



The Round Church at  
**St Andrew the Great**  
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached  
on Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> August 2005  
by Mark Ashton

10p

Micah chapter 6:9-7:20

**The God Who Pardons**

**Introduction: Putting out the Rubbish**

[Illustration 1] Do you enjoy putting the rubbish out? (The garbage as they say in the States). I don't know whether it is a symptom of some strange Freudian complex in me, but I find it very satisfying. Not that it is not a chore every Monday morning, to empty all those bins and wastepaper baskets [Illustration 2] into the vicarage wheelie bins [Illustration 3]—but to know that one has got rid of it, that it has gone, never to return, [Illustration 4] is deeply cathartic. At least, I find that. Now, I know this is not a very PC illustration: Political correctness demands re-cycling these days, energy conservation and an awareness of green issues, in our increasingly throwaway society. But I like to get rid of things—and not just the trash, also the clutter, the bric-a-brac, the junk, which fills up our attics and lofts, our cellars and basements, our garages and garden sheds.

Now, just as our homes need the rubbish cleared out, so do our lives. And God is a clearer-out of rubbish. The prophet Micah brought his book to a marvellous climax on just that note: *Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea* (7:18-19). He is a clearer out of rubbish. As we shall see, the book could not have a more fitting conclusion. But we are going to look first at how Micah gets to that point from chapter 6:9 onwards: *Listen! The LORD is calling to the city—and to fear your name is wisdom—“Heed the rod and the One who appointed it.”*

Remember, it is a book of poetic oracles, where the prophet switches frequently from gloom to glory, from doom to hope: Doom for a prosperous but corrupt nation; hope for a remnant who have put their trust in God. Micah has just issued the challenge of 6:8: *He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.* In the verses which follow, God assesses the nation against that challenge, and the prophet finds it a miserable experience—*What misery is mine!* (7:1).

**1) Misery**

(6:9 – 7:6)

*Listen! The LORD is calling to the city—and to fear your name is wisdom—“Heed the rod and the One who appointed it. Am I still to forget, O wicked house, your ill-gotten treasures and the short ephah, which is accursed? Shall I acquit a man with dishonest scales, with a bag of false weights? Her rich men are violent; her people are liars and their tongues speak deceitfully”* (6:9-12). One senses he could name names, if you asked him to. The desire to earn more money, and to own more goods, had driven moral considerations about honesty out of the window for his contemporaries. There is a chilling note to the first few words of the next verse: *Therefore, I have begun to destroy you, to ruin you because of your sins* (6:13). *I have begun to destroy you*—God's judgement begins—even here and now in the present life, although its culmination will be in the life to come. And the present experience of judgement is frustration and futility: *You will eat but not be satisfied; your stomach will still be empty. You will store up but save nothing, because what you save I will give to the sword. You will plant but not harvest; you will press olives but not use the oil on yourselves, you will crush grapes but not drink the wine* (6:14-15). Now, Omri and Arab were two earlier kings who had

infamously deserted God and turned to paganism so: *You have observed the statutes of Omri and all the practices of Ahab's house, and you have followed their traditions. Therefore I will give you over to ruin and your people to derision; you will bear the scorn of the nations* (6:16). When a nation deserts God, as ours has done, just like Micah's had done, moral standards are steadily eroded. It is not instantaneous. We live in the UK today in a society parasitic on Christianity. We have abandoned its precepts, but we still pretend to follow its practices. But the foundation is no longer there. Public and private morality are imploding all around us. We are like one of those cartoon characters who has just walked over the edge of a cliff and is suspended in midair for a moment of disbelief, before the inevitable calamity occurs.

So, an overview of public life is thoroughly depressing: *What misery is mine! I am like one who gathers summer fruit at the gleaning of the vineyard; there is no cluster of grapes to eat, none of the early figs that I crave. The godly have been swept from the land; not one upright man remains. All men lie in wait to shed blood; each hunts his brother with a net. Both hands are skilled in doing evil; the ruler demands gifts, the judge accepts bribes, the powerful dictate what they desire—they all conspire together. The best of them is like a brier, the most upright worse than a thorn hedge* (7:1-4). We look out on our government, our culture, our media—and we see materialistic people seeking their own advantage. But God is aware, and God is at work: *The day of your watchmen has come, the day God visits you. Now is the time of their confusion* (7:4). God makes sure that there are immediate confusing consequences of our social moral corruption: *Do not trust a neighbour; put no confidence in a friend. Even with her who lies in your embrace be careful of your words* (7:5). They had stopped trusting in God. Now they could not trust each other, not even within the most intimate of relationships: *For a son dishonours his father, a daughter rises up against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies are the members of his own household* (7:6). Today we are tracing the roots of criminal behaviour back into the family. Micah knew just what a sign that is of God's absence from a nation's life—when the family falls apart.

So, we need to be able to recognise rubbish when we see it (spiritual trash). As I am sure you know, you are supposed to be able to put a frog into a pan of cold water and heat the water up gradually until the frog boils to death, without it ever jumping out. Whereas, if you had dropped it into a pan of already boiling water the frog would have jumped out straightaway! (That is not an experiment I have ever conducted myself, I hasten to add!) Well, we are frogs in the gradually heating water—a society that has abandoned God and is falling apart morally. And we need the courage to say, “This is rubbish. It needs to go. It is dirt. It is filth. And we want it out of our lives”: Whether it is business behaviour (how they act at work), or artistic licence (what we watch on screen or stage), or government legislation (how they govern our lives), or our own personal depravity (what I am doing with my own soul).

But from the misery of an honest appraisal of human society, Micah then turns to hope: *But as for me, I watch in hope for the LORD, I wait for God my Saviour; my God will hear me* (7:7). There's a different note!

## **2) Hope**

(7:7-20)

*But as for me, I watch in hope for the LORD, I wait for God my Saviour; my God will hear me* (7:7). He watches and he waits for God—

a) Watch. Watching entails an honest scrutiny of the world around us and of ourselves. It will lead us to acknowledge sin: *Do not gloat over me, my enemy! Though I have fallen, I will rise. Though I sit in darkness, the LORD will be my light. Because I have sinned against him, I will bear the LORD's wrath, until he pleads my case and establishes my right* (7:8-9). Micah (speaking for the nation) was under no illusions: he knew he had fallen, that he was in darkness, that he had sinned against God, that it was God's anger—God's wrath that he had deserved and was experiencing. And there can be no relief until there is honest acknowledgement. I cannot be helped until I know I need help, like the toddler who insists in pushing his own buggy. You can't help him until in some way or other he comes to grief. Only then can you step in and take over. Don't let's be headstrong toddlers in our relationship to God. But Micah did not just watch. He also waited: *But as for me, I watch in hope for the LORD, I wait for God my Saviour; my God will hear me* (7:7).

b) Wait. *Because I have sinned against him, I will bear the LORD's wrath, until he pleads my case and establishes my right. He will bring me out into the light; I will see his righteousness. Then my enemy will see it and will be covered with shame, she who said to me, "Where is the LORD your God?" My eyes will see her downfall; even now she will be trampled underfoot like mire in the streets. The day for building your walls will come, the day for extending your boundaries. In that day people will come to you from Assyria and the cities of Egypt, even from Egypt to the Euphrates and from sea to sea and from mountain to mountain. The earth will become desolate because of its inhabitants, as the result of their deeds (7:9-13).*

Notice that *until* in verse 9: *Because I have sinned against him, I will bear the LORD's wrath, until he pleads my case and establishes my right. He will bring me out into the light; I will see his righteousness.* There was a reversal coming; and it would be executed by God: instead of futility, frustration and moral deterioration, there would be security and prosperity: *Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock of your inheritance, which lives by itself in a forest, in fertile pasturelands. Let them feed in Bashan and Gilead as in days long ago (7:14).* It would be as wonderful as the greatest of God's past acts: *As in the days when you came out of Egypt, I will show them my wonders (7:15).* And there would be a complete reversal of position between those who ignore and oppose God here on earth and often seem to thrive (almost in consequence), and those who, like Micah, watch and wait for God: *Nations will see and be ashamed, deprived of all their power. They will lay their hands on their mouths and their ears will become deaf. They will lick dust like a snake, like creatures that crawl on the ground. They will come trembling out of their dens; they will turn in fear to the LORD our God and will be afraid of you (7:16-17).*

So, there was hope for Micah because he knew what to do with sin. He knew that sin was against God. But he also knew that it was God, and not sin, that would have the last word: *Because I have sinned against him, I will bear the LORD's wrath, until he pleads my case and establishes my right. He will bring me out into the light; I will see his righteousness (7:9).* And that is why he ends the book as he does: *Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea. You will be true to Jacob, and show mercy to Abraham, as you pledged on oath to our fathers in days long ago (7:18-20).*

### **3) Pardon—a God defined by what He does with sin**

(7:18-20)

*Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy (7:18).* God is a God Who is looking for the opportunity to show mercy.

Sin is an offence against God—to ignore Him, to evade Him, to disobey Him, to rebel against Him, to know that He has a will for our lives and deliberately to follow our own will rather than His. God would not be being loving towards us, if He just pretended our sin did not exist. It can't just be swept under the carpet. It has to be dealt with, just as household rubbish must be dealt with. And He has found a way of dealing with it: *You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea (7:19).* God treats our sins as His enemies. Remember verse 10: *Then my enemy will see it and will be covered with shame, she who said to me, "Where is the LORD your God?" My eyes will see her downfall; even now she will be trampled underfoot like mire in the streets,* and verse 15: *"As in the days when you came out of Egypt, I will show them my wonders."* Well, there is an echo here in verse 19 of what God did for the Israelites at the Red Sea when He rescued them from Egypt. They'd sung a song back in Exodus 15:4—*Pharaoh's chariots and his army He has hurled into the sea.*

There was a university theology lecturer who had been invited to preach in a Pentecostal church on that passage, who was being somewhat irritated by the frequent interruptions as he spoke; so, when someone called out from the back, "Praise God for bringing Moses and all those Israelites safely through the mighty depths of the Red Sea!", he responded "Well, actually modern scholarship has taught us that it was probably just the Reed Sea, which is really no more than a marsh, with water only a few inches deep." Unabashed, the voice called again from the back of the church, "Praise God for drowning all Pharaoh's chariots and horsemen in water only a few inches deep!"

Well, just as God destroyed Israel's enemies at the Exodus, so He destroys our sins. They do not simply need wiping out. They need to be destroyed. Their life needs to be extinguished. There is rubbish in our houses which is trash, which we are not remotely tempted to hang on to like this [Illustration 5]. But there are also things that we are tempted to hang on to, but that we would be better off without: [Illustration 6] the bric-a-brac, the junk, in our attics and lofts. We love them, but they ought to go. In a far more sinister sense, there are sins in your and my life that we are happy to see the back of, and there are sins that we love and we cling to. We know they are wrong. But they mean so much to us. We cuddle and cosset and stroke them, and hope God will turn a blind eye to them. He doesn't. He knows the damage they will do us, and He wants to exterminate them.

At one church prayer meeting, a particular Christian used regularly to pray, "Lord, sweep away the cobwebs of my lust and greed and selfishness;" Or "Dear Father, please clean me up and remove the cobwebs of pride and arrogance from my life"; "Deal with the cobweb of my laziness that so afflicts me." Until another Christian in the group prayed, "Lord, couldn't you please just kill that spider!"

***You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea*** (7:19). Through the death of Jesus on the cross, God does not just obliterate the stains of our sin. He destroys sin. He treats it as His enemy. He wants to cut the knot that allows particular sins so to dominate our lives; and He puts them away from us, where we can never reach them again. I am told that, although we have stood on top of the highest mountain peak on this planet, and even on the surface of its moon, no human being has yet reached the deepest depths of its seas.

If this is how God treats sin, if this is what God did with sin, when Jesus died on the cross, ought we not to do the same? Recognise that sin is our enemy; our rebellious attitude to God is the source of endless frustration and futility on our lives, and let Him deal with us. Confess sin and hand it over to Him, and don't let's be seen later scrabbling in the wheelie bins of our own sin, to get some old favourite out again, like a childhood teddy bear, to play with a little more: ***Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea. You will be true to Jacob, and show mercy to Abraham, as you pledged on oath to our fathers in days long ago*** (7:18-20). As He was, so He always will be. History is never over and done with for the prophets, because God remains always the same—and so this book challenges us tonight: Are you going to let this God, Micah's God, be your God? To deal with sin in me, to deal with sin for our nation?

*(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)*