

RAY C. STEDMAN

Adventuring Through the Bible

A Comprehensive Guide to the Entire Bible

New Enhanced Edition



Adventuring Through the Bible

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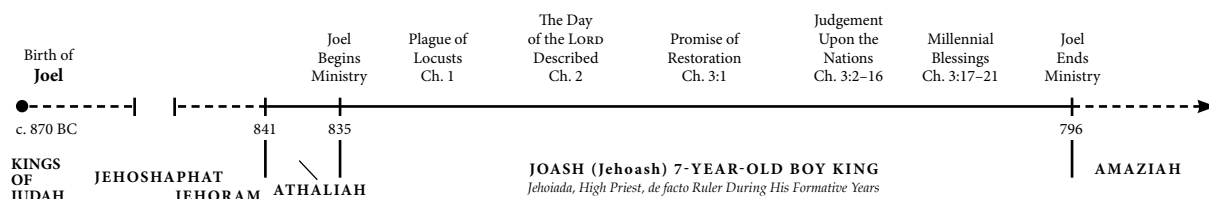
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The Revelation of God's Hand

J. R. R. Tolkien's three-volume epic *The Lord of the Rings* is a novel of momentous events on a vast scale in a place called Middle Earth. The armies of powerful kings clash in horrific battles. Towering spiritual forces engage in a cosmic struggle of good versus evil.

Yet, when the book has ended, we learn that all the sweeping events of the story, including the fate of Middle Earth, hinged on the actions of the humblest, smallest creatures of all—a small band of three-foot tall—creatures called hobbits. The theme of this book is clear: Never underestimate the power of the smallest things.

The little book of Joel is only three chapters long and is often underestimated. That's tragic, because this is one of the most powerful books in the Word of God. Just as the fate of Middle Earth hinged on the actions of the little hobbits, the fate of our world hinges on the prophecies in the little book of Joel.

The Controlling Principle of Life

For centuries, people have searched for the principle upon which all the events of history turn. Long ago, the Greek philosophers concluded that

history moves in cycles. According to this cyclical view of history, a tyrant rises who seizes control of a nation and rules until that dynasty ends. Then control gradually passes to a ruling family or aristocracy. Gradually their power deteriorates until control passes down to the people in the form of a democracy.

But a democracy also eventually deteriorates and gradually yields to the breakdown of all authority, and anarchy ensues. Out of anarchy, a tyrant again seizes control, and on goes the cycle of history. That theory rings true. We see evidence in our own society that democracy is breaking down and paving the way for anarchy and the emergence of a new dictator of iron, perhaps the long-prophesied Antichrist himself.

Through the centuries, other people have contributed guesses about the controlling principle of history. Thomas Jefferson thought the principle was political, and when

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In our examination of the brief but powerful book of Joel, our goal is to understand God's warning of coming judgment—including the "great and terrible day of the Lord"—and to apply the lessons of this warning to our daily lives.

he wrote the Declaration of Independence he incorporated that idea in the prologue—the belief that certain “unalienable rights” are naturally or divinely granted to human beings, and that to preserve these rights, governments are instituted among people. A good government, said Jefferson, does not grant these rights but defends the God-given rights the people already have. Jefferson felt that the forces that shape human history and form the nations of earth were political in nature.

In the late nineteenth century, Karl Marx dipped his pen into the acid of his own embittered spirit and wrote the imposing work that has dramatically influenced our troubled times. His idea was that the controlling force of history is economics: The need to meet the material demands of life shapes the course of history. He called this force “dialectical materialism”—the principle of materialism derived through the conflict of ideas and conflicting economic interests. Even after the collapse of Communism in the 1990s, many people, even in America, still called themselves Marxists and considered economics to be the driving force of life.

But the Bible says that all these beliefs are ultimately inadequate and flawed. The controlling principle behind human history is none other than God Himself. The hinge on which history turns is spiritual: God’s Spirit is at work among people, and you cannot understand human events if you do not recognize this fact.

God tries to win men and women to Himself by holding back the destructive forces in human events. But at last God’s patience reaches an end and there comes a

time—repeated throughout human history—when God says to both individuals and nations, “My Spirit shall not strive with man forever” (Gen. 6:3 NASB). And when He removes His Spirit—the controlling force of life—everything collapses. People are left alone to contend with the chaos they have chosen. That is the message contained in the three chapters of the little book of Joel.

The Day of the Lord

Joel was a prophet to the kingdom of Judah, the southern kingdom, and was probably a contemporary of Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos. We don’t know much about Joel except that he was one of the most visionary personages in the Bible. Joel saw far past our own day to the final stages of God’s dealings in human events.

The book opens with Joel’s call to the people to consider a tremendous thing that had happened in the land. He says:

Hear this, you elders; listen, all who live in the land. Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your forefathers? Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation (1:2–3).

Whenever I read those verses, I’m reminded of my days in the navy. Whenever the navy made an important announcement, it always began, “Now hear this.” And that’s the way Joel begins: “Hear this . . .” His announcement concerns an event of immense importance—the great day of the Lord.

Back in World War II we talked about the coming of D-Day, and then V-J Day. We looked forward to the end of the war, to the day when

the struggle would cease and the horrors of war would end. Here in Joel we see that God has a day circled on the cosmic calendar, the day of the Lord. Joel was entrusted with the task of describing that great day to the people.

It's important to understand that, in a broad sense, what the Bible calls the day of the Lord is not just one event in human history. We will find in this prophecy that the day of the Lord is any event in which God moves in judgment that has been building up, cycle by cycle, toward the final and terrible day. The day of the Lord is the culmination of all judgment that Joel describes in chapters 2 and 3.

The great and terrible day of the Lord is that period described by the Lord Jesus Christ as a time when there will be tribulation as has never been seen since the creation of the world, nor ever will be. And it was given to

the prophet Joel to see across the intervening centuries of time to describe it and to illustrate it by events taking place in his own day, which was an invasion of locusts.

I was in Minnesota years ago during an invasion of grasshoppers—insects very similar to locusts. I can still remember how the sky was literally darkened by the great cloud of these insects. I heard them descend into the field of standing grain, hitting the ground like hail. I heard the continual rattling, rustling sound of their wings. Within moments, every blade of grass, every bit of vegetation was gone, and the fields looked as if they had never been planted.

That's what happened in Israel. A locust horde descended upon the land and devoured every living thing. The crops were ruined and the result was famine.

Everyone in Judah was painfully aware of



Egyptian Locust

by an army of men instead of insects. In describing this event, Joel calls it the day of the Lord:

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming. It is close at hand—a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness. Like dawn spreading across the mountains a large and mighty army comes, such as never was of old nor ever will be in ages to come (2:1–2).

this event, but they didn't understand where it had come from. So Joel said to them, in effect, "God is behind this" (see Joel 1:10–15). This plague isn't just a freak of nature. It happened in obedience to the command of God, working through the natural laws that govern the earth. God's hand allows catastrophes like this to occur in order to make people aware of the spiritual background to life.

We need to wake up to the fact that God is speaking to us through the events of our lives. He wants to bless us but we will not listen. That's our problem! Has this ever happened to you? Has God ever allowed events in your life to awaken you to your need of Him? That is what God is doing in Joel 1.

A Vision of Invasion

In chapter 2, the prophet Joel leaps over the centuries to the last days, using the invasion of the locusts as a picture of the invasion of Israel by a great army in the last days. Only by examining the whole stream of prophecy together can we detect that Joel is speaking of the future. Anyone taking this book by itself would never notice any difference, except that the prophet is now describing an invasion

Does that sounds familiar? That is the language Jesus used: "Then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again" (Matt. 24:21).

Joel goes on to describe how the land will be scorched behind them as this great army advances. Fear grips the hearts of the people as they see this invading host drawn up for battle. Nothing can resist them. The earth shakes before them. The heavens tremble. And then we come to a significant passage:

The sun and moon are darkened, and the stars no longer shine (2:10).

In order to understand the prophetic passages of Scripture, we need to look for interpretational landmarks. Certain prophetic symbols occur again and again throughout various passages of prophecy, and these symbols serve as landmarks so we know where we are.

The darkening of the sun, moon, and stars is one of these landmarks. We see this same landmark in Jesus' great discourse on the Mount of Olives. He refers to a time when the sun shall be darkened, the moon will not

give light, but will turn to blood, and the stars will fall from heaven (see Matt. 24:29). We see this event in the books of Daniel, Isaiah, and Revelation, and described in several other places throughout Scripture. It always marks the same event in human history and serves as an interpretational landmark pointing to the last days before the great and terrible day of the Lord.

This section of Joel, then, seems to describe an invasion of Israel that is also foretold by the prophet Ezekiel in chapters 38 and 39, when a great army invades the land from the north and destroys everything, capturing the city of Jerusalem. But God promises that the northern army who attacks will be destroyed. The books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel all confirm this. Now Joel adds his voice to the chorus of prophets as God reveals the purpose behind this great invasion:

“Even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.”

Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing—grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God (2:12–14).

God offers grace in this passage because He does not delight in judgment. He never enjoys our pain. Rather, He seeks hearts that will listen to Him and open the door for the blessings He wants to pour into our lives. However, in order to get a person or nation to return to Him, God will permit harsh events

to occur—because these are the events that produce a repentant heart.

“Rend your heart and not your garments,” He says, pleading with us in His love. He doesn’t want us to simply make an external show of repentance. He wants us to change internally. But we don’t like to do that, do we?

We are like the little boy whose mother told him, “Sit down!” But he wouldn’t sit down. She said again, “Sit down!” And he said, “I won’t.” So she grabbed him by the shoulders and sat him down in the chair. He looked up at her defiantly and said, “I’m sitting down on the outside, but I’m standing up on the inside!”

God is unimpressed by our outward show. We don’t fool Him for a moment. He wants us to love Him and obey Him on the inside and on the outside, through and through.

God’s Restoration

After leaping over to the end days, the prophet Joel returns to the event of his day: the locust plague in the land. Joel tells the people that just as God will one day deliver His people and drive away the northern armies, so with the present catastrophe, He will restore the land from its barren condition and desolation:

The threshing floors will be filled with grain; the vats will overflow with new wine and oil.

[God says.] “I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten—the great locust and the young locust, the other locusts and the locust swarm—my great army that I sent among you” (2:24–25).

I will never forget the agony in the eyes

of a man I knew some years ago who had recently become a Christian. He told me, “It’s wonderful being a Christian, yet I can’t help feeling sad over the years I wasted and the things I missed during my old lifestyle. I feel sick remembering the terrible things I used to do. If only I’d had the sense to come to the Lord before I wasted so much of my life.”

Here was a man who felt he had allowed the locusts to eat up and waste the prime years of his life. But I had the joy of telling him, “Friend, our Lord says to us, ‘I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten.’” That verse was a great comfort to him.

God promises to make up for the barrenness of our former way of life. All we have to do is turn back to Him in sincere repentance. That is one of the most comforting promises in Scripture.

The Pentecost Prediction

Next, Joel leaps ahead again and writes the great passage that the apostle Peter quotes on the day of Pentecost, which is recorded in Acts 2. Here we see the Christians gathered together in the temple courts. Suddenly a rushing, mighty wind enters the place, tongues of fire appear over every head, and people begin speaking in foreign languages.

Immediately, a crowd made up of people from all over the world—Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Cappadocian, people from Pontus and Asia Minor, Phrygian, Pamphylans, Egyptians, Libyan, Romans, Cretans, and Arabs—gathers around the event. Each of these nationalities hears the Christians preaching the gospel and praising God in their own language. They have never seen or heard anything like it—and grope for

a way to explain it. Finally, they conclude that the Christians must be drunk. Then Peter stands and speaks:

“Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel.” (Acts 2:14–16).

And here he quotes Joel 2:28–29:

“ ‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy’ ” (Acts 2:17–18).

As we have already seen, the prophet Joel has witnessed and prophesied events well into the future, including the still-future invasion of Israel. Here, he sees something different, a mystery that is somewhat undefined to his vision. He says that Israel’s restoration will be followed by an indeterminate period when God will pour out His Spirit on all flesh, and they shall speak the message of God.

We can identify the day Joel is describing. It’s the day of the Spirit in which we live, the day that began on Pentecost when God first poured out His Spirit and continues to be poured out throughout this age. In Acts 2, Peter also quotes Joel concerning the sign of the end of that age:

“I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned

to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the LORD. And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved” (Acts 2:19–21).

That is Joel’s description of the end of the age, which commenced at Pentecost. Joel’s prophecy of Pentecost is the sign of the beginning of the present age. His prophecy of doom and judgment in the great and glorious day of the Lord is the sign of the end of this age. No one knows how long this present age will last, but during this time, God is pouring out His Spirit upon people around the world.

Plowshares and Pruning Hooks

In Joel 3, the prophet returns to the end times and beyond. All that he sees of the age of the Spirit is the great mark of the Spirit’s presence—but beyond that he sees that God will restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem:

“I will gather all nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. There I will enter into judgment against them concerning my inheritance, my people Israel, for they scattered my people among the nations and divided up my land” (3:2).

Jesus said, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him” (Matt. 25:31–32). And then the Son of Man will judge them and divide them, as a shepherd divides the sheep from the goats. Those who are righteous will be invited in to share the Father’s inheritance, while the unrighteous will be sent away. This is the valley of

judgment. In preparation for this coming judgment, God instructs the nations of the world with these amazing words:

Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare for war! Rouse the warriors! Let all the fighting men draw near and attack. Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears. Let the weakling say, “I am strong!” (3:9–10).

Did you know that the Bible says this? Many times you have heard these words from another Old Testament prophet:

*He will judge between many peoples
and will settle disputes for strong nations
far and wide.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.*

*Nation will not take up sword against
nation,
nor will they train for war anymore
(Mic. 4:3).*

Joel’s prophecy speaks of a time when plowshares will be beaten into swords. Micah’s prophecy says the opposite—swords will be beaten into plowshares. Joel’s prophecy comes first, and its fulfillment will come first. The nations will remain at war with each other until God finally tells them, “Beat your swords into plowshares and your spears into pruning hooks.”

There will be wars and rumors of wars, culminating in the final gathering of multitudes in “the valley of decision,” as Joel says in 3:14. Whose decision? Not our decision. Not the decision of nations or kings. The day of the Lord will be the day that God

makes His decision. God will enter the valley of decision and the multitudes of the nations will be gathered before Him. The entire world will be there on this judgment day. At the return of Jesus Christ in power and judgment, all the nations of the world will know that the Lord is God—.

And the city of Jerusalem will be the Holy City once more.

The Future Is in God's Hands

The final scene in Joel 3 is a beautiful one—a scene of peace, when the final battle has been fought and won, and the judgment of God has been handed down. It is at this time when all that was wrong will be put right, and the earth will be the Eden that God originally created it to be:

“In that day the mountains will drip new wine, and the hills will flow with milk; all the ravines of Judah will run with water. A fountain will flow out of the LORD’s house and will water the valley of acacias” (3:18).

Water is always a picture of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, “Whoever believes in me, as

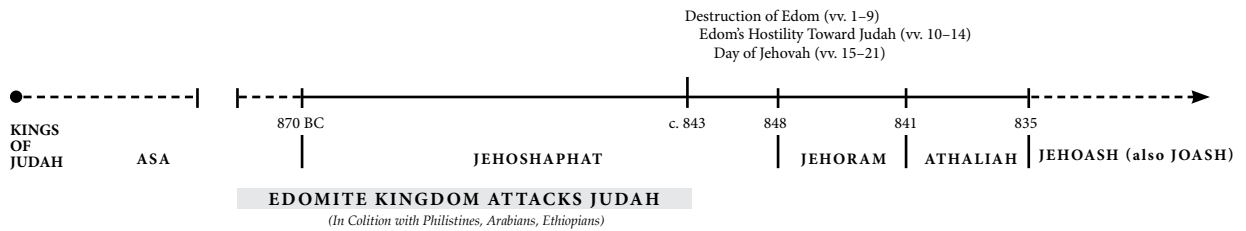
the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him” (John 7:38). He speaks of spiritual rivers of blessing to satisfy a person’s thirsty soul.

Throughout the book of Joel, we have seen the hand of God—moving and shaping events, guiding His people, even clenched into a fist of war. Ultimately, we see God’s hand at work as the hand of an artist, reshaping the world, sculpting it into a thing of beauty once more.

Joel shows us clearly that the future is in God’s hands. If it were in our hands, we’d certainly make a mess of it. If it were in Satan’s hands, we would be on our way to destruction. If it were determined by the blind forces of history, life would have no meaning.

The future of the human race is in God’s hands. We have a choice: We can confidently place our hands in the outstretched hand of God, our merciful heavenly Father—or we can run from Him and turn our backs on Him. But even if we flee, we can never escape His hand. Someday, His hand will hold the gavel of judgment. If we have placed our hand in His, we need never fear that day.

Death to Edom!



The prophecy of Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament, consisting of a single chapter, just twenty-one verses—yet it packs a message for our lives that far outweighs its modest page count. Someone has said that less is more when it comes to getting your message across—and the prophet Obadiah validates that saying.

On one level, the book of Obadiah is a pronouncement of doom against an ancient and long-forgotten nation, the land of Edom. The Edomites had killed, captured, and exploited Jewish refugees who tried to escape the sword of their Babylonian conquerors. God had disciplined Israel by allowing Babylon to lead the nation into captivity. Though God disciplined Israel, He was angry with Edom for gloating over the sufferings of His people. So God, through Obadiah, issued this message of judgment against Edom.

Even though this message was written to an ancient people in a distant culture, diligent students of the book of Obadiah will find rich treasures of truth to apply to their own lives today.

A Tale of Two Nations—and Two Brothers

We know little about Obadiah except that he was one of the Minor Prophets—that is, his book is minor in length, though hardly minor in importance. Old Testament accounts of the days of Elijah and Elisha include a reference to a prophet named Obadiah, so some have assumed the author of this book to be the same man. The name Obadiah, however, was a very common one among the Hebrews and it is unlikely that this is the same prophet.

In the book, Obadiah mentions the day when Jerusalem was destroyed and captured by the alien armies—an event that occurs long after the time of Elijah and Elisha. Most Bible scholars believe that the author of this book was a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah, the last of the prophets before Israel went into captivity.

The name Obadiah means “the servant of Jehovah,” and he truly fulfills the role of

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Though the nation of Edom has long since disappeared, this chapter presents truths for our lives in the prophet Obadiah's pronouncement of judgment against the Edomites. The struggle between Edom and Israel parallels the age-old struggle between the flesh and the spirit.

a servant: Obadiah comes, does his work, delivers his message, then fades into the mists of history.

The book of Obadiah tells the story of two nations, Israel and Edom. The nation of Edom was located south of Israel in a region now referred to as the Negev, or Negeb. The Israelites traveled through this ancient land as they escaped the slavery of Egypt and came into the Promised Land. When the Israelites passed through Edom, the Edomites persecuted them. They were Israel's enemies from the very beginning.

Obadiah also tells the story of two men. Every nation in the Bible is a lengthened shadow of its founder, and the two men behind Israel and Edom were twin brothers. I'm sure you recognize their names: Jacob and Esau. Jacob was the father of Israel, and Esau, his twin brother, became the father of the Edomites. In the story of these nations you also have the extended story of these two men.

Jacob and Esau lived in a state of perpetual

antagonism. We read in Genesis that even before they were born, they struggled together in their mother's womb (see Gen. 25:22–23). Struggle marked the lives of these two men, and the lives of their descendants, the nations of Israel and Edom.

Jacob was his mother's darling and Esau was his daddy's little man. Their lives were characterized by a sibling rivalry that continued for centuries after they died. From Genesis through Malachi, we see evidence of the struggle between Jacob and Esau, between Israel and Edom. In the book of Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, we read:

"I have loved you," says the LORD.

"But you ask, 'How have you loved us?'"

"Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" the LORD says. "Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals."

Edom may say, "Though we have been crushed, we will rebuild the ruins."

But this is what the LORD Almighty says:

“They may build, but I will demolish. They will be called the Wicked Land, a people always under the wrath of the LORD” (Mal. 1:2–4).

What is so important about these two men and these two nations? That is what the book of Obadiah makes clear. In the struggle between Edom and Israel in the Old Testament, we see a parallel with a similar struggle that is described for us in the New Testament—the Christian’s struggle between the flesh and the spirit.

In Galatians 5:17, Paul tells us that the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh; they are opposed to one another. God always uses pictures so we can understand His truth more fully. The picture of Esau and Jacob, of Edom and Israel, represents for us the conflict between the flesh and the spirit.

This is a valuable key to Bible study. Once we learn to recognize the “interpretational constants” in Scripture—the symbols, images, names, and metaphors that consistently signify important truths—many hard-to-understand biblical concepts soon become clear. For example, certain symbols have a constant meaning wherever you find them in the Old and New Testaments: Oil is almost always a symbol for the Holy Spirit; wine symbolizes joy; leaven is always a picture of evil. And these two men,

Jacob and Esau, and the nations Israel and Edom, always symbolize the struggle between the spirit and the flesh.

The Problem of Pride

Why does God hate Esau? Obadiah tells us:

*The pride of your heart has deceived you,
you who live in the clefts of the rocks
and make your home on the heights,
you who say to yourself,
‘Who can bring me down to the
ground?’ ” (v. 3).*

The reference to “you who live in the clefts of the rocks” is a literal reference to the nation of Edom. If you have had the privilege of visiting the Holy Land, you may have gone into the Ma’an section of Jordan and visited the city of Petra, once called “the rose red city half as old as time.” Entry to this amazing city is through a narrow fissure, the Siq, that is only a few yards wide. It runs for a mile or more right through the rock and brings you at last into an open place where temples have



City of Petra

been carved out of living rock—giant temples with doorways twenty-five feet high or more. That was the capital of Edom.

The people of that city felt they were invulnerable because of these natural defenses. They lifted up their hearts in pride, and, as the Lord said (speaking through the prophet) the pride of their hearts deceived them. They thought that nothing could overthrow them, but God said it would be done. Just a few years after Jesus' death, the Romans came in and destroyed the cities of Edom and captured this "impregnable" fortress. It has been in ruins ever since.

The trouble with Esau is pride. The principle of pride is what the Bible calls "the flesh." Our pride wars against God's Spirit. The flesh is a principle that opposes God's purposes for humanity and defies what God is trying to accomplish. Every Christian has this internal struggle. Pride is the identifying mark of the flesh.

Proverbs 6:16 says, "There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him." Topping that list is a proud look—a look of arrogance. Everything else that follows is merely a variation of pride. This is the fallen nature that was implanted in the human race. All who are born of Adam have this congenital twist of pride, the independent ego that evaluates everything only in terms of whether it feeds the omnipotent self. For the proud, there's no room in the universe for rivals, least of all God.

That is the pride of the flesh. That is Esau. That is Edom. The Lord answers the proud in the book of Obadiah:

*"Though you soar like the eagle
and make your nest among the stars,*

*from there I will bring you down,"
declares the LORD (v. 4).*

Pride takes many forms—including violence. Whenever one person acts violently toward another, that is fleshly pride in action:

*"Because of the violence against your
brother Jacob,
you will be covered with shame;
you will be destroyed forever" (v. 10).*

The person who inflicts violent pain and injury on another person pridefully believes that he or she has a right to do so—and the victim has no rights or dignity. Pride is rooted in selfishness and it strikes out against anything that dares to challenge its own supremacy.

I was once in a Christian home and I saw a woman with blackened eyes and bruises on her legs and arms because her husband had beaten her with his fists. This man was a Sunday school teacher! Where does this kind of violence come from? It comes from Edom. It is the pride of the flesh.

Another form of pride, says Obadiah, is indifference:

*"On the day you stood aloof
while strangers carried off his wealth
and foreigners entered his gates
and cast lots for Jerusalem,
you were like one of them" (v. 11).*

In March 1964, twenty-eight-year-old Catherine "Kitty" Genovese arrived home at her Kew Gardens apartment building. She had worked the late shift, and it was past three in the morning. A man approached her

out of the darkness, and began stabbing her repeatedly. She screamed out, “He stabbed me! Help me!” A neighbor opened his window and shouted, “Let that girl alone!” The attacker ran away, leaving Kitty Genovese wounded and staggering.

When no one came out of the building to help her, the attacker returned. She fought him, but he continued stabbing her, then sexually assaulted her, stole \$49 from her purse, and left her in the hallway of the apartment building. The assault lasted about half an hour. At least a dozen neighbors were aware of the attack and heard Kitty Genovese cry for help. Only after the attacker left did one of those neighbors finally call the police. She died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital.

When Obadiah says “you stood aloof,” he is saying, in effect, “You were like all those disinterested neighbors who stood at their apartment windows and watched when Kitty Genovese was tortured and murdered. Some closed their windows and stopped up their ears. Some said later, ‘I didn’t want to get involved.’ Your indifference is a form of pride.”

To be indifferent to the needs and hurts of others is to be supremely self-centered. “I am too important to get involved in someone else’s problems,” says this form of pride. “My life is too important. My time is too important. My agenda is too important. If others have a problem, well, it’s their problem, not mine.”

The pride of indifference causes a great deal of marital conflict. In my counseling experience, I’ve often heard the complaint, “She ignores me,” or, “He doesn’t care about my needs.” It often seems to happen within the first year or two of marriage: Indifference

seeps into the relationship, draining the romance and passion from the marriage, replacing it with selfish pride. During the courtship, a man and woman ask each other, “What are you thinking about? Tell me what you’d like. I’d do anything to please you.” After marriage, it’s, “Where’s my dinner? What about my needs? Don’t bother me!”

That’s Esau at work in the relationship. That’s the pride of indifference.

Next, Obadiah spotlights another form of pride:

*“You should not look down on your brother
in the day of his misfortune,
nor rejoice over the people of Judah
in the day of their destruction,
nor boast so much
in the day of their trouble.
You should not march through the gates of
my people
in the day of their disaster,
nor look down on them in their calamity
in the day of their disaster,
nor seize their wealth
in the day of their disaster” (vv. 12–13).*

God charges Edom with the sin of gloating over the misfortunes of others—another manifestation of pride. Did you ever take satisfaction in someone else’s hurt? Perhaps you have thought, “He had it coming!” or “Serves her right!” Why do we find pleasure in someone else’s sufferings? Why do we delight in rubbing salt into open wounds? Why do we enjoy gossiping about the faults and failures of other people? It’s the Esau in us. It’s pride. It’s the flesh warring against the Spirit of God.

This is only a partial listing of the prideful

sins of Esau. This is why God says, “I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated.” The verdict of God against the pride of Esau—and against your pride and mine—is this in verse 3: “The pride of your heart has deceived you.”

The Trap of Pride

Pride has a way of working out its own destruction. Pride sets a trap—and then proceeds to spring the trap on itself. Here is what Obadiah writes:

*How Esau will be ransacked,
his hidden treasures pillaged!
All your allies will force you to the border;
your friends will deceive and overpower
you;
those who eat your bread will set a trap for
you,
but you will not detect it (vv. 6–7).*

Pride deceives us, tricks us, and blinds us to the danger around us. We don’t recognize it until it’s too late. With a sense of invincibility, we step onto the flimsy carpet that has been spread over the pit, never suspecting that our next step is our last. Everyone else sees the danger at our feet. Some are shouting to us, trying to wave us off—but we’re too prideful to listen: “They don’t know what they’re talking about. I know what I’m doing!”

Famous last words.

We all have this principle of the flesh lurking within us. It’s crucial that we deal with it, root it out of our lives—because Edom has no place in us. God will judge Edom, and there will be no escape for the proud. God is forever set against the prideful, those who live by the flesh instead of the spirit.

One of the grandsons of Esau was a man

named Amalek, whose descendants opposed the Israelites on their way into Canaan. In Exodus 17:14, God says to Moses, “I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.” That is what God is saying about the flesh. He will never make peace with it.

But for Jacob, a day of triumph awaits:

*“But on Mount Zion [a symbol for
Jerusalem or Jacob] will be deliverance;
it will be holy, and the house of Jacob
will possess its inheritance. The house of
Jacob will be a fire
and the house of Joseph a flame;
the house of Esau will be stubble,
and they will set it on fire and consume
it.
There will be no survivors
from the house of Esau.”
The LORD has spoken (vv. 17–18).*

Why must God destroy Esau and the nation of Edom? Because Esau and Edom are equally ruthless. You cannot make peace with the flesh, because the flesh will never make peace with you. Try to appease Esau, try to compromise with Edom, and they will turn and destroy you.

When you come to the New Testament, you find the same two principles—Edom and Israel, flesh and spirit—personified in the pages of the Gospels. In the last week of our Lord’s sufferings, He stood before Herod—and Herod, we are told, was an Idumean. Because Idumea is another spelling of Edom, we know that Herod was an Edomite, a descendant of Esau. Jesus stood before Herod. The representative of Jacob and the representative of Esau stood

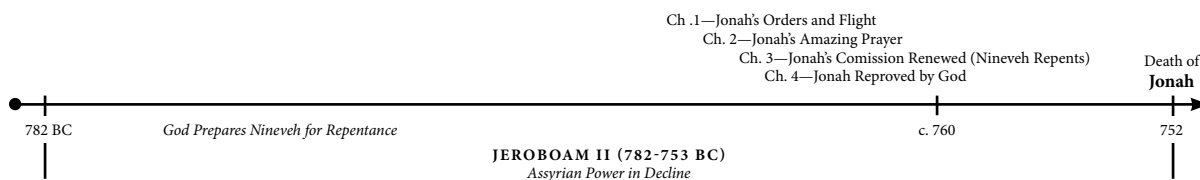
face-to-face. King Herod the Edomite was proud, arrogant, and rebellious; he watched the cruel mockery of the soldiers as they stripped the Lord and dressed Him in His royal robes. King Jesus, the Spirit-filled Israelite, was humble and obedient; He went willingly to His death by torture, which was inflicted on Him at the hands of Herod. The Gospels say that Herod plied Jesus with many questions, but for the son of Esau there was no answer from the son of Jacob. They had nothing to discuss. Compromise was impossible.

God has nothing to say to the flesh—nothing except judgment.

In the end, it was humble King Jesus who broke free from the cross and the grave, and it was proud King Herod who ended his life in shame and exile, a prisoner of the chains of sin and arrogance with which he bound himself. The spirit was the victor. The flesh was defeated. Israel rose; Edom fell.

Israel or Edom, spirit or flesh—which side are you on? That is the central question of the short but towering book of the prophet Obadiah.

The Reluctant Ambassador



The book of Jonah is probably the best known, yet least understood, book in the Bible. The story of “Jonah and the Big Fish” has become a part of our folklore—a tall tale like the story of Paul Bunyan or the legends of Greek and Roman mythology. Most people are familiar with the story, but the book itself is regarded as a fable, a big “fish story.” Because of these attitudes, the true message of the book has been obscured.

Jonah was a real, flesh-and-blood man who lived in history. The book of 2 Kings refers to him as a historical prophet, as does Jesus in Matthew 12:40.

The theme of this story is found in the last two chapters of the book where you have Jonah going to Nineveh, as God had originally commanded, to proclaim the message He gave him. If you ask yourself, “Why did Jonah originally refuse to go to Nineveh?” you get very close to the heart of this book’s message.

You know how the story opens:

The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”

But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD (1:1–3).

It seems that when you are trying to run away from God, you can always find a ship that will take you. But don’t expect smooth sailing! After Jonah boarded the ship to flee from the Lord, he soon found himself in the midst of a great storm. The sailors on the ship each called on their own gods—all but Jonah.

Finally, the sailors cast lots (the equivalent of rolling dice) to determine which person on the ship the gods were angry with, and the lots fell on Jonah. So they questioned Jonah and he admitted, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land” (1:9).

The sailors asked what they needed to

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this chapter is to help the reader see the familiar story of “Jonah and the Big Fish” through new eyes, so that the often-overlooked spiritual truths of this important book will become evident.

LEFT: Jezreel Valley

do to placate Jonah's God, and he said, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea, and it will become calm."

The sailors were reluctant to do so, and tried to row back to land, but the storm lashed the ship even harder. So the sailors prayed that God wouldn't hold them responsible for Jonah's death, and they threw him overboard. The sea went calm—and the sailors all became followers of the Hebrew God. And as for Jonah—

But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights (1:17).

The God of Mercy

In the second chapter, Jonah begged God to rescue him. On the third day, God

answered Jonah's prayer, and the fish vomited him up onto the shore. Jesus Himself said that the three days Jonah spent inside the fish symbolized the three days He would spend in the tomb before the resurrection: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matt. 12:40).

After Jonah washed up on dry land, God reminded him of his original assignment:

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you" (3:1–2).

God's command is stern. He has not changed His mind a bit, but He had finally



changed the prophet's mind. But why was Jonah so anxious to avoid his commission? Why did he not want to go to Nineveh? Why did he flee from God?

Some Bible scholars suggest that Jonah had such a primitive idea of God that he regarded Him as just a tribal deity, for Israel alone, that he thought God could not really be interested in Nineveh, and that if Jonah could get out of the land, he would get away from God. I think that idea is dashed by Jonah's own words.

When the sailors asked Jonah to identify himself, he said to them, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land" (Jonah 1:9). That does not sound like the description of a tribal deity to me. No, that's not why Jonah avoided going to Nineveh.

In fact, the answer is exactly the opposite: Jonah knew God too well. That's why he didn't go to Nineveh. Does that sound strange? In chapter 4 we read:

Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the LORD, "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (4:1-2).

Jonah knew exactly what God was like—gracious, compassionate, abounding in love—and that's why he wouldn't go to Nineveh. He didn't want Nineveh to have the opportunity to repent and be spared. He wanted Nineveh to be destroyed. Jonah hated the inhabitants of this cruel, evil city—a city that had often sent raiders into his own land, killing and plundering. Jonah wanted revenge, not mercy, for the godless Ninevites. So, to prevent God from showing mercy to his hated enemy, Jonah fled to Tarshish.

Here is amazing insight into God's character and proof that the God of the



Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are one and the same. From time to time, those who do not believe the Bible—primarily those who are educated beyond their intelligence—say that the God of the Old Testament was a vengeful, wrathful God, while the New Testament God is gracious and forgiving. In reality, however, Jonah admits:

That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity (4:2).

The vengeful, wrathful, fire-and-brimstone figure in this story is not God—it's Jonah! The judgment of human beings is always more harsh, more capricious, more angry than the judgment of God. God's

judgment is just and merciful. It was God—the God of the Old Testament—who invented grace and mercy and who always abounded in patient love.

So God recommissioned Jonah to go to Nineveh. But Jonah still didn't want to do it, yet he remembered his three-day ride in the belly of the fish. And he went.

The Response of Nineveh

So Jonah came at last to Nineveh, a vast city—so vast, in fact, that it took three days just to walk from one side of the city to the other. A day's journey was reckoned to be about twelve miles, so a three days' journey would be about thirty-six miles. That is a pretty good-sized city. In many ways, it was probably a cluster of towns and neighborhoods much like Los Angeles or New York City.

Nineveh was gathered around the banks

of the Tigris River and formed the capital of the great Syrian (or Assyrian) empire. Declaring God's message to such a huge city was going to take some time. So Jonah began a day's journey through the city, calling out that in forty days God would destroy the city.

Ordinarily that kind of a message would not get much of a reception. The Bible reports that when other prophets with a similar message were sent to wicked cities, they were laughed out of town—or worse. But an amazing thing happened:

The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh:

“By the decree of the king and his nobles:

Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish” (3:5–9).

And the people of Nineveh did exactly what God, through His reluctant servant Jonah, told them to do. So we read of God's response:

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened (3:10).

Why did the people of Nineveh listen to Jonah's message? Jesus Himself gives us a clue. In Luke 11, Jesus refers to this account and says, “As Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation” (Luke 11:30). Some Bible scholars feel that Jonah's features were changed by his experience in the whale's belly.

I recommend Harry Rimmer's *The Harmony of Science and Scripture*, in which he tells of an English sailor who fell overboard in the English Channel and was swallowed by a fish—a giant whale shark. A fleet of trawlers hunted the shark, killing it two days after the sailor was lost. When the shark's carcass was opened, they found the missing sailor alive, but without any hair and with his skin bleached white by stomach acids. Rimmer interviewed this man personally and corroborated his story.

If Jonah's face and body were affected in a similar fashion to this English sailor's, then Jonah must have looked like a walking demonstration of the judgment of God. You can be sure the people took Jonah seriously when he talked about God's coming judgment upon their city. He was living proof that God means what He says. And that is why the city repented, from the greatest to the least, and judgment of God was stayed.

The Anger of Jonah

You might expect the story to end in chapter 3, as the city repents in sackcloth and ashes. But the fourth chapter of Jonah shows us that the focus of this book is not on the city of Nineveh but on Jonah—and the heart of God. We read in this chapter that Jonah was angry with God. Why? Because God did

exactly what He said He would do, exactly what Jonah feared He would do: He spared the city of Nineveh. In fact, Jonah was so bitter toward God that he wanted to die.

After listening to Jonah rant and rave, after denying Jonah's demand that God slay him, God turned the tables on Jonah. He asked His servant a question:

"Have you any right to be angry?" (4:4).

Jonah didn't answer. He sat on the rim rock above the city and waited to see what God would do. We don't know how much time went by, but it must have been several days, because the first day, God prepared a plant. The plant grew up and covered Jonah's head, evidence of God's gracious provision.

On the second day, God prepared a worm that attacked and killed the plant. Then, when the sun came up, God prepared an east wind that blew the heat of the desert in upon Jonah. He sat there sweating and suffering until he was nearly fainting. Again, he asked that he might die, and again, God confronted him about his attitude:

God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?"

"I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die" (4:9).

It's easy to accuse Jonah, but most of us have said something similar to God at one time or another: "Of course I'm angry with you, God. You're unfair. I don't like the way you're running things. You don't understand how I feel. You don't punish the evildoers. I have a right to be mad at you, God, because you aren't running things right."

Finally, God shows Jonah the folly of his attitude. In verses 10 and 11, He points out to Jonah that he is sitting there feeling sorry for himself and feeling sorry for a silly plant that he hadn't even planted or labored over. Why, then, did he not feel even the slightest twinge of compassion for the 120,000 people in the city of Nineveh who were so ignorant of spiritual things that they were like children, not knowing their right hand from their left?

At this point, the book abruptly ends. Why? Because it has taken us right where it was supposed to take us: into the very heart of God.

Most of us are too much like Jonah: We care about our own selfish wants and needs, our own agenda, our paltry possessions. With Jonah, it was a plant; with you or me, it might be a car, a job, a house, or something else. We care about *things*. We care about *self*. God cares about *people*, about living, throbbing, suffering human souls. God loved these Ninevites, even though Jonah hated them.

Who is your enemy today? Perhaps you would love to see God pour out His judgment on some evil world leader. Or on a cantankerous next-door neighbor. Or on the person who stole your car. Or on the drunk driver who took a loved one away from you. Or on the bossy Christian who makes life miserable for you at church.

But God loves that person, just as He loved the Ninevites. You want that person to suffer, but God loves that person. You may become angry and impatient with God for delaying His judgment, but God wants us to see all people the way He sees them. He wants us to take up residence in His heart and see the world through His eyes.

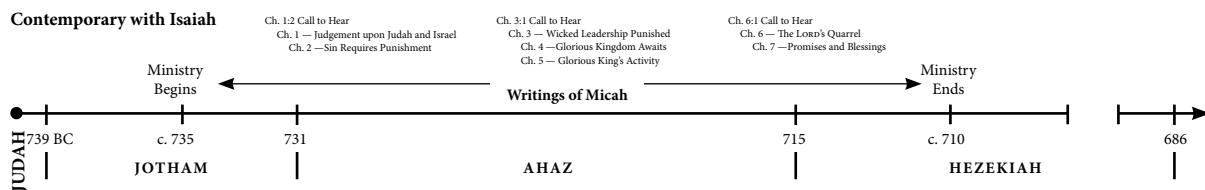
God has sent us to the world to declare the word of Jonah—a word of warning and a word of mercy. All around us are unsaved people. We may find them godless and disobedient. We may dismiss them from our lives as disgusting people, deserving damnation. But spiritually, they are like children, not knowing their right hand from the left. They are the objects of God's love, mercy, and compassion, and He wants to send us to them to tell them about His love.

God has sent us to be a sign to our generation, just as He sent Jonah to be a sign to his generation. What is that sign? It's the sign of Jonah, the sign of resurrection, the sign of people who once were dead but have

been made alive in Jesus Christ. Our message is clear: We serve a God who can bring life from death, who can resurrect those who are swallowed up in the belly of a whale, swallowed up in sin and shame, swallowed up in depression and hopelessness.

Jonah ran from his calling. He was angry over the mercy of God. May we learn the lesson of Jonah's life. May each of us in obedience go where God wants us to go, say what He wants us to say, and do what He wants us to do. Instead of being angry over the mercy of God, may His mercy fill us with joy and a sense of triumph as we declare His message in our day.

Who Is Like God?



What's in a name? In the Bible, names are often highly significant. The book of Genesis contains the story of a man named Methuselah—a famous name because Methuselah is the oldest man in Scripture (and presumably the oldest person who ever lived). When Methuselah was born, his father, Enoch, gave him a name that proved not only significant, but prophetic: in Hebrew, the name means, "When he dies, it will come." Methuselah lived 969 years, and the year in which he died was the year of the Great Flood of Noah.

The book of Micah is yet another example of the significance of names in the Bible. The key to this little prophetic book can be found in the meaning of the prophet's name. In Hebrew, Micah means "Who is like God?" or "Who is like Jehovah?" This is Micah's repeated question. The book indicates that "Micah" was actually a nickname given to this prophet because his oft-repeated message was, "Micah? Who is like God?"

Godlikeness—a word that has been shortened to *godliness*—is the theme of Micah. Godlikeness is also the theme of Paul's epistle to the Ephesians. It's

interesting and instructive to compare these two messages, Micah and Ephesians, side by side. By doing so, we see that the Old Testament and the New Testament complement each other; they speak with a unified, consistent voice.

Here again is proof of the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture. If we do not understand something in the New Testament, we can turn to the Old Testament for insight and clarification.

Micah was a contemporary of the great prophet Isaiah, and his book is similar in style. Sometimes, in fact, the book of Micah is called "Isaiah in miniature" because it is a concise presentation of essentially the same message.

Micah is divided into three parts. The first three chapters describe the failure of the nation. We hear this theme in many of the prophets, but in Micah we see that the Jewish nation has particularly failed to live a lifestyle of godliness. Chapters 4 and 5 contrast Israel's

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

The goal of this chapter is to highlight the key theme of Micah—how to live a godly life—and apply this theme to the situations that arise in our everyday lives.

LEFT: Area surrounding the Dead Sea

ungodliness with a vision of the One who is to come—the Godlike one. This is a prophetic section that looks forward to the coming of Christ, the Messiah. The last three chapters give us God’s plea that the nation repent and return to Him.

The first chapter presents a magnificent picture of God striding forth in judgment against the nation of Judah because of the people’s utter failure to be godly even though He provided them with everything it takes to be godly. This sounds familiar, doesn’t it? Why are we not godly? We have all it takes, in the Holy Spirit, to be godly—yet we fall so far short.

So this book meets us right where we are. We are in the same boat with the people of Judah.

The Punster Prophet

In Micah 1:10–16, we encounter an interesting facet of the text that is difficult to appreciate in the English translation. These ancient prophets were punsters, and although some people say that a pun is the lowest form of humor, the Bible has many puns in it. The problem for us as English-speaking readers is that the puns are in Hebrew! If you could read the original Hebrew, you would see pun upon pun employed in the names of these cities mentioned by Micah.

Micah tells the city of Gath not to weep—and the name of the city means “weeping.” He tells Beth Ophrah (House of Dust) to roll in the dust as an act of repentance. He tells Shaphir (Beauty) that her beauty will be shamed. He tells Zaanán (Marching) that it will not march forth. He tells Beth Ezel (House of Neighbors) that it will end up being unprotected by its

neighbors. He tells Maroth (Bitter Town) that it will grieve bitterly. He tells Lachish (Horse Town) to harness the horses to the chariot and get ready to get out of town.

Chapter 2 goes on to picture the utter destruction of the people, including the rulers, prophets, women, and children. And in chapter 3 we find the reason for God’s judgment against Judah.

Do you remember the story about the Greek philosopher, Diogenes? He went around the countryside carrying a lantern. Even in broad daylight he carried his lantern to arouse curiosity and provoke questions. People would ask, “Why are you carrying a lantern in the daytime?” Diogenes would reply, “I’m looking for an honest man.”

Like Diogenes, Micah has been tramping around the southern kingdom of Judah, searching for godliness. He looks among the rulers of the nation, but he finds only corruption, oppression, bribery, and injustice. Micah exposes the mess in Jerusalem, and he says that the reason for God’s judgment upon His people is that those who have authority to act in God’s stead have forgotten that they are responsible to God.

This indictment touches our own lives today. The New Testament reminds us that masters are to remember that they have a Master in heaven as well. God holds all authority accountable to Himself (see Eph. 6:9). Anyone who forgets this is using power only for personal advantage—and that is the behavior that corrupted Judah and brought the nation under God’s judgment. The prophet sums it up for us:

*Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests
teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes*

for money. Yet they lean upon the LORD and say, "Is not the LORD among us? No disaster will come upon us" (3:11).

When you serve in a position of authority, whether in government, in a church, in a business or organization, or in your family, you represent God in that position. Paul declared, "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God" (Rom. 13:1). Forgetting the responsibility that

we have as leaders and authorities leads to corruption, oppression, bribery, suffering—and judgment.

A Vision of the Messiah

In chapter 4, we encounter a wonderfully exalted vision. Here, the prophet looks across the centuries—past the coming of Babylon, past the rise of the great eastern empire of Greece, past the Roman Empire and the days of the Caesars, past the Middle Ages, past the age of the Reformation and Martin Luther and John Wesley, and even past our own day. In his vision, Micah sees the coming of one who

is Godlike. This is one of the most beautiful messianic passages in the Scriptures:

*In the last days
the mountain of the LORD's temple will
be established
as chief among the mountains;
it will be raised above the hills,
and peoples will stream to it.
Many nations will come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of
the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths."
The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
He will judge between many peoples
and will settle disputes for strong
nations far and wide.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against
nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.
Every man will sit under his own vine
and under his own fig tree,
and no one will make them afraid,
for the LORD Almighty has spoken
(4:1–4).*

This passage describes a scene yet to come. Nations today will never forget how to make war, never beat their swords into plowshares, never turn their spears into pruning hooks, until the coming of the One who rules in godliness. Micah's words describe a future world at peace. The words of Micah 4:3 are almost identical to the words of Isaiah 2:4, which speak of a time when people "will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears

into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore."

These words are inscribed on the pedestal of a bronze statue in the United Nations garden. The statue depicts a strong man literally hammering a sword into a farmer's plow, and it was a gift from the Soviet Union, presented in 1959—three years after Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev promised the West, "We will bury you." So much for dreams of world peace—at least until the Messiah Himself comes to impose His godly rule.

The rest of chapter 4 goes on to describe how Israel will be gathered but will ultimately defeat her enemies.

Chapter 5 opens with a new thought as the prophet says to Israel:

*Marshal your troops, O city of troops,
for a siege is laid against us.
They will strike Israel's ruler
on the cheek with a rod (5:1).*

This verse pictures the Assyrian army being gathered around the city. It is also a picture of the day when a greater Assyrian army out of the north will come against Israel. The reason they will come is given in the statement, they "will strike Israel's ruler on the cheek with a rod." This is a reference to the first coming of the Lord Jesus when He stood before Pilate and the rulers of the nation and they struck Him with a reed, placed a crown of thorns on His head, and mocked Him. They struck the cheek of the ruler of Israel (see Matt. 27:27–30).

Now the prophet suddenly sees where this ruler is to come from. This is one of the great

predictive passages of the Old Testament:

*“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” (5:2).*

Remember when the wise men came from the East looking for the newborn king of the Jews (see Matt. 2:1–6)? They said to the rulers of Jerusalem, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?” And the chief priests said, “in Bethlehem.” How did they know? They knew because, seven hundred years before, the prophet Micah had written these words in Micah 5:2. The chief priests knew Messiah’s birthplace because it had been foretold in Scripture. Micah goes on to describe the One who comes out of Bethlehem:

*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
(5:4).*

Micah’s seven-hundred-year-long vision is 20/20. He sees the true nature of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, the God-man, the only godly person who ever walked on earth. He is the Godlike one, “whose origins are from of old, from ancient times” and whose “greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.”

God’s Plea

In chapters 6 and 7, in a passage of incredible power and beauty, Jehovah turns to plead with His people and to show them the way of Godlikeness. The prophet Micah writes:

*Listen to what the LORD says:
“Stand up, plead your case before the
mountains;
let the hills hear what you have to say.
Hear, O mountains, the LORD’s
accusation;
listen, you everlasting foundations of
the earth.
For the LORD has a case against his
people;
he is lodging a charge against Israel”
(6:1–2).*

That sets the stage. Now God speaks, and this is what He says:

*“My people, what have I done to you?
How have I burdened you? Answer me.
I brought you up out of Egypt
and redeemed you from the land of
slavery.
I sent Moses to lead you,
also Aaron and Miriam.
My people, remember
what Balak king of Moab counseled
and what Balaam son of Beor answered.
Remember your journey from Shittim to
Gilgal,
that you may know the righteous acts of
the LORD” (6:3–5).*

How do the people respond to God?

*With what shall I come before the LORD
and bow down before the exalted God?
Shall I come before him with burnt
offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands
of rams,
with ten thousand rivers of oil?
Shall I offer my firstborn for my
transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my
soul? (6:6–7).*

God's answer is simplicity itself:

*He has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of
you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God
(6:8).*

That is the answer, isn't it? That is the way to Godlikeness: to walk humbly with your God. After all, He is the only one who can

make us Godlike. But the Israelites failed to obey God, so in Micah 7, God warns them of approaching judgment. Once again, the Lord must wake up His people to their folly and sin.

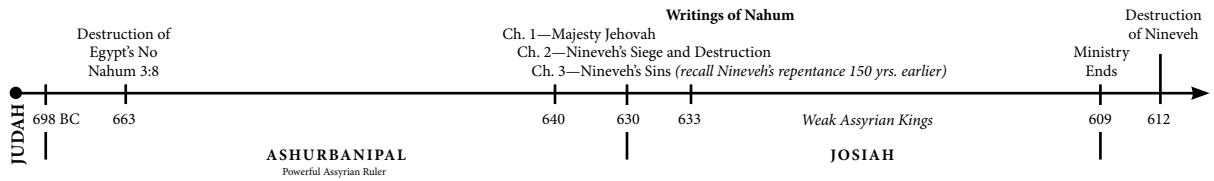
Remember the meaning of Micah's name? "Who is like God?" This is the question, the meaning of Micah's name, that keeps ringing in our ears: Who is like God?

And the answer: Only the one who walks with the Messiah, Jesus the Lord. Only the one who patterns his or her life after the life of the Messiah. Only the one who acts justly (as He acted), shows mercy (as He showed mercy), and walks humbly (as He was humble).

Beneath the thundering of God's judgment, we hear the steady, insistent heartbeat of His love. In His mercy, He pleads with us. He waits for us to turn to Him for forgiveness and restoration. He wants to shape us and mold us to become the people for whom Micah was searching.

God wants to make us into people who are like Him.

The Terrible Wrath of God



When was the last time you heard a sermon preached from the book of Nahum? The fact is, many Christians have never heard the message of Nahum!

The book of Nahum is neglected and considered obscure because it is so short—and, frankly, because it is not the most entertaining book to read. Yet, every portion of Scripture is indispensable and has its own contribution to make to our spiritual growth and nourishment. As the apostle Paul wrote, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17). This little prophecy of Nahum is no exception.

This prophecy reveals certain aspects of God’s character more clearly than any other book of the Bible. The prophets unfold for us God’s divine attributes, and each prophet sees God in a different light. As you read through the prophets, therefore, you are seeing one facet after another of the character of an eternal God. These various aspects of God flash like facets of a diamond in the sunlight.

God’s Holy Anger

In this book, Nahum reveals the facet or attribute of God’s anger. No doctrine is quite as repugnant to people today as that of the anger of God. This is one doctrine many would like to forget. Some picture God as more of a Santa Claus than the Creator-Father-King-Judge He truly is. They cannot bear the thought of God having to discipline or punish someone. They want to reshape their image of God into something more genial, more warm and fuzzy, more . . . soft.

While it is true that our God is loving, patient, and merciful, we should never neglect the full range of God’s character. He is also a Judge, and judges must render verdicts and impose penalties or else they are unjust judges. He is a Father, and fathers must discipline or else they do not love their children.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

In this chapter, our goal is to shine a spotlight on one of the most neglected books of the Bible, the book of Nahum. In an age when many people want to soften and “tame” their image of God, Nahum makes sure we do not forget the full range of God’s character—including His anger.

So Nahum's task is to reveal this unpopular facet of our loving heavenly Father. And he does. The justice of God does not negate the mercy of God; both are authentic facets of His character. He is not a God of justice in the Old Testament and a God of mercy in the New, as some people mistakenly suppose. He is always the same, yesterday, today, and forever. Here in the prophecy of Nahum, it is the facet of the solemnity and towering majesty of God that flashes before our eyes. It is the same facet of His character that flashed before us in the book of Exodus, when the Lord thundered in awesome fury from the heights of Mount Sinai.

As we begin this book, it's important to know why God is angry—and with whom. This prophecy is directed against the city of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria—yes, the same city to which God sent the prophet Jonah. When Jonah preached in Nineveh, the city repented in sackcloth and ashes. God withheld His anger from the city, because every Ninevite, from the king to the lowliest citizen, turned to God and repented of his or her sins.

Nahum's prophecy, however, occurs about a century after the prophecy of Jonah. During the intervening years, Nineveh had sunk back into degrading, oppressive, and idolatrous practices. These were the same sins that had called forth God's warning of judgment in the time of Jonah.

The prophet Nahum was sent to minister to the southern kingdom of Judah at the time of the invasion of the Assyrian king Sennacherib. King Sennacherib, who came from the Assyrian capital city, Nineveh, invaded Israel during the lifetime of the

prophet Isaiah. It was from this great but godless city in the north that the armies of the Assyrians frequently came against the land of Judah and Israel. But God moved to protect His people, and He destroyed these enemies overnight (see 2 Kings 19; 2 Chron. 32; and Isa. 37).

Nahum means "consolation" or "comfort," and as the Assyrian army was camped around the city of Jerusalem, God gave the prophet a message of consolation. Picture the scene as the city was besieged by the most ruthless army of that time. The Assyrians were known to have no conscience whatsoever when it came to burning, torturing, raping, pillaging, and destroying. They spared no one, even killing the children. But even though Jerusalem was surrounded by such enemies, God told the people through Nahum that He would destroy Nineveh, the proud capital of the Assyrians.

The book of Nahum divides into four sections, and each section is a unique description of the anger of God.

Section 1: God's Terrible Wrath

The first section could be characterized as a vision of God's terrible wrath, as we see described for us in chapter 1:

*The LORD is a jealous and avenging God;
the LORD takes vengeance and is filled
with wrath.*

*The LORD takes vengeance on his foes
and maintains his wrath against his
enemies.*

*The LORD is slow to anger and great in
power;
the LORD will not leave the guilty
unpunished.*

*His way is in the whirlwind and the storm,
and clouds are the dust of his feet.
He rebukes the sea and dries it up;
he makes all the rivers run dry.
Bashan and Carmel wither
and the blossoms of Lebanon fade.
The mountains quake before him
and the hills melt away.
The earth trembles at his presence,
the world and all who live in it.
Who can withstand his indignation?
Who can endure his fierce anger?
His wrath is poured out like fire;
the rocks are shattered before him
(1:2–6).*

The prophet envisions God in His anger, eyeing the hosts of Assyria. He has been patient, enduring their sins, giving them every opportunity to repent as they had done in Jonah's day. He has sent prophet after prophet, appealing to them to turn back to Him. Finally, God's patience is exhausted, and His anger comes to a full, rolling boil. Yes, He is slow to anger—but once that anger is aroused, it's a terrible thing to experience.

It is a dangerous thing to repent of one's repentance, as the Ninevites did. To forsake evil, then return to it is an act that provokes the anger of God. His anger is not a temper tantrum. It's not vindictive, petty, or needlessly

cruel. It is not capricious or unjust. It is not selfish. It is not random or chaotic. The anger of God is controlled but fearsome to behold.

In these six verses, Nahum uses all the Hebrew words for God's anger: jealous, vengeance, wrath, anger, indignation, fierceness, fury. What do these words mean?

God's jealousy is not like the selfish, petty, green-eyed monster of human jealousy. The jealousy of God is a burning zeal for a righteous cause, an overwhelming concern for the object of God's love.

His vengeance or retribution is not like the thirst for revenge that often consumes human beings. God's vengeance is rooted in justice and is an accurate assessment of what is right—and wrong. When God avenges, we know that His vengeance is proportionate, just, and true.

God's wrath, His dark and towering anger, is one of the most terrifying aspects of God's character—and it is rooted in justice and truth. The Hebrew word for wrath stems from a term that literally means "hot breathing." The wrath of God is hot and intense, and everything in its path is withered and burned away.

His indignation comes from another Hebrew term literally translated as "foaming at the mouth." God's indignation is not merely a stamped foot or an upturned nose. It is intense and frightening in the extreme!

Heat is a major component of God's anger. The word for fierceness in Hebrew literally means "heat," and the word fury means "burning."

Section 2: God's Personal Wrath

The second section, beginning with

Nahum 1:8, reveals that God's anger can be personal. The anger of God that we see in this section is directed against a single individual: Sennacherib, the pagan king and general of the Assyrian army who plotted to destroy God's people.

This passage parallels Isaiah 36 and 37, which describes the Assyrian army's siege of Jerusalem as they taunted and mocked Judah's ruler, King Hezekiah. Isaiah tells us that Hezekiah took the enemy's messages and spread them before the Lord, asking God to save the city. That night, we are told, the angel of death went through the Assyrian hosts and slew 185,000 soldiers (see Isa. 37:36). Nahum refers to this event in chapter 1:

This is what the LORD says:

"Although they have allies and are numerous,

they will be cut off and pass away.

Although I have afflicted you, O Judah,

I will afflict you no more.

*Now I will break their yoke from your neck
and tear your shackles away" (1:12–13).*

When the angel went through the camp, the Assyrian general was spared, and he returned to Nineveh. But while he was worshiping his false gods in the temple after returning from this engagement with Israel, he was murdered by his own two sons who stole the crown for themselves:

*The LORD has given a command
concerning you, Nineveh:*

*"You will have no descendants to bear
your name.*

*I will destroy the carved images and cast
idols*

*that are in the temple of your gods.
I will prepare your grave,
for you are vile”
(1:14; see also 2 Kings 19:37; 2 Chron.
32:21; Isa. 37:38).*

Years before that event took place, God told the prophet Nahum that He would deal with this man in his own temple, in the house of his gods, and make his grave there. God’s anger sought him out and struck him down.

We see from this section that God’s wrath can be directed against an individual person. Many people find this hard to accept. They want to believe that God, being a God of love, is incapable of actually punishing people. They object to the idea that God’s justice demands punishment for evildoers. God’s love is greater than His justice, they say, and cancels out all punishment.

But, from a biblical point of view, this is a delusion. God singled out Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, for extreme punishment because his sins had reached to the skies like smoke from the cities he had destroyed.

Section 3: God’s Thorough Wrath

Chapter 2 comprises a third section that reveals still another aspect of God’s anger: He is thorough. God addresses Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, saying:

*An attacker advances against you,
Nineveh.
Guard the fortress,
watch the road,
brace yourselves,
marshal all your strength! (2:1).*

This is framed in a dramatic fashion, as though the watchman sees the armies of the Babylonians coming up to destroy the city of Nineveh. History tells us that the combined armies of Cyaxares and Nabopolassar, the father of Nebuchadnezzar, came up against Nineveh. God through Nahum relates what the scene will be like as these armies invade the city:

*The chariots storm through the streets,
rushing back and forth through the
squares.
They look like flaming torches;
they dart about like lightning (2:4).*

This almost sounds like a description of the Los Angeles freeway system! In reality, it is a predictive account of the battle Nahum foresaw raging in the streets of Nineveh as the Babylonians swarmed over the city. Nahum goes on to predict:

*The river gates are thrown open
and the palace collapses (2:6).*

The Greek historian Diodorus Siculus records how the city of Nineveh fell, saying:

There was an old prophecy that Nineveh should not be taken till the river became an enemy to the city; and in the third year of the siege, the river, being swollen with continual rains, overflowed every part of the city and broke down the wall for twenty stadia; then the king [of Nineveh], thinking that the oracle was fulfilled and the river become an enemy of the city, built a large funeral pile in the palace, and collecting together all his wealth and his concubines and his eunuchs,

burned himself and the palace with them all;
and the enemy entered the breach that the
waters had made, and took the city.

[Quoted by John McClintock and James
Strong, *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological,
and Ecclesiastical Literature*, Vol. 7 (New
York: Harper & Bros., 1883) 124.]

The Babylonian armies destroyed Nineveh
exactly as Nahum prophesied. When Nineveh
was destroyed, nothing remained.

Earlier in this century, you could have
visited the vast site of Nineveh and would
not have known that a city existed there. For
miles around, you would have seen nothing
but flat, deserted wilderness. Some years
ago, archaeologists excavated in the area and
unearthed shards and fragments that verify
the existence of Nineveh on that site. Broken
rubble is all that remains of this once-great
city. It was lost for centuries, buried under the
shifting desert sands.

This illustrates the thoroughness of
God's anger and judgment. Nothing escapes.
"Though the mills of God grind slowly,"
observed Friedrich Von Logau, "yet they
grind exceedingly small."

Section 4: God's Irresistible Wrath

In the fourth section, Nahum chapter 3,
God addresses Nineveh and warns that His
anger is irresistible. The tone of this section is
caustic and mocking:

*Draw water for the siege,
strengthen your defenses!
Work the clay,
tread the mortar,
repair the brickwork!*

*There the fire will devour you;
the sword will cut you down
and, like grasshoppers, consume you
(3:14–15).*

In other words, "Try as hard as you
may, build your defenses as strong as you
can—it won't do you any good. My anger is
irresistible." When a nation or an individual
becomes prideful and self-sufficient, God's
judgment darkens like a storm cloud.

What is the message of Nahum for us
today? We can derive both a national and an
individual application. On the national level,
we should be very concerned for a nation that
increasingly rewards pride and worships at
the altar of the self. We should worry about
the increasing immorality and dishonesty
that characterizes our society, our media, and
our national life.

We should also avoid being complacent
about the fact that Communism has fallen
in many nations around the world. In the
Bible, the Assyrians were not only the people
who were actual enemies of Israel, but they
were also a type of a people yet to come—a
society that would threaten the peace of the
earth and play an important part on the stage
of world history in the last days. Many Bible
scholars see the Assyrians of this and other
Bible prophecies as a picture of Russia and
its allied independent states. If you want an
interesting study, compare Ezekiel 38 and 39
with this prophecy of Nahum. You notice that
God says:

*"I am against you,"
declares the LORD Almighty (2:13).*

And when Ezekiel opens his great

prophecy against the king of the north, Gog of the Land of Magog, he opens with similar words:

*“This is what the Sovereign LORD says:
I am against you, O Gog, chief prince of
Meshech and Tubal’ ” (Ezek. 38:3).*

We don’t know what the future holds for Russia. Today there are signs of political and economic confusion in that formerly Communist nation. Will Russia return to totalitarianism or become a fiercely nationalist, expansionist nation? We don’t know. But the likelihood, according to Bible prophecy, is that Russia will regain her stature as a political and military force that will again threaten the peace of the world. Someday, according to these prophecies, Russia will again swarm down from the north to attack Israel—and will face the final judgment of God.

We should also heed Nahum’s teaching about God’s anger for the sake of our individual lives. We should not presume upon God’s love. Instead, we should recognize that God’s anger is a component of His love. If you are a parent, you know how you feel if anyone injures or insults your child or your spouse: You become angry! If you are not angry when you see injustices, then you do not truly love. Anger is an emotion of defense and protection toward those we love. We can even become angry with the person we love, when we feel he or she is engaging in self-damaging behavior. We become angry precisely *because* we love that person and want the best for him or her.

God’s anger is much the same. It is

unleashed in the defense of those He loves. You cannot preach the love of God without preaching the wrath of God, because His wrath is a manifestation of His love. As Charles Spurgeon said, “He who does not believe that God will punish sin will not believe that He will pardon it through the blood of His Son.”

How, then, can we escape the anger of God? Nahum gives us the answer in the first chapter of his book:

*The LORD is good,
a refuge in times of trouble.
He cares for those who trust in him (1:7).*

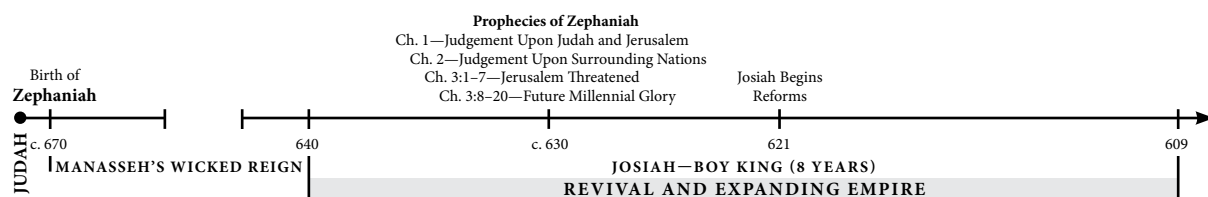
We need not face the wrath of God. No one who turns to God in trust will ever experience His wrath. He exercises His wrath only against those who reject His love.

Years ago, when my children were small, one of my daughters and I had a disagreement about her behavior. I spanked her (yes, I believe that spanking—administered in love and sorrow, not in anger—is biblical and effective). Afterwards, she remained defiant and unrepentant for a time—and I wondered what I should do. Should I punish her further, in an effort to break her stubborn will and bring her to repentance? I prayed for guidance.

Just then, her entire demeanor changed. Her anger and her will seemed to melt. She ran to me and threw her arms around my neck, told me she was sorry, and pleaded for forgiveness. Now, what was I to do? Continue to spank her? Of course not! She was no longer rebellious. Instead, she had taken refuge in me. She had placed her trust in me. She had come to me for forgiveness—and I freely gave it to her.

That's what a father's heart is like, and God is our heavenly Father. His heart of love is always open to those who take refuge in Him and who trust Him for salvation. They will never have to experience His wrath.

As the Lord Jesus put it, "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life" (John 5:24).

The Day of Wrath

If someone said, “You’re so judgmental,” would you consider it a compliment—or an insult?

The concept of judgment has fallen into disfavor in our times. Yet the fact remains that God—the God of the Bible—is very judgmental. While our culture insists that all issues should be viewed in shades of gray, in terms of moral relativism, God insists on viewing the world and the human race in very stark terms of black and white, evil and good, sin and righteousness, wrong and right, goats and sheep, hell and heaven.

As we come to the book of Zephaniah, we encounter a very judgmental prophet who speaks for a judgmental God. You’ll find no shades of gray in the book of Zephaniah, no compromise, no moral relativism. Although many books in the Bible deal with God as Judge, the book of Zephaniah presents the Bible’s most intense and concentrated treatment of this theme.

The Prophet of Judgment

Many people would like to rewrite the Bible and leave out all the distasteful references to God’s judgment. If such a

project were ever undertaken, the book of Zephaniah would practically cease to exist! We cannot simply edit out those parts of the Bible that do not suit our delicate sensibilities.

The Bible is God’s truth to us, His revelation of Himself, so that we can know Him and respond to Him realistically. In order to truly know God, we must know Him in His many dimensions. We must understand His vast love, His deep mercy, His all-encompassing forgiveness—yet these concepts can have little meaning to us until we truly understand His justice and judgment.

Some people make the mistake of thinking that the Old Testament presents a God of judgment while the New Testament presents a God of love. In fact, we find hundreds of references to the love and mercy of God in the Old Testament, while in the New Testament we see many references to

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

The theme of Zephaniah is judgment—a word that is not much in favor in our culture today. This chapter shows the reader why the issue of God’s judgment is more urgent today than ever before. In order to know God, we must know Him as He truly is—and that means we must understand how He intends to judge the world.

LEFT: Reconstruction of sacrificial altar

the justice and judgment of God. The Old and New Testaments testify in harmony to a richly multidimensional God who is both just and loving, judgmental and merciful. We see these facets of God's character eloquently expressed together in Zephaniah, the book of the day of wrath and judgment.

Old and New Testament Prophecy

The name Zephaniah means "hidden of the Lord." The prophet speaks as a representative of the remnant of faith—those relatively few people who remain true to God and faithful to His Word through the time of trouble that is to come upon the earth. God will watch over the people of His remnant to guard their faith during a future time of intense worldwide upheaval and persecution.

The book of Zephaniah is written about this future group of believers who live through the coming day of the Lord—the day of wrath. The prophet, then, is writing as a representative of the people of the distant future, people who would not be born for thousands of years.

In chapter 1, Zephaniah gives us the character of God's vengeance. It is not a pleasant passage. It begins after the prophet identifies himself as a great-great-grandson of Hezekiah, one of the kings of Judah:

The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah, during the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah:

"I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth," declares the LORD.

"I will sweep away both men and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea.

The wicked will have only heaps of rubble when I cut off man from the face of the earth," declares the LORD.

"I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem.

I will cut off from this place every remnant of Baal,

the names of the pagan and the idolatrous priests—

those who bow down on the roofs to worship the starry host,

those who bow down and swear by the LORD

and who also swear by Molech,

those who turn back from following the LORD

and neither seek the LORD nor inquire of him.

Be silent before the Sovereign LORD, for the day of the LORD is near.

The LORD has prepared a sacrifice;

he has consecrated those he has invited"

(1:2-7).

Some people confuse "the day of the Lord" with "the Lord's Day." In the church, we often call Sunday "the Lord's Day" because Sunday—the day Jesus rose from the dead—is when Christians attend church and celebrate His resurrection. What the Bible calls "the Day of the Lord" is something else altogether—like the difference between a horse chestnut and a chestnut horse.

The day of the Lord is the day of the manifestation of God's hand of judgment in human affairs. Notice the personal pronoun throughout the passage: "I will sweep away everything. . . . I will sweep away both men

and animals. . . . I will stretch out my hand against Judah.” God is working through events in history, working through nations and armies and calamities of various sorts. His hand is hidden in the glove of history, but all the writers of Scripture agree that a day is coming when God will intervene directly in human affairs.

Jesus refers to this time in Matthew, where He speaks of a time of great tribulation:

“Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many

people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matt. 24:9–14).

As Jesus continues to describe these events, the fear-inspiring signs and horrors climax in these words:

“Then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened. . . .

“Immediately after the distress of those days ‘the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’

“At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other” (Matt. 24:21–22, 29–31).

The apostle Paul speaks similarly of this time, using the specific phrase “the day of the Lord,” in 1 Thessalonians 5:1–6. Many other passages also refer to the Day of the Lord and they all agree on certain features of that time: It will be a time when people proclaim peace but prepare for war. It will be a time when people hold to a form of godliness but deny its power. It will be a time when people declare that the problems of life have been solved when in fact the world is in greater danger than ever before.

These conditions will usher in the day of the Lord.

The Day of the Lord Arrives

Hollywood has produced a number of science fiction movies that have attempted to show what the end of the world might look like, but they can’t do justice to the horrific wordpictures of the prophet Zephaniah:

*“The great day of the LORD is near—
near and coming quickly.*

*Listen! The cry on the day of the LORD
will be bitter,*

the shouting of the warrior there.

That day will be a day of wrath,

a day of distress and anguish,

a day of trouble and ruin,

a day of darkness and gloom,

a day of clouds and blackness,

a day of trumpet and battle cry

against the fortified cities

and against the corner towers.

I will bring distress on the people

and they will walk like blind men,

because they have sinned against the

LORD.

Their blood will be poured out like dust

and their entrails like filth.

Neither their silver nor their gold

will be able to save them

on the day of the LORD’s wrath.

In the fire of his jealousy

the whole world will be consumed,

for he will make a sudden end

of all who live in the earth” (1:14–18).

The mind recoils from this list of future horrors. Is it easy for God to speak this way? No. God takes no delight in human death and suffering. He does not delight in judgment. The prophet Isaiah calls judgment God’s “strange work,” His “alien task” (see Isa. 28:21).

God’s heart delights in mercy. But ultimately, if His will is to be done, if humanity is to break free of the chains of sin and discover the glorious peace and freedom of the golden millennial age, then human rebellion must be judged. The entrenched evil of humanity must be fully and finally dealt with. That’s why the coming day of the vengeance of our God is certain. His Word speaks clearly on this, throughout both testaments.

Chapter 2 traces the extent of God’s

vengeance. In this passage God provides a list of nations that He will judge—and at first glance the list is puzzling. All of these nations have already disappeared:

*“I have heard the insults of Moab
and the taunts of the Ammonites,
who insulted my people
and made threats against their land.
Therefore, as surely as I live,”
declares the LORD Almighty, the God of
Israel,
“surely Moab will become like Sodom,
the Ammonites like Gomorrah—
a place of weeds and salt pits,
a wasteland forever.
The remnant of my people will plunder
them;
the survivors of my nation will inherit
their land” (2:8–9).*

In these verses, God pronounces judgment against Moab, Ammon, the Cushites, and the Assyrians. However, all of these ancient nations are gone, buried in antiquity. How then can they be destroyed at some future time, in the day of the Lord?

The answer is that these nations are used both literally and symbolically in the Scriptures. They were literally destroyed in the course of history, but they symbolize aspects of humanity that God will judge on the day of the Lord. Moab and Ammon, for instance, always symbolize the flesh of humanity—our self-willed reliance on our own resources. Ethiopia is a picture of stubborn, intransigent human nature: “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots?” the Scriptures say (Jer. 13:23). Assyria represents human arrogance and pride. God says He is against

all these rebellious qualities of human nature. In the Day of the Lord, these forms of human evil will be vanquished forever.

Chapter 3 makes it clear that God’s judgment will be worldwide:

*“Therefore wait for me,” declares the LORD,
“for the day I will stand up to testify.
I have decided to assemble the nations,
to gather the kingdoms
and to pour out my wrath on them—
all my fierce anger.
The whole world will be consumed
by the fire of my jealous anger” (3:8).*

What does God seek to accomplish by destroying the nations of the world? Does He want to get even? No, God, the wise and loving Creator, would not destroy for the sake of destroying. He would only destroy for the sake of creating. See what follows this vision of destruction:

*Sing, O Daughter of Zion;
shout aloud, O Israel!
Be glad and rejoice with all your heart,
O Daughter of Jerusalem!
The LORD has taken away your
punishment,
he has turned back your enemy.
The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you;
never again will you fear any harm.
On that day they will say to Jerusalem,
“Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands hang limp.
The LORD your God is with you,
he is mighty to save.
He will take great delight in you,
he will quiet you with his love,
he will rejoice over you with singing”
(3:14–17).*

After the great and terrible Day of the Lord, God sets up a whole new order, a world filled with peace, joy, gladness, and singing. This is why God is dealing with the human race—so He might bring singing out of sorrow, service out of selfishness, salvation out of slavery. That is the consequence of God's judgment—not destruction but a new creation.

The references to Zion and Israel in this passage make it clear, I believe, that this is specifically a picture of God's care for the remnant of Israel through the tribulation and time of judgment. I do not believe that this section refers to the church, because I believe the church will be taken out of the world before these events occur. When the time of tribulation is past and God calls the remnant of Israel to Himself, they will sing the song of the redeemed. This passage is reminiscent of that beautiful passage in the writings of Solomon:

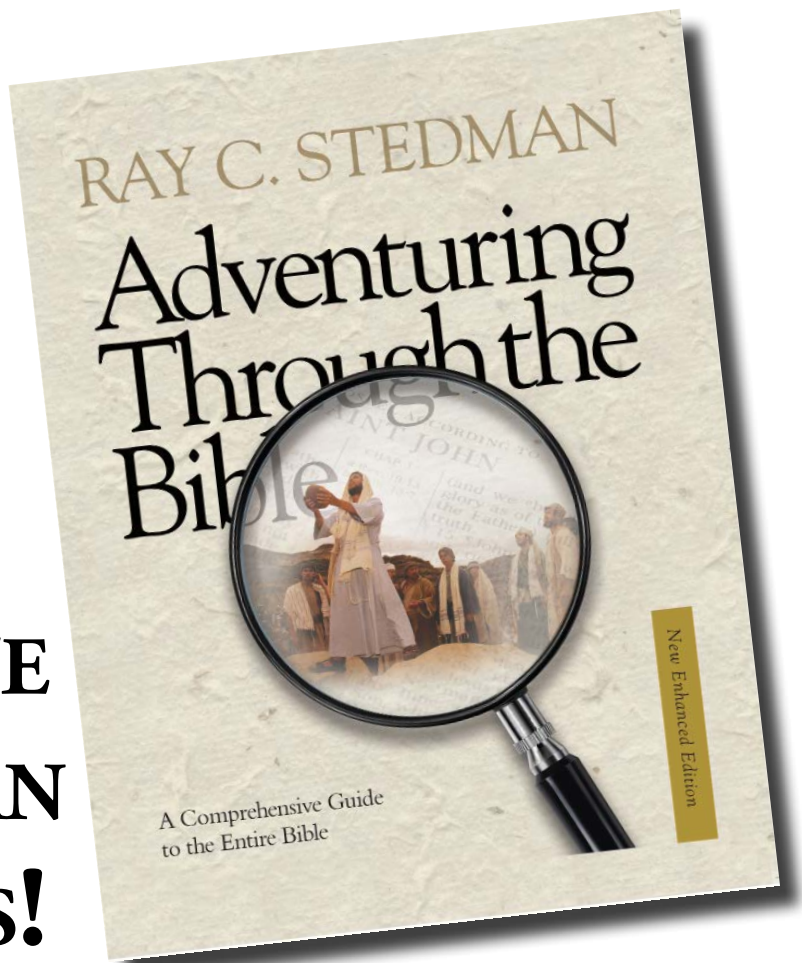
*"Flowers appear on the earth;
the season of singing has come,
the cooing of doves
is heard in our land" (Song 2:12).*

After the terrible destruction comes a time of the singing, which none but the redeemed can join in and sing. That is what God wants to produce in our lives—redemption, joy, and singing.

Judgment is coming upon the world, and it is coming in our own lives as individual believers. We all go through painful, purifying experiences. God takes the pain and darkness of our lives and uses it to bring about a new creative work within us. After the pain and purification comes singing. The justice of God cannot be turned aside—and neither can His love.

That is the sobering yet comforting message of the book of Zephaniah.

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