

OpenTheo

September 8th: Micah 6 & Matthew 8:18-34

September 7, 2021



Alastair Roberts

What does the Lord require? Calming the storm and the Gadarene demoniac.

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 6. 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, 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? The voice of the Lord cries to the city, and it is sound wisdom to

fear your name.

Hear of the rod, and of him who appointed it. Can I forget any longer the treasures of wickedness in the house of the wicked, and the scant measure that is accursed? Shall I acquit the man with wicked scales, and with a bag of deceitful weights? Your rich men are full of violence. Your inhabitants speak lies, and their tongue is deceitful in their mouth.

Therefore I strike you with a grievous blow, making you desolate because of your sins. You shall eat, but not be satisfied, and there shall be hunger within you. You shall put away, but not preserve, and what you preserve I will give to the sword.

You shall sow, but not reap. You shall tread olives, but not anoint yourselves with oil. You shall tread grapes, but not drink wine.

For you have kept the statutes of Omri, and all the works of the house of Ahab, and you have walked in their councils, that I may make you a desolation, and your inhabitants a hissing. So you shall bear the scorn of my people. Micah chapter six begins with a covenant indictment that the Lord brings against the people, with the mountains and the hills summoned as witnesses.

In Deuteronomy chapter 32 verse one, the heavens and the earth are summoned as witnesses for the song of Moses. Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak, and let the earth hear the words of my mouth. The summoning of the mountains and the hills gives a sense of how serious the Lord's indictment is.

However, where we might have expected the Lord to open with searing declaration of his people's guilt, he actually invites his people to bring forth evidence against him. He's looking for some evidence, any evidence, to support their behavior towards him. Was he unfaithful to them in some respect, or did he needlessly burden them? He recounts what he did for them.

He led them out of slavery in the Exodus, the great founding event of the people, the event upon which everything else rested. He provided them with gifted leaders, Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. Moses and Aaron are mentioned as a pair in 1 Samuel chapter 12.

Psalms 77 verse 20 declares, "You led your people like a flock "by the hand of Moses and Aaron." This verse is surprising for including Miriam alongside them. Miriam, of course, was the sister of Moses and Aaron. She was involved in Moses' deliverance as an infant.

She also led the women in song in Exodus chapter 15. This passage is reminiscent of Joshua chapter 24 verses five to 10. "And I sent Moses and Aaron, "and I plagued Egypt with what I did in the midst of it.

"And afterward I brought you out. "Then I brought your fathers out of Egypt, "and you

came to the sea. "And the Egyptians pursued your fathers "with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea.

"And when they cried to the Lord, "He put darkness between you and the Egyptians, "and made the sea come upon them and cover them. "And your eyes saw what I did in Egypt, "and you lived in the wilderness a long time. "Then I brought you to the land of the Amorites "who lived on the other side of the Jordan.

"They fought with you, and I gave them into your hand, "and you took possession of their land, "and I destroyed them before you. "Then Balak, the son of Zippor, king of Moab, "arose and fought against Israel. "And he sent and invited Balaam, the son of Beor, "to curse you, but I would not listen to Balaam.

"Instead, he blessed you, "so I delivered you out of his hand." As in Joshua chapter 24, Micah singles out Balak's attempt to curse Israel as a significant instance of the Lord's deliverance of them, reflecting upon the Lord's faithfulness to and deliverance of them in their history should spur them to current faithfulness. The reference to from Shittim to Gilgal presumably relates to the crossing of the Jordan, another signal event of deliverance also referenced in Joshua chapter 24. The prophet then takes up the question of what renders a person or people fit to enter into the presence of the Lord.

Many would think that what the Lord most wanted was great numbers of sacrifices, perhaps burnt offerings of the finest animals, offering the whole animal to the Lord rather than just having a sacrificial meal. How about multiplying sacrifices countless times over, perhaps even like the sacrifices with which Solomon dedicated the temple? Maybe the more generous and extravagant libations of oil would do it. If that weren't enough, perhaps the worshiper should offer his own firstborn child for his sin.

Would that be sufficient? A common and important theme in the prophetic literature is the critique of mere ritual sacrifice apart from covenant faithfulness. First Samuel chapter 15 verse 22, has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord. Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice and to listen than the fat of rams.

Isaiah chapter one verse 11. What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices says the Lord. I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts.

I do not delight in the blood of bulls or of lambs or of goats. And in verses 16 to 17 of that chapter, wash yourselves, make yourselves clean, remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes, cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, correct oppression, bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. So what then does the Lord require of someone? Micah's answer here is reminiscent of Hosea chapter 12 verse six.

So you by the help of your God return, hold fast to love and justice and wait continually

for your God. Also of Deuteronomy chapter 10 verses 12 to 13. And now Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? But to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord which I am commanding you today for your good.

There are also similar statements in places like Psalm 15, answering the question of the sort of persons that will enter into the Lord's presence. The first requirement is a commitment to justice. A mere negative avoidance of injustice is not enough.

There should be a desire to address injustice more broadly and to bring justice as a positive condition. Loyalty or kindness is the second requirement. Here described as something that the faithful worshiper must love.

Such loyalty must be manifested in relationship with God but also in relationships with one's neighbors. Loyalty extends itself towards others. Justice by itself can become harsh very easily.

Just as kindness by itself can be lacking in justice's orientation towards truth but tempered with kindness, it can be a beautiful thing. The final requirement is to walk humbly with God. This is at the heart of it all.

Where this is lacking, all else starts to become disjointed and hollow. True worship is not just ethical, the performance of moral deeds. Rather true worship is at its very core, a heart set upon the Lord, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

This is what the Lord looks for and desires from us. Anything less is not enough for the worship of our maker. In verse nine, Micah acts as the herald of the voice of the Lord.

The Lord is speaking and all should be summoned to attention. The second half of the verse translated as hear of the rod and of him who appointed it in the ESV could also be read as Leslie Allen suggests as a summons to attention for a group of people. Listen tribe and assemble citizens.

If the first reading is correct, it's a reference to the Lord's punishment and of the one who ordained it. In the second case, it's presumably addressed to Judah at a time when the people would have been assembled together. In verses 10 to 12, there are three key indictments of the people.

The indictment focuses upon stealing, deceit, lying and false measures. As in the book of Amos, the rich of the land are here condemned for their predatory dealings with the poor. Their riches are gained through falsehood, oppression and injustice.

And the more that they gather, the more that those riches testify against them to the

Lord. The Lord promises as their sentence and judgment that he would make them desolate for their sins. Verses 14 and 15 give us curses of futility similar to those found in Deuteronomy chapter 28 verses 38 to 41 in the curses of the covenant.

You shall carry much seed into the field and shall gather in little for the locust shall consume it. You shall plant vineyards and dress them but you shall neither drink the wine nor gather the grapes for the worm shall eat them. You shall have olive trees throughout all your territory but you shall not anoint yourself with the oil for your olives shall drop off.

You shall father sons and daughters but they shall not be yours for they shall go into captivity. Although Micah is addressing people in the Southern Kingdom of Judah, they are accused of keeping the statutes of Omri and the works of the house of Ahab. This might seem strange until we consider that the influence of the Omrides has spread to the south as the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, Athaliah, married King Jehoram.

To secure his reign, Jehoram had killed six of his brothers and through Athaliah, all sorts of idolatry and other pagan influences came into the nation. Athaliah herself had reigned as a usurper and tried to establish the worship of Baal in the Southern Kingdom. Those who follow in the path of the Omrides, however, will be cut off, they will be made desolate and they will be scorned by those who are faithful.

A question to consider, how does walking humbly with our God help us to do justice and to love kindness? Matthew chapter eight, verses 18 to 34. Now when Jesus saw a crowd around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side and a scribe came up and said to him, "'Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, "'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head.' Another of the disciples said to him, "'Lord, let me first go and bury my father.' And Jesus said to him, "'Follow me and leave the dead to bury their own dead.' And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him and behold, there arose a great storm on the sea so that the boat was being swamped by the waves, but he was asleep. And they went and woke him saying, "'Save us, Lord, we are perishing.' And he said to them, "'Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?' Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea and there was a great calm.

And the men marveled saying, "'What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?' And when he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men met him coming out of the tombs, so fierce that no one could pass that way. And behold, they cried out, "'What have you to do with us, O son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?' Now a herd of many pigs was feeding at some distance from them. And the demons begged him saying, "'If you cast us out, send us away into the herd of pigs.' And he said to them, "'Go.' So they came out and went into the pigs.

And behold, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the waters. The herdsmen fled and going into the city, they told everything, especially what had happened to the demon-possessed men. And behold, all the city came out to meet Jesus.

And when they saw him, they begged him to leave their region." Matthew 8 begins a series of dramatic actions that Jesus performs in healings, exorcisms, and other wonders. Here we have an interruption of that narrative with a message concerning discipleship. And we've seen something of the order of these miracles and signs and actions, where Jesus will perform three things and then there's a message concerning discipleship, three more, another message.

This message underlines the difficulty of discipleship, both in the fact of not having somewhere to lay your head and also having to leave things behind in a radical way. Jesus' statement concerning the foxes and the birds of the air might be a subtle reference to rulers within the land and to Gentile rulers more generally. The foxes are those like Herod, he's described as a fox in Luke 13, verse 32, and the birds of the air are people like the Romans and others.

This is the first use of the expression Son of Man in the gospel. And this expression brings back the background of places like Daniel, the references to the suffering of the Son of Man, to the heavenly authority of the Son of Man. This is an expression that Jesus uses of himself, particularly when speaking to people outside of the immediate disciple group.

The term is a somewhat enigmatic one, and perhaps it's a challenge not just to slot Jesus into an existing slot. There is a slot called Son of Man that you find within the prophets like Ezekiel and Daniel, but it's not clearly defined. And so you have this one character that's a bit mysterious and Jesus can define himself relative to this character, but also fill out a picture that has surprising elements to it, such as the Son of Man who's rejected, who's not received, who has nowhere to lay his head, presenting the starkest contrast with the rulers of this age, who unlike the one who has all kingdoms and authorities given to him by the ancient of days, dwell in mighty palaces and beautiful houses.

The final statement that Jesus makes here is perhaps the most arresting. In response to a disciple who asked first to bury his father and then to follow, Christ says, follow me and leave the dead to bury their own dead. It's surprising break with what we'd expect of filial piety, that the son has to be loyal to his father and bury him.

Elsewhere, Jesus teaches against the teaching of the Pharisees who allowed people to be absolved of their responsibilities to their parents. So presumably that's not quite what Jesus is saying here. However, Jesus' statement still should shake us.

The statement, let the dead bury their own dead, suggests that there's a cycle of death

that's playing out. That generation after generation, the dead are burying their dead and these people are walking dead. There's no actual life that's taking place.

The cycle is one of death. And Jesus throughout this chapter has been introducing a cycle of life. He's been dealing with people who are dead, dead in the sense of being outside of fellowship with God and other people, or dead in the sense of experiencing deep sickness and approaching death.

And then we'll see other forms of death as we go through. Jesus has come to break this cycle and those who want to follow him must recognise their loyalty to this cycle of life and not just perpetuating the cycle of death. There is something that must take precedence over that.

Now it's worth bearing in mind that this father had presumably not died yet. Rather the man is waiting for his father to die and then going to follow Jesus. But by that point, it will be too late.

This mission has an urgency to it. There's only a few years before Christ will die. And if he's not on board at that point, he may miss the boat.

And the urgency with which Jesus presents his call to discipleship starts to sharpen the distinction between the following crowds and the committed disciples. That distinction becomes much clearer. Jesus is followed by his disciples into the boat and out into the sea.

And we might think about the story of Jonah as there's this storm that rises up and the people on deck are frantic and trying to deal with the situation. Whereas Jonah is asleep in the hold. Here Jesus is asleep, but the situation changes when he rises up.

The storm rises and Jesus is asleep. Then Jesus rises and the storm sleeps. There is a quaking of the waters.

Now there are three earthquakes in the book of Matthew. The quaking of the sea here, there's a quaking at the cross and there's a quaking at the resurrection. And I think this should be a clue that there's something more going on here.

Jesus is asleep in the grave and then he rises up and he delivers his people. The time will come when the disciples feel that they're left all alone, that Jesus is asleep, that he's not helping them, he's gone from the scene. And they face this great storm around them and then Jesus rises up and delivers them and stills the waves.

That will happen at the resurrection. And this is a preview as it were of that pattern already taking place. The little faith of the disciples contrast sharply with the great faith of the centurion earlier in the chapter.

Jesus is in control of the situation. He's able to rule over the waves in a way that causes the disciples to marvel. They don't know who this person could be.

This shouldn't just be presumed to be a proof of Jesus' divinity, but rather of the prophetic authority of an appointed man, a man who has had incredible authority vested in him. And we'll see as we go through Matthew that actually Jesus has all authority in heaven and earth invested in him, an authority that only God himself can enjoy. But at this point, they're wondering whether this is a great prophet, a prophet greater than all the other prophets.

At the other side of the sea, they arrive at the country of the Gadarenes. There they encounter a sort of trifecta of extreme impurity, demonic possession, tombs, and pigs. Why are there two demoniacs here? It's not the only time that Matthew has two of some people or two of some things where the other gospels only have one.

We see two sets of blind people in chapter 9, verse 27, and in chapter 20, verse 29 to 34, and then also a donkey and a cult in chapter 21. You can see pairs of persons healed, two demoniacs, a woman and a girl, two blind men. Pairs are more common within the book of Matthew than in some of the other gospels.

We see the pair of thieves at the cross. We can see the pairs of brothers in chapter 4. And so maybe Matthew's making a broader point about pairings here as witnesses perhaps or something else. It's quite possible to harmonize these accounts with the accounts that we find in other gospels.

Perhaps Matthew has less of a scenic immediacy than Mark does, and so focuses upon the numbers of people more than the specific engagements that Jesus has in which one of the demoniacs would have been the lead figure. Another possibility to consider here is that Matthew is consciously collecting a series of miracles in a way that highlights numbers. So you have 12 people that are delivered in some way, the leper, the centurion and his servant, Peter's mother-in-law, two demoniacs, paralytic, a woman and a girl, two blind men, and a mute man.

And putting all these together, it's a sign of a new Israel perhaps. The demoniacs address Christ as the eschatological judge, as the son of God, as the one who will torment them. We've already seen Christ presented as the eschatological judge at the end of chapter seven, where Christ is the one who will judge people who come and say, Lord, Lord, and he will say, I never knew you, depart from me, you workers of wickedness.

Elsewhere, we've also seen Satan recognizing Christ as the son of God. The use of such a title underlines the fact that Christ's identity was known to spiritual beings. He is not just a mere man.

He is one who has come from heaven to act in a decisive manner. Many people reading Matthew's gospel or the synoptic gospels more generally can suggest that they have no concept of Christ's pre-existence that Christ is one who has come from heaven, but yet has always existed before that, thinking of Christ just as a great man perhaps. But passages like this suggest that even in the synoptics, there is a concept of pre-existence.

The demons beg that if they are to be cast out, they be cast out into the herd of pigs. The pigs then career down the steep bank and are drowned in the waters. It's similar to the drowning of Pharaoh's army in the sea.

Christ is the son of God who binds the strong man. He is the one with the power to exorcise the demons, to drive them out, to deliver people that have been held in bondage. But yet there's a twist in this story.

We might expect it to end with the deliverance of the demoniacs and then the rejoicing of the people of the town, but that's not what happens. The Gadarenes beg that Christ would depart from them. Much as the demons begged, there's an association between the demons and the Gadarenes.

Now, one interesting thing to observe is that these men were cast out of the town. They were dwelling among the tombs. They were in many ways like scapegoats of the town.

And now the demons are cast out of them and the demons enter into a herd of pigs, a great many of them, according to the Gospel of Mark. This is not the way such scenes usually go. Usually you have the one or two being cast out by the herd, but now the one or two are delivered and the multitude of the herd rushes into the waters.

So there's a reversal of the scapegoat pattern. René Girard has argued that within this story, we're seeing a reversal of the scapegoat pattern. And in the scapegoat pattern, typically, a few people are cast out by a larger group as a sort of lightning rod for the problems within their community.

And perhaps that's what happened to the Gadarene demoniacs. Perhaps all the demons and issues of the community were being cast out into them and they were the ones dwelling among the tombs, holding all these demons of the community. And then Christ deals with those demons, releases the demoniacs from that oppression.

And those demons then go into the herd, which represents the people of the town. The herdsmen run into the town and tell the people and they beg Christ to depart. Christ upsets the social order.

Christ ends up being the one who is cast out, not just the demons from the demoniacs. I've commented upon the patterns of threes within these signs. And here, I think we've seen a movement from more private miracles in the first three signs of chapter eight to more dramatic signs of authority, causing people to fear with an emphasis upon

reaction.

So the first one is what sort of man is this that even wins and see obey him? And the second reaction is that of the people of the Gadarene city who beg Christ to depart from them. In these reactions, we're seeing some of the options that people have in their response to Christ. Will they seek to drive him out as their fear leads to a rejection of Christ? Or will they be people who marvel at his works and follow him? A question to consider.

Within these verses, we see that Christ is one who shakes things up. Christ is one with great power and authority. Christ is one who upsets the social order.

How can the example of the people of the Gadarene city help us better to understand responses to Christ in our day and age?