

GOD'S CALL TO THE CITY

Micah 6:9-16

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The voice of the LORD cries to the city - and it is sound wisdom to fear your name: "Hear of the rod and of him who appointed it! (Mic. 6:9).

Our cities teem with voices of all kinds. There are voices of laughter, excitement, sorrow and suffering. It is of the very nature of cities that they burst with the soundtrack of stores, schools, and entertainment venues. But of all the voices in a city, the voice most needed is the voice of the Lord. Now in this final section of his prophecy, Micah takes his voice as public as possible: "The voice of the Lord cries to the city," he declares (Mic. 6:9). Nothing determines the fate and well-being of a city, he indicates, more than its attitude to the voice of God. Moreover, he knows that as goes the city, so goes the whole nation.

God did not leave himself without a witness in the city streets of Jerusalem; Micah's voice goes forth as a plea to the city that lived in ignorance of God's ways. David Prior comments, "In addressing the city, God is like a town crier, calling publicly for the attention of every citizen, because what he has to say is so important."¹ And if no one else will listen, Micah answers, "it is sound wisdom to fear your name" (Mic. 6:9). The city is deaf to the voice of the Lord. For the people have forgotten that it is the greatest privilege to hear God's Word; no more do they realize that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Ps. 111:10).

¹ David Prior, *The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998), 178.

THE CITY JUDGED BY GOD

We can easily imagine the looks Micah must have received. He is a nag. He is a zealot who will not stay quiet, a disturber of the “peace”. In a city that had known economic booms, the people are concerned only with getting their piece of the pie. In a city that had become a marketplace of the nations, the residents want only to hear the sound of clinking coins. In a city surrounded by fertile lands, the noise they desire is that of wagon wheels delivering produce. The city is deaf to the voice of God, but the prophet will not be silent. Micah is determined to remind the people of the inconvenient truth that theirs is *a God who will not go away*.

There are times that call for subtlety and nuance, and other times that call for urgent directness. Micah’s time was the latter, so he answers the indifference of the city by proclaiming God’s intent to judge: “Hear of the rod and of him who appointed it!” (Mic. 6:9). God had appointed chastisement for Jerusalem, and amidst the clamor of the markets the people are summoned to face the reality of the God they had ignored. We are reminded of America in the roaring 1920’s, oblivious to the signs of the coming stock market crash until finally it came. In the context of Micah’s prophecy there can be little doubt that he refers the marauding Assyrians. Isaiah made the connection explicit: “Ah, Assyria,” he cried, “the rod of my anger; the staff in their hands is my fury!” (Isa. 10:5).

How common it is for men and women caught up in the affairs of the world to imagine God is absent from the equation of their lives. They exercise liberties upon the patience of God, never realizing that the wages of sin must ultimately be paid. Yet God’s patience, born of his tender heart, always has limits. He asks Jerusalem, “Can I forget any longer the treasures of wickedness in the house of the wicked?” (Mic. 6:10). He has granted them time to repent; all through Micah’s prophecy he has cried out against the violently wicked pursuit of wealth. But the people and especially their leaders occupied that time to grab more wealth. Now the rod of judgment would enter God’s hand and they would be reminded that God never goes away. “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’” (Ps. 14:1), lamented David. Jerusalem, like our cities today, acted as if God had forgotten them, that they could safely write their own rules. But history bears stark testimony to the folly of forgetting the Lord.

Not only would God not go away, Micah insisted, but he is also *a God who will not change*. The old God who gave the Ten Commandments to Moses is still God today. As secular society rewrites its rules, God refuses to amend his own. Therefore the prophet, standing amidst the merchants' booths, complains against "the scant measure that is accursed" (Mic. 6:10). God asks, "Shall I acquit the man with wicked scales and with a bag of deceitful weights?" (Mic. 6:11).

Micah is commenting on the "tricks of the trade" in Jerusalem's commerce. The "scant measure" of verse 10 refers to the liquid and dry bushel (Hebrew, *ephah*) use to measure produce, equal roughly to five gallons. Buyers were dependent on the honesty of merchants, and unscrupulous sellers would make their measures slightly small so as to sell less than was agreed. A similar trick was to use dishonest scales or, literally, a "deceitful bag of stones" (Mic. 6:12), that is, weighing stones whose mass did not correspond to their markings, so that more gold and silver would have to be paid into the scales by those purchasing. The merchants were robbing their customers both coming and going: giving them less than promised and making them pay more than agreed.

Such corruption is all "accursed" to God (Mic. 6:10). In the giving of his law, the Lord decreed: "You shall do no wrong in judgment, in measures of length or weight or quantity. You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin" (Lev. 19:35-36). God is just and true, and his people were to reflect this in their business dealings. Proverbs 20:23 states, "Unequal weights are an abomination to the LORD, and false scales are not good."

This reminds us that our true religion is displayed in our treatment of other people. Here, our business practices – the way we treat customers and deal with market pressures – reveals which God we truly worship. God is present in the marketplace, and his ways are not malleable the way that corporate ethics are today. Gary Smith rightly comments, "God will just those who do not conduct their business dealings with others honestly and without deception or lies."²

God determines our true religion not only in how we handle money but also how we handle matters of truth. He continues, "Your rich

² Gary V. Smith, *Hosea, Amos, Micah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 559.

men are full of violence; your inhabitants speak lies, and their tongue is deceitful in their mouth” (Mic. 6:12).

Micah has rebuked the violence of the greedy elites earlier in this book. The rich not only controlled the courts, so that they could cheat the common people, but they also employed gangs of thugs to impose their will. “They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them away; they oppress a man and his house, a man and his inheritance” (Mic. 2:2). But now he adds his disgust over the way this has caused corruption to spread all through society. It is because of the violence of the rich and powerful that “your inhabitants speak lies” and “their tongue is deceitful” (Mic. 6:12). David Prior writes, “the violence of a few leads to dishonesty by the many. A city where brutality and ruthlessness are the order of the day inevitably becomes a place where people lie and deceive for survival. Nobody can be trusted. No longer is peoples’ word their bond.”³

One need only consider the culture in many of our corporations today to witness the truth of this. When senior executives betray loyal employees, laying off thousands to realize short term stock gains, the inevitable result is a workforce that no longer considers the company’s well-being. And if lawmakers are “on the take”, granting favorable rules for those who make large contributions, it is inevitable that companies will no longer pursue the public good. In a land where once a handshake was enough, now lawyers must pour over contracts to examine the small print and the embedded loopholes.

In many African countries where bribery has become a part of civil survival, this presents a pressing issue to Christians. Uganda, for instance, was long known as one of the more honest of African nations. But the violent years of Idi Amin’s rule (1971-1979) destroyed the culture of integrity, replacing it with one of corruption and deceit. Many of the church leaders there realize that if the nation is to return to uprightness, it must be Christians who courageously lead the way. But Westerners are deceived if we think our societies are free from corruption. Micah 6:8 laid out God’s calling for his people: “What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” God has not changed, and he still calls his own people to stand against violence

³ Prior, *Joel, Micah & Habakkuk*, 180.

and deceit, engaging only in fair, honest, and humane business practices, and refusing to embrace a culture of deceit.

The early church leader Tertullian discovered a member of his church who was engaged in fraudulent business. The man defended his practices, insisting that it was the only way he could stay afloat. He implored his bishop, “I have to live.” Tertullian famously replied, “Do you?”⁴ Christians today need to embrace a similar attitude that we are willing to fail in business by the world’s standards before we are willing to engage in corruption, moral violence or deceit.

In the long run, obeying God is the only practical choice, because not only is he a God who will not go away and a God who will not change: he is also *a God who will not stand aside*. Thus he declared to Micah’s Jerusalem: “Therefore I strike you with a grievous blow, making you desolate because of your sins” (Mic. 6:13). God’s strikes sinners not because of any harshness in his spirit – indeed, God’s patience displays the opposite – but for one simple reason: “because of your sins.”

God will not stand aside and allow sin to continue unchecked; a society perverted by lusts into moral violence and deceit must eventually face God’s wrath. James Montgomery Boice observes: “This is his universe. He is the holy God, and our sin has introduced a foul blemish into it. He is opposed to sin and is determined to stamp it out.”⁵ Therefore, the Puritan William Gurnall warns us:

Think not, sinners, that you shall escape thus; God's mill goes slow, but grinds small; the more admirable His patience and bounty now is, the more dreadful and unsupportable will that fury be which ariseth out of His abused goodness. Nothing smoother than the sea, yet when stirred into a tempest, nothing rageth more. Nothing so sweet as the patience and goodness of God, and nothing so terrible as His wrath when it takes fire.⁶

Observing how God’s chosen people of old fell into such a settled state of depravity, we should realize how possible the same is for us. Let us prayerfully develop a habit of responding to the warnings of God’s Word, quickly repenting of known sins, and asking God for a tender spirit that hears his voice of rebuke.

⁴ Citation needed.

⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *Ephesians: An Expository Commentary*, 53.

⁶ cited in A. W. Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, DATE), 86

THE CITY CURSED

When Micah warns that God will make Jerusalem “desolate because of your sins,” he no doubt refers to the threat of invasion and the destruction of the city, a threat that was made good by the Babylonians in 586 BC. But realizing that such a disaster seemed distant and unreal, he expands his threat to touch upon the affluent lifestyle so near and dear to his hearers’ hearts. Drawing directly from God’s ancient words to Moses (Dt. 28:30-31, 38-40), he utters a curse of futility on their cherished possessions:

You shall eat, but not be satisfied, and there shall be hunger within you; you shall put away, but not preserve, and what you preserve I will give to the sword. You shall sow, but not reap; you shall tread olives, but not anoint yourselves with oil; you shall tread grapes, but not drink wine (Mic. 6:14-15).

First, he touches upon the abundance of their food: while they would have plenty to eat they would not enjoy satisfaction. Why? “There shall be hunger within you” (Mic. 6:14). Avarice is always the enemy of contentment, and those who are at odds with God experience a hunger of the soul that no food can satisfy. This curse probably indicates that God will impose a sickness of the body, such as dysentery, so that no matter how much is eaten the body will remain malnourished.

Next, they will store up goods but find that nothing is preserved. “And what you preserve,” God warns, “I will give to the sword” (Mic. 6:14). The Bible commends the kind of frugality that saves against a rainy day (cf. Gen. 50:20-21). But worldly people respond to anxiety for the future by seeking to build an idolatrous rampart of stored-up wealth. But the future is truly secured only through a right relationship with God.

Jesus told a parable about a “rich fool” who greedily stockpiled his wealth in ever-larger barns, never giving a thought to the needy. “But God intervened: ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’” (Lk. 12:20). In Jerusalem’s case, their stockpiled wealth would be taken by the invaders’ sword. Jesus condemned everyone “who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God” (Lk. 12:21); one way or another, in death if not sooner, money will fail to secure our souls.

Micah now turns to the produce of the field: “You shall sow, but not reap; you shall tread olives, but not anoint yourselves with oil; you shall tread grapes, but not drink wine” (Mic. 6:15). Prior explains: “They will put in all the effort and spend much time and many resources in production, but there will be nothing to show for it. Their hard work will prove useless. Worse than that, the benefits will be reaped by others; the profits will go to boost the revenues of their competitors.”⁷ Whereas once Israel through faith had eaten from fields others had planted, now in sinful unbelief the opposite will result. As God foretold to Moses: “A nation that you have not known shall eat up the fruit of your ground and of all your labors, and you shall be only oppressed and crushed continually, so that you are driven mad by the sights that your eyes see” (Dt. 28:33-34).

The futility envisioned by Micah is in large measure experienced by America today. We exert so much labor but experience so little joy. Our satiation fails to give satisfaction. Material prosperity does not secure peace. During one of my trips to East Africa, some Christian friends told me that “America is Africa’s God.” They meant that their countrymen coveted the material abundance and leisure lifestyle enjoyed by Americans. But I pointed out things which they did not know, such as America’s high rate of depression and the widespread dependence on mood-altering drugs. “How many people in your town committed suicide last year?” I asked them. Shocked, they replied that suicide was unknown among them. I then informed them that in the preceding year two people had taken their own lives on my own street in affluent America. America without God is experiencing a cursed futility, so that the idols of materialism and sensuality sap the very life out of nation’s soul. In a land that once boasted safe homes, good schools, plentiful jobs and fair prices, we are now beset by social, moral, economic, political, and psychological crises on every side. What has happened? The curse of futility in cities and a nation that no longer has an ear for the voice of God.

What was the missing ingredient in Jerusalem? Why would Jerusalem eat but still be hungry? Why would they store and yet preserve nothing? Why would they sow but not reap, tread olives but not anoint themselves, and tread grapes but drink no wine? The missing

⁷ Prior, *Joel, Micah & Habakkuk*, 184.

ingredient was God's blessing. As Solomon taught, "Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain," and unless God's blessing rests upon you, "it is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil" (Ps. 127:1-2). Only God can give satisfaction to life, peace to the soul, and security for the future. Calvin directs us back to Micah 6:8 and the way that pleases God, commenting:

God has revealed how we can acquire the things we need in order to sustain ourselves, as well as how to find lasting nourishment for all our life, and even how our children after us can enjoy it, that is, by walking in fear and humility before God and in equity and righteousness with our neighbors. Therefore, if we conduct ourselves this way, he assures us that, even if he grants us only a little, we will still experience contentment, and if we enjoy plenty, he will cause it to prosper, not only for ourselves, but for others. But on the contrary, God threatens us if we think we can advance ourselves by means of fraud, rapine, and dishonest transactions, for all that we might gain this way will profit us nothing, but will run off like water.⁸

THE CITY CONVICTED AND CONDEMNED

Micah 6 began with Jerusalem's summons to the covenant lawsuit of God. The chapter ends with God's conviction and just condemnation. Practically the worse accusation God could sustain towards Jerusalem was that it had fallen into the sin of its northern cousin, the wicked city of Samaria, which had already fallen to the sword within the memory of his hearers. "For you have kept the statutes of Omri," God convicts them, "and all the works of the house of Ahab" (Mic. 6:16). Omri was the Israelite king who founded his reign in blood, establishing a strong but depraved dynasty. His son Ahab, famous for his confrontations with the prophet Elijah, institutionalized the idolatries of his wicked queen Jezebel, leading the people into the worship of the pagan gods Asherah and Baal.

The reigns of Omri and Ahab represented a wanton abandonment of Israel's God and all his ways. Their political, economic, and religious policy was that of unbridled worldliness and expediency. Most despicable were the practical effects of their idolatry. John Mackay writes: "That religion had nothing corresponding to the ethical requirements of the covenant of the Lord but rather introduced an

⁸ Calvin, *Sermons on the Book of Micah*, 357-358.

outlook on life which thought nothing of trampling the rights of others.”⁹

The signature event of Ahab’s reign was the theft of Naboth’s vineyard, in which an honorable and godly neighbor was slain so as to lay hold of his land (1 Kgs. 21). Now a similar idolatry of commercial profiteering had taken root in Jerusalem so that however fervent might be their sacrifices at the temple of the Lord, their practical religion revealed an idolatry no less offensive than that Omri and Ahab. Similarly today, God is not fooled by those who make a show of Christianity but betray idolatry in their love of money, their dishonesty in business, and their cavalier attitude towards truth. Prior comments:

The leadership of a city does not need to set up statues of Baal and Asherah or to worship at their shrines. No mention is made of statues, but of *statutes*; none of worship but of *works*; none of cults but of *counsels*. For these things, which characterize modern city life as much as Micah’s city life, the LORD guarantees judgment.¹⁰

Notice that God convicts Jerusalem in that they “have walked in their counsels” (Mic. 6:16). Idolatry begins as an attitude we pick up from the world: a way of looking at the world along with its ideas of happiness. Think of the ideas coming out of our universities: that there is no truth, no reality, no meaning, and most of all no authority. Then there is Hollywood’s enticing portrait of the happiness comes by being free from shackles, by trying new things according to all your desires, and particularly by immersing yourself in sensual practices that used to be shameful but no longer are. If you expose your mind to such counsel, then you will be pulled into the cruel pragmatism of Omri, the cowardly compromises of Ahab, and the lurid violence of Jezebel. Their end was the awful condemnation of a wrathful God, and so will be the end of all who walk in their counsel.

So it would be for Jerusalem: God promises to “make you a desolation, and your inhabitants a hissing; so you shall bear the scorn of my people” (Mic. 6:16). It is offensive to God when the world indulges in wickedness, but it is intolerably offensive when his people give themselves over to the evils of the world. The people who were

⁹ John L. Mackay, *Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 1998), 124.

¹⁰ Prior, *Joel, Micah & Habakkuk*, 186.

intended by God to be “a light for the nations” (Isa. 42:6) will instead become a byword among all peoples. The ghastly fate of Jerusalem, when finally the sword of God’s justice came, would dumbfound and horrify even the most hardened pagans. Jerusalem, the city named for its calling to bear God’s peace, would instead bear hissing jeers and mocking scorn for its once-proud claim to be the city of God.

Elizabeth Achtemeier sagely applies this same condemnation to the religious sphere today: “Such scornful hooting is perhaps that same reaction that the secular world has to the church when the community that is supposed to be the body of Christ fails to live up to its covenant with the Lord.”¹¹

OUR CALLING TO THE CITY

Before concluding, we should remember that God’s warnings and threats always imply an invitation to grace. For if God was finally resolved to deliver his wrathful vengeance, no warning need be given. Therefore God’s warning constitutes a call to Christians to sound God’s voice in the city. An example for a Christian mission to the city is given in Jeremiah 29:5-7, in the letter God had sent to the remnant of the Jews sent off to exile in Babylon. God presented them with a three-point agenda for the ministry of God’s people in a violent and godless city.

First, God commanded them to *establish a presence in the city*: “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce... multiply there, and do not decrease” (Jer. 29:5-6). Likewise, a Christian awareness of the importance and the depravity of our cities today will lead us to invest our lives in the city. There is a great need today for Christians to live in urban areas, to operate honest businesses in the city, and to spread the wholesome influence of godliness in the city streets. Ronald Sider has written:

Evangelicals must reverse the continuing evangelical flight from the cities... Tens of thousands of evangelicals ought to move back into the city... If one percent of evangelicals living outside the inner city had the faith and courage to move in town, evangelicals would fundamentally altar the history of urban America.¹²

¹¹ Cited in Kenneth L. Barker and Waylon Bailey, *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 120.

¹² Cited from Philip Graham Ryken, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 412.

Second, God directed his people to *seek the peace of the city*: “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile” (Jer. 29:7). Philip Ryken comments: “Seeking the peace of the city means being a good neighbor. It means shoveling the sidewalk. It means cleaning the street. It means planting a tree. It means feeding the poor. It means volunteering at the local school. It means greeting people at the store... It means shutting down immoral businesses. It means embracing people from every ethnic background with the love of Christ.”¹³ Above all, seeking the peace of the city calls us to introduce the city to the Prince of Peace, who brings an end to war with God through his blood of the cross. The Bible says, “We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1), and only through the knowledge of Jesus and faith in his gospel can any person or any city truly know peace.

Third, God calls his people to *pray for the city*: “and pray to the LORD on its behalf” (Jer. 29:7). If the flight of evangelical families from the city is a problem today, how much greater is the flight of evangelical churches from the city! Our most important churches are those located in cities, and there is no higher calling for those churches than to pray for the city, exuding the aroma of Christian faith, hope, joy and love. When Abraham was taken to witness the destruction of Sodom and Gamorah, he did not gloat but pleaded with God for their salvation. So too must we plead with God to use us – as individuals, as families, and as a church – for the gospel work of salvation in the city, for, as God told the exiles in Babylon, “in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jer. 29:7).

In one of the most touching scenes from the Gospels, Jesus wept over Jerusalem, an unbelieving city that was doomed beyond redemption. But, James Boice urges us, “our cities are not necessarily doomed... So long as the return of Christ in final judgment is postponed, we have always before us the possibility of a spiritual and moral resurrection.”¹⁴ Micah wrote, “The voice of the LORD cries to the city” (Mic. 6:9), and God blessed that voice so that many repented and the nation experienced a general reformation. May the Lord’s voice

¹³ Ryken, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 414.

¹⁴ James M. Boice, *The Minor Prophets*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 2:352-353.

go forth into the city today, and may ours be the voices through which he speaks with truth, power, and grace.