

“The Skull Beneath the Ceremony”

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Series: *Minor Prophets*

Bible Text: Micah 7:14-20

Preached on: June 28, 2026

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Well, during the pastoral prayer there, if you're one that likes to keep their eyes open, you may have seen me having a bit of commotion over there. There was an ant in my leg, so I guess Steve left that for me, but that's what was happening during the pastoral prayer, so apologies if that was distracting. Today we come, this morning we come to the book of Micah, and as Steve said earlier, we've been in this series looking at one representative passage to help us better understand these minor prophets. Last week we heard from the prophet Jonah, and this morning we get to hear from the prophet Micah.

Micah preached in the 8th century BC during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, and if you know about the climate, the political climate, the context of this time period, Assyria was rising, and during that rising Samaria was collapsing. Judah was watching judgment move closer and closer, but the sharpest word that you see here in the book of Micah is not for the Assyrians, it is for God's people. Back in chapter 3, verse 11, it says,

Its heads give us judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets practice divination for money, yet they lean on the Lord and say, is not the Lord in the midst of us? No disaster shall come upon us.

At this time Micah was witnessing the abuse of power, the abuse that happens with false shepherds. Prophets were preaching for money, priests were teaching for a price, and yet the people still had the appearance of worship. It was religious ceremony. They still had sacrifices, they had the temple, they had covenant language, they knew how to say, The Lord is with us. As we will see in chapter seven as it closes here that we're about to read, what Micah is confronting, what he is spotting, that the Lord knows is he is confronting religious rot, whitewashed tombs, people who knew how to look alive, but while death was lurking. The title of my sermon this morning is “The Skull Beneath the Ceremony”. We'll see in chapter seven as this book concludes, Micah does not end with just fixating on their sin. Thank God that the book ends with the hope of mercy. So hear now the final word of the prophet Micah. I would invite you to turn to chapter seven. We'll be starting in verse 14, or you can follow along in your Bibles, or in your bulletin in there. It's God's word for us.

14 Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock of your inheritance, who dwell alone in a forest in the midst of a garden land. Let them graze in Bashan and Gilead as in the days of old.

15 As in the days when you came out of the land of Egypt. I will show them marvelous things.

16 The nations shall see and be ashamed of all their might. They shall lay their hands on their mouths. Their ears shall be deaf.

17 They shall lick the dust like a serpent, like the crawling things of the earth; they shall come trembling out of their strongholds; they shall turn and dread to the Lord our God, and they shall be in fear of you.

18 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.

19 He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all of our sins into the depths of the sea.

20 You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Would you pray with me?

Father, this is your word. It is light, and it is life. It is living, and it is active. It is sharper than any two-edged sword. We ask by your spirit this morning, would you put us under your word? Would you search us? Would you cut away what is false? Would you shepherd us? Good shepherd, lead us, save us, pardon us, lead us to Christ. In the strong name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

There's a famous painting painted in 1533. Hans Holbein, I may be saying that wrong. It's called The Ambassadors, and I'm not an art buff. I did read a book just recently about an art thief, so maybe that makes me, no. I appreciate art, and I love being able to take in different images and artwork. This particular painting struck me because the Ambassadors painting is of two dignified men that are standing. If you see it, you'd probably be like, oh, they look ridiculous. But it is supposed to display status, achievement. I mean, there's like a globe and leather-bound books behind them, and before them, there's a lot of nice things that could communicate an array of things that would be successful or impressive. But at the bottom of the painting, there is what looks to be a gray smear, almost as if you took your thumb after the painter had painted it and was getting done and just smeared the bottom of the painting. The interesting thing about this painting is it is known for when you stand and look at it right in front, it looks like a smear. But if you turn to the right, you will actually notice that it's a skull. Death is lurking. Death is in the painting, but it is not visible to the untrained eye.

This is what we are seeing take place in the Book of Micah. In seven chapters, we are seeing the exposure of sin, grave offenses. Micah calls out God's people and directs their gaze, in a sense, towards the skull, towards the religious rot. From one angle, everything looks or seems like it's in order. You have worship, sacrifices, priests, prophets, temple, religious language. But Micah says, look again. There is a skull beneath the ceremony, the facade, and Micah gives us that same angle. This is what we have for us from God's Word this morning.

The question that I would put before us is where is that same kind of death or religious rot working in us?

The temptation to arrange, think with me about it, almost is like a living room, to arrange the furniture in a way that things appear to be fine. When we are tempted to subtly live our lives as Jesus followers, coming into these doors, I know this temptation, you know this temptation, to just say, I'm doing fine. Or I'm really glad so-and-so or these people don't really know what is going on. This reality of presenting a posture or a look of, I've got everything together, when your heart, in fact, is very far from God. Worship may be in these moments or in these seasons, if you have felt, can feel like routine without surrender. Doctrine, you know, Presbyterians, we love our doctrine. We love order. We love to be able to know a lot of things, but doctrine maybe can become just about accuracy without humility. Confession becomes words without exposure and grace. The good news of grace just becomes language without true repentance. You see, from the untrained eye, things may look like we are near to God in our hearts, but I would argue this morning that many of us this morning, our hearts remained hidden from God. As sheep that are prone to wonder, sheep that are scattered while appearing gathered.

What do we need? What do we need this morning, church? Well, I would tell you from Micah's chapter seven, these few verses that we just read, we see the good shepherd. We need the good shepherd. As Steve alluded to earlier, as he was talking about his chickens. What a great image to put in our minds of the need to have our wings clipped at times. Look with me at verse 14.

Our first point is the good shepherd.

Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock of your inheritance.

Micah has spent the majority of the book exposing the sins of God's people. And here at the end of chapter seven, he prays, *shepherd your people*. This is a key ingredient to unlocking and helping us to understand the heart of this book. A prayer for shepherding, not a prayer to make one look better, not a prayer to manage oneself or to dust ourselves off, to pick ourselves up by our bootstraps. No, this is a prayer that the good shepherd would intervene and do what these leaders, these false leaders have tried to do.

Earlier in the book, we start to better understand the nature of this corruption. We start to better understand these false teachers, these false shepherds. Earlier in the book, it says, you hate the good and love the evil. This is speaking of the rulers of Israel. And it gets very vivid. Who tear the skin from off my people and their flesh from off their bones. Who eat the flesh of my people and chop them up like meat in a pot. You didn't know that you were going to get cannibalistic language this morning in a sermon, did you? But this is what Micah is utilizing to try as is to bring to the surface the degree of the evil that was taking place. The leaders were supposed to shepherd the people. Instead, they were devouring them. They were butchers. You see the verbs that are in play here. Tear, strip, eat, flay, break apart for meat in a pot.

From the untrained eye, as we had said earlier, it could have the allurements or it could have the false sense of that things are in order. But Micah turns the room and exposes what is there. This is this very first line of verse 14, church. It is a cry. **It is a prayer of deliverance.**

Continuing in verse 14, *your staff*, your staff. A shepherd's staff, as we know it is a tool to guide, to protect the sheep, to pull the sheep back when they've gone too far, to keep the sheep at bay that are what? Are prone to wander. We are a people, I believe, this morning that often desire the shepherd's comfort but we do not want the shepherd's staff. We desire nearness to God, but we do not desire correction. We desire mercy without confession. And we desire protection without surrender to God.

So, the question I have this morning is where are you resisting the staff of the good shepherd?

Verse 14 continues describing *the flock of your inheritance* as a people *who dwell alone in a forest*.

This is important here because they are in a land that should be fruitful. It is a place of covenant blessing and they are not whole.

It goes on, it says, *let them graze in Bashan and Gilead*. These areas were known for rich, lush pasture.

So Micah is praying for God to restore his people to a fullness and for God to feed them again.

The contrast here is strong and this is why I bring this up because false shepherds, as we well know in our day in the church, in different contexts and ministry and life,

false shepherds feed on sheep; the true shepherd feeds the sheep.

As we heard in earlier in worship passage from John, that the true shepherd, *the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*.

So verse 14 is a prayer for shepherding. And then we look and see in verse 15,

God's answer to that prayer. It is an answer of redemption.

That brings us to our second point. Look at verse 15.

As in the days when you came out of the land of Egypt, I will show them marvelous things.

This is Exodus language. God is saying, I have saved before, I will save again. God's saving power also exposes false power. Look at verses 16 and 17.

The nation shall see and be ashamed of all their might. They shall lay their hands on their mouths, for they shall come trembling out of their strongholds.

Ashamed of their might. The very thing that God, God's people trusted in this context becomes the thing that shames them. God does not merely rescue his people from their enemies. He reveals the emptiness of everything that masquerades as a false God.

What may these, when you think about the word stronghold, what may be the stronghold for you this morning?

Reputation, maybe. Reputation could become a stronghold when being exposed and the light in the light terrifies you.

Or maybe when a criticism ruins you because you care so much about how people view you.

Or when being misunderstood feels unbearable.

When you confess just enough to be honest, but not enough to be truly known.

Or when you detect error in others, but you don't see the plank in your own eye.

When these things become our refuge, they do in fact become our strongholds. And church, a stronghold is not always something that we hate, but often it is something that we trust that comes up empty, that is found wanting.

What are we willing or what are we calling a strength that God calls a stronghold?

When God exposes false strength, he is not humiliating his people for fun. It is an exodus mercy.

When the great surgeon cuts. I think of that story from Narnia when the dragon scales, right? Eustace is trying to remove his own skin and it keeps coming back until Aslan brings his claw. And the thing that is so vivid for me in that moment is the pain with which Eustace feels as he is being exposed, as the light is shining in the darkness.

The reality is that this exodus mercy that God gives, even though these things may be painful, even though reputation may be something that you're tempted to rely upon, it is a mercy. It is a mercy because the reality is that these strongholds do not have the power to bear the weight of your soul. You know what I'm talking about. Those strongholds have been before you this morning or this week. They have been creeping at your door, whispering lies of the evil one to you. Jesus, as we know, brings the better exodus. Look at verse 15. This exodus language is right here before us.

Is in the days when you came out of the land of Egypt, I will show them marvelous things.

The greatest marvel is not that God threw Pharaoh and his army into the sea. The greatest marvel that we see here in chapter seven that is on display is God throws our sins into the depths of the sea. That is good news for you and for me this morning.

Brings us to our final point, the sin that God pardons.

Micah seven verses 18 through 20 says, *who is a God like you pardoning iniquity?*

Did you notice that the two parts in a way as we were reading these verses, how it changes as it's going through in those first four verses starting in verse 14, you get to verse 18,

who is a God like you pardoning iniquity passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance?

Do you know what Micah's name means? Who is like Yahweh? That is what Micah's name means. Who is like Yahweh? And here at the end of the book, Micah is answering the question of his name. Who is like the Lord? What makes God incomparable? Think of the different ways that Micah could have versed this. Who is like you in power? Who is like you in majesty? Who is like you in knowledge, in rule? All those things are true, but no, he says, who is a God like you who pardons iniquity? That is astonishing.

That is astonishing because of the hope of the gospel, the incomparable glory of God in his holy mercy towards a guilty people. And as one sees throughout this book, if you read the prior chapters before chapter seven, he does not make light of sin. Not at all. Micah has shown us the skull beneath the ceremony. So when Micah says God pardons, he is not saying sin does not matter. No, he is saying God is merciful to sinners whose sin matters very much. God does not deny, excuse, or rename sin. He pardons it.

I love what Calvin says on this matter. This is not in your bulletin. I added this later, but Calvin says;

The glory of God shines indeed in all creatures on high and below, but never more brightly than in the cross.

That is the wonder of Micah. *Who is a God like you who pardons iniquities?* He continues passing over transgression, he says. There it is again. There is that exodus language. Remember at Passover, judgment passed over homes covered by the blood of the lamb.

How can God pass over transgression and still be just?

Because that judgment that we deserved fell on another as we know. It is why we are here. It is why we are singing praises to a God.

Thanks be to God that that judgment does not fall on us, but it falls on the person with which we have righteousness before a holy God in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

At the cross, God does not sweep sin under the rug. The shepherd becomes the lamb. The one who gathers the flock gives himself for the flock. He does not feed on the sheep. He not only feeds the sheep, he gives his life for the sheep.

So when God casts our sins away, let me be clear, he is not ignoring injustice. No, he is satisfying justice in Christ. Thanks be to God for that, right? That is something worth singing about this morning. That is something that should get you out of bed in the morning. That is something when you are staring a nightmare in the face that you have resurrection hope in the face of.

Then Micah goes on. It gets better. He does not retain his anger forever because he what?

He delights in steadfast love.

Let that linger this morning. I don't, I'm, of our pastoral staff I think I enjoy awkward silences the most. I love making Hobie feel uncomfortable. I think it's part of my calling. Let this linger because he delights in steadfast love. His joy. It is his joy. God does not pardon with a clenched fist. Let me say that again.

God does not pardon with a clenched fist. He delights in steadfast love.

Mercy is not something that you have to pry out of his hands.

So the question is direct this morning that I would submit to you. I've asked you a lot of questions. I hope this one lands in a particular way for you.

Do you believe Christ Presbyterian Church, do you believe God delights to show mercy? Or do you believe he is willing to do it?

Now if you listen to that statement, it is not the same. Two things are not the same in what I just said. Many of us believe God forgives, but we may imagine him doing it somewhat reluctantly. We imagine he lets us back into the room, but we don't actually get to come to the table. We imagine he has removed our guilt legally, but still in a sense looks at us with almost like a quiet disappointment. This posture, this temptation church, I believe is what reverts us back to living in a works righteousness type of life. It is what I think will very often take us back to strongholds. Strongholds that are stealing the attention and the worship and the glory that God deserves. Strongholds that are void of life, that cannot bear the weight of our soul.

We minimize sin, right? Or at least that could be the track that plays. At least I'm not like them. Or maybe you can explain it away. This is why I am the way that I am. All the different ways that we try to justify and minimize sin when at its core it is eating away at us. It is keeping us from the life that God has designed for us to live. And just like Steve mentioned earlier with the chicken coop, that was so vivid for me in my mind to think about of the hawks that come in. How quickly we forget the good news, the hope of the gospel, and how quickly we think that there are things outside of God's design that are there for the taking, that are waiting to devour us.

Not one of these strongholds have resurrection power to cast your sin, to cast my sin into the depths of the sea. Verse 19 says, it just keeps getting better church, he will again,

he will again have compassion on us.

That word, in my opinion this morning, is some of the most delicious tidbits for me to take from Micah. Again, that word is good news for people who are tired, tired, tired, tired of needing mercy again and again and again after failure. Confession, wandering, seeing the same weakness exposed and being humbled. God's compassion church is not exhausted by the repeated neediness of his people. I think I should say that again.

God's compassion is not exhausted by the repeated neediness of his people.

He will tread our iniquities underfoot. He does not merely forgive sins guilt, he breaks sins dominion. And then you will cast all of our sins into the depths of the sea. Hallelujah. Emphasis on all.

You may need to train your mind, your eyes, this morning to look at God's word and to ask yourself, do you actually believe that?

When this week you have been rehearsing the same sin, past sin that keeps continuing to be in the forefront or the back grounds of your mind that is telling you, you are that. Let God's word expose the false nature of those temptations.

That *he casts our sins into the depths of the sea*. This means that the sin that you think can outrun the mercy of God. It's not enough. The sin of being exposed, the sin that you try to manage, to excuse, rename and bury is cast into the sea. The sins God casts in the sea are not sins that he is going to go and fish back out. Fish back out. I need to hear that this morning. I need to remember that. Verse 20 shows what the bedrock, the foundation is of this.

You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham as you have sworn to our fathers from days of old.

God's mercy church is not a mood. God's mercy is not a mood. It is an oath. It is a promise. It is sealed. Israel has been faithless, but God remains faithful.

So as we close here, Micah's final word is not the skull beneath the ceremony. That's really good. What we find is Micah's final word is mercy.

The painting that I told you about in the opening, as I reminded you, the room is impressive. These two guys, they look dignified. You see the smear. You see the skull. I was looking this afternoon, or excuse me, I was looking earlier this week. I did not realize it. There's a crucifix in the corner of like up towards the top left corner of the painting, and it's hidden. You got to kind of look for it. It's almost out of sight, but it's there, and that is where Micah, I think in a way, he doesn't leave us a crucifix. He leaves us with the mercy of God. He doesn't leave us in our sin. Thanks be to God. He leaves us focusing on the hope of the gospel.

At the cross of Jesus Christ, God shows us that sin is more serious than we imagined, and mercy is deeper than we dare hope.

So do not hide church. Do not hide behind religious language.

How are you arranging the furniture in your room this week? Things that you think is nearness to Christ, but is actually an obstacle? Things that have become a stronghold that you are clenching onto so tightly because you think it gives you peace or you think it gives you some semblance of enoughness or a feeling okay that is actually robbing you of the steadfast love, the steadfast love and mercy of Christ.

Micah's final question is not, who is a people like us? *It is, who is a God like you?*

The final hope of God's people is not that they have been faithful enough, but that in Jesus Christ, God is faithful. Let us pray.

Our Lord and our God, I do not know the many things in this room that our folks are navigating and walking through. You do. I'm asking that your spirit would convict, would soften. Father, that that you would challenge us and convict us to realize that sin really is serious. That you would remove the scales from our eyes and that we would see you in your beauty afresh this morning. Father, I pray for the person that is waging war with temptation, is exhausted and continues to give into a stronghold of self, self-protection, or whatever it is Lord, I pray that you would extinguish it and that your mercy would wash over them. Father, that they would see you again, that they would run to you, that we would believe that you are not a God that holds mercy with clenched fists, but that you have cast our sins into the depths of the sea, that you are the good shepherd, that we would not run away from the shepherd's staff, but, Father, that we would surrender to it. I pray, Lord, that that would be true of us this day and as we go forward. We love you, Jesus. Thank you for this opportunity now to worship you. It's in your name that we pray, Jesus. Amen.

****Portion of scripture read before sermon—John 10:11-18**