

The Judgement to Come

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Preacher: Nick Lauer

[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, church. Would you turn with me to the Old Testament book of Micah? That's page 728 in the Pew Bible. Micah. Micah is one of the 12 what we call minor prophets of the Old Testament. And we call them minor not because their message is less important, but simply because their books are shorter than the longer prophetic books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Now, for the next nine weeks, we're going to be walking through the book of Micah.

Now, why? Why are we spending two months nearly preaching through this book? Well, on a general level, remember what the Apostle Paul says in Romans 15 verse 4? St. Paul says, for whatever was written in former days, speaking of the Old Testament, was written for our instruction that through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures, we might have hope. So as the church, we want to be constantly engaging with every part of God's word, both the New Testament and the Old Testament, all the different types of genres and types of writings and places in scripture so that we might gain the full instruction, encouragement, and hope that God has laid up for us in his word. So here's maybe just a general reason to study a book that we haven't studied in a long time. I don't think we've ever done at Trinity, at least in my memory, a sermon series on the book of Micah. Why? Well, we want to have the fullness of God's word in our life as followers of God.

But is there a more specific reason for doing this book? Well, if you're familiar with Micah at all, you're probably familiar with two passages. One is from Micah 5 that talks about the Messiah coming from Bethlehem. It's the one that Matthew quotes in Matthew chapter 2. This is the passage we read at Christmas time, and we love it, right? It's comforting and it's warm. And that is a wonderful passage, and we'll get to it in due course. The other passage you might be familiar with is from Micah 6, though, and it goes like this. Micah 6, 8. He has told you, O man, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you? Do justice, love kindness, or mercy, or steadfast love. Walk humbly with your God.

That's a wonderful picture, isn't it? And it's easy to think of ourselves as doing just that, as being that kind of people. But are we? Are we the kind of people who really know the God who requires that one multifaceted thing to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly? Do we know that God, the holy, righteous, just God, really know Him? Or is the God that we serve more concerned about external appearances and religious activity and looking good on the outside? In other words, do we really know and worship the true God, the Lord, or are we just serving an idol of our own making?

And what happens when our pretenses and our illusions are stripped away and we see ourselves before this God? What then? How do we respond? How do we respond when we come to see that we haven't been this sort of people? The sort of people who do what the holy God requires? Who do religion, but not justice?

[3 : 5 6] Who love comfort, but not kindness? Who walk pretty self-assured, but not humbly with God? What do we do then? Micah is going to have some pretty serious things to say about that.

Some hard things to say. Yeah, some unpopular things to say. But in the end, it will be good news. News of comfort and encouragement, as Paul says in Romans.

Because in the end, we will see God for who He is. Near the very end, in chapter 7, verse 18, near the very end of Micah's book, Micah will say, who is a God like you? Who is a God like you? Pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression. In fact, that's literally what Micah's name means. Who is like the Lord?

In wonder and in worship, Micah leads us to a place where we know God. Not the cheap idols of our own making, but the true God, the just God, the incomparable God, who is like you, Lord.

And then, in knowing God, we'll know who we really are, the people of God. So, Micah, let's begin with Micah chapter 1. I'm going to read the whole chapter of Micah 1, and then we'll dive in to this magnificent, embracing, and even comforting book.

[5 : 41] Micah 1. 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.

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 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.

[6 : 56] 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 to the gate of my people, to Jerusalem. Tell it not in Gath. Weep not at all.

In Bethlehem, roll yourselves in the dust. Pass on your way, inhabitants of Shaphir, in nakedness and shame. The inhabitants of Zanon do not come out.

The lamentation of Beth-Azel shall take away from you its standing place. For the inhabitants of Maroth wait anxiously for good, because disaster has come down from the Lord to the gates of Jerusalem.

[8 : 06] 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.

The houses of Achzeb shall be a deceitful thing to the kings of Israel. I will again bring a conqueror to you, inhabitants of Marashah. The glory of Israel shall come to Adullam.

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

So Micah has two things to say to us in this first chapter. First, in verses 1-7, Micah says, God is coming to judge. And second, in verses 8-16, Micah shows us that the right response to that truth is to lament.

So let's look at the first point together in verses 1-7. God is coming to judge. Micah begins by calling all people everywhere to pay attention. Hear you peoples, all of you.

[9 : 17] Pay attention to worth and all that's in it. Now, Micah's ministry was located at a certain place in time in history. Verse 1 locates Micah's ministry in the second half of the 8th century B.C.

in what was known as the southern kingdom of Judah. Now, remember at this point in Old Testament history, in Israel's history, the kingdom of Israel had split into two. The southern half remained under the Davidic line of kings with its capital in Jerusalem, but the northern half had broken away after the reign of Solomon and had set up a new capital in Samaria with a whole string of its own kings.

And Micah, we learn from verse 1, is from Moresheth, which is about 20 miles southwest of Jerusalem. This is at a time in Judah's history when there are rumblings on the broader geopolitical stage.

A time of sort of relative peace and comfort has passed. And now, the empire of Assyria to the far north is gaining power with frightening speed.

And already wars are starting to break out. And in the midst of that broad situation, at first, we might think that Micah's announcement of judgment, as he calls all nations to pay attention, we might think that Micah's giving this warning against them, against the nations.

[10 : 37] You can almost imagine Micah's original listeners finding comfort in these first few verses. Oh, yes, that's right, Micah. Preach it. The Lord is going to come. Assyria can't possibly harm us.

The Lord's on our side. Our enemies are going to melt like wax before the fire. What have we to be afraid of? But quickly, we learn that this judgment is coming much closer to home.

It's not the empire of Assyria. But at first, it's the northern kingdom of Samaria that will melt like wax. Verse 6 again, Therefore I will make Samaria a heap in the open country, a place for planting vineyards.

I'll pour her stones down into the valley and uncover her foundations. In other words, it's a picture of a city on the top of a hill just crumbling and becoming a field.

And why will God do this? Verse 7 says, Because Samaria has been worshiping idols, 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.

[11 : 50] So what are we to make of this? What does this opening paragraph of Micah have to say to us today? Well, first, we need to reckon with the reality of God's holiness.

You know, we must not think of the God of the Bible like the irritable, fickle gods of Greek or Roman or ancient Near Eastern mythology.

You know, those sorts of gods were unpredictable and petty. And, you know, the only thing that sort of mere humans could do was to offer sacrifices and hope that we had done enough to keep the gods on our good side for long enough to win the next battle or harvest the next crop.

But this isn't the picture that we get from Micah. It's not the fickle or petty passion of this God that results in judgment.

No, it's the Lord's very presence. What happens when you hold fire next to wax?

[12 : 57] The wax melts. Why? Because the fire's having a bad day? No, because that's the very nature of fire.

In the same way, the Lord's nature is so holy that in the very act of the Lord drawing near, what is unholy begins to come undone.

You see, because of God's holiness, his judgment of an unholy world isn't fickle or mean. It's inevitable. And this leads us to the second thing we need to see in this first paragraph.

What is it that has created this unholiness in creation? Why is it that we creatures can no longer bear to be in God's holy presence without immediately coming undone?

Micah says it's our idolatry. We put a created thing in God's place. We've given the allegiance of our hearts to false gods.

[14 : 03] Our hearts that were meant to love and serve our creator above all else. And the tragedy is we end up becoming like what we worship. We worship false things and we ourselves become false.

We might look vibrant and real on the outside, but inside it's like we're made of wax. Friends, the truth is that God created you and I in his image.

God created us in his image with unparalleled dignity and worth. And you were meant to love him and serve him and find your deepest delight in him. And you and I were made to reflect, actually, the fire of God's glory like a mirror shining back the light of the sun.

And had we not turned away from God into idolatry, his presence in our midst would mean the unfurling of a glory and a reflection and a refraction of his glory that we could scarcely imagine.

Like a mirror made of diamonds now reflecting the light, not just of the sun, but the light of a hundred stars. This was God's intent for us.

[15 : 23] But look what idolatry has done. Look what we've become. Of course, we don't worship statues anymore, do we? No, we might not have literal graven images, but we still worship power.

And we still worship fame. And we still worship prosperity. And we still worship comfort, just like they did back then.

We think we've evolved. But have we? The Canaanite gods, the Assyrian gods, they promised power and prosperity and glory and security.

Is it really any different at the end of the day? So what will become of us? When the holiness of God descends into the wax museum of our idolatry, what could possibly be left?

Will earthly power be much good then? Or worldly prosperity? The things we've spent our lives chasing and coveting and desiring? The things that we've sacrificed for?

[16 : 38] The things that we've curved and bent our lives around? Will any of it stand? And what about us? If we've centered our lives around it, what will we do when the center doesn't hold but melts away?

You know, Jesus himself spoke of final judgment more than anyone else in the Bible. For Jesus, the reality that God will come to judge the world in holiness was not some outmoded idea that needed to be gotten rid of.

But it was a spiritual reality that was inevitable. And the image that Jesus himself often used was fire. There will come a day when the creator steps into his creation.

When God's glory covers the earth like the waters cover the sea. And when God will judge every sin. And those who have refused to worship God but have clung to idols will melt like wax before the fire.

But the fire will never go out. And the undoing will last forever. So how do we respond to all this? If this is Micah's first point that God's coming to judge sin and idolatry, what do we do?

[18 : 03] How do we respond? Well, this brings us to the second half of the chapter. Micah says, we must lament. Let me read again verses 8 and 9.

Micah says, 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. You see, friends, Micah sees what we so often do not see. In the opening verses of chapter 1, verses 1 through 7, Micah spoke of coming judgment on Samaria, the northern kingdom.

And how do you think Micah's audience in Judah, in the south, would have responded to that? Perhaps they would have thought, oh, of course God's going to judge Samaria. Look how wicked they are.

Look at all their idols and sins. Look at all their bad theology. Friends, how often are we like that? We hear of God's holiness.

[19 : 10] We hear of the terrible judgment to come because of human idolatry. And we think, I'm so glad I'm not like those people. But it's not just those people.

Micah's already said as much in verse 5. What is the transgression of Jacob? Is it not Samaria? What's the high place of Judah? Is it not Jerusalem?

He's already pointed to the fact that Judah is guilty as well. Do we think we're any better off, Micah says, to his own people in the south?

We're not. The same sins are in our hearts as well. Yes, their wound is incurable. That is, God's judgment is certainly going to fall on our northern neighbors, Micah says.

But don't you see? It's come to Judah as well. It's reached the very gate of my people to Jerusalem. We are going to face the same inevitable judgment.

[20 : 14] So Micah says, I'm not going to gloat. I'm not going to shake my head in disgust at them. I'm not going to somehow think I'm better. No, I'm going to lament.

And that's what Micah does in verses 10 through 16. For the rest of the chapter, he starts listing cities in and around the southern kingdom.

Specifically, he starts listing cities to the west of Jerusalem. To the west of Jerusalem. Now, why those cities? Well, you see, in the ancient Near East, when an army would invade Israel and Judah, they would go down the coast, around the mountains, and then east.

They'd go south and then head towards Jerusalem across the plain. And all those cities west of Jerusalem, they were the cities that would be taken and destroyed by foreign armies.

And those are the cities that Micah begins listing. And historically, that's exactly what happened. When God's judgment came upon his people in the Old Testament, because they did not keep his law, because they had broken his covenant, in 722 BC, he allowed the Assyrians to destroy the northern kingdom, just like Micah said, and carry the people off in exile.

[21 : 37] And a number of years later, around 701 BC, he allowed the Assyrians to keep going south. And attack the southern kingdom as well. And many of these cities that Micah is listing here, would themselves be destroyed.

And tragically, Micah's prophecy would come true in his own lifetime. So here in chapter 1, foreseeing this coming disaster, Micah raises a lament.

And in Hebrew, the name of each city that he lists, has sort of a similar sound to the specific lament that Micah gives. It's hard to capture in an English translation, but it would be sort of like saying, Washington will be washed away, and Philadelphia will be filled with tears.

He just lists these cities, and with plays on words, issues up a call and a cry of sadness and lament and sorrow. Now, if you're wondering why Micah's lament begins by saying, tell it not in Gath, weep not at all.

Well, that's because Gath was historically a Philistine city, an enemy city on the far western border. So Micah's basically starting off by saying, oh, I hope this terrible news doesn't reach our enemies. It's going to be so bad that they will just gloat over us and increase our shame.

[22 : 52] So what do we learn from Micah's response here? Well, friends, notice that Micah spends two verses speaking about the judgment coming on Samaria's sins, and nine lamenting the sins of his own people.

He doesn't shy away or minimize the reality of Samaria's idolatry, but where does his emphasis fall? How about for the church today?

Do we spend more time pointing out the sins of others or lamenting before the Lord our own idolatry and waywardness and crying out for his forgiveness?

Too often we can fall into this trap. We see the speck in our neighbor's eye, but fail to see the log in our own. We can point out all the theological errors in other churches or traditions, but we fail to lament the fact that our own denomination was founded in racism, covered up sexual abuse for decades, and has unnecessarily sidelined the spiritual gifts of women in the name of biblical fidelity.

When the judgment of God comes, friends, who will have the right to stand? Surely not us. If God were to judge us as our sins deserve, we would have no hope.

[24 : 49] And there's a proper place to lament the sins and to cry out to God with a broken and contrite heart.

Was it not Jesus himself who said, blessed are those who mourn? And was it not Jesus himself, when looking out over the Jerusalem of his own day, he wept because of the sins of his people, because of the coming judgment.

Jesus himself laments the sins of his people. And perhaps there, at the very end of a very bleak chapter, is where the glimmer of hope comes.

Make no mistake, the first chapter of Micah is not a happy one. God's certain judgment and the call to lament our sins, that's the message of chapter one.

But that's not the whole message of Micah. Because Micah will also tell us about a shepherd king who will one day come to gather those who mourn.

[26 : 01] And he will tell us how this holy God, who is like fire to the wax of our idolatry, is also a God who forgives.

A God who does justice, but also a God who loves mercy. Blessed are those who mourn, Jesus said, for they shall be comforted.

Comforted because the shepherd king has come and mourned on our behalf. Mourned for our sins and more than that, even died for our sins.

On the cross, Jesus cried out in lament. This is where Tyler started our service. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Jesus laments and suffers and dies on our behalf.

And because Jesus died on the cross, our sins can be forgiven. We can face the fire of God's presence and not be consumed because he has gone into the fire for us, bearing the penalty our sins deserve.

[27 : 15] And so as Christians, we still lament in this life, not because we have no hope, but because we see more clearly than anyone else how much our sins cost.

The cross shows us how terrible our sins really and truly are. But our lament is not the last word.

The last word belongs to God. And God's last word through Micah is this. Micah 7, 18 through 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 our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

[28 : 16] Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, Heavenly Father, hallowed be your name.

We take a moment now to just sit in quiet before you and in a right way to express our sorrow over our sins.

God, we have not loved you with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. And we have not loved our neighbor as ourself. Lord, we have been such a poor picture of your grace and your glory.

Forgive us, God. Lord, make us a people who are poor in spirit, who mourn, and who hunger and thirst after righteousness.

And Lord, this morning, we again turn to Jesus and say, if it were not for him, how could we stand?

[29 : 46] Thank you for the cross, Lord. Thank you for the price that you paid. Oh, Lord, thank you for redeeming us and rescuing us and making a way for us to be in the presence of the Father.

Not being consumed, but being loved. Oh, Lord, knowing your forgiving grace, help us as we study Micah's book to become a people who in response to your great grace do justice, and love kindness and walk humbly with you.

We pray this in your mighty name, Jesus, our shepherd king. Amen.