

THE PROPHET'S LAMENT

Micah 7:1-7

Rev. Richard D. Phillips

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But as for me, I will look to the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me (Mic. 7:7).

Jesus' last visit to the temple in Jerusalem ended up in a way that broke his holy heart. He had triumphantly entered the city, fulfilling many prophecies of the coming of Israel's king. But after an initially enthusiastic welcome, people began turning against him, as indeed Jesus knew they would. There in the courts of a building intended to represent God's loving communion with his people, God's Son departed with a series of prophetic woes: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!... Woe to you, blind guides... Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets... Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets" (Mt. 23:13, 16, 29-31). Knowing that with his crucifixion, the penalty for the righteous blood spilt in Jerusalem, especially his own, would doom the city, Jesus concluded with a mournful lament: "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 her brood under her wings, and you would not!" (Mt. 23:37).

One of Jesus' points was that the hardened unbelief of Jerusalem had been building over many years, even centuries. Thus he is linked with the prophet Micah, who begins the last chapter of his prophecy with a similar woeful lament. Micah understood that the situation that Jesus denounced was happening right under his eyes. The depravity of the people, especially the leaders, was causing a spiritual breakdown in society, leaving his soul bitter and his heart barren.

MICAH'S WOEFUL LAMENT

It says much about the intensity of Micah's emotional suffering that the precise expression he uses in verse 1 is found elsewhere only in the book of Job: "Woe is me!" (Mic. 7:1; cf. Job 10:15). It is a cry of desolation for the spiritual state of Jerusalem. Another counterpart can be seen in the mournful lament of Jeremiah in the book of Lamentations. Micah wept over a city that was doomed for its sins; Jeremiah wept over that city's ruin after the full extent of the promised doom had come: "How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow has she become, she who was great among the nations!" (Lam. 1:1). As a prophet of the holy God, Micah was required to pronounce woes upon the unrepentant wicked (see Mic. 2:1). But as a true prophet, Micah proclaims God's judgment with tears. He feels the woe for his peoples' sin deep within his own being.

Micah explains his distress with a simile, comparing himself to one who comes to the fields after the summer harvest but is bitterly disappointed by the absence of fruit: "For I have become as when the summer fruit has been gathered, as when the grapes have been gleaned: there is no cluster to eat, no first-ripe fig that my soul desires" (Mic. 7:1). Israel's law directed that harvesters were not to go back through the fields a second time, picking clean the fields (Lev. 19:9-10; Dt. 24:19-21). Instead they were to leave gleanings for the poor. Micah compares himself to one who comes to the fields hungry, his whole body longing for the sweet fruit and the ripe figs he expects to find. Instead, he is shattered when his longings are unmet: there is no fruit at all for him to eat. There is not one cluster of grapes and not even one ripe fig to satisfy his craving.

In such prophetic imagery, the vineyard represents Israel or, more specifically in this case, the city of Jerusalem. Micah leaves no doubt as to the significance of his lament for Jerusalem: "The godly has perished from the earth, and there is no one upright among mankind" (Mic. 7:2). The fruit for which Micah yearned was the "fruit of righteousness" (cf. Phil. 1:11).

We may surmise that this final chapter of the book of Micah reflects the culminating years of the prophet's long ministry, which included the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. While God had granted a season of repentance and reformation under Hezekiah, the downward

trend was only briefly checked. The Bible records that even Hezekiah imbibed in the lust for riches that corrupted the city's leaders and that his heart was proud (2 Chron. 32:24-25). Micah could discern the godless trends that would break forth in unimaginable decadence under Hezekiah's son Manasseh. His heart is broken that after a lifetime of ministry the city was worse than when he started and its doom only more assured. The quality most absent from Jerusalem was godliness; Micah could see no evidence that the people responded to God's blessing with a commitment to God's honor; in the lifestyles of the society he saw no faithfulness or obedience to the Lord. This was the fruit for which his hungry soul yearned, and the utter lack of godly fruit made him bitter and mournful.

Micah's lament depicts the broken heart of God over his rebellious people. Isaiah stated this in a parallel passage. He asked what more God could have done to make his vineyard Israel fruitful? "He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it: and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes" (Isa. 5:2). How bitter this was to the heart of the Lord! And how severe is God's just judgment on his unfruitful church: "And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste" (Isa. 5:5-6).

We should make at least three reflections from Micah's opening lament. The first is to realize that what God is seeking from his people is the fruit of righteousness. The church is not to occupy itself with temporal success. God's people are not to embrace a worldly approach to gaining money, power, and influence. It is God who provides success and security to his church. Instead, the church is to yield to God the sweet fruit of godly faithfulness. What God desires in our worship is not the carnal enthusiasm that attracts the ungodly, but holy affections that draw near to him. God has provided all that his people need to abound in sweet and holy fruitfulness, and when he comes to his vineyard it is fidelity to his Word that he craves.

Secondly, this raises a question for every member of the church. After God has invested in you through the ministry of his gospel, will he find sweet fruit in your life? Is there a growing faith? Are you pressing on in sanctification and advancing in good works? Are you

contributing positively to the work of ministry, evangelism, and missions? Paul wrote to the Philippians to tell of his yearning for them: “It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God” (Phil. 1:9-11). God longs for the fruits of love, truth, purity, and righteousness in your life. Are you seeking to offer these to him, or are you preoccupied with the world’s pleasures and tangled in the weeds of sin?

Thirdly, Micah shows us how difficult and painful it will often be for preachers of God’s Word, and how the servants of God must persevere through trials. At the appropriate time God will cause the seeds of his Word to sprout and bear fruit. In the meantime, John Calvin reminds us, “It is requisite that those of us who have been ordained of God to announce his Word, should faithfully fulfill our charge, rigorously endeavoring in our studies to lead mankind to salvation, attempting with all our effort to see that God is honored.... Inasmuch as God causes the doctrine which we proclaim to prosper, even if we never see its effects with our eyes, let us continue to perform our office and persevere in our calling.”¹

SIN IN THE CITY

As Micah continues his lament he utters a prophetic description of a man in sin that extends far beyond the walls of Jerusalem.

Undoubtedly, in his frustration, Micah was not speaking the literal truth about Jerusalem when he said, “The godly has perished from the earth and there is no one upright” (Mic. 7:2). Like Elijah who cried out in his depressed state in the days of Ahab and Jezebel, “I, I only, am left (1 Ki. 19:10), when in fact there were still seven thousand faithful Israelites, Micah is so distressed that he imagines himself to be the lone remaining believer. Nonetheless, Micah’s description is perfectly accurate when it comes to man in his fallen state, apart of God’s regenerating grace. “There is no one upright among mankind,” Micah grieves. This echoes the lament of Psalm 14:3, which says, “They have all turned aside; together they have

¹ John Calvin, *Sermons on the Book of Micah* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 368-369.

become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.” If we doubt the universal scope of this observation, the apostle Paul cites the psalm in his teaching on the spiritual state of the entire human race in its fallen condition (Rom. 3:10). Micah means that his generation as a whole is no longer faithful in following the Lord, and none who are righteous before God. So it is with every sinner apart from the grace of God in Christ.

Considered from a human perspective, there is no way we would come to this conclusion. There are always people we think are commendable; we even speak of “honor among thieves.” But when we consider righteousness as God defines it – that is, in terms of the perfect standards of his moral law – then Micah’s statement is completely accurate. There is not a single person alive who is righteous before God for the simple reason that every one of us violates God’s law and thus is bound over to condemnation. With the bonds of God’s covenant severed in the Jerusalem of Micah’s day, immorality was unrestrained in Jerusalem. In this, the city had come to resemble the vicious society that is increasingly seen in our own post-Christian times. Leslie Allen writes: “Wherever the prophet looks he can see only the lamentable spectacle of hostility and internecine strife among a people who should have been bound together by strong ties of religion and race.”²

To prove his case, the prophet gets specific about the moral climate of Jerusalem. He depicts the blood-thirsty way individuals relate to one another: “They all lie in wait for blood, and each hunts the other with a net” (Mic. 7:2). Life is now seen as a battle in which one can succeed only by plotting against his neighbor. Micah describes the state of human society in vivid terms: man in sin is like an animal crouching to spring for the kill or like an assailant poised to attack. Instead of seeking the good of his neighbor, everyone is seeking to take advantage of others, even to the point of their death. Allen writes: “Members of the covenant community of Israel treat one another like warring enemies and wild animals. Gone is the fellowship that was based on traditional ties and upheld conservative

² Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 385-386.

values. Society has disintegrated into a struggling mass of hostile individuals.”³

This, too, Paul applies universally to the human condition in sin: “Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known” (Rom. 3:15-17). Man is violent, as the newspaper testifies every day. Unable to live in harmony, we easily develop anger and malice towards others. If we can get away with it, we respond to threats with violence. It is only by the mighty working of God’s grace that even Christians can live in harmony with the closest of our loved ones.

All of this flowed from the top in Micah’s Jerusalem. Micah has contended with corruption and vice among the city’s leaders all through his ministry. But little progress had been made: “Their hands are on what is evil, to do it well; the prince and the judge ask for a bribe, and the great man utters the evil desire of his soul; thus they weave it together” (Mic. 7:3). Micah is not describing a society riddled with corruption from top to bottom. How could it be different when the rulers and judges are on the take, and when men with power (i.e. “the great man”) acts so ruthlessly? In such a culture – the very culture that sinful mankind typically descends to when unrestrained by God and his Word – the only thing people are really good at is working evil. Micah speaks with bitter sarcasm when he names evil-doing as the one remaining proficiency of his people: “Their hands are on what is evil, to do it well.”

Micah wraps up his condemnation of Jerusalem’s morality with another comment that is wrapped in sarcasm: “The best of them is like a brier, the most upright of them a thorn hedge” (Mic. 7:4). Briers are prickly nuisances to those who brush against them, and thorn hedges are an obstruction to progress. We may line this up with Paul’s assessment in Romans 3:12: “All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” This reminds us of one other characteristic of briers and thorns, namely, that they are quick to burn as fuel in the furnace. Thus Micah’s description of Jerusalem’s depravity is a stern warning and a call for urgent repentance.

³ Ibid., 386.

What can account for this sorry state of affairs, both in Jerusalem and throughout the human race? Paul gives the answer, concluding his description of man's total depravity: "There is no fear of God before their eyes" (Rom. 3:18). Man is in rebellion against God, and the result is a downward spiral into decadence and evil. God made man between the angels and the beasts. Psalm 8 says: "You have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and... have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field" (Ps. 8:5-7). But man was intended to look upwards for his identity and his moral standards, not downwards. But if we will not look to God in reverent faith, the inevitable result is a descent into bestial chaos and violence.

A DAY OF CONFUSION

At this point, we might ask the prophet what God intended to do about this situation. We hear this frequently today, as unbelieving people blame God for the deplorably conditions throughout the world. "What is God going to do for us?" rebel man demands. Micah responds in a way that the wicked scarcely imagine: "The day of your watchmen, of your punishment, has come; now their confusion is at hand" (Mic. 7:4).

It is not obvious to what "the day of your watchmen" refers. It could refer to the prophets, who were the watchmen of Israel, warning against the judgment to come. This is how the term is used in Ezekiel 33:7, where God appoints the prophet a watchman to pass on his warnings of judgment. In this case, the meaning is that the punishment long foretold by the prophets was about to be loosed on Jerusalem. In the other option, "the day of your watchmen" may indicate that the time has come for the watchmen of Jerusalem to be tested. In either case the ultimate meaning is clear: "your punishment has now come." Year after year the prophets had given warning, and all the signs of impending judgment were evident if Jerusalem's sentinels had been watching. Now God would vindicate his servants and visit the rebel sinners with judgment.

The nature of Micah's lament indicates that he Micah probably preached this message towards the end of his long ministry. If so, it was long after the days of impending conquest from the Assyrian ruler Sennacherib. And at the latest, his ministry ended around a century

before the eventual fall of the city to the sword of the Babylonians. So what judgment does Micah have in mind? He insists that “the day... of your punishment has come” (Mic. 7:4). So what is the punishment God has visited upon the people, if not an immediate external invasion?

The answer is found in the following words: “Now their confusion is at hand” (Mic. 7:4). In other words, the confused and increasingly miserable state of Jewish society was God’s judgment upon the people. God’s judgment would consist not of invasion from without but decay from within. Society was unraveling right before them, and Micah reports that God’s judgment is at work in this decline.

This is precisely in accord with Paul’s description of judgment in Romans chapter 1. Paul states the general rebellion of sinful mankind against God, one that frequently becomes dominant in a nation or society: “Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Rom. 1:21). In rebellion to God, man begins to worship idols – either idols of wood and stone or the more sophisticated idols of pleasure, wealth, and power. With what judgment does God visit man in his rebellious pride? Paul explains: “Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves” (Rom. 1:24). In the end of history, God will judge all of mankind, casting the unrighteous into hell. But while history waits for that end, God frequently judges rebel societies by giving them over to the very sins their wicked hearts crave.

Micah makes no mention of idolatry in this passage, but it is hard to doubt that this perennial base was increasing in Jerusalem. We know that Hezekiah’s successor, Manasseh, whose reign would have begun not long after Micah’s death, was the king who led the people into the most debased and offensive idolatry in the history of the Old Testament. In any case, having turned their hearts from the Lord, the Lord gave their society over to a most alarming moral decline.

The first manifestation of this was in the relationship between neighbors: “Put no trust in a neighbor; have no confidence in a friend” (Mic. 7:5). A society that chooses to turn from God must reckon with the consequences. It was not long ago that in most American towns,

people would leave the house unlocked and sleep with the doors open; now home security has become a major industry. In our cities, ground floor windows are protected with iron bars. In societies where depravity has long advanced unchecked, such as the nation of Haiti, every home has a surrounding wall to protect against one's neighbors.

But things can get worse than this. Micah continues: "Guard the doors of your mouth from her who lies in your arms; for the son treats the father with contempt, the daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; a man's enemies are the men of his own house" (Mic. 7:5-6). Having turned from God, moral decay would advance so far that a husband dared not tell his secrets to his wife. The household comes to resemble a viper pit: sons mock fathers, daughters raise their hands against their mother, daughter-in-laws feud with mothers-in-law. Micah sums the situation up in a most deplorable way: "a man's enemies are the men of his own house" (Mic. 7:6).

This is the situation increasingly mounting in American society as it has deliberately turned from God. The Ten Commandments are considered an unfair intrusion into civil life. Biblical standards are rejected as out-of-date. Moral restraints in sexual conduct, speech, and public affairs are removed. The result is a chaotic misery in which everyone must fend for himself. And the cause is the rejection of humble, obedient faith in the Lord. David Prior writes: "This defiant rejection of God's revealed truth is the fundamental reason for the social disintegration we see around us."⁴

Consider the state of our marriages today, with the divorce rate now rising over 50%. Christian marriages, while ending in divorce less frequently, can carry on with little less conflict. I remember hearing from a Christian couple in a former church about a marriage retreat they had attended. One thousand Christian couples were gathered around tables. The conference began with a speaker asking each of them to look into the eyes of their spouse. Husbands were to gaze on their wives and wives to their husbands, and repeat these words: "You are not my enemy." My friends commented: "You could have cut the air with a knife." This demonstrates that without our hearts turned to the Lord in humble obedience, and without faithful and vigorous use

⁴ Prior, 191.

of the means of grace, life can quickly become a violent misery. John Calvin, ever the realist, comments:

Now when we reflect on the corruption that dominated Micah's time, let us take heed to ourselves. For his passage is not referring to some savage group of people who had never received instruction, or who were the reprobate of God; they were of Abraham's line, a people who had been chosen from among all the others to be God's inheritance, a people who had been instructed in the Law... How did such confusion come about? Because they turned aside from God. Therefore, because they despised his doctrine of salvation and had turned aside from his righteous path, God was justified in leaving them in a reprobate state, subject to brutal affections and nothing but cruelty, oblivious to their call. Therefore, let us be fearful lest, because we abuse God's grace ourselves, God should have to make us as equally blind and brutish.⁵

WAITING ON THE LORD

What hope remains for a people in such a deplorable a condition – a people like Micah's Jerusalem or America today? Is there hope in a new political leadership? It is not likely, for as Micah said of his Jerusalem, the entire leadership structure had become a conspiracy of self-serving avarice. Are we to hope in the inherent goodness of man, so that people will wake up on their own? Such a hope is vain when we realize that at the root of these problems is man's thorough corruption in bondage to sin. So what hope is there?

Micah answers with the word "But". This indicates that there is one place we can turn, one "but" that interrupts the hopeless prospect of doom. It is the same statement that Paul made in the second chapter of Ephesians, which begins with a hopeless description of mankind dead in sin and bound over in service to Satan and to the passions of the sinful mind and flesh. Paul said of Christians that they had escaped the judgment to which they were bound for only one reason: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved" (Eph. 2:4-5). There is only one place to look for help, there is only one hope for intervention, and that hope is the merciful grace of our God. This is the hope that David took in his lament of Psalm 31: "But I trust in

⁵ Calvin, *Sermons on Micah*, 386.

you, O LORD; I say, "You are my God" (Ps. 31:14). There was hope for Micah in his despairing lament. There is hope for our generation. There is hope for you. But that hope is found only in the Lord.

Micah records three statements that sum up his reliance on the Lord. First, he cries, "As for me, I will look to the LORD" (Mic. 7:7). When he looks at Jerusalem, his heart is embittered, like a hungry man seeking tasty fruit in a barren field. But when he looks to the Lord, he renews his hope. How is this? Because of the grace of the Lord. Because of God's faithfulness to his promises of salvation. Because of God's unchanging character of goodness and love towards his people. Micah's example is paralleled in the book of Isaiah, as that contemporary prophet also looked to the Lord for a future salvation. He asks, "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength" (Isa. 40:28-29).

These prophets set an agenda for us today. Amidst the spiritual decline of our times and the mounting social chaos that can only be seen as God's judgment on our idolatrous culture, let us look again to the Lord. He is ready to save. He is gracious to forgive those who repent. Michael Bentley writes: "Micah turned his eyes away from the things around him, and he looked to God. He knew that, even though the family unit was disintegrating, God remained as firm and stable as he always had been."⁶

Secondly, Micah says, "I will wait for the God of my salvation" (Mic. 7:7). He looks forward to the fulfillment of God's prophecies, most especially the promise of a Messiah who will rule in righteousness and "shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD" (Mic. 5:4), the very Savior whose birth he prophesied in the town of Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2). As we look back on the coming of Jesus Christ and especially to his atoning death on the cross, we see our salvation. Men and women lost in sin may be forgiven, cleansed, and renewed with new life through faith in Jesus Christ. We look forward now to his blessing on the gospel, and in the end to his return in glory to vindicate his people and establish God's righteousness on earth.

⁶ Michael Bentley, *Balancing the Books: Micah and Nahum Simply Explained* (Durham: Evangelical Press, 1994), 83.

Those who wait on the Lord not only receive hope, but, as Isaiah put it, they “shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not be faint” (Isa. 40:31). It is by looking to the Lord and waiting on the Lord’s salvation that we, like the prophets, can gain strength in trying times. What is more, as the prophet Habakkuk shows, we can flourish in barren times with a joy that is from the Lord:

“Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines,

the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food,

the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls,

yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.

God, the Lord, is my strength;

he makes my feet like the deer’s; he makes me tread on my high places” (Hab. 3:17-19).

Lastly, Micah informs us of his final strategy, one that will not fail: “my God will hear me” (Mic. 7:7). Like Elijah in his despair in the days of Ahab and Jezebel, Micah is going to draw near to the Lord. He is going to lift up his heart in fervent prayer. And while he waits for God’s answer, he knows that God hears and that God’s salvation is drawing ever near. So it is now that revival will always begin with renewed commitment to prayer; indeed, when the Lord opens our hearts anew to prayer, the first sign of a revival will be at hand.

Can you enter into this faith of the prophet in such an hour of darkness as he faced? Are you able to look to the Lord, knowing God with such confidence? Can you find peace as you wait for the Lord to deliver you from affliction? Do you find peace in the quiet place of prayer, regardless of the loud clamor of decay and violence around you? If you can, it is only because you can speak in the manner of the prophet. Micah speaks as one who knows God, for he has trusted in God’s Word. He speaks of the Lord as “the God of my salvation,” and confides that “my God will hear me.”

Like Micah, we live in a day where the name of the Lord is so often taken in vain. Leaders in their confusion cry out, “My God!” But,

writes David Prior, “For Micah, *my God* meant everything. It summarized his life and his work. It was the most eloquent expression he could apply to the realities of the city in which he was operating.”⁷

If you want to know God like Micah did, and to know that he is your God, the God of your salvation, you need only pick up his Word, read it and believe. There you will meet the Savior God has sent, Jesus Christ. Through faith in him, you will know the God of salvation. God’s Word will teach you to look to the Lord, wait for the Lord, and pray with confidence to the Lord. For as the Bible declares, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom. 10:11, 13).

⁷ David Prior, *The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998), 192.