

12 May 2024

HOPE FOR THE KINGDOM

1. INTRO

- A. We've looked at the idea of the Kingdom of God in the Bible from a variety of vantage points: the Garden of Eden, the Israelites wandering in the desert, the time of the judges, the ups and downs of the life of King David, and how God's people lived and maintained their spiritual identity during the time of the exile. Before we move back into the New Testament, we're finishing up with the Old Testament this week, and we're going to look at the Kingdom from one more vantage point, namely the prophets.
 - i. This might raise some questions: What is a prophet? What do they do? Why should we care? How does this connect to the idea of the Kingdom? Hopefully by the end of this morning's talk we'll all be a little further forward here.
- B. What do you think of when you hear the term 'prophet'? I think most of us will gravitate toward something like 'a person who can tell the future.' It's not a term exclusive to Judaism or Christianity, lots of religions in the ancient world had prophets. Paraphrasing some helpful resources—**prophets bring predictions and social critiques given to them by God**. That last part is important. I'm not making a prophetic statement if I were to say that Scotland will triumph over Germany in the football. From my limited understanding I suppose that would take an act of divine intervention...Prophetic statements aren't arbitrary guesses, nor is it critique of social issues that conveniently align to what the prophet thinks. Prophets in the Bible are called by God to bring messages to his people, and these messages often leave them being deeply unpopular.
- C. The prophet we're going to look at this morning is called Micah, and the book tells us a few things about him: He came from a town called Moresheth, a town in the rolling valleys of Judah, and he lived during the reigns of Kings Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. This clues us in roughly to his time period, he lived and taught before the exile that Matt talked about last week.
 - i. As we'll see, Micah brings very strong words of critique to God's people, but he also introduces a concept of profound hope. In a very real sense—Israel was warned, explicitly warned, about what would happen if they continued to disobey God.
 - ii. Micah (and other prophets) demonstrate to use the extent to which God is absolutely concerned with justice—not as a theoretical ideal, but as a flesh and bone reality. His language is visceral, it's graphic, it might leave you slightly

squirming in your seat. As it turns out, the Bible is far less squeamish than we are in using strong language to call out injustice.

- iii. But alongside the stark, vivid sections of rebuke, the proclamations of hope are equally vivid. We see glimpses of a deliverer, another shepherd king, a better shepherd king as it turns out, a rescuer for God's wayward people.
 1. *And as we see what Micah has to say, to God's people then and now, I want you to keep our definition of the Kingdom of God in mind. Hopefully you've got it by now: God's rule, over God's people, in God's creation, by God's plan, in God's timing.*
 2. *We're going to look at several sections of Micah's book, and in doing so hopefully we'll learn a bit more about how this teaches us about God's Kingdom and also how we should live out our identity today. Let's start by exploring Micah's world.*

2. MICAH'S WORLD

- A. It's a world of systemic injustice. The first few chapters spend most of their time outlining the case against the people of Israel, particularly those in the leadership. I've asked Cameron to come up and read the third chapter of Micah, which will give us a sense of Micah's world.

Then I said,

"Listen, you leaders of Jacob,
you rulers of Israel.
Should you not embrace justice,
² you who hate good and love evil;
who tear the skin from my people
and the flesh from their bones;
³ who eat my people's flesh,
strip off their skin
and break their bones in pieces;
who chop them up like meat for the pan,
like flesh for the pot?"

⁴ Then they will cry out to the LORD,
but he will not answer them.
At that time he will hide his face from them
because of the evil they have done.

⁵ This is what the LORD says:

"As for the prophets
who lead my people astray,
they proclaim 'peace'

if they have something to eat,
but prepare to wage war against anyone
who refuses to feed them.
⁶Therefore night will come over you, without visions,
and darkness, without divination.
The sun will set for the prophets,
and the day will go dark for them.
⁷The seers will be ashamed
and the diviners disgraced.
They will all cover their faces
because there is no answer from God.”
⁸But as for me, I am filled with power,
with the Spirit of the LORD,
and with justice and might,
to declare to Jacob his transgression,
to Israel his sin.

⁹Hear this, you leaders of Jacob,
you rulers of Israel,
who despise justice
and distort all that is right;
¹⁰who build Zion with bloodshed,
and Jerusalem with wickedness.
¹¹Her leaders judge for a bribe,
her priests teach for a price,
and her prophets tell fortunes for money.
Yet they look for the LORD’s support and say,
“Is not the LORD among us?
No disaster will come upon us.”
¹²Therefore because of you,
Zion will be plowed like a field,
Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble,
the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets. ¹

- B. Thanks Cameron. Well, I promised you some vivid language, didn’t I? Perhaps some of you aren’t exactly sure what to make of this. Let’s dig in a bit and explore what’s going on at this point in history.
- C. If you’re someone who likes dates, we’re looking at roughly 735-700 BCE.² The opening verses of Micah mention that he lived during the reign of three kings: Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. This is how ancient writers provided shorthand for the

¹ [*The New International Version*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Mic 3:1–12.

² Stephen G. Dempster, *Micah*, Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), p. 61.

time in which they wrote, it's a bit like in baby books—or at least our one—where it has a little place where you can write in who the prime minister was when your child was born.

- i. But who are these kings? Let's get a brief look at them, and what we can piece together about the nation during their respective reigns...
- ii. **Jotham** (reigned ~740-732 BCE) We don't actually know too much about Jotham, but here's the quick summary: It appears that Jotham was personally faithful to God but was weak in providing spiritual leadership. Under his rule the people didn't share his degree of faithfulness (2 Kings 15:34), and rather than removing the 'high places' he allowed the people to continue to offer sacrifices and burn incense there.
 1. *The 'high places' most likely means a place where people set up an altar, or sometimes almost an open-air temple, to offer sacrifices, usually on the top of hills. This wasn't the normal practice of the Israelites, but it was a fairly common way for the Canaanites, their enemies. We get a little clue in 1 Kings that this practice went at least as far back as Solomon, David's son. It says that 'Solomon showed his love for the Lord by walking according to the instructions given him by his father David, **except** that he offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places.'* (1 Kings 3:3)
 2. *So, while Jotham is seemingly a faithful, if weak, king, there is a sense in which we're meant to see the religious life of the people on a downward trajectory.*
- iii. How about Jotham's son, **Ahaz** (reigned ~740-732 BCE)? We know a bit more about Ahaz, it's striking that he's one of the most vilified people in the whole Bible. 2 Kings says that 'unlike David his father [another way of referring to David as his direct ancestor], he [Ahaz] did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord his God.' (2 Kings 16:2) While Ahaz was king of Judah, the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians, and rather than defending the other tribes of Israel, Ahaz becomes friendly with the Assyrian conquerors. He even begins to worship like them. Listen to how he's described: 'He followed the ways of the kings of Israel and even sacrificed his son in the fire, engaging in the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites. He offered sacrifices and burned incense at the high places, on the hilltops and under every spreading tree.' (2 Kings 16:3-4)
 1. *Remember when Cameron read out Micah's critiques and they seemed a bit harsh? This is the sort of thing that Micah was railing against. We looked at David as a flawed leader but one who makes sincere efforts to repent and put himself right with God, but here we have not only rampant theological infidelity, but perhaps the most vivid and graphic practice of it, in Ahaz murdering his own son: child sacrifice.*

2. *This shows us the moral and theological landslide that had happened within the ranks of God's people. It affected their political leaders, their spiritual leaders, and individual men, women, and children.*
 - a. *Further, it shows us a particularly vivid illustration of what happens if God's people decide not to live by the principles of his Kingdom. It's a fundamental rejection of God's rule, a profound sin against God's people, we'll see in a bit that it actually affects God's wider creation as well. But we'll also see that God's plan and his timing are still at work, even amid all this darkness, and he's going to use Micah to bring it about. Micah is tasked, like many prophets before and after him, to bring word of divine judgement.*

3. GOD'S JUDGEMENT

- A. Now, at this stage, you may have come into Hope City this morning thinking that judgement isn't a great thing to focus on. Christians are often portrayed as a bit judgy, and to be honest I think to some extent we only have ourselves to blame. How often have we expected friends, family, and others who aren't following Jesus to behave according to what the Bible says? Often as Christians we expect the rest of the world to conform to our beliefs without remembering that it is the message of the gospel and the work of the spirit which changes hearts and minds.
- B. From the outside, the 'judgemental Christian' is a pretty common stereotype, and it's not without some precedent. But what we're looking at here in Micah is something different.
 - i. Micah tells us, in the very first verse of the book, that this is a vision he has *received* directly from God. This isn't a laundry list of stuff Micah doesn't like. It's not a swift *personal* rebuke against evil acts on the part of the leaders of Judah. It's a specific word of judgement and rebuke from God to people.
 1. *We've talked about God's Kingdom from lots of different angles over the past few weeks, but one thing that I hope has been clear through all the talks is that **God is direct and intentional with both who he is and what he expects from his people.** We saw this with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, we saw it with the Israelites in the wilderness, through the judges and the kings. God has set out clear expectations for his people, and they flow from his nature and his character.*
 2. *In the context of Micah, then, we see that God's people once again have wandered off the path that he set out for them.*
 - a. *This isn't just the action of King Ahaz. Micah is also calling out false prophets, people who claim to have words from God for the people but in reality are leading them away from God. Listen to how Micah*

describes their actions: 'Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money.' And then they have the audacity to say 'Is not the Lord among us? No disaster will come upon us.' (Micah 3:11)

3. *Micah says that the judgement coming will be harsh: nothing less than the invasion of Israel and Judah by foreign armies. Remember, this is written prior to the time period Matt discussed last week. God's people end up scattered. This is what he's getting at when he says 'You will go to Babylon; there you will be rescued. There the Lord will redeem you out of the hand of your enemies.' (Micah 4:10)*

4. THE COMING KING

- A. You might be asking at this point, did Micah's words have any effect during his lifetime? It's easy for us, thousands of years later, to look at his words of warning and say—yeah, that's pretty much exactly what happened! Israel and Judah experienced a pretty severe reckoning: they were invaded, scattered, trampled down as a nation. And yet, there is some evidence of transformation...
 - i. The eagle-eyed among you may have noticed that I only mentioned two of the three kings mentioned at the beginning of Micah, namely Jotham and Ahaz. There's a third king that we need to talk about: Hezekiah. He's a night and day difference from his predecessors. Listen to how 2 Kings talks about him: 'He [Hezekiah] did what was right in the eyes of the Lord' (2 Kings 18:3). Sounds like a good start! But how does this work in practice? Well, Hezekiah worked to undo the idolatrous and blasphemous policies that his father had implemented. This takes a few forms:
 1. *First, Hezekiah purified the worship in the temple. Under his father, idols had been brought into God's temple and were worshipped there. Listen to what Hezekiah says to the priests, he's channelling some prophetic energy himself in his address to the priests:*
 - a. *'Listen to me, Levites! Consecrate yourselves now and consecrate the temple of the Lord, the God of your ancestors. Remove all defilement from the sanctuary. Our parents were unfaithful; they did evil in the eyes of the Lord and forsook him. They turned their faces away from the Lord's dwelling place and forsook him. They turned their faces away from the Lord's dwelling place and turned their backs on him.'* (2 Chronicles 29:4-6)
 - b. *The temple workers spend sixteen days dragging idols and pagan altars out of the temple, working to reconsecrate the temple. Chronicles tells us that at Hezekiah's instruction they laid a burnt offering on the altar and began to sing psalms in worship, and then*

notice what happens: 2 Chronicles 29:29 says 'When the offerings were finished, the king and everyone present with him knelt down and worshipped.' The temple has been restored to once again be the place where God is present with his people, and Hezekiah himself models faithful worship for the people. But what's really cool is what happens next...

5. RECONCILIATION AND TRANSFORMATION: PRESENT & FUTURE

- A. Hezekiah's reforms eventually brought both reconciliation between God and his people, as well as wider social transformation. Let's unpack that a little bit. We can see the reconciliation to God part in the restoration of the temple, but there is also wider social transformation. Remember the 'high places' where both Jotham and Ahaz allowed people to worship other gods? 2 Kings 18 tells us that Hezekiah 'removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles' (1 Kings 18:4). I've got an image of King Hezekiah out on the hills with a chainsaw demolishing these idols and altars, but there's actually more to the story.
- B. After the temple had been reconsecrated, Hezekiah decided that it was time to celebrate the Passover, the special feast where the Jews celebrated God delivering them from slavery in Egypt. This was normally part of the worshipping calendar for the Jews, but since the temple had become corrupted there weren't enough consecrated priests to do it, and as a result the people didn't come up to Jerusalem to celebrate like they used to.
 - i. Hezekiah invited *all* of God's people to celebrate, including the ten tribes in the Northern Kingdom. This is a big deal because they had been separated from them politically for roughly 200 years! The Chronicler tells us that lots of people came from Israel, including foreigners who had begun to worship the Lord there. Listen to how the event is described: 'There was great joy in Jerusalem, for since the days of Solomon son of David king of Israel there had been nothing like this in Jerusalem.' (2 Chronicles 30:26).
 - ii. But what's even more interesting is what happens afterward. This reconciliation with God and worship promoted profound change and action in those who were present. There is, if you like, a **vertical** and a **horizontal** dimension to this worship. The next chapter in Chronicles tells us that 'When all this had ended, the Israelites who were there went out to the towns of Judah, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. They destroyed the high places and the altars throughout Judah and Benjamin and in Ephraim and Manasseh.' (2 Chronicles 31:1) Their renewed relationship with God (the vertical aspect) caused them to reassess their relationship with the world around them and to recognise the way in which its values and practises were negatively impacting on them.

- C. This sounds like a pretty happy ending for God's people, right? A decent, worshipping king, reconciliation, social transformation...all pretty great. But what about all the doom that Micah prophesied? Well, the reforms Hezekiah established didn't last following his death, and several subsequent kings fail to live up to his example, and eventually God's people find themselves exiled to Babylon, just like Micah said. So, the judgement from God still did fall on the people, but Micah also promised something else!
- D. Micah, in chapter 5, alludes to a promised ruler who will deliver Israel. He prophesies: "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor bears a son, and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.' (Micah 5:2-4)
- i. Micah, hundreds of years before the birth of Christ, gives God's people a glimpse of what Jesus will be like, and how he will rule over his people, bringing the Kingdom of God to earth in and through his life, death and resurrection.
 - ii. You see, in Jesus' last Passover meal, he tells his disciples that his body would be broken like the bread on the table. Broken for them. His blood pouring out of his wounds would flow like the wine from the jug. And in doing so, he would provide full and complete reconciliation with God, something that the temple sacrifices could never do. In Jesus' perfect sacrifice to his Father, those who place their trust in him can experience full and complete reconciliation with his Father.
 - iii. So, if you have placed your trust in Christ, if you've admitted you've sinned against God and that you believe that Jesus can reconcile you to God, you too can experience this reconciliation.
 - iv. What Hezekiah has shown us is that a vertical reconciliation with God should lead us to reassess our horizontal relationship with wider society. We should seek to understand the ways in which it is impacting on our priorities and how we spend our time. We're all designed to worship something. For those of us who are Christians, fully reconciled to God, the sole focus of our worship should be Christ, and yet I think if we were honest we would have to admit that often we are pulled away from him. It can be helpful to make ourselves aware of the ways in which the culture around us competes for our worship. Nobody wakes up one morning and says, I'm going to start worshipping an idol today. These things slip into our thoughts and our attention, and slowly but surely we can begin to conform ourselves to their pattern.
 - v. Some of these alternative forms of worship are pretty blatant. We don't have altars and Asherah poles in the 21st century west but we do have grocery stores,

museums, football stadiums, they're all architecturally designed to draw us in, to encourage us to spend our time—and our money—within their walls. One of my favourite authors, the Canadian-American philosopher James K. A. Smith, in his book *You Are What You Love*, gives an unusual example of a shopping mall as a temple. Can you think of some other examples?

1. *How about a big retail store is trying to get you picture that nice shiny kettle in your kitchen. Thousands of football fans sing ancient songs in appreciation of their favourite team.*
 2. *Other alternative forms of worship are more subtle. They often aren't even 'bad' things, they're often good things which are gifts from God. Income, a nice home, a new car, close friends, a family, a fulfilling job. These all have the potential to be blessings in our lives but if we allow them to take the place which God alone should occupy, if we place our identify in them, they can easily become idols. We may not even realise this has happened until they are taken away from us.*
 3. *When we talk about the Kingdom of God breaking into this world, we're talking about nothing less than a profound disruption, a different way of thinking, a different way of living. Embracing God's rule, over God's people, in God's creation, by God's plan and in God's timing means that we have to work to identify ways in which the surrounding culture tries to convince us to base our lives on something other than God: our job, our role as parents, our sexuality, our nationality. Jesus came not to remove those things from us, or to trivialize them, but to redeem them.*
 4. *If you're a Christian and you're feeling like this is going to be a really tough task, remember...you're not on your own. Any change in us isn't going to be because we're awesome at pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps, it will be the Holy Spirit reminding us of the truth in God's Word. He can help us to recognize that the wider world can pull us in all sorts of directions, but that if we fix our eyes on Christ and his Kingdom, we can live as God's people, under his rule, in his creation, and trust that he will work in us according to his plan, and his timing.*
 5. *Therefore, for those of us who are Christians I'd like to invite you to spend a minute or two thinking about some areas where you might be tempted to fall into rival worship to a rival kingdom. Where do you need to ask for the Holy Spirit's help in changing those aspects of your life where you are struggling to live under God's reign.*
 6. *And for those of you who wouldn't at this time call yourself a believer have you considered what the current focus of your worship is? Is it providing you with the fulfilment you're looking for, or does it fall short?*
- vi. Micah proclaimed judgement on God's people, but he also offered them profound hope, and in Christ we saw that hope realized. Further, God isn't going to leave this world awash in sin and decay, he's going to set things right once

and for all...but you'll have to come back next week to hear Peter conclude our series.