. The concentration of wealth and power would bring efficiencies and allow Judah to achieve greater strength. Admittedly, there were short-term costs the common people would have to face. But the rabble would get used to inconveniences so that those more fit might channel the results of their labor. And if the small number of elites enjoyed new heights of luxury as a result of their leadership, well, that was just the way of the world. This is how similar predators reason today, and it probably was how the heads and rulers of Israel reasoned then.

³ James Limburg, *Hosea-Micah* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 175.

⁴ Peter C. Craigie, *Twelve Prophets*, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1985), 2:27-28.

Their problem was that God, speaking through the prophet, did not share their view. A quick perusal of the Ten Commandments, for instance, will show that God requires us to preserve the life and well-being of our fellow man, to respect the property that God has given to others, and not to covet the blessings enjoyed by our neighbors. This alone shows that if the actions of the rulers was in keeping with worldly standards of the time – that is, of the evil, pagan standards of the world – they were not in keeping with God’s requirements. The argument, “This is how the world works, so I might as well make sure I come out on top,” is always refused by God. As Micah summarizes later in the book, God requires us “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [our] God” (Mic. 6:8).

But it is not just the evil rulers of Jerusalem who need to consider God’s perspective on sin. However lightly we take our sins, God takes them with the most intense seriousness. Anyone who had visited Jerusalem’s temple should have known this, having watched the daily sacrifices for sin in which a bleating animal had its life torn out in place of the transgressing people. The message was that God detests our sin and must slay the wicked. Anyone who visited Jerusalem during Passover week, when every family in the nation brought a lamb to be slaughtered, would have choked on the overwhelming stench of death, tried to stop their ears against the wails of dying animals, and have cast appalled glances at the rivers of blood streaming down from the temple mount. What was God’s message in this? It was the same as the New Testament’s repeated teaching that the penalty for unforgiven sin is an eternity in hell. According to the Bible, hell is the destination for all who sin, and a place where “the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night” (Rev. 14:11). This shows that our holy God violently detests all sin.

The good news of the gospel of Jesus is that he came to deliver us from this appalling but just condemnation. Jesus died on the cross for sins that he did not commit, but which we did. Paul delivers the glorious message, “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace” (Eph. 1:7). But this gives us no reason to excuse our sins. Anyone who can consider the appalling torments suffered by the holy and innocent Jesus Christ on the cross – chief among which were the

torments of his soul under the wrath of God – and continue to take sin lightly, must be possessed of a calloused conscience which is appalling to God. Of course, the fact is that we are exactly such people, taking lightly and casually excusing sins that revolt the heart of God. Having been forgiven through faith in the blood of Christ, we are now to turn our hardened hearts to be renewed by God in holiness and truth.

ABANDONED BY GOD

Hearthlessly betraying God's righteous calling, the men clothed and appointed as shepherds descended on God's people baring wolves' teeth. But God reminds them that this is the "house of Israel" (Mic. 3:1), that is God's holy nation, and that their victims are "my people" (Mic. 3:1, 2). God has loving sympathy with those he under their authority, just as God's heart inclines towards wives under the authority of husbands, children under parents, church members under pastors and elders, and citizens under civil leaders. If the shepherds will not provide justice and mercy to the people, then God will deal with the shepherds. Micah thus declares: "Then they will cry to the LORD, but he will not answer them; he will hide his face from them at that time, because they have made their deeds evil" (Mic. 3:4).

This threat presupposes the judgments already prophesied by Micah's earlier sermons. Disaster was coming from the Lord to the very gates of Jerusalem (Mic. 1:12), in the form of an invasion of the mighty Assyrian army. When that happened, Micah says, when God gave them a measure of the same violence Jerusalem's rulers had inflicted on their own people, then they would turn their hearts to the Lord for help. "Then they will cry to the LORD, but he will not answer them."

It is God's glory that he is faithful to hear the cries of his people in distress. Psalm 107:6 celebrates God's readiness to answer prayers: "Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress." But this is not what would happen when Jerusalem's rulers cried their prayers to God. John Mackay explains: "Those who have despised their covenant obligations will not be able

to avail themselves of their overlord's assistance in the day of calamity. Their sin separates them from their God."⁵

The question may be asked if Christians need to fear this warning. The answer is Yes. The issue here concerns those who have systematically abused their God-given authority, causing harm to those placed by God under their care. An example is that of a husband's covenantal obligation to his wife. In a later generation, the priests of Israel complained that God did not answer their prayers. "Why does he not?" answered the prophet Malachi. "Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant" (Mal. 2:14). This principle is explicitly carried forward into the New Testament by the apostle Peter. Peter commands husband to love and cherish their wives "so that your prayers may not be hindered" (1 Pet. 3:7). Proverbs 21:13 applies this principle generally: "Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself call out and not be answered."

Not only will the wolves of Jerusalem be deprived of God's deliverance in the day of their trouble, but they will also have to make due with the inward peace and comfort that comes through communion with God. Micah adds, "he will hide his face from them at that time." This recalls the great Aaronic blessing: "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; (Num. 6:24-25). To have God's "face shine upon you," is to be conscious of God's favor and love. G. Wehmeier comments, "As the turning of the face is a sign of friendship and favor, so the turning away of the covering of the countenance is a sign of no mercy."⁶ Thus, Bruce Waltke observes, "The worse form of judgment for Israel is not the affliction itself but the absence of God in it."⁷ This is precisely as God had warned: "Then my anger will be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them and hide my face from them, and they will be devoured... so that they will say in that day, 'Have not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us?'" (Dt. 31:17).

⁵ John L. Mackay, *Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 1998), 86.

⁶ Cited from Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah*, 151-152.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 152.

This is something Christians may experience as God's chastisement when we "grieve the Holy Spirit" (Eph. 4:30) through persistent or gross sins. Indeed, when we feel an absence of God from our lives, and a corresponding lack of the grace of his Spirit within us, we should investigate the pattern by which we have been living, the sins we have been accommodating, and our faithfulness to the obligations God has given us to those under our care.

Why would God so abandon the rulers of Jerusalem? His answer was plain and clear: "because they have made their deeds evil." They had violated every pretense of justice, so God had afflicted them with calamity, refused to hear their prayers, and had turned his face away from them – and God had done this justly as the penalty for their terrible sins. Their poor example urges us to give heed to our manner of living and especially to our faithfulness in God-given authority. Paul made the issue clear: "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked" (Gal. 6:7).

THE OPEN DOOR OF GRACE

The only way for us honestly to apply this passage is to realize our own kinship with the ruthless rulers of Jerusalem. We might not have their opportunity for such widespread evil. But in the positions God has given us, we have acted in a similar spirit. We have been preoccupied with our own well-being so as to act cruelly to others. We have turned our faces from the needy. We have caused harm to others in our behavior as parents and as children, as husbands and as wives, as bosses and as employees, as pastors and elders and as church members. We have imbibed of the spirit of "the heads of Jacob and the rulers of the house of Israel" (Mic. 3:1). By our actions, we have shown hatred for good and love for evil. If God should visit us with calamity, refuse our prayers, and turn his face from us, we will have deserved it. And if God should cast us forever into the torments of hell, we will have deserved that, too.

So what hope is there for Micah's listeners, then and now? The answer is implied by the mere fact that God has graciously provided us this warning. We can turn our hearts from evil and convict ourselves before God, fully confessing our sins and the evil of them. We can seek the grace of our God, of whom Micah says, "he delights in mercy" (Mic. 7:18). We can turn our ears to the good news that

God has acted in mercy by sending his Son to die for our sins on the cross.

One of Micah's originally hearers who responded in this way was the highest official in the land, the one entrusted with authority over all the heads and rulers of the house of Israel, King Hezekiah. As I mentioned previously, Jeremiah records that Hezekiah did not lash out against Micah and his rebukes. Instead, Jeremiah says, "Did he not fear the LORD and entreat the favor of the Lord...?" (Jer. 26:19). The Bible records that Hezekiah did just this, and that when he prayed in true repentance and faith God heard his plea, showed the king his face, and relented of the disaster he had brought.

An even greater example concerns Hezekiah's son and successor, King Manasseh. Manasseh was probably Judah's most wicked king, leading the people into abject idolatry, filling Jerusalem with innocent blood, and even instituting child sacrifices in the valley beneath the temple mount, starting with his own son (2 Ki. 21:2-16). Predictably, God brought severe penalties upon Manasseh, and when he did the evil king sincerely repented. The Bible records: "When he was in distress, he entreated the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. He prayed to him, and God was moved by his entreaty and heard his plea and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom" (2 Chron. 33:12-13). This is the one prayer God always hears: the sincere prayer of confession of sin and the humble prayer for God's grace. When Manasseh returned to Jerusalem, he removed the idols, cleansed the city of sin, and restored true worship, thus beginning the sweeping reformation that would be completed under his godly grandson, King Josiah.

How could God forgive such sin? Only through the infinitely precious blood of his own divine Son. God is willing and able to forgive your sin, to the glory of his grace. And God calls us to the kind of reformation that sweeps out the idols of our hearts and restores the principles of God's justice, through the power of the Holy Spirit that he sends. But God calls you to be smitten by the prophetic rebuke, as Hezekiah was, to confess your sin and look humbly in faith to the Savior Jesus Christ. And being forgiven by the blood of Christ, God calls you to start anew in the holy way that is empowered by his own Spirit living within you. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but

have eternal life... Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (Jn. 3:16-18).