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The reality of judgement

Please read Micah 1:1-9

Why are religious people frequently filled with gloom and doom?' This is a question which people often ask. They think to themselves, 'We are only on this earth for a little while. Why don't we enjoy it while we can?' Their motto is: 'Let us eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.' They do not want to be reminded of a day of judgement. They bury their heads in the sand, like ostriches. They assume that if they do not stop to think about the future, then it will go away. For them death, judgement and punishment are all taboo subjects which should be avoided because they make people feel miserable.

Micah had the same reaction to his message in his day. He had been sent by God to tell the people about the vision which 'he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem' (1:1). Yet when he spoke to them about the future events which were going to occur, their

reaction was: 'Do not prophesy about these things; disgrace will not overtake us' (2:6).

Micah prophesied during the last half of the eighth century BC, and into the first part of the next century. He was a contemporary of Isaiah, although he may have been a little younger. Certainly he commenced his prophecy some years later than Isaiah.

Both of these prophets lived in Judah, which was the southern half of the land. The capital of Judah was Jerusalem (the home of Isaiah) while the main city of the northern kingdom was Samaria. We know that there was little love lost between these two halves of the country at that time, and the situation became worse still in later centuries. By the time of Jesus, the Jews did not even associate with the Samaritans (see John 4:9).

There are many similarities between the prophecy of Isaiah and that of Micah. However, this is not surprising since they both lived at the same time, and each of them had a great longing to see the people returning to wholehearted devotion to God. The main difference between them was that Isaiah lived in the city (indeed, he seems to have moved in court circles), while Micah was a country boy whose home was Moresheth Gath (see 1:1, 14). Micah, therefore, delivered his prophecy through the eyes of someone who lived on the hillsides which were situated about twenty-five miles southwest of the capital. Moresheth Gath probably lay something like halfway between Jerusalem and the Mediterranean coast.

Micah's prophetic utterances were delivered over a long period of time—between thirty and fifty years. His prophecy is made up of a number of oracles, or poems. His work commenced during the reign of King Jotham and he continued prophesying throughout the reign of wicked King

Ahaz. However, most of his prophecy seems to have been given during the lifetime of the godly King Hezekiah. Indeed some scholars believe that Micah may have been largely instrumental in bringing about the revival of true religion which occurred during the reign of Hezekiah.

Listen to God (1:1-2)

Micah starts with the words of the Lord. The people of the land are called upon to 'hear' and to 'listen'. This is how two other prophetic addresses begin in this book. In chapter 3:1 we read, 'Listen, you leaders of Jacob,' and in chapter 6:1 Micah says, 'Listen to [or 'hear'] what the Lord says.' This reminds us of the phrase which we read many times in the New Testament: 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear.'

Who is being called upon to listen? The prophet says, 'O peoples, all of you ... O earth and all who are in it.' So this is a message for everyone. This means that the message was not just reserved for those who lived in Israel and Judah; it sounded out to the inhabitants of the whole world. This is still the case today. The message which faithful preachers have to declare is for everyone who will take care to listen.

What makes this message so important, and why are all the peoples of the earth being called upon to take special notice of it? It is because the Sovereign Lord is speaking to everyone; and when God, the Creator and Sustainer of the whole universe, speaks then all people had better make sure that they listen.

One of the most terrible things about the people of today is that they do not want to hear what God is saying. They have no desire to pay attention to anything at all which will challenge them. They are fixed in their ways, and they are determined that nothing will change them. They will alter their habits for no one—not even God!

Micah then takes us to a scene in a law court. If we were in dire trouble and being prosecuted, and were standing in a court of law, then we would want to find people who would be able to bear witness on our behalf. We would like them to testify to our good character and our generally helpful attitude towards others. In fact, we would like to be able to find a witness who would truthfully say, 'I know he did not do it because he was with me at the time.'

Here, in verse 2, we are presented with a witness. It is the Sovereign Lord who is standing waiting to bear witness to what he knows. The solemn thing is that the witness which God is going to bring is one that is against his own people. God himself is sitting in his court of justice—that is, heaven. Micah called it, with great awe, God's 'holy temple'.

This is the setting of the first oracle that Micah delivered. He was probably preaching in the city of Jerusalem at this time. As he speaks we can well imagine the reaction of the people towards this message.

Words of judgement (1:3-4)

Micah told the people of Jerusalem what was going to happen. He said, 'Look! The Lord is coming from his dwelling-place' (1:3). When believers today hear such words they are delighted. They say, 'Christ is coming again.' Christians look forward to the glorious appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ; it is their hope. When the Lord comes back to this earth a second time it will be to deliver us from the pain and sorrow of this present evil world. But the people of Micah's day had no such hope. The prophet had not yet told them of the one who would come out of Bethlehem Ephrathah to be ruler over Israel (see 5:2).

Every one of those listening during those days in Jerusalem would have known that the phrase, 'The Lord is coming,' was

an indication that the Lord was going to come with the express purpose of intervening in the affairs of men. We can read about the Lord coming down in judgement in Psalms 18:9; 96:13 and 144:5, as well as numerous times in the prophecy of Isaiah.

Micah then paints a vivid description of the effects of the Lord's coming: 'He comes down and treads the high places of the earth' (1:3). This may mean that the Lord is coming to the mountains to show that he is higher, stronger and more stable than any power. Or it may mean that he is coming down to smash to smithereens the heathen high places, those shrines where false gods and goddesses were worshipped.

The prophet further says,

'The mountains melt beneath him
and the valleys split apart,
like wax before the fire,
like water rushing down a slope' (1:4).

Leslie Allen comments, 'Micah uses this terrifying poetry to build up an impression of God's irresistible power directed in catastrophe against his enemies.'¹

The purpose of God's coming (1:5-7)

Micah told the people that 'All this is because of Jacob's transgression, because of the sins of the house of Israel.' We can almost hear the people in Micah's audience beginning to tut-tut and shake their heads in a knowing way. We can imagine them saying, 'I feared that our northern neighbours [Israel] would go too far. They have sinned against the laws of God once too often and now, quite rightly, the Lord is going to punish them.'

They would think this because of what was actually happening around them. Everyone knew that the Assyrian army was threatening Samaria; and it could only be a matter of time

before the northern kingdom fell under its onslaughts. Amos had warned them: 'Woe to you who are complacent ... who feel secure on Mount Samaria' (Amos 6:1). Now that things were hotting up for Israel, God was going to punish them severely and he was going to use the dreaded Assyrians to demonstrate his displeasure. 'You can't say that they haven't been warned,' is what Micah's hearers might well have said.

What is Jacob's transgression which is spoken of here? Micah gives us the answer: 'Is it not Samaria?' (1:5). Samaria was guilty because she had been unfaithful to God. She had indulged herself in pleasure rather than in wholehearted obedience to God's commands. Verse 7 says, 'since she gathered her gifts from the wages of prostitutes, as the wages of prostitutes they will again be used.'

Prostitution is often used in the Scriptures as a picture of infidelity to God. When a nation, or an individual, went after false gods it is often likened to a husband turning his back upon his wife and seeking pleasure in a woman of the street. Ezekiel spoke about a similar case: 'For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am about to hand you over to those you hate, to those you turned away from in disgust. They will deal with you in hatred and take away everything you have worked for. They will leave you naked and bare, and the shame of your prostitution will be exposed. Your lewdness and promiscuity have brought this upon you, because you lusted after the nations and defiled yourself with their idols' (Ezekiel 23:28-30).

Micah then told his hearers what God was going to do to the disobedient people. He said, 'I will make Samaria a heap of rubble' (1:6). When I read these words it brings to my mind a picture of what London looked like in the blitz (the massive bombing of the early days of the Second World War). London

was a mess of broken and ruined houses; indeed, some parts of it remained so for some years after the end of the war.

God said that Samaria, which had been a great city with grand buildings in it, would become like a bomb-site. After the judgement of God the city would be flattened. It would only be fit to be ‘a place for planting vineyards’ (1:6).

Micah goes on to give a more detailed description of what the Lord was going to do to Samaria. He says, ‘I will pour her stones into the valley.’ The once proud city which had been built upon a hill (1 Kings 16:24) would be thrown down into a valley. In fact her stones would be poured into the valley just ‘like water rushing down a slope’ (cf. 1:4). All that would be left after the destruction would be the foundations of the once grand city but even they would be poking through the violently disturbed earth. God said,

‘All her idols will be broken to pieces;
all her temple gifts will be burned with fire;
I will destroy all her images’ (1:7).

This verse takes us to the root of all of Samaria’s sin. Her idolatry, which took her away from the worship of the true God, will not only be worthless; it will be utterly destroyed by fire (as nature itself will melt ‘like wax before the fire’ of God’s judgement—see 1:4). At that time the money which had been earned by prostitutes would be taken and reused. The prophet seems to mean that ‘The wealth that Samaria had gained from her idolatry will be taken by the Assyrians and placed in their own temples, to be used again in the worship of idols.’²

Judah’s fate (1:8–9)

To those in Jerusalem, who were feeling very smug that Samaria was going to be punished so severely, Micah says words to this effect: ‘You can see the sin of Samaria and you know that

Jacob's transgression is the sin of Samaria (1:5). but what about yourselves?' Was Judah completely faultless? No, it was far from perfect. And then, with penetrating accuracy, the voice of Micah cried out, 'What is Judah's high place? Is it not Jerusalem?' (1:5). He means that the holy city of Jerusalem, to which the people of the southern kingdom looked in awe and reverence, was nothing other than a pagan centre of idolatry. It is true that Samaria was going to be destroyed and her citizens taken away as captives, never to return; but Jerusalem, too, will not escape the judgement. 'Her wound is incurable.' The disease of Samaria's sin will also come to Judah. This is the burden of Micah's message: 'The Lord wants to alert you to the danger you are in.' This is why he says, 'It [the judgement] has reached the very gate of my people, even to Jerusalem itself' (1:9).

History tells us that the Assyrian army did come right up to the walls of Jerusalem, as Micah graphically put it, to 'the very gate'. Gates of ancient cities were very important. It was there that justice was meted out! It was all very well for Jerusalem to condemn Samaria for its sin, but how holy were the people of the southern kingdom? The answer was that they were as bad as those who lived in the north, and they too would be judged by the Lord.

The apostle Peter tells us, 'It is time for judgement to begin with the family of God.' He also adds, 'And if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?' (1 Peter 4:17).

Our response

What did Micah do? He performed a visual parable. He tells them,

'Because of this [coming judgement] I will weep and wail.
I will go about barefoot and naked.

I will howl like a jackal
and moan like an owl' (1:8).

Micah acted dramatically, as Ezekiel sometimes did, to draw the people's attention to the dire straits that they were in (see Ezekiel chapters 4 and 5).

Micah dressed himself only in a loincloth (which was as bad as being totally naked), and he walked stripped and barefoot through Jerusalem. He also howled like a jackal and moaned like an owl. The prophet of God did all this to demonstrate the awfulness of the sin of Samaria—indeed, the sin of all of God's people.

These things may seem almost laughable to us, but we are foolish if we do snigger at them. Britain, in common with many other nations, is guilty of very grave sins. We are not only guilty of turning our backs upon God and his commands, but we are condemned because we put our own desires before the will of God. Most of all, we are guilty of the heinous sin of failing to heed the warnings which God continually gives us that he will not overlook our sin.

The Lord's name will be vindicated, and he will regain his rightful place among the people. Paul tells us that one day,

'At the name of Jesus every knee [shall] bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord'
(Philippians 2:10–11).

It may be that there is someone who is reading this book who has never been convicted of his or her sin. If so, then the solemn fact is that '[Your] wound is incurable' (1:9). There is no hope for you in the state that you are in. Judgement is even now lurking at your door. The only escape for you is to become a new man

or woman by turning to the Lord Jesus Christ in repentance of your sin, and trusting him for your salvation. Those who want to escape the judgement of God 'must be born again' (John 3:3, 7).

However, Christians are not let off God's punishment completely. God says, '[Judgement] has reached the very gate of my people' (1:9). He says, 'My people need to repent and turn again to me.' He is a foolish person who 'invokes a blessing on himself and therefore thinks, "I will be safe, even though I persist in going my own way"' (Deuteronomy 29:19).