

OpenTheo

September 9th: Micah 7 & Matthew 9:1-17

September 8, 2021



Alastair Roberts

Finding hope in a time of betrayal. New wine in new wineskins.

My reflections are searchable by Bible chapter here:

<https://audio.alastairadversaria.com/explore/>.

If you are interested in supporting this project, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X330?ref_=wl_share).

You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes:

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Micah chapter 7. But as for me, I will look to the Lord. I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me.

Rejoice not over me, O my enemy. When I fall, I shall rise. When I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me.

I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against him, until he pleads my cause and executes judgment for me. He will bring me out to the light. I shall look upon his vindication.

Then my enemy will see, and shame will cover her who said to me, Where is the Lord your God? My eyes will look upon her. Now she will be trampled down like the mire of the streets. A day for the building of your walls.

In that day the boundaries shall be far extended. In that day they will come to you from Assyria and the cities of Egypt, and from Egypt to the river, from sea to sea, and from mountain to mountain. But the earth will be desolate because of its inhabitants, for the

fruit of their deeds.

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

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

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 in dread to the Lord our God, and they shall be in fear of you.

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. He will again have compassion on us.

He will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old.

The final chapter of the book of Micah laments the state of a corrupt society. The righteous are few, treachery and deceit are pervasive, and there is no one left to trust. It concludes however with a confident expression of the prophet's hope in the Lord.

The prophet compares the situation to a man coming to a vine or fig tree after everything has been harvested, hoping to find something tasty to eat and finding that there is nothing left. We might think of the episode in Mark chapter 11 verses 13 to 14 here, as Jesus might have been alluding to this passage in his judgment upon the fruitless fig tree. And seeing in the distance a fig tree and leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it.

When he came to it he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, May no one ever eat fruit from you again. And his disciples heard it.

As the prophet Micah scours the land, he cannot find godly and upright persons. They seem to have vanished from the land. Everywhere he finds wickedness, violence, oppression and injustice.

Corruption is found at the very heart of the people and at the very top of their social hierarchy, in the prince, the judge and the elite. Even those who are upstanding by comparison with others and would be held in higher honor are still like thorn hedges, hurting rather than helping their neighbors. Judah had been given ample warnings of coming punishment by the prophets.

The prophets were like the watchmen of the nation. And now the day that they had warned of, the day of the Lord's judgment, was near at hand. It was upon the people.

As Leslie Allen notes, the prophet here plays upon the similarity of the sounds of the words for hedge and confusion. The way that the corruption that's going to be judged rhymes with the punishment, underlines the poetic justice that the Lord will bring upon them. How do you live in a treacherous and deceitful society? Micah's description of Judah's society might remind us of descriptions of life under communism in Eastern Europe, for instance, where children would deliver their parents over to the authorities, where lies and deceit became society's way of life, where no one could trust their neighbors.

Those nearest and dearest are ready to betray, deceive or disown you. Relations between neighbors, husbands and wives, parents and children, between siblings and members of the same household, are all riddled with distrust. Jesus refers to this passage in Matthew chapter 10 verses 34 to 36, as he describes the resistance and persecution that his disciples will experience within their households, communities and closest relationships.

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and a person's enemies will be those of his own household.

The prophet Jeremiah speaks to a similar situation, highlighting the danger of trusting in man, rather than trusting in the Lord. In Jeremiah chapter 17 verses 5 to 8 he writes, Thus says the Lord, Cursed is the man who trusts in man, and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come.

He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.

The placing of verse 7 is debated among commentators. Mark Ginnellette, for instance, sees the section that follows as beginning with verse 7, rather than verse 7 belonging with verses 1 to 6. Where we situate verse 7 will colour our reading of the relevant sections, as Joanna Hoyt notes. Does the woe oracle end on a note of hope or not? Bruce Waltke argues that what we have here is a Janus verse, a verse that looks both forward and back, connecting to both sections, closing one and opening the other.

Hoyt, however, argues that the verse should be placed with the latter section, although

she de-emphasises the sharpness of the divisions that some people imagine between these sections. Micah or the editors of his prophecy clearly wanted heroes to move from the message of woe to one of confident hope. These should not be viewed as hermetically sealed off from each other.

In a situation where there is no one to trust, Micah's response is to look to the Lord in faith. He is confident the Lord will both hear and deliver him in his time of distress. Allen observes that the concluding half of the chapter can be divided into four parts, which he suggests should be understood as a liturgy, as there are various voices and forms of speech represented within the section.

There is, he argues, a psalm of confidence spoken by Zion in verses 8-10, followed by an oracle of salvation in verses 11-13. In verses 14-17, there is a prayer of supplication, and the final verses are another psalm of confidence. Reading the section as a prophetic liturgy has been popular among commentators following Herman Gunkel, who argued that the section was inserted into the book later in the post-exilic period.

However, there are those who dispute this understanding. John Goldengate, for instance, argues that, rather than being a liturgy, it is a prophetic message expressed in a quasi-liturgy. Hoyt questions the late dating, maintaining that we shouldn't be surprised if the Lord were to reveal aspects of the longer-term future to his prophet, in order that the people might have hope as judgment approached them.

He also mentions the possibility raised by some commentators that this was an adaptation of existing liturgical material, possibly from the Northern Kingdom. The opening section leading up to verse 10, whether it begins with verse 7 or verse 8, presents us with the words of a personified Zion, when the enemies of Zion might think they have triumphed over her. They should not be so proud.

When the Lord has finished judging his people, he will lift them up and restore them once more. They will also be avenged upon their adversaries, who will be brought down and humbled. Even while the great powers who rise up as enemies against Jerusalem might think that they are in charge of the situation, the personified Zion recognises that it is really the Lord that is using these powers as instruments for his work, that he is the one that they need to relate to.

The oracle of salvation that follows in verses 11 to 13 describes the restoration of Zion and the extension of the borders of the land, while some might see in verse 12 the nations coming to Jerusalem, as in Micah chapter 4 verse 2. It seems more likely that this is a reference to the return of the scattered children of the nation. They are going to come back from the various lands of their exile. The word used twice for Egypt in this verse is not the usual one used for Egypt, and some commentators like Hoyt express uncertainty that Egypt is being referenced here at all.

As Zion and Israel are restored, there will be a corresponding judgment upon the nations that have risen against her. The unfaithful nations will be rendered desolate for their sins. In verses 14 to 17 we have a prayer of supplication.

The Lord is addressed as the shepherd of his people, pasturing his flock in good land. Bashan and Gilead are lands in the transjordan, lands which were good for grazing, but belonged to the fallen northern kingdom and had been lost to Assyria. There is a response of the Lord to the supplication in verse 15.

The Lord speaks of a new exodus-like deliverance that he will accomplish for his people. This will demonstrate his glory in the sight of the nations, who will be put to shame. The nations would suffer the judgment apportioned to the serpent.

The chapter, and the book more generally, ends with a psalm of confidence. The confidence of the prophet is found in the character and the faithfulness of the Lord. The Lord is a God who pardons iniquity and passes over transgression.

Micah is most likely here alluding to Exodus chapter 34 verses 6 to 7, where the Lord declares himself to Moses after Israel's sin with the golden calf. The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation. Micah expresses his assurance in the promises of the Lord, the fact that the Lord will deal with the iniquities of his people and that the Lord will be faithful to his covenant promises, promises that go all the way back to Abraham and the forefathers.

A question to consider, how does the conclusion of the book of Micah relate to some of the themes of Micah's prophecy more generally? Matthew chapter 9 verses 1 to 17. He then said to the paralytic, rise, pick up your bed and go home. And he rose and went home.

When the crowd saw it, they were afraid and they glorified God who had given such authority to men. As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, follow me.

And he rose and followed him. And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners? But when he heard it, he said, those who are well have no need of a position, but those who are sick go and learn what this means.

I desire mercy and not sacrifice for I came not to call the righteous, but sinners. Then the

disciples of John came to him saying, why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast? And Jesus said to them, can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment and a worse tear is made.

Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.

In Matthew chapter 9 we continue the sequence of miracles that we began in chapter 8. That sequence began with the cleansing of the leper, the healing of the centurion's servant, the healing of the fever of Peter's mother-in-law, and then went on to the calming of the storm, the casting out of the two demons, and now we get to the healing of the paralytic. These miracles come in threes. The first three are more private, less dramatic miracles.

The second three are more dramatic and come with the sense of authority, and the response to these miracles is particularly highlighted. The first miracle of chapter 9 ends the second cycle of miracles, a cycle which places this emphasis upon people's reaction of fear and wonder to Jesus. The authority of Christ is emphasized and opposition starts to emerge, and in the final cycle Jesus' fame spreads far further.

This block of miracles isn't just a grab bag of stuff that Jesus did, but it's like the rest of Matthew, it's progressively presenting a case for the identity and the authority of Christ and moving the larger story forward. The healing of the paralytic occurs when Jesus returns to his own city from the land of the Gadarenes. From chapter 4 verse 13 we know that the city is Capernaum.

The paralytic is carried to him by others on a bed, and Jesus responds to their faith by declaring the sins of the paralytic forgiven. We've already seen an association between faith and Jesus' work in the encounter with the centurion, and in Jesus challenging of his disciples for their little faith in the calming of the sea. We see a further example later on in the healing of the woman with the issue of blood and the blind man.

The faith in such cases is looking to Christ for deliverance. It doesn't come with any pretensions of its own or confidence in itself, but just reaches out to him, and in the centurion's case Jesus declared that such faithful persons would sit with the patriarchs in the kingdom, and in this case Jesus declares the sins of the paralyzed man to be forgiven. As in the case of the centurion, it's noteworthy that Jesus is performing these miracles on account of the faith of someone other than the person who's receiving the healing.

Faith is extremely important, but it's not always the faith of the person who is delivered

by the miracle. On some occasions like this it's someone else entirely. Reading the story of the paralyzed man here, we might be reminded of the benefit of praying for others, of bringing them before Christ, even though they may be paralyzed in some way, that they may not be able to come before Christ themselves.

We can carry them, and that insistent bringing people before Christ might be part of the calling that we have been given. The scribes think that Christ is blaspheming, claiming a prerogative that is God's alone. Only God can forgive sins, but Jesus can read their hearts, and he, as a demonstration of his true authority, heals the man.

If he did not in fact have this authority to forgive sins, God would not give the confirming sign of the healing that follows. It's a two-stage healing. It's an inward healing, the forgiveness of his sins, and then an outward healing.

Jesus once again speaks of himself here as the son of man. He's acting in a particular office. The son of man is a human figure of eschatological significance, a sort of uber prophet.

We can think of the way that it's used in Ezekiel. The common argument that Jesus forgives sins as proof that he is God seems to me to short circuit the case that the Gospels actually present for Christ's divinity. The response of the crowd is important to notice here.

They do not see this as proof of his divinity, but proof that this is a truly remarkable prophet. This is a prophet like no other. To whom does God give authority to forgive sins in this way? You can think about the authority that God gives to people like Elijah and Elisha.

They act with authority. They can do great deeds without necessarily having to pray for them to occur. They are invested with power to do certain acts.

But this Jesus of Nazareth seems to be invested with a far greater power than any of these former prophets. There's something about him that stands out, and the more that we follow this through in Matthew, the more that we'll realize that he has been given the full authority of God. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given into his hands, and he acts with the authority of God's very name.

This is, I believe, how we'll arrive at a proper account of Christ's divinity. It's a longer route, but it leads to a more decisive understanding. Jesus now calls Matthew.

Tax collectors were despised for their collaborations with the Romans, but also for their injustice. Not only did they deal with Gentiles, they were dealing with the imperial oppressor. The fact that Jesus would eat with such persons was scandalous to many observing Jews.

The setting is important. Jesus is reclining at a table in a house with these people. This is, as it were, a picture of Israel.

The picture of Israel of eating around the table, and in Jesus' ministry, Jesus, particularly in Luke's gospel, but also in the other gospels, Jesus often teaches in the context of a meal, teaches that Israel is being redefined, and the meal table is a picture of that. And at this meal table, all the wrong people are present. It's not just the centurion, who's a faithful person, who will recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

It's also tax collectors and sinners, the people who are not welcome within polite society. And here the Pharisees enter the picture as one of the key antagonists of Christ in his ministry. They challenge Christ for his action, questioning his disciples.

But Jesus hears it, and he responds by drawing attention to the character of the law. He quotes Hosea chapter 6, verse 6, and the original context of that is God's restoration of his people. This isn't just individual repentance, it's God restoring his people to fellowship with him.

And this verse provides a framework for perceiving the entire law. Jesus quotes it again in Matthew chapter 12, verse 7, where he's challenged concerning his practice on the Sabbath. Later on in chapter 23, verse 23, he'll talk about the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy, and faith.

Earlier on in the Beatitudes, he has said, blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Christ is on a mission of mercy, a mission of righteousness that sets things right that have gone wrong. And this was what the law was always about, this is what God always wanted.

We've gone through Jesus' manifesto in chapters 5 to 7 in the Sermon on the Mount, an account of saving righteousness, of righteousness that restores and sets things right that are broken. And Jesus is teaching the same thing here. God desires that sort of righteousness, not just sacrifice and a multiplication of bulls and rams and goats.

God desires people to give their hearts. God desires people to show mercy and to heal and restore those that are lost. And yet as tax collectors and sinners seek to get close to Christ to find forgiveness and restoration, all the Pharisees and the scribes can see is a failure on Christ's part to keep himself fully separate.

Something has gone deeply wrong in the way that they see the purpose of God's law. After he has responded to the Pharisees, Jesus is approached by the disciples of John who ask him concerning fasting. Jesus' response is one that underlines who he is.

He is the bridegroom with his people. And when the bridegroom is around, there should be joy and delight. It should be a time of feasting and celebration.

There will be a time when the bridegroom goes and at that time it will be appropriate to fast. But while the bridegroom is still there, they should be celebrating. Christ is the one who's restoring Israel.

He's also the bridegroom come to the bride. And as it were, he's inaugurating the great feast of the end of history in the middle of history. People are having a foretaste of what it's like to have the marriage supper of the Lamb.

This response further underlines the importance of what Jesus is doing in these meals and their symbolic significance. After the illustration of the bridegroom and the feasting associated with the wedding, Jesus gives a further illustration. An illustration of putting unshrunk cloth upon an old garment, followed up by another example of putting new wine into old wine skins.

The importance for Christ is that both need to be preserved. There are the practices of the law, the practices of the old order, but there's also the practices associated with fulfilment of the law. And those practices can't be contained by the structure of the law itself.

Those old wine skins will be burst by this new practice of the kingdom. But that doesn't mean that the old practices of the law are to be just rejected and dismissed and ridiculed. They have their place and they are to be preserved in their proper place.

But yet the order of the kingdom is one that goes far beyond them. The contrast here may be more explicitly seen in the difference between John and his disciples who are existing within those older structures, and Jesus and his disciples who were the new wine that could not be put into the structure of the old wine skins. A question to consider.

Here and elsewhere Jesus uses meals and feasts as a framework within which to reimagine Israel and its identity and the order of the kingdom. What are some of the ways in which our practice of the Lord's Supper can reorder our societies in the light of the kingdom to come?