

Falling Forwards

As we approach the end of a year, it is often with almost battle-weary hearts that we do so. During the course of the year, you probably battled many temptations and probably lost a good few of those battles. In other words, you fell. You are still here, which is a good sign. But many times the falls we endure become setbacks which we grin and bear, and we arrive at the end of the year perhaps not much further along in our walk with God, and frustrated by that.

I want to examine the heart of a prophet of God who learnt to fall forwards. He fell, but each fall only slowed him down, it did not set him back. He learnt how to respond to his falls so that they turned into advantages and catalysts for growth rather than pits of despair. I want us to examine the words he spoke, and the thoughts he thought, because they are key to falling forwards.

Micah 7:7-9 *“Therefore I will look to the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation; My God will hear me. ⁸ Do not rejoice over me, my enemy; When I fall, I will arise; When I sit in darkness, The LORD will be a light to me. ⁹ I will bear the indignation of the LORD, Because I have sinned against Him, Until He pleads my case And executes justice for me. He will bring me forth to the light; I will see His righteousness.”*

Micah has fallen. The kind of fall is a fall into sin. We know that by the language he uses. He says in verse 9, *“I have sinned against the LORD”*. So his fall is the fall we believers experience. We don’t know what his sin was, and that’s good, because it leaves it blank to fill in our fall. The fall is left general so as to be something any believer can relate to. Micah knows he has sinned.

He calls his sin a fall. It is not a fatal fall. He has not fallen into apostasy. He has not fallen into denial of Christ. This is not the fall of Hebrews 6 – of someone who claims to be a believer but fails to ever take Christ up, but falls from his profession.

But he has fallen. This is the fall into sin. Romans 3:23 describes sin as a fall from the glory of God. For a Christian, sin is a fall from a walk with God. There is a sense of communing and making progress and then a stumble. I Cor 10:13.

When you have fallen, you are not still walking. You are on the ground, maybe flat on your face. Micah acknowledges this. The experience of sin is like a nasty trip and fall when you were enjoying your walk.

He describes it another way. He calls his sin *‘sitting in darkness.’* As if he were in a room with candles enjoying easy communion and now his sin just blew out all the lights. God seems far away. The light of His face seems absent. Communion seems gone. Prayer and the Word seem like trying to read in the dark. In darkness, everything loses its colour, everything loses shape. In fact, there is not much to do in darkness except sit. You cannot work, move, read nor do much else.

Micah finds himself where every believer finds himself, or herself, at some point. Fallen, guilty and in a gloomy place where the light of God's fellowship seems absent.

What do you usually do when in this place?

Some Christians decide that God must be very tense towards them, so they back off. They reason He must see them now as distasteful, so they figure it is best to just give God His space while they do their own thing for a while. After a few hours, or days, or however long they decide, they come back and start again.

Others try to pour guilt upon themselves, perhaps hoping that, if they are writhing in guilt, then God will be pleased and consider them absolved because of how sorry they were.

Others reason it away, or excuse it, or justify it, or blame it on others, until they have themselves believing no wrong has been done and no confession is necessary.

None of these responses is Biblical. Therefore none of them will restore joy in God and a delighting in Him. None of them will restore the light of His face – which is a major theme in this passage.

Here comes the critical point where the battle is won or lost. Few believers do what Micah did. Micah knew some things about God that were fundamental to his attitude. Believing those things, he knew how to address himself and his enemies in the middle of the guilt.

In fact, Micah actually pre-empts the enemy. In verse 8, he expects the enemy to be gloating. He believes the enemy will be laughing and happy and glad over his fall.

What kind of enemy delights in the sin of a believer?

Satan, the accuser (Revelation 12:10). Satan delights in our falls. Satan is glad when a Christian's progress is interrupted. But Micah knows that is not where the enemy's chief joy is. Micah knows Satan truly rejoices only when the fall becomes a state. Micah is planning on short-circuiting the joy of his enemy because he says his fall will not be permanent and his darkness will not be darkness.

In other words, Satan's joy is not primarily in your fall, it is in the fact that you do not get up. Satan's joy ends when a Christian gets up from their fall and continues. Nothing annoys him as much as a believer who keeps on going. Satan's joy is not primarily in the gloom of sin, it is that you no longer look for the light of God to break in. Satan's joy is that your darkness turns to despair. That as you are in a place of lowness, where the sight of God seems all but gone, you believe the darkness to be permanent and start to turn away, or look within. Satan's joy ends when in that dark valley, you say – 'but God will still be my light.'

Now look how Micah's beliefs start to emerge. He has hope not just before his falls, but after them. He has hope not when he is living well, but after he has sinned.

Micah has some kind of belief system that, right after having fallen into sin, flat on his face, almost pitch dark - he holds up his hand to Satan and says – 'don't you start snickering at me. This is not how it ends. This is not where I stay. This is not how I finish. I am down, but I am not out.'

Now stop there and try to feel the tone in Micah's voice. Here is a man fallen. When you have fallen, what is the emotional tone of your heart? Usually discouraged, disheartened, maybe despairing, maybe frustrated at yourself, ashamed.

But if you sense Micah's tone, he is defiant. He is gritting his teeth like a prisoner of war who won't relent to his interrogators. He is staring at the enemy – be it Satan, be it his own flesh, be it the world; and saying with gutsy, single-mindedness – 'it's not over.'

I want you to know that that kind of attitude is what you and I should covet. It is this kind of heart which sustains us through the fight. The Christian life is an endurance event, one with many possible falls. It is not how you start, it is how you finish. *And one of the ways we know how you will finish is what you do when you fall.*

What was it that Micah knew and understood which gave him this hopeful, confident, bold approach?

These are things which he knew, and things which you and I must know:

I. You Must Know the Difference between Fatherly Displeasure and Wrath

"I will bear the indignation of the Lord because I have sinned against Him." Micah is not in denial of his sin. He knows it, he confesses it, he owns up to it. He also has a realistic view of God. He knows his sin upsets God. Indignation means anger. His view of God is not one that sees God's mercy never getting angry.

But understand that this is not wrath. This is not God pouring down punishment. This is not the flaming vengeance described in 2 Thes 1:8. This is not the fury God has for those who reject Him. This is not the sword going out of His mouth slaying His enemies.

This is the displeasure a father has when his son fails him. Fathers get angry at sons. Not because they do not love them. They get angry *because* they love them. This is the corrective anger that insists upon change for the better for his child.

God is not wrathful with His children. He is not condemning. He is not punishing. He is not exacting retribution.

He is insisting upon change. He is, with a heart filled with love, intolerant of what will harm his son. He is going to get sin out of his son one way or another.

If God's anger at one of His children were some kind of tantrum or malicious outburst, do you think Micah could look up to his accuser with such boldness? Micah knows God is working with him. He knows he has fallen. He knows God will continue to train him. So he looks at his enemy and says – 'Don't you think this is detrimental to me. I will go through his time of purging until God is finished dusting me off'.

That is one of the reasons Micah can say that his response is going to be '*I will bear the indignation of the Lord*'. Consider what some other Scriptures say of God's wrath:

Psalm 76:7 '*Thou, even thou, art to be feared: and who may stand in thy sight when once thou art angry?*'

Nahum 1:6 '*Who can stand before His indignation? And who can endure the fierceness of His anger? His fury is poured out like fire, and the rocks are thrown down by Him.*'

Now if Micah had that in mind, he would not say – '*I will bear it.*' He knew there was an ocean of love between God's furious wrath and God's fatherly displeasure. I am reminded of David.

2 Samuel 16:11 *And David said to Abishai and all his servants, "See how my son who came from my own body seeks my life. How much more now may this Benjamite? Let him alone, and let him curse; for so the LORD has ordered him. ¹² It may be that the LORD will look on my affliction, and that the LORD will repay me with good for his cursing this day."*

David accepted the discipline of the Lord. He bore His indignation. But both David and Micah knew the difference between the anger of a Father and the anger of an enemy.

Many a Christian confuses or mingles the two. We do not fully understand how God can be angry at unrepentant sinners one way, and angry at repentant believers another. But that is the testimony of Scripture. Romans 8:1. "*No condemnation*".

How do you respond to a God whom you think despises you, or is your enemy? Do you approach? Do you seek? Christians may remain flat on their faces, or only gradually getting up, because they are confused about the character of God.

Part of the reason we do not understand His character is a lack of understanding of the second thing which Micah knew.

2. You must Understand The Difference between Justification and Sanctification.

Now this is not just for theologians. In fact, the truth is every one of us is a theologian. Every one of us has a theology. You have beliefs. You have doctrines you hold to be true. Your action and your behavior flow out of those beliefs. Micah's theology was rooted in the truth of God; so he could get up out of a ditch, because he understood the difference between justification and sanctification.

Let me walk you through what he says and the difference will become plain.
He says he is going to bear the indignation of the LORD until...

'Until He pleads my case for me.'

When he says, *'plead my case,'* what comes into your mind? A courtroom scene. Who is on trial? Micah. Or you might substitute your own name in there. On what charge is he in court? The charge of committing the sin which has brought about the fall, the darkness the indignation. He has, in his own words, *'sinned against the Lord.'* So who do you expect the Judge to be? **God**. Micah pleads guilty to sinning against God, who happens to be the Judge Himself.

Who do you think the prosecuting attorney might be? Satan, the accuser? Perhaps the law of God which condemns us; perhaps our own conscience. And the accuser presses the charges and lays them out before God, crying out for justice to be done upon us.

And who does Micah expect to come to his defence? The Lord Himself. The Lord will be His defence attorney against God.

This is justification.

Galatians 3:13 says that everything the Law- which is God's standard of conduct before Him – demanded of me, I have failed to perform. Therefore I am under the curse of the law, I am under damnation; I am therefore cursed. But, the message of the Gospel is that Christ came and lived and died and rose again and took my curse, and not only took my curse, but lived a life of perfect obedience and righteousness, which is credited to me when I believe by faith in Him. It is not merely that my debt was paid by Him; He credited me with His life.

So now when God looks at me, He looks at His Son's obedience and righteousness clothing me, and is pleased.

Now **Romans 8:32** becomes true of me, everything good which God could give me has been purchased. The wrath is gone, the pleasure has come. I dwell in spiritual blessings in Christ forever more.

How do you get that?

Romans 4:5, 5:1- By faith alone.

Micah is in that sort of relationship. He knows He is justified.

Look at the next phrase – *'and executes justice for me.'* You would expect that God would execute justice against him. But Micah knows God's anger is the displeasure of a Father setting His son straight; but overwhelmingly, he knows God is for him. Micah knows the

verdict. He knows, as well as an Old Testament saint could know, that God was definitely going to rule in his favour. No doubt, no probation period.

Look at the catalogue of things Micah says about God's attitude towards him:

He will hear me.

He will be a light to me.

He will plead my case for me.

He will execute justice for me.

He will bring me forth to the light.

Romans 8:31 – *if God be for us, who can be against us?*

God's favour has been settled, and nothing in Micah's behaviour is going to change that.

This is the ground on which Micah keeps getting up. He is absolutely convinced that God is for him. He knows God will discipline, but he entertains no ideas about God being distant or cool or estranged, or provoked to leave. This is a rock-solid assurance that the same God I have sinned against is there to plead my case.

Justification is a position God gives us which secures His favour and relationship to us forever.

Do you have the kind of theology which can understand how God can be displeased with you as a sinning child, and still be pleading for you and working for your good? That's justification.

Sanctification is a process of becoming more like Christ in practice day by day. It involves the many things we seek to do – obeying God's commandments, reading the Word, praying, fellowshiping, evangelising, loving one another, putting off sin and putting on Christ. It is also by grace, through faith, but instead of being a once off position we gain, it becomes a lifelong process we undertake. Justification is not something you grow in. It is a settled fact from now into eternity. Sanctification is a growth process of becoming more like Christ.

Now here is where the crucial distinction must be made. If you mix and mingle justification and sanctification, you will live a rollercoaster Christian life.

What do I mean? How many of us have secretly thought that, after we had sinned, God no longer saw us as righteous, based on our performance? How many of us have thought that if we read our Bibles and pray in the morning, that we must be more lovable to God than before and thus He is enjoying us, but, if we do not do these things, then He is cold and frustrated? How many times have we thought that, when we have not performed a

certain sin, we are really close to God and He loves us, and when we do perform the sin, we are now estranged and He dislikes us.

If you live like that, you will think God's relationship to you, or, if you like, your position in relation to Him, ebbs and flows depending on your performance. That is the heart of legalism, the heart of the idea of works-based salvation.

When you live like that, you have a God who pleads your case based upon you, not based upon Himself. Your *practice* keeps altering your *position*.

Do you notice Micah saying, "*I will bear His indignation, and He will plead my case until I have read my Bible and prayed consistently, and attended all the services and dealt with every sin in my life and done all I know is right?*"

Micah does not give his behaviour (*practice*) as a basis for God's favour (*position*). It is the reverse. He gives God's favour as the basis for him getting up and carrying on. There is world of difference between letting your sanctification flow out of your justification, and letting your sanctification become your justification.

One is to make your works the basis of your favour with God. The other is to make God's favour the basis of your works.

If you think your sin has made God change His mind about you, you haven't understood justification. If you are trying to use your sanctification to cause God to love you more, you are mixing the two. If you think your sin makes Him love you less, you are mixing the two.

Micah regarded justification as a basis to fight sin, not fighting sin as a basis of justification.

Can you see that Micah was saying, 'Such is God's commitment to me, I know I will get up again?' He was not saying, 'Such is my commitment to Him, I know I will get up again'. He based his works on justification, not his justification on works.

We seek sanctification not to gain favour, but because we have favour.

In fact, we need to be like Micah in this way. He knew his sins were forgiven sins. That is why he kept fighting. The sins we defeat are defeated sins.

The only way to defeat the sins is to see them as punished, covered sins. When I make war on my sins, I know they are already punished, covered. When I keep getting up, and saying – 'This one too, was bled for, paid for, and plead for before the throne of God. I hate it, will turn from it and go on by the Spirit of God because He accepts me' – I will weaken those sins till they have no hold on me.

If you turn this around and say, 'I will defeat these sins so that God will accept me' - you are dead.

If you live in a kind of conditional acceptance with God, your joy and your progress will be conditional. The condition will be your performance. But if you live in the air of *acceptance in Christ*, your life will flow out in living, fighting, depending, grateful, faith.

So look at the responses which Micah manifests when he has this kind of mindset.

I will look. His confidence in God's view of him causes him not to hide amongst the trees of the garden or look inwardly to try and find relief. He does not look at others to compare himself and find relief. He looks straight to the Lord, because he knows there is mercy there. To fall forward is to look to the LORD immediately after a fall. Take the knowledge of God's displeasure as Father, take the knowledge of justification being separate from sanctification and look to the LORD. He is your judge and your advocate. He is your Father who is unhappy over your sin, and delighting in you.

I will wait. Micah is not going to insist upon God pulling him out that second, nor throw a tantrum if he does not overcome this sin overnight. He is not going to give up because God does not grant revival overnight. He is not going to throw in the towel if God leaves him in a dark night of the soul for a period of time. His confidence in the character of God and his justification leads him to say – 'I can wait'. No waiting is wasted, when you are waiting on God.

I will bear. Micah could say 'I will go through whatever training processes I need to purge this out of me. I know His hand is tender and merciful. I need correction.' I have said before that the Bible does not make a distinction between trials and discipline. They are all training tools God uses to purge out what should not be there, and to build in what should. So embrace His path for you with both hands. Kiss the rod.

And then I want you to see Micah's utter confidence in what is going to happen.

I will arise. He knows God doesn't leave His children in the miry clay. He knows that a child of God gets up again. God makes sure of it. Though this be the umpteenth fall, he knows God will fulfil Philippians 1:6.

I will see His righteousness. He knows He will experience more illumination. He will see more of God. Even in the dirt, he looks up and says – 'I will yet see more of God. I am not done; such is God's commitment to me'.

You don't have to fall this year, but it is not unlikely. The question is, will you fall forward, or backwards? The joy of Satan is not in the fall as much as it is in what you do next. When you despair, trust in your own works, you go backwards. But when you understand God's displeasure as Father, set your mind on His justification of you and boldly defy the accuser; look, wait and bear – you will fall forwards.