

Who is like the Lord? Judge

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[0 : 00] Good morning. Please turn to chapter 1 of Micah, which is on page 938 of the Church Bibles. The word of the Lord that came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem.

Here, 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.

For behold, the Lord is coming out of his place, and will come down and tread upon the high places of the earth, and the mountains will melt under him, and the valleys will split open like wax before the fire, like waters poured down a steep place.

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?

Therefore, I will make Samaria a heap in the open country, a place for planting vineyards, and I will pour down her stones into the valley and uncover her foundations.

[1 : 29] All her carved images shall be beaten to pieces. All her wages shall be burned with fire, and all her idols I will lay waste.

For from the fee of a prostitute she gathered them, and to the fee of a prostitute they shall return. 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, and it has come to Judah. It has reached the gate of my people, to Jerusalem. Tell it not in Gath.

For the good, because disaster has come down from the Lord, to the gate of Jerusalem. Harness the steeds to the chariots, inhabitants of Lachish.

It was the beginning of sin to the daughter of Zion, for in you were found the transgressions of Israel. Therefore, you shall give parting gifts to Moresheth Gath.

[3 : 05] The houses of Axib shall be a deceitful thing to the kings of Israel. I will again bring a conqueror to you, inhabitants of Moresheth. The glory of Israel shall come to Adullam.

Make yourselves bold, and cut off your hair, for the children of your delight. Make yourselves as bold as the eagle, for they shall go from you into exile.

The second reading comes from Micah chapter 2. Woe to those who devise wickedness and work evil on their beds. When the morning dawns, they will perform it, because it is in the power of their hand.

They covet fields, and seize them and houses, and take them away. They oppress a man and his house, a man and his inheritance. Therefore, thus says the Lord, Behold, against this family I am devising disaster from which you cannot remove your necks.

And you shall not walk haughtily, for it will be a time of disaster. In that day they shall take up a taunt song against you, and moan bitterly, and say, We are utterly ruined.

[4 : 18] He changes the portion of my people, how he removes it from me. To an apostate he allots our fields. Therefore, you will have none to cast the line by lot in the assembly of the Lord.

Do not preach. Thus they preach. One should not preach of such things. Disgrace will not overtake us. Should this be said, O house of Jacob? Has the Lord grown impatient?

Are these his deeds? Do not my words do good to him who walks uprightly? But lately my people have risen up as an enemy. You strip the rich robe from those who pass by trustingly with no thought of war.

The women of my people you drive out from their delightful houses. From their young children you take away my splendor forever. Arise and go. For this is no place to rest because of uncleanness

that destroys with a grievous destruction.

If a man should go about in utter wind and lies saying, I will preach to you of wine and strong drink. He would be the preacher for this people. I will surely assemble all of you, O Jacob.

[5 : 27] I will gather the remnant of Israel. I will set them together like sheep in a fold. Like a flock in its pasture. A noisy multitude of men. He who opens the breach goes up before them.

They break through and pass the gate going out by it. Their king passes on before them. The Lord at their head. Good morning everyone.

My name is Andy Meadows. I'm one of the assistant ministers here. Do please keep Micah chapter 1 and 2 open. Let's pray before we start. Father, we thank you that all the Bible, all your word is from you.

That this is God breathed. And Father, please help us now to listen to your challenging word. Amen. Well, as we've said earlier, it's the first Sunday of Advent.

So we're officially allowed to start talking about Christmas. And so here is a question. What God do you want people to hear about this Christmas? What God do you want people to hear about this Christmas?

[6 : 37] You're at a carol service here or at work or at school. What do you want the speaker to say? Or you're speaking to someone about the Christmas message.

What are you going to tell people? I expect something quite positive. God shows his love for us in the birth of Jesus. God is with us. Jesus came as a light and a life.

That's the God we want people to hear about. I don't imagine we'd come close to the message Micah gives God's people in chapter 1. Look again, chapter 1, verse 2.

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.

For behold, the Lord is coming out of his place and he will come down and tread upon the high places of the earth. And the mountains will melt under him and the valleys will split open like wax before the fire, like waters poured down a steep place.

[7 : 45] Miserable Micah might not be on the top of our list to speak at a carol service. Yes, okay, I'm not going to speak on this at the Christingle next week.

Although having fire and candle wax would make a great visual aid of verse 4. We want to be appropriate to the occasion. But what I'm getting at is the temptation to find this part of God's character really uncomfortable and quite frankly embarrassing.

And that in turn can lead to giving the impression that God is like a middle-aged, middle England vicar. Smiley, nice, a bit spineless.

Like Rowan Atkinson in Four Weddings and a Funeral. Or maybe God is like the granddad on Christmas Day, falling asleep in the chair when there's chaos going on all around them.

But over the next three Sundays in Advent, in our Advent series in Micah, we're going to see a bigger view of Christmas. Because we're going to see a bigger view of God.

[8 : 54] And that is Micah's main concern throughout this book. Micah's name literally means who is like God. And it's where he lands in chapter 7.

So do keep your finger in Micah 1 and turn over to Micah chapter 7 right at the end of the book. And let me read chapter 7 verses 18 and 19.

Who is a God like you? Pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance.

He does not retain his anger forever because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us. He will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

I expect we prefer to hear this spoken about and not chapter 1. But Micah teaches us to hold on to both aspects of God's character.

[9 : 59] Yes, God does come to save. But he saves through judgment. Turn back to Micah chapter 1 with me. When an SAS paratrooper parachutes in somewhere, they first look up and gauge their surroundings to get their bearings.

And we need to do the same as we look at the Bible and see where we are in the big Bible story. Micah is an unfamiliar book. But we might know more than we think.

That's because Micah was around at the same time as Isaiah. And they love to borrow each other's material. So when we looked at Isaiah last year, as we go through Micah, you might think, oh, I

remember that.

That's because it's copied from Isaiah or Isaiah copied it from Micah. I don't know. And we've actually parachuted into the 8th century BC. I've got a map on the screen.

Chapter 1, verse 1 tells us that Micah was preaching at the time of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. And this is a time when the kingdom was split into two.

[11:01] The northern kingdom, can't quite read that. That is the northern kingdom, still called Israel, confusingly, with Samaria as the capital. And the southern kingdom of Judah with Jerusalem as its capital.

And you'll see at the top right-hand corner the Assyrian Empire. They are the big issue of the time. If you're watching the news in Micah's day, Assyria is what the headlines are all about.

And they go on a massive conquest. If you look at the next map, two maps, see the arrows pushing out from Nineveh. That is Assyria on the march.

Now, three years into Ahaz's rule in 732 BC, they conquered Damascus. Then ten years on, 722 BC, they conquered Samaria and took away everyone as slaves.

No more northern kingdom of Israel. And Micah is very clear. This is judgment from God. So look down at chapter 1, verse 5.

[12:06] 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? God is coming to judge because of what is going on in these capital cities. A little microcosm of what's going on in the nation at large.

It's a time when God's people are not living for him. They're hardening their hearts and turning away from him. And in this courtroom scene of chapter 1, God comes as the judge, the jury and the executioner.

And so fast forward, King Hezekiah takes over in nervous times as we thought about in Isaiah last year. He's surrounded by the Assyrian superpower. And in 701 BC, the worst happens.

Chapter 1, verse 9. For her wound is incurable and it has come to Judah. It has reached the gate of my people to Jerusalem. God's judgment through Assyria comes on the southern kingdom.

[13:17] And chapter 1, verses 10 to 16, recounts how Assyria invades and conquered the towns of Judah one by one as they got closer and closer to the capital. And they got right up to the gates of Jerusalem before God miraculously intervened and saved his people.

But that just delayed the inevitable because God's judgment did fall eventually as later Babylon became the dominant power.

They invaded Judah and took them into exile. And so at the end of 1.16, well that comes true. God's people are carried into exile.

But Micah is speaking in chapter 1 and 2 before these events take place. Before Assyria invades. Before Babylon takes them into exile.

But that is the judgment that is coming on both kingdoms. And as we go through the book we'll see themes cycle round. The book is structured around three cycles of judgment followed by hope.

[14:20] And we're going to look at the first cycle this morning. It is mainly judgment. I work that out of all the verses. Chapters 1 and 2 are 93% judgment, 7% hope.

And that is reflected in this talk. So when we get to point 2 after 20 minutes, don't panic. We're going to focus on chapter 2 though. Because here is the evidence for the prosecution.

And then the judgment handed down. And so what do we learn about Micah's God? Well the first thing on the handout. God judges fairly.

God judges fairly. We're not on the world map anymore. We've zoomed in by drone to someone's bedroom. Have a look at chapter 2 verse 1. Woe to those who devise wickedness and work evil on their beds.

It's still dark. A man is lying in his bed. He's just woken up. He's thinking. He's running through the day in his head. Planning every move. And all of them evil.

[15:26] Verse 1 again. When the morning dawns, they perform it. Because it is in the power of their hands. Are you asking what he's up to today? He tells you. And you say, why are you doing that?

And he says, because I can. And who is going to stop me? Now Micah could have picked on lots of things. That were going wrong. He picks on shady property deals.

Verse 2. They covet fields and seize them. And houses and take them away. They oppress a man and his house. A man and his inheritance. This is not talking about sharp bidding.

Or careful speculation. But oppression. Powerful people who have the system on their side. And maybe they did have some of the heavies for the dirty work.

But the picture here is of barristers, not bandits. People. Property taken away in courts. And now in this subsistence farming economy of the day, each family had a piece of land.

[16:29] And the man in verse 1 wonders which person is going to lose their farm today. And as soon as it's light, no one is there to stop him. And Mrs. Smith and the kids are going beggars on the road by evening.

And no house, no land, no food. And so no secure place in the people of God anymore. With that going on, who is going to stop him?

Well, God. God's going to stop him. Because what kind of God would watch this happen and not be angry? What kind of God wouldn't care about people driven off their land?

A future stolen, children starving. And so God's judgment falls. Verse 3. Therefore, thus says the Lord, behold, against this family I am devising disaster.

From which of you cannot remove your necks? And you shall not walk haughtily, for it will be a time of disaster. In that day they will take up a taunt song against you and moan bitterly and say, we are utterly ruined.

[17:36] He changes the portion of my people. How he removes it from me. To an apostate he allots our fields. Therefore, you will have none to cast the line by lot in the assembly of the Lord.

The emphasis here is on exact fairness. At verse 1, the man lying on his bed devises evil. And verse 3, God devises disaster against them.

And the footnote makes it clear that evil and disaster are the same word in the original and can mean either, depending on the context. God is using the same lingo. That's saying he will repay in kind.

The sovereign schemer will go to work here. And so you plan, God plans. You plan evil. God plans disaster. They thought they could get away with it forever.

But God sees what they do. And God plans to give them an exact fair match. They take away God's people's land and future inheritance.

[18:37] God will take away their land and future in the people of God's. He gives them a taste of their own medicine. What is Micah's God like?

He is the God who hates injustice and makes plans to respond entirely fairly. What should a good God do about injustice and evil and wickedness?

He should judge and judge fairly. Well, here then we see the rightness of God's judgment. But still this idea can still be so distant to us.

This talk of an Assyrian invasion to a long-gone nation. How can we visualize that more? Well, we're in luck. Because one of the kings of Assyria was so pleased with his invasion of Judah.

He ordered a massive mural to be built, to be carved, and placed in one of the biggest rooms of his palace. It depicts the siege of Lashish of chapter 1, verse 13.

[19:41] And even more luck, because the British decided to steal this, or permanently borrow, this stone mural. And brought it to the British Museum, room 9.

Just the other side of the River Thames. And so we can go visit. Maybe go on a growth group social, or a family outing. And when you're there, we can face up to the reality of God's judgment.

That every time God threatened judgment in history, it has come one way or another, eventually.

But again, it's so easy though, isn't it, to compare ourselves to these people.

Think, well, I'm not like that. Nor are my friends. And yet, when it comes to our standing before God, it's not about what we haven't done, but what we have done.

And whilst we haven't committed these, such white-collar crimes, compared to God's standard of holiness that we thought about at the start of our service, we fall woefully short, we live our own way, that Micah's God is our God, who must punish sin and hold everyone to account, from the powerful criminals to us and our nice neighbours.

[21:04] What kind of God would see what's going on in our world and not be angry and not come to judge? But no one wants to hear that.

No one wants to hear that. Verse 6 to 11, paint a picture of what Micah was up against. Have a look at verse 6. The religious preachers of Micah's day wanted to stifle his preaching of judgment.

They wouldn't be caught dead preaching such a negative message. But this is more than don't preach. It's a fundamental challenge to who God is.

And so verse 6, we can imagine Micah's critics giving him a dressing down. Pipe down, Micah. God's not going to judge us. I thought he was slow to anger. So now you're saying he's going to zap us with his judgment?

Are those the kind of things we would expect from a God who has promised to bless his people? Give it up, Micah. You're going to give the idea that God is some nasty, fire-breathing ogre.

[22 : 30] Why I can't bring myself to believe in a God like that. And we can see why Micah is having a hard time and an argument with these preachers.

It's 35 years out from the siege of Jerusalem. It's 13 years away from the siege of Samaria. And so when Micah comes along and says judgment is coming, there's no market for his message.

They seem so secure. They only want a God who gives blessings, not warnings. And Micah, yes, he does say that God does bless those who walk uprightly.

But that's not you. Verse 8. But lately my people have risen up as an enemy. You strip the rich robe from those who pass by trustingly with no thought of war.

The women of my people you drive out from their delightful houses, from their young children you take away my splendor forever. Micah is saying you're not the upright people who God does good to.

[23 : 36] You are the wicked people who God is fair to. And through their history, God has been capable of judgment and leveling cities. The promise has never been live however you like and you'll be fine because God is nice.

And then Micah goes all sarcastic in verse 11. If a man should go about and utter wind and lies saying I will preach to you of wine and strong drink, he would be the preacher for this people. This is Micah's final attack. The preachers are so committed to saying what people want to hear, they might as well be saying anyone for a pint. He's saying the best preacher for this people is like Father Jack.

From sitcom Father Ted, if you know that reference. The drunken priest going around shouting drink and other things I can't possibly say here. That's who you want.

That's your preacher. The priest who pops up at the bar and wants you to know that God wants you to have another drink so long as you buy him one. The preachers preach their positive message and the heroes drink it up.

[24 : 49] They love to hear the covenant promises perhaps but not the covenant prescriptions. They love the God's comforts but not God's commandments.

They assume their function is to tell people what they want to hear. The economy is growing and God is smiling. And yet all this in Judah, 8th century BC could easily be London in the 21st century, couldn't it?

We can see it for ourselves when we hear preachers around us. And it's not so much in what they do say but what they don't say. We can see for ourselves when we go onto the Church of England website under the tab What We Believe.

You'll find a video entitled How Would You Describe Who God Is? And it's so striking. God's love is mentioned four or five times. God is love. God is love. God is love. God is love.

All in two minutes. And not a word about his justice and judgment. Now I don't know what the people in the film truly believe. I don't know whether they mentioned God's judgment.

[25 : 59] It was edited out. But either way, we can't look down on them or the editor. Because isn't that our temptation ourselves? The part of us that wants to edit out God's judgment.

Maybe we find ourselves doing that in conversation time and time again. And Micah insists we cannot have less of God without losing all of him. Losing sight of the God who judges fairly, well, it devastates lives.

It wrecks faith. And it ruins the community of God's people. But instead, actually, God being a God who judges fairly must have been a great comfort to God's faithful people living at this time.

You can imagine them seeing all this wickedness going around them. And the questions begin.

Does God care? Does he see what's going on? Has he fallen asleep? Is he faithful to his promises? Is he going to do anything about it? And the answer is yes. We must not mistake God's patience for indifference. Eventually, God's patience did run out on this people.

[27 : 13] And so Micah is writing this prophecy down after the fall of Samaria in the northern kingdom in 722 BC. And so when God's people read of Micah saying it would happen, they can look to the rubble and see that God does judge and judge fairly.

And so God's judgment will come on this southern kingdom. No matter what others preach, God will sort out the mess. And likewise for us, the judgment on Samaria and Jerusalem that we can see in the British Museum point to a bigger judgment to come on the last day when Jesus' second advent. And so when we see evil and wickedness all around us, people oppressing others and ignoring God, even amongst the church, we can know with confidence there will be a judgment and justice from God.

Patience is not indifference or impotence. Patience, a final judgment will come and that should be of great and real comfort to us.

Well then after a barrage of judgment, Micah opens up a window of hope. Because God is the God who judges fairly and God is the God who gathers his people.

[28 : 39] That's the second thing. And briefly, God gathers his people. Verse 12. I will surely assemble all of you, O Jacob.

I will gather the remnant of Israel. I will set them together like sheep in a fold, like a flock in its pasture, a noisy multitude of men. He who opens the breach goes up before them.

They break through and pass the gate going out by it. Their king passes on before them, the Lord at their head. The picture here is of a shepherd king who will gather his people together like sheep.

The flock has been divided, scattered, devastated, but he comes and draws them back again.

These verses assume that chapters 1 and 2 have already happened.

And so this is looking forward to the restoration of a faithful remnant after judgment on the southern kingdom. God bringing his people back from exile in Babylon.

[29 : 45] And so the false preachers are right to say that God saves, but wrong when they suggest that he saves everyone without judgment, regardless of sin.

There is a major focus on salvation through Micah, but it's salvation through judgment. Because that is what God is like. He is the God who comes to judge and he comes to save.

He comes to punish and he comes to forgive. Both go hand in hand. So in this season of Advent, when we are struck again by who God is, we have a bigger view of what is going on at Christmas. At his birth, Jesus is called a savior. But that implies, doesn't it, that we need saving. An empty swimming pool doesn't need a lifeguard.

But people drowning under God's judgment need rescuing. If that's not the case, then the cross becomes a charade.

[30 : 53] For then there's no anger of God that falls upon the Son of God, who suffered God's judgment in our place. And so what God do we want people to hear about this Christmas?

The God who saves through judgment. Because that is who our God is. And that's what we need to keep hearing. Because nobody else wants to hear it.

We need to keep holding on to that truth for ourselves. And we must pray that our friends and family take heart to what they hear and understand why judgment is needed.

And accept the rescue on offer. God cares about sin. So much so that he sent Jesus into the world to face his judgment instead of his people.

And now he is gathering his people together as people bow their knee and turn to Jesus for forgiveness. And he will gather his people again fully and finally when he returns at the end of the age.

[31 : 57] And so in this world of sin, as the carol puts it, we are to wait like Micah. Just again, as we close, turn to chapter 7 and verse 7.

What does Micah do when he sees this world of sin? He will wait for God. Verse 7. But as for me, I will look to the Lord.

I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me. God came in history in Bethlehem to save. And he will come again on the last day to judge fairly and gather his people.

I will wait for the God of my salvation. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we praise you and thank you that you are a God who cares about sin.

You care about the mess of this broken world. You care about injustice. And so much so that you must judge. We thank you that Jesus came to save.

[33 : 07] That you punished sin on him. And that we receive your full forgiveness when we return to you. And please help us to wait.

Wait for you to come again to sort out the mess in this broken world. We pray that throughout Advent we'll be looking forward to that second coming.

And that we will wait for the God of our salvation. Amen. Amen.