

## **False Prophets, Deliverance is Promised.**

Micah 2:1-13 (8-13)

I predict a housing crisis is occurring in North America. Corporations buy up houses to rent. They pay just a little more than a normal citizen can pay, and in this way, the corporations are accumulating properties. Opportunities for affordable home ownership are decreasing. This is good business so we should buy stock in these companies. But it's preventing people from building property wealth.

This pattern will probably increase homelessness as there are more unaffordable rents. These companies outbid middle-class home buyers and prevent first time homeowners from purchasing homes. Furthermore, these companies subject tenants to what they allege are unfair rent hikes, shoddy maintenance, and excessive fees. Even though this is not exactly what Micah describes in verses 1 & 2, it's the same kind of economic dynamic we face today.

We know that statistics can be used in a variety of ways to make our own arguments. One of my first sociology books was a small book titled, "How to Lie With Statistics." And we always gravitate to stories that prove our biases. But I think when we study what's going on around the world, as we wade through a variety of material, we find that more people simply are not better off and have fewer opportunities to have a secure, free, and comfortable living. And today we have inflation to deal with. Imagine how it impacts a low wage worker.

Just one personal example. When Rose and I were candidates at a congregation, when it came time to talk about salary and benefits, I asked the group, "Can I live like you do?" They had talked about taking vacations in Hawaii, enjoying cruises, spending significant time on ski vacations, sending their high school age children far away to a private school, and so on. Plus, we had been in their homes and saw really nice furnishings and expensive knickknacks. I asked, "Does what you are offering to pay us, allow us to do these things?"

I was asking an honest question. I didn't know the cost of living there. It was a move of good distance. Plus, we had 3 kids to raise. I was not trying to get more money. It was simply an unplanned curious question. So, we left the room for 15 minutes. When we were called back, we were offered a \$15,000 dollar increase over their first proposal. It was a surprise and allowed my children to learn and enjoy skiing.

Regardless of how one uses statistics, I think we must face that we have similar political, economic, and social dynamics as Micah was condemning. The details are different, but the results are the same around the world.

Micah began his ministry in the reign of King Jotham, but nobody listened. Then he prophesied during the reign of King Ahaz, but nobody listened. Finally, he prophesied during the reign of Hezekiah when the leaders and the people repented. Micah didn't give up, even though results were slow in coming. Micah preached for anywhere between 16 and 25 years before there was any response. But by then it was too late as God was offended with Israel's sins, so Assyria and Babylon were in motion.

Two weeks ago we studied verses 1 to 5. Today in verses 6 to 11 we have another description of what occurred back then. I think we can make the case that it is like what is occurring today.

**Verse 6.** Micah begins quoting the prophets of the establishment. "Do not prophesy about such things. Disgrace will not overtake us." It seems that after the biting, threatening words of verses 1 to 5, many were indignant that Micah was exposing their crimes before the public. They wanted to shut Micah up. But Micah kept responding. All we have to do to get a feel for these words is listen to conservative politicians and then liberal ones on mass media. "No, we are right, and yes, you are wrong!"

The emotion in these verses makes it a difficult problem for us. "Who is really talking? What do they mean? And what is making sense?" But it's clear, true prophets are considered

troublemakers. Their powerful sermons disgraced the privileged classes and embarrassed the false prophets. So the call to stop talking is classic, normal and expected. And today, we shout over people and choose the prophets we want to listen to and ignore the others. That's the dynamic going on in verses 6 and 7. And Micah expected that he would be increasingly criticized as his opponents became desperate.

However, we unpack these words, it's clear there is conflict between 2 groups of prophets: between the true & the false; between genuine prophetic faith and the vested interests of the established order and religion. It can be argued the religious leaders represent the interests of the landgrabbers of verses 1-5. The false prophets & the profiteers were hand in glove.

The phrase, "*Do not prophesy*" is plural, associating Micah with his contemporaries such as Isaiah and Hosea. This is not the usual word for prophesying. It's like the false prophets are saying, "You can't preach at me."

The phrase, "*Do not prophesy about these things*," possibly indicates, "The false teachers will not prophesy about these negative but true things." Either way, it is plain they would not be seen dead preaching such a negative message. They must support the establishment which uses physical and legal and economic force to get richer & more powerful and so on.

We know that during much of Israel's history, there were true prophets and there were false prophets. God's prophets often gave difficult, unpopular messages. The false prophets often pandered to their hearers' desires by preaching optimistic, 'uplifting' messages. Things are not different today. Many believe preaching should not tackle issues of hot button business ethics, politics, care of the earth & social movements.

Instead, preachers and leaders should focus on spiritual matters & not interfere in marketplace issues. They should talk about worship, prayer, and a personal relationship with God, not fraud and corruption & so on. However, true prophets

continue to preach against the lies by which people try to justify their lifestyles, politics, and theology. Micah did not let himself be silenced by bad theology or calls to blunt his message.

I've been in Mennonite congregational, conference and denominational meetings when someone says something, or asks a question, that makes everyone feel awkward. They expose the real issues. And they have broken a cardinal cultural religious sin – making people unhappy, uncomfortable, and exposing reality. Using peace terms, they have broken the peace by lifting up tough issues we try to ignore. These people tend not to last too long in their positions as they are lovingly ostracized. But I think we suffer as organizations because of this when we too quickly smooth over negative, threatening ideas, thoughts, and questions.

The sentence, "*Disgrace will not overtake us*" seems to be the false prophets saying, "The way we chose to operate in the marketplace is our own affair, not someone else like prophet Micah. After all, what does he understand and about property, finance, pollution, & so on?"

We know that false prophets today hate the Bible's teaching on sin and judgment, and therefore its teaching on the atoning blood of Christ. Increasing numbers of supposedly evangelical scholars now scorn the teaching that Jesus died in the place of sinners, receiving the wrath of God their sins deserve. In place of the Bible's teaching on sin and the cross, false preaching today emphasizes human goodness, moralistic works, health, prosperity, life-style training, and wealth that mimics self-help psychology. So, we need to be careful who we listen to and believe.

In **verse 7**, Micah asks us and his original listeners, four questions. **First**, Jacob, meaning all of Israel – should such things I have talked about not be said?

**Second**, Is the Spirit of the Lord angry and to be restricted to what you want to hear?

**Third** question. Are these God's doings? This suggests that simply because God has allowed these evil and deplorable conditions to last so long, does not mean he approves them.

**Fourth**, Do not my words do good to the one whose ways are upright? This question implies the response to true prophetic messages hold good news for those who are good, but ominous only for those who have not been walking uprightly with God's values.

We don't fully know how the false prophets, the defenders of the status quo were responding to Micah and God's messages, but we can easily use our imagination from what we see around us today as well as our own understanding of human defensiveness. Whether it is God Almighty or Micah on God's behalf, responding with these four questions, it's clear the message is: "If ungodly people would live according to the covenantal standards of the Lord, Micah's words would have a positive effect on them & how the nation lived together. If they humbly listened, repented, and changed, the reproach, disgrace & anger they felt, would become a means of blessing for all of them.

Micah, like all true prophets, brings a message that at first, we might not want to hear. It's a rebuke to our greed and our covetousness, our corruptness and selfishness, which results in oppression to many people. It's a rebuke to our desire to only hear good things and not be challenged. But it's a message we need to hear, and when we hear that message, we know we need a Savior. We can't find salvation ourselves. We are weak and sinful. But the good news is, we have a Savior who is strong. Our Creator breaks in by grace & gathers us to himself. The Almighty frees us from our sin and makes a way. We can trust because He is true.

I subscribe to the Atlantic Magazine. I don't always agree with its articles, but they get me thinking. In December, 2009, there was an article titled, "Did Christianity Cause the Crash?" In 2009 the Atlantic published an article that asked if prosperity-gospel churches

helped cause the subprime mortgage crisis. They reported how Wells Fargo Bank specifically targeted churches.

The article says, "The plan was to send finance officers to guest-speak at church-sponsored "wealth-building seminars" and dazzle the participants with the possibility of a new house. They would tell pastors that for every person who took out a mortgage, \$350 would be donated to the church, or to a charity of the parishioner's choice. The loan officer would not say, 'Hey, Mr. Minister. We want to give your people a bunch of subprime loans.'" Instead, they would say, 'Your congregants will be homeowners! They will be able to live the American dream!'" Hanna Rosin, the author of the article shares how Jesus and money was what the spiritual diet was of these churches.

It's nice to have a preacher or church leader who tells you what you want to hear. We want a prophet who will promise us wealth, health, a good life, and a great retirement. We want a pastor who says we can have our best life now. But Micah condemns prosperity gospel preaching - plain and simple. The prosperity gospel is the idea that God wants to give you everything you want in this life. Money is the idol, and it can and has created grave injustices.

In contrast, the true message of the Bible is not one of prosperity and peace in this life. In fact, our faith often calls for sacrifice & self-denial & going the extra mile. Rose and I have a plaque hanging in our house that reminds us: "Faith makes things possible, not easy."

That's not a message we naturally want to hear. 2 Timothy 4:3-5 prophesies, encourages us, and warns, "For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your

ministry.” Many of Micah’s listeners did not want to hear a hard message from God, and so God judged them. May this never be us.

In **verse 8** the debate with the false prophets ends and confusion of who is actually talking seems to be clear. Verses 8 to 11 seem to be God talking and he lists another set of examples of Israel’s disobedience. Micah resumes his list of charges and describes how lawless people were wreaking almost as great a disaster upon the country as if it had been looted by an enemy army. Robber gangs, perhaps hired by the wealthy, stripped unsuspecting people, often the middle class & poor, thinking themselves secure, were going peaceably about their ways with no designs for harm against anyone.

The phrase, “even those returning from war,” veterans, indicates that instead of being given pensions, the returning veteran seems to have been robbed of even those few articles he brought with him from the front. It’s hard for us to fully understand what Micah is talking about because like with Paul’s letters, we have to dig to figure out what he was reacting to.

But still, **verse 9**, helps us understand what Israel is being criticized for. Widows and children are driven from their homes. The future of any country is its children. So, when they don’t have secure places to live, often they become a lost generation. This short-sighted policy and practice, puts a blight on a nation’s future. To see this, all we have to do is look around the world, and near by.

**Verse 10.** This seems to refer to conquered people being rounded up by their capture and taken into slavery and exile. Israel would lose their inheritance of the land, because of their unethical religious and political and justice practices. They were defiled & ruined people so they will not rest in their home and in their promised land. That’s a message no one wants to hear – regardless of the reason.

Then **verse 11**, takes another shot at false prophets. It indicates that too many people,

listen to those who prophecy they will have plenty of beer & wine. This is code for listening to people we like to hear because their message pleases us. Micah is using sarcasm here. He talks about preaching with wind and vanity. It shows up in the Hebrew & is lost in translation. But it’s a play on words of God’s spirit and hot air. So, we could say the pew ruled the pulpit. We don’t like Micah & people like him. It’s nicer to take in cheerful lies & not bitter truth.

But Jesus followers are called by the Holy Almighty to a standard of morals & ethics. The prophets clearly say that because Israel’s sins were so great, their must be awful destruction. Is this what the world is facing – at least in some nations today? Will we listen?

Then we have **verses 12** and 13. A message of hope, ending the first oracle of doom. At least on commentator says these verses were inserted later to nullify Micah’s biting message. But we know God always offers hope of some kind. These words offer invincible optimism. Jacob and Israel refer to the 12 tribes. The vision is they will be brought back together in the land. The word, *flock*, brings back happy memories of an agricultural and powerful society in David’s and Solomon’s time. *Throng*, reminds people of God’s promise that Abraham’s ancestors will be like the sands of the sea.

**Verse 13** announces that this is Yahweh’s doing. The language here in Hebrew indicates the King, the Lord, will lead the people back to their land. Salvation will be offered again!

This is a short word of hope after all the details of what Israel was doing wrong. Its for our benefit. The best learners are those who learn from other people’s examples, and not make the same mistakes. This is why the Word of God is powerful. “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy

3:16-17) May we take in these warnings as well as remember that our Creator redeems us.

---