

THE GIFT THAT GOD REQUIRES

Micah 6:1-8

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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).

Most pastors today do a good deal of marriage counseling, and I am no exception. I have learned that while every marriage is unique, most marital problems fall into familiar categories.

Usually one or both partners have little idea of their biblical calling in marriage, or have expectations that are not reasonable. It is especially common in marriage for spouses to take one another for granted: amidst the busyness of life they do little to convey their appreciation or affection. When this has been going on for a long time, emotional coolness and hard feelings may easily beset their relationship.

In Micah 6, God has a quarrel with his people Israel along these very lines. Not that the Lord has grown distant towards them, but rather that his people have taken him for granted and distanced their hearts. As God summons the prophet to plead his case, the scene is that of the courtroom. But it is family court, not criminal court. God has a grievance against his people, and the result he seeks is the renewal of the ancient covenant faithfulness and love.

GOD'S COVENANT LAWSUIT

In our day, such a quarrel would take place in a counselor's office or pastor's study. But the Old Testament form for God's appeal to his people was the covenant lawsuit. This kind of proceeding was designed to protect and vindicate one who has been wrongfully used

in a covenant relationship. Since in this case it is God who calls for redress, it is an extremely public affair: he summons his prophet to stand before the people on his behalf. He calls the very mountains to witness what will be said between the Lord and his betrothed covenant nation. “Arise,” God calls to Micah, “plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice” (Mic. 6:1). It is not unlikely that Micah delivered God’s message in the temple courts, where many of Jerusalem’s leaders would be present. Moreover, it might well have been given during one of the great feasts when the whole nation was assembled, especially the Passover, with its remembrance of the very historical events Micah recounts.

The prophet summons the long-standing mountains to bear testimony, since they have borne witness to Israel’s long record of misdeeds. There is likely an intended contrast between the immovable mountains and the fickle hearts of Israel. Furthermore, Leslie Allen writes: “Calling such important witnesses stresses the seriousness of the case and its epoch-making quality. Who can be the guilty party at so awesome a court hearing?”¹

Most importantly, this reference locates the protest within the covenant that God made through Moses. “Hear, you mountains, the indictment of the Lord,” Micah cries, “and you enduring foundations of the earth” (Mic. 6:2). These were the very witnesses summoned to observe God’s making of his covenant with Israel. Three times during his covenant-making with Moses, God said, “I call heaven and earth to witness” (Dt. 4:26, 30:19, 31:38). Only if the mountains could be moved and their foundations dug up would God’s covenant obligations suffer a lack of testimony before his people. The mountains knew that in entering God’s covenant Israel had promised obedience to his commands, along with God’s promise to bless them as his own beloved people. The ancient hills had also witnessed Israel’s infidelity to these marriage vows.

With this august assembly gathered, Micah explains the purpose of his message: “for the LORD has an indictment of his people, and he will contend with Israel” (Mic. 6:2). The charge is a breach of covenant: Israel has not fulfilled her marriage vows to the Lord. His rightful expectations have not been met. Israel has lost interest in God, taking

¹ Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 365.

his blessings for granted, and has gone its own way. The indictment has the purpose not of dispensing punishment but of pleading renewed loyalty and love. David Prior notes: “The language here is personal and passionate, far more like a father’s pleas to his child or a husband pleading with his wife... This is the plea of a loving God, whose heart has been broken by his people’s rejection of him.”²

GOD’S CASE VINDICATED

This passion is seen in the opening words of God’s complaint: “O my people” (Mic. 6:3). God’s reaches out to Israel with tender love. And he goes on to invite complaint against his own marital performance: “O my people, what have I done to you?” (Mic. 6:3). The implication is that Israel has acted as if God had let them down. They have grown tired and bored with God. But what has God done to merit this emotional distance? Has the Lord failed to uphold his end of the covenant? Israel is invited to explain. God queries, “How have I wearied you? Answer me!” (Mic. 6:3).

Israel, it seems, found it tiresome to be God’s people. Like many believers in Christ today, they were weary of having to live a certain way and of being unable to partake of the world’s sinful pleasures. But has God deserved this attitude? His complaint here is similar to the one in his song of the vineyard in Isaiah: “What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?” (Isa. 5:4).

God’s complaint could easily be repeated today. It is especially telling for those who reject his salvation altogether: what has God done to deserve this treatment? And it is a valid complaint for so many of God’s covenant people in Christ, who quickly turn their hearts away from God and back to the world. George Hutcheson gives a universal assessment: “There can be no true cause shown why any should choose to forsake God. Yea rather, all should cleave unto him, since his commands are not grievous, his yoke easy, his trials not above measure, his punishments not above deserving, and a Mediator ready to undertake for his people in all exigencies.”³

² David Prior, *The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998), 170.

³ George Hutcheson, *The Minor Prophets* (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 2001), 148.

“Answer me!” God demands, but Israel had no answer. So it will be in the future day of judgment when all mankind stands before the Lord, discovering too late that they have no reply to God’s indictment. Bruce Waltke comments: “He dealt with them in the grace of the cross of Jesus Christ, but they responded unnaturally in unthankful apathy and neglect, and so their mouths will be silenced, and they will be held accountable before him (cf. Rom. 3:19).”⁴

Hearing no explanation for Israel’s lack of devotion, the Lord calls his people to consider the evidence of their history. This reminds us that Christianity is a historical religion: our salvation rests on God’s great saving acts, especially the gift of his Son Jesus to die on the cross for our sins. Looking into Israel’s past, Micah demands that they consider God’s deliverance of Israel in the exodus from Egypt. This was the greatest saving event of the Old Testament, serving as a paradigm for the greater deliverance in Christ.

God recounts the exodus in four points, beginning with his freeing of Israel from their bondage in Egypt: “For I brought you up from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery” (Mic. 6:4). The language is provocative: not only has God not let Israel down, but he brought them up from the mud-pits of the Nile. The God they had spurned with their hearts is the saving God who rescued them from their helpless, hopeless state under Pharaoh’s whip.

Every Christian can see a similar redemption in the cross of Christ. We were slaves in bondage to sin, held fast in its power, condemned in its guilt. But God had mercy and sent his Son to receive sin’s punishment in our place on the cross. Michael Bentley writes: “God stooped down and lifted us up out of our iniquity and degradation and, through the atoning death of Christ on Calvary, he made us new men and women.”⁵ Remembering this great salvation, how can we ever grow bored with God or resent our discipleship to Jesus? God has not let us down, but rather has lifted us up from our sin.

But God did not stop with Israel’s departure from Egypt. He adds, “and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam” (Mic. 6:4). In other words, God raised up Spirit-anointed leaders to guide Israel to the promised land. Moses was the law-giver who met with God.

⁴ Bruce Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 379.

⁵ Michael Bentley, *Balancing the Books: Micah and Nahum Simply Explained* (Durham: Evangelical Press, 1994), 46.

Aaron was the high priest who made atonement for their sins. Miriam, their sister, was the prophetess who led the women in singing of God's victory on the banks of the Red Sea (Ex. 15:20-21). It might be true that in Micah's time Israel's leaders fell far short of their forebears in the exodus, but this was the result of the people's lack of devotion to the Lord. Likewise, we today can be sure that if we seek the Lord to be our Savior and Shepherd, he will provide faithful preachers, pastors, and lay leaders whose instruction and example will serve us in the pilgrimage of our lives.

God not only sent his people on their way to freedom, but he also intervened on their behalf along the way: "O my people, remember what Balak king of Moab devised, and what Balaam the son of Beor answered him" (Mic. 6:5). As the tribes of Israel drew near to the promised land, the king of Moab plotted to deter them. Summoning Balaam, who possessed unspecified mystic powers, they employed him to utter a curse on Israel, which at least would have had the effect of making many Israelites believe that they were cursed. But each time Balak summoned Balaam to curse, God "resisted the ungodly king and his hireling prophet, and instead put a word in the pagan prophet's mouth that blessed Israel."⁶ Thus the Lord, having delivered Israel out from Egypt, also oversaw the successful completion of their journey to Canaan.

Micah wraps up the account, "and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal" (Mic. 6:5). This refers to the passage of the Jordan River, completing the exodus journey. Shittim was that last stop on the east bank of the Jordan and Gilgal was the first camp on the west side. In this crossing, the Lord continued to help Israel, even drying up the Jordan waters, just as he had done at the Red Sea, to enable Israel to pass over with dry feet.

Taken altogether, this history lesson recalled Israel's deliverance from bondage, God's provision of spiritual leadership, God's intervention along the way, and God's oversight of the journey's successful conclusion. God did not leave his people to fend for themselves, either in the slavery in Egypt or on the long journey to Canaan, but provided his saving grace at every point of their need. Christians likewise may look to God with thanks for his every provision for our

⁶ Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah*, 384.

journey through this life into heaven, being sure, with the apostle Paul, “that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6).

Yet God’s great works in history will only impact our present faith if we remember them! This was God’s purpose: “that you may know the saving acts of the LORD” (Mic. 6:5). The Hebrew text literally states that history reveals the “righteousnesses” of the Lord. In other words, God’s saving acts vindicate him before his people. This is why the essential work of each generation is to recount and pass on the good news of what God has done all through history, and most especially in the gift of his Son Jesus to deliver us from sin. God had instructed Israel, “Remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness” (Dt. 8:2). Likewise the chief purpose of preaching today is to hold before the church the good news of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ. To this end, Jesus specially instituted the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, signifying his atoning death, instructing us, “Do this in remembrance of me” (Lk. 22:19).

Micah’s point is that God’s people are to be drawn to him in a bond of grateful devotion. Our motivation to worship and serve God is chiefly our thanksgiving for his salvation blessings. In the gospel we see proof of his faithfulness to his promises and evidence of his redeeming love. Believers are to reason, “The God who did all this for me will not fail to meet my present or future needs.” As Paul urges, after detailing God’s gospel salvation in the first eleven chapters of Romans, our only reasonable response to such abounding grace is “to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom. 12:1). Leslie Allen observes that Micah’s recital of God’s blessing for Israel in the exodus “symbolizes not only the covenant love of God but also his claim upon the covenant loyalty of his people... [It] was intended to create a permanent bond of allegiance between him and their descendants.”⁷ How much more ought Christians embrace this bond of gratitude in thanks for the redeeming blood of Christ.

⁷ Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 366.

I SURRENDER ALL

Many of us have wealthy friends or family members for whom it is almost impossible to buy gifts. Everything they might want they already have. How much more difficult was Israel's challenge: just what do you give the God who already has everything? "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high?" (Mic. 6:6), the people ask. God desired his people to seek restoration with him, so what will it take? What evidence can they produce to prove their love? Micah's hearers know that God is far above them, so they come bowing. They also know they should not come empty-handed, so what gift do you bring to the Lord?

Immediately, the Israelites turn to the offering of sacrifices: "Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?" (Mic. 6:6). Burnt offerings were completely consumed by fire, unlike fellowship offerings, a portion of which was return to the giver. So the burnt offering was costly. The same was true of a year-old calf. Calves could be offered from seven days old, so a year-old calf was one in which a year's worth of labor and food was invested. Would God be satisfied with costly offerings like these?

From quality, the speaker turns to quantity: "Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil?" (Mic. 6:7). He thinks of the mammoth offerings made by Solomon and other kings. Solomon used to offer thousands of burnt offerings at a time (1 Ki. 3:4), and for the dedication of the temple he sacrificed 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep (1 Ki. 8:63). Would something like that suffice, or oil offerings in the tens of thousands?

Taking this logic to its ultimate conclusion, he asks, "Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" (Mic. 6:7). This was, of course, an abomination to God, since it followed the despicable practice of the pagan god Molech. It is possible, however, that Abraham's willingness to offer his son Isaac is remembered here. But the idea is evident: I will give my greatest possession to the Lord if that is what he desires.

We are reminded here of Israel's namesake, the patriarch Jacob, when he returned to the land of his fathers to face his brother Esau. Jacob had wronged Esau twenty years earlier, stealing his father's blessing at the contrivance of his mother Rebecca. When Jacob fled, Esau

promised to kill him in revenge (Gen. 27:41-42). Now Jacob is returning from distant lands with his wives, children, and vast flocks, dreading the reunion that would occur once he crossed the river Jabbok, the boundary into his father's old lands. Sending a servant ahead to scout the situation, the report came back: "[Esau] is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him" (Gen. 32:6).

Jacob was now in dreadful fear, but he had a plan. He would appease Esau with a series of gifts. First, he sent forward two hundred female goats with a servant to present them as an offering to Esau. But, Jacob wondered, "What if that is not enough?" So then he sent another servant with twenty male goats. "I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me," Jacob reasoned. "Perhaps he will accept me" (Gen. 32:20). But unsure of this, Jacob sent more of his flocks as gifts, then more, and then still more. Altogether, he sent servants to Esau with thirty female camels with their young, forty cows, ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. Running out of animals, he then turned to offering his wives and children. First he sent Leah, his least favored wife, with her children, then Rachel, his beloved wife, with her children. Still, Jacob could not know that Esau was appeased. But now, with all his possessions, all his wives, and all his children having been offered to appease Esau's wrath, Jacob was alone.

Imagine if Jacob knew the old hymn, how would have sung in the darkness by the river: "I surrender all... all the goats, all the sheep, all the camels, all the cows, all the bulls, all the donkeys, all my wives and children." But Jacob had not surrendered all, for he had not surrendered himself. Therefore God came and wrestled with Jacob in the darkness, and when Jacob gave himself to the Lord in faith he finally knew he was saved.⁸

This was the problem of Israel's attitude toward the Lord. They would offer burnt offerings, year-old calf offerings, thousands of rams and tens of thousands of rivers of oil. But they would not offer God what he asked for: themselves; their hearts; their undivided faith; their unfeigned devotion.

⁸ Taken from James Montgomery Boice, *Amazing Grace* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1993), 208-209.

HE HAS SHOWN YOU, O MAN

So what is the gift that God requires? Micah answers, “He has told you, O man, what is good” (Mic. 6:8). In other words, it was not a mystery what God required, because he has revealed this clearly in his Word. Micah addresses himself to the individual worshiper – “to you, O man” – asserting that God has already told him. Consider the words of God to Moses so long before: “And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good?” (Dt. 10:12-13). In other words, God’s people were to serve him by keeping the two tablets of the Ten Commandments, which Jesus summarized:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Mt. 22:37-40).

What was the problem with the Israelites’ desire to bring sacrifices? The problem was that the sacrifices were a picture of what God had promised to give to them, the true Lamb of God, his own Son, whose death would atone for their sins. The sacrifices were never intended to offer a way of buying off God. The question, then, is what those who have received God’s priceless gift of salvation should then offer to him in return. The answer is our very selves: our hearts, our minds, our bodies, and our souls. The way we offer our whole selves to God is by loving him with all that we are and loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Micah expresses this truth with one of the most succinct, lovely, and potent descriptions of a life offered in gratitude to God. Geerhard von Rad calls this “the quintessence of the commandments as the prophets understood them.”⁹ J.M.P. Smith calls Micah 6:8 “the finest summary of the content of practical religion to be found in the Old Testament.”¹⁰ Micah declares: “He has told you, O man, what is

⁹ Cited from Kenneth L. Barker and Waylon Bailey, *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 113.

¹⁰ Ibid.

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).

In these memorable words we see the prophetic summary of God's law. First, our duty to man is to "do justice" and "love kindness." The idea of justice is that we are to treat people fairly, giving them what is due to them. A person who "does justice" is one who treats people right, offering respect, integrity, and fairness. Secondly, loving our neighbor means to "love kindness." The word for "kindness" (Hebrew, *chesed*) is one of the hardest words in the Old Testament to translate with just one term. In different contexts it is translated mercy, faithfulness, and loving kindness. It is the great description of God's faithful, kind, and merciful covenant love. Peter Craigie explains: "it gives, where no giving is required, it acts when no action is deserved, and it penetrates both attitudes and activities."¹¹ To "love kindness" is to look on the weak and vulnerable with the eyes of God's love and give them not what they deserve but what they need.

Justice and kindness summarize the second great commandment. Micah concludes with the first great commandment, summarizing our love for God: "to walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:8). To love God is to walk with him. This means a lifestyle wholly devoted to him, seeking his glory in all things and enjoying his pleasure in our lives. To walk with God is to live humbly. The Hebrew word more accurately means to walk "circumspectly" or "carefully"; that is, to act with an awareness of the holiness and grace of the Lord. Walter Kaiser writes, "Pride alone insists on taking first place, but faith seeks to give God first place... Living a circumspect lifestyle will bring one's life into conformity with God's will."¹² It is only a man or woman who is born again to a living faith who can walk humbly with God, and only one who walks with God is able truly to do justice and love kindness.

Corrie ten Boom tells a story about her father that exemplifies the godliness Micah describes. Her father was a watchmaker, and the family was experiencing great financial hardship. A wealthy man came into his shop and decided to buy the most expensive timepiece

¹¹ Peter C. Craigie, *Twelve Prophets*, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1985), 2:46.

¹² Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Micah-Malachi*, *The Communicator's Commentary* (Dallas: Word, 1992), 74.

available, the sale of which would provide for all the family's needs. As her father was putting the cash into the box, the man mentioned that he was buying it because a nearby competitor had been unable to fix his previous watch. At this, Corrie's father asked to see the broken watch. After a few minutes of tinkering, he handed it back, fixed. "There, that was a very little mistake," he said. "It will be fine now. Sir, I trust the young watchmaker. Someday he will be just as good as his father... Now I shall give you back your money and return my watch."

Young Corrie was shocked by her father – by his justice, kindness, and humble walk before God. She complained that he had thrown away a golden opportunity for much-needed income. But he gently chided her, "Corrie, what do you think that young man would have said when he heard that one of his good customers had gone to Mr. ten Boom? Do you think that the name of the Lord would be honored? As for the money, trust the Lord, Corrie. He owns the cattle on a thousand hills and He will take care of us."¹³ Corrie's father showed justice to the man whose watch needed fixing. He showed kindness to the young watchmaker whose reputation was at stake. And most importantly, his approach to business and life was humbly appropriate for one redeemed and cared for by the sovereign God of grace.

LOVE SO AMAZING, SO DIVINE

How much has God been willing to give to us? God has given himself in the covenant of grace, and while we were still sinners he gave his only Son to deliver us from our sins by the blood of his cross. What gift is appropriate for us to offer back to him? We can never match God's amazing gift of grace. But we can give him all that we have and all that we are. God wants us to give ourselves to him not in elaborate shows of rituals and sacrifices, but in the daily way we live our lives, walking humbly with him and showing justice and kindness to our fellow man. That leaves only one question: how, then, do we wrap this gift that God desires? We wrap it in trusting faith, born of a grateful heart. As Isaac Watts immortalized in his

¹³ Corrie ten Boom, "Trust the Lord," *Guideposts Magazine* (Aug. 1976), 7.

hymn, the gift that God requires is our self-surrendering love in grateful wonder at the priceless gift of Jesus Christ:

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My riches gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride...

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.¹⁴

¹⁴ Isaac Watts, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," 1707.