

A God of Justice + Mercy: His Judgments Prevail (Micah 1)

Matthew Williams

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We live in a world riddled with injustice. Rulers gain office through rigged elections. Elected authorities line their own pockets at the nation's expense. Court systems treat people differently because of their religious convictions or the color of their skin. Countries grab land through brutal wars. The list goes on and on.

But injustice isn't limited to what's around us. It's also found within us. We harbor bitterness. We hoard our possessions instead of practicing generosity. We show favoritism. We refuse to submit to the authorities God establishes. In countless ways, we fail to treat our neighbor in keeping with God's moral standard. It's ultimately not a Russian problem, a white problem, or a rich people problem. It's a human problem which means it's also not a new problem.

The book of Micah addresses the injustice head on. It was written by a Jewish prophet named Micah during the second half of the 8th century BC. His name literally means, "Who is like the Lord?" and it fits the theme of the book! Micah explains that all the injustice in Israel, all the ways her social relationships failed to uphold the covenant requirements of the law, is rooted in a far greater problem, namely, her relationship with God. Yahweh, the Lord GOD, the one to whom Israel must give an account.

He's a God of justice. He's also a God of mercy. The structure of the books reflects both aspects of his holy character. Micah is divided into three sections, marked by an imperative for Israel to "hear" or pay attention. Each begins with a word of judgment and ends with a word of mercy.

By the end of the book, the central message is clear. Injustice is a problem only God himself can solve! We need Jesus to make us just, to cleanse us from sin and empower us to walk in righteousness. Only when God graciously restores our relationship with himself are we able to love one another as he has loved us. The message of Micah is the message of the gospel.

But Micah doesn't open with an upbeat word of hope. He spends the entirety of Ch. 1 delivering a sober warning. **The Lord is coming to render justice through divine judgment.** It's not a feel-good message. But it is exceedingly important. God

is holy. He is the moral standard. He's also righteous. He perfectly conforms to the moral standard. And he's just. He requires his creatures to conform to the moral standard. In a world filled with injustice, we need to remember there is a God in heaven who personally ensures justice will prevail. And that's exactly where Micah begins.

1) GOD'S JUDGMENT IS CERTAIN (vv. 1-7)

V. 1 reminds us how Scripture works. What did the Word of the Lord do? It "came" to Micah. The truth about God never originates within us or the principles of human reason; it's found outside of us and comes to us. The Spirit superintended Micah's thoughts and words such that he said exactly what God wanted him to say.

And the message he delivered came to Israel at a particular time - "in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah." After the reign of King Solomon, Israel divided into two kingdoms - the northern kingdom of Israel whose capital was Samaria, and the southern kingdom of Judah whose capital was Jerusalem. Though Micah was from Judah, God gave him a word for the entire nation, which the prophet refers to collectively as "Israel" or "Jacob."

It was a difficult time for God's people. Tiglath-pileser III, known as "Assyria's Napoleon," began harassing the northern and southern kingdoms. It was the equivalent of Russia massing troops on the border of Ukraine. Yet when life is scary, what does God do? He grants us the gift of his Word. It's a word that orients us in uncertain times because it's a word that defines reality. It was a gift of grace. It was exactly what Israel needed. It's what we need too, my friends.

And in case part of you is wondering, "Matthew, how could a book written to a little nation in the Ancient Near East 2,700 years have anything to say to me?" Allow me to remind you of three things. First, God hasn't changed. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. What Micah tells us, about who God is, what he's like, and how he relates to the world he created, is still true today.

Second, we haven't changed. Sure, we have iPhones and they didn't. But who we are at the core - our joys, our sorrows, our desires and spiritual temptations - is no different. 1 Cor 10:11. "Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come."

Micah recognizes as much. Though he's addressing a particular people, the word God gave him applies to every human being on the face of the earth because the God speaking through him is Lord of the whole earth! V. 2, "Hear, you people, all of you; pay attention, O earth, and all that is in it, and let the Lord God be a witness against you..."

What's a witness? It's someone who sees. Someone who knows. Someone who has a firsthand knowledge of what happened. We are immediately thrust into the heavenly courtroom where God himself bears testimony not just against Israel, but against the whole earth. Why? Because he is a God who sees. He's a God who knows.

Ps 139:1-4, "O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether."

Everything you have done or not done. Everything you have said or not said. Everything you have looked at with your eyes or thought in your mind, God knows. He's kept track of all of it. It's a terrifying thought, friends. God isn't an idle observer or a cosmic busybody. He is the holy and righteous Judge of the universe. V. 2, "...let the Lord God be a witness against you, the Lord from his holy temple."

To say God is holy means what? It means he is the moral standard. Whatever conforms to his character is good; whatever does not is evil. And what does our holy God do in response to our evil, to the pride in our hearts, that does life our way instead of God's way? V. 3, "For behold, the LORD is coming out of his place, and will come down and tread upon the high places of the earth." He's both a witness and a judge, a perfectly holy judge who will not ignore, overlook, or remain morally neutral toward the injustice of men, toward our failure to obey his law in act, attitude, or nature.

He is a Judge who "comes out." He is a Judge who "comes down." He is a Judge who "treads upon" every human power and principality – men, women, and children alike. None are exempt. None are spared. All are accountable and that includes you and me. Hebrews 4:13, "No creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account."

What happens when God executes judgment? Look at v. 4. The mountain “melt.” The strongest, most seemingly immovable things in the created order disintegrate before him. Micah continues. The valleys, the habitable places on earth where men dwell, are “split open.” The life we have lived apart from God will be exposed in all its wretched wickedness. From the highest of heights to the deepest of depths, there is no escaping the Holy One. He cannot be avoided. He cannot be doubted or denied out of existence.

When he judges the earth, the entire created order and human civilization with it is “like wax before the fire, like waters poured down a steep place.” Have you ever stood next to a thundering waterfall? I remember standing at Victoria Falls in Zambia watching as a river a mile wide plunged off a cliff 35 stories high. It was an overwhelming display of power. Resisting the justice of God is like trying to stand beneath Victoria Falls. It’s impossible. You’ll be crushed. God’s judgments are no less decisive, no less certain.

If Micah had stopped there, everyone in Judah would have nodded their heads in approval, convinced he was talking about God’s judgment on “bad guys” like Assyria. But look at v. 5. “All this is for the transgression of Jacob and for the sins of the house of Israel.” Then he calls out the capital cities of Samaria and Jerusalem.

In the prophets, “high places” were locations in Israel, typically on the top of hills or mountains, where the Jews practiced idolatry, worshiping pagan gods. Micah says that Jerusalem, the city God chose as his dwelling place on earth, has become “the high place of Judah,” one big city of idolatry. What’s the point? The Lord holds those who consider themselves part of his people no less accountable than nations that want nothing to do with him.

He never turns a blind eye to sin, including sin among the supposed “good guys.” It might be a little deal to you or the people around you, friend. Everyone you know might think of you as the “good kid.” But the sin you too have committed is a big deal to God. In the western world, if you have mutual consent and no one gets hurt, it’s all good. That kind of attitude also fails to ask the most important question: “What does the Judge of all the earth think?”

Samaria was built on a hill 300’ high. In response to her unrepentant sin, God promises to destroy the city. His judgment is not an abstract “things won’t go well

for you." It's deeply personal. V. 6, "I will make Samaria a heap...and I will pour down her stones into the valley." The false gods she trusted to deliver her? Beaten to pieces. The unjust wages she earned by oppressing the poor? Burned with fire. Why? Because it was all the fruit of spiritual prostitution, spiritual unfaithfulness to God.

The problem runs deeper than outward behavior. I guess we shouldn't have created that golden calf. Sorry about cheating that widow. No. The problem is that they failed to honor and trust and serve the Lord who redeemed them out of Egypt as a people for his own possession.

And trusting other people or things besides God to give you life is folly because none of our chosen idols – reputation, money, sexual pleasure, or entertainment – will stand in the end. They too will be judged. They too will be exposed as a false god, a futile refuge. They will disappear like sand between your fingers on the day you stand before your Maker to give an account for your life. The judgement of God against every sinner, every injustice that denies or denigrates his absolute holiness is certain.

2) GODLY SORROW IS THE RIGHT RESPONSE (vv. 8-16)

We can respond emotionally to everything I've just said in several ways. You can get angry. "I have a right to live however I want and I'm not going to let some crazy Christian tell me otherwise." Other people just get numb. Hearing about God's judgment is like watching a scary movie. "Wow. That's pretty freaky. I sure hope that never happens to me." But then the lights come on and we move on to the next thing. Still others become self-righteous. "Boy, it sure feels good to know Russians and liberals are going to get what's coming to them."

What's the right emotional response to the certainty of God's judgment? It's a cry of lament. It's godly sorrow. It's a heart-level response that grieves our guilt before the judge of all the earth, both personally and socially, and compels us to humble ourselves before him in a spirit of contrition. Look at v. 8.

"For this I will lament and wail; I will go stripped and naked; I will make lamentation like the jackals and mourning like the ostriches. For her wound is incurable (judgment is certain!), and it has come to Judah; it has reached to the gate of my people, to Jerusalem."

Unlike many of his countrymen, Micah was faithful to Yahweh. He had good reason to hope in the promises of redemption in the rest of the book. Yet even he didn't respond to his own prophecy with an "at least I'm good" attitude. His heart broke for God's people. His heart broke for those who bore Yahweh's image yet refused to submit to him. Micah warned them of imminent judgment, and he did it through tears. Would that we had the same compassion for our friends, brothers and sisters.

It's how Jesus responded. Luke 19:41-42, "And when he drew near and saw the city (Jerusalem), he wept over it, saying, 'Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.'" Does the coming judgment of God cause you to weep too, brothers and sisters? Does it compel you like Micah to lovingly warn with those who need to hear? Micah couldn't stay quiet. His affection for God's people compelled him to speak.

It's not hard to feel sorrow when we look at all the social injustice in the world. Plenty of non-Christians experience as much. But that's not where Micah begins. Nor is it where we should begin, brothers and sisters. For all the brokenness in our world reflects something of far greater moment than our actions toward one another. It reflects the injustice, the sin, all of us have committed against God and the judgment we deserve as a result. That's the sorrow, that's the grief that should fill our hearts more than any other. Rom 6:23, "For the wages of sin is death..." Godly sorrow is the right response.

In the second half of the chapter, Micah implores his countrymen to follow his example, addressing a list of cities facing destruction and exile. He wasn't exaggerating. The Assyrians sacked every one of them by 701 BC. Nearly every place he warns contains a play on words in Hebrew lamenting the poetic justice of God's judgment, as well as the utter futility of saving ourselves.

In v. 10, Micah tells Beth-le-aphrah or "House of dust" to "roll yourselves in the dust." He warns Shaphir or "Beauty town" in v.11 that she will soon be led out in "nakedness and shame." And the inhabitants of Zaanan or "Going forth town" will not "go forth" into battle against the Assyrians. They will be paralyzed with fear.

Whatever "standing place" or military security Beth-ezel or "House of Taking Away" enjoyed or offered to others will be taken away by lamentation. They will be too

wracked by sorrow to help themselves or their neighbors. Even the inhabitants of “Maroth” or “Bitter town” in v. 12 will wait in vain for news that is sweet or good. Why? “Because disaster has come down from the LORD to the gate of Jerusalem.” He cannot be stopped or deterred. His righteous judgments will prevail.

In v. 13, Micah tells the inhabitants of Lachish (which sounds like “to the steeds”) to harness their chariots “to the steeds” to flee the Assyrians. Ironically, 1 Ki 9:19 identifies Lachish as one of the first cities King Solomon built for all the chariots and horses he accumulated. He disobeyed the Lord who told Israel to trust him to defend the nation instead of accumulating weapons of war to defend themselves like all the nations around them. Indeed, it was “the beginning of sin,” where Israel’s trouble started.

It’s where our own trouble begins too, friends. We look to human power, human resources, or human wisdom to deliver us instead of trusting in the Lord. Isaiah 31:1, “Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the LORD!”

In v. 14, Micah warns Moresheth-gath, which sounds like “one who is betrothed,” that she will receive a dowry or “parting gifts.” She would soon come under the authority of a new husband, Assyria, and the rest of the Jewish people would be forced to pay tribute to the Assyrian king as she is taken away. The houses of Achzib, or “deceit,” will be “a deceitful thing,” a vain refuge to the kings of Israel who look to them for safety. It’s the same word used in the OT to describe a dry riverbed taunting thirsty travelers.

In v. 15, Micah tells Mareshah, which sounds like the word for “conqueror,” will itself be conquered by one the Lord brings against her, reminding Israel it’s ultimately God, not Assyria, who’s bringing his sovereign judgments to pass. And as David took refuge in the caves of Adullam from King Saul so too the “glory of Israel,” the leaders of the people, will soon scatter, desperate for an escape.

How should we respond when confronted with the judgment our sins deserve? V. 16, “Make yourself bald and cut off your hair.” They were cultural expressions of mourning in ancient Israel. In other words, we need to repent! We need to embrace a godly sorrow for the sins we have committed. For unless something changes,

Micah warns, “the children of your delight,” members of your own family will suffer the consequences.

Sin is always like that. If you choose to ignore God or disobey his commands, it will have a profound effect on the people closest to you. It did back then. It still does today.

CONCLUSION

Micah begins with sober warning. **The Lord is coming to render justice through divine judgment.** The same warning applies to us, my friends. Whether on the day you die, or the day Christ returns, every one of us must appear before the judgment seat of God. The justice of God ensures no one will get away with anything. The warning is a gift of grace.

So where do we turn? We cannot flee from him. We must flee to him. Ps 130:1–4, “Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD! O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy! If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.”

How do we know that, friends? How do we know that when we respond to the conviction of sin and the certainty of God’s judgment in places like Micah 1 by crying out to the Lord for mercy that he will indeed hear our voice, answer our plea, and in the words of Micah 7:18-20 pardon our iniquity, pass over our transgression, and cast all our sins into the depths of the sea? We know it because of Jesus. Micah 1 shouts, “We need a Savior!” And the entire Bible answers, “Jesus is the Savior we need.”

And when your soul is grieved by the weight of sin, when your heart trembles over the divine the judgment you know you deserve, look to the cross. See Jesus, our Great Savior, receiving in his body and soul the full fury of divine justice. Isa 53:5–6, “But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. 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.”



Repentance begins with godly sorrow. But it doesn't stop there. It leads to the joy of forgiveness through the blood of Christ. Disaster justly came down from the Lord upon him that mercy might justly come down from the Lord on you. Don't ignore your sin or the reality of God's judgment. Think often of the judgment you deserve. And look just as often to the Savior who was wounded that you might be healed.

Micah, no less than the gospel, doesn't begin with good news. It begins with bad news. But the warning, the threat, the sobering reality, is exactly what we need to send us running to Jesus. May we do as much again and again, brothers and sisters. Let's pray.