

What's Our Attitude? Micah 1:1-8

A young man was employed as clerk in a telegraph office in a town in England, way back when it was the modern way of communication. Somehow, God led him to see that he was a sinner, & this caused him great distress of mind. The young man went to the office one morning greatly troubled and praying the best he could.

The click of his machine told him a message was coming. He saw that it was from Windermere up among the beautiful lakes. There was the first name and residence of the one to whom the dispatch was sent. It was followed by these words from the Bible, "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world," from John 1:29. The telegram said, quoting Ephesians 1:7, "In whom we have redemption, through Jesus' blood, the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of his grace."

Then followed the name of the person sending it. This was a strange telegraph message! The explanation and background is this: A servant girl, living in the town was distressed about her sins. Somehow, probably by mail, she let her Christian brother know her concern and asked, "What must I do to be saved?"

The brother, being unable to write her at once, sent her the telegram. The servant girl found her way to Jesus through the life-giving words of scripture, from her brother. And so did the young telegraph operator. This was an authentic telegram from Heaven to both persons. God's Word did the work!

This is an example of what the Bible is for. It is the Word of our Creator God to us. But it's so easy to downplay and even ignore the prophets of the Old Testament. We simply don't like bad news about us. From Israel's history and how badly they followed the prophet's admonitions, we should learn to not ignore these stories and alerts for us today. They are in the Bible to help us get to know and follow the Almighty God.

How we receive a message depends a lot on how we view the messenger and our attitudes about

the contents. We can view the Old Testament prophets as people of gloom and doom, full of judgement and negativity. We can have great distaste for their messages of change! If that is our attitude when we receive warnings – the outcome to us is predictable. Or as we saw last week, we can see them as an act of God's love. We can accept them as our Creator trying to reach like a lover's plea of affection. God's character does not want to be our prosecutor. The Almighty would rather be the defense attorney. Even more, he wants to be our Savior.

If you think about it, anytime someone warns us about something, they don't want the bad thing to happen to us. We warn our children to stay away from a hot stove and to not play on a busy street. Why? Because we want to avoid the consequences of that. It is the same with the prophets. They offer messages of destruction & warnings, because there is hope behind them.

The prodigal son finally came to his senses and returned to his father. The people of Nineveh choose to listen to Jonah and repented. David expressed his sorrow for his sins after Nathan confronted him. The Roman centurion, Cornelius, responded to the angel and invited Peter to come and tell him about Jesus. Each of these people and billions more throughout history, have had to be receptive to hear, see, and then change. So, if we can take in the Old Testaments prophets with this attitude, this mindset, this outlook, we have much to learn. Even when it is a message we don't like.

Of all the prophets, Micah is perhaps the one whose contributions have been most habitually underestimated. Rather than being judged by the quality of their poetry, the popular rating of the prophets has been based on the number of written pages that has happened to survive from each of them. By this standard, Micah has not fared well. This also goes along with the fact that we know so little about him. These two circumstances have caused Micah to be one of the least appreciated prophets – except for chapter 6, verse 8 that we looked at last week. Micah comes to us as a collection of short prophetic messages organized in a pattern of

three cycles of judgement and salvation. So let's look at the first part of the first cycle. We must study what they were doing wrong – for our own benefit. And appreciate God's mercy.

Micah prophesied during the time of the spreading power of Assyria. Just one generation before Micah, we have the story of Jonah where Nineveh, their capital city full of people, repented. Possibly this repentance spread across Assyria. We use the same kind of language today when we talk about Ottawa – meaning the government, representing all of Canada.

But by Micah's time, only a few years after Jonah, that repentance had been forgotten by Assyria. They were back to their old ways of wickedness & evil. The lesson for us – Repentance does not stick unless we continually do so. Each generation must turn to God of their own choice. The message here is - There are no automatic Christian grandchildren or children!

Micah's message begins by proclaiming – here is a word from the Lord – so pay attention! (**verse 1**) Then he identifies where he came from – the town of Moresheth, in the southwest part of Palestine. Next, he mentions when he was offering these pronouncements – during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. Then he tells us that he had a vision concerning Samaria and Jerusalem.

After giving this background Micah then says in **verse 2**, “Listen, all of you people! Pay attention, earth and all upon it! The Eternal Lord gives evidence against you; the Lord speaks from His holy temple.” So it's not just a warning for the people of Samaria and Jerusalem. God is giving a message through Micah to – all the earth, to all of creation. Hear this message!

Like Isaiah, Micah saw that the destiny of all the nations as integrally related to the destiny of God's people. And vice versa. This message is a warning to all nations, especially when Samaria and Jerusalem are destroyed as a sign of God's wrath toward all people. Even though God forgives us, we are also punished for sin. The burning timbers and ruined houses of

Samaria and Jerusalem are an eloquent visual sermon to the people of the world.

This majestic sovereign all powerful Creator God, speaking from his holy temple, not just some ordinary earthly place, testifies against the people of the world. So we need to take this seriously. It is foolish to ignore the Lord.

Then **verses 3 and 4** describe scenes of terror. “Look at this: the Eternal is leaving His home in heaven, and He is coming down to walk over the high places of the earth. The mountains will melt beneath His feet; the valleys will burst open, Like wax next to a raging fire, as water pours from the heights.”

Sound a little bit like what is occurring in various places around the world, doesn't it? With this kind of warning, the Almighty wants us not to just hear – but to see. Messages like this should give us the attitude that our God is not a God we can safely observe or just talk about. We cannot think of our Savior as detached or distant. Instead, when the Lord comes, the world falls apart. Even nature cannot hold up under our Lord's holy presence, much less you and I. The verb here is intentional. God doesn't just walk, he stamps, he presses down, he overtakes.

Micah is trying hard to get people's attention. He has an urgent message. But most of the time we find it impossible to believe that anything else or something else is more important than what we are doing. It is so much easier to keep on as we are, where we are, and doing what we are doing. It's why Jesus stressed, “Seek ye first the Kingdom of God.” (Matthew 6:33)

Ivan Turgenev wrote, that the most important problem in life is to know what to put first. Micah tells us, put the word of God first. Jesus tells us, put God's Kingdom first in life. Somebody said, make the main thing the main thing. But this is so hard to do. The prophets knew this. It's one reason they give us poetic imagery to get our attention. Some of the prophets, like John the Baptist, dressed weird and did weird things to symbolize their message & get people to give more than casual momentary notice.

I think it's important to notice the phrase, "**God treads on, stamps on the high places of the earth.**" This can be tied into Isaiah's prophecy we use in the Advent season, that "The valleys will be filled, and the mountains and hills made level." (Luke 3:5, Isaiah 40:4) Also this phrase is about God squishing, destroying the temples to other gods that were usually located in high places. It's an image of the powerful Yahweh, attacking the gods that people worship.

It is clearly more than a symbolic message as to which God is more powerful than any other god. We know the gods people make - idols and religions of various kinds, including money, power, fame, material goods, ourselves, or sex. But the Holy God keeps striving to get us to accept, recognize, follow, and obey. We can think the cataclysm that accompanies God's intervention in history and this world is just like a violent storm or volcano or earthquake. Even if we believe the message is just metaphorical, it still describes the force and intensity of the soon to be destruction of both Samaria and Jerusalem.

One reason humans tend not to like the prophets is, they require more of us than we really are prepared to give & more than we want to be. It's not hard to listen when we think our own welfare is at stake. We can and will listen when someone wants to tell us how to benefit ourselves. There is a whole industry called advertising that appeals to our self love. But the prophets, Jesus and the Kingdom of God focus on inviting us to listen, give heed, see, and hear them, so we can speak to people for their benefit.

Next, **verses 5 to 7** tell us why God is coming down from above. If you could ask Israel and Judah why God is doing this, they probably would have a whole list about the evil of the Assyrian Empire, their idolatry, cruelty, their unbelief, and so on. We might have the same kind of answers – all about other people who are not like us. People out there! But Micah wastes no words. He tells it like it is – about their own selves! And how God uses all kinds of people. Judah and Israel would have been glad to hear about the Lord coming as Judge. They would have assumed that it meant they would be

delivered. That their way of living would be vindicated. This often happened with them, and it happens with us. We think we are doing ok compared with others.

But here, once again, God's says, it's because of you I'm coming down. It is the transgression of both Jacob & the sins of Israel that are the reason God is coming in judgment. Ouch! This is why we dislike and even hate prophets. They major on the negatives and minor on the positives.

Micah pulls no punches here. He accuses Jacob of transgression. Judgment is coming not because of the wickedness outside the people of God, but because the people of God have rebelled against him. The word **transgression** means **rebellion**. Micah emphasizes the rebellion of God's people against him. The word for sin means to **be self-willed and to fall short**. God's people have wandered away from him. They have gone so far away they don't even know the danger they're in.

And we know from the larger story of Israel, this is not the exception; this is the rule. Micah specifically calls out both Samaria and Jerusalem with respect to these sins. These are not isolated instances of sin in the nation and church; these are instances of sin that are permeating in all of God's people. Just in case they would protest against him, Micah gives exhibit A in the courtroom of God's testimony against his people. He talks about the high places of Judah.

Why would he do this? Well, the high places were where false worship was held. I think we can include the temple in Jerusalem which is on a high place! They were the center of idolatry in the nation. While Judah, Samaria and Israel would have seen themselves as good people and as being safe, they were mocking God and themselves by worshiping other gods. We see this throughout the Old Testament history. Over and over we read how the people of Israel went to the high places and sacrificed there. They were drawn to false gods. For example, we have the famous story of Elijah defeating the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. (I Kings 18)

This is a lesson for us. As individuals, as the church, and as society, aren't we quick to ignore our own sins and focus on the sins of the world? We must be very careful here. Not that we should excuse the world, but we cannot excuse our own sins. It is dangerous to compromise what is the Almighty's view of truth and justice and peace and worship. I will leave it up to you to name what attitudes, idolatry, and theology we need to admit and confess to.

The Bible's message to the church is always,

Are we ready to clean up our own act?

Because if we are not, we have no business trying to clean up the world. The Lord wants to understand that we see the seriousness of the situation here, so the language shifts in **verse 6**. Notice the "I" language. God is the one who is speaking. He tells his people what he will do. What he will do is not only bring judgment; he will destroy the sin that he hates.

We often wonder why God seems so cruel and why some innocent people suffer. Well, God's judgement is more than punishment. It is his way of ridding the world of the sin that he hates. We puzzle about the flood and the tower of Babel. Surely there were some good people back then. But the story of Abraham bargaining with God about how many good people were in Sodom and Gomorrah makes the point – few are good & holy. (Gen. 18:16-33) So God attempts to wipe sin off the face of the earth, which is what happens with Samaria. We do not fully understand these actions by God, but they do make the points: 1) we need to follow God fully; 2) we are our brothers and sister's keeper; 3) we have some responsibility for the systems we live in – church, community, and nation.

We need to know that Samaria was where some Israelites rejected God's capital in Jerusalem, where His name dwelt and instead, they built the perfect, planned capital city, isolated from other hills in the region, more than 300 feet high. It was designed to show that Israel could take care of itself, that it did not need God, that it didn't need God's temple for worship. It was not just a political separation, a split between the people of

Israel. It became a symbol of defiance toward Creator God. That is why the stories of Jesus in in Samaria are so astounding and revolutionary. It is God loving the enemy.

We need to notice; false worship is condemned. **Verse 7**. Idols are smashed. Centers of idolatry are laid waste. And any wealth they had built up was destroyed. Enemy armies like Assyria, would come in & carry all accumulated wealth away. Prostitution refers to the temple practices of prostitution for fund raising. It is also a common Old Testament term, symbolizing idolatry and spiritual unfaithfulness.

This is not the happy ending we like to hear in our movies, books and so on. The words transgression and sin tell the story. And as often as we have heard this, the sting of this message does not diminish. It is clear the worship of false gods, in Jerusalem, Judah and Samaria, is not acceptable. These cities are to be destroyed, the offending images are to be pulverized, and everything connected with their worship is to be utterly scattered and taken away.

This word from Micah must have been a shock to the people in Jerusalem who looked down on Samaria, and vice versa. The people in Samaria who thought they were better than those in Jerusalem, would have hated God's message. God is an equal opportunity condemner. This is grim reading.

But are we any different? It is easy to dismiss any gloom and doom person as a pessimist. We simply do not like to face unpleasant facts. But we need to not be in denial of reality – especially God's viewpoint. We must position our attitudes and spirituality to be open to God's messages. We are always in danger when we do not hear, see, and watch out for God's messages and messengers. What is our attitude toward messages we don't like, but are true?