

Study 39: Micah – Walk Humbly With God

Introduction. Too many people today, when they think of the prophets, probably lump them together stereotypically, and see them all as intense men who wandered about calling others to repentance for their sins and threatening punishment should they continue in their evil ways. In truth many Old Testament prophets did exactly that, but none did that exclusively. In fact, as God's specially chosen messengers, these men proclaimed far more than repentance and punishment. Much of what they proclaimed was God's love for His people and the salvation He offers them. The prophets also reminded the people of the promises attached to their Covenant with God, of God's faithfulness and of their infidelities. In other words, the stick was there, but so too was a carrot.

Another mistake is to assume the prophets were all alike as men. I can recall once being in the middle of a mild theological discussion with a Methodist minister when he said, "Oh, you Catholics, you're all alike!" Of course, I had to explain that in every respect we Catholics are perhaps the most diverse religious community in the world; and diverse in so many ways: demographically, politically, racially, ethnically, nationally, and yes, even theologically. Indeed, it's our very catholicity that makes us so diverse. There's a lot of room for variety under Catholicism's big tent. It's always a mistake to view people stereotypically. And the same is true with respect to the prophets.

Zephaniah and Zechariah were both of royal blood, while some others were common folk who worked hard for a living. Amos, for example, was a sheep-breeder, shepherd, and dresser of sycamore trees. Some, like Ezekiel, were priests. Habakkuk was likely a Temple singer, a cantor who assisted the priests. Haggai seems almost CEO-like, an ancient post-exilic cheerleader and Temple builder. At least from a worldly perspective, the prophets were indeed an eclectic group of men whose lives spanned several centuries.

In this study guide, we'll look at one of these prophets, a man named Micah, one of that group of 12 "minor prophets" and the last of the four 8th-century prophets. Micah, who has often been compared with Amos, followed in the footsteps of his predecessor. Like Amos, Micah was a man of the country, certainly no city-boy. Both were straightforward men, strong of faith and apparently strong of body, who preached God's message in clear, concise language.

Reading. Open your Bible and read the entirety of the Book of the Prophet Micah. Like most of the minor prophets, Micah's book is not long, only seven chapters. If this is your first reading of Micah, don't try to understand everything. Some of the prophet's references are a bit obscure and will certainly need further explanation. A first reading will always leave you with questions, but it should also give you a sense of the spirit and faith of the author. As we get to know Micah and his message, we begin to understand why God called this man at this particular time, and what God accomplished through his ministry. Because the Holy Spirit's inspiration crosses the barriers of time, we also become sensitive to the prophet's impact on our own journey of faith as we recognize foreshadowing of the problems and crises of our own times.

Micah, the Man and Prophet. Micah's name is a shortened form of *Mikyah* which means "who is like Yahweh." It's a fitting name for this prophet whose book is so filled with professions of faith that the man himself becomes increasingly unimportant. Micah focuses only on the Lord and His Word: the Word God speaks to His prophet. In this sense, Micah has always reminded me of John the Baptist, who explained his relationship to our Lord Jesus in the simplest of terms:

He must increase; I must decrease [Jn 3:30].

In the very first verse of his book of prophecy, Micah identifies his place in Judah's history. He tells us that he was a prophet during the reigns of three Judean kings: Jotham (c. 740-735 B.C.), Ahaz (c. 735-715 B.C.), and Hezekiah (c. 715-686 B.C.):

The word of the Lord which came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem [Mi 1;1].

Micah, then, entered the scene a few decades after the prophet Amos. His call by God quite likely occurred in his home city of Moresheth, a city of Judah, sometime prior to 722 B.C. This was the year the Assyrian king, Sargon II, after a three-year siege, finally took Samaria, the ruling city of the northern kingdom, Israel.

Micah was also a contemporary of the great prophet, Isaiah. Micah never mentioned Isaiah, but this shouldn't surprise us. Each had been called by God to proclaim a particular message, not to interact with other prophets. Their focus was always on God and His message. But we can easily picture Micah and Isaiah, alongside each other in Jerusalem, striving to prevent the destruction of God's people.

Interestingly, though, Micah is unique in one other respect: he is the only prophet mentioned in another book of prophecy. Jeremiah, who was called by God about a century after Micah, recalled Micah's words to convince the authorities not to put him to death:

Micah of Moresheth used to prophesy in the days of Hezekiah, king of Judah, and he said to all the people of Judah:

"This says the Lord of hosts: Zion shall be plowed as a field, Jerusalem, a heap of ruins, and the Temple mount, a forest ridge."

Did Hezekiah, king of Judah, and all Judah condemn him to death? Did Hezekiah not fear the Lord and entreat the favor of the Lord, so that the Lord had a change of heart regarding the evil he had spoken against them? We, however, are about to do great evil against ourselves [Jer 26:18-19].

This reference is particularly interesting because it provides additional support regarding the spiritual reforms Micah encouraged, that they were taken seriously by both Hezekiah and the people. Additionally, the fact that Jeremiah knew of Micah's prophecy a century later provides some assurance that the Book of Micah was likely written either by Micah himself or by his contemporary disciples.

As mentioned above, Micah was from a place named Moresheth, although we don't know precisely where this city was located. Because it was also known as Moresheth-Gath, it might have been a colony or a kind suburb of Gath. We are, however, certain it was located southwest of Jerusalem in Judah's border area, along the frontier of the low country, overlooking the rich, fertile plain that sloped down to the sea. Its general location is important, though, since it explains Micah's experiences during the northern kingdom's final days.

A brief summary of the Assyrian attacks on Israel: When Tiglath-Pileser II (745-727 B.C.) became king of the Assyrians, he invaded the area north and west of the Sea of Galilee. He took the people captive and deported them:

In the days of Pekah, king of Israel, Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria, came and took Ijon, Abel-beth-maacah, Janoah, Kedesh, Hazoe, Gilead, and Galilee – all the land of Naphtali – deporting the inhabitants to Assyria [2 Kgs 15:29].

A decade later, in 722-721 B.C., Sargon II conducted a siege of Samaria and went on to deport thousands to Syria. He then repopulated the area with immigrants from many places, including Babylonia, Syria, and Elam.

The imminent destruction of Samaria obviously impressed Micah. As he related the many calamities faced by the northern kingdom of Israel, he described, whether real or symbolic, how it had affected him:

For this I will lament and wail, go barefoot and naked; I will utter lamentation like the jackals, mourning like the ostriches [Mi 1:8]

(Here is another of my favorite animal-related verses. Some animals actually display mournful behavior. Elephants and crows, for example, seem deeply affected by the deaths of others in their pack or flock. Do ostriches mourn, or perhaps merely sound like mourners? I haven't a clue... something to investigate.)

We can, then, be fairly certain Micah witnessed some of the horrendous devastation wrought by the Assyrians, devastation that spilled across the border and greatly affected the western part of the border districts where Micah lived. Quite likely it was the approach of the Assyrians that led Micah to make his way to Jerusalem. He might not have been "barefoot and naked," but it seems he went in haste. God certainly made use of this experience to sharpen the prophet's vision. Having seen how Israel had suffered because of its sins, he would surely recognize the corruption and sinful lives of Judah's wealthy and ruling classes.

The Book of Micah and its Message. Like the other minor prophets, Micah's prophecy is relatively brief, only seven chapters. Keep in mind, when we read the prophets, we read only key elements of their message, that which they or their disciples considered so important it must be written down for the benefit of future generations. The prophets, though, were primarily preachers who spoke directly to the people, much as Jesus preached to the people wherever they gathered, in the Temple areas, in marketplaces,

in the fields or on hillsides. It was the spoken Word, the preached Word, that moved the people to repent and accept the gift of faith. The written Word always came later, and we, thanks be to God, are its beneficiaries.

Most scholars describe Micah's prophecy as consisting of three oracles or prophetic cycles. Each cycle begins with a judgment or condemnation; the first and third then move on to include a lament; and all three conclude with a description of a type of salvation. It's a unique structure, compared with most other prophetic works, but seems to work for Micah and provides a useful literary vehicle for the continued proclamation of his prophecy. Anyway, inspired as Micah was by the Holy Spirit, what the prophet wrote, how he wrote it, and the structure of his book must be exactly what the Spirit wanted from him. Our job, then, is to come to a deeper understanding of what Micah and the Holy Spirit are telling us, both historically and spiritually.

At this point, let's look at each of the three prophetic cycles and see what Micah is telling his contemporaries and us.

- † **1st Cycle: Jerusalem and Samaria [Mi 1:2-2:13].** This first cycle focuses on God's judgment of both Jerusalem and Samaria. It begins with a vision of God coming forth from the Temple and going to the high places:

Hear, O peoples, all of you, give heed, O earth, and all that is in it! Let the Lord God be witness against you, the Lord from His holy Temple! For see, the Lord goes out from His place and descending, treads upon the heights of the earth [Mi 1:2-3].

In this remarkable beginning, Micah called on all the peoples of the earth to pay attention to God's condemnation of Samaria and Jerusalem. Their sins were many, but the greatest was that of idolatry:

All its carved figures shall be broken to pieces, all its wages shall be burned in the fire, and all its idols I will destroy [Mi 1:8].

In the lament that follows [Mi 1:8-2:11] Micah cited the names of the cities that would be destroyed as the Assyrian army made its destructive way toward Jerusalem [Mi 1:10-15]. The Hebrew names lend themselves to wordplay and puns of which Micah took full advantage.

But Micah didn't stop there. Like Amos before him, He continued by castigating the wealthy landowners who had oppressed the people:

You covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them; you cheat owners of their houses, people of their inheritance [Mi 2:2].

For the Jews, these were extremely serious sins, not only because they were direct and obvious violations of God's Commandments, but also because they deprived families of the inheritance that God had granted them when He assigned land to His people. (See Joshua 13 ff):

Now, therefore, apportion among the nine tribes and the half-tribe of Manasseh the land which is to be their heritage [Jos 13:7].

For this, Micah told them, they would be punished. The enemy would come and take away all their stolen property. He then described how they refused to listen to God's Word and his prophet:

"Do not preach," they preach, "no one should preach of these things! Shame will not overtake us" [Mi 2:6].

This first prophetic cycle concludes with a word of hope and salvation directed to the remnant that survives the onslaught:

I will gather you, Jacob, each and every one, I will assemble all the remnant of Israel; I will group them like a flock in the fold, like a herd in the pasture; the noise of the people will resound. The one who makes a breach goes up before them; they make a breach and pass through the gate; their king shall go through before them, the Lord at their head [Mi 2:12-13].

Some scholars believe these hopeful verses to be a later addition made at the time of the Babylonian exile, or even later. As you might expect, I disagree. During the Assyrian attacks, which went on for quite some time, thousands were captured and exiled. The fate of these people plagued the minds of those, like Micah, who still faced the might of the Assyrians. Given what Micah wrote later about Jerusalem under siege [Mi 4:9-14], this most likely relates to the Assyrian attack in 701 B.C. Anyway, I'm always a bit leery of scriptural scholars who seem to deny the power of God to inspire his prophets not only to share God's Word with His people, but also to offer them a vision of the future.

† **2nd Cycle: Against Israel's Rulers [Mi 3-5].** In this prophetic cycle, Micah proclaimed a judgment against the nation's rulers, as well as the corrupt priests and false prophets who supported them in their oppression and sinfulness. First, he challenged the leaders:

"Is it not your duty to know what is right, you who hate what is good, and love evil? [Mi 3:1-2]

Micah then continued in colorful, but brutal language to accuse them of despicable treatment of the people over which they ruled. No one in power escaped the prophet's accusations. He went after the leadership of both kingdoms, along with the priests, the professional prophets (who demanded payment for favorable prophecies), and all those who oppressed the people for their own gain. He called them out for their sins and for their arrogant pride in assuming they were immune from God's punishment:

Hear this, you leaders of the house of Jacob, you rulers of the house of Israel! You who abhor justice, and pervert all that is right; who build up Zion with bloodshed, and Jerusalem with wickedness! Its leaders render judgment for a bribe, the priests teach for pay, the prophets divine for money, while they rely on the Lord, saying, "Is not the Lord in the midst of us? No evil can come upon us!" [Mi 3:9-11].

The professional prophets were really no better than fortune-tellers. God didn't choose such men to proclaim His Word; instead, He chose the unlikely, often the

most reluctant, as His messengers. As for Micah, after leveling these accusations against the prophets, he described his own call:

But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, with justice and with might; to declare to Jacob his crimes and to Israel his sins [Mi 3:8].

Like all the prophets, Micah was no spin-doctor; he proclaimed God's message in plain, clearly understandable language. For example, God's punishment of Jerusalem would be devastating:

Therefore, because of you, Zion shall be plowed like a field, and Jerusalem reduced to rubble, and the mount of the Temple to a forest ridge [Mi 3:12].

Chapter 4 begins with a marvelous prophecy of salvation, virtually identical to that found in Isaiah [Is 2:2-5]. I include it here, despite its length, because it's so wonderfully hopeful:

In days to come the mount of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest mountain; it shall be raised above the hills, and peoples shall stream to it: Many nations shall come, and say, "Come, let us climb the Lord's mountain, to the house of the God of Jacob, that He may instruct us in His ways, that we may walk in His paths." For from Zion shall go forth instruction, and the Word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples and set terms for strong and distant nations; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; one nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again. They shall all sit under their own vines, under their own fig trees, undisturbed; for the Lord of hosts has spoken [Mi 4:1-4].

Scholars, of course, spend careers arguing which of the two prophets was the first to write these words, something that makes absolutely no difference to you and me. The two men preached in the same city at the same time, and no doubt accepted each other's prophecy as the Word of God. That one might borrow a particularly effective image from the other shouldn't surprise us. Neither man was worried about copyrights. The only real difference between the two versions? Micah's final verse [Mi 4:4] is not found in Isaiah:

Micah continued to prophesy about the gathering of a remnant [Mi 4:6-8] and then spoke of a serious war crisis. As mentioned above, this likely included the siege of Jerusalem and its unexpected liberation – again in reference to the siege by Assyria under Sennacherib in 701 B.C. After all, the Assyrian envoy had blasphemed the Lord God [2 Kgs 18:29-35], and pleased with Hezekiah's reforms, God sent his angel to destroy the Assyrian army [2 Kgs 19:34-37].

Chapter 5 begins with what is surely Micah's most famous prophecy:

But you, Bethlehem-Ephrathah, least among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel; whose origin is from of old, from ancient times [Mi 5:1].

With these words Micah joined his prophecy to that of Nathan's of a ruler to come from the house of David [2 Sam 7:12-16], thus proclaiming Micah's hope for the future. Of course, we find direct references to this prophecy in the New Testament regarding Jesus' birth. In the Gospel According to Matthew, we find King Herod concerned about the Magi's search for the Messiah:

Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he [Herod] inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people, Israel'" [Mt 2:4-6].

And in the Gospel According to John, the people argued about the Messiah's origins:

Some in the crowd who heard these words said, "This is truly the Prophet." Others said, "This is the Messiah." But others said, "The Messiah will not come from Galilee, will he? Does not scripture say that the Messiah will be of David's family and come from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?" So, a division occurred in the crowd because of Him [Jn 7:40-43].

Chapter 5 continues with the salvation prophecy of a shepherd king of the house of David, a prophecy that Christians have long believed points to Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Consider, for example, Micah's most fitting description:

He shall take his place as shepherd by the strength of the Lord, by the majestic name of the Lord, his God; and they shall dwell securely, for now his greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth: he shall be peace [Mi 5:3-4].

Some of the verses that follow [Mi 5:9-14] might well refer to the reforms of Hezekiah, since they describe the destruction of worship in the high places.

- † **3rd Cycle: The Trial of Israel [Mi 6-7].** In this cycle we find God conducting a trial of Israel, and actually calling on the earth itself to act as the jury. He begins by describing all that He has done for Israel, and then asks His most telling question:

My people, what have I done to you? How have I wearied you? Answer me! [Mi 6:3]

We then hear from the people, via Micah, who asked God what offerings they could make to please Him. But God simply told them the basics of leading a holy life. In some respects, these few words are probably the best summary of Micah's entire message:

You have been told, O mortal, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God [Mi 6:8].

Can there be a better description of what our loving God asks of us than this concise proclamation of His Word?

The Lord then added more charges and accusations [Mi 6:9-12] before finally delivering His sentence [Mi 6:13-16] of utter destruction:

Therefore. I will deliver you up to ruin, and your citizens to derision; and you shall bear the reproach of the nations [Mi 6:16].

The next few verses [Mi 7:1-6], another lament by the prophet, reiterated the sins and evils he had witnessed. His words, seemingly filled with despair for the human race, were obviously touched by hyperbole; but still, they give us a sense of how difficult these days were for Micah and his contemporaries. The following is a good example:

The faithful have vanished from the earth, no mortal is just! They all lie in wait to shed blood; each one ensnares the other [Mi 7:2].

The remainder of Chapter 7 [Mi 7:7-20] is a poem by Micah, a spiritual message addressed to the tiny remnant that survived in the northern kingdom, even after Assyria repopulated Samaria in 732 and 722 B.C.

Filled with hope, the people looked to a future in which the Lord God will wash away their sin and once again shepherd His chosen ones. It begins with these hopeful words:

I will wait for God my savior; my God will hear me! Do not rejoice over me, my enemy! Though I have fallen, I will arise; though I sit in darkness, the Lord is my light [Mi 7:7-8].

If you see a foreshadowing of Jesus here – His Passion, Death, and Resurrection – you are not alone. Many of the Church Fathers have remarked on this as well. Read the entirety of Micah’s final poem and savor the hope experienced by those who had been through so much tragedy and knew they faced even more. On final example:

Who is a God like you, who removes guilt and pardons sin for the remnant of his inheritance; who does not persist in anger forever, but instead delights in mercy? [Mi 7:18].

Who indeed? As Moses proclaimed to Pharaoh: “...there is none like the Lord, our God” [Ex 8:6], who extends His divine mercy and forgiveness to the penitent.

How blessed we are that the words of the prophet Micah, like the words of all the authors of Sacred Scripture, were so treasured that they were passed down through the generations and protected, not as dead literature, but as the living Word of God. As you read this and the other books of the Bible, always thank the Holy Spirit, not only for inspiring these authors, but also for guarding their and His work so we too can “listen” to the holy Word of God through the words of a preacher like Micah.