

December 3/4, 2005

Christmas in the Prophets
The God of My Salvation
Micah 7:7-20
Pastor Bryan Clark

So how do you feel this morning? That is the question of the day in the culture in which we live. People are driven by their feelings. A lot of people think with their feelings. A lot of people determine their basis of truth to be their experiences and their feelings.

But the question is: Are feelings a good way to determine truth? One of my favorite illustrations of this is a fighter pilot. They tell me that when a fighter pilot is flying at night it becomes very difficult to tell whether you are upside down or right side up, and whether you are going up or down. They have to discipline these fighter pilots to trust their gauges because they know that if they go with their feelings they will crash and burn.

In the same way, as Christians it is very important that we learn to live our lives according to the gauges, not on the basis of our feelings—because if we are going to go with our feelings, we are guaranteed that we are going to crash and burn.

Let me ask you a question: Do you always *feel* saved? Do you always *feel* forgiven? Do you always *feel* like God really wants to be intimate with you? If you are anything like me, the answer would be no. There are days when, if I were God, I would not want to be around me. I do not always feel those things.

There are weeks when I am on the top of my game, and I feel like I am doing really well. There are other weeks where it is a disaster, and it is just one disappointment and failure after another. Especially in those moments, I have to keep my eyes fixed on the gauges and not my feelings. Of course, the gauges would be the truth of God's Word. What are those truths that we need to discipline our minds to believe, especially in those times of failure and despair?

If you have a Bible, turn with me to Micah 7. I am sure most of you were probably reading the book of Micah this past week. It is in the Old Testament toward the end. If you find Jonah, it is the very next book. This is the second week of Advent. The theme is *Jesus Is Savior*. As I mentioned last week, we are going to develop all of the Advent themes out of the Old Testament prophets.

Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah, so pretty much everything we talked about last week with Isaiah is true of Micah. The nation was in rebellion toward God. They were embracing more of a pagan value system, and they were experiencing the discipline of God. Their choices had left them in a very dark, despairing, hopeless situation. The northern half of the kingdom had already been conquered by the Assyrians. The south was eventually going to fall. It was just a disastrous time for these people.

If you go back to chapter 6 you get a bit of the context of our passage this morning. In verses 1-3, God basically is setting up the courtroom. He is going to have a hearing and His own people are on trial. In verse 3 God asked the question, "What have I done that you would treat Me this way?" In verses 4 and 5 God rehearses His faithfulness and says, "The track record is that I have never been anything but faithful to you." In essence, *I don't deserve to be treated this way*.

In verses 6 and 7 God says that He has had it up to here with all this religious activity. They have maintained their level of religious activity, but that does not impress God. It is not coming from their heart. They are not really embracing God. And He does not want it anymore.

What does God want from them? Verse 8 is a very familiar verse:

He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8, *NASB)

In 1977, when Jimmy Carter was inaugurated as President of the United States, he swore his oath to office on an open Bible, and the Bible was open to Micah 6:8. This is what God wants from us. Starting in verse 9, all the way through chapter 6 and through the first six verses of chapter 7, there is the rehearsing of the life of the Hebrew people because of the foolishness of their choices. It is just dark and despairing; it is a disaster.

In the midst of all this despair and in the midst of all of these struggles—these self-inflicted struggles—Micah introduces this closing section starting in verse 7 of chapter 7. It is absolutely filled with wondrous hope. He ends this very dark book with this final section of hope.

But as for me, I will watch expectantly for the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me. Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy. Though I fall I will rise; though I dwell in darkness, the LORD is a light for me. (Micah 7:7-8)

In the midst of all this despair, Micah says that he waits expectantly for God. That word "expectantly" does not mean he is crossing his fingers and hoping God might show up. It means he is absolutely sure; he is absolutely positive. He is on the edge of his seat. He knows God will show up. He makes a very emphatic statement: "My God hears me."

How does he know that? Because God has promised to be their Savior. Micah understands that God has made a promise to be their Savior; and no matter what has happened, God will be faithful to keep His promise.

In verse 8 he talks about how his enemies are rejoicing over him. You have to picture the scene we talked about last week. The Assyrians have conquered the northern kingdom. They are about to conquer the southern kingdom. The pagan nations delighted in the struggles and the failures of the Hebrew people. When the Hebrew people walked with God, God did miraculous things, and it created terror in the hearts and minds of the pagan nations. They were very fearful of the Hebrew God. But when they were under discipline and everything seemed to be falling apart, these pagan nations absolutely delighted in that. They loved to gloat, as it appeared that God had abandoned His people—suddenly they were not so powerful anymore.

You have experienced this. If you have ever taken a stand for Jesus and then compromised or failed in some way, you recognize there are always people in your world who will celebrate that. There are always people who will rejoice or gloat in the fact that you have failed. Somehow it makes them feel better about their own disastrous life.

The reality is that there are people all over our city who would love to see Lincoln Berean come crashing down. They would find great pleasure in that. They would love to see some sort of a crisis or some sort of a scandal. Somehow it makes them feel better about their own dysfunctional life.

That is what Micah is talking about. The enemy is gloating because God's people are suffering. But he tells them, "Be careful of that—because even though I fall, I will not stay on the canvas. God is my Savior and I will rise. Even though it looks like we are in darkness, we will come back to the light." It is a very hope-filled statement: "I am not staying down, because God has promised to be my Savior."

I will bear the indignation of the LORD because I have sinned against Him, until He pleads my case and executes justice for me. He will bring me out to the light, and I will see His righteousness. (v. 9)

Verse 9 is very important. Micah is not saying, “God, it is really hard living with a bunch of losers. I am really the only one who is doing it right here, and on that basis I think You will bless me.” He is not saying that at all. He is not self-righteous. He is not holier-than-thou.

He is saying just the opposite. He is identifying with the sin of his people. He is saying, “God, we deserve this. We had this coming. We have been a very bad people.” He is accepting that. But in the midst of that, he recognizes God has made a promise and God will once again show His righteousness. God will once again plead his case. Micah will once again rise.

It is interesting to me when I talk to Christians who have basically lived a very selfish life, a very self-oriented life, and have embraced their own value system and made a series of foolish choices—they get their life into a mess, and then they are mad at God because God does not just make it all go away, as if somehow it is God’s fault.

One of the things we have to realize is that even though God is faithful, even though God is good and gracious, there are consequences to foolish decisions. And sometimes the despair is self-inflicted. It is because we did not walk in obedience to God. We have made a mess of our lives, and God is not going to just magically make all of that go away. But it does not mean He does not love us. It does not mean He has abandoned us. It does not mean He isn’t our Savior. Micah knows that and that is what he is saying.

Then my enemy will see, and shame will cover her who said to me, “Where is the LORD your God?” My eyes will look on her; at that time she will be trampled down like mire of the streets. (v. 10)

Again, he is talking about his enemy. When the enemy sees the despair of the Hebrew people, they are asking the question, “Where is your God? I thought your God was so big. I thought He was so powerful. I thought He was so tough. What has happened? Has He abandoned you? Has He left you?”

Micah is saying that these people one day will be very ashamed of having said that because when God emerges, suddenly they are going to realize God is right here. And God will trample them underfoot like you would trample the mud in the streets.

It will be a day for building your walls. On that day will your boundary be extended. (v. 11)

Verse 11 is a verse absolutely filled with hope. The idea of walls is not the Hebrew word that would be used to describe the walls of a city. This is a different word. It is used to describe a smaller rock wall, sometimes used to define the boundary of a nation. It was oftentimes used of creating a little bit of a fence around a vineyard or a garden to keep the critters out. Remember that a vineyard was always symbolic of God’s prosperity and God’s blessing.

What Micah is saying in verse 11 is that when God arises—when God emerges to deliver them—God will prosper them to such a degree they will have to enlarge the boundary of the vineyard, because God is going to pour out His blessing upon them.

This is not a case where Micah is saying God is going to come along, and He is going to help them survive this disaster. This is what Micah is saying, “Even though we do not deserve it, even though we have been a rebellious people, God is not only going to deliver us, God is going to prosper us. We will have to kick out the boundaries just to hold everything that God wants to give us.”

It is hard for us to process that. When we look at our own lives, our failure to measure up and to walk the walk, we think God is kind of tolerating us, and God is tired of us. We think God may help us survive, but that is about it. It is hard for us to recognize God wants to do far more than that. God wants to prosper us. God wants to bless us. God wants to pour out His blessings upon us in ways we cannot even begin to imagine! Micah, in verse 11, is filled with the hope of God’s promise.

It will be a day when they will come to you from Assyria and the cities of Egypt, from Egypt even to the Euphrates, even from sea to sea and mountain to mountain. And the earth will become desolate because of her inhabitants, on account of the fruit of their deeds. (vs. 12-13)

This is talking about an event that we believe is still yet future; but when God ultimately culminates history with this great victory, people will come from all over the world in order to worship this God. It sounds a lot like Philippians 2 where every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus is Lord. They will come from sea to sea and mountain to mountain, and they will worship. And the lands of the enemies will be desolate, as God will declare Himself to be the all-powerful, almighty, victorious King. Micah knows that is absolutely guaranteed, and he finds his hope in God’s promise.

Verse 14 is Micah’s prayer to God:

Shepherd Your people with Your scepter [*a scepter is not a club; a scepter is a rod of blessing—it is a positive*], **the flock of Your possession which dwells by itself in the woodland, in the midst of a fruitful field. Let them feed in Bashan and Gilead as in the days of old.** (v. 14)

In other words, what Micah is asking is: “God, take us back to those days when we could go to those lush green pastures, as the sheep of Your pasture, and we can feel safe and secure. We can have our feast in this green lush grass.” The areas of Gilead and Bashan were to the north and the east of the Jordan River. They had beautiful valleys with lush green grass. It is a beautiful picture of Micah wanting God to take him back to those days of prosperity.

Now that raises a question: If you were God, and you knew that these people had disobeyed, were rebellious and deserved everything they were getting, how would you answer that prayer? I know how I would answer that prayer. I would say, “You have got to be kidding. You can graze in the parking lot for all I care. This is your fault. These were your choices. You thumbed your nose at me; live it up! Eat the gravel in the parking lot.” But that is not how God responds.

“As in the days when you came out from the land of Egypt, I will show you miracles.”
(v. 15)

That is God speaking in verse 15, hearkening back to that time when God led His people out of Egypt and He did one miracle after another to protect them, to provide for them and to lead them into green pastures. God’s answer to Micah’s prayer is not, “You have got to be kidding Me.” It is, “Absolutely, I will! I will be your Savior. I will deliver you. It will be one miracle after another, as I will once again demonstrate My power and My faithfulness to My people.”

Nations will see and be ashamed of all their might. They will put their hand on their mouth, their ears will be deaf. They will lick the dust like a serpent, like reptiles of the earth. They will come trembling out of their fortresses; to the LORD our God they will come in dread and they will be afraid before You. (vs. 16-17)

This is a very graphic section where he is talking about the reality that when God emerges again as the faithful and conquering King, these enemy nations that were gloating, that were laughing, and that were making fun of the Hebrew people will suddenly be stunned at the all-powerful King that will emerge. They will be embarrassed at the smallness of their might. They will put their hands over their mouths. They will be almost paralyzed with fear.

It means they will be deaf; they will be paralyzed; they will be stunned. They will be like the snakes that come slithering along, eating dust. They will come out of their hiding places. They will recognize that they are in the presence of a power far beyond anything they could have imagined.

Verse 18 then is the key. Micah asks the question, **“Who is a God like You?”** Who is like God? The problem is when we fail, when we come up short, when we feel in our hearts like we are doing a lousy job of living like a Christian, we imagine that God is like us.

If I were God, I will tell you how I would respond to that. I will tell you how I would feel about that. I would say, “I have had it with these losers! I have had it with this group of people who simply will not obey Me and walk with Me.” That is how I would respond.

So I think if that is how I would respond, that is how God responds. That is the problem with thinking with our feelings. What Micah is saying is that just is not true. God is not like you. God does not react like you do. Who is like God? No one is like God. In those moments of despair, we cannot think with our feelings. We must think with our minds of faith and believe that God is not like any other person we know.

Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious acts of the remnant of His possession? [*in other words, His people*] (v. 18a)

That word "iniquity" is an interesting word. It means to miss the target. It means to be off course. There is a passage in Judges where it talks about a group of warriors who were so skilled that anytime they shot at a target, they hit it. They never missed a target. This is the same Hebrew word, only it is being used in the context that we miss the target. We come up short. We fail to be what God has called us to be.

The reality is the more you come to know the holiness of God, the more you become aware of how far short of the target you fall. It is a young, immature believer who thinks, *I am doing great. Most days I am really on track.* The more you mature in Christ, the more you will realize, *I am not even close. I fall far short of the mark.*

Do you remember when the rich young ruler came to Jesus and said, “Jesus, I am keeping all the commandments. I have got it all wired. What else can I do?” And Jesus said to him, “Sell all your possessions and follow Me.” The rich young ruler went away sad because he was very wealthy, and he was unwilling to do that.

Jesus did not need his possessions. Jesus did not need his money. The first commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, your mind and your strength. What Jesus was saying to this rich young ruler is, “You are not even close to keeping the first commandment.

Frankly, you are not even in the ball game.” He wanted him to recognize how far short of the mark he fell so that he might recognize his need for a Savior.

If you are thinking day in and day out you are doing really well, I have to tell you, you are falling far short of the mark. And so am I. The first commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, your mind, your soul and your strength. Let’s be honest with ourselves. We are not coming close to that on a daily basis. When you understand that, it is very possible, then, to begin to feel the despair of that—to begin to feel like a failure—to begin to feel like, *How could God even want me around? I just fail to live up to the standard day after day after day.*

That is where Micah says, “Nobody is like God. God has promised to be the Savior. Therefore, He pardons my inability to hit the mark. He wipes the slate clean. He covers my rebellion with His blood.”

It is interesting that, throughout the years, on the Day of Atonement, it was Micah 7 that was read. Over and over again the people were reminded, as the blood of the lamb was shed, that it is the promised blood of God that will atone for our sins that we might be covered. They were reminded that their sins were placed on the scapegoat. The scapegoat was lost in the wilderness, symbolic that it is God that will take our sins away from us that we might stand in righteousness before Him. That is exactly what Micah is saying.

He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in unchanging love. (v. 18b)

Right now these people were experiencing God’s discipline because of their rebellion and sin. God’s discipline was an act of His love to get them back on track. But sometimes it is easy, if we go with our feelings, to think God must be angry with me all the time—because if I were God, I would be angry with me all the time. But that is not true.

Again, we have to go with our minds of faith, not with our feelings. God desires to love us with this unchanging, steadfast love. This is a word that means God loves us all the time. God loves me on my best days, and God loves me on my worst days. God is not angry all the time. God is loving all the time. God does not love me begrudgingly. God desires to love me.

No wonder Micah says, “Who is like this God?” No one! Nobody gives you that sort of a commitment. Nobody loves you like God loves you on your best days *and* on your worst days.

He will again have compassion on us. (v. 19a)

That word "compassion" is a Hebrew word used to describe the love a mother has for a child. God loves you the way a mother loves a child. It is a never-ending love commitment.

He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea. (v. 19b)

That phrase "He will tread our iniquities under foot" is a great phrase. It is used consistently throughout the Old Testament to describe when one nation thoroughly conquers another nation: that nation is trampled under their feet. It is a beautiful imagery where Micah is saying, “Our sin is the enemy. And God does not just *kind of* defeat the enemy. God *absolutely* decimates the enemy to where He tramples the enemy of our guilt and our sin under His feet. If that is not good enough, He picks up what is left over, and He casts it into the depths of the sea. It is absolutely gone!”

On my worst days, in my most despairing moments, I need to believe that God has conquered this sin; God has conquered this guilt. He has trampled it under His feet. He has cast it into the sea; it is

gone. He has wiped the slate clean, and He desires to love me and have me in His presence. Who is like this God?

You will give truth to Jacob and unchanging love to Abraham, which You swore to our forefathers from the days of old. (v. 20)

You might ask the question, “How does Micah know this? What is the basis of Micah claiming this promise?” The answer is in verse 20. He goes all the way back to the promise that God made to Abraham that was then re-upped with Jacob in Genesis 28. God made the promise to Abraham in Genesis 15 that the basis of this relationship would be a covenant relationship where God said, “I promise that I will shed My blood to atone for your inability to keep the covenant.”

The only way that we could have a relationship with God is if God promised to deal with our inability to hit the target or our inability to walk in righteousness and meet the standard. God promised Abraham; God re-promised Jacob. And Micah knows that. That is what he says here. “God, You made a promise; and on our best days and on our worst days, I claim that promise. God has promised to be our Savior. God has promised deliverance. God’s promise that we would rise again was never based on our ability to perform well. It was based on the character of God.” Micah knows God promised.

That word "truth" in verse 20 is an interesting word. It is translated other places in the Old Testament as a “doorpost” or a “pillar.” In other words, what is this truth that holds the whole building together, that is the support beam or the doorpost? The answer is that it is God’s promise. It is God’s promise; it is not your performance. It is God’s promise that holds the building together.

The magnificent truth is that Jesus was the full and complete fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, the promise to Jacob, and the prophecy of Micah. The truth is that Jesus Himself was God in the flesh, who would shed His blood to pay for our inability to keep the covenant.

Do you remember when the angels met the shepherds that night outside of Bethlehem? The angel said, “For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior—Christ the Lord.” "Christ" means Messiah. "Lord" means God. This is God in the flesh, the long-awaited and promised Savior of the world, who would shed His blood to atone for sin so that we might know forgiveness and enter into this hope-filled relationship with God.

The reality is we don’t always *feel* this way. We don’t always *feel* like God loves us. We don’t always *feel* forgiven. We don’t always *feel* like God wants us to be around Him. And if you think with your feelings, you are guaranteed to crash and burn. We have to be a highly disciplined people—especially in our moments of despair—to keep our eyes fixed on the gauges of truth and with our minds of faith believe that God is unlike anyone else. God is unimaginable. We must believe that, even in our most despairing moments. God desires to love us and have us with Him.

My Only Defense

by Ruth Harms Calkins

The powerful reality grips me, Lord
That when I kneel in Your presence
To ask Your forgiveness
I am utterly stripped of façade.
You accept no big-name references
No high-caliber recommendations.
Extenuating circumstances

Crumble to dust
In Your court of appeal...
I am forgiven never
Because of inherited tendencies
Or emotional discomfort
Or nagging weakness...
I can never plead
Corrupt environment
Or life's strange twistings
Or my own unbelievable stupidity...
Ultimately I have one solitary defense.
Only one –
But always one:
Forgive me, God
For Jesus' sake.
Like a song unending
The words keep singing...
I am totally forgiven
I am continually cleansed
Just for Jesus' sake.

--"My Only Defense" from p. 127 of *Tell Me Again, Lord, I Forget* by Ruth Harms Calkins
(Wheaton: Living Books, 1986).

You have to believe that God's favor to you has never been—and never will be—on the basis of your ability to perform. It is on the belief that God made a promise—and His promise is that He would be our Savior. On the basis of that promise, God will never leave us, forsake us or abandon us. Even in our worst failing and despairing moments, God desires to love you. God desires to prosper you. God will be your Savior. Because that is true, even in my darkest, most despairing moments, I have every reason for hope.

*Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
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Study Questions
Christmas in the Prophets
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Opening Discussion

1. Do you think feelings are a good source of truth? Why or why not?
2. Can you share a time when “thinking” with your feelings produced a negative result?
3. Do you always *feel* saved? Do you always *feel* forgiven? What happens if you go with those feelings?

Bible Study

1. Read Micah 6:1-3 for a little background. God is holding court and His people are on trial for their rebellion against Him. What does God want from His people according to Micah 6:6-8? What does He *not* want according to Micah 6:6-7?
2. Micah 6:13-16 gives us a taste of the consequences of their rebellion. Should we as Christians expect to experience the consequences of our foolish decisions? In other words, are we free to live as we please and expect God to constantly clean up our messes?
3. Read Micah 7:7-20. This closing section of Micah is a word of hope related to “the God of my salvation.” Summarize Micah 7:7-9.

How might this truth be contrary to our feelings when we are experiencing the consequences of our choices?

4. Have you noticed your “enemies” gloating when you fail to walk the walk as a Christian?

Do you see this in the culture in general? Why is this?

What is Micah’s warning to the “enemy?”

5. Oftentimes when we think with our feelings we imagine that God is like us in how He reacts to our failures and sins. Is that true according to Micah 7:18-20?

What is God like according to these verses?

6. The word translated “truth” in 7:20 means “pillars” or “doorposts” (see II Kings 18:16). What is the truth that supports or holds up our lives in the midst of our failures according to Micah 7:20?

What did God promise Abraham (see Genesis 15)?

Application

1. Write a one or two sentence summary of the truth we must focus on, even when we suffer the consequences of our foolish choices and sins.
2. What practical things can you do to make sure you think with your mind and not your feelings in times of struggle?
3. From this text, have each person choose one truth about Jesus the Savior that you are thankful for this Christmas season. Spend some time in prayer thanking God for that truth.