

Greed, Coveting, Oppression & Selfishness.

Micah 2:1-5; 1 Kings 21:1-16

The Nobel Peace Prize for 2021 was awarded to Dmitry Muratov and Maria Ressa. They received the Peace Prize for their courageous fight for freedom of expression in Russia and the Philippines, which is a precondition for democracy and lasting peace. We could say, they are representatives of all journalists who stand up for this ideal in a world in which democracy and freedom of the press face increasingly adverse conditions.

Here is a list of why both these courageous individuals are in danger. They expose abuse of power, the use of violence and growing authoritarianism in their own countries. They are fearless defenders of freedom of expression. Ressa focuses critical attention on President Duterte regime's controversial, murderous anti-drug campaign that resembles a war waged against the country's own population. She has also documented how social media is used to spread fake news, harass opponents, and manipulate public discourse.

Muratov defends freedom of speech in Russia and has a critical attitude towards power. He has unfavorable articles on subjects of police violence, corruption, unlawful arrests, electoral fraud, & "troll factories" providing false information, to erode trust in the media and to hassle journalists. These Pulitzer Peace Prize winners are good sources of information on aspects of society rarely mentioned by other media.

No one of us likes to hear negative information about ourselves. Journalism is a dangerous profession. Especially when they point out human rights issues, corruption, and abuse of power. Journalists are killed just for doing their job like this last week in Mexico. Around the world, many journalists and film makers are arrested, mistreated, interfered with, including in Canada. Amber Bracken and Michael Toledano were among the 29 arrested on Wet'suwet'en territory, gathering information about a protest last November.

All societies need their prophets – their truth tellers and questioners. In a speech during a debate on the state of the nation in February 2015, the leader of the official South African opposition party stood up in parliament boldly confronting the leader of the governing party. Several times in his memorable speech, he repeated the president at the time was not an honourable person but was a broken man, ruling over a broken people & a broken system.

Around 730 BC, Micah the spokesperson of the official opposition to the ruling power of Judah and Israel similarly confronted the rulers and the citizens, accusing them of being a broken people, led by broken leaders, in a broken system. This brokenness was nothing but sin.

In Micah, we see the oft-repeated pattern in the prophetic books of the Old Testament, where the guilt of a sinful people is exposed and then judgement is meted out on the offenders. We previously considered Micah chapter 1 and considered his lamentation over Samaria and Judah because of their predicted destruction.

A commentator describes what was occurring. "The small landowner, who could provide for himself, and his family was suddenly destitute. Where once he was self-sufficient, he became dependent on others, his livelihood lost to the unscrupulous dealers in real estate. The small landowner lost not only his own livelihood, but also his "inheritance" (2:2), that which he might have bequeathed to his children for their future support and survival. The greed of the wealthy created a category of "new poor." A section of society that once fended for itself now could no longer do so; the nation's socio-economic foundation was crumbling."

Micah was a pre-exilic prophet, before Israel and Judah were decimated by Assyria and later shipped off to captivity and exile in Babylon. The prophets repeatedly warned the people by pointing out their transgressions and covenantal unfaithfulness of the chosen people of God as a justification for why a God, faithful to his covenant, would respond as he did.

Micah 2 gives us more information about the sins of the disobedient people, sins that showed that they were broken. Let's look at verses 1-5.

Verse 1 is an astounding indictment. Micah moves from general to specific accusations. He says the wealthy are so interested in exploiting that they were unable to sleep at night. They spent these wakeful hours devising schemes to defraud and dispossess their fellow citizens. When daylight came, they proceeded to execute their plots. They had such power, they could do anything they wished. It seems there was no one, in government, in the courts or in the religious system who would hold them to account. The authorities were in league with them. Society's leaders could do as they wished, and there was no justice. Does this sound familiar? Premeditated greed!

This is so familiar, plain, and shocking – let's go over this again. There are 5 steps in this sin of greed, covenanting and oppression: **Verse 1**

1. People eagerly desire what is not their own – 'they covet fields and houses';
2. They devise plans & strategies to accomplish their desires – they 'plot evil on their beds';
3. People use their power to get what they want – 'it is in their power to do it'; **Verse 2**
4. They do all this with the greatest expediency – 'right away at morning's light';
5. People impoverish others in the process – 'they defraud a man of his home, a fellowman of his inheritance.'

It is clear these are not sinners who fell under sudden temptation and gave into weakness but determined oppressors. Biblically the phrase, "*At morning's light*" indicates a lack of fear and shame because thieves often operate under cover of darkness. They show a diligence that would be commendable, but it is misapplied. They are dedicated and unscrupulous villains.

Why? "*Because it is in their power to do it*" is a telling phrase. Wealthy and successful people usually reach a point when there is nothing they reckon they cannot achieve or acquire. They have the resources; the influence; all they need

is the opportunity. The bottom line is, "I want it and I'm going to get it." We see this often with individuals and groups in our world today.

The story of King Ahab & Naboth is a Biblical example. 1 Kings 21:1-16 states Naboth owned a vineyard, in proximity to King Ahab's palace in the city of Jezreel. Ahab desired to acquire the vineyard so that he could turn it into a vegetable garden. Since Naboth inherited the land from his ancestors, Naboth refused to sell it to Ahab. According to the Mosaic law, the law forbade the permanent selling of land. But Queen Jezebel executed Naboth, so King Ahab could take the property. She did so with the cooperation of the local elders and nobles and two scoundrels who made false accusations.

Back in 2009, during the housing crises, a US company was accused of taking in \$120 million dollars with dealings that were not illegal, but clearly were on the borderline of what was right. They defied the spirit of the law. The legal system thought it would be too hard to get a conviction. The company did pay a fine of \$10 million. However, without any declaration of fault, that meant it would have been hard to successfully sue them in a civil trial.

It was a deal made for corruption, favoritism, plus sends out the message – just operate to the edge of the law, make a lot of money, pay a little fine, and there will be no jail time, and you can keep a lot of money. This kind of decision keeps one safe from financial & legal jeopardy, and from jail, and earns you lots of money. Make \$120 million, pay a fine of \$10 million, have a \$110 million profit, & hurt a lot of people. This way of doing business destroys the justice system, a society, and a nation.

The Bible reminds us frequently that we are not satisfied with the money and possessions we have accumulated. This attitude continues to be prevalent today. People who are already rich beyond measure continue to exploit others. This kind of activity may not happen exactly as it's described here, but we know it happens all over the world in various forms by all kinds of

people and groups. Just because something is legal, does not make it ethical, moral, or godly.

We must be careful not to view people in their brokenness and sin as being peculiar & unique. We must recognise our own inclinations and tendencies to offend a faithful God. Throughout the ages, people, nations, religions, & societies have shown their brokenness by the sins they have wilfully committed. When you first read this passage, were you were thinking, “What is the relevance of this archaic Old Testament prophecy to me in this modern age?”

Well, the people of Israel were a nation with redistribution of land at the Almighty’s direction. When they conquered the area of Palestine, every tribe, every clan, and every family were given a piece of land. The proposed economic system was every 50 years, each piece of land reverted to the original family. I’m not going to explain that system today, but what Micah and the other prophets describe was a deliberate attempt to take peoples property – the basis of their wealth. So as bad as this greed is, it was considered even worst by the prophets, because it led the people away from God’s planned economic system.

Christopher Wright expands on the connection: The prophetic message about economic justice & injustice did not stem from a general concern for human rights, nor from an advancing ethical sensitivity. It was not even a simple economic issue. ***It was deeply spiritual.*** Let me say this again. This is a deep spiritual issue. Anything which threatened a household’s economic viability, anything that threatened a household’s economic viability or drove them out of secure tenure of their portion of land was a threat to its secure membership of the covenant people. To lose one’s land, especially in an agricultural society, was more than economic disaster: it struck at one’s very relationship with God. Everywhere you look in the prophets, this vehement indignation at economic injustice is evident or not far from the surface.’

(Wright, *Living as the People of God*)

When a society’s wealth mostly consists of real estate, a mania for acquiring more and more, by seizure, theft, false charges and violence, no wonder God gets angry. So who gets disposed? Obviously, the poor, new immigrants, widows, middle class, and those without wealth, power, and political influence. When you take away, by any means, someone’s God given heritage – God becomes wrathful. **(Verse 3)**

So, it should not surprise us God says, “I am planning disaster against this people, from which you cannot save yourselves. You will no longer walk proudly, for it will be a time of calamity.” Is this what is occurring in several countries around the world today?

Verse 4 continues this reproach. Those who brought ruin on others, will suffer the same unpleasant fate. It will be a painful experience when property barons will see their unfairly acquired land divided up among the poor of Israel and the immigrants Assyria brings in.

Then in **verse 5**, Micah says those condemned, will have no inheritance in Israel. They will be cut off from their political & economic advantages. Plus, they will be removed from any part of their religious community. This verse means, because the people have blatantly disregarded the obligations of the covenant with their God, the oppressors have effectively removed themselves from any inheritance in the community and congregation. That’s harsh!

This kind of prediction shows that when a society produces only two kinds of people, poor people suffering at the hands of the rich, this catches the Almighty’s negative attention. Regardless of what political or economic or social system we believe in, this is a constant message in the Bible. If you remember your Advent verses this is a common theme. Greed, covenanting, corruption, oppression, & selfishness, to enhance one’s own wealth and power, always receives a big no – no in the Bible.

Phillips in his commentary, illustrates how such hardness of heart can be found today: “When I

attended a graduate school of business, we were taught, it was the duty of executive decision makers to place the stock value above all other considerations, even if one's decisions resulted in pollution to the environment, ruin to low-level employees, corruption in the government, & this was in a business ethics class! With this value, the company exists solely to make money for its stockholders. If small businesses operated by families for generations are wiped out, if widows are evicted from their homes, if layoffs reduce loyal workers to poverty, (not able to afford necessary living expenses), these things are simply 'the cost of doing business.'"

He continues, "The only sacrifices that cannot be made are in the stock price & ever soaring executive compensation packages. All the while, the board members and CEOs live in a fairy-tale land far removed from the common people about whom they neither know nor care; a world of rich estates, private jets, skyscraper views, & too often, richly appointed churches with smooth and elegant preachers whose wagging tongues assure them of God's favor."

So, Micah's verdict is; the punishment will match the crime. Those who have destroyed the lives of others have, in the end, destroyed themselves. The irony is that these words, which might well have been used by the land-stealers, are now being used against them. Micah is, in effect, acknowledging the nation has reached the place of no return. Disaster and deportation are coming.

How do we compare today to back in Micah's time? Obviously, we live in a very different world. But the principles still hold. Our society encourages coveting. If we had a poll, asking us, "What is society's favorite sin," would we pick coveting, greed, & selfishness? Society might not be in favor of murder or lying all the time, but we too often seem to be in favor of coveting. We have a whole industry called advertising. Its purpose is to convince us that we do not have enough. They convince us that even if we have something, we need the new and improved something of the something.

But our Creator calls us to contentment. He calls us to be satisfied with what he has given, to trust him. One of the verses of this teaching is Philippians 4:12. "I know what it is to be in need, & I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want." This contrasts with what Micah and the prophets describe. It is so difficult to live out. And we do not like the message. Which is why many people gravitate to a health and wealth gospel.

We may think that we don't have the opportunity or the power to engage in the sort of white-collar crime described here. But again: the root of these crimes is covetousness, defrauding people. **(verse 2)** We cannot believe that we are any freer of a covetous attitude than those we read about in the Bible. Underneath our respectable exterior, what might be found? The fact that we have done nothing like the thieves in this scripture, does not mean we are virtuous. Maybe we are, but, maybe we simply lack the opportunity to sin in this way. There but for the grace of God go I, should be our thinking.

And I don't fully understand why lots of people in society should suffer because a small group of persons act as Micah describes. Its simply not fair. This would be a good discussion.

But despite all this, Micah confidently looks ahead to a great reversal of circumstances to be set in motion by God himself. Christianity with our centre of gravity pushed forward into a future day of reckoning that we think Christians will avoid, has tended to pay less attention to these kinds of warnings. But the Bible warns us often, we must deal with this kind of evil, now, or we all suffer. If the Almighty treats his chosen people this way, why would he treat us any different? Galatians 6:7 warns us, "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A person reaps what they sow." Plus, as we will know and may see, we can be confident that justice will eventually be done. The Bible and Jesus' birth promises this.

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