

OpenTheo

September 5th: Micah 3 & Matthew 6:19-34

September 4, 2021



Alastair Roberts

Three oracles against injustice. Laying up treasures in heaven.

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 3. And I said, Hear you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel. Is it not for you to know justice, you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin from off my people and their flesh from off their bones, who eat the flesh of my people and flay their skin from off them and break their bones in pieces and chop them up like meat in a pot, like flesh in a cauldron? Then they will cry to the Lord, but he will not answer them. He will hide his face from them at that time, because they have made their deeds evil.

Thus says the Lord concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry, Peace, when they have something to eat, but declare war against him who puts nothing into their mouths. Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision, and darkness to you, without divination. The sun shall go down on the prophets, and the day shall be black over them.

The seers shall be disgraced, and the diviners put to shame. They shall all cover their lips, for there is no answer from God. But as for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression, and to

Israel his sin.

Hear this, you heads of the house of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel, who detest justice and make crooked all that is straight, who build Zion with blood, and Jerusalem with iniquity. Its heads give 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.

Therefore because of you, Zion shall be ploughed as a field, Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height. Micah chapter 3 contains three oracles, verses 1-4, 5-8 and 9-12. These three oracles are bound together, as Leslie Allen suggests, by a common theme of justice.

Although dating the oracles of Micah with certainty is difficult, and it is likely that, as in other prophetic books, they are out of chronological sequence at various points, being ordered more according to literary, theological and thematic principles, we do have an external reference that helps us in dating material in this chapter. In Jeremiah chapter 26, verses 17-18, we have a reference to verse 12 of this chapter, which places it during the reign of King Hezekiah. And certain of the elders of the land arose and spoke to all the assembled people, saying, Micah of Moresheth prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah, and said to all the people of Judah, Thus says the Lord of hosts, Zion shall be ploughed as a field, Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

The first oracle is addressed to the rulers and officials of the people, and the words here are Micah's own. Allen notes that since the oracles of this chapter seemingly date to the period of King Hezekiah, Jacob and Israel here must refer to the southern kingdom, as the northern kingdom had already been wiped out by the Assyrians. The task of the judges, officials and rulers of the people was to know and to execute justice, acting as the representatives of the Lord.

However, so far were these men from knowing and wanting to execute justice, that they hated the good and loved the evil. The actual performance of justice requires a posture of heart towards that which is evil and that which is good, hating the evil and loving the good. This is described in Amos chapter 5, verse 15, in the charge that's given to the people there.

Hate evil and love good and establish justice in the gate. It may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. Wicked rulers are condemned for their perverted hearts in Isaiah chapter 5, verse 20.

Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. Following on from the preceding chapter, we get a clearer sense here of the structures of oppression. The rich landowners

were taking advantage of the precarious state of the poor and removing them from the land.

The false prophets were covering for them with their flattering words and the unfaithful judges were turning a blind eye or even aiding and abetting them through their failure to execute justice. Micah describes these leaders in the most arresting imagery. They are savagely tearing his people apart and butchering them like meat to be consumed.

He closely identifies with the victims of these evil rulers. He speaks of them as his people. These wicked officials and rulers had closed their ears to the distress of the people.

Now the Lord would close his ears to their cries in the day of their distress. This is an instance of the principle described in Proverbs chapter 21, verse 13. Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself call out and not be answered.

The second oracle addresses the false prophets. This time the words are those of the Lord himself. The task of the faithful prophet was fully and fearlessly to declare the word of the Lord.

These prophets however were flatterers and mercenaries. Their messages were designed to line their pockets rather than truthfully to communicate the word of the Lord. They would weaponize and adulterate the word of the Lord for their own gain, presenting divine approval as contingent upon people's willingness to give money to them.

The wealthy clients who funded them would receive flattering words while any who failed to do so would receive messages of condemnation, judgment and doom. In such a manner they would have brought dishonor upon the word of the Lord and would have caused people to distrust prophets more generally. These prophets would face the darkening of their vision as a result, putting them to shame.

The prophets do seem to enjoy some measure of genuine insight but that would soon be denied them in a way that put them to a more open shame, revealing them to be charlatans. They had, like Balaam, perverted actual gifts for their own gain and would suffer judgment accordingly. Against the flattering falsehoods of the unfaithful prophets, the words of Micah are the real thing.

As a prophet he is anointed and filled with the spirit of the Lord for his divinely appointed mission. His mission is that of declaring Israel's sin to it. He speaks with manifest power and with demonstrable justice.

He isn't hiding any of the truth from the people or denying the issues. He speaks with candour and with courage. He unflinchingly addresses realities that others shrink back from lest they jeopardize their income or their status.

The source of the power and the courage that he expresses is the Lord himself. The third and final oracle of the chapter begins in verse 9. It's very similar to verses 1 to 4. It begins with the same sort of words. Hear this you heads of the house of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel.

It's the same addressees. Once again they are condemned for their hatred of justice and the way in which they pervert all that is straight. They systematically adulterate the truth and justice.

The entire society of Jerusalem and of Judah by extension is built upon iniquity and injustice. Corruption is pervasive at its heart. The officials and judges pervert their judgments for bribes.

Priests and prophets who should be committed to delivering the full counsel of the Lord to upholding the law and delivering his word of revelation are fueled not by faithfulness but by desire for material gain. And while doing all of this they are presumptuous. They believe that since the Lord is in their midst in Jerusalem nothing terrible can befall them.

We might hear recall Jeremiah's temple sermon in Jeremiah chapter 7 verses 3 to 10. Thus says the Lord of hosts the God of Israel amend your ways and your deeds and I will let you dwell in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words.

This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord. For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless or the widow or shed innocent blood in this place and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm then I will let you dwell in this place in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever. Behold you trust in deceptive words to no avail.

Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal and go after other gods that you have not known and then come and stand before me in this house which is called by my name and say we are delivered only to go on doing all these abominations. In chapter 1 verse 6 judgment had been declared upon Samaria for its sin. Therefore I will make Samaria a heap in the open country, a place for planting vineyards and I will pour down her stones into the valley and uncover her foundations.

A similar sentence is declared upon Jerusalem here. She will become a heap of ruins and the mountain of the house a wooded height. A question to consider.

In verses 2 and 3 Micah uses the imagery of butchery to describe the way that injustice has come to function within the land of Judah. Why do you think he chose this particular image? Why might it be an especially apt way of thinking about injustice and the way that it functions? Matthew 6 verses 19 to 24 Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal but lay up for

yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal for where your treasure is there your heart will be also. The eye is the lamp of the body so if your eye is healthy your whole body will be full of light but if your eye is bad your whole body will be full of darkness.

If then the light in you is darkness how great is the darkness. No one can serve two masters for either he will hate the one and love the other or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

Therefore I tell you do not be anxious about your life what you will eat or what you will drink nor about your body what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns and yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field how they grow they neither toil nor spin yet I tell you even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

But if God so clothes the grass of the field which today is alive and tomorrow's thrown into the oven will he not much more clothe you? Oh you of little faith. Therefore do not be anxious saying what shall we eat or what shall we drink or what shall we wear? For the gentiles seek after all these things and your heavenly father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you.

Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. At the end of Matthew chapter 6 Jesus continues his teaching about what it looks like to live in a way that fulfills righteousness.

Jesus' teaching here is similar to that of Solomon. What we see in Solomon is wisdom unpacking the logic of the law seeing the deeper ways in which the principles of the law can be expressed and lived out. He's recognizing shrewd ways that we can conform ourselves to it.

Once again Jesus recognizes that motives don't float free but they can be moved in different ways by material situations and conditions. And there's a problem that we face. The problem is all the things that we invest in on this earth are things that can fade, things that can fail, things that can be lost and that can be corroded or rusted or tarnished.

And this is similar to what we see in the book of Ecclesiastes as Solomon reflects upon the fact that even if this person builds up this great wealth through wisdom they may end up leaving it to someone who's a fool and will swander it or bad luck can hit them or they may find that all their wisdom comes to naught in some other way. The alternative then is to invest your resources in something that will last, something that will endure

and those are spiritual treasures. The other thing that he notices here that he highlights in his teaching is that the heart will tend to follow your resources.

Where your treasure is there your heart will be also. And there's a logic to that statement that isn't merely condemning the building up of treasures on earth, it's also calling us to invest our resources in things that will last in the things of heaven. The point that Jesus is making is do you want your heart to be set upon the things of heaven? Well invest your resources, invest your money in the things of heaven.

This is similar to some of the things that Jesus has been teaching earlier in this chapter. Do you want to care about what God thinks over what your neighbour thinks and what the crowd thinks? Well then make sure to perform your prayer in a secret place where only God can see and not in front of the audience of your neighbour. You'll perform to whatever audience you have and so perform to an audience that is of God alone and then you'll find that that is the audience that you set your heart upon conforming to and pleasing.

Put your money where you want your heart to be and where it is not vulnerable to loss and where it won't place your heart in the same jeopardy of loss. Jesus has already used the imagery of the lamp to describe his disciples and now he uses it to describe the eye. We can speak about things like the apple of our eyes, the thing that we are focused upon or cherish above all else.

The eye orients the body, it turns the head which moves the entire body in turn. If your eye is set upon the light then your entire body will be affected by that. However if your eye is set upon that which is evil it will be very different.

In Matthew there seems to be a particular meaning that has a bit more of an idiomatic flavour and it's concerned particularly with generosity. In Matthew chapter 20 verse 15 we encounter this expression again where the master says to the labourers in the vineyard, am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me or do you begrudge my generosity or more literally or is your eye bad because I am good? The contrast between the good and the bad eye might be the contrast between a generous person who looks out and sees people to whom to give and the envious person who turns green when they see anything that they want that the other possesses. Now that is a way in which we deal with the sins connected with money.

Do we have a good eye? Do we have an eye that's fixated upon helping other people or are we people that are focused on what we can gain for ourselves and what we envy of our neighbours? Jesus continues to teach about the dangers of money. Mammon or money can become a master. Our powers place us under their power very easily without us realising what's going on.

Our liberties can take liberties with us. Our technologies can render us subject to them.

We think that the economy makes us rich but we can often find ourselves enslaved to its continual growth.

It preoccupies our attention. We become fixated upon it. We can think about similar things with new technologies which promise to make us free and give us all these new powers and yet we find ourselves enslaved to our devices.

We're not actually freed by them. They take us away from things that are good and so in the same way money can become a master over us if we're not careful. There is a danger of focusing upon ideas and motivations and not being sufficiently attentive to things.

Money itself, not just our motives concerning money, but money itself is a dangerous trap and we need to be very wary of how we relate to it. Treated shrewdly it can be good. Treated foolishly it can entangle us in all sorts of evil and bondage.

Like Solomon, Jesus draws attention to the creatures and God's concern with and provision for them. Once again the issue is our attitude to material possessions and provisions. We are to adopt a posture of dependency upon God for our daily needs.

Worry is far more likely to diminish our life than to extend or fill it. There's relief to be found in a reminder of the limits of our power. This isn't a denial of the value of prudence and provision for ourselves but it's a spiritual posture to be adopted with anxiety being the alternative.

And there's a connection with the prayer for daily bread here. The contrast between worry and faith. Jesus will return to some of these themes in the parable of the sower where the concerns of this age and the worries of this age can choke the seed, the deceit of wealth.

All of these things are obstacles for our pursuit of the kingdom. What is our priority? It should be the seeking of the kingdom and God's righteousness. Everything else must be secondary.

The kingdom alone is where we will ultimately find security. A question to consider. Where in this section is Jesus picking up themes from the book of Ecclesiastes? Look back at the book of Ecclesiastes and see some of the parallels between its teaching and Jesus' teaching here.