

SERMONS  
ON THE BOOK OF

*Michah*

JOHN  
CALVIN

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P U B L I S H I N G  
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you, and thus learn to devote all our faculties to you, that we may both avow and show in truth that the rule of a holy life has been given to us in your Law. And, in addition, may we so adhere to your promises that you not allow, through either the allurements of this world or through Satan's flatteries and illusions, our minds to be drawn away from that love which you have once and for all revealed in your only Son, in whom you daily confirm us by the doctrine of your Gospel, until at last we shall come to enjoy fully this love when we attain to that heavenly inheritance which has been acquired for us by the blood of your self-same Son. Amen.<sup>30</sup>

30. The *Supplementa* editors note that this prayer originally appeared in Calvin's *Commentary on Micah*, where it followed his comments on Micah 6:8. See *Commentary on Micah*, 339–40.

## 23

S E R M O N O N

Micah 6:9–11<sup>1</sup>

(Mon., 5 Jan. 1551)

*The voice of the Lord cries to the city, and wise is he who fears God's name. Listen to his rod and to him who testifies to it. Is not the treasure of the wicked still in the house of the wicked, and are not the scales that weigh it false?<sup>2</sup>*  
(Micah 6:9–10)

**M**icah shows here how poorly the Word of God was received. For although he had sufficiently warned the wicked and had exhorted them to repent, no great results ensued. In truth, very few reformed their lives. And although they were no longer guilty before

1. Cf. *Commentary on Micah*, 340–50.

2. *Le muyd eschars*, lit. the meager scales full of wrath.



God, they were nonetheless afraid of his threats. But the majority of the people remained hardened in their hearts. Consequently, Micah was forced to complain, which is why he says: *Listen to his rod and to him who must decree it.* That is, start thinking about yourself. Don't wait for God to strike. Rather, as soon as you hear his judgment, obey and cling to him in order to obtain forgiveness. But what happened? We observe just the opposite. For the wicked continued to use their false scales, their inequitable weights, and were full of extortion and violence. Thus fraud and malice reigned. Hence, the people became hardened through their own obstinacy, which, in sum, is what Micah's charge is all about.

Now let us note in particular his words concerning *the voice of God that cries*, but which no one hears, because none was sufficiently wise. Very few feared the name of God or received his Word with humility, which is why Micah says that *the intelligent person<sup>3</sup> fears the name of God.* It's as if he were saying that the majority did not even care to remember what he was saying, as if they considered it nothing more than a sound reverberating in the air. For they neither fathomed the majesty of God, nor realized that it was God who was speaking. For this reason people who have no fear of God do not acknowledge that they should be subject to his majesty.

Now he says: "an intelligent person." The word that Micah uses here often implies a "just," "righteous," or "steadfast" person. For we know that human steadfastness results from a confidence in being able to discern between good and evil. Thus, he employs the word "intelligent" to signal that those who adhere to righteousness, that those who are willing to be taught, are the ones who fear the name of God. But their number is certainly small. For the greater part of humankind are stubborn and obstinate. No matter what one says, they refuse to be instructed. They are beyond hope.

Now Micah specifically says that *the voice of the Lord cries out to the city* [Micah 6:9]. It's as if he were saying that God never teaches secretly, or communicates in an obscure tongue, but proclaims with

3. *L'homme d'intelligence.*

a loud voice the things that require correction. He especially says *to the city*, as if he were saying: "Behold, my trumpet sounds! It heralds the coming war." Now, although the Lord, for his part, speaks this way in order to arouse the people from their stupor, nonetheless, very few listen. Accordingly, we ought note here that if we continue to wallow in our sins, then we cannot feign that God did not amply warn us. For not only does God speak to us, but he cries out in a loud and clear voice. God asks only that we hear his voice, which still rings in the air.

Why, thus, have mankind become so deaf that they cannot hear God's voice? Because they have stopped up their ears. Thus, they can no longer concoct an excuse for not hearing his voice. For since God has spoken so forcefully, who can claim: "I knew nothing about it. I never heard him or recognized his voice"? Indeed! But, as I have said, mankind knowingly close their ears, in order to escape being taught by God. That is why Proverbs states: "Wisdom cries aloud in the streets" [Proverbs 1:20-21]. What Solomon means here is that God cannot be accused of leaving humanity in ignorance. But what do we see? No one listens or wants to be schooled by God. Such ignorance, therefore, will be punished, since mankind deliberately justify such malice in order to ignore the will of God.

Now when Micah asserts that *the man of intelligence will fear the name of God* [Micah 6:9], we should note that he wanted to emphasize what a unique benefit it is to be taught sound doctrine. And that is a boon not given to everyone, certainly not to the obstinate who have become stubborn through their own malice. We know how few feared God during the time of the prophets. But what about ourselves? We must implore God not to permit our own minds to indulge in vanity, which they will do if God does not restrain them. Thus, it is necessary for God to restrain us by his bridle and to guide us along the right path, or, otherwise, no matter what people might say to us, we will gain nothing from it.

Now it is also important to consider the manner in which we listen, for it is insufficient to listen to God's voice as if it were only a sound emitted by a mortal. Rather, we must regard it as a voice to fear, and as one which magnifies God's name. Therefore, let us exam-



ine more carefully this word “fear” which Micah uses. He could have said: “The voice of God cries aloud to the city, and only a few hear it.” But instead he says: *Only a few fear the name of God*, that is, only a few became less dissolute. And why does he mention the fear of God’s name, unless upon hearing God’s Word, the very majesty of God is elicited from us?<sup>4</sup> That is what happens when God confronts us. And if we reject God, or do not consider ourselves accountable to God and his Word, ought we not truly perish for such an ingratitude? What possible grounds of “ignorance” can spare us from that? That is what Micah is trying to say in this passage when he claims that *an intelligent person prizes*<sup>5</sup> *the name of God*. In fact, the word “fear” has a twofold meaning. It can mean “to hold in awe” or “to highly consider,” as well as “to fear.” But within Micah’s context here, it is easy to deduce that he means “to fear.” In that light, we know what message we should glean from this text: that when God speaks to us, he does so not merely to be heard by us, but he speaks in a loud and clear voice for all the world to hear. Why? In order that no one may plead ignorance.

For that reason, Micah adds: *Listen to his rod and to the person who decrees it against you, or who testifies against you* [Micah 6:9]. I offer both of these possibilities, as the word “decrees” or “testifies” in Hebrew can be translated either way.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, this phrase can also mean “who will testify to this” or “who subpoenas you” or “who announces the trial” or “who summons you to the trial.” In any event, the meaning is clear. The people had been warned by numerous admonitions that they would have to appear in court before God; nevertheless, they continued to engage in malice. Now lest we become confused by the diverse translations and lose Micah’s natural sense<sup>7</sup> here, once we take everything into account, it is obvious that he is referring to the coming judgment. In brief, this

4. “For as soon as we hearken to God, his majesty . . . must so penetrate all our thoughts, as to humble us before him and to constrain us to do him homage.” *Commentary on Micah*, 346–47.

5. *Regardera*, “will regard,” “highly consider,” “look to,” or “hold in awe” in the context here.

6. *Yā’at* appears to be the Hebrew verb in question here. To capture its multiple meanings, Calvin uses the French verbs *testifiera* and *ordonne*.

7. *Sens naturel*.

is what he means: “Hear the rod and him who subpoenas you,” that is, him who forewarns of its coming. For the verb that Micah uses here implies a trial date, or a summons, when a person is required to appear in court, or when by mutual consent persons set a date for settling a payment, or concluding some other agreement. Quite frequently, the verb does mean “to testify,” but that is not its meaning here. Thus we can now grasp Micah’s intended meaning in the passage: *Hear the rod and him who has summoned you to the trial*, that is, him who has given you time to think about it. Otherwise, God will so harass you that you will never escape his hand.

Now, we could inquire as to why Micah speaks of “hearing the rod.” He could have said: “Feel the rod,” as he says in another passage, where he warns: “Look out for the hand that strikes.”<sup>8</sup> If that were the case, he should have said: “Think about the rod.” But the issue here has nothing to do with further punishments that God might cause the people to suffer, but only with the warning which Micah addresses when he says: “him who subpoenas you.” He does not say: “Think about the rod,” but “him who announces the trial.” Thus, he is simply referring to the warning, as the blows had not yet fallen. That is why he says: “Hear the rod.” Now fools never think that God will touch them until they feel his hand. But mankind are well advised to convert upon being warned. As Solomon says in Proverbs 26[:3]: “Just as a horse requires a whip, and the ass a bridle, so the back of a fool requires a rod.” But on the contrary, a prudent and well-advised man will not wait for the whip to fall, but as soon as he hears that God has a controversy with him, he will acknowledge: “Alas! I have offended God. I must never despise his threats or ignore them, but in all humility I must return to God and implore God for his forgiveness.” Therefore, as soon as we encounter the first sign of God’s wrath, we must acknowledge the offenses which we have committed against God, and ask God for his mercy. That is Micah’s meaning behind this passage. And it is a highly useful message, because it informs us that if we have been rebellious up to now, and have continuously rejected God’s yoke, then

8. Calvin might have had Isaiah 26:11 in mind.



it is time to think about ourselves, or never. Furthermore, it means that, when God speaks to the world, we must not be so stupid or asleep as to ignore him until he is forced to strike us. For, in fact, we know that it is not in vain that God threatens us, or displays his wrath, or warns us of our faults. For if we fail to take account of his admonitions now, then God will certainly make us feel his hand later.

Now when Micah says, "Hear," he is addressing those to whom God was offering a very special grace, insofar as God was warning them. For that is not given to everyone. In fact, our Lord is not obligated to warn us in advance: "Beware, you have fallen short; I need to help you." Did any preacher warn Sodom? We know that they were destroyed without hearing a single sermon or word of instruction. Our Lord did not grant them such grace. Therefore, let us note that it is an inestimable privilege for God to warn us of our faults, for God to call us back when he sees that we are about to stray, or for God to revive us and to encourage us to seek him when he sees how miserably we wallow in our vices and cling to them. Thus, whenever our Lord engages us in such a way as to enable us to realize that he is admonishing us and exhorting us, that, I tell you, is a special gift that spares us from his wrath. Consequently, this doctrine pertains only to those who possess God's Law, his prophecies, and his Gospel. With these, one can remind us every day of our faults, thereby saving us from being blinded by the Devil and completely bewitched by him. Thus our Lord sends us threats and exhortations as remedies and as incentives to lead us to repentance. Therefore, let us thoughtfully ponder these words, "Hear the rod," that God might hold our sins before us every day, reminding us that it is his duty to be the world's judge, and that we need to be conscious of it all the time. Consequently, let us never despise this form of God's grace. For whenever anyone admonishes us, let us realize how close at hand evil is, unless we obtain forgiveness from God. And let each of us look carefully at himself, for whenever we are admonished for our sins, we tend to accuse our neighbor, and overlook ourselves. Now, it should be just the opposite. For each of us ought to examine our self, pass judgment, and pronounce

the sentence. For the only way we can be reconciled to God is to acknowledge and confess ourselves as we are.

Micah specifically states: *Hear the rod and him who summons you.*<sup>9</sup> For it is no light matter for God to oppose us and for us to ignore him. We would have to be entirely out of our minds to fear the threats of a single mortal more than all of God's warnings. What level of stupidity would support such a fear? That is why Micah specifically says: *and him who summons you.* It's as if he were saying: "Mankind are so blind and hardened that they attribute neither glory nor majesty to God. When God speaks through his prophets, they deem it a fable, or better yet, they perceive the prophets to be appeasing God, as if God were a little child. Now is that the kind of authority that God exercises over his own? Therefore give heed to the person who announces this deed and forewarns of God's rod." Now we do not receive God's Word as we ought, because in part no angels descend from heaven to accompany it, nor does God appear in person to address us. Rather, only mortal beings preach it to us. That is why we deem God's Word to have so little merit and authority. On the contrary, however, we ought to be convinced and resolved that it is God who has spoken, even though he has employed the services of mankind.<sup>10</sup> That is more precisely what Micah meant, as if he were saying: "Although I have never ceased admonishing you, you have yet to place any faith in my words. Be that as it may, you will nonetheless discover that God has a firm hand and will accomplish what I have proclaimed. Therefore, try to understand that it is God who has decreed this impending judgment day."<sup>11</sup> Thus we are forced to realize that the prophets were not speaking on their own authority, but they were inspired<sup>12</sup> by God's Spirit. Otherwise,

9. The central verb here is *ordonnée*, which has multiple meanings and shades of meaning, all of which Calvin invokes.

10. The *Supplementa* editors call attention to Calvin's explication of this passage in his *Commentary on Micah*. Unlike his interpretation in this sermon, which focuses on the verbs *assigner* and *ordonner*, meaning to summon and command or prescribe, in the *Commentary* Calvin focuses on the verb *testifier*, and the role that Micah plays in *testifying* as a prophet to the coming event which is being prescribed.

11. *Ceste verge icy.*

12. *Poulsey*, lit., "pushed there."



they could not have proclaimed things from God. Therefore, if at the present we fail to grasp that God, indeed, speaks through humans and uses them as his instruments, then let us pray that it may please God to illumine us to see that when ministers preach his Word to us, we are not hearing merely the sound of voices, or utterances from lips, or the enunciation of words; rather, let us realize that it is God himself who is speaking through the mouths of his ministers,<sup>13</sup> in order that by understanding his Word as we ought, we might at last submit to God and render God the obedience and homage which God is due.

Now having said these things, Micah continues: *The fire still burns in the house of the wicked, for the treasures of iniquity, false scales, rapine, usury, and inequitable weights still reign there* [Micah 7:10]. From this we can perceive, he says, their total lack of any fear of God. Now, in truth, his word “fire” here can be translated in different ways. For some interpret it as “man,”<sup>14</sup> while others translate it as we do. That is, the word “fire” implies an “astonishment,” although this is not its general meaning. In any case, however, in this passage we can see how Micah was trying to show how incredibly hardened the people had become, since God was unable to elicit any favorable response to his Word. That is the “fire” that is still burning in the house of the wicked, which he mentions by way of “astonishment,” as a kind of shocked response on the part of an interrogator: “You mean that mankind would continue to allow a fire to burn in their houses?” For the fire burns all the brighter so long as false weights and measurements are tolerated. Thus malice, ruthlessness, and extortion amount to fires that will consume them, yet they appear indifferent and take no steps to extinguish them. Thus Micah is shocked by their outrageous action.<sup>15</sup> For if someone were to cry “Fire!” we would not hesitate to rush to our house. We would run to it. Even if the fire were still twenty houses away, we would treat it as already upon us. Now, we are feed-

13. See the *Institutes* 4.3.1, where Calvin explains that this work is a “delegated” one, not a transfer of God’s “right and honor.”

14. The Hebrew word in question is *'esh*.

15. *Brualité*.

ing a fire in every corner of our house and are oblivious to the danger in which we live. Indeed, it is astonishing how slow and indifferent mankind are to think about themselves. Now, in truth, we might not recognize such a fire at first. Why not? Because it might be covered with cinders and ashes. But the fire of God’s wrath can be ignited in an instant. Just when we think the embers are cold, God’s fire can flare up and burn us. Thus Micah is justified in demanding: “How is it that the fire still burns in the house of the wicked?” It’s as if he were saying: “Is it possible that, even though mankind have had their ears buffeted by the prophets’ incessant cries, exhortations, and admonitions, along with God’s countless threats, the fire is still burning and they completely ignore it?” In short, that is a terrifying condemnation to fall on the head of people who neither fear God’s threats nor pay heed to God’s numerous admonitions.

Furthermore, let us note that Micah’s astonishment is not the result of his own human sensibilities, but it is God who by means of his Holy Spirit enters the prophet as a person in order to show how monstrous, shocking, and contrary to nature it is for mankind to become so hardened and obstinate. It is enough to shock and astonish even the angels of paradise. What is one to think? That humankind have less reasoning powers than animals? The voice of God can sunder rocks and anything else as hard or harder, yet mankind remain totally unmoved. That is what Micah is saying, not by virtue of his own natural sensibilities, but rather because God wants to reveal through him how monstrous a thing it is for humanity to remain unaffected by either God’s Word or God’s threats. Thus he accuses them of continuing to feed the fire of God’s wrath, although they do not see it. But be that as it may, as I have already said, it will burst into flame to consume them, at a time they least expect it.

Now this ought to teach us that, whenever God threatens us, we need to take a closer look at ourselves than we have ever done before. Indeed, we ought always keep this metaphor before us, as it was not placed in Holy Scripture without a purpose. We frequently encounter the word “fire” in the Scripture as a metaphor for God’s wrath, for



by means of it God is able to convey the extent to which his wrath and vengeance are to be feared. In giving us such a sign, it's as if God were saying: "Fire! Fire! Don't you realize that the fire is burning?" Now whenever the Lord cries aloud like that, if we fail to listen to him or fail to take stock of ourselves, then we lose any grounds for alleging ignorance; nor can we blame our damnation on the ruse that we were not warned in time. Our own consciences will condemn us, for we know that we have been sufficiently warned as to what we are doing.

Now in particular Micah identifies the fire with the false weights and measurements, which underweighed everything. He even refers to rocks when speaking of weights, as rocks were used in his time as weights. He calls them the "weights of abomination," and asserts that God considers it an abomination for us to engage in fraud and deceit against our neighbors. That is the argument which Micah follows when speaking of God's wrath, that is, he compares it to fire. He continues: "And just what are these false weights?" For mankind are quick to ask: "And just where is this fire?" Thus Micah explains: "Whenever you use false weights and resort to extortion and fraud, you stoke the fire of God's wrath. Indeed, the vengeance of God will consume you." True, it may smolder under cinders for a while, but dare not imagine that God's fire has gone out. For just when we least expect it, God will cause it to burst into flame, as we know from daily experience. For those who live by fraud, usury, rapine, extortion, and ruthlessness, and use false weights and measurements, in spite of what they may disclaim, do so purely to enrich themselves. For in their view, they have far more to gain by living in a manner that offends God than by living a just life. In their mind, who would want to pursue a righteous life and cooperate in good conscience with one's neighbors, if nothing is gained by it? Rather, whoever hopes to become rich must cast off his conscience. That is how the Devil poisons people and bewitches them: by convincing them that the only way to garner wealth is to engage in evil. On the contrary, however, Micah proclaims that who-

ever employs false weights and measurements lights the fire that one day will finally consume him.

Now, in truth, they might not see this at first, but what Micah has said will nonetheless come to pass. Even we can see it when we open our eyes, for although people who use false weights may become rich for a while, in the end it is not worth it. In fact, what do we see? Why do we see so many revolutions occurring in the world, save for the fact that God's malediction falls on all gain that has been wrongly acquired? Wherever neither trust nor equity reigns, we will always encounter ruin and confusion. Thus our Lord makes it amply clear as to why Micah's statement is so important. But what happens? We never give it a moment's thought. Certainly, we know how to complain. For upon seeing things more chaotic than they have ever been before, we manage to say: "How grave it all is! Look at all of the upheavals and changes! Not even a father's property can be inherited by his son!" Yet, in order to avoid this, scarcely anyone inquires as to why this is happening. All of these things have come about because mankind no longer trust each other. They would rather gouge each other's eyes out than help one another, let alone abstain from violence, usury, rapine, or using false weights and measurements. That is what we have to note. Above all, we must implore God not to allow us to betray<sup>16</sup> our neighbors. The reason why Micah says that false weights are an abomination to God is to show us how important it is to avoid having God's vengeance fall on our own heads because of our involvement in such evil. And why is that? Because God is not passive or idle. We must always remember that God is the world's judge and will fulfill his office.

To this day, God considers fraud, deceit, and iniquity to be abominable. None of it will go unpunished. God's hand will destroy and eradicate it. But what do we see? The world openly declares its unfaithfulness. We profess to be Christians, yet many live in doubt. Go down any street in Geneva, and you will discover about as much righteousness and loyalty there as you would among dogs. For the market shops

16. *Desloyaulx*, i.e., to become disloyal or cheat.



have become robbers' dens, where the throats of the poor are slit. And if you observe the working class, whom you would expect to act with greater sincerity,<sup>17</sup> you will discover nothing but lies and trickery. We preach against it every day. But what good does it do? We preach loudly and clearly: "God abhors false weights and measurements. Be assured that one day you will have to give an account before God." But nothing comes of it. For in the eyes of most people, God no longer inhabits the heavens as a judge. This conforms with what the Psalm reports: "The evil say in their heart, 'there is no God'" [Psalm 14:1]. And why is that? Because, although an evil humanity knows in its conscience that God exists, it is content to believe that it escapes God's eyes, and thus cannot be punished for its iniquities which it commits against both God and neighbor.

In spite of this, however, let those who fear God desist from all fraud and deceit the moment they hear that God will judge us. Let them avoid using any false weights, and disdain from all deceitful practices toward their neighbors. And although they observe how these practices prevail among others, let them challenge them wherever they can, in order to warn those who engage in these affairs of the danger and peril that awaits them, though they assume themselves to be safe. In fact, this is how we ought to treat everyone, that the world might realize that our goal is to live justly and equitably with each other. And if in the past we acted differently, we now come before our gracious God in true repentance, imploring God that it may please him so to govern us by his Holy Spirit that his wrath need never burst into flame to consume us.

In accordance with this holy doctrine, let us prostrate ourselves before the face of our gracious God in acknowledgment of our faults. Let us pray that it may please God so to awaken us that, every time our vices are called to our attention, we will so disdain them as to mortify all the evil affections of our flesh. And that whenever we are warned of God's wrath and judgment, we realize the true wages of our sins. At the same time, let us never lose hope in God's goodness and mercy,

17. *Simplicité.*

which he has promised us. But may we come to God in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, in keeping with God's promise to all his elect, unites us to God, his Father, in order that he might make us participants of eternal life. May God grant this grace not only to us, but also to all peoples and nations of the earth, etc.

*The end*