

THE MESSAGE OF MICAH

(Tom Constable)

Micah directed all the nations to witness God's judgment of His Chosen People in these litigation speeches. He wanted the people of the earth to learn that Yahweh is sovereign by observing His dealings with Judah. If Israel had been faithful to God's purpose for her, all the nations would have learned how wonderful it can be to live under the government of Yahweh. But Israel had failed in her calling. Therefore, Micah pointed out—for the benefit of all people—that those who serve under God's government can expect judgment when they fail in their calling. As a police officer who breaks the law gets more severe treatment in court than the ordinary citizen, because of his calling, so the people of Judah got more severe treatment from the LORD, because of their calling.

"What is the message of Micah? The most prominent theme in Micah is judgment." Micah was very much aware of the throne in heaven, God's throne, that symbolized His eternal sovereignty over all people, including His chosen people. He was also aware of the failure of the throne on earth: the failure of King Ahaz of Judah.

Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah, and both of these prophets ministered in the Southern Kingdom during Ahaz's reign. But Micah's emphasis was different from Isaiah's. Isaiah focused on the throne in heaven. He saw the LORD (Yahweh) high and lifted up above the earth, ruling in sovereign majesty and providing salvation for all people. Micah focused on the human rulers under the divine sovereign. He spoke of "the powers that be" that are ordained of God (Rom. 13:1). His eyes were on the earth. He saw the sin and corruption, the sighing and crying of the people, their agony and tears, and he traced these tragedies to misrule by people in authority in Judah.

The unique contribution of Micah is twofold: First, this prophet unmasked and denounced the false rulers. Second, he unveiled and announced the true Ruler. The false rulers were the princes, priests, and prophets that surrounded him. The true Ruler was someone whom Micah saw coming in the future to rule and reign properly.

We see Micah's picture of false authority clearly in 3:11: "Israel's leaders pronounce judgment for a bribe, Her priests teach for pay, And her prophets divine for money." Micah identified all three major types of Judahite rulers as corrupt: civil leaders (the princes), religious leaders (the priests), and moral leaders (the prophets). The judges were judging according to who paid them best. The priests were teaching the people, but for what they could get out of it. The prophets were not really prophesying messages from the LORD but were getting messages from other sources. They were practicing sorcery and witchcraft for money and passing these revelations off as the word of the LORD. In every case, ministry was being conducted, but for selfish motives: for what the ministers could get out of ministering.

The judges (princes) were passing judgment in legal cases because they hated good and loved evil (3:1-3). They should have "known" judgment (3:1). That is, they should have practiced justice, ruled justly, and shown no partiality. Instead they were, as Micah described them, tearing the skin off the people, eating their flesh, and chopping up their bones like butchers (3:2b-3). They were robbing the people, like soldiers who took the spoils of war. They were not impartial. They did not represent God, the true Judge of His people. They were corrupt. "It is remarkable that, in harmony with Isaiah, Micah speaks no word against the king."

The priests were no better (3:11). When we think of Israel's priests, we probably think of them offering the sacrifices that the people brought to the temple. But one of the primary responsibilities of the priests in Israel was to teach the people the Word of God (Deut. 17:8-13). This was really a more important ministry than cutting up animals. This man-ward duty, of teaching the people God's Word, was more significant than their God-ward duty, of offering sacrifices. God had scattered the priests in Israel, rather than giving them one geographic region to inhabit, so that they could teach the people His will. Yet the priests in Micah's day were just telling the people what the



Judahites wanted to hear, not what God had said. And they were doing it for money. They distorted their messages to get a favorable response to their messages.

The prophets claimed to have received fresh messages from the LORD for the people, but most of the prophets in Micah's day delivered favorable so-called "words from the LORD" only if they received adequate compensation. If the people did not pay them well, they either gave a message of gloom and doom, or no message at all. They were getting messages for the people all right, but they were messages from the wrong source. Their "prophecies" amounted to sorcery and witchcraft. Micah wrote of them in 3:5: "When they have something to bite with their teeth, They cry out, 'Peace!' But against him who puts nothing in their mouths, They declare holy war." The people had to pay for good prophecies. Otherwise they would get prophecies of disaster.

Many Christian ministers make ministry decisions primarily on the basis of money. I am not just referring to people who go into the ministry because they think it is a comfortable way to earn a living. I am also referring to evangelicals who are in the ministry because they love the LORD and want to serve Him. It is a temptation to evaluate opportunities for various ministries on the basis of financial remuneration.

Wherever you find distressed and suffering people, the cause is usually their leaders. If the leaders are out of harmony with God, if they love evil and hate good, if they are selfish rather than servants, the people suffer. This is true no matter what form of government exists. Every form of government has the equivalent of princes, priests, and prophets: civil, religious, and moral leaders. Corrupt authorities rule for their own benefit, not for the benefit of the people. This is the opposite of "servant leadership."

Micah saw through the religious smog of his own day to a Ruler on the distant horizon beyond. He saw this One coming out of human obscurity, not out of a position of power. He would arise from the obscure town of Bethlehem in Judah, but His real origin was eternity (5:2). He would arise and shepherd His flock in the strength of the LORD (5:4). He would faithfully represent Yahweh and act in His strength. He would not serve Himself but Yahweh. He would not be a crooked judge but impartial. He would not pervert the truth to glorify Himself but would tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. He would not pass deceitful and destructive messages to the people, but only the true words of the LORD.

The result of His ministry would be peace, not distress and suffering (5:5a). The negative side of His rule would be the destruction of all the things that the people's false rulers had encouraged them to trust in: horses, chariots, cities, strongholds, treaties, witchcraft, images, and idols. The strength of a nation is never in these things, but in its leaders. Israel would one day have a Leader who would provide adequate strength for her. He would not abuse her but glorify her.

The timeless value of Micah is that it reminds us that the test of authority is its motive. If the motive of leaders is self-seeking, self-service, and self-glory, their leadership is corrupt and evil. The strength of leaders is in their recognition of Yahweh.

We see this clearly in that One whom Micah saw arising out of obscure human conditions, yet with the authority of eternity behind Him, to take the reins of power and produce peace. When He came the first time, the obscurity of His human background so blinded the eyes of His contemporaries that they rejected Him and said: "We do not want this man to reign over us" (Luke 19:14). But when He comes the second time, no one will be able to resist His sovereign authority, and He will reign over the whole world. He will provide the perfect civil, religious, and moral leadership that this world has longed for but has never yet enjoyed.

In the meantime, the duty of God's people is to obey Him because our eyes of faith have seen Him, and our hearts know Him. As His disciples, we must serve as He will serve, in whatever sphere of leadership or position of authority we may occupy. And we must eagerly await His return in power and great glory. Titus 2:13 says that we should be "looking for the blessed hope and [even] the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus."

Micah is a great book because it contrasts imperfect leaders with the Perfect Leader. It uncovers present corruption, but it also gives us hope of future celebration. It assures us that God will replace selfish leadership with selfless leadership. It provides negative and positive leadership models for church leaders and individual Christians today. I believe that the aspect of God that Micah helps us to appreciate most is His leadership.