

Victory of the Lamb – January 1, 2023 – Fresh Start –

Micah 7: 18-20 – Pastor Ben Sadler

Micah 7: 18-20 (EHV)

¹⁸Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity
and passing over transgression
for the remnant of his inheritance?

He does not retain his anger forever,
because he delights in steadfast love.

¹⁹He will again have compassion on us;
he will tread our iniquities underfoot.

You will cast all our sins
into the depths of the sea.

²⁰You will show faithfulness to Jacob
and steadfast love to Abraham,
as you have sworn to our fathers
from the days of old.

I want to make a case for New Year's resolutions. I know that some of you don't believe in New Year's Resolutions. Some people in my own household don't believe in New Year's Resolutions. Some of you have told me, "Why wait until the New Year to make a resolution? If you need to set a goal, do it now." Others have said, "new year's resolutions don't work. We set big goals and then by the end of January, we fall back into old habits."

Ok, I agree with you. But here is why I believe this is a good time to set new goals. It's usually during the months of November and December that our lives get out of whack. Because of all the obligations, traditions, and busyness of the holidays, I usually overeat, overspend, and overwork. Which means by the time January comes around, I need to set new goals for my spiritual life, physical life, my financial life, and my mental life. And January is the perfect time to do that. Not only are you turning the page in the calendar, but January and February don't seem to have all of the temptations to excess and overindulgence like the previous two months.

Did I convince you all of the benefits of New Year's resolutions? Probably not. But even if you don't believe in making a new year's resolution, I think we can all agree that we need to keep growing and changing and improving. Healthy things grow. A healthy plant, person, or company is not going to stay the same. The seed grows and produces fruit. The baby grows and learns new skills. The company grows and adapts to the changes of the market. Healthy things grow. So whether you want to make some necessary changes on January 1st or if you want to make changes on February or December or July (you decided) we all need to make changes.

But change is hard for lots of reasons. So much of our lives are built on automatic, subconscious habits. And so it takes time and effort to break old habits and establish new ones. But it is also hard because of something deeper. It is hard because of something called shame.

What is shame? Well, shame is different than guilt. Guilt is when we have done something wrong. We hurt someone's feelings. We acted selfishly. We did something wrong, so we apologize and do what we can to make amends. That is healthy. If we didn't have guilt, we would be sociopaths, hurting people without remorse.

Shame on the other hand means that we believe we are something wrong.

Guilt = I did something wrong.

Shame = I am something wrong.

Shame has to do with our identity. Maybe because we did something wrong or something wrong was done to us, we came to the conclusion that we are something wrong. That belief that we are something wrong is powerful.

Some of you have heard of the psychologist Brené Brown. She has built her career on studying shame and its affects on people. Shame keeps you from trying new things, from changing and growing. Shame makes you believe that even if you could improve and change, you don't deserve to change. Shame keeps accusing you telling you that you will always be a failure, so why try?

And so, one of the reasons that we don't want to set goals or improve or change is because shame has become our identity.

Well, today is New Year's day. The start of 2023. It is a change in our calendar. And I believe it can be a fresh start for everyone of us. But first we have to figure out what do with our identity of shame. And so here is the question I want to answer: **How can I live a new life in the new year?**

And to answer that question I want to go to our reading from the prophet Micah. What do you know about the prophet Micah? Well, Micah was a prophet who lived in the southern tribe of Judah at about 750BC. He was a contemporary of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah was known as a major prophet and Micah was known as a minor prophet because Isaiah wrote a large book and Micah wrote a small book. But although this book is short, you could read the whole thing in about 15 minutes, it packs a powerful punch.

So, what was going on with the Israelites in 750 BC during the time of Micah's preaching? By this time, the nation of Israel had been divided into two groups, the north and the south. The north was usually called Israel or Samaria and the south was usually called Judah. Micah saw that both the north and the south had become corrupt.

He says, **If a liar and deceiver comes and says,
'I will prophesy for you plenty of wine and beer,'
that would be just the prophet for this people! (Micah 2:11)**

In other words, the preachers knew more about brewing and drinking beer than preaching the word of God.

There was systemic corruption. Micah said:

¹¹ **Her leaders judge for a bribe,
her priests teach for a price,**

**and her prophets tell fortunes for money.
Yet they look for the Lord's support and say,
"Is not the Lord among us?
No disaster will come upon us."**

Micah wanted them to see their sin. He wanted them to have a healthy understanding of their guilt. The people had become corrupt. They were filled with idolatry, wickedness, and selfish gain. And so Micah predicted that God was going to send in the nation of Assyria to destroy the people in the north, which is called Israel. They were going to suffer the consequences for their sin.

And the south was no different. The people in the area of Judah were also corrupt and unjust. They showed no mercy. And they didn't have a healthy fear and reverence for God. And so God said that even in the south, the land of Judah, the people would experience the consequences of their sin. About a hundred years after Assyria came through to swallow up Northern Israel, Babylon was going to come and conquer Judah, destroy the Temple, and take the majority of the Jews into Babylonian captivity.

In other words, now was the time for the Israelites to see their guilt and repent before God.

That is the same for us. The New Year creates an opportunity to look back and see when we were selfish and self-centered. When fell into idolatry, corruption, and sin. That is a spiritually healthy process. We need to see our sin and the natural consequences of our sin.

But we must not let our guilt because of sin turn into shame. Just because we sinned before God, doesn't mean God is done with us. It doesn't mean that we are no longer God's children.

You see, the prophet Micah did not want the Israelites to be overwhelmed by their guilt to the point of shame. He wanted them to see how God would take away their guilt and give them a new identity. And so in the very last verses of this prophecy Micah says this:

**¹⁸Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity
and passing over transgression
for the remnant of his inheritance?**

Micah has a play on words. Micah's name actually means "Who is like God" and so this seems to be the heart of Micah's message. Yes, we have sinned. Yes, we deserve God's wrath. Yes, his justice calls for us to be condemned. But who is like God who pardons iniquity?

And then he says he **passes over transgression**. Micah wants God's people to think back to the second book of the Bible, the book of Exodus, where Moses led the nation of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. In those days, the Egyptian leaders and slave masters were their enemies. And so God sent plagues on Egypt so that Pharaoh would let them go. But he didn't so God's last plague was the Passover. The angel of the Lord passed over all the homes that had the blood of the lamb. And all those who didn't they lost their first born. Just like Pharaoh took the firstborns from Israel, now God was taking the firstborn from Egypt.

But now Micah is saying that God is passing over their sin. He is not giving them the punishment they deserve he is passing over their sin.

Micah goes on to say:

**He does not retain his anger forever,
because he delights in steadfast love.**

God does not delight in being angry. According to his justice, he must be angered over sin. Just like we get angry when we hear about someone harming someone else. We have a just anger over the evil in this world. So does God. But that is not his delight. What God delights in is his mercy. He can't wait to pardon.

Micah goes on:

**¹⁹ He will again have compassion on us;
he will tread our iniquities underfoot.
You will cast all our sins
into the depths of the sea.**

Again, Micah wants us to think of the imagery from the Exodus story. In the days of Moses, when God rescued his people out of Egyptian slavery, they walked out of Egypt in the direction of the Red Sea. But after they were set free, the Pharaoh of Egypt changed his mind and decided to go after the Israelites one last time. But God fought for Israel. He parted the waters of the Red Sea and the Israelites walked through on dry land. But when the Egyptians tried to pursue the Israelites, the Lord closed up the sea. He stomped down Israel's enemies and through them into the depths of the sea.

Micah is saying that God is doing that same thing for us. But our enemies are not the Egyptian slave masters, but our own sin. Our sin and guilt comes after us like an enemy. It wants to cause us shame. It wants to change our identity and enslave us all over again. But Micah says that God treads our sin under his feet. He throws our sin into the sea.

This imagery is picked up in the New Testament. When we were baptized, we had a Red Sea kind of moment. Our sins were trampled by God under his feet and our sins drown under the waters of our baptism.

Finally Micah says:

**²⁰ You will show faithfulness to Jacob
and steadfast love to Abraham,
as you have sworn to our fathers
from the days of old.**

God had made promises to Abraham and to Jacob. Jacob, also known as Israel, and Abraham also known as the first Hebrew, received promises from God. God said that he would be with them and love them and bless them. In fact, he said that he would use them and their family line to bless all nations. God made that promise and he was not going to change his promise even though the people had sinned.

So in these short two verses at the end of Micah, the prophet tells us that God actively looks at our guilt that causes our shame, and he passes over it, he tramples it, he throws it into the sea. He forgets our sins and remembers his promises to Abraham. But when did this happen? When did God go after our sin and destroy it?

Micah, the same prophet tells us, in Micah 5

**“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times.”**

**He will stand and shepherd his flock
in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they will live securely, for then his greatness
will reach to the ends of the earth.**

Micah is predicting Christmas. He is predicting that Messiah, Jesus, will come out of Bethlehem. But he is not only predicting Christmas, he is predicting Jesus’ ministry, his life, death and resurrection. You see, when Jesus went to the cross, he was like a king going to battle. But this king was not fighting against some evil people out there. He was not fighting against you because of your wickedness. He was fighting against the sin that lives inside of you. He was treading it under his feet. He was throwing it into the sea. He was ruling over your sin so that you could live securely and in his peace.

This is what you need to know: **Jesus defeated your old identity of shame.** You don’t need to hold on to that identity. You don’t need to beat yourself up anymore. Jesus has destroyed your old identity. Shame and sin have been drown in the sea.

I think this helps us answer our opening question: **How can I live a new life in the new year?**

Get a new identity.

If you used to think, I’m just a sinner who screwed everything up, see your new identity, that old sin was drown in the sea. If you think, Even if I could change, I don’t deserve to change. God is just waiting to destroy me. Remember he delights in showing mercy. You need to see yourself different before you can be different. You have to see you how God sees you so that you can begin to do the things that God is calling you to do.

Now if you take on that new identity as a loved, child of God, what kind of changes do you want to make in the New year? I’ve heard it said that each of us a like a four-legged stool. We have four areas of our life: spiritual, physical, Mental, and emotional. And each of these areas needs our attention. So maybe now that you have no guilt or shame you could look at these areas and see how you could grow.

Spiritual

Physical

Mental

Emotional

In your spiritual life, I would encourage you to have some type of devotional plan. Every year for the past few years I have been taking a group through the Bible in a year. You can sign up for that reading plan through the YouVersion Bible app by going to **Votl.life/bible**

When it comes to your physical life, do something that you enjoy. Move more and eat food that God made.

When it comes to your mental life, keep growing. Keep learning new ideas and new skills. **Votl.life/grow**

When it comes to your emotional life, keep connecting with your family and friends. Join a Life Group so that you can gather with other Christians. **Votl.life/groups**

This is a new year. It's time for a fresh start. But before you have a fresh start, you need a fresh new identity. Jesus actively defeated your past. He stomped on your sins. He throw them into the sea. You are no longer enslaved by them. He delights in showing mercy. So, what are your going to do, now that you don't have to carry around that guilt and shame? Let go of the past and life into the future that God is creating for you. Amen.