

# **A LOOK AT A BOOK: Micah**

## **October 5, 2014**

### **The Message of Micah: What Does God Want?**

#### **What do you want out of religion?**

The rising generation has been taught to give the benefit of the doubt to the unknown, so mystery is in style. Since truth is personal – my truth may not be your truth – tolerance is the least we can offer to people with different values than ours. And in this sort of environment, the ability to make changes is essential. Changes in your moral standards? Yes. Change in your religious practices? Of course.

One study a few years ago concluded that church-shopping has become a way of life among Christians in America. One in seven adults changes churches each year; one in six regularly rotates among different congregations. The so-called process theologians even go so far as to suggest that God changes. He, too, develops and grows along with everything else in the universe, they say.

Tolerant, changing, accommodating, tantalizingly mysterious and indefinable – does this describe what you understand Christianity to be? Is that what you look for in your own spiritual renewal and religion?

#### **Introducing Micah**

If so, you might be interested in the next minor prophet we come to in our series of “A Look at a Book” – the prophet Micah. Let me remind you, these books are “minor” not because they are unimportant but because their books are short. Several centuries before the birth of Christ, these books were collected together in one scroll and became known as “the twelve,” although the twelve prophets represented prophesied over five different centuries!

Micah wrote in a day not too unlike our own. Prophesying around the same time as Isaiah prophesied (in the eighth century B.C.), Micah found the nation of Israel in deep trouble with God, as God’s people had fallen to terrible moral depths. Society was dissolving and misery was ensuing. In this passage, Micah speaks as the personification of the people of Judah.

Micah 7:1-6

Misery abounds. There are no grapes or figs. Cravings go unfulfilled. These people are supposedly God's people, but the godly are not to be found: they are swept from the land. Instead, murder is widespread. Rulers are corrupt. Justice is perverted through bribery. It's a rich man's world!

The rot of this land has gotten so bad that people cannot trust each other, not even spouses. The family has disintegrated.

Yet Micah was not hopeless. He says in the verse following the passage above, "But as for me, I watch in hope for the Lord, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me" (7:7). Micah's hope in this terribly difficult situation was based on something more than himself or even God's people. It was based on God! Notice the first word of verse 7: "but." You could sum these verses up by saying, "Yes, the situation is grievous, *but* God will hear me." Micah separates himself from the sin that he has described; then he watches and waits for God to see, hear, and respond. So he calls God "my Savior."

If this is the situation in which Micah finds the southern kingdom of Judah in the years just before and after the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel – a situation full of sin and evil abhorred by the Lord – what is it that Micah says the Lord wants? Is God basically tolerant, changing, and mysterious? What does God desire?

As we look through the book of Micah, we will observe three things that God says he wants.

### **God wants wrongs to be rebuked**

God wants wrongs to be rebuked, especially among his own people. This theme predominates throughout Micah, except for a couple of the more hope-filled chapters (e.g., chapters 4 and 7). The book appears to fall into three series of prophecies – chapters 1-2, 3-5, and 6-7 – and the sins of God's people are condemned in each one of these series.

After providing an introduction and a summons to listen in the opening verses of his book, Micah promises that God is coming to confront Judah for its sins.

Micah 1:1-7

Micah 2:1-3

As chapter 2 continues, we learn that the people of Judah had even sunk to loving false prophets and their false prophecies! Not content with lying with their own mouths, they wanted to put lies in God's mouth: " 'Do not prophesy,' their prophets say. 'Do not prophesy about these things; disgrace will not overtake us'" (2:6). You can understand why God then describes them by saying, "If a liar and deceiver comes and says, 'I will prophesy for you plenty of wine and beer,' he would be just the prophet for this people" (2:11). The point here is not so much their interest in "wine and beer" as it is in their willingness to sacrifice truth for the sake of wine and beer – and plenty of it! They wanted prophets who would tell them nothing more than that the land was going to be full of good things for them. Those are the prophets they would listen to. You could say that they picked their prophets as people might pick their psychics, but not as people pick their bankers or their doctors. Can you imagine picking your doctor based on how cheery and optimistic his diagnoses are! This is what Judah was doing.

So God would judge them for their sin. Both Samaria and Jerusalem – the northern and the southern kingdoms – would be judged.

Notice how severe this judgment would be: "The Lord is coming from his dwelling place; he comes down and treads the high places of the earth" (1:3). And when God "treads," he does not lightly skip from stepping stone to stepping stone. No, he crushes!

We know from history that the Assyrians destroyed Samaria (another name for the northern kingdom of Israel) several years after Micah gave his prophecy. The northern ten tribes of Israel disappeared from the pages of history forever. One hundred and fifty years later, Jerusalem and the southern kingdom of Judah were defeated and carried off into exile.

The second series of prophecies, comprising chapters 3-5, also focuses on the sin that required rebuke. Micah states his own commission in terms of rebuking sin: "But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression, to Israel his sin" (3:8).

More of the sins among God's people are catalogued throughout these middle three chapters. Primary among those sins were the sins of the leaders, who abused the people for their own ends. The graphic language in the opening verses of chapter 3 reflects the horror of the nation's life under these leaders as well as the terrible perversion that the abuse of authority is (see 3:1-3). The leaders are also guilty of

not respecting the sanctity of human life, with despising justice and distorting rights, and even with bribing judges. “Her leaders judge for a price” (3:11).

At its root, of course, sin is a matter of the heart: “you...hate good and love evil” (3:2). It is disaffection for God, and greater affection for the things he has made. As Jesus said, “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander” (Matthew 15:19). When a heart is twisted, no one should be surprised when it does evil.

In response to the sins of the leaders (and the people too, we’ll see), God says that he will punish the nation by abandoning it to its invaders: “Then they will cry out to the Lord, but he will not answer them. At that time he will hide his face from them because of the evil they have done” (3:4). He will ensure they are besieged and destroyed. He will wipe out their leaders. Those who remain will be taken into exile in Babylon. Other nations will gloat at their fall, as God deserts his people and returns them to the nations from whence they came.

God also promises the false prophets that he will not hear them. These for-profit prophets are giving out false information. They are not leading people to God but away from him. So God promises not to answer them.

Micah 3:6-7

This is the heart of God’s punishment upon his people: cutting off his communication with them. He will not take their calls. He will not speak to them. He wants a separation because of their sins.

Indeed, the sin of Israel was not limited to its leaders and prophets. The whole nation was guilty of false worship and false trust. So in chapter 5 God promises to destroy the objects of both their political and their religious security.

Micah 5:10-13

Remember, these were the people to whom God had revealed himself. These were the people whom God specially loved. But they had begun to trust horses and walls. They sought out divinity by observing clouds and reading chicken en trails! They loved sacred stones. They dotted the land with carved images that essentially gold God to get lost – “these are out gods that we will rely on.”

## **God wants his people to be restored**

What else does Micah tell us that God wants? God wants his people to be restored. In every section of his prophecy in which we read about the severity of God's judgment, we also read about the sweet hope of his salvation.

After Micah's initial denunciations in chapter 2, surprising words of light burst out of the darkness: "I will surely gather all of you, O Jacob; I will surely bring together the remnant of Israel. I will bring them together like sheep in a pen, like a flock in its pasture; the place will throng with people" (2:12). Notice the trilogy of saving promise: "I will surely gather..."; "I will surely bring together..."; "I will bring them together..." God would save his remnant.

That does not mean he would not judge. He would judge by sending Judah into exile. But he would rescue Judah as well.

Micah 4:8, 10

God would fulfill these promises by sending a first group of people from Judah and Jerusalem into exile about 150 years later, around 605 B.C. The rest of the city would eventually follow. God would then fulfill his promise to restore his people seventy years after this first deportation, when the first group of Jews returned from exile to Jerusalem. Eventually, Ezra and Nehemiah would also return to the land to lead the people in recovering God's Word and rebuilding Jerusalem's walls. God would restore his people, as he promised through Micah.

In chapter 7, the prophet Micah personifies the restored Jerusalem.

Micah 7:8-9

The ferocious language of God's judgment against his people in the book of Micah should not leave us with the idea that God said nothing more to his people. He did say more! He spoke words of restoration to these rebuked, chastened people. A remnant would inherit the promises of Israel as a whole (2:12). After all the trials and troubles, God would reestablish his people in righteousness and justice. God's Word to his people was stern and ominous, yes, but it was not finally hopeless or despairing. Everyone who loved God more than God's blessings would see their way through the initial chastening. They – or their children after them – would be restored. God's people would again be lifted up.

### **God wants his character to be known**

God also wants his character to be known. If the basic message of Micah is that wrongs will be rebuked and that God's people will be restored, behind and above these two basic points is God's commitment to make himself known both through his judgment and through his mercy.

*Through the acknowledgment of his supremacy*

First, God wants his character to be known through the acknowledgment of his supremacy.

Micah 4:1-7

God did not intend for the nation to be reassembled simply for the good of his own people but ultimately so that his supremacy would be acknowledged. He wanted his sovereign rule over the nations to be understood. He had delivered his people from Egypt in the Exodus, thus showing his supremacy over Egypt's gods; now he would deliver his people from Babylon, showing his supremacy over Babylon's gods. The famous picture of peace in these verses – nations beating their swords into plowshares (4:3) – will not come through a League of Nations, a United Nations, or a Pax Americana. It will be established through God's own reign.

If we return to chapter 3 for a moment, we recall the severity of God's promises of judgment. Chapter 3's last verse, in fact, reads, "Zion will be plowed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets" (3:12). Yet the beautiful imagery of chapter 4's opening words indicates a 180-degree turn: "In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and peoples will stream to it" (4:1). God ultimately plans to exalt this place as a reflection of his own greatness.

Why will the peoples stream to this place? Look at the next verse: "Many nations will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths'" (4:2a). People of all nations will turn to God. And, as a result, "The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (4:2b). The Word of God, which had become scarce among God's people in Micah's day, would, in this day of redemption, become like a river of life going out from God's people to all of God's world! What a glorious vision and great hope: God reconciling the world to himself, and God ruling supreme over his world (cf. 7:16)!

*Through the remembrance of his righteousness*

Second, God wants his character to be known through the remembrance of his righteousness.

Micah 6:1-5

In these verses, God recalls his blessings to Israel. He reminds them of his miraculous delivery from Pharaoh's power, his preservation of them through the wilderness, and his giving of the Promised Land.

God had acted righteously toward them, and he wanted them to remember his righteousness. By chastening and delivering his people, God called to their minds not only their unrighteousness, he demonstrated his utter and complete righteousness in his dealings with them.

*Through the demonstration of his mercy*

But third, God is also merciful, and he wants that to be known. This is how the book of Micah concludes.

Micah 7:18-20

There is pardon for sins and forgiveness for transgressions! God's compassion will liberate us from the tyranny of our sins! In all of this, of course, God means to display his mercy, so that Micah can sing, "Who is a God like you." This is the Lord's final word through Micah to his people!

Notice also whose transgressions are forgiven: God "forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance."

### **Conclusion**

So that's what God wants.

What do you want?

God wants wrong to be rebuked. Do you? Or are you more committed to holding onto your sin? Really, this describes all of us until we are saved.

God wants his people to be restored. Do you? Maybe this sounds a little better to you. You might be on board with the morality of the Bible. Morality is a good

thing; you have always known that. But perhaps you have never thought much about God's people, and God's special concern for his people.

God wants his character to be known. Do you? Here's the real bull's-eye in this book. God acts so that his supreme sovereignty, his righteousness, and his mercy will be known. He acts to reveal himself. Honestly, do you care that much about God? Perhaps you think of religion more as guilt-induced fire insurance. Your conscience bothers you, and this is one way of playing it safe. Or maybe religion is a social thing. You like some of the people at church and some of the meetings. Or maybe religion provides your moral encouragement – helps keep you and the kids walking straight. But consider, does your religion have much to do with God? Is knowing him the center of your religion? Is learning to know him better the center of your life and ambition? If you are a Christian, it is.

Micah 6:6-8

God does not want us to give sacrifices. Rather, he wants us to humble ourselves before him and submit to his authority. He also wants us to act justly and love mercy. By doing so, we will reflect to the world around us the God that we worship. Loving justice and mercy reflects God's own character. Choosing humility acknowledged and displays his supremacy.

What do you want out of religion? What's the most important thing religion offers?

If God's judgment does seem severe, why does remembering what Christ did on the cross help us to understand that severity?

Why can God not simply "erase" or "overlook" our sins and remain holy and just?

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Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament* (adapted with changes)