

Our Incomparable God

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Date: 14 October 2015

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn now to the passage in Micah that we read together and looking at the final three verses of the chapter. Micah chapter 7, verses 18 to 20.

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 out iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old.

Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah, so they were prophets around the same time with an overlap in their ministries. But we learned from Micah at the beginning of the book that he left us here, that his prophecy, his ministry, was towards the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom.

Whereas Isaiah was focused on the southern kingdom with its capital at Jerusalem. Whereas Micah had also the northern kingdom, as God directed him to prophesy to them as well.

[1 : 18] Now this was a really critical time in the history of the people. In fact, it was a critical time in the history of that part of the world. Because the Assyrian empire had expanded greatly, and eventually it would come to overrun Samaria and most of Judah as well, apart from Jerusalem itself in Isaiah's day, until the Lord miraculously delivered the city, as we learn from the books of Kings and Chronicles.

So it was a very significant time. It was a time when we find the likes of King Ahaz making an alliance with the Assyrians.

Instead of looking to God as he had been counseled by Isaiah, probably by Micah as well, he actually formed an alliance with the Assyrians, with these pagan people who had come and encroached upon his country.

And not only that, but we learn from 2 Kings chapter 16 and from verse 10 there, that he actually went on a visit to the Assyrians, and he saw there in their capital an altar, and brought back a copy of that, and instructed that it would be copied, actually in, instead of, or along with the altar that the Lord himself had actually specified for the people.

It's in 2 Kings chapter 16, we don't need to read the thing right through, but he went to Damascus to meet Tiglath-Pileser, the king of Assyria, and he saw the altar that was at Damascus, and King Ahaz sent to Uriah the priest a model of the altar, and its pattern exact in all its details.

[3 : 08] And Uriah the priest built the altar in accordance with all that King Ahaz had sent from Damascus. In other words, that was a king of Judah instructing his religious leader to actually build this copy of the altar of this pagan nation that he had seen at Damascus.

And you can read into that and know from that just how far the people had fallen into idolatry, and into sin, and how Ahaz's own heart was really set on that, rather than being true to his God.

And when you come to chapter 7 of Micah, you can see, along with that, how the result of that really led to chaos in that society. You know, people will say to us, well, isn't it really a bit much for you people who are Christians, and believe in the whole Bible?

What can you possibly make of the likes of these prophecies, these books of the prophets, as they're called in the Old Testament, like Nahum, and Micah, and Obadiah, and especially these minor prophets?

Aren't they just full of dark things and judgment? What business does that have with today's world? And it's when you go into these books, you realize that they are as relevant to today's world and to the society we belong to as any other part of the Bible.

[4 : 28] Because here's a description of a society that's really become so fragmented that even family order has broken down. That's why the chapter there tells us that this is really what things were like.

Fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, daughters-in-law, they were a threat to each other. They were actually, in terms of not, instead of having the kind of family order and the family allegiance and loyalties, everything just had broken up.

And on top of that, you've got the social disorder that's mentioned here in Micah. For example, the rich were getting richer while the poor were getting poorer.

And the rich were able to exploit the poor who were left defenseless so that you had all of these problems in society along with the idolatry, you might say as a result of the idolatry, and God, in a great sense, had withdrawn from the people and this really was what the result was.

That's why it's so important that we see in these descriptions things which are so relevant, so up-to-date, so applicable to our own day, as indeed are the solutions that these great prophets proposed to the people in respect to their relationship with God.

[5 : 56] And here you find, in this chapter, the imagery that he uses at the beginning of the chapter is very illustrative, it's very graphic in some ways.

He's saying, this is what it's like, he's saying, it's like when you go to a vineyard or a place where there's been fruit, but it's after the season of fruit is over.

And you go through, there in the grape, the grapes have been gleaned, there is no cluster to eat, no first ripe feed that my soul desires, the godly has perished from the earth, there is no one upright among mankind.

And then he goes on to speak about all the various things that he finds amongst the people. That's the description he's giving. He would love to have again days when there was proper spiritual prosperity.

But he says, it's like just looking for fruit when the time of fruit is gone. There's just a little bit left to have three here and there.

[7 : 01] That's how it felt to him. Doesn't it feel like that sometimes when you read and when you hear of what's happening in our own day, of the state of people's lives, of the state of our society, of the breakdown of order and of family order and of marital order and of many other ways in which we find that social breakdown as a result of departure from God, from his ways, from his laws, from his set precepts.

Well, what does Micah tell us here? Well, in chapter 7, from verse 8 especially, you have four parts actually. We're just looking at the last part but just to give you an idea of what leads to that, in verses 8 and 10, you've got an emphasis there on confession of sin or penitence, you might say.

And that's followed in verses 11 to 13 by an emphasis on promise. A promise that, again, where the people, God is saying to them, it's a day for building up your walls, not for actually, for losing hope because the days are coming when people will actually be gathered to you in the future.

And in verses, say, 14 to 17, you've got an emphasis on prayer and God's answer to prayer. They're praying to God, shepherd your people, pastor your people with your staff.

And verse 16 has the answer, the nations shall see and be ashamed of all their might. And so, the final part from verse 18 is really a praising of God for that answer to prayer, for the hope that's still laid up for them, rather than that God is not going to bother with them anymore.

[8 : 49] And it's in the form of a praise that praises God for who he is, for what he's like and for what he does. And the emphasis especially is on him being a pardoning God, a God who forgives sin, a God who is marked by compassion and mercy, and a God who is faithful to his covenant promises.

So the two things we can take from that and a few points under each of these. First of all, here's an emphasis in this praise on the God of continuing pardon.

the God of continuing pardon. And then secondly, the God of covenant promise, where you find from verse 19-20, he will again have compassion on us, you will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham.

And it's within these that you find so much of an emphasis on things which ought to be so critically important and central to ourselves in our Christian lives, but which you would dearly love to see and pray for seeing spread through a society that's come to such a sad level of degradation and sin when you see God so much ignored.

Well, he says, in this God of continuing pardon, he says, who is a God like you pardoning iniquity, passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance.

[10 : 26] What he's really saying is, we're praising you O Lord because you're incomparable. You cannot be compared to any of the gods of these nations that are around us.

They are in fact no gods at all, but you are incomparable and you are incomparable for many ways, for many things, but especially here because you are a pardoning God, a God who pardons iniquity and passes over the transgression of this remnant.

And of course he's talking here of a small group of faithful people and yet he's praying for the people as a whole as well that they will come yet to be restored.

And this all goes back in many ways to Exodus. The imagery from Exodus is very obvious as you go through even this final part of the prophecy of Micah. Remember recently we looked at that passage in Exodus 34 where God revealed the inner meaning of his name to Moses when he passed by before him.

God having said I will make my goodness pass before you in answer to Moses' prayer, please show me your glory. And as he passed before him, God emphasized his own great characteristics there, the Lord, the Lord God, merciful, gracious, compassionate, keeping covenant.

[11 : 54] And very similar language to what's used here from Micah. So Micah is probably going back to that passage and really borrowing from that what he now wants to lay before the people, that God has not changed.

This is the God of the Exodus, this is the God of Moses, the God of the fathers, the God who is still this compassionate, forgiving God. And of course, that means that in contrast to these gods that the people had so willingly come to embrace, the gods of the Assyrians, the way in which their king Ahaz in Jerusalem had imported all of the, what he had copied from the Assyrians, what Micah is emphasizing is to pardon sin you must first of all be a living being.

Idols don't pardon. Idols don't have the capacity to forgive. You have to deal with someone who is living and moving and this God, this personality, this God who is the only God, the true God, the creator God, the redeeming God.

before you can say about him who is a God like you pardoning iniquity, you have to realize that he is of course this living entity, this being that's eternal and constantly the same.

And you notice there that he's using again the three words for sin that again we saw recently iniquity, the twistedness of sin, transgression, the deliberate rebellion, that aspect of sin and the word sin itself, the failure to hit the target or hit the mark and what he's saying really by this is that the pardon of God is comprehensive, there is no aspect of sin that it doesn't cover, there is nothing to do with sin that God has not provided for in his pardon, in his covering of transgression.

[14 : 02] That's just in passing but of course that's something you can fill out and need to fill out and that the Bible fills out so much. But you notice these two words that he's using here, first the two concepts here, who's like you, pardoning iniquity and secondly, passing over transgression.

The word pardon literally means to lift something away. And what Micah is dealing with is that sin in the guilt of sin especially is a reality.

It's not a theory, it's not something that people have made up, it's not something that religious people have invented, it is something that is real and it is especially real to God.

If you want to get away from the reality of your guilt, one of the commonest ways of doing it is just to deny the existence of God. But it doesn't do away with the reality of guilt.

It doesn't do away with what is in your conscience and strikes you in your conscience over doing wrong, over something that you know is amiss in your life. And that itself should really prove the point.

[15 : 09] What's the point of conscience unless it's an authority you're answerable to? And what Micah is saying is when God pardons, he takes away the weight of guilt.

He's thinking of guilt as something that's just a heavy weight that lies upon a person or a people. When God pardons, it's the lifting away of that.

It's taking it somewhere else. It's removing it. It's taking it from where it is on us and it's gone like the scapegoat in the wilderness on the day of atonement when the sins symbolized, the sins were symbolically pressed onto the head of the live goat and then it was sent away by the hand of the possession of somebody that was chosen for the task to be led away in the wilderness so that it would not come back.

Their guilt was lifted away. They could see the symbol of it just so illustratively carrying as they watched that goat going away out into the wilderness.

they were able to see if they were right with God, if they were exercising faith. That's an illustration of what God does in pardon. He lifts away our guilt.

[16 : 35] He takes it away altogether. We don't see it again. That's something that's carried through into the next part of it as well. And into the final part when we see he casts them into the depths of the sea.

the second phrase that he uses here, he passes over transgression. Passing over transgression.

Now that does not mean that God in pardoning sin doesn't really deal with it. That what he does is just overlook it and pass on and doesn't really treat it in any way but just ignores it.

Of course that's not the case. You know that's not the case. And when you think about passing over, the very words pass over takes you again back to Exodus, to Exodus 12 and into 13 where the great event of the Passover was instituted and where the blood of the Passover as it was sprinkled as God had required kept those under it protected from the angel of death.

And it's very interesting and important how God spoke to the people through Moses. When I see the blood I will pass over you.

[17 : 54] See he didn't pass over them in a way that just ignored their guilt. What they deserved as well as the Egyptians. When I see the blood I will pass over.

The passing over was because there was already a sacrifice in their homes that had to do with dealing with sin that was itself symbolical of the Passover of the sacrifice of Christ who would come to be the Lamb of God who takes away and lifts away the sin of his people and in his blood provides for the passing over of our sins by God.

I will pass over he said and here is what Micah is saying who is a God like you who passes over the transgression or the remnant of his heritage.

And there is an idea in that as well that when God passes over our sins it is in order to get quickly as it were to something else.

If we can speak with all respect of God it is as if God is just in a hurry not that he doesn't deal with sin properly but what he really wants to get to is forgiveness and salvation and our acceptance with him.

[19 : 18] And so he passes over sin and in passing over sin and in dealing with it his burden if you like is to bring us to know forgiveness to bestow his salvation.

The famous professor Rabbi Duncan Dr. Rabbi Duncan apparently at one time when he was in Edinburgh on his way to the college where he was professor of Hebrew and this young man came out of a club somewhere on the street where Duncan was walking towards the college and this man came out of a doorway there that had a club of some kind in it apparently and he recognised Dr. Duncan and said oh hello doctor is there anything new today?

and Duncan looked at him and said oh yes he said great news there is great news and he had a very serious face and sparkling eyes and this young man thought oh what's happened?

He thought there was something terrible that had happened some catastrophe that they hadn't heard about in their club when he was in and Duncan stopped and the man said what is it doctor what is it?

and he put his hand on his shoulder and he said Jesus Christ still cleanses from sin he chose the words very carefully Jesus Christ still cleanses from sin Duncan was prone to depression he was prone to going down in his mind he was prone sometimes to even question his own salvation and it may well be that that was one of the occasions and that God had come to assure him and to bring him again to the blood of Christ but this is how Duncan put it the blood of Christ still cleanses from sin you see he wasn't saying it used to cleanse or it did once cleanse or it would cleanse again what he meant was it cleanses now and for Duncan this was thrilling and it had been laid on his soul as an experienced man of God and yet come at that moment to say this to this young man the blood of Christ still cleanses from sin have we lost ourselves the sparkle and the excitement over that have we become used to it as if it was just a matter of fact thing because here is

[21 : 55] Micah reminding us that it's one of the great things that makes God incomparable and worthy of praise that he forgives that he pardons that he passes over the transgression of his people and he finishes that by saying he does not retain his anger forever because he delights in pardon or in steadfast love as the word really is he delights in steadfast he does not retain his anger forever and the word retain means to see something tightly so as not to let go of it and that's itself a remarkable thing that Micah is really describing God as a God who because he delights in steadfast love and because he's marked so much with compassion yet though he has anger and he is angry with sin he does not hold so tightly to that anger that he refuses to let go of it in the interest of pardon what a great thought when God would have been perfectly just to have kept a hold of his anger and refused to let it go and hold it against us that's what the psalmist too as we've been singing and as we sing so often from that great psalm that's what he was caught up in wonder with as well if you oh Lord were to mark iniquity oh Lord who could stand but there is forgiveness there is steadfast love with you so tonight here is the first thing Micah reminds us of he's the

God of continuing pardon of ongoing pardon the God who's incomparable in terms of pardon lifting away guilt in terms of passing over transgression and moving on quickly to forgiveness the God who does not refuse as it were to let go his anger so that he will issue forth in forgiveness for the undeserving that we are but secondly he is the God of covenant promise 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 he will again have compassion on us you see that's now looking to the future he's described God in his incomparableness as a pardoning God and now he's saying this is still so for us in the future you will still have compassion on us you will return to us in compassion and that's the word that we often find as well that takes into our view the love the compassion the pity and the care of a mother for a child the way that that child is nurtured and nourished and cared for and protected it's from the compassion of that mother that all of that comes and that's the description you have for God the God who is yes he reproves yes he disciplines yet he does it in love for his people and so he turned to them in compassion that's where

Micah's hope is now resting and the result of that as he says is twofold he will tread out iniquities underfoot you will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea and that again matches the two things in the previous verse the two things pardon and passing over you've got two things here as well as a result of that compassion the treading of our iniquities and the casting out of our sins you will tread our iniquities underfoot sometimes that may appear to be a thing to do with anger a thing to do with just squashing things under your feet but actually it's mostly in the bible used as a description of total victory you find it in respect to Jesus as well in the new testament having done what he did in his life and death and risen from the dead and been exalted to glory you have put all things under his feet he is now in total victory over all enemies everything else and here is

Micah saying this is the result of God's compassion it is that you will tread our iniquities underfoot our iniquities these sins of ours these sins of ours that we don't deserve to have forgiven but not only are you a pardoning God not only do you pass by our transgressions you put them under foot you are a complete victor over them they are actually under your feet when you forgive them they are not going to come out of there you remain victorious over them and that of course again takes us back to well takes us back to the cross certainly because there is no question as to whether the cross will forever more be sufficient for God to retain and maintain his victory over sin it will be the victory of Christ by his death on the cross is a victory that is everlasting unchangeably everlasting you would despair otherwise wouldn't you if you thought for a moment there was a possibility that somehow what Christ had done was not going to last for eternity that it needed to be adjusted or something else added to it it's not it's absolutely lasting comprehensively completely and it's also connected with our own victory in him and you remember this is the kind of language that Paul used when he was writing to the Romans in Romans 16 and verse 20 when he was assuring them there having gone through all that he had specified of

God's requirements in relation to the great truths of salvation the God of peace it's interesting in the context that that's the title he gave God the God of peace will shortly crush Satan under your feet that's a text you and I need to come back to repeatedly it isn't just saying that God did crush Satan under his feet in the cross he's talking to his people he's addressing his people he's saying to them in his victory your victory is assured and it's not long to go he's saying however long the world is going to last it's a short time in terms of God's great plan and in relation to eternity God will shortly crush Satan under your feet you know the day of judgment is not just going to be about seeing

[29 : 32] Satan crushed under Christ's feet he'll be under your feet too he'll be under his people's feet the Lord's people's feet because they are assured in Christ's victory that they prevail with him over all their enemies sin the world death Satan all of them and that's really the description here he will tread our iniquities under foot everything to do with sin and the consequences of sin and the things related to sin crushed under your feet and that really strikes a note in your heart tonight too doesn't it when you're like me so often taken up with our sin and the way that sin is still very much so so much part of the fabric of our lives and how it sometimes gets us down and how it comes back with added force at times and how you come to complain that this is still what you find in yourself well here is the prospect here is the thing that

God is taking you towards you will cast all our iniquity all our transgression and the second part of this description is you will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea now again that goes back to the exodus and to that great event of Israel leaving Egypt when you take it from Exodus 12 into 13 and you read the description there of the Egyptians pursuing them and how the waters of the Red Sea were divided so the people of Israel went over and then Moses with the rod your member his arm and the waters came back over the Egyptians as they were trying to follow them and the armies of the Egyptians were drowned but a really interesting thing is that in in Exodus 14 this is and verse 27 you actually find that this is what what is described as that

God threw the Egyptians into the depths of the sea before that it's just been describing the coming back together of the waters without any reference to God doing something to the Egyptians you just think well it's just the way that he arranged it when Moses lifted up his rod but there in chapter 14 there in verse 27 that's what it says he threw the Egyptians into the sea and you remember what he said through Moses to the people have a look at them said God through Moses have a look at these Egyptians today because you will never see them again they'll be out of your sight forever more God threw them into the sea they never again were seen except as dead corpses on the shore by the

Israelites now he's saying that of our sins you will throw or cast all our sins into the depths of the sea they'll never resurface they'll never revive when God says your past is gone your past life your past way of life your past behavior your past sins they're all gone it's gone forever it's in the depths of the sea you can never come back and of course the root of that there's the renewed compassion and the result of it is the way that sin and equity is dealt with and then there's finally the root of all of that because you will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to

Abraham as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old now being faithful of course is God being reliable you will show faithfulness he's reliable because he's true to his promises he promised to Abraham he promised to Moses he promised to Jacob these great promises of redemption for Israel for God's people this is really the fountain out of which this stream of pardon flows towards them and with ourselves that faithfulness is so precious to you when you come before God and you pray for forgiveness and you confess your sins and you ask for pardon how would you feel if you had the least suspicion that God was not consistent that God was going to be different with you today rather than the faithfulness he showed to you yesterday when

[34 : 55] God is faithful he's always faithful when God is reliable he's always reliable there is no one consistent like God is he's not going to be something else tomorrow to you when he's promised to be what he is to you today that's where Micah really finds again his own hopes to be anchored and his hopes for the people you will show faithfulness to Jacob to these people the descendants of Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham he really means the people who have come as descendants of these great fathers of the past you will prove reliable to them as you were to their fathers before them has God stopped being reliable is not as dependable for us tonight as he was to our fathers of course he is whatever changes have taken place in the world God's covenant faithfulness and commitment cannot be displaced which is why it ends in this way as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old you will show faithfulness and steadfast love there friends tonight is our hope as well take that into your own life but take it into the society that we belong to in the providence of

God where is there hope for this society don't say there's none where is the solution to the problems of this society don't say there's none don't despair as if things were never going to change again because here is Micah reminding us of the kind of God that we're dealing with and serving the incomparable God the God who is indeed the same yesterday today and forever the God of continuing pardon and the God of covenant promise let's pray Lord our gracious God we do give thanks for the consistency that we know pertains to you for the way that we experience that in our own lives personally as well as from reading it in your word oh Lord help us we pray to continue to be faithful to you and to be worthy recipients of your grace even as our fathers before us help us to be thankful that your word assures us of your own constancy to your covenant promises and help us to be confident oh

Lord in you and not in ourselves and nevertheless confident that you are still that God who pardons iniquity and who is able to return to a people so that they be turned to yourself hear us now we pray for Jesus sake Amen Amen Amen Amen very much and