

Pardoned

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Date: 16 October 2022

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[0 : 00] You might have heard that President Biden in the US pardoned thousands of people just a few days ago. So over 7,000 people that were previously convicted of possession of marijuana since it became a crime back in the 70s were cleared of their convictions.

You might be relieved to hear that tonight's sermon is not about marijuana. That is not the aspect of the story that we'll focus on, especially because you can even buy cannabis moisturizers at your local Holland and Barrett these days.

So not a straightforward topic, but it's a concept of pardon that ties in with tonight's passage. These people in the States had been found guilty of a crime.

Imagine there had been a trial and they'd been sentenced. And now all of a sudden they've been declared innocent by way of being forgiven by the president himself, just out of the goodness of his heart.

It's remarkable. It's a remarkable process. And all presidents do this, pardoning some hundreds, some thousands of people during their presidencies. And I believe most countries have something similar.

[1 : 15] Now, of course, there are always political reasons behind a U.S. president pardoning people. But still, we see a similar sequence of events in chapters 6 and 7 of Micah.

There's a trial to begin with where Israel stands accused and then declared guilty. And then there's a sentence to serve. And while the sentence is being served, the pardon arrives.

And so we'll look at the passage in these three sections. The trial in chapter 6, the sentence and the pardon both in chapter 7. So trial, sentence and pardon.

So why a trial? At the start of chapter 6, Micah asks God to speak and bring his case against Israel. With nothing less than God's own creation as witness. This is solemn. Read verse 2. Hear, you mountains.

[2 : 20] Listen, you everlasting foundations of the earth. I don't know if it's the same for you, but I can very easily read these more poetic introductory verses in the Old Testament.

The ones that normally come before a prophecy. And just gloss over them. Go through them very quickly. Just, you know, in a rush to get to the actual juicy part of God's message. But these two is God's message.

And I'd like us to try and sit with it for a moment or to try and see what it's trying to achieve. Now, God made the mountains. And I'd like you to picture some really tall, grand mountains.

With all due respect for the beautiful British landscape, I think mountains are not its forte. Back home in Sicily, my hometown is some 60 miles away from Mount Etna.

And that is farther than Edinburgh is from Glasgow. And yet on a clear day, you just see it there sitting in front of you as if it was a 10 minute drive away. Two and a half times as tall as Ben Nevis, no man ever built something like that.

[3 : 29] And certainly not something that spits ashes and lava half the time. God made mountains like that. And even twice as tall as that, as we know, in other places in the world.

And God made the foundations of the earth. And so he's calling on them. He's calling them as witnesses to remind Israel of who he is, of his power.

And that is how serious Israel's sin is to God. And in fact, that's how serious anyone's sin is to God. And I want us to sit with how uncomfortable, hopefully, that feels.

And so in verse 3, we have God's charge against Israel. What have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Do you feel the heartbreak in those sentences which are asked rhetorically, of course?

What have I done to you? Isn't that what we ask people when we feel like we're being treated unfairly? What have I ever done to you to deserve that? And then he goes on to remind them of everything that he had indeed done for them, but all the good things that he'd done for them. [4 : 47] I brought you out of Egypt, away from slavery. I put leaders in place to guide you through the desert with Moses and Aaron and Miriam. He mentions them in verse 4.

And when Balak, king of Moab, asked the prophet Balaam to curse you, I made him bless you instead. That's what that story refers to.

Balak was expecting a curse against his enemy, Israel, and was angered by the prophet's blessing that he gave them instead. But Balaam answered in Numbers 23, 26, Did I not tell you I must do whatever the Lord says?

And the Lord had said, bless Israel. And so God is basically telling them, I would never curse you. I didn't do it back then. I wouldn't do it now. So if you feel cursed right now, that's because you have brought curses on yourselves.

And he goes on reminding them of how he took them from Shittim to Gilgal at the end of their journey in the desert, before getting to the land that he had set aside for them.

[5 : 48] And Shittim, the place where the people had broken the covenant, but God renewed once again. So what more could God have done?

Now that's the accuser's charge. And then it's the defendant's turn. And you'd expect them after this to come to their senses and admit that they're at fault.

But no. In verses 6 to 8, they too use rhetorical questions. With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God?

Burnt offerings? Maybe with calves a year old? And so far, it sounds reasonable in the context of sacrifices back then. But then it escalates.

Thousands of rams? Or maybe 10,000 reavers of olive oil? Or should I offer my firstborn even, the fruit of my body? Israel have completely misunderstood how this relationship with God works.

[6 : 53] And so they get all snarky with this sarcastic answer, because they think that God is just impossible to please. He's too perfect. No amount of sacrificing could ever make up for their sins against him.

But their answer betrays a fundamental lack of understanding, because they seem to think that their sacrifices should actually somehow pay for their sins, rather than being an outward demonstration of repentance that God would mercifully accept to forgive them.

And so on the one hand, given their comments, they have realized that something isn't quite working. And so they push back on God because of how impossible it is for them to become acceptable to him through sacrifices.

Not even the sacrifice of a firstborn would be enough. Not that God would ever want that. And on the other hand, they are still missing the point.

And their lack of understanding is completely exposed in verse 8. No, people, no. Verse 8 says, he has shown you. He doesn't want your firstborn.

[8 : 01] He has shown you, oh mortal, what is good. What does the Lord require of you? It is your question. To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Act justly, love mercy, walk humbly with your God. And so far from their legalistic view of a relationship with God, where they're able to pay an entry fee in the form of a sacrifice to get access to his presence, God tells them, I want you to prove that you hate sin by acting justly.

That you are kind to others and forgiving of them by love and mercy. And I want you to walk with me in humility. So God isn't saying that he expects them never to sin, but he does demand that they hate sin and that they love what is right.

And what's most beautiful is that God isn't telling them to stay away from him in terror and only approach him through sacrifices, but he wants them to walk with him in fear.

That fear that stems from humility, from looking at those mountains, even Ben-Nemis, and recognizing that he created them. That fear that results in love and respect and admiration for God.

[9 : 28] God, it's impossible to please you. You're too perfect, they say. No, it's just that you don't love me. And I'm making up excuses, he replies. You're afflicted, not because I neglected you, but because of your own sin.

And what I require of you, you know it, but you simply won't do it. And then in verses 9 to 12, after their response, God goes back to his charges.

And if in the first verses of the chapter, the focus was on everything that God had done right for his people by delivering them from captivity, by blessing them, by getting them out of the desert, into their promised land, now the focus is on what they have done wrong.

And then the same sins that we saw exposed a couple of weeks ago at the start of the book with Jonathan. So if you look at verses 10, 11, and 12, you'll find greed, find wickedness, find theft, dishonesty, lying, violence.

These people are out of control. And remember, act justly, love, mercy is what their God is asking of them, but dishonesty and personal gain is what they're all about.

[10:52] So at this point, the accuser has brought his charges, the accused have laid out their pathetic defense, and the verdict comes, and it's guilty.

Because a just God, a holy God, cannot not condemn the unrepentant sinner. He cannot ignore unrepentant sin.

And so in verse 13, we read, I have begun to destroy you, to ruin you because of your sins. And we get this list of illustrations that show how Israel is going to get the exact opposite of what they were trying to achieve with their wickedness.

They yearned for wealth, regardless of how it was acquired, and God will make sure that they're left empty-handed.

They'll eat, but stay hungry. They'll store up, but save nothing. They will plant, but not harvest. They will press olives, but have no oil.

[12:00] They will crush grapes, but have no wine. The verdict is guilty, and the punishment is, in the second part of verse 16, I will give you over to ruin, and your people to derision.

I love how, and I'm being sarcastic, whenever I read about Israel's conduct, I invariably catch myself looking down on them. I don't know if it happens to you.

Just from up here on my beautiful 21st century pedestal where we got everything figured out, we know who all the prophecies were about, and we kind of pitied them for not, you know, believing that they would get to the promised land, for not understanding everything that God says about the Messiah, and then it always takes a few minutes to catch up with me, the realization that thousands of years later, we are not that different, really.

So let's reflect in a moment on this tendency to use God's perfection as an excuse for our sins. My question for us tonight is, do we ever find ourselves giving up on resisting sin because we could never attain God's perfect standards anyway?

Do we ever find ourselves, catch ourselves thinking on the lines of, I've already messed up today, I might as well not bother for the rest of the day because I won't achieve anything anyway, I will never be good enough.

[13:29] That feeling that we've let got down so much that there is no sacrifice if you're an Israelite, but maybe in our day and age there's no amount of prayer, there's no amount of reading your Bible, there's no amount of, investing time into a church ministry that can make up for what I've done, that can make me right with God again.

Do we fall into the same legalistic trap? Because all sin is serious to God and no sacrifice of any shape or form is big enough, no sacrifice that we could make is big enough to buy us his mercy. But at the same time, no sin is too big for God. And so if we find ourselves overcomplicating things in our head, despairing at that thought of being unable to undo our sins ourselves, then let's go back to the basics.

Back to verse 8. What God wants is for us to act justly. Wanting what is just means that we hate sin. He wants us to love mercy, and love in mercy means committing to being gracious and kind to our neighbors. And God knows we're fallible. He knows we can fail and often will fail.

[14:46] But he wants us to hate what is wrong even when we do it. And he wants us to love what is right even when we don't do it. And still in verse 8, he wants us to walk humbly with God.

And it's ironic, I think, that the creator of the universe, he comes to tell us that he wants to walk with us. And we say no because we're not good enough.

Who am I, who are we to tell God, no, I don't want to walk with you because you're too perfect. He wants us to walk humbly with him. And that also means learning to accept every day that God loves us.

And even though he is perfect, he isn't demanding perfection of us. He wants us to love him and hate sin. And accepting that in itself is humility. And I think the sooner we make peace with this, the

more we'll be able to enjoy the beauty of walking with God as his children.

So the trial is over and the verdict was guilty. And now it's time for Israel to serve its sentence. And this is our second section for tonight. The first six verses of chapter seven, the sentence to be served.

[15 : 58] And we won't spend too much time on this point, but I'd like us to try and see the similarities between the condition of Israel and the condition that our world is in as well. God's punishment for Israel really is the result of Israel's self-inflicted misery itself.

And what is this, if not the description of a world that is under the grip of Satan, just like ours, a world where most have turned their back on God? God. And so verse one of the second chapter shows us Micah's anguish at the realization that he's the only godly person left.

There's no grapes to eat, there's no early figs. Grapes and figs are a beautiful image of how sweet living in a community that loves God would feel.

But there's only sorrow and emptiness left for him. There's people constantly turning against each other. In verse two it says in wait to shed blood, hunting each other with nets.

These are apocalyptic images. There's abuse of power as the ruler demands gifts, the judge accepts bribes, the powerful dictate what they desire, that's in verse three, and these three they all conspire together, the rulers, the judges, the powerful.

[17 : 18] And I had to say this one really hit home for me, because rulers demanding more from their people, judges, accepting bribes so that the powerful can keep going about their life, doing what they desire.

It kind of just sounds like when I was watching the news earlier. And of course, when that is what happens at the top of any society, then at the bottom there can be nothing but mistrust and fighting with every man and woman for themselves, fighting over the scraps.

We see that in verses five and six. They cannot trust a neighbor, they cannot trust a friend, they cannot trust a partner, they cannot trust their own children. This is Israel, this is the people of God, the chosen people, they turned their back on God and ended up here.

But if we are honest and if we look around ourselves, we're there too. Because these are the images of a world that's turned its back on God and the world we live in has done that too.

Because we too are reaping what we sowed as descendants of Adam and Eve ourselves. angels.

And so as we keep sin in ourselves, our world is just as broken, perverted, full of evil and conflict.

[18 : 31] And sure, there are faithful Christians just like Micah. There's millions of us all over the world. But even then, not one of us doesn't commit these sins that we see listed here.

the first time I read this passage, I had kind of Hollywood-style apocalyptic images in my mind of these people hunting each other.

But then as I kept reading it, I kept finding similarities between these dynamics that were written about of mistrust and selfishness and greed and our own society.

And so I found myself wondering if we have maybe let the kind of Western 21st century way of doing things proper, kind of cloud our judgment and become a bit desensitized to sin.

Because we might tendentially as a society be superficially nice to each other at least. We might have laws that protect our rights and the most vulnerable that allow our society to function in an orderly way for the most part.

[19 : 37] But sinfulness is in us and around us. We might have learned to dress it up individually and as a society. But those few expressions of selflessness that we do see around us, they should not fool us into thinking that the situation is not that bad.

Because wherever we turn we see a society here as well that is focused on greed. We see loneliness and disinterest in other people's well-being. We see a social and an economic structure that rewards the greedy and marginalizes the disadvantaged.

Verse 4 says now is the time of your confusion. And if it isn't confusion that we see all around us and our friends, family, colleagues that do not know God and seem to be constantly in search for something that is worth living for.

So I think these six verses are like a slap in the face that wakes us up if we've become accustomed to our way of life in this world.

Sin is sin, no matter how camouflaged, no matter how not in your face it is or politically correct, because greed is greed, even if we justify it by saying that that's just the way that our economy works.

[20 : 48] what misery is mine, says Micah, and what misery is ours. But here comes the but. Micah doesn't just observe all this, sits in a corner and cries while waiting for his end. Micah does what all godly people in the Bible tell us, teach us to do. He looks around himself, he does recognize the state of need of the world. There is certainly grief, but then he looks up with the confidence of those who trust in the true God. Verse 7, I read it this morning as well at the end of the service, but as for me, I watch in hope for the Lord. I wait for God, my Savior. My God will hear me. And this is the verse where our evening changes. This is the verse where Micah reminds us that the same holy and just God that will condemn the sinner is also a merciful God, an infinitely merciful God that will save the repentant from their own sin.

[22 : 07] And so our third section is all about God's pardon. did you notice that in verses 8 to 13, that same God that acted as the accuser at the beginning of the passage, he's now the liberator. In fact, verse 9 even says that God will now plead Israel's case and uphold its cause. That's the God that was bringing the charges against them. He's now pleading their case. through Micah in verse 9, Israel admits its sin and repents. Because I have sinned against him, I will bear the Lord's wrath. Israel now does see God for who he is. Not a God that asks for the impossible, but a God that, verse 9, will bring me out into the light. A God that is righteous, they say. And so Israel once again enjoys the favour of its God, is victorious over its enemies and is a place of life in contrast with the desolation around it.

[23 : 17] That's in verses 11 to 13. And so these last verses of the book describe an awesome display of power and love on the part of God. Of God the shepherd looking after its flock in the pasture land and forest. That's a beautiful image that we have there. Everything that was grey and bleak is now alive and green again. The enemies that were a threat to Israel before are now the ones that have been humiliated by God. But even for them, in verse 17, there's hope. In seeing God's power at display, they will turn in fear to the Lord our God and will be afraid of you, says Micah. And so finally, Israel's praise can burst out with Micah's in verse 18. Who is a God like you who pardons sin and forgives transgression. You do not stay angry forever, but delight to show mercy. Now Micah's prophecies have been fulfilled as far as the people of Israel of the time are concerned.

[24 : 22] Israel was destroyed by the Babylonians and then the kingdom of Judah was restored after the exile. However, as we saw in chapter 5 with Alistair last week, his prophecy goes beyond the people of Israel of the time. It goes beyond the restoration of Judah all the way to the restoration of God's relationship with all of his children as included in Jesus. And if chapter 5 specifically mentioned Bethlehem as the place where the ruler of Israel would come from and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, so very clearly referring to Jesus, in today's passage too, especially in the very last verses of the book, we have explicit references to Jesus and his work in our lives. Because what is the ultimate demonstration of the fact that God does delight to show mercy, as verse 18 says, if not that he sent his only son to take our own sins and die with them so that we could be reconciled with God? Verse 19 says you will tread our sins under foot, which kind of evokes God's own words in Genesis 3 15 when he says that Jesus will one day crush Satan's head with his heel. And still in verse 19, and hurl all of our iniquities into the depths of the sea. And that is what Jesus has done once and for all with his death. Because that's what happens to our sins.

[25 : 47] If we repent and ask him for forgiveness, they are forgotten forever. And so Micah is confident in his hope that God will be faithful to Jacob and Abraham as he pledged to with his promise to them. See in verse 20. And what did God promise them? That Israel would go to the promised land, that Israel would become a big nation, but also that through Israel the whole world would be blessed. And Micah knew that his prophecy went beyond his here and now all the way to us because we are the recipients of God's promise to Jacob and Abraham too because we've been blessed through one of their descendants Jesus in a way that we can't even fully comprehend.

There isn't a sin, not one that you or I committed, not today, not yesterday, not ten years ago, not ten years from now, that will ever be able to separate us from God if we accept Jesus' work of salvation on the cross because we have been pardoned just like Israel.

And so if on the one hand we do want to look around and grieve as we acknowledge the condition that our world is in, broken by sin that keeps fueling God's wrath, on the other we will not despair.

[27 : 08] We cannot despair because there is a way out in Jesus and Jesus' death and resurrection shelter us from God's wrath and give us eternal salvation. So for any of us that haven't accepted Jesus yet, God's love for you, for all of us, is bigger than our rejection of him so far and of our sins because nothing is too big for him.

And so God asks us in this passage to go before him repentant and to commit to hate and sin, to love and mercy and to walk in humbly with him. And Jesus is the only one that did that perfectly during his life on earth.

And so ultimately that is the message of Micah, be like Jesus. And when the apostles asked Jesus in John 6, 28, what must we do to do the works that God requires?

Jesus answered, the work of God is this, to believe in the one he has sent. And so let's do that. Let's believe in Jesus' plan of salvation for us and accept his forgiveness and walk humbly with him. Let's pray. Amen. Father, we thank you because you are a holy God and you are a just God, Father.

[28 : 29] And that is because you're perfect, you're sinless. And Father, we ask for forgiveness for our sins, for all the ways in which we offend you in the way we relate to each other and to you.

At the same time, Father, we're here ready to receive your forgiveness. And we thank you so much because we know you will forgive us because of your immense mercy.

And we can't thank you enough, Father, other than all we can do really is accept it. And so, Father, we pray for every one of us tonight that whenever Satan tries and convinces us that we're not good enough, Father, we'll be ready because of what we read tonight to say that we know we're not good enough for you and we can never be, Father, but we don't need to because we have Jesus.

So, Father, we thank you for his death and his resurrection. We thank you for how he has defeated the devil, Father.

We thank you because it's through him that we are pardoning you. Father, help us tell anyone around us that doesn't know this, Father.

[29 : 54] Help us tell them about it. May your spirit really work in our lives so that as we go out into the world every day, Father, we really want to share this amazing, life-changing news.

Be with us, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.