

# Epiphany 4

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February 3, 2002

## Prayer of the Day

O God, you know that we cannot withstand the dangers which surround us. Strengthen us in body and spirit so that, with your help, we may be able to overcome the weakness that our sin has brought upon us; through Jesus Christ, your Son our Lord. Amen

## Micah 6:1-8 [1]

{1} Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. {2} Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel. {3} "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! {4} For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. {5} O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the LORD." {6} "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? {7} Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" {8} He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

*1-2. plead your case...:* The people are called on to plead their defense against Yahweh's indictment which began in 1:1.

*Hear, you mountains...and you enduring foundations of the earth:* The mountains and the foundations of the earth "hear" the case as witnesses.

*the controversy of the Lord:* A *rib* is a case at law, here between Yahweh and his people.

*3-5:* Yahweh presents his case: He has loved and cared for his people. The people's response to his love has been false worship and unrighteous behavior (Chapters 1-2).

*4-5. O my people...I brought you up from the land of Egypt.... O my people remember...*

*King Balak of Moab...Balaam son of Beor:* Yahweh offers two examples of his saving acts for the care and protection of his people, the Exodus and the episode of Balaam. The story of Balaam is in Numbers 22-24, and is a part of the story of the Exodus. In 1967 fragments of texts written on a plaster wall with references to Balaam were discovered at Deir 'Alla in Jordan. [2]

*from Shittim to Gilgal:* The final part of the exodus from Egypt to the promised land. Gilgal was the first camp in the new land.

*6-7:* The people ask to know what they must do, what sacrifice they must make to restore their relationship with him. The possibilities begin with small offerings and move to thousands and tens of thousands to climax with the sacrifice of children.

*7. firstborn:* "The prophet makes no comment about human sacrifice directly, but lists all possible offerings as inadequate for the present need. It would seem that all such remedies including the sacrifice of a child were serious options for everyone, king and citizen alike, at that time. Only later, with Jeremiah and Ezekiel and the abominations of the Tophet does horror enter into it." [3]

8. *mortal*: 'adam. The people are reminded of their origin; they are Yahweh's creation, and therefore responsible to him for what he requires of them, not what they choose to offer him

Yahweh declares what he requires, and it is not sacrifice, unless it is the sacrifice of injustice, cruelty and arrogance.

*to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God*: "'To do justice'...is to uphold what is right according to the tradition of YHWH's will, both in legal proceedings and in the conduct of life.... 'To love mercy' is to choose and devote oneself to acts of that recognition....humility lies in not going one's own way presumptuously, but in attending the will and way of God....The specific requirement is to do justice which is a way of loving mercy, which in turn is a manifestation of walking humbly with God." [4] This is good; this is what God requires.

## **Psalm 15**

{1} O LORD, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill? {2} Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart; {3} who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbors; {4} in whose eyes the wicked are despised, but who honor those who fear the LORD; who stand by their oath even to their hurt; {5} who do not lend money at interest, and do not take a bribe against the innocent. Those who do these things shall never be moved.

The Psalm is "torah liturgy" or "liturgy of entrance." "At the time of entrance into the sanctuary in Jerusalem, a liturgical act took place. The participants in the worship stand at the portals of the worship area and ask the question: "O Yahweh, who may sojourn in your tent, who may dwell on your holy hill.?" From the inside a priestly speaker answers them with the declaration of the conditions of entrance." [5]

4. *the wicked...those who fear the Lord*: There are two groups of people in Israel, the wicked and the righteous. The righteous keep their word, even to their own hurt (verse 4).

## **1 Corinthians 1:18-31**

{18} For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. {19} For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." {20} Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? {21} For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. {22} For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, {23} but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, {24} but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. {25} For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. {26} Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. {27} But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; {28} God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, {29} so that no one might boast in the presence of God. {30} He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, {31} in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

19: Isaiah 29:14 (Septuagint except "I will thwart" in 1 Corinthians is "I shall conceal" in Isaiah.)

21-25. *foolishness...wisdom*: Paul argues that the wisdom of God is perceived as foolishness by those steeped in the wisdom of the world, while it is the wisdom of the world that is truly foolish. God has deliberately chosen what is weak and foolish, low and even nonexistent to shame the strong and wise, the high and mighty. The wisdom of

the world is dependent on one kind of "bottom line" or another; like politics it is the science of the possible. God's wisdom has a different view; it creates things that otherwise would not be possible! It is a reflection of who and what God is, and is therefore superior to any "worldly" quality. God has done this, not out of necessity, or because that is the way things are; he has done it specifically and deliberately to demean the ways of the world, to reveal them for what they are, namely the achievements of foolish and weak human beings.

22-23. *Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified:* Signs (the nonrational claim) and wisdom (the rational explanation) are the standards of the world. To that Paul opposes revelation which conveys knowledge that cannot be obtained in any other way.

26. *not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth:* This is often understood as a description of the social character of the Corinthian Christian community, unlearned, lower class, without standing. On the other hand Erastus was the city treasurer of Corinth and Gaius hosted the whole church (Romans 16:23), and there were individuals in other cities also who were of higher social class (e.g. Dionysius, Acts 17:11; the leading women, Acts 17:4, 12). "Not many" does not mean none. In fact, some of the disunity in Corinth is precisely because of social class conflict (for example, the controversy over meat sacrificed to idols, 8:1-13; abuses at the Lord's Supper, 11:17-22). The wise, the powerful, those of noble birth must, like those of the other classes, understand that their only boast is to boast in the Lord.

31: Jeremiah 9:24 (Septuagint); cf. 1 Corinthians 15:31.

### **Matthew 5:1-12**

{1} When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. {2} Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: {3} "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. {4} "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. {5} "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. {6} "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. {7} "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. {8} "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. {9} "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. {10} "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. {11} "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. {12} Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

"The name beatitude is derived from the Latin *beatitudo*, which corresponds to the Greek *makarismos* ('macarism'), a label that may have been used perhaps even in the New Testament itself [Galatians 4:15, "what has become of your praise (*pou oun ho makarismos hymon*)]."<sup>[6]</sup> "The Old Testament and post biblical literature contain a large number of beatitudes, presenting them in a wide variety of forms and functions and making it thereby difficult to see their primary characteristics. Comparing all these materials leads to the following conclusions:

1. Their original function (Sitz im Leben) is in the ritual.
2. Their nature is that of declarative statements.
3. Their future orientation is eschatological as well as this-worldly.
4. They are connected with ethics and morality."<sup>[7]</sup>

"Strictly speaking, they should be pronounced by the divine judge in the after-life, as verdicts at the eschatological judgment. Spoken in the present they reveal a message that belongs to the future of persons for whose eternal salvation this message is decisive."<sup>[8]</sup> "By revealing a new way of life, the beatitude affects moral behavior and demands an ethical awareness."<sup>[9]</sup>

3. *Blessed...*: "Within an honor-shame setting, perhaps the best translation for 'blessed is/are' would be 'how honorable...', 'How full of honor...', 'How honor bringing...', and the like. The counter to 'beatitudes' are the 'woes' or reproaches in Matt. 23:13-35; there the formula: 'Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites...' out be translated: 'How shameless your are...'" [10] "The language used here, that is, 'blessed,' is honorific language. Contrary to the dominant social values, these 'blessed are...' statements ascribe honor to those unable to defend their positions or those who refuse to take advantage of or trespass on the position of another. Obviously then the honor granted comes from God, not from the usual social sources." [11]

*poor*: "being 'poor' was to be unable to defend what was yours. It meant falling below the status at which one was born. It was to be defenseless, without recourse....In a society in which power brought wealth (in our society it is the opposite: wealth 'buys' power), being powerless meant being vulnerable to the greedy who prey on the weak. The terms 'rich' and 'poor,' therefore, are better translated 'greedy' and 'socially unfortunate.'.... By contrast, being merciful, pure in heart, or a peacemaker points to moral qualities a person must strive to acquire....'Mercy' is the obligation one has to repay debts of interpersonal obligation....To be pure of heart is to have one's thinking and feeling faculties attuned to what pleases God, something close to our word 'conscience.'.... 'peacemakers' are those who work toward [the end of meaningful human existence]." [12]

"As the church fathers recognized, and I believe they were right, the first beatitude in the S[ermon on the] M[ount] (as well as in the S[ermon on the] P[lain]) is basic. Thereafter, all others are climactic developments of some sort. In the SM the climax is reached in Matt. 5:12. Moreover, vs 3b and vs 10b ("for theirs is the kingdom of heaven") repeat the same statement in the present tense and provide an inclusio around 5:4-9. The second lines of the beatitudes in 5:4-9 state eschatological promises in the future tense. This series in 5:4-9 contains beatitudes that correspond to consecutive scenes describing the destiny of the righteous in paradise. Thus one may see in these verses a greatly abbreviated apocalyptic vision of the world to come...." [13]

## Reflection

The question of whether human sacrifice would satisfy Yahweh's justice is hyperbole. Human sacrifice was practiced in Judah (Judges 11:31; 2 Kings 16:3; 17:17; 21:6; 23:10; Isaiah 57:5; Ezekiel 16:20), but it was forbidden (Deuteronomy 18:9-14; Leviticus 1:21; 20:2-5; Jeremiah 7:31; 19:5; 32:35; Ezekiel 20:31). In Genesis 22:1-2 Yahweh tests Abraham demanding that he sacrifice his only son, Isaac only to provide an alternative. This leads to the question What *does* Yahweh require of his people, and the answer: justice, kindness and humility!

Within the context provided by the readings for the day the beatitudes exemplify God's requirements of his people. These are not optional behaviors but the very heart of our response to God, who does not require sacrifice from us, but offers his own Son on our behalf. Humility, being poor in spirit, is the fundamental condition of a relationship with God. In Micah it is walking humbly with God.

## Hymns [14]

*With One Voice* (e.g. 762v), *Hymnal Supplement* 1991 (e.g. 725s) and *LBW* (e.g. 32).

E=Entrance; D=Hymn of the Day; I=First Lesson, P=Psalm; II=Second Lesson; G=Gospel

364 --D--Son of God,  
493 --D--Hope of the  
248 --I--Dearest Jesus, at  
464 --II--You Are the

764v --G--Blest Are They  
(794s)  
689v --G--Rejoice in God's  
811s, 86

### **Prayers of the People** [15]

Pray for the needs of the Church and the world and attend to God's holy wisdom, saying, "Lord, in your mercy," and responding, "Hear our prayer."

A: For all Christians, that we might consider our call and give ourselves completely to Christ's service, trusting that God's weakness is stronger than human strength and God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom. Lord in your mercy, Hear our prayer.

A: For politicians, civil servants and all who work in social services. Let them show by their example that their service is not out of self interest, but out of concern for the good of all people and the care of the weakest and most vulnerable. Protect especially women and children who are brutalized and live in fear. Lord in your mercy, Hear our prayer.

A: For all people who are low and despised in the world, the homeless, the runaways, those who suffer from mental illness, and diseases like AIDS. You chose what is low and despised in order to confound the worldly wise. Let us never boast lest we boast of you. Lord in your mercy, Hear our prayer.

A: For all who suffer from sick, trouble, want or sadness. We implore you to make us channels of your blessing to them and in turn to be blessed by the sick and the poor. Lord in your mercy, Hear our prayer.

A: We give you thanks that you sent before us Moses, Miriam and Aaron, and countless saints and witnesses. May we one day join the throng before the throne of the Lamb, singing your praises. Lord in your mercy, Hear our prayer.

P: Hear our prayers and teach us to do what you require of us; to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God. Amen.

### **Or** [16]

#### *Presider or deacon*

God chose the weak to shame the strong. Let us pray for all those who in their weakness need justice, mercy, and peace.

#### *Deacon or other leader*

For the holy catholic church throughout the world.

For N our bishop, for presbyters, deacons, and all who minister in Christ, and for all the holy people of God.

For this holy gathering and for all who enter with faith, reverence, and fear of God.

For this country, for all nations and their leaders, and for our community.

For all those in danger and need: the sick and the suffering, prisoners, captives, and their families, the hungry, homeless, and oppressed.

For the dying and the dead, and for those who care for them.

For ourselves, our families, friends, and companions on the way, and all those we love.

#### *Presider*

Almighty God, who teaches us to walk humbly, hear our fervent prayers and lead all the peoples of the world to your holy mountain; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

## Notes

[1] Micah was active during the reigns of three kings of Judah: Jotham (742-735), Ahaz (735-715), and Hezekiah (715-687). The central event for Micah is the fall of Samaria to the Assyrians in 721. His oracles are addressed to the capitals of the northern and southern groups of tribes: *Samaria* and *Jerusalem*. *Cambridge Annotated Study Bible with Apocrypha* (Electronic edition), *in loc*.

[2] Jacob Hoftijzer, "The Prophet Balaam in a 6<sup>th</sup> Century Aramaic Inscription," *Biblical Archaeologist*, March 1976, pp. 11-17.

[3] Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Micah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New York: Doubleday, 2000, pp. 523 f.

[4] James Luther Mays, *Micah: A Commentary*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976, pp. 141 f.

[5] Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59: A Commentary*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988, p. 227

[6] Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3-7:27 and Luke 6:20-49)*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995, p. 92. On Galatians 4:15 see Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979, pp. 226 ff., and especially on 3:26-28, "which we have shown to be related to the literary form of the macarism."

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 93.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 96.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 97.

[10] Bruce Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989, p. 47

[11] *op. cit.*

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 49.

[13] Betz, pp. 109-110.

[14] <http://www.worship.on.ca/text/rcla9899.txt>

[15] [http://www.worship.on.ca/text/inter\\_a2.txt](http://www.worship.on.ca/text/inter_a2.txt)

[16] <http://members.cox.net/oplater/prayer.htm>