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**Core Seminar**

**Old Testament**

**Class 19: Jonah & Micah**

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Good morning again. We’re continuing to move through the Minor Prophets. Today we’ll look at Jonah and Micah. One is a popular story – in fact so popular and so well known that the main theological point is often overlooked. The other is a little known prophet – but one who preaches a powerful message that adds considerably to our understanding of Old Testament hope.

Even though Jonah comes before Micah in your Bibles, we’re actually going to look at Micah first. Why? Because in so many ways Jonah is a foil to Micah. The things the Israelites are doing that Micah rails against are exactly the things that Jonah does—and that the pagan, non-Israelites in Jonah repent of. Looking at the themes of Micah and then applying them to Jonah should help us get beyond the familiarity of Jonah’s story into his message of judgment and mercy. That is, judgment to Israel and mercy to her enemies.

One key theme in both of these books is that God’s salvation is for *all peoples*. Not just the Jews. So before we get into Micah, let’s do some work tracing that theme through Scripture. ***Where else in the Old Testament do we see that idea? Where is it in the New Testament?***

**MICAH**

**Introduction and Theme**

That said, let’s jump right to Micah. In the historical timeline, Micah is the latest of the Minor Prophets we’ve seen so far. Incidentally, if you haven’t done so already, open up Micah and follow along. Even if I’m not quoting verses directly, keeping your finger roughly in the same place in the book I’m speaking from will help you piece it together. In chapter 1, verse 1, you see the names of kings who reigned during Micah’s ministry. Even though those are all Judean kings, Micah’s prophecy concerns both kingdoms. And a lot goes on during Micah’s time, there at the end of the 8th century. As the book opens, Assyria is about to invade Israel. By the end, this invasion is complete with the Northern Kingdom conquered, scattered, and completely annihilated. The South will remain, but for a time it looked like the Assyrians would do the same to them. Just to give you some bearings, this is also the time of the prophet Isaiah.

This invasion and dispersion of the northern tribes is of course a major theological conundrum. Those are Yahweh’s people. Is He casting them off? Is He not fulfilling His end of the covenant? Well of course the answer to those questions is “no.” This isn’t Yahweh’s fault. Micah’s message is that this judgment wouldn’t have happened if Israel had kept *her* end of the covenant. And there’s still hope if she’ll repent. But since she won’t, Micah’s message flashes to the future. He predicts a day when a remnant of Israel will be saved through a future King in the line of David.

We can summarize the main point of Micah like this:

*God will judge all people; yet he will save a remnant through a future King.*

Even though Israel is lost, hope is not lost. You can hear in that theme sentence that Yahweh is still committed to saving His people. But not every single individual of Israel will be saved. Only “the remnant” will. Now, as we’ve gone through the minor prophets, the so-called “book of twelve,” we’ve pointed out where new themes emerge. The theme of divorce that emerges first in Hosea, of the Day of the Lord starts in Joel. Though the idea of a remnant has been mentioned once already—in Amos—it’s in Micah that it really comes into its own as a major theme. And it will continue as a major theme through the rest of these prophets. Basically, the remnant is those who will still be saved even after the fall of the North and the South. And that remnant is defined as *those who repent*. It’s really as simple as that. The two nations are cast off, but those who repent will make up the returning, saved, remnant. And this salvation will be accomplished by the great and final coming King. So it’s important to see that right here, in Micah, we’re seeing another significant piece of foundation being laid for the New Testament. As Paul will later write, “not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.” And, as will be foreshadowed in Jonah, the remnant will eventually be expanded to include even those not ethnically descended from Israel. So when, suddenly, promises made to the ethnic people of Israel are fulfilled in the New Testament through the church, do we cry foul? Charge God with “replacement theology?” No! The prophets have been preparing us, starting with Micah, for this very idea.

**Style**

One quick note about Micah before we move into the text itself. He’s a masterful writer. He’s got great rhetorical skills, using word play, powerful images, and a sharp wit. But much of his style and sophistication is lost in translation. For example, there’s a passage at the end of chapter 1 where Micah proclaims a series of woes on towns throughout Judah that appears fairly dull in English. But Micah is doing two things there. First, the towns Micah mentions trace the route Sennacherib would take as his army marched towards Jerusalem in 701 BC. Second, each woe he proclaims is, in Hebrew, a word-play or a pun on the name of the town. We might get a similar flavor if someone said “You cannot *wash* the corruption out of *Wash*ington,” or “Sin is nothing *new* in *New* York.” In other words, sin is intrinsic to these people. To get the full sense of Micah’s writing, you might read this book with the help of a good commentary or introduction, like the one in the ESV study Bible or Dillard and Longman’s Introduction to the Old Testament.

So what is Micah about?

**I. God wants wrongs to be rebuked**

First, Micah wants us to know that God wants wrongs to be rebuked. Israel and Judah were marked by sin. Micah condemns a host of social and economic sins, including covetousness, theft, fraud (2:2), dishonest scales (6:11), bribery (3:11), deceit (6:12), violence and bloodshed (6:12 and 3:10). He also condemns religious sins, including witchcraft (5:12), idolatry (1:5-7), an unwillingness to heed the Lord, and a desire to listen to false teachers (2:6, 11). At root, this sin is a matter of the heart. “you . . . hate the good and love the evil” (3:2). Israel violated her covenant with God by deliberate apostasy *and* in the way she lived out that apostasy. Socially, economically, politically. She treated God’s word with distain. Chapter 2, verse 11: “If a man should go about and utter wind and lies, saying, ‘I will preach to you of wine and strong drink,’ he would be the preacher for this people!” Picking prophets based on how optimistic their outlook was. That’s where things had gone.

So God will judge. Publicly and severely. Chapter 1, verse 3:

**3**For behold, the Lord is coming out of his place,  
    and will come down and tread upon the high places of the earth.  
**4**And the mountains will melt under him,  
    and the valleys will split open,  
like wax before the fire,  
    like waters poured down a steep place.  
**5**All this is for the transgression of Jacob  
    and for the sins of the house of Israel…  
**6**Therefore I will make Samaria a heap in the open country,  
    a place for planting vineyards,  
and I will pour down her stones into the valley  
    and uncover her foundations.

When God comes, he doesn’t skip lightly; the earth is crushed beneath him. His judgment is powerful. And it is personal. This wrath isn’t some unfortunate consequence of his justice that he’s kind of embarrassed about. He delights in showing wrong to be wrong and himself to be right.

So if you’re one who puzzles over God’s wrath and the idea of hell, let me assure you on the testimony of passages like this: God’s wrath is real. He has a capacity for wrath and is committed to responding to our sin in wrath. How much does God hate sin? Jesus’ death shows the extent to which God was willing to go in order to deal with it.

As a result, we should take the warnings in the Bible *very* seriously. This was a *real* judgment Israel endured, and so will ours. No one should be complacent in their religion. And one stern warnings in the Bible are one of God’s gracious means to preserve our faith. Read Micah as a warning not to play fast and loose with sin. It will enslave us. And it is deadly.

**[Take Questions]**

**II. God wants his people to be restored**

God wants sin rebuked and punished, but he also wants his people restored. That’s the second major theme in Micah. Micah concludes each passage of judgment with a passage of hope for salvation and mercy. For example, in 4:6-8 he says,

**6**In that day, declares the Lord,  
    I will assemble the lame  
and gather those who have been driven away  
    and those whom I have afflicted;  
**7**and the lame I will make the remnant,  
    and those who were cast off, a strong nation;  
and the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion  
    from this time forth and forevermore.

**8**And you, O tower of the flock,  
    hill of the daughter of Zion,  
to you shall it come,  
    the former dominion shall come,  
    kingship for the daughter of Jerusalem.

Judgment ends with perfect judgment of sin. But in that judgment, God graciously elects to save a remnant, a small portion of people set apart to be his own. For these people he promises justice but also mercy. He promises salvation. He promises to restore them to their land. God fulfilled this prophesy in part by bringing Judah back from their exile in Babylon.

But God promises an even more profound salvation. Micah points forward to a more final and lasting salvation in the central passage of the book. In Micah 5:1-5 God promises a “ruler in Israel” who will come from Bethlehem and “stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And he shall be their peace.” Who is this king? None other than God himself become man.

**III. God wants his character to be known**

Finally, a third theme in Micah: God wants to be known. He judges sin and shows mercy *in order to* display his character and be glorified and acknowledged by all. We see this is three ways.

First, God wants his character to be known through the acknowledgment of his supremacy. Micah says in 4:1-3,

It shall come to pass in the latter days  
    that the mountain of the house of the Lord  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
    and it shall be lifted up above the hills;  
and peoples shall flow to it,  
    and many nations shall come, and say:  
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,  
    to the house of the God of Jacob,  
that he may teach us his ways  
    and that we may walk in his paths.”

Both Jew and Gentile come to God’s mountain seek to walk in his paths. And so God’s redemptive plan ends with people from all nations acknowledging and rejoicing in his supremacy.

Second, God wants his character known through the remembrance of his righteousness. In chapter 6 God recounts his many acts of blessing and salvation towards Israel, starting with their deliverance from Egypt and slavery, the provision of leadership in Moses and Aaron, their triumph over enemies and entrance into the promised land. This’s why we talk about redemptive *history*. There is a long story of God redeeming his people, and we can glorify God and show forth his character by retelling the story. This is one of the ways in which God makes himself known.

Last, God wants his character known through the demonstration of his mercy. We saw in the previous section how God wants his people restored; God’s restoration goes so far that he even promises to forgive sin. Micah says in 7:18-20 “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.”

If you think about it, those are perhaps the three big themes that underlie the Christian gospel. A just God who claims to forgive sin, that he might be glorified. If you’re looking for a different perspective on the gospel that holds those great truths high, Micah is a great place to start.

**Conclusion**

So how do we take hold of these promises? How do we become part of this remnant? We repent of our sins. As Micah says, “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

But, of course, the danger for God’s people is always that they *presume* their inclusion in God’s family instead of doing the hard work of repenting. And with that problem in mind, let’s turn back to Jonah.

**[Take Questions]**

**JONAH**

**Context**

With a reference to Jonah in 2 Kings 14:25, we’re able to place his ministry during the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel in the early to mid-8th century BC. That timing is significant, because Jonah is called to preach to the Assyrians. And the mid-8th century BC is just before Israel is invaded by Assyria. So at this point in time, Assyria has been Israel’s perpetual enemy for some time. And that’s the dynamic that sits under this book. Assyria is Israel’s enemy. Jonah doesn’t like the Assyrians. But Jonah’s called to preach to them (incidentally tying Jonah, Nahum, and part of Micah together in their focus on the Assyrians). To make matters worse, it seems Jonah may have been accustomed to a very different type of prophecy. The reference in 2 Kings 14 has Jonah prophesying expanding its borders at the expense of its enemies. How humiliating to now turn and preach to the benefit of those very enemies.

Redemptive-Historically, Jonah is similar to the other Minor Prophets we’ve looked at so far. But what Jonah adds to the story is the emphasis that Yahweh is God over all the nations, not just the covenant people, and that He saves both Jew *and* Gentile. Now, these things are taught in other books too. But in Jonah it’s *really* emphasized. What this helps us see is that in all this talk about God’s wrath on the Day of the LORD, Yahweh’s desire is primarily to *save.* And even to save from among the Gentile nations. He is a God of grace and mercy. The book of Jonah shows how positively active He is in saving people, pursuing them with grace even when they don’t know it.

The story of Jonah and the whale is so well known that we often miss the theological point. We make that exciting story the focal point, rather than seeing that that story is but the vehicle to convey a very important message. And that message is that God’s mercy is profound and extends to all his people from every tribe and language and people on earth.

**Historicity**

One quick note on the historicity of the book. Is Jonah a true story? The story is often dismissed as a parable or a fable because of how fantastic it sounds. But it’s nothing like the parables Jesus tells in the Gospels, or like the fables of Aesop. It’s long—an entire book of the Bible. It’s detailed, populated with life-like characters, and set in an identifiable, historical place and time (8th Century BC Nineveh). And, more importantly, Jesus treated it as an historical happening.

Let’s now step through the book chapter by chapter and look for the theme of God’s mercy, even mercy to the gentiles.

**Jonah 1**

In chapter 1 God calls Jonah to preach to Ninevah. Instead, Jonah flees, boarding a vessel headed to Tarshish. God sends a storm. We should note the contrast between the pagan sailors and Jonah. The pagans fear the wind and storm and begin praying, while Jonah sleeps. Conscience-stricken, the sailors resist throwing Jonah into the sea, while Jonah, volunteering to jump into the raging ocean, is most likely suicidal. The sailors ask God for mercy as they throw Jonah overboard. Then the sailors “feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.” (1:16) In stark contrast to Jonah who at the beginning of chapter 1 ran away from the Lord (1:3). So who’s following the Lord? The Israelite Jonah? Or the pagan sailors? Irony abounds, and it’s a theme that will come to full maturity in the New Testament book of Acts. The book of Jonah is already telling us that God deals with the Gentiles, that in his mercy he enables some to fear Him, presumably to come to know him, and even show some traits of godliness.

The chapter ends as the sailors throw Jonah overboard and God provided “a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.” (1:17).

**Jonah 2**

From inside the fish Jonah repents and prays to God. Note that he praises God for saving him from drowning, even while he is still in the belly of the fish. Jonah knows that even if he is going to die in the fish, he must still acknowledge God’s goodness and mercy. He has been well and truly humbled. “I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.” he says in 2:4. Jonah knows he’s been punished, yet he humbly seeks God’s forgiveness. “with the voice of thanksgiving [I] will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay.  Salvation belongs to the Lord!,” Jonah prays (2:9). Here, and here alone in the book, Jonah recognizes with gladness that God is a God of mercy.

**Jonah 3**

In chapter 3 Jonah fulfills God’s command and preaches to Nineveh. It’s interesting that Jonah only preaches about God’s impending judgment. He doesn’t explicitly command the Assyrians to repent of their sin, nor does he offer the possibility that judgment could be averted. Yet again the pagan nations outshine God’s prophet and the Assyrians respond immediately with repentance. “And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.” (3:5) In fact, the King of Assyria, who only heard the message secondhand, did the same thing himself, verse 6 tells us. He issued a proclamation calling on the people to fast and “call out mightily to God” and “turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands.” “Who knows?,” he says, “God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.” Note the contrast to Jonah—he only repented of his sin after God sent a raging storm and caused a fish to swallow him for three days. Yet the Gentiles of Assyria repent after an unknown foreigner preaches a single sermon. The King of Assyria understands God’s mercy better than Jonah himself, and is a better example of repentance and humility.

**Jonah 4**

**Chapter 4** is the climax of the book, and drives home the book’s theological message. Let’s look at the **first few verses** together.

**1**But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. **2**And he prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. **3**Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

Isn’t that amazing? Jonah originally fled because *he knew* that if he went and preached, and they repented that Yahweh would spare them! We often think that he fled because he was scared of what the Assyrians would do to him if he approached them. Not true. What he was afraid of was *Yahweh’s mercy*! He didn’t want the Assyrians to benefit from it! He knew Exodus 34:6 which he quotes here. “for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” In chapter 2 he rightly humbled himself and accepted God’s judgment and his mercy. Now he’s reverting and arrogantly trying to decide God should be merciful to whom he should judge. And God’s response is much of the point of the book. No matter how corrupt the Ninevites are, no matter how disobedient Jonah is, no matter any situation with winds, waves, and fish, if Yahweh has set His grace upon someone *nothing* can stop it! He will have mercy on whom He will have mercy.

God’s response is in the form of a living parable: a plant grows up to give Jonah shade as he sits on the mountain side, and then God kills it. God’s explanation? **verses 9-11**.

**9**But God said to Jonah, “Do you do well to be angry for the plant?” And he said, “Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.” **10**And the Lord said, “You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. **11**And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?”

And with that, the book abruptly ends. The story is meant to show Jonah how he too ought to be as zealous as God for the salvation of other peoples. To be God’s people is to care for the nations the way He does.

**Conclusion and Application**

Jonah reminds us that God cares about all people. There isn’t any nation that’s outside the pale or beyond God’s salvation. Jonah assumed God’s covenant was exclusively for one people; his story and his book are great testaments to the universality of God’s message. This is the great message of Jonah 3: God intends his word to spread globally, and he will bring people to himself from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

And if God cares about all peoples, Christians should too. This is the single most important application point from the book of Jonah. As Mark Dever has said, “God has always been more committed to reaching the world than his own people have been.” We should care about seeing God’s word spread throughout the nations, and that care and concern should translate into evangelism and missions. Jesus commanded his disciples—and that includes you, Christian—to “go and make disciples of all nations,” (Matthew 28:19). It should be normal for Christians to pray for the growth of the church in other nations; to give money to support missions in other nations; to go and help plant churches in other nations. Our work spreading the gospel should be international and global to reflect the universality of God’s dominion. And our fellowship with believers from other countries will be a powerful, visible, counter-cultural testimony of God’s work in our lives.

Of course, we should not miss the humbling message of this book. Who are we? The humble Assyrian king? No—we are the reluctant prophet Jonah. We are God’s people, we are called to take a message of mercy to those who haven’t heard, we are those who are so slow to go. And we are those who too often seem more occupied with our own comfort than God’s great plans to show his mercy to the nations. Read Jonah with this in mind and walk his humbling road.

***So let’s think about that before we finish. How should these two books—both Micah and Jonah—change the way we think about missions globally and evangelism here in DC?***

**Conclusion**

Well, we’ve looked at half of the Minor Prophets. I pray that you’ve been struck by the Lord’s holiness, our own sinfulness and need of a savior, the Lord’s great mercy in providing that savior in Jesus Christ, and our great calling now to live new and holy lives as His disciples. Next week we’ll continue on in the Minor Prophets.