

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Speaker: Mr. Peter Ollerhead

Messages from some Old Testament Prophets: Micah

Amongst the political figures of recent British history, there is one who towers above the rest. Wherever men meet to discuss the twentieth century, this man is sure to command attention because of the significant part he played in world affairs during most of the defining moments from the end of Victoria's reign to the first decade of the present Queen. I am, of course, talking about Winston Spencer Churchill who lived from 1874 to 1965. During his long life he played many parts, from war correspondent to prime-minister, adding bricklaying and painting to his accomplishments along the way! Perhaps his most lonely and yet momentous task was to warn the nation of the rising danger it faced during the thirties. Very few seemed to listen; very few seemed to care, yet his strident tones never ceased to point to the evidence. Due to this he was viewed as a voice in the wilderness, a prophet of doom who disturbed the comfort of a nation wearied by the cost and killing of the war to end all wars. Looking back we can acknowledge the clarity and truth of his message, but it was ignored at the time until it was almost too late.

Today's talk is about another prophet whose message was anything but comfortable for he spoke forth condemning the behaviour of his people. He lived thousands of years before Churchill and miles away from the British Isles, but I would suggest that his words have a meaning and relevance for us even in the twenty first century. I am talking about the prophet Micah whose words are recorded for us in the thirty third book of the Bible that obviously bears his name. So, if you wish to follow the references in this morning's talk, you will have to find the book of Micah in the Old Testament.

Micah lived in the southern region of Israel known as Judah. Amongst his contemporaries were the prophets Isaiah and Amos. This would indicate he was living in the eighth century BC. It was a time of economic prosperity tinged with spiritual apathy. Due to the able administration of King Jereboam the second of Israel and King Uzziah of Judah both kingdoms had been extended to almost the limits of Solomon's era. This led to a time of luxury, however which was not shared amongst all the people but only a few. This state of affairs that engaged the attention of Micah and his fellow prophets. They were concerned that the demands of the Mosaic covenant, including its stress on social justice, should be met by all of God's people.

Micah's prophecy is a collection of messages to his fellow citizens which, needless to say, were not well received by some. They were more than negative condemnations, however, because they brought before the people the possibility of change. This also, in our day, gives us the possibility of learning the timeless truths brought out by Micah.

Chapter 1 begins with his belief in the sovereignty of God: "Hear, all ye people; hearken, O earth, and all that therein is: and let the Lord God be witness against you, the Lord from his holy temple."

To Micah, the Lord was not limited to the borders of Israel. He was not merely a tribal god but a deity who compassed the earth. His influence and power were without limit. Do we, in our world of rapid change, possess Micah's grasp of the transcending power of God?

His first sermon or prophecy to his people is contained in the first two chapters of the book. The stark reality of what was going to afflict the inhabitants of Judah and Samaria is presented in graphic images. The cause and effect are outlined so that none can be in doubt. In 1:6-7, we read, "Therefore I will make Samaria as an heap of the field, and as plantings of a vineyard: and I will pour down the stones thereof into the valley, and I will discover the foundations thereof. And all the graven images thereof shall be beaten to pieces, and all the hires thereof shall be burned with the fire, and all the idols thereof will I lay desolate: for she gathered it of the hire of a harlot, and they shall return to the hire of an harlot"

The cause of this dreadful calamity is stated in verse 5, "For the transgression of Jacob is all this, and for the sins of the house of Israel." The smoking ruins and desolation of the dwelling places of Israel would be a stark witness to all with eyes to see - a terrible witness to God's hatred of the sins of His people.

In this study of Micah's prophecies we must understand that the prophet was not looking at things merely from a secular point of view. For Micah it was not the militant aggression of Assyria that was primarily responsible for bringing Israel to her knees. Rather was it the rejection of the social obligations of the Mosaic covenant. The book of Exodus

22:25-26 states, "If thou lend money to any of my people that is poor by thee, thou shalt not be to him as an usurer, neither shall thou lay upon him usury. If thou at all take thy neighbour's raiment to pledge, thou shalt deliver it unto him by that the sun goes down.

The rich and influential leaders of Israel were, without compunction, robbing their fellow countrymen with greedy zeal to make themselves even richer. Micah warned them, as Moses had many years before, that if they continued to disregard God's commands there was a price to pay.

Quoting again from the book of Exodus 22:22-23, "Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child. If thou afflict them in any wise, and they cry at all unto me, I will surely hear their cry." The burden of Micah's words was that they could not sin with impunity.

The second of Micah's three speeches is contained in chapters 3 to 5. It begins, as did the first, with a call to listen to the prophet's words. The leaders and rulers of the nation are rigorously put on the spot with the question, as recorded in 3:1, "Is it not for you to know judgment?" The New International Version makes this statement to the leaders even more pointed for it renders it as, "Should you not know justice?"

Again the leaders of the nation are challenged to govern with equity and to condemn the pitiless and punitive treatment of the poor. If they didn't, then the time would come when God would not answer them in their distress.

Micah further enlarges upon the specific errors in their governance. Widespread corruption amongst the ruling clique led to bloodshed and violence, as he makes clear in 3:9-11. They seemed indifferent to the warnings of Micah. As they passed along the busy streets of the city of David, they must have thought that the imposing edifice of the Temple would stand for ever. How could anyone accept that this site would become a heap of stones overgrown with thickets, as Micah prophesied it would become? The religious leaders, too, were singled out for condemnation. Their voices were giving a different message than that brought by Micah. These were the false prophets who were leading the people astray. Micah tells us about them in 3:5, "Thus saith the Lord concerning the prophets that make my people err, that bite with their teeth, and cry, Peace; and he that putteth not into their mouths, they even prepare war against him." Then, as now, not all of the voices that spoke in the name of God were owned by Him. Those that speak in line with the scripture of truth are the authentic messengers of the living God.

That Micah was bringing the true message is borne out by the subsequent history of Israel. Within a few years, Jerusalem was but a heap of stones and the leaders had been taken captive by the invading armies. Even then everything was not gloom and doom, for despite the imminent crisis, Micah held out the hope that Israel would be restored to its former state. Indeed the promise is for even greater things. In 4:1-8 Micah outlines the prosperity and influence that will be Israel's in a coming day. There is more than a hint in 5:2 with regard to the identity of the king whose reign will bring these things to pass. "But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting."

I have a feeling that many of you listening this morning will immediately recognise those words as the ones quoted by Matthew in Matthew 2:6. This was when he was recording the details of the birth of the Lord Jesus. It is in consequence of such verses that we believe that this promise of great blessing for Israel will be honoured in the millennial reign of Christ.

The last of Micah's three prophecies begins in 6:1 and carries on to the end of the book in 7:20. The background to this is one of a legal tribunal where God brings a case against His people. In the opening verses, He calls the mountains as witnesses of the truth of His case. These silent observers have seen the consistency of the Lord towards Israel. Over the many years following the redemption from the slave yoke of Pharaoh, the nation had received nothing but kindness from their God. 6:3 asks a question, "O my people, what have I done unto thee? And wherein have I wearied thee? Testify against me."

God as prosecuting counsel is seeking to determine the motive for the nation's abandonment of the pathway of dependence and faithfulness. From the opening section, in which examples of the Lord's goodness are quoted, it is obvious that the fault lay with the waywardness of His people. They answer, through the lips of the prophet, in verses 6 and 7 as they, too, ask a rhetorical question which is concerned with the externals of religion. They wish to know how to approach and what to bring into the presence of the high and exalted God. They suggest that a large number of the choicest animals should be offered as a sacrifice in order to please the Lord. Micah goes straight to the nub of the problem in his answer in verse 8. This is such a classical answer I must quote it here in its entirety: "He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?"

This has always been a scripture that helps the serious enquirer into spiritual matters. From this we understand the demands of true discipleship; it is a prescription for a life style and not for isolated actions. As Alan Redpath once said, "The conversion of a soul is a miracle of a moment but the manufacture of a saint is the task of a lifetime."

Such verses as the one just quoted give us the flavour of the demands of the life of faith which by the power of the Spirit of God mould us into saints.

Micah was not saying that external expression of our worship has no meaning. It is clear from a careful reading of the Old Testament scriptures that the sacrificial system was an integral part of the Mosaic covenant. What is demonstrated here is that sacrifices offered without inward conviction were not acceptable to God. It is the same in our Christian era because the only true sacrifice for sin has been made by the Lord Jesus and we believe that this sacrifice is intensely pleasing to God. If we claim to believe in Him and to attend religious ordinances, yet ignore the claims of the faith upon our time, attitudes and behaviour, there is something wrong. Neither is the statement of Micah's, that has just been quoted, invalidated by Christianity. It is still expected that Christians should exercise the qualities of true religion such as kindness, humility and living in communion with God. The letter of James in the New Testament describes the external obligations of our religion as, "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world."

Such actions do not earn God's favour or show the way of salvation; rather are they the outward expression of inward convictions and faith in God as revealed to us in Christ. Outward conformity to religious practices can lead us into the error of thinking that we are what we purport to appear.

When my daughter was quite young she wanted both a rabbit and a guinea pig as pets. So one day I set to and made a cage that I designed as I went along. My idea was to make it large enough to allow both pets to live in the same cage but with different compartments. Can I say here, to any who are thinking that it would be too small and that to keep such animals in confined space would be cruel, that it was a somewhat massive structure. Looking back I would judge that I used enough wood in that one structure to build a kennel large enough to house a brood of Alsatian dogs! The point of this story is that we bought a rabbit but not a guinea pig. This meant that the pet, which we called Frisky, had ample room in which to live. True to its name, this animal liked to move about, and one day my daughter came running into the house to exclaim excitedly that we now had a guinea pig. The reason for this was that Frisky had managed to jump up into the section of the cage that I had promised her would one day contain a guinea pig. She thought that because the guinea pig section contained an animal, it was a guinea pig. I know it is only a childish story but even as adults we are sometimes apt to think that when we attend a church or place of worship, then that attendance turns us into adherents of that particular faith. As Micah points out in his prophecy, it takes heart conviction and true belief to make us into followers of the living God.

This relationship between faith and dead works is clearly dealt with in Scripture. To quote from the Letter of James again this time from 2:18, "Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works."

By dead works is meant those actions which, we think, will buy us merit with God. This is not to say that, as Christians, we should not be marked by good works and kind actions. Obviously those that follow Christ must express the same concerns that Micah has outlined in his prophecy. Again, it must be emphasised that works by the Christian are not produced by slavish obedience to the letter of the law but rather by the indwelling of the Spirit of God.

The rest of Micah's prophecy is given over to a repetition of the condemnation against the present sin and the certainty of the coming judgment of the nation. The great hope of restoration and ultimate forgiveness is repeated in glowing tones at the end of the book. What more cheering words could be written than those contained in 7:11? I quote from the New International Version, "The day for building your walls will come, the day for extending your boundaries."

The rich forgiveness, which is characteristic of the Lord, causes Micah to ponder on the uniqueness of God, for in 7:18, he asks the question, "Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? He retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy."

Such statements are true in any age for it is the mercy and goodness of God that brings salvation not the merit and good works of men. For the Christian such statements cause us to give thanks for the One, who, at the cost of His life, purchased that forgiveness by His suffering upon the Cross. The children's hymn puts it so succinctly,

*"He died that we might be forgiven,
He died to make us good,
That we might go at last to heaven,
Saved by His precious blood."*

It might be claimed by some that such thoughts are simplistic, yet I would claim that, in the sufferings of Christ, the glory and wonder of the love of God are revealed. The great thing is that such love can be grasped by the child yet at the same time taxes the affections of the most pious disciple.

The closing verse of the prophecy accentuates this thought of forgiveness for Micah is confidently content to rest in the mercy of God. "He will turn again, he will have compassion upon us; he will subdue our iniquities; and thou will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea."

We could not finish our study today with a better thought than that of the great kindness and mercy of God to His people. The knowledge that we are acceptable to God because He, through Christ, has removed our sin is truly wonderful.

As we conclude our brief glance at this book, we must take Micah's words seriously. He has shown us that for God's people, obedience to His word is not an optional extra. Christianity is not a pick and mix, choose what you want, type of life. Neither is it for amusement only, akin to the slot machines that litter the bright arcades of the large towns and sea-side resorts of our land. In the time of Micah such levity in matters of faith was roundly condemned as we have seen. How much more should we, if we believe in Jesus as the Son of God, the risen ascended Lord, and appreciate something of the enormity of what He accomplished upon the cross, be moved to act decisively and with conviction in this world which crucified Him. Should we not still be those who love mercy and seek to walk humbly with our God? May we all, through the power of the Spirit of God, seek to live in the light of His presence, growing in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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