



Sermon Transcript August 9, 2020

Do Justice What Do We Have? Micah 6:8; 7:1-20

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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 7:1-20

¹Woe is me! For I have become as when the summer fruit has been gathered, as when the grapes have been gleaned: there is no cluster to eat, no first ripe fig that my soul desires. ² The godly has perished from the earth, and there is no one upright among mankind; they all lie in wait for blood, and each hunts the other with a net. ³ Their hands are on what is evil, to do it well; the prince and the judge ask for a bribe, and the great man utters the evil desire of his soul; thus they weave it together. ⁴ The best of them is like a brier, the most upright of them a thorn hedge. The day of your watchmen, of your punishment has come; now their confusion is at hand. ⁵ Put no trust in a neighbor; have no confidence in a friend; guard the doors of your mouth from her who lies in your arms; ⁶ 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.

⁷ But as for me, I will look to the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me. ⁸ Rejoice not over me, O my enemy, when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, the LORD will be a light to me. ⁹ I will bear the indignation of the LORD because I have sinned against him, until he pleads my cause and executes judgment for me. He will bring me out to the light; I shall look upon his vindication ¹⁰ Then my enemy will see, and shame will cover her who said to me, "Where is the LORD your God?" My eyes shall look upon her; now she will be trampled down like the mire of the streets.

¹¹ A day for the building of your walls! In that day the boundary shall be far extended. ¹² In that day they will come to you from Assyria and the cities of Egypt, and from Egypt to the River, from sea to sea and from mountain to mountain. ¹³ But the earth will be desolate because of its inhabitants, for the fruit of their deeds. ¹⁴ Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock of your inheritance, who dwell alone in a forest in the midst of a garden land; let them graze in Bashan and Gilead as in the days of old. ¹⁵ As in the days when you came out of the land of Egypt, I will show them marvelous things. ¹⁶ The nations shall see and be ashamed of all their might; they shall lay their hands on their mouths; their ears shall be deaf; ¹⁷ they shall lick the dust like a serpent, like the crawling things of the earth; they shall come trembling out of their strongholds; they shall turn in dread to the LORD our God, and they shall be in fear of you.

¹⁸ Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. ¹⁹ He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. ²⁰ You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old.

Introduction: When you feel like you have nothing . . .

“Woe is me!” That is how the final chapter of the book of Micah begins. It begins with the cry of a grieving prophet at the end of a long ministry career. He gave it his all. He was faithful to proclaim to the people what they needed to hear; not what they wanted to hear. We saw back in Micah 3, that unlike many other prophets who sought to line their own pockets by telling the people what they wanted to hear, Micah told the people what God wanted them to hear. Contrasting himself against these other prophets, he said in Micah 3:8, *“But 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 and to Israel his sin.”* He spent his entire ministry calling the people of Judah, to return to God and *to do justice*, to use their power to care for the most vulnerable. Or as we put it last week, “to make someone else’s problem their problem.”

You could make the case that for a good portion of Micah’s ministry his words fell on good soil that led to spiritual reform. We know from Micah 1:1 that a large part of Micah’s ministry took place when Hezekiah was king of Judah. Jeremiah looks back on this time and talks about the impact that Micah had on King Hezekiah. Jeremiah says in Jeremiah 26:18-19, *“Micah of Moresheth prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah.”* And he noted how Hezekiah responded to Micah’s ministry. King Hezekiah took Micah’s words to heart; he turned to God and put his trust in God. As a result, God delivered him from his enemy. In fact, Hezekiah was known for the spiritual reforms he brought about in Judah. We learn in 2 Kings 18 that he tore down the idols that had been erected throughout the land and he turned in faith to God. The summary of his reign reads like this in 2 Kings 18:3, *“And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, according to all that David his father had done.”* Surely, Micah must have been hopeful and encouraged to see how King Hezekiah responded to the message of God through Micah.

So why do we hear Micah crying at the beginning of Micah 7, *“Woe is me!”* Why do we find Micah grieving like a mother who lost a child or a widow or widower who lost a spouse or a nation that has been conquered and is fallen? That is how strong this cry is that Micah cries. It is not a cry of self-pity as if to cry, “woe is me—nobody likes me.” Instead, it is a heart-breaking cry of deep despair—again, it is a lament. We see this same emotion from Micah back in Micah 1:8 where he says, *“For this I will lament and wail; I will go stripped and naked.”* What is behind this strong emotion of Micah’s cry, *“Woe is me!”*

Every good reform that Hezekiah brought about was reversed when his son, Manasseh, took the throne. The summary of Manasseh's reign is stated in 2 Kings 21:2, "*and he did what was evil in the sight of the LORD.*" That is the opposite of what was said of his father. Manasseh rebuilt *the high places*—the idols that Hezekiah tore down. He was less like his father and more like the infamous King Ahab, the wicked king of the ten northern tribes of Israel. Micah alludes to this at the end of Micah 6, where he accuses the people of Judah of doing the *works of the house of Ahab*. Manasseh offered his own son as a sacrifice. It was said in 2 Kings 21 that so much innocent blood was shed under Manasseh's reign that you could fill Jerusalem from one end to the other. And perhaps the most grievous thing that happened under Manasseh's reign is that the people followed him and became like him. In 2 Kings 21:16 it says that *he made Judah to sin so that they did what was evil in the sight of the LORD*. Because of this, God's judgment is set against Judah. God says in 2 Kings 21:12, "*Behold, I am bringing upon Jerusalem and Judah such disaster that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle.*" Or as we heard from Micah's mouth last week in Micah 6:13, "*Therefore I strike you with a grievous blow, making you desolate because of your sins.*"

The end of Micah's career coincides with the beginning of Manasseh's reign and so he cries, "*Woe is me!*" As he looks around and sees what is beginning to unfold, he said he feels like the person who goes out to glean the harvest, to pick the fruit, and there is nothing there. Gary Smith describes it this way, "harvesters and gleaners walk to the field with their saliva glands working overtime, for in their imagination they can already taste the wonderful experience of biting into the first fresh grape. They expect to find gorgeous large fruit on the vines, but in this case they find nothing."¹ Thus the grieving prophet cries, "*Woe is me! For I have become as when the summer fruit has been gathered, as when the grapes have been gleaned: there is no cluster to eat, no first ripe fig that my soul desires.*"

The first six verses describe what he sees when he looks around the "vineyard" of Israel. He sees nothing. First of all, he sees "nobody." He says in verse 2, "*The godly has perished from the earth, and there is no one upright among mankind.*" Like Elijah, he feels all alone without anyone of like faith. He then sees "no justice." Again, the "prince" and the "judge" and the "great man" and "the best of them" are singled out for putting *their hands on what is evil* and he adds *to do it well*. These people of power and position were to care for the most vulnerable but instead they are like thorns and briars to the ones they are to extend care to. Consequently, this evil trickles down to the people and so there is "no trust" between neighbors and you can't even trust your own family. He says, *guard the doors of your mouth from her who lies in your arms*. You can't trust your spouse, let alone your son or your daughter or your in-laws—nobody.

He looks around the vineyard of Israel at the end of his prophetic career and there is

no one with him and there is no justice and there is no trust. There is nothing! And so when he cries “*Woe is me!*” he is lamenting the corruption and the lawlessness and the absence of righteousness and he feels it. Smith says, “In his own humanness the circumstances of life have an impact on his disposition.”² What is going on around him in his country—nationally and locally—spiritually, morally, economically, politically—it is all affecting his disposition and so he cries out with great disappointment “*Woe is me!*”

Can you relate to this? One of the words that has been used quite often to describe the events of 2020 is the word “unprecedented.” It is said that this pandemic, COVID-19, is “unprecedented.” It is world-wide and local all at the same time. Uncertainty and disagreement abounds as to how to respond to the virus—what to re-open and what not to re-open. It is a very stressful time right now for families and teachers as they consider their schooling options for the coming year. There are the economic ramifications attached to this issue as well that add to the uncertainty of this “unprecedented” moment. And then throw on top of that the intense issue of racial injustice that our country is wrestling through. Should we be surprised that a hurricane passed through our towns this past week? What do the final four months of 2020 hold for us? We are being told to brace ourselves for an “unprecedented” election process.

Like with Micah, all of these “circumstances of life have an impact on our disposition.” We feel it. Peggy Noonan wrote an article this week in the *WSJ* with this title: *America Is a Coalition of the Worried: Everyone is anxious this summer—not over regular things, but over big and essential things.* In this article she writes, “Everyone wants a feeling of safety. But no one is certain where safety is.”³ In other words, she is looting around the “vineyard” and there is “nothing”, no fruit to be found. So she too cries, “*Woe is me!*” We feel the effects of isolation. We feel the anxiety that comes with uncertainty. We feel the tension that is wrapped up in the tone of our country; it seems like every issue is met with one side yelling at the other. As God’s people, we are not immune to this and we can easily be drawn into it. When that happens, we cease to be “salt and light” to a broken world. When that happens, we lose sight of our calling to “make other people’s problems our problem.” That has been my concern for the church and more specifically, WEF, when it comes to the issue of race. At times it feels like we are walking through the vineyard looking for good grapes—good fruit—and there is “nothing.” So we look at this deep wound and cry with Micah, “*Woe is me!*”

I think the word “unprecedented” is over-used. Perhaps, depending on your age, it may seem like nothing like this has ever happened in your lifetime, but this issue of racial injustice has been present in our country for 400 years, since 1619. And if you take into consideration the book of Micah, injustice and oppression of the vulnerable is an issue as old as mankind. I find it interesting that the beginning of Micah and the end of

Micah—the beginning of Micah’s ministry and the end of Micah’s ministry—is marked with lament. That tells me that what we are calling “unprecedented” is something that is rather normal in the course of human history and the human experience. What we learn from Micah is that **when it seems like you have nothing, you actually have something. What do we have when it seems like we have nothing?**

We Have a Prayer

The first thing we have when it feels like we have nothing is that **we have a prayer.** After looking around the “vineyard of Israel” and seeing no fruit—feeling as if there was nothing there—nobody, no justice, no one you can trust—he takes his complaint and he turns to God in prayer. I love Micah 7:7. I have used it several times this week in conversations with people who are feeling the weight of whatever seems “unprecedented” in their lives. Micah says, *“But as for me, I will look to the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me.”*

Whenever you feel like you have “nothing” you actually have something that can never be taken away from you. You have a prayer! In fact, one of the upsides of bringing us to the point of lament and feeling like there is no fruit in the vineyard is that it brings us to the end of ourselves and all we have left is what we have needed all the time—prayer. You can look to God! You can turn to God! As you turn to God, you can *wait* on God. You may not like to hear the word *wait*. But that is what it means trust God. We find rest in God’s purposes and God’s wisdom and God’s goodness.

Here is what Micah understood. God works through the prayers of his people. Don’t you love the confidence expressed by Micah at the end of this verse, *“my God will hear me.”* Gary Smith says that “if the church wants God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, prayer is needed. Without prayer, nothing should be ventured for God, and without prayer nothing can be accomplished.”⁴ Micah knows that the will of God for Judah includes them heading into captivity in Babylon because of their sin. But he also knows that God will bring them back. That is what he is praying in verse 8-9 when he repents of the sin of his people. He says in verse 8, *“Rejoice not over me, O my enemy; when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, the LORD will be a light to me.”*

Often when it seems like there is no fruit in the vineyard—when you have nothing—it feels like God doesn’t hear your prayers. Sometimes we can confuse *waiting* with God not hearing. But that is not the case. It is the confidence that God hears and that God is at work that allows us to *wait*. That is exactly what is behind the Negro Spirituals that found hope in the context of great suffering. They turned to God in their pain. I think of the spiritual *“Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?”*

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Arthur Jones said that this song provided “hope that their present suffering was not the end of the story.”⁵ And so they sing with hope as they wait for God’s salvation, “Were you there when God raised him from the tomb?” It says in Psalm 9:18, “*For the needy shall not always be forgotten; and the hope of the poor shall not perish forever.*” Gary Smith reminds us that “God hears the prayers of the righteous and acts because they care enough to seek his grace.”⁶

It is good to observe how many prayers of lament—the cry *Woe is me!*—are born out of injustice. Psalm 9:9 says that “*The LORD is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.*” Eric Mason said that “Most African-Americans have had two life-altering experiences that are burned into their memory—the moment they realized they were black and the moment they realized that was a problem.”⁷ What do we do about that? We cry out to God in prayer. We lament! We repent! We pray that God would make us a church that reflects the oneness we have in Jesus. **What do we have when it seems like we have nothing? We have a prayer.**

We Have a Future

The second thing we have when it seems like we have nothing is that **we have a future.** Knowing that they will be going into exile, into the land of Babylon, Micah speaks of a future day when the nations will come to Jerusalem. He says in verse 12, “*In that day they will come to you, from Assyria and the cities of Egypt . . . from sea to sea and from mountain to mountain.*” He speaks of a future deliverance for his people in verse 15 when he says that just like he brought them out of Egypt, he will deliver them once again. Even though difficult days lie ahead for them, they have a sure future. Even though right now it may look like there is “nothing” in the vineyard, God will once again make them a fruitful vine.

There is something curious about this section of Micah 7 that I find both fascinating and hopeful for the present. The future promise that Micah writes about may not materialize in their lifetime. What kind hope is that for those who are walking in the present barren vineyard? But there is something interesting in verse 14, which is literally right in the middle of this section (verses 11-17) that speaks of an unspecified and possibly distant future hope. There is something to grab onto in the present. He says, “*Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock of your inheritance, who dwell alone in a forest in the midst of a garden land; let them graze in Bashan and Gilead as in the days of old.*” In other

words, he is praying that as they wait for the future promise of God that God would do it now! He is praying that God would give them a taste right now of what will be in the future.

That is my prayer! “Do it now, Lord!” We know that we have a future where every tribe and every nation—every ethnicity (what we now call “race”) will be gathered as one people before the throne of God. All the sin and injustice of racism will be gone. That is a glorious and future hope. But are we not the church? Can we not pray that God would reach into the future and bring about a manifestation of what is to come by taking our unity in Christ and making it visible in our unity as a local church. Diverse in ethnicity and race and one in Christ, we become a picture now of what is yet to come. Do it now, Lord! For the testimony of Jesus, do it now. Jesus said in John 17:23 that our love for each other and our unity is a testimony to the world that the Father sent the Son. In John 13:35, Jesus said that our love for one another and our unity demonstrates that we are indeed followers of Jesus. So Lord, do it now!

Mark Vroegop pastors a predominantly white church that has been working towards racial reconciliation in their own church—it is along journey. They have in their church what they call “3DG’s” which stands for Diversity Discipleship Discussion Groups. He tells the story about a white man in their church by the name of Aaron. Aaron was very bothered and angry over this emphasis on racial reconciliation and after the first church-wide discussion on this matter shot off an email to the pastor expressing his feelings about the matter. This prompted Mark to meet with Aaron. In doing so, he discovered Aaron’s story. Aaron grew up as a white minority in his neighborhood and all through school he was singled out, mocked and even assaulted because he was white. This created an deep seated animosity within him and as he shared his pain, Mark tried to point him to the power of the gospel to heal that pain and invited Aaron to attend the 3DG meeting that week. He didn’t think Aaron would attend, but he did.

Aaron came and stood in front of the group and told his story. His anger and his pain and his long struggle bubbled to the surface and he fully expected to be rejected again. A minority leader of the 3DG, who could fully relate to and understand this kind of pain, stood up and said, “can we pray for you.” Laying hands on Aaron, he prayer over him. Listen to what Aaron said about this experience. “I cannot describe the change that one interaction brought about in my heart, or how healing it was to have my African American brothers and sisters praying over me. God used those relationships to both expose the raw pain and emotions that I had buried for decades and to replace those pains with love . . . my mind and my heart have been totally changed.”⁸

Because we have a glorious future in Jesus, we can pray with great boldness in our times of lament, when it seems like there is no fruit in the vineyard, yet we can still pray, “do

it now Lord!” Shepherd your people . . . *who dwell alone in a forest in the midst of a garden land; let them graze in Bashan and Gilead as in the days of old.*” Let us get a taste of what is to come through displays of your love and grace so that others can know that Jesus is indeed the Savior of the world. Let us get a taste of the kingdom to come in the kingdom now. “Do it now, Lord! Do it now! Do it here! Do it with us! **What do you have when it seems like you have nothing? You have a future!** And it is that future that causes us to pray with boldness, “Do it now, Lord! Do it now!”

We Have a Loving God

The final thing we have when it seems like we have nothing is that **we have a loving God.** As often is the case with prayers of lament, when we are reminded of what God has done for us, our tune changes. We move from despair to hope. That is what happened with Micah as well. He started out in Micah 7 by looking at the vineyard of Israel where he didn’t see any fruit and so he laments, “*Woe is me.*” But now he comes to the end of this prayer and he is looking to God. And he begins by saying, “*Who is a God like you.*” By the way, that is what Micah’s name means: “Who is like God?”

These verses speak for themselves as they champion the love of God for us. “*Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old.*”

It is hard to read these verses and not see Jesus written all over them. It is because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross that our sins are forgiven. Don’t you love that image of our sins being cast into the depths of the sea? That is what he does with them. Truly there is no god like our God. If we have known and tasted that love, then that love will shine through us. In fact, that is what Jesus was saying in John 17:23 about the power of our oneness and unity. It will show to the world that the Father has sent the Son and that God loves us with the same love he has for the Son, Jesus. If that love fills us, it ought to cause us to move to the one in need as we make someone else’s problem our problem. And it when that love shines through us is has the power to change a person’s heart.

In 1963, George Wallace become Governor of Alabama. In his inauguration address he proclaimed “Segregation now. Segregation tomorrow. Segregation forever.” He became the face that stood for opposition to the civil rights movement. In 1972 he was running for his party’s nomination for President, when at a campaign rally he was shot and the bullet lodged in his spine, leaving him paralyzed at the waist.

Seven years later, he wheeled into Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, where Martin Luther King, Jr. had once pastored. That church sits just one block away from the Alabama State Capital where he made that hurtful inaugural speech. He was wheeled to the front of the church and he said to this African American Congregation, “I have learned what suffering means. In a way that was impossible before the shooting, I think I can understand something of the pain black people have come to endure. I know I contributed to that pain, and I can only ask for your forgiveness.” This is was the first of many such public and private confessions he made.

His daughter, Peggy Wallace Kennedy, believes that the seed of the governor’s transformation was planted by a Black congresswoman from New York named Shirley Chisolm. She was running against Wallace for the presidential nomination. Despite the advice from her staff, she visited Wallace in the hospital a few days after the shooting. She said, “Sometimes we have to remember we’re all human beings, and I may be able to teach him something, to help him regain his humanity, to maybe make him open his eyes to make him see something that he has not seen . . . One act of kindness may make all the difference in the world.”⁹ Indeed it did. One act of kindness set the stage for God to bring an amazing change of heart.

That is the power of the love of God. It is real. It is what shines through us and moves us to make someone else’s problem our problem. In doing so, we give evidence that Jesus is the Son of God and that God the Father loves us as much as he loves Jesus. **What do you have when it seems like you have nothing? You have a loving God.** The love of God can so transform your heart that it can touch others and bring about racial healing in a vineyard that often seems to have nothing. What should we expect to see when we walk around the “vineyard of the church?” We should see the Fruit of the Spirit: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*. That is the power of the love of God.

Conclusion

This brings us to the end of our series on the book of Micah. He is the prophet who has called his people *to do justice*. We are taking this ancient word and applying it to the contemporary injustice of racism, asking God that we the church would be agents of healing. What have we learned?

It begins with lament.

We know that sin is the root of racism and only the gospel can root it out.

A God of hope forms us into a people of hope

If God made our problem his problem then it is no problem for us to make other people’s problem our problem. That is restorative justice.

What do you have when it seems like you have nothing? You have a prayer.
You have future. You have a loving God.

And so God can use us be agents of healing. May he do so for the sake of the testimony of Jesus. May we walk in the vineyard and see the fruit of the gospel among us. For the glory of God.

¹Gary Smith *Hosea, Amos, Micah: NIV Application Commentary* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) 570

²Ibid., 580

³Peggy Noonan “America Is a Coalition of the Worried” in *The Wall Street Journal* Aug. 6., 2020

⁴Smith., 586

⁵Arhtur Jones *Wade in the Water: The Wisdom of the Spirituals* (New York: Orbis, 1993) 30

⁶Smith, 586

⁷Eric Mason *Woke Church: An Urgent Call for Christians in America to Confront Racism and Injustice* (Chicago: Moody Publisher, 2018) 27

⁸Mark Vroegop *Weep With Me* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020) 154

⁹Ibid., 162

