

OUR INCOMPARABLE GOD

Micah 7:18-20

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Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? (Mic. 7:18).

What's in a name? As the prophet Micah sees things, much in every way. At numerous points in this book we see the prophet deriving significant meaning from names. During Sennacherib's invasion, Micah took the names of towns and cities as harbingers of their fate (cf. Mic. 1:10-15). He seems to see his prophecy of Christ's birth as a fulfillment of the names of Bethlehem (house of bread) and Ephrathah (bountiful). How appropriate, then, that Micah would conclude his book with a reference to his own name. The name Micah means "Who is like the Lord?" As the prophet completes his record he identifies himself with this testimony, writing: "Who is a God like you...?" (Mic. 7:1).

It is fitting that Micah should conclude his book with this question, which is really an assertion of God's incomparable glory. He means, "There is no one like the Lord, for the God of Israel is greater than all gods!" Micah not only asserts this claim, but he goes on in these final verses to say, "Let me count the ways!" James Boice comments: "Micah rehearses the ways in which the true God is unlike all others. Deliverance by mighty acts is among those ways. Yet his emphasis is on God's willingness to forgive sin and show mercy, which he concludes is the supreme measure of God's surpassing excellence."¹

¹ James M. Boice, *The Minor Prophets*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 2:357.

OUR INCOMPARABLE GOD

Before we focus on Micah's specific reasons for declaring God's incomparable excellence, it will be profitable to consider the picture of God given throughout the book. When reading the Bible, we should always be concerned to gain a clearer knowledge of God. So as we conclude our studies in Micah, we should ask, "What does Micah reveal to us about God?"

Since so much of Micah describes God's judgment on Israel's sin, our first thoughts should turn to God's *holiness*. The God presented by Micah is a holy God, that is, one who will not abide with sin.

Strictly speaking, God's holiness means that God is set apart from all others. God is in a unique category unto himself. He says through Isaiah: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8-9). It was because of God's holiness, so integral to his deity, that Moses was required to take off his shoes before the burning bush. J. Gresham Machen writes that "From beginning to end the Bible is concerned to set forth the awful gulf that separates the creature from the Creator."² Yet when the Bible speaks of God's holiness, it invariably relates this to his absolute separation from all evil and sin. Geerhardus Vos writes, "Jehovah's holiness... involves not merely that his nature is stainless, empirically free from sin, but means that he is exalted above the possibility of sin -- in him, as the absolutely good, evil cannot enter."³

We are confronted with this reality all through the book of Micah. The book opens with a scene of frightening cataclysm, the high places trodden down and the mountains melting in fire" (Mic. 1:3-4). Micah explains why: "All this is for the transgression of Jacob and for the sins of the house of Israel" (Mic. 1:5). Most humans think of sin as a slight matter, except for the sins committed against us. But, God, who is the Creator and Lord of heaven and earth, is grievously offended by all sin. Why? Because he is transcendently holy. Sin is a gross offense to his person and a stench in his holy nostrils. Even when it is God's own beloved people who give themselves over to sin, God

² J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity & Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923), 62.

³ Geerhardus Vos, *Grace & Glory* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994), 269.

declares his intention to judge it with great severity. “Woe to those who devise wickedness,” Micah cries, “and work evil on their beds!” (Mic. 2:1). “Lately my people have risen up as an enemy,” God declares (Mic. 3:8). Why? Because they have given themselves over to sin. Our holy God is a just God, so sin will be judged. Our holy God is bitterly, personally opposed to all evil, so his wrath burns against the wicked.

A second attribute of God that Micah highlights is his almighty *power*. We see this, too, in the book’s opening verses, which speak not only of God’s anger at sin but of his power in judging it: “I will make Samaria a heap in the open country... I will pour down her stones into the valley and uncover her foundations” (Mic. 1:6). Man’s strongest fortress is no match for God’s power. No locked door can keep God out and no foundation is solid enough to withstand his stroke. When the Assyrian conqueror Sennacherib besieged God’s city and mocked God’s name, the Lord struck down a hundred and eighty-five thousand soldiers of the Assyrian army in a single night.

A third attribute of God laid bare in the book of Micah is his *sovereignty*. It is not the king on his throne, the power-broker in his mansion, or the general on his stallion who determines the fate of peoples, but only the Lord in his sovereign majesty. This is, in part, a function of his infinite might: God’s will reigns supreme in that no other force can hope to thwart him in the least. God is omniscient, knowing even the secret thoughts of the wicked in their bedrooms (Mic. 2:1). While many nations assemble against God’s people, Micah points out their folly: “They do not know the thoughts of the LORD; they do not understand his plan” (Mic. 4:12). God employs even the wicked acts of men for his own sovereign purpose: the pagan armies gathered against Jerusalem only because God purposed judgment for his people, and because God summoned them for their own destruction: “he has gathered them as sheaves to the threshing floor,” Micah says (Mic. 4:12).

God’s absolute sovereignty over all history, including the minutest details of the affairs of men and nations, is best seen in the many and specific prophecies Micah makes regarding the future. Early in his ministry, he foretold that the judgment that recently visited wicked Samaria was soon coming to wicked Jerusalem (Mic. 1:9). He predicts details of the Assyrian advance prior to the event (Mic. 1:10-

16). As the threatened invasion draws near, he prophesies God's deliverance of his people when the enemy comes to the very gate of the city (Mic. 2:12-13). Looking further into the future, Micah sees the Christian age of the gospel, when people from the world over will come to God to worship and learn: "Many nations shall come, and say: 'Come, let us go up... to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths'" (Mic. 4:2). Most dramatically, Micah provides one of the most detailed and accurate predictions of the Messiah's birth, nearly 700 years in the future: "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days" (Mic. 5:2). He can a prophet dare to speak with such boldness about specific events that have not yet happened, some of which lie many centuries in the future? Because he speaks for a sovereign God, who exercises perfect control over all things, both large and small.

INCOMPARABLE GRACE

We might continue this survey of God in the book of Micah, but the prophet himself should be given the last word. We ask, Is there one thing about God that causes Micah to celebrate his incomparable glory? If there is, what is it? The answer, according to these final verses, is that the majesty of the holy, almighty, and sovereign God is seen most wonderfully in his grace. "Who is a God like you," Micah marvels, "pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance?" (Mic. 7:18). Following Micah's hymn of praise for God's forgiving grace, we observe, first, what God forgives; second, how God forgives; third, God's attitude in forgiving; and, finally, the finality of God's forgiveness. In all of these aspects, Micah would have us join with him in wondrous praise for the incomparable grace of God.

First, *what is it that God forgives?* Micah employs three terms to describe the offense that sinners have given to God. First, Micah says that God pardons *iniquity* (Mic. 7:18). This word (Hebrew, *'avon*) refers to our guilt. Our sins have incurred a debt to God's holy justice that must be paid. The second word is *transgression* (Hebrew, *pasha*). This denotes rebellion against God's authority. Whenever we sin we are flouting God's right to govern our lives, and as traitors we deserve

to be punished with death. Jesus speaks of this in his parable of the ten minas, in which rebels insist, “We do not want this man to reign over us” (Lk. 19:14). The king rightly responds, “As for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slaughter them before me” (Lk. 19:27). Third, Micah speaks of *sin* (Hebrew, *chatta’ah*), referring to wickedness or evil. As ruler of creation, God cannot tolerate evil, but must destroy it. All three of these – guilt, rebellion, and wickedness – have been ascribed to Micah’s Jerusalem, just as they all can be ascribed to us. Judging by the standard of God’s perfect law, Paul concludes: “None is righteous, no, not one;... no one does good, not even one” (Rom. 3:10-12).

This was the great problem of Micah’s generation: not just enemy armies or inept leadership, but the just wrath of the holy God against their iniquity, transgression, and sin. It was because of offense to God that Micah’s generation suffered such misery and that their immediate future was so dark. It is our great problem, too; just like the Jews of old, we need to be forgiven

So how can a holy God ever forgive his peoples’ sin? Micah’s language is vivid and instructive, containing the very heart of the Bible’s gospel. First, speaking of our guilt, the prophet says that God displays incomparable grace by “pardoning”. The Hebrew word (*nasa’*) literally speaks of God lifting our guilt, taking it away. The Israelite would naturally think of the Day of Atonement ritual, when the High Priest would lay his hands on the head of the scapegoat, who was then taken outside the camp and sent far off into the wilderness. Along with the scapegoat, another spotless animal was slain in sacrifice. The meaning was that by the substitutionary death of a God-appointed sacrifice our guilt is lifted and taken away. Bruce Waltke explains, “God does not wink at sin, but provided the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the only one who kept his covenant obligations (Rom. 3:21-26) both to bear and to take away sin.”⁴

The New Testament applies this teaching directly to the cross of Jesus Christ. Paul writes that God forgave our trespasses: “by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross” (Col. 2:14). The theological term for the transfer of our sins to Christ is *imputation*. Paul describes this,

⁴ Bruce Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 464.

saying, “For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

With what joy would Micah have witnessed the scene when John the Baptist first identified Jesus as the Messiah, saying, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn. 1:29). This was the same hope of forgiveness foretold by Isaiah, in his prophecy of the coming Messiah as the Suffering Servant of the Lord: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:6).

Micah uses a second verb to describe God’s gracious response to our rebellion: “passing over” transgression (Mic. 7:18). Because of his compassionate love, God does not demand retribution on his rebellious people but overlooks their offenses. The language here also points to the cross, this time through the events of the Passover. God had determined to strike the land of Egypt for its rebellion, sending his angel of death to strike down all the firstborn of the land. But the Israelites were instructed to place the blood of the Passover Lamb on their doorposts; when the angel of death saw the blood, God’s wrath passed over the sins of God’s people. Paul applies this directly to Christians, whose rebellion against God is passed over, “For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7). So it is today for only those who seek refuge in the blood of Jesus. Micah praises God for “passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance” (Mic. 7:18), namely, for those who have confessed their sins and believed in the gospel of Christ.

We see why Micah glorifies the incomparable grace of our God. What other god ever spoke of sending his own Son to die on the cross for the sins of his people? What kind of person responds to our wickedness against him by placing our guilt onto himself? Yet this is exactly what God has done for us. “Who is a God like you?” we marvel. Michael Bentley points out that this is the main difference between Christianity and all other faiths:

Unlike all other, so-called, deities, our God pardons sin and forgives transgression. This is one of the things that any serious reader of the Gospels notices about Jesus Christ: he often forgave people their sins (e.g. Mark 2:5). He is the same today. He still shows his wonderful mercy to

sinner by forgiving them when they confess their sin, repent of it and turn in faith to him.⁵

Just as marvelous is *God's attitude in forgiving our sins*. Does God forgive begrudgingly, resentfully, or half-heartedly? Micah responds, "He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love" (Mic. 7:18). This is Micah's great hope for his people. Yes, God intended to chastise them for their great sin. But judgment would not last forever, and it would lead to forgiveness and the restoration of blessings. Why? Because of the God that he is! Because of the mercy and compassion in his heart his people! Micah's hope is in the incomparable God, whose heart is moved by grace!

Micah describes God's heart with the Hebrew word *chesed*, the great Old Testament word for the covenant mercy and love of God. This word is so rich that it can hardly be translated by a single English translation. It is rendered as "steadfast love" by the English Standard Version; "faithful love" by the Holman Christian Standard; "unchanging love" by the New American Standard; and, perhaps most familiarly, as "mercy" by the King James and New International versions. What is the attitude of God's heart in forgiving our sins? Walter Kaiser writes, "He does not delight in holding a grudge, or in bottling up His anger over our sins."⁶ Instead, he delights in tender, loving, mercy for his people.

The Scottish minister, Alexander Whyte, told of an evening when an older minister came to discuss some pastoral matters. When their business was completed, the old man seemed to linger and to want the conversation not to end. Finally, he asked, seemingly in jest, "Now, sir, have you any word of comfort for an old sinner like me?" Whyte realized that behind the half-smile was a real seriousness and even a deep agony. He wrote later, "It took my breath away. He was an old saint. But he did not know the peace of forgiveness." Whyte walked over and sat beside the older minister, opened his Bible to Micah 7:18, and read, "He delights in showing mercy."

It was on this mercy that Micah relied as well. We can imagine the power of this statement in the prophet's heart as he grasped for hope of Israel's forgiveness. In themselves, God's people had nothing to

⁵ Michael Bentley, *Balancing the Books: Micah and Nahum Simply Explained* (Durham: Evangelical Press, 1994), 92.

⁶ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Micah-Malachi*, The Communicator's Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1992), 91.

offer to gain their forgiveness. Jerusalem had partaken in the same idolatry that earlier had doomed Samaria. But Micah would have answered, “He delights in showing mercy.” Yes, but Jerusalem’s leaders were lying awake at night devising new and more wicked schemes of robbing the poor. “He delights in showing mercy.” Corruption had so permeated society Micah had been forced to admit that no godly people were left. He wrote, “They all lie in wait for blood... Their hands are on what is evil, to do it well” (Mic. 7:2-3). Such wickedness had spread that a man could not even trust his wife or children. How could such depraved people be spared by a holy God? Because “he delights in showing mercy.” Micah’s hope lay in God’s delight in mercy, and there he rested his burdened heart.

This was Dr. Whyte’s answer to the suffering old minister: “He delights to show mercy.” The next morning he received a letter in reply. It read: “Dear friend, I will never doubt Him again. Guilt had hold of me. I was near the gates of Hell, but that word of God comforted me, and I will never doubt Him again. I will never despair again. If the devil casts my sin in my teeth, I will say, ‘Yes, it is all true, and you cannot tell the half of it, but I have to deal with the One who delights in showing mercy.’”⁷

Finally, Micah notes *the finality of God’s forgiveness*: “He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea” (Mic. 7:19). The word for compassion (Hebrew, *racham*) speaks of tender affection, the way a mother loves a child. God responds to our sins the way a protective parent destroys a snake in the children’s playground: “he will tread our iniquities under foot.” Kenneth Barker writes, “Sin is pictured as an enemy that God conquers and liberates us from.”⁸ A. R. Fausset adds, “When God takes away the guilt of sin, that it may not condemn us, He takes away also the power of sin, that it may not rule us.”⁹ Here is God’s answer to the third of our offenses: our guilt he takes away to the cross; our rebellion he covers with Christ’s blood; and the corrupting power of evil in our hearts he treads under foot.

⁷ Cf. Bryan Chapell, *The Promises of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 136-137.

⁸ Kenneth L. Barker and Waylon Bailey, *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 134-135.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 135.

Not only does God tread on our sins, but he “will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea” (Mic. 7:19). Here, the reference is to the destruction of Pharaoh’s chariots in the Red Sea. Just as the Egyptians were prevented by God from catching up to the Israelites so as to destroy them, God will not allow our sins to catch up to us. John Mackay comments, “Just as not one of the entire army of Pharaoh that followed the Israelites into the Red Sea survived (Exod. 14:28), so too the consequences of ‘all’ their iniquities will be swept away by God.”¹⁰ With this in mind, no wonder that Micah echoes the praise the Israelites sang overlooking the Red Sea:

Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders? You stretched out your right hand; the earth swallowed them. You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed; you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode” (Ex. 15:11-13).

How important it is to our relationship with God, and to our peace and joy in salvation, that we realize the finality of our forgiveness in Jesus Christ. David Prior points out that in passages like this from Micah, God not only cast our sins into the sea, but he placed a sign on its banks ordering, “No fishing.”¹¹ Another place where we read of the complete removal of our sins is the great new covenant promise made by Jeremiah and echoed in the book of Hebrews. God declares to us: “I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more” (Heb. 8:12). How can an all-knowing God forget that we have sinned against him? Because, in Micah’s language, he has lifted our sins and taken them to the cross; he has covered them with the blood of Christ; he has trodden them under his own foot; and he has cast them into the sea of his incomparable grace. Truly, Micah wonders, “Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression?” Or as Samuel Davies put it: “Who is a pard’ning God like Thee? / Or who has grace so rich and free?”¹²

¹⁰ John L. Mackay, *Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 1998), 137.

¹¹ David Prior, *The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998), 201.

¹² Samuel Davies, “Great God of Wonders!” 1723-1761.

INCOMPARABLE FAITHFULNESS

Can we count on God extending this same grace to us? Will God continue to delight in showing mercy to sinners today? Micah provides the answer in the concluding verse to his book of prophecy, a verse that persuaded Micah of God's continuing mercy: "You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old" (Mic. 7:20). In other words, God shows mercy to his sinful people because of his incomparable faithfulness to his covenant promises of old in the Bible.

Micah praises God because he will "show faithfulness to Jacob." He word for *faithfulness* is *emet*, which also means *truth*. God will be true to Jacob. In Genesis 28:14, God promised Jacob, Israel's namesake patriarch, that his offspring would be "like the dust of the earth," spreading abroad "to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south." How could God fulfill this promise if he annihilated Jacob's descendants because of their sin? Moreover, he promised that "in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed." How could Jacob's children bring salvation to all the world if Israel itself fell victim to sin? The answer is that God could not be true to Jacob unless he worked salvation for Jacob's descendants, physical and spiritual, and in faithfulness to the promise God was delighted to show mercy to his people, ultimately by sending his own Son to die for their sins.

God will also show "steadfast love to Abraham." Here is the Hebrew word *chesed* again, which here might be best translated as merciful, covenant fidelity. Abraham received promises that were even greater than those given to his grandson Jacob. On one occasion, God brought Abraham out under the bright canopy of the sky and said: "'Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be'" (Gen. 15:5). In all the vast starry host Abraham beheld in that ancient desert sky, one star shined for every sinner who trusts in the Lord Jesus Christ. If you are a Christian, Abraham looked upon a star that represented you. How could God be faithful to Abraham unless you entered into the fullness of the promised salvation?

Micah thus concludes, “as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old” (Mic. 7:20). All through the Bible, believers read promises of forgiveness and salvation given by God. Those promises now belong to us, who take possession of them by trusting in God’s Word. Prominent among them all is the promise of Micah 7:19: “He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.”

The writer of Hebrews said of God’s promises: “We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul” (Heb. 6:19). What other hope do we have but that God will be faithful to his promises of grace? Can we hope that we will win the battle with sin by our own strength? Can we imagine that we can reform our lives so as to make ourselves presentable to the holy God? Neither of these is a realistic hope. God’s promises of faithful, covenant, forgiving grace not only assure us of his love for us in Christ, but they also give us the strongest of all incentives to live holy lives to the praise of his incomparable name.

Donald Grey Barnhouse explains how grace motivates us to holiness by telling of a man who was paralyzed by the fear of his sin. During the First World War he had fallen into bad company and while living in Paris he became engrossed in sexual sin. After the war, he became a Christian and fell in love with a wonderful Christian girl. But he was afraid to propose marriage to her out of the fear that his past sin would rise up and cause him to betray his marital vows. He came to Barnhouse and asked for advice. Barnhouse told him that if he wanted to marry the girl, he should start trusting her with his heart and should tell her the truth about his past.

Barnhouse also told the man of another couple with a similar issue. After they had married, the husband told his wife of his sinful sexual past, and his fears about a future recurrence of those sins. She responded by kissing him and gently saying this:

John, I want you to understand something. I know my Bible well, and therefore I know the subtlety of sin and the devices of sin working in the human heart. I know you are a thoroughly converted man, John, but I now that you still have an old nature and that you are not yet as fully instructed in the ways of God as you soon will be. The Devil will do all he can to wreck your Christian life, and he will see to it that temptations of every kind will be put in your way. The day might come – please God that it never shall – but the day might come when you will succumb to temptation and fall into sin. Immediately the Devil will tell you that it is

no use trying, that you might as well continue on in sin and that above all you are not to tell me because it will hurt me. But, John, I want you to know that here in my arms is your home. When I married you I married your old nature as well as your new nature. And I want you to know there is full pardon and forgiveness in advance for any evil that may ever come into your life.

Barnhouse finished telling the story, during which the former soldier held his face in his hands. But after the final words, he lifted his eyes and said wonderingly, “My God! If anything could ever keep a man straight, that would be it.”¹³

That is it. God delivers us from the power of sin by first assuring us of our complete forgiveness through the blood of Christ. Why would he do this? Because “he delights in steadfast love” (Mic. 7:18). Because of his faithfulness to the promises of the Bible. Because in our salvation by grace alone, the holy, almighty, sovereign God proves the glorious truth of Micah’s words of praise: “Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance?” (Mic. 7:17).

¹³ Boice, *The Minor Prophets*, 2:364-365.