

HERE COMES THE JUDGE

SERIES: WHO IS A GOD LIKE THEE?

By Doug Goins

The title for this series in the book of Micah comes directly from Micah's own prayer: "Who is a God like Thee?" (Micah 7:18). As Micah watches the circumstances swirling around him, he wonders about the character and nature of God, and his actions in the world. Micah is really asking, "Who are you anyway?" He thought he knew God, but then God did something unexpected and threw that certainty off kilter.

If your relationship with God is characterized by honesty and wonder, then at times you have to wrestle with the mystery, even the contradiction in what we know of God's character. He is holy, strong, jealous, powerful, sovereign and mighty; but at the same time he is intimate, patient, tender, innocent, kind and merciful. All of these qualities describe the very God of the universe.

You may believe that wholeheartedly. You may be very secure in your faith and in your relationship with your sovereign Lord. We affirm that he is a God who rescues, a God who helps, a God who protects us from evil. How do you introduce this Lord, who gives us victory over our enemies, to people who are struggling today with the sinful activity of terrorism in our world? Does this God understand the international chaos that has been created by evil leaders in the world? Does God know about all the deaths of innocent people in recent weeks? If so, can and will he do anything about it?

We are going to wrestle with these questions as we sit under the teaching of the prophet Micah, who preached eight centuries before Jesus came to earth. The issues of his day were very similar to what is happening in our world, especially these past two months. Micah witnessed innocent victims suffering horrible deaths, the reality of international military conflict, and very real threats to his nation's security.

Introduction to Micah's Message

The very first verse of the book of Micah provides the introduction to the message. This short verse tells us four important pieces of information: the authority by which Micah speaks, the identity of the messenger, the setting into which the message comes, and the subject of the message.

The word of the LORD which came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem.

Micah, a prophet from the small village of Moresheth, was a contemporary of the prophets Hosea and Isaiah. He preached during the time of these three kings—Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah—who reigned in the southern kingdom of Judah from 750 to 686 B.C. During this period, Micah predicted the fall of Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel. In chapter one, verse six, God says, "For I will make Samaria a heap of ruins in the open country, planting places for a vineyard." This destruction occurred in 722 B.C., about ten to fifteen years after Micah began preaching this message.

Micah also predicted the fall of Jerusalem. He was, in fact, the first prophet to tell the Israelites that their nation-state would fall and their capital would be destroyed. Look ahead to chapter 3, verse 12.

Therefore, on account of you,
Zion will be plowed as a field,
Jerusalem will become a heap of ruins,
And the mountain of the temple will become
high places of a forest.

This prophesy was fulfilled in 586 B.C., about 100 years after Micah's death.

Micah's prophecies in this little book focus on two characteristics of God: the fact that he is a God of justice and judgment, but also a God of mercy, hope and grace. He is a God who delivers his people from the hopelessness of moral failure. Micah emphasizes God's undeserved grace, and keeps repeating the fact that God's salvation, his initiative in saving us, is unstoppable. God finishes what he starts in saving his people. We clearly see this in the theme verse at the end of the book: "Who is a God like Thee, who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in unchanging love" (Micah 7:18).

Now if that is true, and Micah was convinced it was, then in response, our lives as God's covenant people ought to reflect his character. We ought to relate to people the way God does. Our lifestyles should reflect fairness toward others in human relationships; loving, steadfast, covenant-loyalty to God and a willingness to walk humbly and thoughtfully before God. Perhaps the most famous verse in Micah, chapter 6, verse 8, sets forth what God requires of us.

He has told you, O man, what is good;
And what does the LORD require of you
But to do justice, to love kindness,
And to walk humbly with your God?

Setting

Chapters 15 through 20 of 2 Kings summarize the life and times in which Micah prophesied. It was a very dark period, as the sins of the northern kingdom of Israel were being punished by Assyrian invaders. Micah could see that the evil attitudes and behavior from the north—idolatry, materialism, Baal worship, economic exploitation, child sacrifice, even witchcraft—were creeping south into Judah and into its capital, Jerusalem. The people no longer had any regard for Scripture.

One result of all of this was an increasing gap between the rich and the poor, both in Israel and in Judah, which Micah fearlessly challenges. He also challenges the nation's leadership at every level—the political, religious, and social leaders were all perpetuating corruption. Micah addresses the issue of religious life. Temple worship was booming in Judah. Everybody went to church—the worship services and sacrificial system were incredibly popular, yet Micah saw how shallow they were. This "pop religion" bore no resemblance to true transforming faith in *Yahweh*.

Against that backdrop, Micah says that God's judgment is inevitable. Final and complete judgment will come to Judah in the form of Babylonian invasion under Nebuchadnezzar. The people who survive the military assaults will be carried off into exile in Babylon. That won't be the end, however. Each message that Micah preaches ends with a word of hope. The judgment of exile will be followed by restoration to their homeland, which will prepare the way for a new Messianic future for the people of Israel.

Micah takes a sweeping view of history. He takes in thousands of years of history at a glance. He moves confidently from imminent Syrian invasion, then to Babylonian invasion still a century and a half away, then seventy years of exile followed by a return to the land, and then into the future, the coming of Jesus Christ as Messiah. Finally, he looks to what he calls “the last days,” God’s final restoration, setting things in order on earth.

Today we need to hear the challenge of Micah in our modern world. The spiritual crisis that he faced in Judah is matched today in our churches, our communities and our political system. He won’t just speak generally, collectively. He will challenge us personally to focus on the spiritual transformation of our desires and our actions. Micah expects that this reformation will affect every relationship that we are involved in: at home, at church, at work, at play, and in community. Loving mercy, acting justly, and walking humbly with God are not just suggestions or possible options. Remember, Micah said it is the heart and soul of what is pleasing to God, who wants our lives to reflect his character.

Look carefully again at the first verse, Micah 1:1. There are two phrases I want you to notice for emphasis: “the word of the LORD which came to Micah,” and, “which he saw,” otherwise translated as “perceived” or “witnessed.” That verb in the Old Testament always refers to prophetic revelation. Micah perceived or witnessed God’s direct communication. He is not expressing his own bias, his human perspective. This is not an editorial opinion. This book is the word of God and it carries the very authority of God himself. It is a divine viewpoint that can’t be revised. And it has power—power to bring life if we submit to it, or power to bring judgment if we resist what Micah has to say.

In his book entitled *The Prophets*, the Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel makes a wonderful summary statement about the amazing responsibility of the Old Testament prophets. In the first chapter, “What Manner of Man is the Prophet,” he talks about the issue of witness, or what the prophet sees.

As a witness, the prophet is more than a messenger. As a messenger, his task is to deliver the word; as a witness, he must bear testimony that the word is divine.

The words the prophet utters are not offered as souvenirs. His speech to the people is not reminiscence, a report, a hearsay. The prophet not only conveys; he reveals. He almost does unto others what God does unto him. In speaking, the prophet reveals God. This is the marvel of a prophet’s work: in his words, the invisible God becomes audible. He does not prove or argue. The thought he has to convey is more than language can contain. Divine power bursts in the words. The authority of the prophet is in the Presence his words reveal. (1)

The judgment of “the Lord God”

We are going to hear God speaking through this text, so let’s pay attention and let it change us. Micah’s first “word” is wrapped up in the first two chapters, which represent one set of prophecies. He introduces the God of justice in this message of warning, which is difficult to hear. Chapter 1, verse 2 begins with a command to listen: “Hear, O peoples, all of you; Listen, O earth and all it contains....” Judgment is coming to all of the people on earth, and God is coming to witness, to pay close attention to what’s going on. We are going to see God’s nature in a new way and we are going to begin to understand how he administers his justice and brings judgment to pass.

**Hear, O peoples, all of you;
Listen, O earth and all it contains,
And let the LORD God be a witness against you,
The LORD from His holy temple.
For behold, the LORD is coming forth from His place.
He will come down and tread on the high places of the earth.**

**The mountains will melt under Him,
And the valleys will be split,
Like wax before the fire,
Like water poured down a steep place. (Micah 1:2-4)**

Micah begins by describing the Lord's appearance, which triggers in the people not only awe and fear, but also a sense of joy because God is revealing his majesty. Micah's Hebrew listeners would be joyful because they expect that God, as it says in verse 3, is coming forth, literally marching out to battle. He is coming out to be a warrior, and they hope that he is there to defend them and defeat their enemies, especially this Syrian superpower that is threatening them. That's what they're hoping this warrior God will do for them. He did it before. He brought them out of Egypt in the exodus under Moses. He did it in the conquest of Canaan under Joshua's leadership.

God will come to judge the earth

It is important to pay special attention to the fact that this initial call to hear is addressed to all the nations of the earth. Every human being needs to see and hear what God is doing, not just the Hebrew people in Judah. His words have universal application. He appears as the Sovereign of the entire earth and he comes from his kingly palace in heaven to dispense justice. God is holy, so all of his activity is holy and just. He comes to judge his overt enemies, those in active opposition to him, but also to witness against anyone who practices injustice. Nothing escapes his notice or his fair response.

As God reaches the high mountains of earth in verse 4, everything is torn from its foundation. Peaks and valleys are split wide open. God's power is so great that it overwhelms the most solid, most permanent aspects of nature. The implication is that there is nothing any nation or individual could do to avoid the enforcement of his just decisions. Nothing, no one is outside of his control.

God will come to judge Israel and Judah

So far Micah's audience really likes what he is saying. These dramatic metaphors really grab their attention. They are excited about God coming in power to judge the evil nations around them. But Micah is really setting them up, because the next section introduces a jarring surprise. God's awesome coming is an expression of his anger over the sins of his *own people*. In verse 5, Micah warns his listeners that God is going to come to judge Israel and Judah.

**All this is for the rebellion of Jacob
And for the sins of the house of Israel.
What is the rebellion of Jacob?
Is it not Samaria?
What is the high place of Judah?
Is it not Jerusalem?**

And now God speaks personally:

**For I will make Samaria a heap of ruins in the open country,
Planting places for a vineyard.
I will pour her stones down into the valley,
And will lay bare her foundations.
All of her idols will be smashed,**

**All of her earnings will be burned with fire,
And all of her images I will make desolate,
For she collected them from a harlot's earnings,
And to the earnings of a harlot they will return. (Micah 1:5-7)**

In verse 5, God accuses the northern nation of Israel and the southern nation of Judah of spiritual rebellion against him. They are represented by their capital cities, Samaria and Jerusalem. The rebellion, if you look carefully at the verse, is tied to the high places of idolatrous Canaanite worship, centers of religion that were sensual, seductive and sexually perverted. A crucial issue comes to light here, which is as true for us as for the Israelites: We either embrace the living God, or we end up bowing before idols of one kind or another. This is a consistent theme throughout the book of Micah.

In verses 6 and 7, God predicts the total destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel. The stones of her city walls and houses are going to be removed clear down to the foundations. Her idols will be destroyed and the land will revert back to agricultural usage as vineyards are planted. Sargon II, a Syrian general, destroyed the city of Samaria just a few years after Micah preached this. Idols were the tangible symbols of Samaria's pagan worldview, and from that idolatry came her twisted value system and unethical conduct. We'll investigate that value system later in chapter 2 and how it expressed itself. As Micah preached this message in Judah before the fall of Samaria, his southern audience must have been asking themselves, "What is going to keep Judah from suffering a similar kind of fate?" The point of verses 5-7 is very clear: God's judgment of sinful, rebellious people will result in an overwhelming and complete destruction of everything they hold dear, everything they trust, particularly the things that stand in the way of their relationship with God and true worship of God.

There is an important application of these opening seven verses for us. God views us, his church, in the same way he viewed Israel, his chosen people. We are to be a holy people as was Israel, and our God is just as angry when he witnesses sinful attitudes in rebellion against him and against what we know to be true about him, the truth of his Word. It makes him just as angry when we worship things other than him alone. We don't carve statues and bow down to them, but we can certainly find ourselves living for all kinds of things besides God. We can live for the things that we acquire or earn with our living. We can make an idol of education. We can make an idol of relationships, even family. We can make an idol of the use of our discretionary time. What we serve, what we sacrifice for, reveals what we worship. It can be a pattern of bowing down to my own ambition, serving myself, putting myself first, lusting after my own desires instead of desiring God more than anything else. Whatever form it takes, this is nothing less than a veiled denial of his sovereignty and lordship. If we love anything more than God, he will witness it, the text tells us, and he will eventually move in judgment against that thing in our lives.

This entire book of Micah suggests that God deals with idolatrous people like us in two ways: with grace and justice. First of all, think about God's surprising, undeserved grace. God repeatedly sends his prophets and preachers to convict people of their sin and call them back into relationship with him. In the book of Jonah, God didn't immediately destroy the wicked city of Nineva. He waited 150 years after Jonah's ministry and the Ninevites' response to the message, before bringing final destruction on those wicked people. Micah's 35 or 40 years of preaching in the southern kingdom are an expression of God's grace to Judah. God is just as patient with us in the face of our wickedness, rebellion and disobedience. He gives us time to repent. If you think about it, there really is no need for God to be gracious. He does not have to be compassionate, but I am really glad he is! If God immediately executed judgment for every sin, then none of us would be alive.

The second way God deals with sinful people is deserved justice. Both God's grace and his justice are based on certainties that we have already considered. He rules all nations and individuals. He is a holy God who witnesses what they do. He has unlimited power to execute his will over nature and over human beings. And if we accept all of that to be true, as verses 1-7 make it clear, then we can believe that he will eventually bring deserved punishment on people when his undeserved compassion and undeserved patience have been ignored. We should

expect divine justice for sinful rebellion against God's revealed will, especially for putting any person or any thing in his place. This passage tells us that when we make that choice it will have explosive and devastating effects in our lives.

Brokenhearted over God's judgment

As we turn to the remainder of chapter 1 of Micah, we see that Micah doesn't maintain an objective distance from his message. He's not cool or dispassionate and he doesn't take any joy in God's coming judgment on Judah, his own nation. Micah is deeply affected by Judah's sin and the consequences of the sin. Micah is really brokenhearted over God's judgment. He introduces a call to lament sin and the wages of sin. Look at verses 8 and 9:

Announcement of grief

**Because of this [what has been summarized in the first seven verses] I
must lament and wail,
I must go barefoot and naked;
I must make a lament like the jackals
And a mourning like the ostriches.
For her wound is incurable,
For it has come to Judah;
It has reached the gate of my people,
Even to Jerusalem.**

There is no hint here of accusation or condemnation toward his people. He identifies with them empathically, sympathetically. There is an incredible intensity to this determination to lament because of what is happening in the north with the fall of the northern kingdom, but in verse 9 he adds an additional reason for the lament—because of his own country, his identification with his own people. In other words, Samaria's illness is communicable and terminal. Her sin sickness has already infected Judah, and the cure for Judah is going to be just as radical as for Israel; it will be the cure of God's judgment. Micah weeps as he delivers this sermon, as we notice in the language he chooses: "lamenting," "wailing," "lamenting in mourning," "through tears." In his weeping, Micah is not trying to manipulate his congregation's emotions. His lament comes from real inner agony.

Micah stands with godly messengers throughout biblical history, people who have expressed this kind of identification with sinners and deep sorrow over coming judgment. In Exodus, chapter 32, Moses was willing to have his own name blotted out of God's book for the sake of the nation he was leading, the sinful people of Israel. Jesus himself, in the gospels, wept over the stubborn, unresponsive people of Jerusalem, including the hypocritical Pharisees who rejected him (see Matthew 23). He weeps over them as much as if they were innocent victims. In the beginning of Romans, chapter 9, the apostle Paul is in anguish over the stubborn resistance of the Jews who refuse to respond to Jesus as Messiah. Paul echoes Moses. He says he is willing himself to be cursed, to be cut off from Jesus Christ if his own people could come to faith.

Grief for specific cities in Judah

Micah's message of lament is summarized in verses 10 to 15. He talks about God's coming judgment against Judah. It will be in the form of a Syrian invasion, after the fall of Samaria. During the reign of Hezekiah, King of Judah, General Sennacherib conducted a thirteen-year conquest of Western Judah under the command of General Sargon. Sennacherib's forces ended up at the gate of Jerusalem in 701 B.C. "It has reached the gate of my people, even to Jerusalem," (Micah 1:9) and "... a calamity has come down from the LORD to the gate of Jerusalem" (Micah 1:12b).

Sennacherib did lay siege to Jerusalem but he couldn't take it because God protected the city. During the thirteen-year campaign, however, Sennacherib captured and destroyed 46 cities, including eleven that are mentioned in this lament in verses 10-15. One of the cities on the list, Moresheth-gath (verse 14) is Micah's hometown. His own home was destroyed in the conquest. The rest of the cities listed here were near Moresheth-gath in the western part of Judah. Look at Micah's grief over this judgment. Eleven cities that he mentions are going to suffer, and in a manner related to the meaning of their name. There is a cryptic play on words, a dark, tragic humor, in the association of the city name with the coming destruction from the Assyrians. Beginning with verse 10:

**Tell it not in Gath,
Weep not at all.
At Beth-le-aphrah roll yourself in the dust.**

Beth-le-aphrah means "house of dust."

**Go on your way, inhabitant of Shaphir,
in shameful nakedness.**

Shaphir meant beautiful or pleasant. But they will end up in ugly nakedness, humiliated.

The inhabitant of Zaanan does not escape.

Zaanan means going out, or escape, and they won't experience the meaning of their name.

**The lamentation of Beth-ezel:
"He will take from you its support."**

Their name meant support or standing, and that will all be taken away.

For the inhabitant of Maroth becomes weak waiting for good.

Maroth meant bitter. They will be waiting for sweetness and goodness, the opposite of their name, but it won't come. Their name will be fulfilled.

**Because a calamity has come down from the LORD
To the gate of Jerusalem.
Harness the chariot to the team of horses,
O inhabitant of Lachish—
She was the beginning of sin
To the daughter of Zion—
Because in you were found
The rebellious acts of Israel.
Therefore, you will give parting gifts
On behalf of Moresheth-gath;
The houses of Achzib will become a deception
To the kings of Israel.
Moreover, I will bring on you
The one who takes possession,
O inhabitant of Mareshah.
The glory of Israel will enter Adullam.**

Mareshah meant possession. They will be possessed by Assyrian invaders.

Again, the prophet Micah is speaking through tears. The imagery would be powerfully arresting to the people hearing their own villages named mysteriously, cryptically, humorously. It would be as if we would hear predictions at Peninsula Bible Church that an enemy agent representing the God of heaven is going to come into our communities and cut down every tree in Palo Alto (“Palo Alto” means “tall tree”). Or that the sun will never shine again in Sunnyvale. Or that some how Los Altos Hills will be leveled flat. There is humor in the Hebrew construction of this, and yet the effect of it is frightening. The wages of sin will be death. There will be public exposure, humiliation, and every material thing that people put their hope in will be stripped away. Devastation will be complete.

There is another reason to grieve. The last verse of the chapter, verse 16, gets very personal. It’s about relationships.

**Make yourself bald and cut off your hair,
Because of the children of your delight;
Extend your baldness like the eagle,
For they will go from you into exile.**

All of these physical commands are expressions of extreme grief and mourning. The individuals they care about more than anything else, their innocent children, will be taken away from them. Although the children did nothing to deserve it, the sin of the parents brings judgment on the kids.

Again, Micah is brokenhearted over God’s judgment. His need to lament for his people, for their sin, and for the wages of that sin is an important model for us today. We, however, do not know much about this or feel very comfortable with it. Lament is not a sign of weakness. It does not suggest relational compromise. It’s not a denial of responsibility. It’s not a softening of belief in God’s justice, because Micah still predicts destruction. Moses, Jesus and Paul did not suddenly change their minds about the sinfulness of their audiences. They did not take a wishy-washy position that somehow God’s love will overlook all the evil and everything will be okay. Their kind of grief, their careful lament, is a personal expression of deep sorrow that God is ending his longsuffering patience and bringing judgment and death.

We do need to lament today. We need to lament the great catastrophe of violence and sickness and death that our nation has faced since the terrorist attacks of September 11th. However, it struck me this week that the most important tragedy in all of this, locally, nationally and internationally, is the death of victims, whether innocent or evil, who died without any knowledge of the true God of the Scriptures.

Three things strike me as I consider those who died having intentionally rejected the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. First, I have been convicted of the fact that I don’t really lament the lost people in my world, people who suffer the punishment of eternal death and separation from our Savior God. How about you? Do you sorrow deeply over people who will die without a relationship to Christ? I applaud all of the positive motivation for getting financially involved in missions projects like our “Joy to the World,” the gospel being proclaimed and people being saved out of the kingdom of darkness. But perhaps the burden of sorrow and grief over people going to hell without Jesus can also serve as a powerful motivation to invest in these local and international mission organizations. We must also act out of concern for a lost world that doesn’t know the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The second thing I wrestled with this week was my attitude towards the terrorist evil-doers in our world. This is a very difficult issue. Micah lamented God’s coming judgment on the evil in Israel and Judah, as legitimate as that judgment was. Rebellious people, like the suicide terrorists of September 11, deserve God’s wrath. But I think we

are called to lament, to mourn God's legitimate punishment of people and of nations. We should feel as much sorrow for the death of those who have freely chosen to reject God and his will as we do for the Christian martyrs in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The third issue is very personal for each one of us. This issue of lamenting really forces us to examine our deepest attitudes toward the ungodly people in our lives who have all kinds of violent influence and presence around us. Do we pray against them, or do we pray for God's mercy on them? Do we love them enough to have a crisis like Micah's when God does judge them? Do we just put up with them and wait for God to deal with them? Or do we cry out to God in intercession for their very souls? Do we express profound grieving love for those who are lost in their trespasses and sins? If we don't, perhaps it's because we have never considered the call to lament, to mourn, to grieve over sin and its consequences. Perhaps we have lost a sense of compassion over people who are going to die and experience the wrath of God. Either way, I think we've got to do business with God.

I hope that what we are wrestling with in Micah's message is unsettling for you. It is for me. We will spend seven more weeks listening, wrestling, praying, thinking about who we are before this God and what our calling is in this world. The world is really out of control.

Much of the opening section of Micah, chapter 1 comes from Psalm 97. This psalm contains similar parallels and the same tension between joy and fear, between a God who saves and a God who judges. I hope that this will stir in you a holy, righteous feeling of discontent and unsettledness.

The LORD reigns; let the earth rejoice;
Let the many islands be glad.
Clouds and thick darkness surround Him;
Righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne.
Fire goes before Him,
And burns up His adversaries round about.
His lightnings lit up the world;
The earth saw and trembled.
The mountains melted like wax at the presence the LORD,
At the presence of the Lord of the whole earth.
The heavens declare His righteousness,
And all the peoples have seen His glory.

Let all those be ashamed who serve graven images,
Who boast themselves of idols;
Worship Him, all you gods.
Zion heard this and was glad,
And the daughters of Judah have rejoiced
Because of Thy judgments, O LORD.
For Thou art the LORD Most High over all the earth;
Thou art exalted far above all gods.

Hate evil, you who love the LORD,
Who preserves the souls of His godly ones;
He delivers them from the hand of the wicked.
Light is sown like seed for the righteous,
And gladness for the upright in heart.
Be glad in the LORD, you righteous ones;

And give thanks to His holy name.

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NOTES:

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[Back to Index page](#)

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