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A Covenant Lawsuit, Part 2

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 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? ¹

Hosea named his third born child Lo-ammi as a living sermon. God had an important message for the northern Kingdom of Israel.

Hosea 1:9, "And the Lord said, 'Name him Lo-ammi, for you are not My people and I am not your God.'"

This is a significant statement for at this time in redemptive history the northern Kingdom of Israel forfeited the privileged status of being a holy nation. During the era of Moses, God organized His covenant people into a nation whose health and welfare would be predicated upon Israel's national fidelity to God. In 931 B.C. Israel suffered civil rebellion such that the nation divided into two kingdoms: Israel in the north and Judah in the south.

From the start, Israel went the route of rebellion and infidelity to God. From their inception on down to the time of Micah, the nation compromised their worship and service.

Amos 8:2b: "Then the Lord said to me, 'The end has come for My people Israel. I will spare them no longer.'"

Micah served as a prophet to the southern Kingdom of Judah when Israel went into exile (Micah 1:16)! The prophet used this event to encourage Judah unto fidelity to God! See, Judah was greatly influenced by Israel such that what Israel did in moderation, Judah did in excess! If Judah therefore did not turn from her wickedness, the nation likewise would go into exile! Yet that would not happen in Micah's day. Rather, Micah served at a time when Judah remained a holy nation to the Lord and so continued to receive the covenant protection of God. In fact as part of this protection, God initiated a Covenant Lawsuit against Judah in which the Lord deigned to sue Judah for her worship, service, and devotion. It is important that we keep in mind that the lawsuit was not initiated out of an anger or wrath on God's part. It was filed in love! This is important as we consider what specifically God calls His people to toward the end of this passage. Micah 6:1-8 was given NOT to provide Judah the conditions by which God would continue to love them; rather, it was given as the result of God's love. Because God cared for Judah, this is how they must live.

The Participants

There are four participants in this lawsuit. First we have the plaintiff, the one with the accusation. This was and is the Lord. Don't ever forget that it ultimately is against Christ that we sin and it is ultimately with Christ with whom we have to do! As such, it doesn't matter what kings, priests, prophets, parents, friends, or companions say. It is to God that we all someday will answer!

Secondly, there is the plaintiff's spokesman. This was Micah. In ancient court cases, the plaintiff in a trial utilized a spokesman who argued their right before the court. Again, that spokesman was Micah! And by way of note, that spokesman remains God's people today.

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. 2001 (Mic 6:1–8). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

Thirdly, there is the jury. God calls upon the ever enduring mountains as His witness and so jury. The point is that God is dealing with truth and not perception. That before whom God pleaded His case was that which had witnessed it all; there would be no partiality!

Fourthly, there is the defendant. There is a mini-climax at this point as Micah utilized intensification and word placement to produce a “pregnant pause” before the announcement of the defendant. Against whom was God going to a court of law? Israel, God’s covenant people (notice the word choice, “Israel” was the very name that the Lord used on their wedding night, Genesis 32:28)!

The Prosecution

The case opens with two questions.

Micah 6:3, “My people, what have I done to you, and how have I wearied you? Answer Me.”

Both questions revealed the root problem when it came to God’s people: Judah felt burdened by God! It was sort of what happened in the time of Malachi when God’s people grew bored with Christ, His worship, and His service! Speaking of the call to worship, God said this to the remnant that had returned to the land:

Malachi 1:13a, ““You also say, “My, how tiresome it is!” And you disdainfully sniff at it,’ says the Lord of hosts, ‘and you bring what was taken by robbery, and *what is* lame or sick; so you bring the offering!...””

And so it was amongst God’s people in Micah’s day! The service and worship of God had become a burden to them which many resented. They regretted the obligations and calling which God had placed on their life. Accordingly, God asked His people to respond to His lawsuit but not until they first considered His loving grace!

The Support

The support God gave was intended to close the mouths of God’s people in shame. For if God were guilty of anything, it was that He cared for Israel with an everlasting love!

- God’s Redeeming Grace Seen in the Exodus,

Micah 6:4a, “indeed, I brought you up from the land of Egypt and ransomed you from the house of slavery.”

This verse contains a pun on account of the people’s accusation against God. Far from “wearying” His people, Micah 6:3 (literally, bringing them into slavery on account of failed expectations), God brought them out of slavery! And He did so by the “payment of a price,” the blood of the Passover Lamb! This continues to be the way God loves us!

- God’s Guiding Grace Seen in the Wilderness

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

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! In other words, they were not a bereft people. God led them through “Moses, Aaron, and Miriam”!

- God’s Preserving Grace Seen at the Promised Land

Micah 6:5a, “My people, remember now [this again does NOT mean simply to call to mind, BUT to relive something such that you could say that you were there] what Balak king of Moab counseled [recall he wanted God’s people to be the recipients of wrath from heaven] and what Balaam son of Beor answered him [instead of wrath, Balaam invoked the richest blessings from the Lord upon God’s people!]”

This continues to be the care of God for His people... the world/the devil/evil men might “intend it for evil,” BUT GOD ALWAYS “INTENDS IT FOR GOOD” (Gen. 50:20)! This is the care God has given His people throughout Redemptive History!

- God’s Prospering Grace Seen in the Promised Land

Micah 6:5b, “My people, remember now ...from Shittim to Gilgal...”

Using another literary device known as Aposiopesis or “Broken Construction,” God essentially says, “*I could give you a thousand more examples of how I have loved you and cared for you! Yet let ‘Shittim to Gilgal’ suffice!*”

The significance of “Shittim to Gilgal” is that they represent that time when Israel transitioned from being under the disciplining hand of the Lord in the wilderness to being the unrestrained covenant bride of Christ in the Promised Land!

It was these four redemptive acts that God placed before His people with the exhortation for them to “remember” each one of them as if they were the ones delivered!

How would the people of Judah respond? Did God’s word melt their hard heart? Amazingly NO! Instead they leveled their own complaint. We begin noting “The Flaw” which led Israel to complain against God. We see it in their first question.

The Defense

- Their Flaw

Micah 6:6a, “With what shall I come to the Lord?...”

Whether Micah anticipated this to be the natural response of his countrymen or whether this was their actual response is unknown. However the questions shine a light on the mindset of Micah's countrymen at the time.

Notice the choice of words used in this first question, "with what shall I come?" First, Micah has transitioned from talking about the nation to the individual. Accordingly, we need to make sure we understand the shift in focus and emphasis here. As a nation, Judah's well-being was predicated upon their works/faithfulness. As an individual, the child of God's well-being was predicated upon the will of God. They stood before the Lord by grace through faith (cf. Galatians 3:8, 14). Now it is easy to read the conditional promises that God gave to the Nation and personalize them such that today we might think that if we don't do such and such, God is going to get us! That obviously is what Micah's countrymen were doing (as we'll see). Second, the word for "come" does NOT here mean to "come before," BUT to "come to meet [with gifts in order to placate¹]" (cf. Deuteronomy 23:5). It signifies a humble prostration before a superior in order to acquire something! The idea is, "*Lord, what kind of humbling must we do before You? What kind of groveling will move You?...*"

Micah 6:6b, "...and with what shall I bow myself before the God on high?..."

Carrying on from the previous statement, the idea is to "bow" for the purpose of appeasement, "*God, what must we present in order for you to accept us?*" Micah's generation was painfully mindful that God seemed far off and removed (cf. Micah 3:4)- that is what is behind the expression, "God on high!" He no longer heard their prayers; He no longer responded to their cries. So, *what would it take for them to be accepted back into the graces of their "God on high"?*

Micah 6:7a, "Does the Lord take delight in thousands of rams?..."

The word for "take delight" refers to the satisfaction of a debt both in the sense of atonement for sin and the fulfillment of ritual requirements.

Micah's indictment (Micah 6:1-5) clearly rattled the nation. It hit a nerve causing many to ask the question, "*What does God want from us? What else must we do to appease Him?*" Bruce Waltke put it this way:²...

Instead of responding to such a wonderful Lord with loving and obedient hearts, Micah's generation transformed the covenant into a contract... She thinks that she has a legitimate complaint against the Lord for inflicting intolerable burdens on her, and then rejecting the sacrifices which she offered in worship in order to win his favour... (T. Desmond Alexander, 2009, pp. 211-213)

From this we see The Flaw of the nation. Somehow and somewhere along the way as individuals they abandoned the grace of God by which they were to fellowship with God and serve Him. In its place they adopted the mindset of the pagan who endeavors to relate to God on the basis of their own deeds- hoping that if they do the right things, God once again would draw near to them and in turn bless them!

With that, Micah recorded the response of the people of God which in essence was to indict God for being unreasonable or "unplacateable"!

Their Countercharge: “God is Unreasonable”

Micah 6:6b, “Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings?”

You will note that the questions o from being difficult to being ludicrous. We truly see the progression of the sinful mind.

We begin with the difficult, “Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings?” This is an interesting reference for if a Jew thought that they had done something to compromise their relationship with God, they would have offered a sin offering. That they reference a “burnt offering” tells us that even now Judah wasn’t mindful that they had done anything wrong!³ Further notice that of all the offerings the “burnt offering” was the most demanding and/or unselfish. The whole animal was offered (in contrast to the sin offering or the peace offering). So they begin by offering to do the difficult in order to placate God. Yet why stop here? *No! It won’t just be any ol’ burnt offering; it is going to be one involving a costly animal...*

Micah 6:6c, “Shall I come to Him... with yearling calves?”

Calves were eligible for sacrifice as early as 7 days (Leviticus 22:27; Exodus 22:29). Yet to raise and feed an animal for “a year” and then sacrifice it involved greater sacrifice. Accordingly, the “yearling calf” was regarded as the best sacrifice (Leviticus 9:3) for it involved much more of the worshipper. And so, *is this what God wants? Will this appease Him? Or will it take something more?*

Micah 6:7, “Does the Lord take delight in thousands of rams?”

In liturgy, such a sacrifice is called a “Hecatomb” which is a mammoth offering such as the ones Solomon and other kings occasionally made (cf. 1 Kings 3:4; 8:63; 2 Chronicles 30:24; 35:7). Now outside of a couple of wealthy kings in Judean history, such an offering was way, way beyond the ability of the people of God. *Yet why stop there?*

Micah 6:7b, “Does the Lord take delight in ten thousand rivers of oil.”

The questions are getting ridiculous, but that that is the point! “Oil” was the ceremonial *accompaniment* of a number of offerings, obviously therefore given in relatively small quantities (again, it was a concomitant⁴). If you therefore heard that an offering in worship was going to require say 500 gallons of oil, you’d know that that was a huge sacrifice involving thousands of animals.

Yet, here the question involved NOT thousands of sacrifices, BUT hundreds of thousands of sacrifices because it involved “ten thousand rivers of oil”!!! And so the idea here is, *“Is this what it is going to take in order to get a break from God?”* Yet the people are not done. From the ludicrous their arrogance brought them to the blasphemous...

Micah 6:7c, “Shall I present my first-born for my rebellious acts, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

We are talking here about child sacrifice, that which Ahaz already had done in a previous generation (2 Kings 16:3) and that to which Manasseh eventually would turn (2 Kings 21:7)! This wicked practice was common amongst the Canaanite nations surrounding God's people. Molech was a pagan god associated with child sacrifice and his sanctuary was called Topheth- literally, "burning place!" See in these pagan cultures a child at best was a slave, a sex object, or sacrificial fodder. If times were bad, a child easily could be used in an attempt to placate the gods! In fact, to maintain a good relationship with the divine, many pagan cultures offered their first born son as safe precaution⁵!

Yet this was not to be the case among God's people. In light of the grace of God the covenant child was precious in God's eyes (cf. Deuteronomy 6:4-7)! Furthermore, the entirety of the religion of Yahweh revolved around a person standing before the Lord on the basis of the grace of God! Therefore that such a notion could even be considered indicates how foolish Judah had become in their struggle with God!

Inherent in every question raised here is an indictment of God. Because they mistakenly thought that it was their job to placate God, Judah responded to God's Lawsuit with a countercharge: God is Unreasonable!

Through Micah, the Lord gave an impassioned appeal for His people to "Come back and renew their covenant love! God's history with His people was and continued to be one of grace and mercy" (Micah 6:1-5)! Yet the nation's response (Micah 6:6-7) in essence was, "*Lord, what do You want from us? What's it going to take for us to get a break? You mean to say that after everything we have done for You, WE somehow have become the bad guys?*"

The court case has reached an impasse... which now is broken by the clarifying words of God: What does God want from us? Not more sacrifice or greater feats of devotion, but that which any spouse would want: loyalty!

The Resolution

Micah 6:8a, "He has told you, O man [up to now, Micah has addressed the nation; here he turns to the individual child of God, so change gears in your thinking. No longer are we talking about their national fidelity; the focus now is on their personal relationship with God], what is good; and what does the Lord require of you..."

The word for "require" is covenant language! When God enters into a relationship with man, there is a corresponding responsibility that man naturally fulfills. Notice, it is not required in order to have a relationship (obviously they already were in-covenant with God). Rather it is required on account of the relationship!

In marriage, because a husband and wife love each other they do this, sacrifice that, offer this, and say that. And so it is in any relationship, including our relationship with God. In fact, listen to Hosea 8 and the complaint God raised against His people at the time.

Hosea 8:1b-3a, "They have transgressed My covenant, and rebelled against My law [IOW, they had not been faithful to the covenant!]. They cry out to Me, 'My God, we of Israel know Thee!' Israel has

rejected the good...”

In the context, “the good” clearly references covenant faithfulness. And so it is in our text as well. “He has told you, O man, what is good [that is, what constitutes fidelity in their walks with God]...”. In fact, notice that this “good” was something they already knew, long before.

Micah 6:8a, “He has told you, O man...”

When did God tell His people this? In the past when first they were brought into a covenant relationship with the Lord (cf. Deuteronomy 10:12)! From this we see that the message that is about to be given by Micah in this passage is an old one; it is not new (cf. 1 Samuel 12:24). It was what the Israelites received long before, but had since neglected!⁶ In his indictment of the people of God in Galatia, Paul leveled this charge against God’s people:

Galatians 2:18, “For if I rebuild what I have *once* destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor”

The Galatians all received eternal life NOT by placating God, BUT through the forgiveness of sin on account of the substitutionary death of Christ on the cross! This completely and totally did away with the system of works righteousness (whereby the sinner must do certain things in order for God to accept them). Yet the passion to placate God remained strong. In time this resulted in the Galatians erecting practices and standards by which they endeavored to please God and so earn His love, approval, and blessing (that which they already had in Christ). As such Paul said this:

Galatians 5:2-3, “Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. [How so?] And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law.”

If you forget Christ and, as a Christian, endeavor to relate to God on the basis of your conduct, NOT ONLY will Christ be of no benefit to you, BUT once again you will be in a system of works-righteousness by which you must perfectly fulfill the law or God won’t like you!

That is what God’s people had done in Micah’s day. Rather than enjoy the benefits of Christ (and so living in trust and confidence before Him, Isaiah 30:25), Judah “rebuilt” the system of works righteousness thinking that God would be impressed by their sacrifice! And where did they get the money and resources to offer such sacrifices? They robbed the poor and took advantage of the weak; which was a violation of the relationship they already had with God!

What ought the child of God to do? Rob from more poor people and so offer a hecatomb? Resort to infanticide and so offer up a child? Absolutely not! Rather, they simply needed to respond positively to the relationship they already had with God!

What did this mean? What would this look like? Three things (which Hosea also stressed to his generation, Hosea 12:6).

Micah 6: 8b: “...but to do justice...”

The word literally means “to establish God’s standard of justice and judgment.” It calls for a sense of responsibility toward weaker members of the community. It insists on the rights of others. Notice, this is right out of the Covenant Calling of God by which He has established us to be a covenant community which does far more than simply worships together, but lives and grows together (James 1:27). It is to care for the weak and hurting amongst us.

Micah 6:8c, “...to love kindness...”

This is an important word when it comes to the Kingdom of God! *Hesed* is the Old Testament word used to describe the loyalty of God toward Israel (Psalm 37:28; Amos 5:15). In grace God united himself to Israel and voluntarily took upon himself obligations the people of God were honor-bound to fulfill. When applied to people, it expresses an attitude of covenant obligation NOT primarily toward the community, BUT God! Accordingly, when applied to the individual, this referenced a loyalty to God which resulted in the demonstration of loving concern for the body. Accordingly, this properly is the motive that ought to compel us to “do justice.”

Micah 6:8d, “...and to walk... humbly... with your God”

The word for “walk” also has rich covenant overtones. Recall, in a society where transportation usually occurred on foot, the concept of “walking with someone” was full of meaning. It is the word used to describe apostasy: “going after” or literally, “walking after” (Exodus 32:1; Jeremiah 5:23; 7:24; 11:8; Psalm 1:1). In contrast, it also is the word used to describe the faithful child of God. He is the one who “follows God” or literally “walks with God” (1 Kings 3:14; Psalms 119:1ff).

Thus, to “walk with God” expresses the idea of a relationship of deep and abiding fellowship with God! They were to walk “humbly” with their God! The word for “humbly” referred to being low on account of one’s own brokenness or poverty. As such, it gives the character of our walk. Our relationship of communion with God is to be carried out in a humble manner knowing that there is nothing we could ever do to create it or maintain it!

So as a whole, what was the message of Micah to his generation? What ought we to take from this passage?

Notice first what it is NOT. Micah here is NOT saying that sacrifice or religious devotion to the Lord is unimportant. Neither is he saying that all that God cares about is our heart. RATHER, what Micah/God is telling His people is that true religion is NOT defined first by what we say or offer to God in the context of a worship service, BUT rather how we live the previous six days! See, what we offer to God on Sunday truly is the compilation of the lives we lived all the week. We can say in a moment of religious ecstasy, “God! I love you more than life! Take me! I’m Yours!” But if in our living we deny the calling of God, the statement is shown for what it really is: fake/phony!

Isn’t that what Christ Himself taught His generation?

Matthew 5:23-24, “If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.”

This is what it means to worship “in spirit” (John 4:24). It means we worship with integrity! If you’ve had a bad sin weak, you bring it to the Lord and confess it! If you’ve hurt someone, it means that you do what is necessary to restore them! Isn’t it this that comprises authentic religion?

James 1:27, “This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of *our* God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, *and* to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

R. H. Pfeiffer put it this way:

[In many cases] the prophets did not believe that a change in the ritual was essential: they merely shifted the emphasis from form to substance, from the acts of worship to the life of the worshipper, from rites to character. (Pfeiffer, 1961, p. 134)

Leslie Allen put it this way:

...it was conveniently forgotten that Yahweh’s sovereignty extended over the whole of life. Ceremonies discharged with emotional feeling and material extravagance became the sum total of spiritual commitment. ‘They would offer everything excepting what alone he asked for, their heart, its love and its obedience’ (Pusey).” (Allen, 1994, p. 375)

So what does God want from you, me, us? What does God want who

- Right now is preparing a place for us in the New Heavens and New Earth?
- At times in the Christian’s life ordains the inconvenient truth of suffering?
- Has sent His Son to be the Redeemer and Reclaimer of God’s people?

What does God want? He wants us to live today as citizens of heaven who understand and know that they have been made for a higher purpose. Accordingly, He wants our worship. But we must understand that that worship involves the whole man, not just what we offer in a moment of religious ecstasy.

End Notes

¹ Lange, J. P., Schaff, P., Kleinert, P., & Bliss, G. R., *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Micah*, p. 48.

² *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (TOTC), emphasis mine, pp. 212-213 and pp. 211–212.

³ Keil, C. F., & Delitzsch, F., *Vol. 10: Commentary on the Old Testament*, p. 335- “There is no reference here to sin-offerings, through which disturbed or interrupted fellowship could be restored, by means of the expiation of their sins; because the people had as yet no true knowledge of sin, but were still living under the delusion that they were standing firmly in the covenant with the Lord, which they themselves had practically dissolved.”

⁴ cf. Lev. 2:1, 15; 7:12.

⁵ To protect God’s people from emulating their neighbors here, the Lord prescribed that a sacrifice be offered in the place of the first born, cf. Ex. 13:12-13.

⁶ Just as God predicted in Deut. 8:14.

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on March 3, 2013. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.