



Sermon Transcript July 5, 2020

Do Justice It Starts with Lament Micah 6:8; 1:1-16

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on July 5, 2020 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text

Micah 6:8

⁸ He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 1:1-16

¹The word of the LORD that came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem.

² Hear, you peoples, all of you; pay attention, O earth, and all that is in it, and let the Lord God be a witness against you, the Lord from his holy temple. ³ For behold, the LORD is coming out of his place, and will come down and tread upon the high places of the earth. ⁴ And the mountains will melt under him, and the valleys will split open, like wax before the fire, like waters poured down a steep place. ⁵ All of this is for the transgression of Jacob and for the sins of the house of Israel. What is the transgression of Jacob? Is it not Samaria? And what is the high place of Judah? Is it not Jerusalem? ⁶ Therefore I will make Samaria a heap in the open country, a place for planting vineyards, and I will pour down her stones into the valley and uncover her foundations. ⁷ All her carved images shall be beaten to pieces, all her wages shall be burned with fire, and all her idols I will lay waste, for from the fee of a prostitute she gathered them, and to the fee of a prostitute they shall return.

⁸ For this I will lament and wail; I will go stripped and naked; I will make lamentations like the jackals, and mourning like the ostriches. ⁹ For her wound is incurable, and it has come to Judah; it has reached to the gate of my people, to Jerusalem.

¹⁰ Tell it not in Gath; weep not at all; in Beth-le-aphra roll yourselves in the dust.

¹¹ Pass on your way, inhabitants of Shaphir, in nakedness and shame; the inhabitants of Zaanan do not come out; the lamentations of Beth-ezel shall take away from you its standing place. ¹² For the inhabitants of Maroth wait anxiously for good, because disaster has come down from the LORD to the gate of Jerusalem.

¹³ Harness the steeds so the chariots, inhabitants of Lachish; it was the beginning of sin to the daughter of Zion, for in you were found the transgressions of Israel.

¹⁴ Therefore you shall give parting gifts to Moresheth-gath; the houses of Achzib shall be a deceitful thing to the kings of Israel. ¹⁵ I will again bring a conqueror to you, inhabitants of Mareshah; the glory of Israel shall come to Adullam. ¹⁶ Make yourselves bald and cut off your hair, for the children of your delight; make yourselves as bald as the eagle, for they shall go from you into exile.

Introduction

What does it mean to lament? Mark Vroegop contends that we have largely forgotten the biblical invitation to lament. He became acquainted with the biblical idea of lament through his own pain. He and his wife had to bury their stillborn daughter, who was carried to full-term. He confessed that while he firmly believed in the goodness of God, he was not prepared for the depth of grief that he and his wife experienced. He found that whenever he tried to be honest in sharing his grief with others, he said; “people usually wanted to move on—quickly.”¹ Propelled by his own pain, he began to study the biblical idea of “lament” and his own experience caused him to conclude that this is often a missing element in our grief. We don’t know how to lament.

I wonder what word comes to mind when you hear the word “lament.” Perhaps, the first word that comes to mind is “sorrow” or “crying” or “weeping.” No doubt, that is part of what it means to “lament.” But a biblical lament is more than tears and sorrows. A simple definition for what it means in the Bible to lament is this: “a lament is a prayer in pain that leads to trust.”² It fully acknowledges the pain and at the same time, it restores hope and trust in God. But it implies that you need to express the pain to get to the point of genuine hope and trust.

We begin our series this morning on the Old Testament book of Micah. In Micah 1 we find that this prophet is lamenting. He is crying out in pain. He says in verse 8, “*For this I will lament and wail; I will go stripped and naked; I will make lamentations like the jackals, and mourning like the ostriches.*” Some of this language is rather foreign to us, but it is in keeping with how the ancient Near Eastern cultures expressed profound grief. Gary Smith says that when Micah says “*I will . . .*” it expresses the prophet’s firm resolve to act.”³ I find it instructive that this is the first thing he does—this is his first response—his first action he takes in this book. He laments.

And furthermore, you get the sense that in his lament he is holding nothing back. His lament is compared to the sounds of a *howling jackal* and the loud screech of an

ostrich. Smith says, “the louder and overt the expression of grief, the stronger the pain that is communicated to others. Micah’s ravings are the sign of his deep anguish.”⁴ And then he ends the chapter by inviting the people of Judah to join him in his pain and to join him in his lament. He writes, “*Make yourselves bald and cut off your hair, for the children of your delight; make yourselves as bald as the eagle, for they shall go from you into exile.*”

So when we talk about “lament” we are talking about how to give voice to our pain. The fact that over a third of the 150 Psalms are categorized as Psalms of Lament tells us that God wants us to learn how to express our pain. It also affirms for us that it is good and necessary to express our pain to God. In fact, there is a pattern that emerges in the Psalms of Lament and this pattern teaches us how to express our pain. The pattern of lament often goes like this:

1. Turn to Prayer: Talk to God about your pain, even if it is messy
2. Bring Your Complaint: Tell God your questions, fears and frustrations
3. Ask Boldly: Ask God to act in accordance with his character
4. Choose to Trust: Let this move you to deeper trust in God⁵

It is interesting to see how Micah’s prayer in pain led him to deep trust in God. At the very end of Micah, the prophet expresses deep trust in God. He says in Micah 7:18-20, “*Where is another God like you, who pardons the guilt of the remnant, overlooking the sins of his special people? You will not stay angry with your people forever, because you delight in showing unfailing love. Once again you will have compassion on us. You will trample our sins under your feet and throw them into the depths of the ocean! You will show us your faithfulness and unfailing love as you promised to our ancestors Abraham and Jacob long ago.*” That is great statement of trust in the context of a lot of pain. But that is where biblical lamentation takes us. It takes us to deeper trust in God.

So what was it that caused Micah to cry out with *lamentation like the jackals, and mourning like the ostriches*? He begins with verse 8 by saying, “*For this I will lament and wail.*” Well what is the *THIS* that causes Micah to lament and wail? The *THIS* that caused Micah to lament is people and their problem and their pain. It is the very thing that should cause us to lament as well. What is it that should produce within us the cry of pain that leads to deeper trust? It is people, their problem and their pain.

Lament for The People

Clearly, people are the focus of Micah's lament. Micah was a prophet. He was a "professional" prophet, with a career that lasted for about 40 years. We discover in verse 1 that the timeframe of his ministry is marked by the reign of three kings in Judah; Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. In this opening verse, we discover that the word that came to him from God was concerning *Samaria and Jerusalem*. These two cities were capital cities. Samaria was the capital city of the northern ten tribes of Israel. While Jerusalem was the capital city of the two tribes of Judah to the south. Like we saw last week in Revelation, cities represent people. Capital cities represent entire countries. And so he says in verse 2 to the people of Israel and the people of Judah, *"Hear, you peoples, all of you."*

That really gets to the heart of what a prophet is called to do. He comes with a word from God to the people. Notice how verse 1 begins, *"The word of the LORD that came to Micah."* He comes with a message from God. So he pleads with them from the beginning, *"Hear, you peoples . . . pay attention, O earth, and all that is in it."* I think of what Moses said to the people of Israel before they crossed into the promised land. In Deuteronomy 30:15, he gathered the people together and said, *"I have set before you today life and good, death and evil."* There is life in obeying God's Word. That is what Jesus was saying when he said, *"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."* For the good and wellbeing of the people, the prophets bring *the word of the LORD* to them.

Micah is not a long book, it is only seven chapters. But many commentators feel that these seven chapters stretch across the forty years of Micah's ministry. And so Micah 7 is reflective of the final years of his ministry. And when you start reading Micah 7, you find a very discouraged prophet at the end of his career. Now I know in verse 1 that the last king that Micah served under was Hezekiah, and there was spiritual renewal that took place under Hezekiah, and we will see in a moment how Micah had a direct impact on Hezekiah. But most likely, Micah was around when Hezekiah's son, Manasseh was rising to power. And there was no king in Judah's history as evil as Manasseh. This discouraged prophet was lamenting the spiritual state of the people at the end of a long career. The spiritual state of the people was reflective in the breakdown of the family. Listen to what he laments in Micah 7:5-6, *"Guard the doors of your mouth from her who lies in your arms."* In other words, you can't trust your spouse. He adds, *"for the son treats the father with contempt,*

the daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; a man's enemies are the men of his own house." And so the prophet laments for the people who have strayed from God and the brokenness that comes with it.

One more thing about Micah's lament for people. Micah is from Judah, the two tribes to the south. The town he came from, *Moreseth*, was twenty-five miles southwest of Jerusalem. In verse 9, he calls the people of Judah and the people of Jerusalem, *"my people."* They are his people. But the first half of Micah 1 is not about "his" people but instead it has to do with "those people." What he says in the first seven verses of the book has to primarily do with the people of *Samaria*—the people of Israel, the ten tribes to the north. Micah's lament for people includes "his people" and "those people." His cry of pain—his lament— is a cry for people.

Lament for Their Problem

What is the problem that Micah laments? In very generic terms, it is their sin. He says in verse 5, *"All this for the transgression of Jacob and for the sins of the house of Israel."* Later, in Micah 3:8, Micah says that he is not like those "false prophets" who are unwilling to call out the sins of the people. He said, *"But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD . . .to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin."* And so he asks the key question in Micah 1:5, *"What is the transgression of Jacob? . . . And what is the high place of Judah?"* He responds to these questions by saying, *"Is it not Samaria? . . . Is it not Jerusalem."* By naming these capital cities, Micah indicates that the problem that plagues these countries is deeply rooted in the halls of power.

Micah starts by identifying the sins of Israel, the ten tribes to the north. Here he concentrates on their idolatry and the sexual immorality associated with it. In verses 6-7, he speaks of their carved images and the prostitution associated with the temple. If you recall from our recent series *CASKET EMPTY*, when the ten tribes to the north separated from Judah to the south, they never had a king "in the halls of power" that led the people of Israel to worship God. Instead the first thing their first king, Jeroboam, did was to build worship centers at the northern and southern ends of the kingdom to keep the people of Israel from going to Jerusalem to worship at the temple. And so when Micah is calling out the sin of Israel, "his people" in Judah would be quick to say, "Amen!" It is always easy to see the sin of "those people." But Micah was using the sin of Israel to really speak to "his people"

and their sin. In fact, this is who he is really writing to. He is a prophet sent to proclaim *the word of the LORD* to his own people . . . the people of Judah.

As we make our way through Micah, we will see that the sin of Judah is idolatry and injustice. We think of the issue of justice when we think of Micah because of that often quoted verse in Micah 6:8, “*He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*” What does it mean *to do justice*? Tim Keller says that “the most basic meaning is to treat people equitably.”⁶ It is enlightening to see how often the issue of justice comes up in Scripture—the word is used over 200 times in the Old Testament—and how the emphasis is placed on how we treat the most vulnerable. For example, in Zechariah 7:10-11 it says, “*This is what the LORD Almighty says: Administer true justice, show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the immigrant or the poor.*” The fact that Micah calls “his people” *to do justice* gives us a hint that this is their problem. We will take a look next week at how there was systemic injustice at play in Judah.

Now the people of Judah would have been taken back by Micah’s strong words to them. When he locates Judah’s sin in verse 5, he locates it at the center of their worship. He says that their transgression is in *the high place of Judah . . . Jerusalem*. How can he say that? They have the priests. They have the sacrifices. They have the temple. One of Micah’s contemporaries—one of his “colleagues” in ministry—was the prophet Isaiah. He brings a similar word to the same group of people. In Isaiah 58 the people of Judah didn’t think there was anything wrong with their worship. In fact, when you read about their “worship” habits, you would be tempted to conclude that they were deeply devout. Isaiah acknowledges that they daily seek after God and they love to come to worship—*they delight to draw near to God*—is what he says of them. They even fast regularly. They were very “religious” in their observance. But Isaiah went on to say that while they keep religious observances, they fail *to do justice*. They fail to care for the hungry, the homeless poor, the naked—their own flesh. In fact, Isaiah says that this is what religious observance—the love of God—is all about. It is to *pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted*—love of others. It is the same thing James says in the New Testament when he talks about the essence of *pure religion*. It is caring for the orphan and the widow. It is *doing justice*.

At the heart of Micah’s lament is the injustice taking place in Judah. Proverbs 31:8

says, *“Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute.”* That was their problem. Silence is a form of injustice. The practice of justice is integral to our worship of God. Proverbs 14:31 says, *“Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors God.”* Micah laments the injustice that has become a systemic part of the life of Judah.

Lament for Their Pain

This leads Micah to lament the pain that is coming because of their problem—their sin. The pain that is coming is in the form of God’s judgment. Now remember, he begins by talking about the ten tribes to the north—“those people”—the people of Israel. And in very strong graphic terms he describes God’s coming judgment. He says that God himself is going to come down and when God comes in judgment, who can stand? He says in verse 4, that when God comes down, *“the mountains will melt under him, and the valleys will split open, like wax before the fire, like waters poured down a steep place.”* Anytime you read a passage like this, it ought to serve as a warning to us. Am I right with God? Jesus is the one who makes us right with God. It is through faith in Jesus that we are made right with God. But if I don’t have the righteousness of Jesus applied to my life, who can stand on their own good—their own merit before God? *“There is no one righteous, no not one!”*

It was during Micah’s ministry that the hand of God’s judgment came against Israel in a very dramatic way. They were taken into captivity by the Assyrians. And that is what Micah is referring to in the first seven verses of Micah 1. But he is using Israel’s exile—their judgment—as a warning to Judah. *“This same thing could happen to you!”* *“Learn the lesson from your brothers to the north!”* It just so happens, Micah writes this shortly before the Assyrians flex their muscles against Judah and Jerusalem. I think that is what he is saying in verse 9 when he says, *“For her wound is incurable (speaking of Israel—they are already gone, taken into exile) and it has come to Judah; it has reached to the gate of my people, to Jerusalem.”*

Quite literally, this happened in the time of Micah. Assyria, under King Sennacherib had invaded Judah. He had invaded forty-six of Judah’s cities. Eleven of those cities are listed in the rest of Micah 1. Cities like Gath, Beth-le-aphrah, Shaphir and so on. You can’t pick it up in English, but in Hebrew he is using these cities as puns to describe God’s coming judgment. It would be like saying that *“Watertown will be covered with water, Washington will be washed away, and Waterloo will meet its*

waterloo.”⁷ I will give you two examples. Beth-le-aphrah literally means “house of dust.” And he says of this city, “roll yourself in dust.” Or *Mareshah* in verse 15 means “conqueror.” But he says of this city, “I will bring a conqueror to you.” But now the enemy, we are told in verse 9 is at the very gate of Jerusalem itself. Micah’s lament is a deep anguish over what is about to happen to Jerusalem. His lament is a call to turn to God.

That is exactly what happens. Hezekiah is king and the Assyrians have the city of Jerusalem surrounded and under siege. Jeremiah looks back on this time in Jeremiah 26 and he recounts how Micah came to Hezekiah and the people of Judah with this warning: “Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.” And what did Hezekiah do? It says in 2 Kings 19:1, “As soon as King Hezekiah heard it, he tore his clothes and covered himself with sackcloth and went into the house of the LORD.” It is what Micah invited him to do at the end of Micah 1. He invited Hezekiah to join him in his prayer of lament. Jeremiah says of Hezekiah, “Did he not fear the LORD, and did not the LORD relent of the disaster that he had pronounced against them?” Indeed, he did. God delivered them from the hand of the Assyrians.

This is what I want you to see. The prayer of lament is the first step to healing. Gary Smith says that “when they are ready to plead for God to act on their behalf, then Micah can give the answer to their questions and lead them to the next step. But if the audience is unconcerned about the future, there is no hope they will ever change their ways.”⁸ Before we can restore what is broken, we need to lament. Lament is a cry for people, their problem and their pain. It is the first step.

Do Justice: Our Call to Lament

There is a reason why I have chosen to spend some time this summer in the book of Micah. Micah 6:8 calls us *to do justice*. As we saw in Isaiah 58, this is not just a “side issue” of the faith. Tim Keller makes the observation that “there is a direct relationship between a person’s grasp and experience of God’s grace, and his or her heart for justice.”⁹ And yet, while we love to talk about grace—our entire evangelical movement is built on the mantra “by grace alone”—there is a people and a problem and a profound pain to lament. Somehow, the message of grace has not translated to racial justice within our culture and within the church. This is something to lament. The ability to reconcile begins with lament.

How does lament open the door for racial reconciliation? When we “weep with those who weep” we embrace the emotions of sorrow, hurt, misunderstanding, and injustice. We begin to “feel” the pain of injustice. I saw a news report recently on how the video of George Floyd had deeply impacted a white community in western Pennsylvania. It is a community that is 90% white. The news reporter was talking about how “for the first time” many of the residents were seeing and in essence “feeling” the injustice of racism in our culture. For the first time, many of them were really talking about it. Now in some sense, the black community or the minority community could be rather incredulous that these people are just now seeing what to the community of color has long been painfully part of their everyday life. But my point is that when the pain is “felt” and when it moves to genuine lament, there is a way forward to reconciliation.

Lament can include several things. It can include sorrow and remorse over what has been the average experience of the black community throughout the history of our country. It could be lamenting the inherent disadvantages there are in our country for a person of color. It could be personal repentance over ways prejudice marks us or our defensive posture rises up within us or our inaction to respond to injustice conveying our lack of justice, loving kindness and humility. In speaking about justice, Fleming Rutledge wrote, “To be outraged on behalf of oneself or one’s own group alone is to be human, but it is not to participate in Christ. To be outraged and to take action on behalf of the voiceless and oppressed, however, is to do the work of God.”¹⁰ I am suggesting to you this morning, that this work begin with learning how to lament for people, their problem and their pain.

Lament is born out of learning. It can’t be contrived. In order to be genuine, it is the outgrowth of discovery and understanding. We have an opportunity to discover together how we can be a people that strive *to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with God*. I invite you to learn with us and to ask God to open your heart to the pain of others.

- Join us each Sunday as we walk through the book of Micah
- The leaders of the church are reading a book called *Beyond Racial Gridlock* by George Yancey. Read it and form a group to discuss it.
- The leaders of the church are putting together a statement on racism along with some commitments we want to make as a church. We will share that statement with you the final Sunday of the series on August 9.

My prayer is that the first thing God does within us is that he causes our hearts to lament. That we would feel for the one who hurts. That in feeling, we would learn to lament.

A Prayer of Lament

O Lord, how long will your church be divided among racial lines? How long will the lingering effects of animosity, injustice, and pride mark your blessed bride? How long, O Lord, will my white brothers and sisters not understand the pain in those whose experience is different than ours? How long, O Lord, will my minority brothers and sisters struggle with distrust and feel ostracized?

God, grant us the heart to weep with those who weep. Give us empathy and understanding. Create trust where there is pain. Make your church the united bride you want her to be.

The divisions of mistrust and historical bias run deep. O God. Without you, nothing will ever change. In our pain and our weariness, we express our hope that Jesus can change our hearts and unite the church. We believe the gospel is greater than our divisions. And we long for the day when the world will take note of how we love each other. So, help us to meet each other in this prayerful journey. We come to learn to lament. Hear us as we weep together, that we might walk together.

In the name of Jesus, our King. Amen.¹¹

¹Mark Vroegop "Strong Churches Speak the Language of Lament" thegospelcoalition.org
April 9, 2019

²Mark Vroegop *Weep With Me* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020) 36

³Gary Smith *Hosea, Amos, Micah: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) 452

⁴*Ibid.*, 452

⁵Vroegop, *Weep With Me*, 36-38

⁶Timothy Keller *Generous Justice* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010) 3

⁷Smith, 452

⁸*Ibid.*, 455

⁹Keller, preface

¹⁰Fleming Rutledge *The Crucifixion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015) 143

¹¹Vroegop 25

Sermon Title: it Starts with Lament

Sermon Text: Micah 6:8; 1:1-16

Sermon Date: July 5, 2020



1. Read Micah 6:8 and talk about the connection between doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God.
2. Describe the kind of church experience you had while growing up as it relates to racial reconciliation. If you were not raised in church, describe the culture in your city or family when it came to ethnicity.
3. What fears do you have as we engage the topic of race? What makes you nervous?
4. How familiar are you with the biblical category of lament? What did you learn about lament from the sermon. Read Psalm 13. Can you find the four categories of lament in this psalm?
 1. Turn to Prayer: Talk to God about your pain, even if it is messy
 2. Bring Your Complaint: Tell God your questions, fears and frustrations
 3. Ask Boldly: Ask God to act in accordance with his character
 4. Choose to Trust: Let this move you to deeper trust in God⁵
5. Why is it important for the church to work towards racial reconciliation? What happens if this is neglected?
6. List three to five prayer requests for you and our church as we enter this journey.