

The Prophecy of Micah: *A Lament for the Idolater*

Micah 1:1-16

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on September 6, 2020

Introduction

- ❖ This morning we're beginning a new sermon series in the book of Micah. Micah is one of the twelve minor prophets – minor, not in terms of importance, but in terms of length compared to the major prophets. Micah comes right after the better known Jonah. That prophet who refused, at first, to go to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. In those days, the Assyrians were a powerhouse on the world's scene. The big bully, terrorizing and taking over other nations.
 - Well, as we're told in the first verse, Micah served as a prophet during the reigns of three kings of Judah – Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. And based on what we know of their reigns in 2 Kings, that means Assyria was still the dominant world power.

- ❖ Now, **Jonah** was sent to preach a message of judgment against Assyria – prophesying their downfall, which was averted because his preaching led to their repentance. And God stayed his hand. Well, years later, the Assyrians were back to their wicked ways, threatening the very existence of God's people. They were such a threat that the book that follows Micah, the book of **Nahum**, is directly addressed to Nineveh, prophesying its doom. So considering how so many prophecies during that time were condemning the Assyrians, you can see why Micah's audience would've be expecting to hear something similar.
 - But he goes in a different direction. **Unlike Jonah or Nahum, Micah's prophesy of judgment wasn't directed towards Israel's enemies – but towards Israel herself.** Assyria is still in view – not as the *object* of God's judgment – but as the appointed *means* of judging and punishing Israel.

- ❖ Notice in v1 how the collection of oracles in this book – that span the length of the prophet's long career – are written "*concerning Samaria and Jerusalem*". Those are the two capital cities of the northern and southern kingdoms, respectively. After King Solomon, there was a bitter civil war. From that point on, when Scripture speaks of Israel, it usually refers to the ten tribes of the **northern kingdom**. And when it mentions Judah, it's talking about the **southern kingdom**. Micah, we're told, is from Moresheth, in the southwest region of Judah. So unlike Jonah, he wasn't sent to a foreign nation to preach judgment on them. No, he operated in Judah, likely in Jerusalem, preaching to his own.

- ❖ **Micah is a book that challenges the presumptions of God's people.** When you're considered God's chosen, it's tempting to presume upon his grace. You're all for God showing up with a heavy hand of justice – assuming that being "his people" means you're exempt. That contributes to a false sense of entitlement and a lack of godly fear. **There's this presumption that God will always bless his chosen people regardless of their behavior.**
 - That's how unjust practices among the people of God go unchecked and ignored – both in ancient days and today. How else do we account for the American church's complicity with the evils of chattel slavery and Jim Crow-era segregation? How else can we explain the sex abuse scandals in recent years, polluting churches across denominations? How else did the term "evangelical" – which literally means *a person of good news* – become a despised term by many in our contemporary moment?

- ❖ One could argue that all of those developments can only be explained by a church culture where our status as the children of God has failed to translate into a grateful sense of responsibility – but turned instead into a selfish sense of entitlement.
 - **That explains why the people of God are much quicker to see sin and injustice in the world around us – than in our own hearts or in our own community.** If a prophet like Micah were to appear today, there are so many problems going on in the world that we would expect him to address. But like his original audience, we would be in for a shock when the prophet suddenly directs his message against us.

- ❖ **The imagery that you'll notice being used throughout this prophecy is that of a cosmic courtroom.** In chapter 1, notice how it says how God has come to be a "*witness against you*" (v2). Now there he's talking to the earth and everyone in it. We're all under trial, including God's people. Then, later in chapter 6, the courtroom imagery is even more direct.
 - Listen to 6:1-2, "*1Hear what the LORD says: Arise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. 2Hear, you mountains, the indictment of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth, for the LORD has an indictment against his people, and he will contend with Israel.*"

- ❖ **God the Judge is indicting his own people.** He's contending with Israel. And let's not fool ourselves into thinking he won't contend with the Church. As we study Micah 1 this morning, let's fix our attention on three observations in the text. We'll see (1) The appearance of a Holy Judge, (2) The crime of idolatry, and (3) The lament for those under God's judgment.

The Appearance of a Holy Judge

- ❖ Let's begin in vv1-4. Here we see God the Judge enter the courtroom, and Micah is like the bailiff calling for everyone's attention. **All rise, for the Lord GOD Almighty.** Listen to v2, "*Hear, you peoples, all of you; pay attention, O earth, and all that is in it, and let the Lord GOD be a witness against you, the Lord from his holy temple.*"
 - Notice that the Lord GOD is serving as a witness against the peoples of the earth. When Micah's audience heard v2, they were probably cheering. "Yes, like Jonah's prophecy, like Nahum's, this is going to be another one calling out the Assyrians." That cheering continues, until v5, when God indicts his own people for their sin. "*All this is for the transgression of Jacob and for the sins of the house of Israel.*" (v5)
 - So God is witnessing against the nations, but he does this by showing the nations his willingness to judge his own chosen people. **If even his own people are not exempt from the Lord's judgment, then how much more fearful ought the nations to be?**

- ❖ **Imagine a classroom where a group of students – including the teacher's own son – misbehaved badly and broke some cardinal rules.** I'm sure the other guilty students wouldn't be surprised if the teacher's son was shown leniency and punished less severely. They wouldn't be shocked. They'd just be resentful of him and his privileged status.

- ❖ But imagine if that teacher took her son, stood him in front of the class, and showed no mercy and justly punished him as he deserved. Do you see what kind of message that sends? **It would strike fear in the hearts of everyone in the group that misbehaved.** They now know that there will be no leniency, no exceptions, no mercy. That's a witness against everyone else who is equally guilty.
 - **And not only does it send a message to the guilty, it communicates a message about the kind of teacher or judge we're dealing with.** The Judge in Micah 1 is a just judge who shows no partiality, no favoritism. Israel will not receive a lighter sentence just because they're the children of God. God is just. He never turns a blind eye to sin or injustice, even if the guilty is his own son.

- ❖ **That's the message sent when this Judge leaves his chambers and enters the courtroom.** Keep reading in v3, *"³For behold, the LORD is coming out of his place, and will come down and tread upon the high places of the earth. ⁴And the mountains will melt under him, and the valleys will split open, like wax before the fire, like waters poured down a steep place."*
 - This is a terrifying scene. **Maybe it didn't register for you, but this is describing creation disintegrating before the presence of the Lord.** Mountains melt like wax. Valleys split open and their contents pour away. This is frightening stuff.
 - Imagine the Himalayas, the Alps, the Rockies – picture God planting his foot on one of those peaks and immediately flattening it, leaving behind his footprint like in melted wax. That is a terrifying image, but that sense of terror is the intended outcome. If these grand fixtures of creation – mountains and valleys so much larger and older than us – **if even these cannot withstand the appearance of the Lord, then what hope is there for any of us?**

- ❖ Very often, when we're facing trials where we're being mistreated or we're witnessing some injustice we're strongly opposed to – we wish God would appear. And right all the wrongs. **We picture him riding into battle on a white horse, scattering our enemies to the four winds.** It's a heroic scene. Maybe terrifying for our enemies, but it's a glorious picture for us.
 - What we don't picture is this. **We don't picture creation disintegrating before God's presence.** As he approaches – with every step he takes – more of creation unravels. So what do you think will happen to you when he gets close enough to you?

- ❖ In the book of Isaiah – a contemporary of Micah – he experienced firsthand something close to it. In **Isaiah 6**, we're told that the prophet saw a vision of the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up. Six-winged angels flew above him. **With two wings they covered their eyes – because even pure, sinless creatures – could not gaze directly at the Lord of hosts.**
 - He is holy, holy, holy. No person, no power, no presence can compare. The foundations of the temple threshold shook. **And Isaiah – a prophet so accustomed to issuing woes of judgment on others – could only manage to mutter, "Woe is me! For I am ruined."** Or as the old KJV puts it, *"For I am undone."*

- ❖ **Isaiah is describing an experience of personal disintegration.** Just like the mountains and valleys, he was coming apart. He could not withstand the presence of the Lord. He was coming undone. Disintegrating.
 - **Now if there ever was an integrated man – someone whose life was whole and put together – it would've been Isaiah.** He was considered by his contemporaries to be a man of integrity, a righteous man of God. **But all it took was one glimpse at the holiness of God, and he was undone.** Compared to others, he was fine by human standards. But the moment he came into the presence of the Ultimate Standard, he was ruined, undone.

- ❖ Friends, that's the same reaction expected of us when we read, here in Micah, of the Lord GOD leaving his throne room and descending to earth – to the courtroom where he presides as Judge. And those on trial include everyone. Including Micah, including Isaiah, including Israel, and including the Church today.

- ❖ **I know this terrifying depiction of God as a Holy Judge seems contrary to the more common view of him being a God of love and mercy.** But there is no contradiction. **Judgment is not the opposite of love. The opposite of love is indifference.** That teacher would not be loving her son if she were indifferent towards his behavior and showed him leniency while punishing his peers. She would be instilling in him a selfish sense of entitlement. It's love that moves her to judge her son as guilty and not to let him off the hook.
 - **And if not for judgment, we wouldn't know what mercy is.** Mercy is only grasped and appreciated when you have a clear sense of what you deserve and how terrifying it would be to get it. So there's no contradiction.
 - This is the same God. **The loving and merciful God that we love and appreciate is this Holy Judge who appears in Micah 1 to establish justice on earth.**

The Crime of Idolatry

- ❖ That's our first observation. Secondly, in vv5-7, we see the crime of idolatry. That's what this trial is centered on. That's what this case is built on – a gross violation of the first commandment: ***Thou shall have no other gods before me.*** And it's not just the pagan nations surrounding Israel and Judah that are at fault. No, both are guilty of idolatry. Listen to v5. What is the reason for this trial? *“All this is for the transgression of Jacob and for the sins of the house of Israel. What is the transgression of Jacob? Is it not Samaria? And what is the high place of Judah? Is it not Jerusalem?”*
 - If you keep reading in vv6-7, it focuses on Samaria in the northern kingdom and predicts its coming destruction by the Assyrians. All of its carved images and idols will be demolished.
 - Now it helps to have some background information about the northern kingdom. You should know that its kings were mostly wicked and idolatrous, starting with the first king **Jeroboam**.

- ❖ After successfully leading the rebellion against Solomon’s son, Jeroboam realized that Judah would always hold an advantage over them because the temple was in Jerusalem. Any Israelite who sought to be faithful to the Lord would still have to visit Jerusalem to observe the various annual feasts and worship there.
 - **So Jeroboam’s solution was to create his own temple system in the north.** And instead of just one temple, he thought it would be ingenious to have two. He made two carved images of golden calves (symbolic of strength) and had all his citizens worship the Lord at either location.

- ❖ **This act of political expediency became a snare for all subsequent kings of Israel.** Leading them into idolatry. And their people followed. Now a few generations after Jeroboam, a wicked king named **Omri** and the son who reigned after him, **Ahab**, established and built up the city of Samaria, which they made the capital.
 - **And Ahab, as you may know from his encounters with the prophet Elijah, introduced Baalism to Israel.** He established high places throughout the kingdom dedicated to the worship of Baal, the Canaanite god of rain and fertility. For these offenses, and a countless others, the northern kingdom of Israel was utterly destroyed.

- ❖ **The history of its destruction and the theological explanation for it is recorded in the book of 2 Kings 17.** That’s the chapter to read to understand the background of books like Micah. In 2 King 17:6, it says that “*In the ninth year of Hoshea (the last king of Israel), the king of Assyria (Sargon II) captured Samaria*”, and he began to displace the Israelites.
 - Then it says, “*7And this occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God . . . and had feared other gods. It continues in v15, “15They despised his statutes and his covenant that he made with their fathers and the warnings that he gave them. They went after false idols and became false, and they followed the nations that were around them, concerning whom the LORD had commanded them that they should not do like them. 16And they abandoned all the commandments of the LORD their God, and made for themselves metal images of two calves; and they made an Asherah and worshiped all the host of heaven and served Baal. 17And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings and used divination and omens and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger. 18Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel and removed them out of his sight. None was left but the tribe of Judah only.” (2 Kg 17:7; 15-18)*
 - This is why the LORD was very angry with Israel. Why he allowed the Assyrians to destroy and displace them. Why that kingdom, to this day, ceases to exist. Now that’s not to say that false worship was their only fault.

- ❖ **As we’ll see in Micah, the north and south were both guilty of social injustices, oppressing the weak and poor.** The most well-known verse in Micah is about God’s heart for his people to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with him (6:8). So there’s a lot in this book that addresses societal ills and our duty as the people of God to be on the side of justice and mercy. We look forward into getting into those texts.

- ❖ But chapter 1 is establishing the baseline reason for this coming judgment. **And the point being emphasized is that all of the horizontal sins of injustice stem from a vertical sin of idolatry.** False worship is not merely a theological mistake, an intellectual error. Having a mistaken view of God affects more than just where and how and on what day of the week you worship. Whether its in a temple, mosque, synagogue, or church. On a Friday, Saturday, Sunday, or any day of the week.
- ❖ No, it's much more than that. **How you see God eventually affects how you see yourself and how you treat others around you.** Did you catch that one profound sentence in 2 Kings 17:15? It said, "*They went after false idols and became false.*"
 - **They became like what they worshiped.** A similar pronouncement is made of Israel in **Jeremiah 2:5**, "[They] *went after worthlessness and became worthless.*" They went after what was false and worthless and in turn became false and worthless. **We become like what we worship.**
- ❖ Think about how this works. Even in modern society, we still worship idols. We try to convince ourselves that we're somehow wiser or more sophisticated than the ancients. That we've left behind those primitive beliefs. **But we still worship the same idols. We just don't personify them anymore and give them names.** And yet we're still sacrificing our bodies, our children, our marriages to satisfy the demands of the same idols – whether it's money, career, power, beauty, or love.
- ❖ But just think about how false worship is changing you – how you're becoming like your idol and how it negatively affects the way you treat others. If you worship **money** – if making money is what you live for – you'll start to objectivize everything. You'll start seeing the world and the people in it in terms of their monetary or instrumental value.
 - If you worship **beauty**, you'll eventually become superficial and self-absorbed. Like beauty, your character will be skin-deep, shallow, and empty. And so will your relationships be with others. If you worship **power** – like the power or influence a career might offer – you'll become obsessed with status and be ruthless in your dealings with others. You'll be manifestation of raw power.
- ❖ We become like what we worship. That explains the moral degradation of Israel in the days of Micah. **Just as idols are false, Israel became false.** Just as her idols were destined to lay waste, Israel will likewise be laid to waste.
 - The way vv6-7 describe an utter destruction of the ten tribes of Jacob is meant to be shocking. Remember, even though Micah is referring to the kingdom of Israel, he's speaking to the kingdom of Judah – warning that they're not exempt from judgment. **If God will do this to Israel, then he'll do this to you – if you continue in idolatry.**
- ❖ The trial has begun. The Holy Judge has appeared. Idolatry is the crime at hand. It's a vertical offense with horizontal effects. Now the verdict is in for Israel. The question that remains is – how will Judah, how will the rest of God's people, respond?

The Lament for Those Under God's Judgment

- ❖ This leads to our third observation in vv8-16. Here we see a lament for those under God's judgment. **Micah describes a scene reminiscent of an ancient funeral, describing the typical behavior of a mourner.** Being stripped of your outer garment; weeping and wailing. Listen to vv8-9, “*8For this I will lament and wail; I will go stripped and naked; I will make lamentation like the jackals, and mourning like the ostriches. 9For her wound is incurable, and it has come to Judah; it has reached to the gate of my people, to Jerusalem.*”
 - “*Her wound*” is referring to Israel’s idolatry. It’s incurable. There’s no turning back God’s judgment. Like we said, the verdict is in for the northern kingdom. **The problem is that this festering wound has spread to Judah, to the gates of Jerusalem.** So in the remaining half of chapter 1, Micah turns his attention to Judah, and using the form of a lament, he tries to persuade the people to change course, to repent of their idolatry, and to return wholeheartedly to the Lord.

- ❖ Now in vv10-15, Micah goes through a list of towns in Judah around Jerusalem – lamenting how they will eventually be destroyed by another Assyrian campaign aimed at conquering the entire region. This would occur in 701 BC under the Assyrian king, Sennacherib. That story is told in 2 Kings 18-19.
 - Micah names eleven towns. He mentions six in vv10-12, ending with a reference to Jerusalem and her gates again. Then in vv13-15, he mentions five more. If we had more time, we’d point out the interesting word play applied in each verse. **But the main point is that, in v16, Jerusalem is portrayed as a lamenting mother –** grieving over the children of her delight who will be exiled when the Assyrians come.

- ❖ **By using this form of lament, it shows that these predictions of coming judgment are being issued without an air of superiority or prideful disdain.** Because that’s the tone conveyed by a lament. They’re not meant to be accusatory. Rather, in a lament, you’re identifying with the audience, which conveys empathy.
 - Now why would a prophet use a lament? They usually rely on prophet warnings – issuing *woes*. **But a lament can sometimes be more persuasive than a prophetic warning.** In a lament you’re building bridges of commonality with those under judgment. It’s a more sympathetic posture. But all the while, you’re not denying or downplaying the truth of God’s holiness or of his coming judgment.

- ❖ Just think of other examples in Scripture. It’s like how **Moses lamented over the hardness of Israel** during their wilderness years. In Exodus 32, Moses so identified with the people that he was willing to be blotted out God’s book – to be cut off for their sake (32:32). Or it’s like how in Romans 9, **Paul lamented over the hardness of his kinsmen** towards the gospel, and he was willing to be cursed for their sake – for their salvation (9:3).
 - Or picture **Jesus himself lamenting over the hardness of Jerusalem** in Matthew 23:37, “*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!*”

- ❖ **But Jesus was not just *willing* to be cut off or cursed for the sake of others – he actually was.** Micah 1 ends with Jerusalem as a lamenting mother, looking on helplessly as her children (these smaller towns) are destroyed. **But in the Gospel, as Jesus laments over Jerusalem herself, he didn't look on helplessly as his people went into exile.** He went to the cross where he was cut off and cursed – taking on the just judgment of God in our place.
 - **When God forgives his people – when he shows us mercy – it never comes at the expense of his holy justice.** The book of Micah is emphatic that God never turns a blind eye to sin – even the sins of his own people. He won't give his children a pass or let them off the hook. **God is and will always be perfectly just, and in his infinite wisdom, he has devised a way to remain that way while being merciful.**

- ❖ The answer is the gospel of Jesus. When Jesus saves, he doesn't do it by whisking us away to escape the day of the Lord – to avoid God's judgment. **No, Jesus saves by bearing the brunt of God's judgment in our place.** The wrath of God against the sins of his people was fully unleashed on Christ, and it was extinguished by the cross. Justice was perfectly served upon my Savior, who lived and died for me.
 - *“Because the sinless Savior died / My sinful soul is counted free / For God the Just is satisfied / To look on Him and pardon me.”* That's good news of the gospel. Because Jesus took it upon himself, I'm not getting justice from God. I'm getting mercy.

- ❖ It's only until you experience this mercy – until you realize how much you're not getting what you truly deserve, which is just judgment – only then can you lament for those still under God's judgment.
 - When you look upon the lost in the world, you won't gloat. You won't puff up with pride. **How could you gloat over the fact that someone is going to receive justice – since you yourself were spared when Christ received justice in your place?**

- ❖ The gospel is what enables us to lament for the lost. It reminds God's people today – the Church – that we are no better than anyone still under God's judgment. **That being chosen is not a compliment to us – but a calling.** As Christians, we are called to show the same mercy we have been shown.
 - We are called to imitate Christ. **If it's true that we become like what we worship, then our worship of Christ ought to transform us more into the image of Christ.** Where we share the heart of Christ to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with him.

- ❖ **That idea is going to carry us into the rest of Micah, as we seek to be people of justice and mercy.** But it all begins with proper worship – with Christ at the center. Otherwise, we are being shaped into the image of something else. So let's fix our eyes on Christ and worship him together.