

PRAYING AND WAITING

Micah 7:14-17

Rev. Richard D. Phillips
Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, May 11, 2008

Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock of your inheritance (Mic. 7:14).

Micah's preaching was over. Like every preacher commissioned by God, he was sent to deliver two messages, which together make up the first half of Micah chapter seven. First, he delivered a message of bad news, God's judgment on sin: "The day of your watchmen, of your punishment, has come" (Mic. 7:4). Second, Micah delivered a gospel message of hope centered on the coming of Christ: "when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me" (Mic. 7:8). Yes, God will judge all sin, but he has provided an advocate to plead the cause of believers (Mic. 7:9), a Savior to gain their forgiveness by the cross. This was Micah's message, and now it had been given.

So what does a preacher do when the sermon is over? What do Christians do when their witness has been given? The answer is found in the remaining verses of Micah chapter 7, in which Micah turns to the Lord in prayer and then worships God for his sovereign grace. Micah's resolve to commit himself to prayer is expressed in the midst of his final sermon: "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). The prayer itself, along with God's reply, is recoded in verses 14-17. Leslie Allen comments:

The piece forms a worthy climax to the book of Micah... It is a monument to the faith of men who transcended their earthly woes and climbed to a spiritual vantage point. From there they could survey the present in the reassuring light of God's past and future dealings with his

covenant people... Here is an earnest of boldness toward God in approaching “the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace in the form of timely help’ (Heb. 4:16).¹

THE DESIRE OF MICAH’S HEART

I would not be surprised to learn that Micah was a lover of the Psalms. I say this because most scholars classify the concluding section of his book as a psalm of prayer and praise, and because his whole way of thinking is so similar to the psalmists. In particular, I can imagine Micah exulting over the words of Psalm 37:4, “Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.”

This is exactly what we find in the prayer of Micah 7:14, in which the prophet lays before the Lord the very desire of his heart. “Shepherd your people with your staff,” he prays, since they are “the flock of your inheritance” (Mic. 7:14). Micah’s longing for the salvation of his wayward people has almost broken his heart, so he brings his heart before the Lord in prayer.

God as the shepherd of his people is one of the main themes of the Old Testament, and it appears in all three of the salvation messages in the book of Micah (cf. Mic. 2:12; Mic. 5:4-6; and Mic. 7:14).

Micah’s plea stems in large part from the poor state of Jerusalem’s leadership. Starting with the king and working down through the elites, all were devoted to pursuing their own good at the expense of the people. This is why the heart of Micah’s prophecy declared the birth of a royal Savior in the town of Bethlehem. In contrast to the weak and corrupt leaders of Micah’s day, “He shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God” (Mic. 5:4).

This looks back on the ancient prophecy of Jacob, Israel’s namesake patriarch, who foretold on his deathbed, “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples” (Gen. 49:10). The royal scepter has its origins in the shepherd’s rod, employed to defend his people. “Shepherd your people with your staff,” Micah prayed, echoing David’s famous words, “Your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (Ps. 23:4). Looking forward, how the

¹ Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 404.

prophet would have rejoiced to see the royal son of David, God's own Son and Messiah. Jesus declared, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (Jn. 10:11). Therefore, in the light of the completed canon of the entire Bible, we can rightly compare Micah's prayer with the words of the Christian plea: "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:20). For it was in the coming of the Savior Micah had predicted that God would answer the prayer of the prophet's heart.

Micah continues his prayer by setting forth the peoples' need: "who dwell alone in a forest in the midst of a garden land; let them graze in Bashan and Gilead as in the days of old" (Mic. 7:14). The word for "forest" is the same word Micah used for "thicket" in Micah 3:12. There, the idea was that the temple mount would be in such a state of ruin that it would become like an untended field. Micah returns to this idea to describe the spiritual state of Jerusalem before and especially after God's judgment.

There is a question about the phrase "in the midst of a garden land." Some commentators think this means that while Israel is surrounded by fertile lands, these lands are occupied by its enemies. They are hemmed in increasing poverty while those who beset them enjoy abundance. Other commentators note that the word used for *garden* is *carmel*, which means *orchard*. This could be a reference to wooded Mount Carmel by the sea. In this case, the idea may be that Israel, for all its spiritual barrenness, lives a solitary existence, since it is set apart from the world for holiness.

Whatever Micah's precise intent with these words, his overall meaning is clear: God's people long to enjoy the fertile blessings of former days. This is the clear import of the final words of Micah's prayer: "Let them graze in Bashan and Gilead as in the days of old." Bashan and Gilead were choice lands originally possessed by Israel but long since occupied by their enemies. So Micah prays that in the future God would himself shepherd his people into green pastures, restoring to them the blessings of former times.

Likewise, all Christians should look beyond their present hard times for a salvation that will abound in blessing. Michael Bentley writes: "Believers will not always be living with the trials and testing of this life. There is hope coming, a day when God's people will enjoy the

presence and blessings of the Lord forever.”² Just as Micah longed for the first coming of Christ, Christians join him in looking for Christ’s return to bring the fullness of salvation to his people.

A BIBLICAL APPROACH TO PRAYER

It is not incidental that Micah concludes his ministry in prayer. If we will reflect on Micah’s prayer, including its source, its content, and its result, we may learn much that will help us in our praying.

First, we ask what was the source of Micah’s prayer, or, the question, why was it that Micah prayed? The first answer is that he was a realist about the dark depravity of his times. He cared deeply about his generation and the people to whom he sought to minister. This is no cold or formal prayer! “Woe is me!” he began the chapter, frustrated over the spiritual barrenness of Jerusalem. This shows that Micah looked upon the world with honest eyes, gazing through the lens of God’s truth. He was not deceived by mere externals. He did not harbor delusions based on the fact that God’s temple was in the city, but acknowledged that Israel’s covenant privileges only heightened the dreadfulness of their idolatry and sin. He further recognized that God must judge so wicked a city and that Jerusalem’s fall was assured, starting with its present moral decay (cf. Mic. 7:1-6).

Micah seems also to have had a sober understanding even of himself. He did not respond to the grave challenges facing him by looking to himself or seeking to devise new techniques of prophetic ministry. Rather, he soberly assessed his sinful world and turned in prayer to God. If we have a similarly sober assessment of our generation, of the moral despair into which Western society has fallen, of the carnal and compromised state of the evangelical church, and of our own feebleness before such forces, we will also respond by devoting ourselves to the ministry of prayer.

If one source of Micah’s prayer was the candid assessment of verses 1-6, a second source was the gospel hope revealed in verses 8-13. Amidst the darkness of his times, he looks for God to be his light. Though his ministry seems to have failed, he declares, “when I fall, I shall rise” (Mic. 7:8). Though he knows that God’s hand will fall heavy against the city, God has revealed a salvation for the remnant of

² Michael Bentley, *Balancing the Books: Micah and Nahum Simply Explained* (Durham: Evangelical Press, 1994), 91.

those who trust in him. We know from the whole of Micah's prophecy that he placed his trust in the coming of a Savior from God to deliver his people. "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah," he announced, "from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel" (Mic. 5:2). This was Micah's hope. Whereas Judah's foolish kings cast about for worldly alliances, increasingly becoming like the world in its tactics and idolatrous religion, Micah saw that he must remain faithful to God and his Word, and that God would send a Savior for the remnant of faithful believers, however small it might be.

The gospel is our incentive to pray as well. Many observers have noted the increasing worldliness of so many evangelical churches today. Faced with a public that has seemed disinterested in biblical Christianity, church after church has responded by making alliance with worldly sources of power, much as the kings of Jerusalem sought aid from Assyria or Egypt. If worldly people consider biblical worship to be boring, the church has teamed with Hollywood, bringing the glitz and glamour of the entertainment world into the church. If the simple preaching of God's Word has not seemed to win the culture, then churches have taken a page – indeed, whole books – from the business world of marketing, designing the church, its worship and its ministries according to the results of consumer surveys. One striking result has been the shrinking of prayer in the lives of Christians and churches, if not its complete disappearance. In a book that summed up the lessons of more than three decades of his worldwide ministry, James Montgomery Boice commented on the declining place of prayer in evangelical churches:

It is almost inconceivable to me that something called worship can be held without any significant prayer, but that is precisely what is happening. There is usually a short prayer at the beginning of the service, though even that is fading away. It is being replaced with a chummy greeting to make people feel welcome and at ease... Another prayer that is generally retained is the prayer for the offering. We can understand that, since we know that it takes the intervention of the Almighty God to get self-centered people to give enough money to keep the church running. But longer prayers – pastoral prayers – are vanishing... How can we say we are worshiping when we do not even pray?³

³ James Montgomery Boice, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace?* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2001), 178.

In contrast, a true Christian life will be dominated by prayer. The reason for this is the hope we have through Jesus Christ. The writer of Hebrews reasoned: “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God,... Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:14-16). At the heart of our gospel is the finished work of Jesus, who has put away our sins and taken up his ministry in heaven for us. Christ has reconciled us to the faithful God who keeps his promises, the mighty God who rescues his people, and the merciful God who has compassion on his flock. In a situation at least as dark as any we may face today, Micah did not seek worldly allies or strategies but recommitted himself to his covenant Lord in prayer. Likewise, the more we believe the gospel, and the more we understand life through the lens of God’s plan for all history, the more energy and time we will devote to looking to the Lord in prayer and then waiting for his salvation.

Having considered the source of Micah’s prayer, we should also note its content. It consists of the very promises God had already made to him. On what basis, after all, would Micah point to the debauched and idolatrous people of Israel and speak of them to God as “your people... the flock of your inheritance” (Mic. 7:14)? The answer is that God himself had declared this in his Word. In response to the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem, God had told Micah, “I will gather the remnant of Israel; I will set them together like sheep in a fold, like a flock in its pasture” (Mic. 2:12). This was God’s promise of a future salvation: he would assemble the scattered sheep of Israel together in a new and stronger fold (cf. Mic. 4:6-7). Micah has set his heart on God’s promise, so he utters back to God in prayer what God had spoken to him in his Word. He reminds the Lord that he had made his people his “inheritance”; that is, God had declared that his chosen people were his particular treasure. So Micah calls on God to shepherd his flock unto salvation.

This is a pattern we will see repeated in all the great men and women of the Bible. They studied God’s Word, they gathered the promises God had made, and they then repeated these back to God in prayer, asking him to fulfill his Word. If we want our prayers to be strengthened and our hearts to grow more confident in prayer, then we

must first be sure what it is that God has promised do and then bring the promises of Scripture into God's presence with a heart of faith.

This approach to prayer was lived out by Art Matthews and his family, the last missionaries to escape from China after the Communist take-over. They lived in a single room with only a stool for furniture. All contact with outside friends and financial support was cut off. With only a small stove for heat they often shivered, and their food was reduced to a daily meal of rice cooked over burning manure that Art gathered in the streets. All through this trial the Matthews trusted God, they spoke to him in prayer, and they strengthened themselves by his Word. One passage to which they held was Jeremiah 17:7-8: "Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought." When they finally were released and returned to America, their biography was titled *Green Leaf in Drought Time*, chronicling God's faithfulness in answering their pleas in fulfillment of his Word.⁴

We have considered the source and the content of Micah's prayer, but what about its result? One result was God's answer, provided in verse 15, and the triumphant joy that welled up in Micah's heart. But the ultimate result is found in the final verses of the book, a glorious hymn of praise to the incomparable God of grace. Micah shows us that if we want truly to worship God in the joy of our salvation, then we must devote ourselves to him in prayer. The apostle Paul emphasized this same relationship between prayer and a heart settled before God, urging that when we commit ourselves to God in prayer, "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:7).

THE PRAYER OF FAITH ANSWERED

Few things are more satisfying to believers than answered prayers. Sometimes Christians will find their prayers for understanding answered in the teaching of the Bible. At other times we can see a clear answer from God in the unfolding of his providence. On these occasions, the chief blessing is not merely the help we receive from

⁴ Isobel Kuhn, *Green Leaf in Drought Time* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957).

God but the assurance that God is with us. Micah's prayer received a direct answer that was richly satisfying to the prophet's heart. God told him, "As in the days when you came out of the land of Egypt, I will show them marvelous things" (Mic. 7:15).

The greatest instance of God's saving grace in the Old Testament was Israel's exodus from slavery in Egypt. Whenever God wanted to inspire his people to confidence, he reminded them of these great events. So it is here: God promises Micah that his prayers for salvation will be answered in such a way as can only be compared with the marvelous power displayed by God through Moses. We recall of the ten plagues by which God broke the will of mighty Pharaoh, culminating in the death of all the firstborn of Egypt. We are reminded of the passage of the Red Sea, when the waters parted to allow Israel to pass through, only to close up to destroy Pharaoh and his host. We are reminded further of the cloud of smoke by day and the pillar of fire by night, the manna that fell from heaven, and many other marvelous things God did in leading Israel through the desert. Finally, we are reminded of the crashing walls of the fortress of Jericho when Joshua obeyed God's Word. God points Micah back to these great days. He asserts, "Do not think that your faith is one that only remembers such mighty things, for I will do more things like it to save my people in days to come."

Again, Micah would find his faith satisfied by reading the New Testament accounts of the coming of Christ. Indeed, the miracles performed by Jesus far exceed the wonders of the exodus, the spiritual salvation to which Jesus brings his people far out-marvels the salvation experienced in the days of Joshua, and the worldwide scope of the church compared with the nation of Israel far better displays the almighty power of God. Bruce Waltke writes: "The exodus that Christ affords his church, bringing them out of a world of sin and judgment and setting them on their heaven-bound journey through the Wilderness, involves far greater 'wonders.' Israel's Passover, the baptism into the Red Sea, whereby they put Egypt behind them and set out for the Promised land, and the heavenly manna and the water from the rock all typify Christ and his greater salvation (Jn. 6; 7:38-39; 1 Cor. 10:1-4; 2 Cor. 5:17)."⁵

⁵ Bruce Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 460.

BITE THE DUST!

Micah responds to God's brief but wonderful answer by lifting up his heart to exalt the Lord. Given that his own day saw Israel shamed before the nations, it is to the reversal of fortunes and the triumph of God over the wicked that he speaks: "The nations shall see and be ashamed of all their might; they shall lay their hands on their mouths; their ears shall be deaf" (Mic. 7:16). All the mocking of God that Micah had to endure will then be put to an end. All the wicked will be exposed before God's holiness. Israel's enemies will find themselves with nothing to say, trying only to cover their ears in a vain attempt to avoid the reality of their defeat.

In today's terms, Micah's exaltation is the equivalent of a football player spiking the ball after scoring a game-winning touchdown. "They shall lick the dust like a serpent, like the crawling things of the earth; they shall come trembling out of their strongholds; they shall turn in dread to the LORD our God, and they shall be in fear of you" (Mic. 7:17). Micah foresees the fulfillment of God's curse to Satan in the Garden, for his tempting role in the fall of Adam and Eve: "on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life" (Gen. 3:14). This is where the popular phrase "bite the dust" comes from, and Micah sees this finally coming true. We are reminded of the cringing fear of the demons before the presence of Jesus in the Gospels, as well as the Book of Revelation's promise of Satan's ultimate and final defeat in the Day of Judgment.

An example of how God's enemies meet frustration, even in this present life, is seen in the experience of the French humanist, Voltaire, whose writings were so popular during the Eighteenth Century Enlightenment. Voltaire was a great mocker of the Bible and Christianity, once writing that in fifty years from his time no one would remember Christianity. "In twenty years," he said, "Christianity will be no more. My single hand shall destroy the edifice it took twelve apostles to rear." Imagine how frustrating this was to the Christians who witnessed the popularity and apparent success of Voltaire's scoffing. They would have done well to take this page out of Micah's book: "I will wait for the God of my salvation" (Mic. 7:7).

For twenty years passed and Christianity remained. Voltaire, however, died, and in death even he remembered Christianity. The doctor who attended him records the bitter frustration of his last words: “I am abandoned by God and man! I will give you half of what I am worth if you will give me six months’ life. Then I shall go to hell; and you will go with me. O Christ! O Jesus Christ!” Fifty years came after Voltaire’s famous boast, and the house from which he assaulted God’s church with his pen was by then the headquarters of the Geneva Bible Society, from which the church was mass-producing and disseminating Bibles.⁶ What a fulfillment, in its own small way, of God’s answer to Micah’s prayer: “I will show them marvelous things” (Mic. 7:15). What a striking fulfillment of the divine vindication celebrated by the prophet: “They shall come trembling out of their strongholds; they shall turn in dread to the LORD our God, and they shall be in fear of you” (Mic. 7:17). And what a reminder to us of the wisdom of Micah’s strategy when faced by dark times: I will pray, and I will wait!

If Micah’s triumphant words seem to us to hold a bitter edge, it is because he was more of a realist than we tend to be. Our true enemies are rightly to be hated – namely, Satan, sin, and death. Just as we feel a visceral triumph when cured from a deadly disease, or feel deep satisfaction when a murdering tyrant is brought to justice, Micah rejoices at the humiliating fall of God’s enemies. Indeed, the progression of verse 17 is played out over and over again under God’s holy, providential rule in history, as it will be in the end for all who shake their fists against him: their aims are frustrated, their plans fall to the earth, their strongholds are broken, and unless they confess their sins and seek God’s grace, their end is a fearful turning to face the dread of God’s wrath. Meanwhile, writes Isaiah in a passage that in many ways parallels the final chapter of his colleague Micah, “They who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint” (Isa. 40:31).

⁶ c.f. James M. Boice, *Psalms, vol.1*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994. p. 101.

THE LORD OUR SHEPHERD

If we reflect on Micah's prayer, its initial fulfillment in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the promised final fulfillment in the return of Christ to judge the earth, we see a great argument set forth. For those who follow the Lord as sheep to a shepherd, entering his fold through faith in Christ, God promises a salvation that will declare the wonders of his grace. As in the Passover, those who followed the Lord into the desert were spared the penalty of God's wrath and cared for in wonderful ways, but those who refused to submit and follow him felt the full sting of death. So it is for everyone. If we harden our hearts against the Lord we can only end in frustrated defeat, victims of Satan, death, and our own sin. But if we follow the good Shepherd, the Lord Jesus, God will respond to our prayers by displaying marvels of his salvation. The God of Micah is a God to be followed, even through the desert times of our lives, for he promises us a mighty salvation that will give us all the desires of our heart.