

THE PROPHET MICAH AND HIS FAMOUS SAYING

He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good: and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God? (Micah vi. 8.)

THIS brief discourse is on a leading verse in the Book of Micah, one of the minor prophets, who records a great controversy which Jehovah has with His chosen people. It forms indeed the key verse of Micah's prophecies. Some even regard it as the doctrinal key to the whole Old Testament, and, moreover, aver the saying to be "its grandest Ethical Utterance". It certainly gives us the very highest conception of the sovereignty and righteousness of God, with the sublimest standard of man's duty towards God.

At a critical period in the history of Israel God raised up three contemporaneous prophets to declare to His decadent rebellious people fiery expostulatory messages of warning, supplemented by heart-moving pleadings to resume their allegiance to Him. The messages dwell upon the awful guilt, perfidy, and danger of their moral and spiritual apostasy. Unless a national repentance takes place their wickedness will inevitably bring a terrible retribution. With these warnings are proclamations of the goodness and faithfulness of Jehovah, interwoven with glowing portraiture of the mercy He shews to the loyal and obedient, and of the future rejuvenation and transcendence of Israel as a nation.

Of Micah himself little is known except that he was an inhabitant of Moresheth-Gath, a village in the maritime plain of Judah: that he prophesied during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, Kings of Judah, approximately 740-700 B.C.; and that his contemporaries were Isaiah and Hosea.

One thing, however, is certain; he was a child of pious parents. His name bears this out. In the East then, and as often now, names were given to children indicative of their parents' desire regarding their future character and well-being. For instance, Isaiah means "Jehovah is Saviour"; Hosea means "Saviour" (cf. Joshua); Micah means "Who is like Jehovah?" A verse in the song of Moses gave him his name. It was sung after the deliverance of Israel from the bondage of Egypt, and the triumphant crossing of the Red Sea. "Who is

like unto Thee, O Jehovah, among the gods, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises (mercies), doing wonders?" (Exod. xv. 11). Reared by such God-fearing parents, he grew up in the fear and the love of God, acquiring an intimate knowledge of the Divine mercy, majesty and power manifested in the history of his people. His prophecies make this apparent. He was well versed in the ancient Scriptures: and had the root of the matter in him.

The composition and arrangement of his oracles betray a remarkable unity and symmetry. In their substance and language they have naturally much in common with those of Isaiah and Hosea. They form a beautiful organic whole. "Micah's style is full, round, and perspicuous; his diction is pure and his parallelisms regular". "His rhythm also is pleasing, with an occasional play upon words in order to gain the ear". Contrastively they speak of wrath and love, of judgment and mercy, of disaster and restoration, urging repentance and faith. Assuredly he preached a balanced doctrine as became his calling. Thus the strain of his Oracles follow that of the Song which suggested his name, as also that of the Psalms sung and chanted by the Levite choir in the sanctuary.

Lest any one might question his prophetic commission, Micah clearly makes it known: "Truly I am full of power by the Spirit of the Lord, and of judgment, and of might to declare unto Jacob his transgression, and to Israel his sin" (iii. 8).

Now let us come to the consideration of Micah's superlative saying: "He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good, and what doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God?" But first, we must note that his book is marked by three main divisions. Omitting the superscriptions, each begins with a clarion call to "Hear". The first extends to the end of chapter ii: "Hear ye peoples, all of you: hearken O earth and all that therein is". The second includes chapters iii, iv and v: "Hear I pray you, ye heads of Jacob, and rulers of the house of Israel". The third takes in chapters vi and vii: "Hear ye now what Jehovah saith". The calls at once are universal, national, and particular. No one is omitted. When God speaks He speaks to all without distinction.

If we would apprehend rightly the force and the scope of this crucial saying we must interpret each of its four clauses in the light of its Old Testament usage. Firstly, then, what is

“goodness”? Generally, it is that which is commendable, whether morally, profitably, pleasantly, beautifully, wholesomely, kindly, always in contrast to badness in whatever way. The saying itself defines it religiously as justice, mercy, and humility in concordant action.

Secondly, what is it “to do justly”? The answer ostensibly is that which is in conformity with the truth and the right according to the holy law of God. This verily is fundamental, for it denotes likeness to God who made man in His own image. “All His ways are judgment: a God of truth, and without iniquity; just and right is He” (Deut. xxxii. 4).

Thirdly, what is it, “to love mercy”? What mercy? Where is its norm to be seen? It shines at the Altar of sacrifice as the Covenant-love of God pardoning the sinner and reclaiming him to righteousness with new quickened life in the soul. There is none perfect other than this. To love mercy then is to reciprocate the saving love of God, and manifest it in our lives to others by acts of compassion and helpfulness.

Fourthly, what is it, “to walk humbly with God”? Enoch sets the first example of this. Humility is a cardinal virtue, the precursor and preserver of all others. It acts as the negation of pride, self-reliance, and haughtiness of spirit. The proverb runs: “Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall”. We see humility even in God Who humbled Himself to behold the things that are in heaven and earth; we witness it in the Incarnation, and in the life, work and death of Jesus, Who was always meek and lowly in heart. The apostolic injunction has to be observed: “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus . . . Who made Himself of no reputation and took upon Himself the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men, and being found in fashion as a man He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross” (Phil. ii. 5-8). “Piety and pride are not less opposed to each other than light and darkness.”

Micah’s saying in no way encourages the idea of self-righteousness. It reflects the tenor of one in Leviticus, “Ye shall be holy for I am holy”, and of another in the Sermon on the Mount, “Be ye therefore perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect”. Since this is utterly impossible apart from Divine grace and the help of the Holy Spirit, the would-be Christian is cast unconditionally upon what Christ accomplished for us

on the Cross and by His resurrection. Thus the saying convicts the sinner of his desperate need; but where there is conviction there is always with it a Divine invitation to come to Christ for mercy and succour.

Now that we can apprehend the sense of the various clauses in Micah’s great statement, it becomes perfectly clear that together they represent the leading, or active, principles of the Atonement. These are the allied Divine sovereignty and goodness, justice and mercy, fidelity and truth which bring to the repentant and the believing remission of sin and guilt, and imputed and imparted justifying righteousness, the sequence of which is a new and abiding relationship with God. These efficacies are summed up in the terms redemption and reconciliation. The best theory of the Atonement we have in 2 Corinthians v. 21: “He hath made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.” Words fail to describe the peace and comfort which follows this supreme intimation.

This singular sentence of the prophet’s crystallizes the Old Testament Gospel into a Faithful Saying closely akin to the first of the Faithful Sayings in the Pastoral Epistles: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.” Both are arresting religious formulas, soul-saving proverbs, jewels of sparkling brilliance, paramount aphorisms, and easily understood, the truth of which roots itself imperishably in the memory, and makes them worthy of all acceptance.

Micah, however, was only repeating in his own way a similar aphorism from the book of Deuteronomy x. 12, 13. “And now, Israel, what doth Jehovah require of thee, but to fear Jehovah thy God, to walk in all His ways, and to love Him, and to serve Jehovah thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, to keep the commandments of Jehovah, and His statutes which I command thee this day for thy good?”

Furthermore, Micah’s saying throws a bright illumination on the *modus operandi* of his ministry. It was from his intimate knowledge of the Pentateuch, and his awe-inspiring realization of the holiness of God, that he was led to rebuke so scathingly and unambiguously the idolatry of the masses, the moral degeneracy of their rulers, the apostasy of the priests, the cupidity of false prophets, and threaten Divine disaster on Samaria, Jerusalem and Lachish, if haply all would repent. For, while

God was of purer eyes than to look on iniquity, He willed not by His mercy the death of the sinner, but that he should turn to Him and live. Until there is a thorough conviction of sin, and of its malignity as a revolt against the goodness and covenant-love of God, men's ears remain deaf to the gracious invitation of the atoning mercy of the Saviour. It is by the fear of God that men depart from evil, even as it is by mercy and truth that iniquity is purged.

The soul of the prophet grieved exceedingly over the waywardness of the people. Was he not by race one of them? He yearned over the distress of the poor, the oppressed, and the downcast. Hence what a hard, trying, even dangerous task he had to carry out! Yet how directly, fearlessly, and bravely he kept voicing the word given him to declare! For those whom he censured, although he did so in love for them, resented bitterly the exposure of their evildoing, and even sought to take his life. We learn this from Jeremiah xxvi. 17-19. But the Lord used the king to thwart their evil design. Many of our present-day preachers would do well here to imitate Micah's courage and fear not the enmity of their hearers, and perhaps their vengeance. The Lord's work should be done in the Lord's way: "The kingdom of God is at hand; repent ye, and believe in the Gospel" (Mark i. 15).

Two things energized the prophet's faith. There remained a remnant of God-fearing people in the land, a holy seed, a "seven thousand" who had never bowed the knee to Baal. These formed the true Church, or *Qahal*, of God. Amid the general declension it had not perished, and it never would. Again, like the patriarchs, he saw Christ's day afar off and was glad. The Law and the Sacrifices looked for their fulfilment in Him. Isaiah had the same vision, and spoke of the atoning work of the Suffering Servant, but Micah predicted the exact birthplace of the Messiah, which the event verified. "But thou, Bethlehem Ephrathah (giving its ancient and modern name), though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall He come forth that is to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings have been from of old, from everlasting" (v. 2).

On Him Micah anchored his faith. He it was who should redeem Israel, and make the nation a joy in the earth. Of this, the imperishableness of the *Qahal* was an earnest or pledge. It witnessed that the Divine design in the calling of Israel to be a

blessing to all nations could not fail. That was sure and steadfast. On God's part it admitted of no repentance or change. For ever His word is settled in heaven and His faithfulness unto all generations.

Accordingly to the *Qahal* Micah particularly addressed his prophecies of the future rejuvenation of Israel, and the latter glory of God's chosen people. "In the last days the mountain of the House of the Lord shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills, and many nations shall go and say, Come ye and let us go to the mountain of the Lord: and He will teach us His ways, and we will walk in His paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the Law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem¹ . . . for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it" (iv. 1-4). These apocalyptic addresses are certainly momentous. They focus thought on the majesty of God Who is glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders. Truth and righteousness shall ultimately prevail over sin and iniquity. Then shall the will of God be done on earth as it is done in Heaven: when all shall do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with their God.

Behold then the rare beauty and remarkable symmetry of these prophecies. Their orderly relation and mutual consistency, fully attest their organic unity. All are God-breathed, "are words that do good to them that walk uprightly". Accordingly, they can only be morally and spiritually interpreted. Yet there are still some who fatuously allege that the book of Micah is a composite work. Such are blind to its Divine origin and inspired excellence. They allege that certain sections are interpolations, or later additions, which somehow have crept into the text. Chapters vi and vii are said to be post-exilic writings, and the final three verses simply "a hopeful editorial appendix". Alas! The famous saying then is not Micah's but that of an anonymous scribe.

This appendix, however, guarantees the authenticity of the whole book, for herein written expressly is Micah's signature and seal to his collections of Oracles, viz., "Who-is-like-unto-Jehovah?"

Let us read the appendix. See in it a final lyric strophe, a culmination and summary of the doctrine and spirit of the prophecies, and a grand doxology ascribing praise and glory to

¹ Cf. Isaiah ii. 2-4.

God for His infinite goodness, His incomparable justice, and His immeasurable mercy and truth.

Who is a God like unto Thee that pardoneth iniquity,
And passeth by the transgression of the remnant of His heritage?
He retaineth not His anger for ever,
Because He delighteth in mercy.
He will turn again, He will have compassion upon us, He will subdue
our iniquities;
And Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.
Thou wilt perform the truth to Jacob and the mercy to Abraham,
Which Thou hast sworn unto our fathers from the days of old.

For comfort, consolation and assurance there is everything here that a seeking sinner requires, peace to the conscience, joy to the heart, and satisfaction to the reason.

Two comments may be made on the Doxology. The first is that it is based on the classic doctrinal passage of Exodus xxxiv. 5-7, where Jehovah proclaims to Moses the glory of His name through the infinite riches of His grace.

Jehovah, the Jehovah God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in grace and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, and transgression and sin, and will by no means clear the guilty.

Have we not in this proclamation all the efficacies of the Atonement?

The second comment is that we can read clearly in the Doxology a digest of the one hundred and forty-fifth Psalm, which is one of pure praise and adoration, and has a parallel in the one hundred and third Psalm. Being an alphabetical Psalm and one to be specially memorized, it follows that Micah could recite and sing this song equally with the song of Moses which taught him his theology. Briefly it says:

Great is Jehovah, and His greatness is unsearchable. Generation after generation shall praise His works, and speak of the glorious honour of His majesty, while also they will declare the might of His terrible acts. Always shall men abundantly utter the memory of His great goodness and sing of His righteousness. Jehovah is gracious, full of compassion and His tender mercies are over all His works.

To Micah, God's pardoning of sin shines supremely as the Miracle of miracles. It exceeds in wonder all His other works. He beholds in it the beauty—the pleasantness—of Jehovah.

How great is its mystery! It forms the secret of His covenant, the secret of His tabernacle, where in times of trouble He hides his people. No one can sufficiently relate all the manifold benefits of His mercy.

Depth of mercy! can there be
Mercy still reserved for me?
Can my God His wrath forbear?
Me, the chief of sinners, spare?

Scripture everywhere echoes an absolute affirmative. He retaineth not His anger for ever, He delighteth in mercy. "He that trusteth in the Lord, mercy shall compass him about." "The Lord redeemeth the soul of His servants, and none that trusteth in Him shall be held guilty" (Psalm xxxiv. 22, R.V.). "The Lord is righteous in all His ways, and merciful in all His works" (Psalm cxlv. 17). "As the heaven is high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward them that fear Him. As far as the east is from the West, so far hath He removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm ciii. 11, 12).

Micah uses three different words to describe the wonderfulness of the way in which God pardons sin. The first word is *nasa*, which in Exodus xxxiv. 7 and in Psalm xxxii. 1 is translated "forgiveness". It denotes the lifting up and taking away of sin, a work done by God Himself. This He did through His eternal Son Who in the fullness of time became the Lamb of God to bear away the sin of the world (John i. 29). In Psalm xxxii. 1 the parallel to *nasa* is the covering of sin which took place at the Mercy Seat. "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered."

The second word is "passeth-by", an act reminiscent of the Passover, when on that fateful night, the sprinkling of the blood of the paschal lamb on the lintels and sideposts of their doorways saved the Israelites from the avenging angel, and brought deliverance to them from the bondage of Egypt.

The third word is "subdue". "He will subdue our iniquities", or, as the R.V. has it: "He will tread our iniquities under foot". Mercy is many-sided in its operations. There are no restrictions, modifications, or qualifications to it. "Mercy breaks the power of cancelled sin and sets the sinner free." Christ is made unto us wisdom and righteousness with (*te—kai*) sanctification and redemption (1 Cor. i. 30). Mercy is new every morning. Mercy is daily added to mercy to mortify the

roots of innate evil, so that the Christian might “ be holy and without blame before Him in love ”. Hence “ He delighteth in mercy ”.

The extent of His delight is shewn in that all the sins of His people are cast into the depths of the sea. There is no more remembrance of them. “ Their sins and iniquities will I remember no more ” (Heb. x. 17). “ Who therefore shall lay anything to the charge of God’s elect? It is God that justifieth, who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather that is risen again, Who is even at the right hand of God, to make intercession for us ” (Rom. viii. 33, 34).

Furthermore, Micah’s hope is that of the Church universal. He voices the glad and confident assurance that since God is omnipotent and faithful to His word the triumph of righteousness on earth is absolutely certain. “ God will perform the truth to Jacob and the mercy to Abraham which He swore unto the fathers from the days of old.” The Church will yet be delivered from the dominion of the Evil One, even as Israel was delivered by the mighty intervention of Jehovah in the years of Moses. “ The earth shall yet be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”

O come, O come, Immanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here,
Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice, rejoice, Immanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

In Micah’s famous saying, with these concluding verses of his book forming its magnificent corollary, the gospel according to Micah is recorded in such plain language that no one could possibly misunderstand it. That was seven centuries before the time of Christ. If this seems wonderful, the same gospel was declared during the previous seven centuries at least. Though written in symbols, and prefigured in types, yet its spirit and its truth, as witness the Psalms, were well known to the godly and the upright. This fact alone should act as a powerful deterrent on those whose delight is to pick the Old Testament to pieces: and serve as a powerful stimulant to the faith of those who believe in the inerrancy of the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets which speak unitedly of Christ as their fulfilment.