

Micah 1-3: Judgment Against Judah and Samaria

Micah comes from a Hebrew word that means “Who is like the LORD?” Coming from the Judean town of Moresheth, Micah was one of four well known prophets to prophesy to Judah. He followed Obadiah, Joel, and Isaiah. Most likely his ministry overlapped Isaiah’s, and while these men are devoting their energies to God’s people in Judah, Hosea is working in the northern kingdom urging the people to repent. A best date for the ministry of Micah would be between 735 and 700 B.C.

The book opens by telling us Micah’s ministry took place during the reign of Judean kings Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. As Micah begins to prophesy, Assyria is pushing into the northern areas of Israel, and within a few short years the northern ten tribes would be completely absorbed into the Assyrian Empire. Since the northern tribes found themselves in such great danger from an enemy oppressor, the southern two tribes should stand up and take notice. What was happening to their brothers in the north could happen to them! If they did not correct their behavior, they were going to be equally punished by God.

It is important to understand the background of Judean society during the days of Micah. Jotham’s father, Uzziah, had returned Judah to a place of prominence not enjoyed since the days of Solomon. During the early part of Uzziah’s reign, the Assyrians were busy at home dealing with internal problems which allowed Judah and the nations surrounding it to extend their borders and influence. Uzziah had been a good king, and his son Jotham shared a similar character. He continued many of the policies of his father. After Jotham, his son Ahaz began to rule. His character was completely opposite of his father and grandfather. During the reign of Ahaz, Israel, and Syria pressed Judah to enter into an alliance in order to resist the Assyrians. Pekah (king of Israel) and Rezin (king of Syria) attacked Judah when she refused to join the alliance, Isaiah 7:1. Pekah killed over 120,000 persons in one day and carried off another 200,000 into captivity, 2 Chronicles 28:6-8. We get a glimpse of the character of Ahaz in Isaiah 7:11-12. Isaiah approaches Ahaz and urges him to seek the Lord for assistance against Israel and Syria. Ahaz refuses and turns to Assyria for help. Assyria came in and destroyed the Syrians, killing Rezin, 2 Kings 16:5-9. The alliance with Assyria turned out to be a costly mistake for Ahaz and the nation of Judah. In order to get the Assyrians on board, Ahaz plundered the gold and silver in the temple and the king’s house. *So Tilgath-pileser king of Assyria came against him and afflicted him instead of strengthening him*, 2 Chronicles 28:20. After the death of Ahaz, the Assyrians continued to exhibit great pressure on Judah. Sargon II, who followed Tilgath-pileser, invaded Judah during the reign of Hezekiah. By 701 B.C. the Assyrians under Sennacherib held Jerusalem under siege. It was only after Hezekiah’s prayer and God’s intervention that the nation survived, Isaiah 36-

37. Had it not been for Hezekiah's leadership and the influence of godly men and women, Judah may have very well fallen to Assyria.

The period of materialistic prosperity and international prominence enjoyed by Judah during most of the eighth century B.C. had created social and religious problems very similar to that of their northern counterpart, Israel. Micah deals with the social ills and superficial religious conditions of the day. The rich oppressed the poor, unethical business practices were the norm, and those in positions of authority corrupted their power. During the reign of Ahaz, Judah sank to some of its lowest levels. As Assyria placed more pressure on Ahaz, he became, *yet more unfaithful to the Lord*, 2 Chronicles 28:22. He *gathered together the utensils of the house of God, he cut the utensils of the house of God in pieces; and he closed the doors of the house of the Lord and made altars for himself in every corner of Jerusalem. In every city of Judah he made high places to burn incense to other gods*, 2 Chronicles 28:24-25. The worship of idols meant nothing but trouble for Judah. At the end of the sixteen-year reign of Ahaz, his son Hezekiah worked hard to initiate reforms for Judah. The priests returned to service, the temple reopened, and the high places for idol worship were torn down. While Judah returned to worshipping the Lord, they still had a problem with worshipping Him *wholeheartedly*. They suffered from the tendency to offer mechanical worship to God while they had not fully given their hearts to God. We read of some of Micah's most famous words in 6:6-8 where he deals with this problem:

With what shall I come to the Lord And bow myself before the God on high? Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings, With yearling calves? Does the Lord delight in thousands of rams, In ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I present my firstborn for my rebellious acts, The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? 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?

In previous lessons, we contrasted Hosea and Amos who were eighth-century prophets to the northern tribes of Israel. Amos prophesied about the upcoming doom and judgment upon Israel by God. Hosea spoke of God's sustaining love and devotion to a people who continually rejected Him. An interesting study is to contrast Micah and Isaiah, eighth-century prophets to Judah. In speaking of this contrast, Smith writes that Isaiah stressed *total reliance on the Lord. If Isaiah stressed faith, Micah stressed works.*¹ Judah needed to follow through with God's expectations if they were to stave off the judgment of God. Throughout the book, Micah speaks of punishment for evil doing and also of a time of restoration and blessing once the period of chastisement has passed. Glimmers of hope of what will be possible during the church age are seen throughout this book.

Destruction is coming

As the book opens, we are told where Micah is from, which kings ruled during his ministry, and who his prophecy focuses upon. They are called together to hear what the Lord has to

say concerning their situation. Micah's message came from the Lord. The setup is similar to what we have seen in some of the other Minor Prophets: a court scene. God has a case against His people and the earth is called as a witness. In verse three, Micah uses the word *Behold!* This was to grab the attention of the people and to explain the suddenness of the judgment coming against them. God is going to come out of His holy temple and *tread on the high places of the earth*. As the Lord approaches, the earth melts in front of Him. The language in verses three and four is symbolic—speaking of God's judgment against His people in both nations, north and south. Both Samaria and Jerusalem had multiplied their sins against God. Their gross sin began *in the high places*, where idols were worshipped. It is hard to imagine the brazenness of erecting idols in the holy city, Jerusalem; but during the reign of Ahaz, that is exactly what happened. In fact, it happened in every city, 2 Chronicles 28:23-25. This behavior was repugnant to God. Micah says God's action against them was going to be in the very near future.

In verses six and seven, Samaria is in focus. She would be completely destroyed. Samaria, the capital of the northern ten tribes, was a haven for Baal worship instituted during the days of Ahab and Jezebel. Micah says that Samaria would become *planting places for a vineyard*, 1:6. On this, Smith comments: *The city would remain so long in ruins that vineyards would be laid out upon it. Visitors to the ruins of Samaria can observe for themselves the fulfillment of this prediction.*² During the reign of Jeroboam II, Samaria was strengthened significantly. In some places, the walls surrounding the city were over thirty feet thick. Samaria was looked upon as an impregnable city. God says, however, that He would make Samaria *a heap of ruins in the open country*, and he would *pour her stones down into the valley*, 1:6. The entire city would be leveled to its foundation. The religious icons and idols Israel held so highly would be *smashed*. They would be powerless against the judgment of God. All the things Samaria held dear were going to be completely destroyed. The harlotry mentioned in 1:7 refers to spiritual harlotry. Israel had gone after the worship of idols to increase their material prosperity. And yes, they had prospered physically while going their own way. God says this would be *returned* or taken away.

Micah laments over the fact of the coming judgment. The lament was common in this time period and it was done for a purpose: to demonstrate to the people the seriousness of the judgment coming against them. He would cry out, beating his chest and manifest great grief. When he speaks of going *barefoot and naked* he is not speaking of going around in the nude. He is speaking of being dressed without the "upper garment" as to symbolize humiliation. His lament would be as *the jackals and a mourning like the ostriches*, 1:8. The lament would be genuine in nature because the destruction of Samaria was inevitable. The wound that was coming to the north would also make its way to the south (Jerusalem).

Beginning in verse ten, Micah goes through a list of cities who he called to join him in lamenting the downfall of their nation. It is believed the five cities mentioned in verses ten through twelve sat to the north of Jerusalem and would be the first to stand up against

enemy invaders headed to the capital city. Micah makes a play on the names of the cities located in this area to explain the gravity of the situation.

- Gath was told to *weep not*.
- Beth-le-aphrah (Dust-town) was told to roll itself in the dust. This would be a sign of deep agony and grief.
- Shaphir (Fair-town) was told to leave their town in *shameful nakedness*. Again, this is a sign of lament.
- Zaanan (March-town) did not march and did not escape.
- Beth-ezel (Neighbor-town) would no longer be able to be hospitable. This city would perish as well.
- Maroth (Bitter-town) was waiting for good, but it would not come. The destruction would go all the way to Jerusalem.

These outlying cities would have most certainly been affected by the invasion of Sennacherib in 701 B.C. as Jerusalem was besieged.

After the cities on the north were subdued, the invaders (the Assyrians) would begin taking the cities on the south of Jerusalem. Lachish (Horse-town) was to *harness the chariot to the team of horses*, 1:13. Lachish sat on the southwest of Jerusalem, toward Egypt. Lachish is referred to as *the beginning of sin to the daughter of Zion*. The exact meaning of this phrase is unknown. Was it a reference to Judah's trust in horses and chariots which they would have received from Egypt? Isaiah mentions in several places the faithlessness of the leaders of Judah who trusted in earthly alliances and not in the saving power of Almighty God. Lachish would have been the first stop for the imported horses and chariots. Lachish would also suffer the judgment of God because of the prominence of idol worship in that city. It is said that in the city *were found the rebellious acts of Israel* which is an obvious reference to idol worship. Lachish was overtaken by the Assyrians and became the headquarters for Sennacherib in 701 B.C., 2 Kings 18:14; Isaiah 36:2.

Moresbeth-gath (the Betrothed of Gath), Micah's hometown, was to be overtaken by the enemy. She would be giving *parting gifts* to the king of Assyria. Achzib (False-town) would *become a deception to the kings of Israel*. They could not rely on this city for protection. Mareshah (Inheritance-town) would find itself in the possession of someone else. Adullam (Refuge-town) would find itself home to the "glory of Israel." Some have said the elite of the nation would flee to this city, along with all that would be considered precious and valuable. All of this would come to pass with the coming destruction of the cities around Jerusalem by Assyria in 712-710 and 702-701 B.C. As the Assyrians came into the land, they would haul the inhabitants off into captivity. It is said that Sennacherib took over 200,000 captives during his invasion of Judah.

Reasons for this judgment against Judah

Why was certain punishment coming to God's people? It was because of willful and deliberate sin. They schemed iniquity, 2:1. They worked out their evil plans with careful forethought and executed them as soon as the morning light came over the horizon. These charges were directed at the ruling class in Judea. Their plans were worked in the sight of all—giving us insight into the brashness of the people in committing sin. They seized fields, took homes, and robbed men of their possessions and inheritances. Wealth was in the hands of a small number of people who worked hard to ensure that they extracted as much from the poor as possible. As we look at our own society and time, are things *that different*? We live in a culture that seems to emphasize “get what you want at any cost.” The warnings made to people who lived so many centuries ago should be heeded by certain segments of our culture. Are we listening?

Because of the sins of the people, God says that He was planning a calamity that they would not be able to escape from. While men were planning evil, God was making plans on how to execute judgment against them. The oppressors would become the oppressed. There would not be any deliverance from their situation. Imagine how this message must have sounded to the smug and prosperous people in the upper stations of society. Little did they realize how it would become reality very, very soon. As the rich and wealthy are humbled and abased, those they oppressed taunt them. They who had kept their finger on the poor were now the ones who were ruined. Their lands, homes, and possessions were removed from them. The land they had received by inheritance would be overtaken by the enemy.

It should not be surprising that Micah and the other prophets were not received well by the people. False prophets, who were in the pockets of the rich and influential, discouraged Micah and his contemporaries from preaching. The people were rejecting the message of the Lord. They were very receptive to the prophets who predicted an optimistic future. They believed that because they were God's special people that God would do only good to them. They failed to realize that God's favor and blessings upon them were conditional; they were based upon compliance with the covenant made at Sinai and reaffirmed by those who entered the Promised Land under Joshua. The phrase *house of Jacob* in verse seven is significant. The patriarch Jacob was given a new name “Israel” when he got his spiritual priorities in order. “Jacob,” in Hebrew, means “heel grabber.” To refer to God's people as “Jacob” would present them as stubborn, “worldly and unconverted.”³

The children of Israel, who looked at themselves as being upright and holy, God's special people, were not really that special. Some specific sins are listed in verses eight and nine:

- Stripped the robes (mantles or outer garments) from unsuspecting passers-by. Even returning soldiers were not exempt from their thievery.
- Evicted women from their homes. Could this be referring to widows who could not provide for themselves?

- They had trampled on the children of the nation, making them homeless along with the women.

Having little concern for the most vulnerable in society would not go unnoticed by God. This was a message the people did not want to hear. Micah speaks of the heart of the people when saying *if a man walking after wind and falsehood had told lies...he would be spokesman to this people, 2:11.*

The chapter ends with a glimmer of hope. Some day, after a period of chastisement, God would gather a remnant and put them together. Verse thirteen is messianic in nature. Jesus is the *breaker [that] goes up before them*. Hailey observes, “The breaker is thought to be the Messiah who breaks down the wall of sin that separated them from the Lord and made them bondsmen. As they go out, their King, the Messiah leads them, with Jehovah at their head.”⁴

Judgment is coming to the rulers of Judah

As we enter into chapter three, the focus comes upon the rulers of the nation—those who controlled national affairs. These men were placed in high places for a reason—to dispense justice. They should have known and practiced it. Instead we see a completely corrupt leadership. They *hate good and love evil, 3:2*. In describing the depths of their sin, Micah speaks of men who oppressed and violently extorted everyone they could, 3:3. There was a day coming that these oppressors would cry out for mercy. Their cries would go unheeded. God would *hide His face from them at that time because they have practiced evil deeds, 3:4.*

Judgment is coming to the false prophets of Judah

Many prophets during the days of Micah prophesied with the wrong motives. They willfully led the people astray—often for physical gain. For those who fed and supported them, they prophesied good things. For those who gave them nothing, they had only evil to say. There was a day coming when their visions would cease. Their words were going to come back to haunt them; they would be embarrassed. God would not answer their cries for help and assistance.

Compared to these false prophets, Micah was *filled with power...with the Spirit of the Lord...and with justice and courage, 3:8*. Micah was speaking with the authority and power of the Lord. He was confident, but not arrogant. He knew the difference between right and wrong and was not afraid to speak the truth in all matters. His job was to make manifest the sins of his people—even if it was an unpopular message.

A final message to the rulers of Judah

These rulers hated justice and twisted everything that was straight, 3:9. This was not some naïve departure from God’s expectations. The leaders knew exactly what they were doing as they deliberately transgressed the laws of God. Violence, bribery, extortion, and priests

preaching for hire were just some of the sins of the people. All this was practiced in the open, in front of all. Yet they still leaned upon the Lord and claimed He was *in their midst*, 3:11. They felt sure that calamity would not fall upon them. Micah says Judah and Jerusalem will be completely destroyed. This must have sounded strange to a people who took such pride in the temple and in the buildings of the holy city. But make no mistake—there was a day coming in which the prophecies of Micah would come to reality.

For Discussion

1. When did the ministry of Micah take place?
2. Describe the political times of Micah.
3. What were the economic and social times like while Micah lived?
4. What would become of Samaria according to Micah's prophecy?
5. What was the purpose of the lament during the days of the prophets?
6. The people of Micah's day *schemed iniquity*. What does this say about the condition of their heart? Are there any applications for our own generation?

7. As the rich were hauled away into captivity, how would they be treated by the poor persons they had oppressed?

8. How was Micah's message received? Why would the people not have preferred his preaching? What applications can we make for our own time? See 2 Timothy 4:1-3.

9. What did it mean to refer to God's people as the "house of Jacob"?

10. Read 3:1-3 and 3:9-11 and describe the leaders of the land of Judah during Micah's day.

11. What would happen to Jerusalem because of their sinfulness?

(Endnotes)

- 1 Smith, James E. *The Minor Prophets*. p. 137
- 2 Smith, James E. *The Minor Prophets*. p. 287
- 3 Smith, James E. *The Minor Prophets*. p. 301
- 4 Hailey, Homer, E. *A Commentary on the Minor Prophets* (Louisville, KY: Religious Supply, 1993), p. 200