

Living Sacrifices

Micah 6

Rev Dr Jos M. Strengholt

I like the detective novels of John Grisham a lot, especially when they are about trials in court. Or those rather old TV series like Law and Order.

I love the arguments, the tension, the accusations, the defence.



1. The court case

Micah takes us straight into the court room. The God of Israel is the plaintiff and He lays out his case. The indictment, the formal charge, is against the people of Israel. They are the wrongdoers.

And there are witnesses also: the mountains, the hills, the foundations of the earth. Strange witnesses.

The mountains and the hills are witnesses because they are even older than God's Covenant with Israel, and they have, as it were, witnessed all the events in the history of Israel and its relationship with God.

They have witnessed how God has dealt with his own people, and they have seen how those people have behaved in regard to God.

We do not have mountains, hardly even hills here in Holland. If Micah had lived now, here in this country, he would maybe have called our rivers as witnesses?

Micah calls the mountains to listen to the accusations of God against his people, and then God, as the plaintiff, builds up his case slowly.

He first asks: 'What had I done wrong to you? How have I wearied you?'

Imagine that God asks of you: 'Please tell me; where have I wronged you? How did I exhaust you?'

Maybe some of the poor and suffering peasants of Israel who had lost their land, were tired of God. They had always obeyed God, but had it helped them? They had been impoverished because of the evil acts of the rich.

When people feel low and bad, many blame God. 'Why should we worship him? Why did He not help me! Has He done me any good?'

And the rich people in Micah's days could not really use a God who had laws that actually forbade them to accumulate wealth at the expense of other people. They were tired of God. 'We do not need Him with his rules, we can help ourselves just fine, thank you.'

They also adopted other gods that allowed them to do as they please. A great trick, also used nowadays. If you do not like God or what He wants from you, you change your view of God, and make him more amenable to what you like and what society deems normal.

In the verses 4-5, Micah reminds them of their history. After God asked Israel how he had tired them, He reminds them: 'I tired myself by bringing you out of Egypt.' Micah plays with words, not visible in our bible translation.

God saved Israel from slavery in Egypt, He gave them leaders to take them to the promised land, and when others wanted to curse Israel, God turned that into a blessing for them.

God has always been good for his people. We as his children have nothing to complain about, nothing to charge him with. He has blessed you. This reminds me of the old bishop Polycarp.



In the year 155AD, Polycarp was brought before the Roman governor in the city of Smyrna. Because he was the bishop, he was sentenced to death. The governor took pity on the old man of 86 years old, and he tried to persuade him to save his own life. 'Man, denounce Christ, otherwise you will be burned on the stake!'

The faithful bishop Polycarp answered, "86 years have I served him, and He has never done me injury; how then can I now blaspheme my King and Saviour?"

But this was not how Israel responded to all the years of God's goodness. In the verses 9-16 Israel, still in court, is reminded of all their evil deeds.

They did not show a shred of thankfulness and commitment to the God who had always blessed them. And they eloped with other gods and lived a life of lawlessness.

2. Why that is so unacceptable : what God did for them

St Paul, in his letter to the Romans, says:

Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made. [...] Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him. (Romans 1.20-21)

This is the tendency of all people. We are blessed by God in so many ways, but we forget to thank him and to worship him and we do as we please.

That is why in the New Testament we also read about the court case of God against all human beings. He has done nothing bad to us, but we are to be blamed for our lack of true worship and obedience. Our judgement is well deserved.

God never does anything that is not in accordance with his Word. He never does anything other than what He told us He will do. He abides by his covenant.

It is awe-inspiring that God relates to us and that we can relate to him. Truly a miracle.

Followers of Jesus Christ participate in this renewed covenant: God continues to relate to us, in spite of our many transgressions and in spite of our lack of thankfulness and worship.

Israel knew of God's patience, and we know that God is patient with us. That is a fact. If God would immediately punish us for any of our wrongdoings, none of us would be alive today. But he is ever loving and forgiving, thanks to Jesus Christ,

The Lord, the Lord God, is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth. (Exodus 34.6)

But God's goodness and patience for us must not be put to the test. To very imperfect Christians, as we all are, Paul writes that God's kindness is intended to lead us to repentance.

Knowing that God is gracious and that He forgives our sins, must not lead us to sloppiness, but to a life for Him.

In the court case of Micah, the accused people realised they had to do something, so they asked him: 'What must we do!'

Maybe they did feel that something was wrong. Maybe they felt guilty? Or they just feared the possibility of punishment? Or maybe Assyrian armies were already in the land and the rich leaders of Israel panicked?

'What must we do!'

A good question for all of us. How do we repair our relationship with God?

3. What would have been the solution?

What suggestions did those scared people in Micah's days come up with? How did they think they could repair their relationship with God?

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?

‘Is this what God wants? Massive sacrifices in the temple? That we pray very hard in the temple and pay God with sacrifices?’

As Christians, when we stand in the court of God, we confess our failures, and we can do this with confidence, as we know that our judge is also our saviour.

We are tied into a covenant with God. Every week we lift up the cup of salvation. Jesus said:

Drink this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.

In our court of law, it is Christ who pays the price for our wrongdoings. His sacrifice is effective where 10.000 rams or goats could never restore our relationship with God.

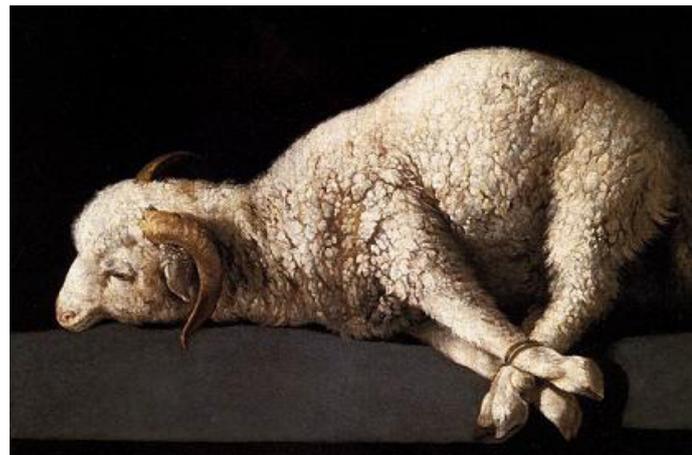
Even those accused by of God in Micah’s days realised that maybe massive sacrifices might not be enough. ‘Should we do more?’, these people asked:

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

If all my possession cannot save me, maybe if I give my child to God? It could be that these people had been so influenced by their worship of the Baals and the Ashera's, that they really believed that God could be pleased if they would sacrifice their children?

So how to please God? Extra many sacrifices? Being careful with tithing? Giving more? Making sure you are always in church when you are supposed to? Saying your prayers, reading your bible, not cursing?

Then Micah tells them what God wants. Those are beautiful words for putting in a picture-frame on your wall.



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?

I have often heard this text used in the sense that what God asks of us is not complicated, but simply that we do justice, and that we are merciful, and that we live humbly. No complicated Christian laws, no rules, nothing difficult. God wants you to be a good person.

Surely He does want that, but this is, I think, a complete misunderstanding of these words of Micah. What Micah says is: ‘God does not want your possessions as a sacrifice, he does not want your children as a sacrifice, but He wants much more. He wants you and you obedience.’ Your whole life.

Micah does not mean to say that sacrifices are not important. But they lose their value if the one who is sacrificing, does not first offer himself obediently to God.

When we come to God it is not only about what we bring in our hand, but also about our heart and our complete lifestyle of obedience to Him.

This does not mean we cannot worship God in moments when our heart is not exploding with sheer goodness and when we are less than perfect people. Our life is never like that. We go up and down in our feelings and our devotion and obedience.

If we feel less than perfect, we must still worship: worship helps us to align our heart with God again. So if we feel down and out, even going through the externals of worship is good. It helps us to align ourselves with God and his will once again.

But to think that we can please God or buy his appreciation by the externals of worship only, is completely wrong.

Conclusion

So concluding, the only solution for the disobedient people of God in Micah's days was to return to God and to live carefully by his Word.

So we must not take the verse about justice and mercy and humility out of the context of Micah and Israel's laws. We cannot use those words to suggest that for God, anyone who does justice and kindness in terms of how we understand that today, is okay with God.

St Paul summarises the issue when he writes that God desires you and me to be the sacrifice: a living sacrifice for Jesus Christ. He wants your heart and your obedient life.

St Augustine of Hippo said in a sermon, "You ask what you should offer: offer yourself. For what else does the Lord seek of you, but you?"

Amen