



BETHEL
PRESBYTERIAN

MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Volume 12 Issue 7

February 17, 2013

A Covenant Lawsuit

Micah 6:1-8, Hear what the LORD says: Arise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the indictment of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth, for the LORD has an indictment against his people, and he will contend with Israel. “O my people, what have I done to you? How have I wearied you? Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. O my people, remember what Balak king of Moab devised, and what Balaam the son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the righteous acts of the LORD.”

“With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

God created man to worship and serve God.

Isaiah 43:6b-7a, "Bring My sons from afar, and My daughters from the ends of the earth, everyone who is called by My name, and whom I have created for My glory..."

Revelation 4:11, "Worthy art Thou, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for Thou didst create all things..."

We call this the doctrine of Creator Rights. God created us; therefore He has the right to do with us as He wills. And that will is for us to glorify and so honor Him. Yet, we know that mankind in Adam rebelled against this. In their folly and blindness, they didn't want to serve God; they wanted to serve themselves! Weren't they surprised to discover when they woke up the next morning that in their sin they did not become free, autonomous beings? Rather they had become subjects and servants of Satan! Yet God in His grace deigned NOT to allow man to perish in his sin. Accordingly He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to die in the place of the sinner that the sinner might be forgiven.

This raises the question: Why did God do this? Why did God redeem us? In the context of redemption, we were saved to worship and so serve God. Speaking of man's redemption, God told Moses this:

Exodus 4:22-23, "Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the Lord, "Israel is My son, My first-born. So I said to you, 'Let My son go, that he may serve [lit. "worship"] Me'; but you have refused to let him go..."

Paul gives us the reason that God saved us:

Romans 9:23, "...in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory."

This is the reason for our redemption, the worship and service of God! And so God created us that we might serve Him. God redeemed us that we might serve Him! In fact, it is in this context we read that He is a "jealous God." When used of us, "jealousy" is a bad thing for we do not deserve that which we desire. But when used of God, "jealousy" speaks of God desiring that which He has a right to! He redeemed us and therefore deserves our love, devotion, affection, worship, and service. **AND HE IS UNWILLING TO SHARE THIS WITH ANYTHING OR ANYONE.**

Exodus 20:4-5a, "You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God..."

Now it is this truth, the fact that we have been redeemed to serve/worship God such that God has a right to our devotion and affection. This is the foundation of Micah 6. On account of redemption, God had a right to the worship and service of the nation of Judah. Yet somewhere along the way, Judah developed the conviction that God existed for their purpose and pleasure! They wouldn't deny that they were God's servant, but this was only because God was their servant! Accordingly, it wasn't enough to serve the Lord; they came to believe that they could to serve Him their way. They cast off the traditions and teachings of the older generation and adopted the exciting worship practices and lifestyle of the Canaanites. They still

were “God-centered” in their living, but they came to serve the Lord on their own terms.

Now you must see that this is an aberration of the first order. What a horrible place Judah had come in their rebellion against God! Yet amazingly, God did not cast them out (which we would have expected). Rather, the Lord took it to a court of law where He filed a law suit against His people.¹ His plan was to sue Israel for their worship, love, and devotion! It wasn’t to condemn them, but restore them!

Now the proceedings of that law suit are detailed in Micah 6! Before us is a Covenant lawsuit! Notice the participants. In ancient law cases, there typically were four players. First we have the plaintiff, the one with the accusation.

Micah 6:1, “hear now what the Lord is saying.”

This is an important distinction. See, it is God who was calling the nation to this trial (not Micah). This is the voice of God. In fact it is the Lord who “has a case against His people” (Micah 6:2c). As we have seen when it comes to understanding our sin we tend to be self-centered. The people of God in Micah’s day had become bored with the worship of God, Kingdom service, and their covenant obligations. And so they dabbled in all sorts of things, experimenting with this and trying that. No doubt most if not all of them thought, *“It is no big deal. We are a new generation and therefore ought not to be bound by the old ways. Besides, if we are hurting anyone, it is only ourselves.”* Yet in so doing they were NOT simply rejecting the traditions and practices of their parents; they were rejecting God! W. S. Plumer explains it this way:

We never see sin aright until we see it as against God... All sin is against God in this sense: that it is His law that is broken, His authority that is despised, His government that is set at naught... Pharaoh and Balaam, Saul and Judas each said, ‘I have sinned’; but the returning prodigal said, ‘I have sinned against heaven and before thee’; and David said, ‘Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned. (Jerry Bridges, 2006, pp. 20-21)

Don’t ever forget this, that when a person is redeemed by God, the Lord claims them as a vessel for His glory, honor, and purpose. We truly are not our own. Accordingly, to “work out our salvation” selfishly, thinking it is all about us and that God exists for our welfare and pleasure, is to sin against God! Now, positionally, Judah would always be the Lord’s. God would not cast them out or disown them, ever! But, relationally, to cultivate such an existence is to alienate God and so forfeit His covenant blessings, which is exactly what Judah was on the cusp of doing!

Now God in His grace was not going to allow Judah to live in this place without hearing from Him. As such, He initiated this lawsuit to bring them back! And that brings us to the second participant, the plaintiff’s spokesman.

Micah 6:1b, “Hear now what the Lord is saying, ‘Arise...’”

The word arise means to “stand up.” This is addressed to Micah (here it is a masculine singular). Thus we note that it was the prophet Micah that was to be the spokesman for God in this trial! Notice the calling.

Micah 6:1b, “...Arise, plead your case [lit. “strive” or “contend,” there is no “your” in the original]...”

The word for plead literally means to “reclaim one’s rights.” This is the normal word used in a setting of law. It carries the sense of “contending with” or “the raising of charges against for the purpose of establishing the right of someone.” So Micah was called by God to plead His rightful claim on Israel! What “right” specifically was in question here? As we’ve already seen, God’s right to be worshipped and served on His terms!

Many in the church today would profess that they are servants of God. But let us challenge how they are serving God with Scripture, and it won’t be long before you hear the charge of legalism. We have no problem serving God, but it must be on our terms. How often have you heard this:

- *I don’t serve God best that way.*
- *That may be good for you, but not me.*
- *After all, God isn’t so much interested in what we do, but our heart!*

As this text indicates, God not only has the right to our service, He also has the right to set the terms of that service!

The third participant is the jury.

Micah 6:1c-2a, “Hear now what the Lord is saying, ‘Arise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Listen, you mountains, to the indictment [literally, “the charge”] of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth [literally, “everlasting/constantly enduring foundations”- emphasizing their unchangeableness]”

Once again, these are the words of a court room. They reflect the proceedings of a legal trial typical in the Israelite’s day in which the mountains and other natural elements were called as witnesses. It is not enough that the Ancient of Days, one who is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable has summoned the nation before Him via this Covenant Lawsuit, God calls as His Witness Mountains and hills whose longevity and permanence evoke wonder and amazement in the hearts of man. When you stand before a mountain and you know that it was there when Moses led the people through the Red Sea, when the Barbarians sacked Rome, when Europe had just been founded, when the war for Independence was fought in America, when you were born, and long, long after you are dead! These geographic wonders testify to their permanence and immovability. Truly, all that God’s people had done, the mountains had witnessed! The mountains were privy to it all! And so God called upon them to be His witnesses and so jury!

And finally this brings us to the defendant.

Micah 6:2b, “...because the Lord has a case against His people; even with Israel He will dispute”

Micah’s choice of words in the opening verses of this chapter created a dramatic suspense. We say this for three reasons. First, the defendants are concealed from Micah’s hearers until the very end, thus adding to the impact of the statement, “The accused is... ISRAEL!” Furthermore, while this section clearly was intended for Judah, here God calls the nation by its covenant name, “Israel”! This is significant. “Judah” was the nation that was left after 10 tribes rebelled against King Rehoboam in 931 B.C. “Israel”

on the other hand was THE covenant nation, the Bride of Christ, and so the apple of God's eye (cf. Genesis 32:28)! The choice of language here would have been like Christ calling Judas His "Friend" right after Judas betrayed Him with the kiss! It is shocking! This wasn't just "any 'ol person" that God was indicting; this was His people for whom He died to save!

In Hebrew there are two parallel phrases, the writer is employing a literary tool called "Intensification." In intensification, the second phrase or word builds upon the first phrase or word, thus making it more specific. Thus the sense of the verse is, "...because the Lord has a case with His people, *now you're never going to believe this*, even with His covenant people Israel!"

These are the participants. Let's examine the proceedings of the Prosecution beginning with the first two questions.

Micah 6:3a, "My people, what have I done to you?"

This is a defensive question to establish God's innocence! The implied answer is, "Nothing!" Yet what a question; it implies that Judah had a beef with God! What was that beef?

Micah 6:3b, "How have I wearied you?"

Literally this means "how have I brought you down ['to slavery'- that's the idea]?" And so, "How have I enslaved you?" The word refers to the act or process of making a person weary. It is used in Scripture to refer to the wearying of the patience either by (1) demands of too great severity (Isaiah 53:23) or (2) by failing to perform one's promises (Jeremiah 2:31). Here it is the latter of which the Israelites were accusing God, "*Why is the Lord allowing the Assyrians to hold us in siege? Has God reneged on His covenantal love?! We've done so much for God... why is He repaying us with this?*"

That was the people's complaint against God which here is represented in a question from the Lord, "How have I subjected you to slavery?" And then God adds for emphasis this:

Micah 6:3c, "Answer me!"

Literally this could be rendered, "accuse me" or "testify against me." In other words, support your indictment! Before God allows His people to give a defense He describes how He has loved them proving that their accusation was groundless.

The support for this claim is found in the history of Israel. This is the history of God's dealings with His people. It is a history of grace. In fact, if you have eyes to see this you will note that each of the four grounds of support that God gives in His case against His people continue to be realized in our lives today! And so, make the following analysis devotional! Each point is what God has done for you!

God's Redeeming Grace Seen in the Exodus²

Micah 6:4a, "Indeed, I brought you up from the land of Egypt..."

This is a play on words (a pun) with the phrase, “How have I wearied you?” Both words have the same root, just different meanings. God is saying, “Far from bringing you down into subjection, I have brought up!”

Micah 6:4b, “...and ransomed you from the house of slavery.”

This carries the basic meaning of “a transfer of ownership from one to another through the payment of a price.” When God delivered Israel from servitude to Egypt, He did so at a high price; the firstborn of every man and beast in Egypt (Exodus 4:23; 12:29). Yet such a cost was not paid by the Israelite because God gave His first born, the Lamb of God, in the place of His people! Think of the lamb’s blood on the door posts!

The Exodus was no small event in Redemptive History. It was provided for by the blood of a sacrificial lamb that was given in the place of God’s people! And so, far from God “burdening” His people, in redemption He unburdened them! And such is the case for everyone in Christ. In the words of Charles Wesley:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature’s night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray, I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.
Amazing love, how can it be, that Thou my God shouldst die for me?!

And yet God’s love and care for His people didn’t stop there.

God’s Guiding Grace Seen in the Wilderness

Micah 6:4c, “...and sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.”³

God’s provision of leaders is a common picture of grace in the Old Testament (Joshua 24 & 1 Samuel 12). God never leaves His people orphaned, bereft, and without guidance! In fact in Ephesians 4 it is expressly laid down. God essentially says, “On top of everything else, I have gifted the church with leadership!” (cf. Ephesians 4:7, 11)

When Israel was at their lowest point as a nation, enslaved to a cruel taskmaster known as Pharaoh, God not only offered the ransom price to deliver them, but He also provided His people leaders who would guide them unto the Promised Land! It is worth noting that everyone of these leaders were mistreated by the people to whom God sent them. Stephen asked the leaders of his day this:

Acts 7:52, “Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become.”

God gave the gift of leadership and God’s people abused them, rejected them, and even killed them! Detailing this sad history and more, Christ gave this parable to His generation,

Matthew 21:33-39, "There was a landowner who planted a vineyard and put a wall around it and dug a wine press in it, and built a tower, and rented it out to vine-growers, and went on a journey. And when the harvest time approached, he sent his slaves to the vine-growers to receive his produce. And the vine-growers took his slaves and beat one, and killed another, and stoned a third. Again he sent another group of slaves larger than the first; and they did the same thing to them. But afterward he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the vine-growers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and seize his inheritance.' And they took him, and threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him."

How sad! And yet such was and is the grace of God for His people; leadership! Listen to the statement made by Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 31:2-3, "Thus says the Lord, 'The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness- Israel, when it went to find its rest.' The Lord appeared to him [in Moses] from afar, saying, 'I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness.'"

Such was the glorious grace of God in the wilderness!

God's Preserving Grace Seen at the Promised Land

Micah 6:5a, "My people, remember now..."

Once again this is not "the calling to one's mind of a bunch of facts," BUT a vivid re-living of the significant of an event! In Passover, God's people were to "remember" their slavery such that each and every participant could say NOT- "My great, great grandfather was delivered by God in the Exodus!" BUT, "I was delivered by God in the Exodus!" In fact, if you look at Micah 6:4 you will note that God did NOT say, "I brought up your grandfathers..." BUT, "I brought YOU up..." Leslie Allen put it this way:

The chronological chasm between the remote past and the time then present was bridged by a community whose cultural heritage was continually kept alive. Each succeeding generation of worshippers received it, treasured it, and passed it on. Those of God's people living at any one time were but representatives of a larger entity. So dynamic was their sense of sharing in the community of their forebears, dead and gone for hundreds of years, that it could be said that they had a share in the Exodus event. Every generation could say in turn, 'We were there when Yahweh brought Israel out of Egypt.' (Allen, 1994, p. 366)

And it was this that God's people had lost in Micah's day. Each then no doubt could articulate the fact that throughout their history God had delivered their nation. BUT very few continued to personalize it such that they viewed themselves as the very ones whom God delivered! With this we see the problem; it is not that the Israelites had "forgotten" what God had done. It is that they no longer viewed themselves as the first generation of those delivered by God! They took the grace of God for granted.

Micah 6:5b, "My people, remember now what Balak king of Moab counseled..."

The word "counsel" is in the emphatic position. Why was Micah being so strong here? Recall the counsel;

Balak wanted Balaam to curse Israel, that is, to call the wrath of God down upon them (cf. Numbers 22:2, 6)! Now if Balak had been successful in evoking the wrath of God upon Israel, God's people would have been in greater trouble than if the combined forces of every nation were raised against them! Yet notice what God did on behalf of His people.

Micah 6:5b, "My people, remember now what Balak king of Moab counseled and what Balaam son of Beor answered him..."

Do you remember? Instead of cursing Israel, Balaam, at the behest of God, BLESSED Israel! God turned the evil conceived by Balak into the richest blessings for His people! This is the preserving grace of God to all those named amongst the beloved! What foe is against you today? Trust God and watch the Lord bring utmost blessing from their wicked designs!

God's Prospering Grace Seen in the Promised Land

Micah 6:5b, "My people, remember now [again, relive this glorious provision- now skip down in the text to the last point] ...from Shittim to Gilgal..."

Micah is utilizing a literary tool called Aposiopesis⁴ or "Broken Construction" (where a final example is given in such a way as to say, "How many more examples do I have to give?"). That is the significance of the fragment, "...from Shittim to Gilgal!" So the "crème de la crème" of God's case is "...from Shittim to Gilgal." What specifically happened in these two locations?

Shittim was the site of the last stopping point before God led His people across the Jordan (Joshua 3:1). And thus, the mere mentioning of the name represented to the Jew that time when the shame of disobedience (the very reason Israel had wandered in the desert for 40 years) was exchanged for victory and the consummation of God's promise to bring His people into the Promised Land! Then there is Gilgal. Gilgal was the site of the first encampment on the west side of the Jordan as well as the place where Israel was circumcised! By this ceremony, God renewed His commitment to His people which clearly had been reflected in all of the provisions that the Lord gave Israel from the Exodus onward!

So, what more could God say? These are but four of a thousand examples of God's love, protection, and care by which He delivered His people from slavery! The point is that these were given in order that you might know [which speaks of a personal, intimate interaction] the righteous acts of the Lord; the final statement "the righteous acts of the Lord" is a forensic expression conveying the idea that God was indeed just or righteous in His dealings with His people. He had done them no wrong!

Christian, Christ has never done you wrong either! And yet somehow along the way, God's people arrived at the conclusion that God had become a burden to them! This raises one last devotional consideration. If a nation that had received so much love and care from God could come to the conclusion that God had become a burden, don't you suppose we could too?

So how can we avoid such a heinous thought/consideration? Micah gives us the answer here (Micah 6:5). We must continue ever and always to "remember" the work of Christ on our behalf!

End Notes

¹ This is not the only time we read of a covenant lawsuit filed by God against His people. See also Deuteronomy 32 and Psalm 50. The lawsuit itself falls into five parts: (1) an introduction summoning heaven and earth as witnesses (cf. Deuteronomy 32:1, 2; Psalm 50:1–6); (2) a basic statement of the case by Yahweh’s counsel, including interrogation of the guilty party (Deuteronomy 32:4–6; Psalm 50:16f.); (3) an accusation of Israel’s ingratitude, including a recital of the benefits they have received from Yahweh (Deuteronomy 32:7–15; Psalm 50:7–13, 18–21); (4) rejection of recourse to sacrifice to Yahweh or other gods (Deuteronomy 32:16–18; Psalm 50:8–13); (5) either a verdict of punishment (Deuteronomy 32:19–25) or a caution urging a change of conduct (Psalm 50:14f., 22f.).

² In the Old Testament, the Exodus was an event invested with much of the significance that the Cross and Resurrection bear in the New Testament. To it many a psalmist and prophet look back as proof and pledge of God’s election love and saving power. It was the fountainhead of covenant grace, which took theological as well as chronological pride of place in the recital of the events of salvation history celebrated by Israel in their regular worship.

³ Here there is a striking point of contact with the covenant formulations of Joshua 24 and 1 Samuel 12. Both link a reference to the Exodus with mention of Moses and Aaron as “sent” by Yahweh.

⁴ *Aposiopesis* is the concealment or suppression of entire sentences or clauses, which are of themselves necessary to complete the sense, and therefore must be supplied from the context. This is especially frequent after conditional clauses; besides the examples already given in § 159 dd, cf. also Exodus 32:32 (the LXX and Samaritan supply *and*); Numbers 5:20, Judges 9:16 (in verse 19, after a long parenthesis, an imperative follows as the apodosis to this conditional clause); 1 Samuel 12:14 f., 2 Samuel 5:8 (where indeed the text is probably very corrupt; cf. the addition in 1 Chronicles 11:6); 2 Samuel 23:17, Psalm 27:13, 1 Chronicles 4:10. For other examples of various kinds, see § 117 l, and especially §147; in Aramaic, Daniel 3:15.—On Genesis 3:22, cf. § 152 w at the end. (Gesenius, F. W. (1910). *Gesenius’ Hebrew grammar*)

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About the Preacher

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