

THE PROPHET OF BETHLEHEM, PART 1

Micah 1-2

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We're looking at the Minor Prophets. They're called "minor" not because they're unimportant but because they wrote less than the Major Prophets. We have thus far looked at Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, and some months ago we did a study in the Book of Jonah. Today we're in the Book of Micah.

The Book of Micah divides rather easily into three divisions. Chapters 1–2 constitute one division, 3–5 the second division and 6–7 a third division. This morning we will look simply at the first two chapters.

Our familiarity with the prophet Micah arises from the notable occasion of the wise men coming to Herod asking him where the king of the Jews is to be born. Herod, turning to his Old Testament scholars, hears that He was to be born in Bethlehem. It was to the prophet Micah that they referred. To most Christians, Micah is known only for that verse. However, as we look at the prophet Micah this morning and evening, we will attempt to understand his message in a larger context and find better appreciation for that one word we've been most familiar with.

In this first verse he gives us an introduction to himself. His name Micah means, "Who is the Lord." While we know nothing about his parents, we can suspect that Micah's parents, like the parents of Joel and Elijah who called their children "God is the Lord," were also godly people who expressed their loyalty for God in the naming of their child. They are not known in the pages of history at all except by inference that they gave a child a name.

The fact that his name suggests godly parents gives rise to suggest to another feeling. That is that God uses persons who have been brought up in a godly home with parents who have had faith.

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He indicates that he is from the town of Moresheth. He was therefore kind of a small-townsmen. His ministry would take him to what was for him the large city of Jerusalem. But as one commentator said of him, “When Micah spoke he had wasted lives and bent backs before him, pinched peasant faces peering between all his words.” He’s very concerned about the oppression of the poor. The man out in the rural area sees what little he has gobbled up by land grabbers and robber barons who through the greasing of the wheel of justice with their money take away what little he has.

In giving us the names of three kings who reigned during the time of his life, Micah also dates himself: Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. We thus know that Micah is a younger contemporary of Isaiah and that just a few decades before him Amos and Hosea ministered in the north. It was a time of great prophets. But it was also a time of great testing for the nation. During the reign of Jotham, the Assyrian threat to the northeast, the military power which had been dormant for a century, came back to life; Syria in the north that had been a vassal to Judah and Israel comes back with great strength. At a time of political and economic turmoil and revolution, a time of darkness for the people of God and the destiny of the people of God, God has his great shining stars speaking to the people.

Isn’t it the case that whenever the age is dark so also is the word of God bright? In our own personal lives when a situation is very dark there shining most brightly is the Word of God which we can cling to.

It was during the reign of Ahaz (whose reign Micah completely lived through) that Judah the Southern Kingdom was in its greatest period of apostasy. Isaiah had sought to get Ahaz to trust in the Lord rather than in military alliances. He chose to disobey the warning of Isaiah and his disobedience led to a whole century of vassalage and subservience of Judah to foreign military

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power, suggesting that when the Word of God is wantonly disobeyed in our lives certain consequences always ensue. Certain servitude and bondage comes as a result of disobedience. It was Ahaz of the kings of Judah who made his son pass through the fire in a practice of heathen worship. It was he who used the bronze altar of Solomon in the temple for occult divination. It was he who closed the doors of the temple sanctuary so that the worship of the Lord was not carried out in the Lord's own city, Jerusalem.

Hezekiah his son began a ministry of change. He listened evidently to the prophecies of Micah and Isaiah and therefore there was a reprieve given to Judah for a period of time. Micah indicates also in his introduction that he addresses his remarks against the capital cities—Samaria representing the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and Jerusalem representing the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

In his first sermon, 1:2–2:13, he gives a series of messages related to punishment and promise. Most of the section deals with the punishment. Only the last two verses, 2:12–13, deal with the wider theme of promise. Micah, by laying a heavy stress on punishment in this opening section, is showing the kind of condition the people of God have gotten themselves into, therefore the kind of necessary judgment that is to come against them. But with the word of prophecy always is the word of hope. The word of what God is going to do. The silver lining behind the dark clouds. If you find yourself today in the kind of position that Micah's audience found itself in, you may be very deeply convicted of a wrong that you have been doing and God forcefully says to you, "If you persist in that here is what is going to happen to your life."

But with that announcement also comes the gospel, the good news, a word of promise that shows you the way out of your dilemma. I pray that this today will be to you as the message of Micah was meant to be to the people whom he gave it.

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Before we look at verse 2 and following I want to parenthetically note some underlying assumptions of the Book of Micah and indeed of all prophecy.

One underlying assumption is that sin brings judgment. Transgression of God's ways brings a harvest of weakness in our life, subservience. And also of direct chastisement. Micah in his book will speak of the sins of land grabbers, rulers who literally hated good and loved evil. Of false prophets who prophesied for the money that was given to them. Priests who taught simply because they got a salary. He will speak also of the corruption of society in general. For all of these things God is to bring judgment.

Micah also has an underlying assumption; he has a philosophy of history. It is something which all of us as the people of God have which the world does not have. For a philosophy of history means that we have an understanding of our origin and of our destiny. Of our roots and the final goal to which we march. Micah has the understanding of Israel's destiny being bound up in the God of creation, the God who called Abraham and the God who brought Israel out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. He had a nation whose history began somewhere and whose history was going somewhere, to the day of the Lord when God rang down the curtain on human history and brought in both a day of judgment and a day of blessing. So as Christians, in a personal sense we have a sense of origin, a sense of beginning, a sense rooted in Jesus Christ and his work on the cross and in His resurrection on our behalf. Our destiny has begun somewhere. And we are going somewhere. We know what is going to happen to the world and we know who the future ruler of the world really is. What a treasure we have! How unlike the world we are to know these things about where we are coming from and where we are going.

We also have in the prophecy of Micah a revelation of the character of God who also acts in truth and in love. His truth brings judgment and his love brings mercy.

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As we look at Micah 1:2–2:11 we explore the theme of punishment that is coming upon Judah and the reasons for that punishment.

I. In verses 2–9 Micah speaks of the disaster that is to happen to the Northern Kingdom of Samaria, a disaster which is to serve as a warning to Jerusalem, the capital of the Southern Kingdom.

He begins with words from the court of law where the appearance of the judge takes place.

Micah has this understanding that the judgment of God is about to begin on Judah and God is coming from his chambers into the courtroom of human history to exercise his role. He will come out of his holy palace, or his holy temple. He will come as a witness because he has an understanding of all that has happened. He will come as the plaintiff or the prosecutor because he has a concern and a right to prosecute against the wrong. He also enters as the judge who has the wisdom and the authority to judge fairly. In a panoramic view of the judgment of God in verses 2–5, Micah sees God as coming out of his place. The first thing that his feet land on is the tops of the mountains. His presence is presented as an awe-inspiring, hair-raising sort of feeling, that God when He trod the earth starts as an Everest conqueror. When God is trodding the earth, things that are solid begin to melt and turn to liquid so that the mountains are cleft and the waters pour down a steep place. It is an awesome thing to meet the living God. Well we might in our own age emphasize the friendship of Jesus but not at the exclusion of the scriptural understanding that God is omnipotent, all-powerful, and great. His appearance bedazzles and shakes the earth.

When God comes from his holy place he comes to try the earth. It would have been the assumption of Micah's contemporaries that when God comes to judge He would judge the nations. He would give Assyria their licks and Egypt and Syria their licks. But Micah, in a

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prophetic word which stands conventional thinking on its head, says that the reason why God is coming in this auspicious moment out of his holy palace is because of transgression and sin within Judah and Israel itself. Transgression is the direct rebellion against God in the form of disobedience. And sin is the failure to reach the goal that God had intended for the people.

Peter picks up on this theme in a Christian setting when he says that God judges his own people first. “The time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God. If it begins with us what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel?” (1 Peter 4:17).

In other words God cannot begin to exercise his judgment upon the world unless he has first of all taken care of his saints. As believers we recognize that the judgment of God for us is already past. But while we say that we must be careful not to latch on to the conventional thinking of Micah’s day, which said, “God made a covenant with Israel and the covenant is so secure we can do whatever we want and God will never call us to account for our actions.” We are to live wisely and soberly as children of the day and not as children of the night.

In verses 1: 6–9, Micah, in this description of what is to happen to Samaria as a warning to Jerusalem, describes in a close-up situation that Samaria, that town which is fortified and on a hillside, is to be made into a heap. Its vineyards are to be thrown down, the stones of the city are to be cast into the valley. And its religious objects which are built through the money spent in religious prostitution, these images which are an affront to God are themselves to be obliterated. When Micah declares this word about Samaria He is not declaring it as simply a person who is speaking from a narrow, nationalistic point of view and saying, “Good for them. The Northern Kingdom revolted and they had it coming to them. It’s about time God punished them.” But when he sees God’s punishment coming upon Samaria he begins to lament. Micah is appalled at the message which is has to bring. He is no prophet who preaches judgment easily as though it

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was a glad thing to see that somebody finally got what they had coming to them. But like every true man or woman of God who has had the not-so-joyful task of announcing the fact that this action is not pleasing to God and consequences are going to ensue, Micah's heart is broken.

Typical of the mourning rites of Near Eastern people, he rends his garments and he wails.

It is our custom when there's grief in our culture to go inside our enclosures, to pull or blinds, draw our shades, close our doors, decline invitations. We have a quiet way of expressing grief.

The Hebrew people expressed grief in a far different manner. They expressed it in a volatile manner with expressive gestures. So Micah in an elaborate display says the grief is in my heart for what is going to happen. It's the kind of grief that has no healing because the situation is past remedy. Which needn't have been at all if at the outset God's word had been heeded and obeyed. Tragedies of life could be avoided if we walk with the Lord. His counsel is to bring us to peace, to bring us to well being.

II. In verses 10–16 Micah picks up the second theme of the time of punishment, the disaster that is occurring in Judah, which is also a warning to Jerusalem.

I've indicated that Micah came from a small town. In these verses Micah calls out the names of small towns as omens of the destiny that awaits Jerusalem if it does not come to its senses.

When Micah begins with "Tell it not in Gath," our biblical ears are immediately in tune to something said a century and a half earlier by David, when upon hearing of the suicide of Saul and the finishing of that job by one of his soldiers, the word brought to him that Saul was dead, instead of making David happy he gave the lament, "Tell it not in Gath." Gath was a Philistine city and the Philistines were opponents to Israelis. "Tell it not in Gath" was a lament.

Micah picks up on that same phrase of David and starts. You know he's going into a funeral lament. Then he begins to describe in a kind of way of a pun. He uses names of towns that have

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meanings or sound like meanings that are expressive of their fate. Micah sees the invading armies of Assyria lying siege to the small towns around Jerusalem.

Then since Micah himself has mourned when he saw what was happening in Israel, he now urges the people to enter into mourning over what is to happen to these towns. Make yourself bald and cut off your hair for you shall go into exile.

Micah reveals to his wide-eyed hearers who are aghast and ready to hear the worst that behind the grim future stands none other than the person of the Lord whom they can count on no longer as a safe stronghold. But rather, as His people's enemy He comes to chastise and afflict because of sin.

III. In 2:1–5, Micah picks up on the third theme of punishment by talking specifically about the crimes of Judah.

We see a more detailed list of crimes in other prophets, but specifically Micah's fundamentals, in which he sees the breaking of the tenth and eighth commandments, the commandments about coveting and the commandment about stealing. He specifically accuses the robber barons, those who do not engage in normal real estate transactions to get property, but instead grease the wheel of justice to accomplish their own aims and attempt to so deprive the poor of their investment that they cannot survive. He indicates to them that as punishment the property which they have gained is to be totally taken from them and poetic justice is handed out. They who desire the property of others will themselves, when God brings His justice, have no property of their own. In verse 5 Micah refers to the fact that from time to time within the people of God there was a periodic redistribution of land. It was a custom to pass land on from one generation to another. From time to time an adjustment might need to be made in the allocation. We don't do that in our culture. Within the society Micah's talking about, people lived on the same land for generations.

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When the land was redistributed there was a religious ceremony in which lots were cast. The person who got the first lot got the choice land. In that day Micah is saying there will be no line that is cast by lot for you. It will be taken away.

IV. A fourth division on this theme on punishment Micah responds to the false prophets who are contesting with him.

We must not think of chapters 1 and 2 as simply preached on one occasion and that was it.

Probably there were many sermons Micah preached from the words given in these two chapters, preached in the cities wherever he could find an audience. Over a period of time there no doubt built up a core of spiritual resistance to his message, so that there were false prophets who came along. Micah quotes them. They say, “Do not prophesy about these things” (2:6, NIV). Here Micah is saying, “They are indicating to me that I should be quiet with my message, that I am not speaking the word of God.” Who indeed wants to be so foolish as Micah to demolish comfortable doctrines, doctrines which assure us that no matter what we do everything is going to be ok. Micah responds to these false prophets by indicating that he speaks in the Spirit of the Lord. And what he is saying is the Spirit’s doing. And that those who do good and walk uprightly will give heed to his message.

He will later in chapter 3 accuse his opponents of being in the ministry for profit rather than for the sake of being a prophet. They were profiteers rather than prophets.

In 2:8–9 Micah addresses the patrons of the false prophets that anoint their palm with money that they might prophecy good things. He says, “Lately my people have risen up like an enemy. You strip off the rich robe from those who pass by without a care, like men returning from battle. You drive the women of my people from their pleasant homes” (NIV). Here’s a reference no doubt to widows who have young children still at home who are in their pleasant or cozy houses. In this

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Micah paints a beautiful picture for us to see, a widow with her young children in her cozy house. But the mercenary spirit of the land grabber is so great that he must evict the widow with her children in order to secure her land and therefore deprive her children of their heritage or their glory or their possessions. Such is not to go winked at by the Lord.

Thus verse 10 indicates, “Get up, go away! For this is not your resting place, because it is defiled, it is ruined, beyond all remedy” (NIV). Then kind of a sarcastic word in verse 11: Micah indicates of the false prophets that they’re like persons going around with a great deal of wind coming out of their mouth, giving a promise to the people of wine and strong drink. What he is in essence saying, is the people are in such a mood that the only kind of preaching they want to hear is the sort of preaching that promises them alcohol galore. If you could make that kind of promise then you could be successful as a prophet in this kind of society. It’s a deep and penetrating indictment of his people, with that theme of punishment unrolling on the land and upon the people, captivity looming.

Here is where the prophets stand out as tremendous landmarks on the landscape of history. Because what they said actually came to pass. They were not people beating the air. The captivity which they promised came. But Micah closes with a word of hope. It was always the prophet’s hope that his word would cause change. Even if it didn’t cause change because God had made an irrevocable covenant with Israel, ultimately God by his own degree would bring about a better end for his people.

V. In verses 12–13 he looks to the promise.

“I will surely gather all of you, O Jacob [Here He’s referring to both north and south—Israel and Judah]; I will surely bring together the remnant of Israel” (NIV). A remnant is a small thing, which has been left over from the original. “I will bring them together like sheep in a pen, like a

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flock in a pasture; the place will throng with people” (NIV). Here’s the regathering of the people of God and then their deliverance as they are regathered. “One who breaks open the way will go up before them; they will break through the gate and go out. Their king will pass through before them, the LORD at their head” (verse 13, NIV).

Sometimes poetic language is a little difficult to grab hold of. What essentially Micah is saying is that the people of Israel are gathered like sheep in a fold by God (reminiscent of David who was both shepherd and king, and Jesus who is shepherd and king). As they are gathered, the Lord himself, not some military power, not some political alliance, but the Lord himself would come and He would make a break in the wall which contained them. That is to say, He would make a hole in their confinement. He would tear aside the barrier which would keep them in permanent captivity. He would come and make a break, an opening, and they would follow Him out into freedom and the Lord would go on before them, the Lord always at their head.

Micah looked to the salvation of his people as belonging to the person of the Lord God who would personally come to the rescue of his people and create a way of escape.

The gospel is not according to the despair of this age. For one man and one man only entered history, entered life, by choice. None of us chose to get into this room. All of us simply got here. There is only One who had the choice before he came—Jesus. He came not by accident but by voluntary choice. He entered from outside the “room” of earthly existence. Something no one else ever did. He entered with faith. He entered with hope. And He was a carpenter and He made a door in the room. He said, “I am the door. If any man exits after me he will get out.” What a difference from the room of hopelessness to the escape the Lord provides.

Saint Paul said that Jesus made a way for us to escape from the evil world in which we live. All glory to God through all the ages of eternity!

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Micah from his Old Testament setting sees that if the people of God are going to escape their captivity and their bondage they will need the personal intervention of the Lord to bring them out. We who understand something of Jesus and His marvelous life and His resurrection from the dead know that in Him this prophecy is already fulfilled. That Jesus came and He made a breach. He made a breach in the enclosure of death which would forever separate us from one another and from God. He opened up the door.

It is my joy and privilege to simply remind you that Jesus has made a way of escape for all of us to follow Him to escape the wrath of God and to enjoy the salvation, the mercy, and the love of God. We have a Friend in the heavens.

Closing Prayer

We give thanks in this moment, our heavenly Father, that our earth has been pierced by your Son. You have entered the world. You have entered in a miraculous way our own hearts to live within us, to create in us a new being, a new man, a new woman. Already we have seen your delivering power in our lives. We've not yet seen it all, for much of what we've seen is in the Spirit. It is not visible to the eyes. We know that the day will soon come when all things which are invisible will be made visible. We will see with our own eyes the glorious entrance you have prepared for us as your people into your eternal temple and dwelling place. We have a habitation in the heavens not made with hands. God, we thank you that you have chosen for us a way of escape. We thank you that you care enough about us that you choose to give us salvation instead of punishment if we will but let your Son stand as our substitute and experience the punishment of your wrath rather than we ourselves experiencing it. So great is your love for us that you would do this. Although from time to time we may rationally argue with you about justice and judgment in our hearts deep within where our spirit really is, all of us without Jesus would be

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desperately afraid of meeting you. All of us would not want to stand before you a moment as we are without Jesus. For with our own heart we agree with your word, “There is none righteous no not one” (Romans 3:10). Even I have come short of the glory of God. So I look for my salvation in you, Lord. I look for your salvation not in my nation, not in my employment, not in my education, not in the pursuits which I enjoy, not in my family, not in material advantage. Not in anything but you. My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness. You’ve made a way of escape. We praise you for that. Let that word be deeply written on our hearts this day and this week that we might stand taller and better as your people conscious of the great work that you have wrought on our behalf. In Jesus’ name. Amen.