

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MICAH

Micah 7:8-13

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Rejoice not over me, O my enemy; when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, the LORD will be a light to me (Mic. 7:8).

“O LORD, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me” (Ps. 3:1). “O LORD my God, in you do I take refuge; save me from all my pursuers” (Ps. 7:1). “Hide me in the shadow of your wings, from the wicked who do me violence, my deadly enemies who surround me” (Ps. 17:8-9). These are excerpts from just the first handful of Psalms, the book of Scripture that most pointedly depicts the prayer life of the believer. They show that the life of faith is a life beset with real and deadly enemies. And while Christians should pray for God to bless those who abuse us, we nonetheless also imbibe of the Old Testament’s fervent desire for the downfall of the enemies of God and the gospel.

Micah’s last chapter provides a choice instance of this biblical theme: “Rejoice not over me, my enemy” (Mic. 7:8). How striking it is that in a passage that might rightly be labeled “the gospel according to Micah,” a prophetic psalm in which he makes his most heartfelt confession of faith, the context is his reply to the scoffing enemies of God and his people. In these verses, Micah sees the salvation of Israel in terms of their deliverance from the scorn of enemies, and also as the vindication of God through the disgrace of the wicked.

THE CITY BESIEGED

It not certain when in his ministry Micah would have preached this message, but there are elements in the text that align well with the invasion of Assyria under Sennacherib, in 701 BC. Micah’s use of

feminine nouns and pronouns for Israel and the “enemy” suggests a focus on the city of Jerusalem and the Assyrian capital of Nineveh. We are strongly reminded, also, of the taunts hurled by the Assyrian herald before the gates of Jerusalem. The jeer, “Where is you’re the LORD your God?” (Mic. 7:10), is practically a quote from the speech of Sennacherib’s emissary, recorded in Isaiah 35:18-20. If Micah is setting his gospel confession in the context of the Assyrian invasion, then it is apparent that he sees salvation as God’s deliverance of his people from an enemy siege. Bruce Waltke argues, “The prophecy is stated abstractly, never naming the enemy, because it is applicable to the salvation of God’s people from any enemy, for that hope rests on God’s fidelity to his sworn covenant with Abraham.”¹

That this theme of deliverance from an enemy siege is a primary biblical approach to salvation can be seen at the cross of Jesus Christ. Jesus understood his crucifixion in terms of the prophecy of Psalm 22, which depicts a righteous victim besieged by violent enemies: “For dogs encompass me; a company of evildoers encircles me; they have pierced my hands and feet” (v. 16). This was literally fulfilled as Jesus was besieged by his enemies and wounded by them to the death. Jesus quotes from Psalm 22 in his cry from the cross (Mt. 27:46), and the prophecy of Psalm 22:18 was exactly fulfilled: “they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots” (cf. Mt. 27:35).

Since Micah’s theme of the city besieged fits Jesus’ experience on the cross, we are not surprised to see that the New Testament applies this same model to the church’s deliverance in the Second Coming of Christ. Paul writes that Jesus will return “to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted” (2 Thess. 1:6). Jesus will return to the earth to deliver his besieged church and inflict vengeance on his and our enemies (2 Thess. 1:8-9; cf. Mt. 24:3-31).

If Micah presents salvation as God’s city rescued from a deadly siege, if this same model defines Christ’s own deliverance at the cross and empty tomb, and if the city besieged by enemies describes the church at the return of Christ, then Christians should understand their own salvation in these same. The gospel proclaims deliverance from our

¹ Bruce Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 451.

enemies, including Satan, sin, and death. Micah's gospel is our gospel: God's rescue of his weak and afflicted people in faithfulness to his own covenant promises.

SALVATION FROM THE LORD

Micah's enemies would have included not only the Assyrian invaders but also the scoffing unbelievers inside Jerusalem. He defends himself against their mockery by presenting his hope of salvation from the Lord. Just as Jonah learned in the belly of the great fish that "salvation belongs to the LORD" (Jon. 2:9) – that is, that God saves by his own sovereign will and might – Micah learned the same lesson in his dark hours. Like Jonah in his watery prison, Micah knew that he could do nothing to save himself. He saw no prospects for a change of attitude in sinful Jerusalem. And he saw no mercy in the faces of his enemies. Yet he warns his enemies not to rejoice over his plight. Why? Martin Luther answers: "It is the Lord alone that saves and blesses: and even though the whole mass of all evils should be gathered together in one against a man, still, it is the Lord who saves: salvation and blessing are in his hands."²

With his eye on God's grace, Micah sees a great hope through his present and future trials. It is true that his enemies have ample reason to scoff, but Micah informs them: "when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, the LORD will be a light to me" (Mic. 7:8).

Notice that Micah makes no attempt to deny the sad plight he and God's people are in. They had fallen from the glorious height of prior generations of faith. He knows that in the future they will fall altogether, their city destroyed by the agents of God's wrath and the surviving people carried off into exile. They had fallen morally into social decay and spiritually they had fallen into idolatry. He pictures God's people as a man sitting in darkness, perhaps in a cell or dungeon, perhaps an allusion to the coming exile. There is no light and no hope, only gloom and despair. But when he turns in faith to the Lord he sees light piercing the darkness: "the LORD will be a light to me." Micah knew that God had preserved a faithful remnant among the wicked generation, and he himself had prophesied a glorious restoration (Mic. 4:6-13; 5:7-9). Perhaps Micah remembered

² Quoted in Charles H. Spurgeon: *A Treasury of David*, 3 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, n.d.), I:32.

David's words in Psalm 27:1, "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" Matthew Henry writes: "In our greatest distresses we shall see no reason to despair of salvation if by faith we eye God as the God of our salvation, who is able to save the weakest upon their humble petition, and willing to save the worst upon their true repentance."³

It is to the matter of repentance that Micah next turns. He is concerned that the wicked blaspheme the name of Israel's God because of the state of his people, so Micah hastens to point out that their calamities all result from their own sins: "I will bear the indignation of the LORD because I have sinned against him" (Mic. 7:9). Micah and his people were suffering not because God was absent, but because God in his holiness was most present. Jerusalem's lamentable position is not to the shame of God but to the glory of his holy justice, since Micah says, speaking for the people, "I have sinned against him."

Micah goes on to show us the difference between a true and a false repentance. False repentance involves sorrow not so much for the sin but for its consequences. But Micah exhibits true repentance, saying, "I will bear the indignation of the LORD" (Mic. 7:9). When God punished Cain for the murder of his brother, Abel, Cain complained, "My punishment is greater than I can bear" (Gen. 4:13). But Micah acknowledges that Jerusalem's current dismay was not only just, but bearable in light of the hope of God's grace. He repented in faith, and thus he could bear God's reproach for as long as the Lord saw fit. He knew that the purpose of God's chastisement of his people was ultimately restorative, so he renewed his courage to wait on the Lord.

Repentance is necessary to salvation, since God not only saves us *in* our sin but also *from* our sin. And repentance coupled with faith is certain to receive salvation. Undoubtedly, Micah would have known David's psalm of salvation: "I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and you forgave the iniquity of my sin" (Ps. 32:5). Micah himself, writing as a prophet of the Lord, assures us that sincere repentance, looking in faith to God's promise of forgiveness, will result in our salvation. He says that we will find an advocate for

³ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, n.d.), 4:1051.

ourselves in God: “until he pleads my case”; and a defender from our woes: “and executes judgment for me” (Mic. 7:9).

It was the memory of these words that achieved the gospel restoration of Wang Mingdao, one of the early leaders of the house-church movement in China. In the 1920’s and 1930’s he was one of Beijing’s leading preachers, addressing huge crowds until the Japanese invasion in 1937. Despite his refusal to cooperate with the occupiers, Wang avoided arrest. But after the war, he soon ran afoul of the Chinese Communist authorities. Specifically, he refused to join the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, the government sponsored Protestant church, which Wang thought to be compromised. For this, he and his wife were arrested in 1955. In his prison, the Communists inserted cellmates who terrified Wang with tales of torture, and, isolated and weakened, Wang broke. He promised to sign any statement and to preach any message he was told to preach, so the Communists released him and his wife from prison.

After his release, Wang was a spiritually broken man. He willingly attended meetings at which his confession was read and his support of the state church proclaimed. Disgusted with himself, he wandered the streets of Beijing, muttering, “I am Peter, I am Peter,” referring to the apostle’s denial of Christ. But then suddenly Wang regained his old boldness for Christ. He again refused to cooperate and preached a true faith in Jesus. He explained the change by stating that he had recalled Micah 7:7-9, in which the prophet warns his enemies not to gloat. He saw his sufferings as God’s chastisement for his sins and committed himself to wait for the God of his salvation (Mic. 7:7). He reminded himself and others: “He will bring me out to the light; I shall look upon his vindication” (Mic. 7:9). Desiring only to glorify his gracious God, Wang published a written withdrawal of all his confessions and agreements. He was arrested again and imprisoned for another twenty-two years, during which he provided a strong example that emboldened many other persecuted Christians.⁴

Wang Mingdao had imbibed not merely the words of Micah, but also the prophet’s faith and spirit. “He will bring me out to the light,” Micah declares; “I shall look upon his vindication” (Mic. 7:9). God’s honor was bound up in his salvation, Micah knew, and he fully trusted

⁴ Cited from David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2003), 47-57.

that God would fulfill his promises and publicly demonstrate his faithfulness to those who call upon his name. This is the same hope that every Christian shares, taking our guilt and shame to the blood of Christ. Paul says that sinners “are justified by [God’s] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness,... so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:24-26).

ENEMIES CAST DOWN

It is with this salvation in mind that Micah counsels his enemies not to rejoice over his misery. Dangerous as it is to despise and afflict God’s treasured people, how much more so given that God’s own honor is bound up in their condition. Micah thus foresees not only his own salvation but also the condemnation of the godless scoffers: “Then my enemy will see, and shame will cover her who said to me, ‘Where is the LORD your God?’ My eyes will look upon her; now she will be trampled down like the mire of the streets” (Mic. 7:10).

Micah foretells that the first phase of the wicked’s judgment will be to “see” the salvation of those they had mocked. This accords perfectly with the teaching of Jesus about the final judgment. Jesus stated that when he “comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne” (Mt. 25:31). The nations will be gathered before Christ the judge, and he will separate them, some for eternal glory and some for eternal condemnation. “He will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’” (Mt. 25:33-34). Notice that this happens prior to the condemnation of the ungodly; their first judgment is to witness the justification of those whom they had despised in this life.

Even more, those who have trusted Jesus as their Savior, having their sins washed clean in his blood, will be praised for their works of faith in Christ’s name. Jesus will recount before the wicked all the good works of the godly – providing food and drink to the needy, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and those in prison. “Truly,” Jesus will say to his justified people, “as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (Mt. 25:40).

With what dismay will the ungodly, who mocked and abused God's people in their weakness, witness the reception of the elect into glory!

The result of this will be their own eternal disgrace: "shame will cover her who said to me, 'Where is the LORD your God?'" (Mic. 7:10). In life, the ungodly boast in the success of their debaucheries, exulting that God has done nothing to punish or thwart them. But how the tables will be turned in the last day, just as it is whenever God visits his church with special blessing. So it was in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. The Roman soldiers beat him, mockingly dressed Jesus in purple and crushed a crown of thorns into his skull. While Jesus suffered on the cross, the Jewish leaders jeered: "He trusts in God, let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, 'I am the Son of God'" (Mt. 27:43). When Jesus had died, his mockers went away exultant. But on the third day, Jesus was raised from the dead; Paul wrote that Jesus "was declared to be the Son of God in power... by his resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:4). In the final judgment, the very people who scoffed at the crucified Jesus will have the exquisite shame of having their transgressions and sins recounted before his white throne (Mt. 25:41-45).

Third, Micah declares the utter destruction of the enemies of God: "My eyes will look upon her; now she will be trampled down like the mire of the streets" (Mic. 7:10). This indicates that part of God's salvation of his people is to have them behold the ruin of those who had afflicted them. So it was when Moses' generation looked back after their passage of the Red Sea to witness the drowning of Pharaoh and his hosts beneath the waves (Ex. 14:28). Isaiah highlights this very prospect by placing it at the conclusion of his great prophecy. He speaks of the coming of the Lord "in fire and his chariots like the whirlwind" (Isa. 66:15), to rescue his besieged church. "By fire will the LORD enter into judgment, and by his sword, with all flesh; and those slain by the LORD shall be many" (Isa. 66:16). God's people will then behold his glory, amidst the glory of the new heavens and the new earth (Isa. 66:18-23). From that vantage point, Isaiah concludes by depicting Christ's church looking out on the eternal sufferings of those who were cast into hell: "And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh" (Isa. 66:24).

Jesus picked up on this very language, repeating Isaiah's words about eternal suffering in hell: "their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched" (Mk. 9:48). "Depart from me, you cursed," he will declare, "into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Mt. 25:41). If you have never been forgiven your sins, confessing them to God and putting your guilt away at the cross of Jesus Christ, must you not hear Christ's words with dread? Must you not realize that this is your own fate in your present unbelief, trembling before your own just condemnation and punishment in hell? Should you not cast yourself before God, seeking mercy through his provision of the atoning blood of his Son, the only Savior for sinful mankind? Micah, considering from his own context God's just retribution against Assyria's capital and its people, who delighted to trample God's city, wrote: "now she will be trampled down like the mire of the streets" (Mic. 7:10). How can we escape a similar judgment? Only by appealing to God through faith in the blood of his Son Jesus.

The delight of God's people in beholding the sufferings of hell, something we can scarcely imagine now, will be a holy exaltation of God's justice, power and wrath. It will be the delight of the Song of Moses after the destruction of Pharaoh and his chariots: "I will sing to the lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea" (Ex. 15:1). John Calvin accepts that we now find such a celebration hard to conceive, but comments: "We shall therefore be only then capable of this spiritual joy, of which the Prophet speaks, when we shall put off all disordered feelings, and God shall subdue us by his Spirit."⁵ It is with the holy and pure mind of Christ that we shall glorify God over the fires of hell.

Who are our enemies, whose trampling will be celebrated by glorified Christians in heaven? Given Micah's focus, it is impossible to deny that they will include those who afflicted Christians, who opposed the church in this life, and made sport of the Christian gospel. But principle among our enemies, and working behind them all, is the devil. With what joy will we behold the great fall of our tormentor, accuser, and former slave master! The Book of Revelation says: "The devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and

⁵ John Calvin, *A Commentary on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, 5 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1559, reprint 1986), 3:382.

sulfur... tormented day and night forever and ever” (Rev. 20:10). Using the figure of Babylon, the song of heaven celebrates the destruction of the entire world system in rebellion against God:

Hallelujah!
Salvation and glory and power belong to our God,
For his judgments are true and just;
For he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality,
And has avenged on her the blood of his servants (Rev. 19:1-2).

ON THE DAY OF THE LORD

It is fitting that Micah’s gospel hope should conclude with a portrayal of the age of glory after the return of Christ, the vindication of his church, and the judgment of Satan and his rebel world. Micah knows that his city must be judged because of her sins against the Lord. But God has planned a new and greater city, the scale of which boggles the believer’s mind: “A day for the building of your walls! In that day the boundary shall be far extended” (Mic. 7:11).

After Jerusalem’s fall in 586 BC, the fervent desire of all devout Jews was the city’s restoration, which God granted in 528 BC. The city was destroyed again by the Romans in AD 70, and when the modern nation of Israel recaptured Jerusalem in 1967, many Jews and Christians saw this event as a covenant restoration. But in this present age, God’s city is the Christian church, the nation of Israel having forfeited its status by rejecting Jesus the Messiah, so that Jews and Gentiles alike gain their citizenship in God’s city only through faith in Christ (cf. Rom. 11:17-24). The author of Hebrews wrote to Christians in the church: “You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem... and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant” (Heb. 12:22-24). How vast now are the dimensions of God’s city! Waltke comments: “Zion’s walls will be expanded to embrace all the elect from the ends of the earth.”⁶

Yet such glory as is found in the spiritual blessing of the church today will be far outshone by the glory of God’s eternal city in the age to come. The Book of Revelation, and the entire Bible, concludes with a vision of the city to come: “the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming

⁶ Thomas McComiskey, *An Exegetical and Expository Commentary on the Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 756.

down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God’ (Rev. 21:2-3). Thus in the age to come, after the return of Christ, will be the fulfillment of all God’s covenant aims and all his salvation promises.

Those who dwell in the glory of the eternal city will be gathered not merely from Jerusalem, but, Micah adds: “In that day they will come to you, from Assyria and the cities of Egypt, and from Egypt to the River, from sea to sea and from mountain to mountain” (Mic. 7:12). The “River” is the Euphrates, the great river of Assyria. Micah sees God drawing people to himself from even the lands of Israel’s historic enemies, and in this way he signifies the whole of the earth, “from sea to sea and from mountain to mountain.” What a gathering it will be in glory: the redeemed people of God, drawn from every nation, tribe, and tongue, united for worship in the presence of God’s glory!

Yet, as we consider the glories of the age to come, and the fulfillment of all our hopes in the Lord, Micah realizes that we need to be reminded of this present, evil world: “But the earth will be desolate because of its inhabitants, for the fruit of their deeds” (Mic. 7:13). This refers to the world outside of God’s reign. Leslie Allen writes: “For these areas nothing good is promised. Their denizens are to reap the fruit of age-old enmity and exploitation of God’s people. As Israel’s territory has been the scarred battlefield of successive foreign armies, so by way of compensation their territory is to suffer desolation.”⁷

One thing this means is that all the treasures of this world will be destroyed with it. The empires will fall, the buildings will crumble, the piles of gold will evaporate. Paul applies this realization to Christians, urging us to live not for earthly rewards but for the age to come and the spiritual rewards with Christ that will never perish: “For the present form of this world is passing away” (1 Cor. 7:31).

⁷ Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 398.

EVERY TEAR WIPED AWAY

It was with this gospel hope that Micah faced the dark times of his own life. He knew that it was because of his own sins and the sins of his people that God's indignation rested on Jerusalem. But he knew that sin can be confessed and that by faith in God's promise of salvation in Christ it can be forgiven. Micah knew that when he called upon God, he would find a divine advocate in heaven; Christians know this even better, being told that "Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us" (Rom. 8:34). Micah knew that God would lift him up out of his misery and sin: "He will bring me out to the light" (Mic. 7:9). Thus he did not need to fear his enemies, and he had an answer for the scoffing of the sinful world. Christians, knowing our calling to take this same gospel to everyone, need not even hate our enemies, but by loving them in Christ's name we advance the cause of his kingdom and our own salvation.

It is not hard to imagine the light in the prophet's face as he contemplated this gospel of salvation. But imagine how much greater would his be joy if he could read the completed revelation of God in the Bible, a privilege we enjoy. What bitterness he had experienced as he preached God's Word at the temple: what joy he would have at the book of Revelation's portrait of the new temple in which God will eternally dwell with his people! Micah knew that all his labors for Jerusalem had failed, at least in the short run, and that it must suffer destruction. So with what rapture would he read Revelation's depiction of the New Jerusalem descending from heaven in its pristine glory! How much suffering he had witnessed, how much sorrow he had known, and how many tears he had shed for God's people. But looking ahead to the world to come, the coming day he had so boldly prophesied, Micah would have received God's answer for all of his loss: "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21:4).

No wonder that the verses that follow Micah's gospel confession are filled with praise to the glory of God. "Who is a God like you?" he marvels with joy. If we receive the same gospel in faith, looking through perhaps clearer eyes with the completed witness of Scripture and beholding the saving work of Jesus Christ, how these same

promises should embolden us to live faithfully in our own dark times, and should transform our present aspect from tears to joy and from lament to praise.