

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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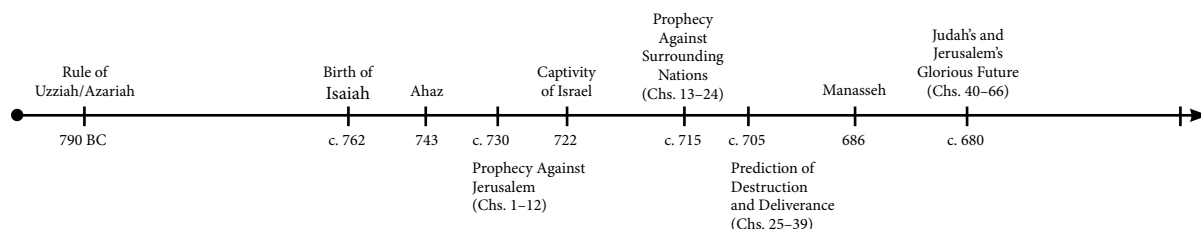
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The Gospel According to Isaiah



Isaiah was the greatest of the prophets and a master of language. If you enjoy beautiful, rolling cadences and powerful literary passages, you'll enjoy this book.

The book of Isaiah is found in the exact middle of the Bible and has often been called a “miniature Bible.” How many books does the Bible have? Sixty-six. How many chapters does Isaiah have? Sixty-six. How many books are there in the Old Testament? Thirty-nine. In the New Testament? Twenty-seven. The book of Isaiah divides in exactly the same way. The first part of the book has thirty-nine chapters. There is a distinct division at chapter 40, so that the remaining twenty-seven chapters constitute the second part of this book.

The New Testament begins with the history of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ who came to announce the coming of the Messiah, and ends in the book of Revelation and the establishment of a new heaven and earth. Chapter 40 of Isaiah, which begins the second part of the book, contains the prophetic passage that foretells the coming of John the Baptist: “A voice of one calling: ‘In the

desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God’ ” (Isa. 40:3).

John the Baptist said that he fulfilled this passage. Isaiah 66 speaks of the new heavens and the new earth, which is echoed in the New Testament book of Revelation. So you find here in Isaiah a remarkably close parallel-in-miniature to the entire Bible.

The book of Isaiah presents the most complete revelation of Jesus Christ to be found in the Old Testament, which is why it is sometimes called “the fifth gospel” or “the gospel according to Isaiah.” The prophetic passages of Isaiah point clearly to Christ, even though they were written seven centuries before He was born. These startlingly clear prophecies, which have been fulfilled in multiple ways in the life of Jesus the Messiah, provide proof that the Bible is the divinely inspired Word of God.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

The goal of this chapter is to show that the surprisingly clear prophecies and salvation message in the book of Isaiah dovetail with the life and message of the Lord Jesus Christ. This chapter shows that Isaiah is truly “the gospel according to Isaiah.”

LEFT: Gate outside the old City of Jerusalem

I like to picture the book of Isaiah as the Grand Canyon of Scripture: deep, vast, majestic, colorful, and layered with history. Visitors to the Grand Canyon are always astonished as they stand at the rim and look out over the silent canyon and see the winding silver thread of the Colorado River more than a mile below. You frequently hear a tourist exclaim, “How could a tiny thing like that river carve out a huge canyon like this?”

You get a similar impression as you look out over the vast expanse of the book of Isaiah. You immediately sense the grandeur and power of God. You sense the insignificance of humanity when compared with His might and majesty. You have to ask yourself, “How could Isaiah, a mere human being like me, write a book like this?”

The Source of the Book of Isaiah

We know very little about Isaiah. He lived during the reigns of four kings of Judah: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. His ministry occurred about seven hundred and forty years before Christ when Sennacherib, the Assyrian invader, captured the ten tribes that formed the northern kingdom of Israel. Judah, the southern kingdom, was plunged into idolatry toward the end of Isaiah’s ministry in 687 BC and the people of Judah were carried captive into Babylon in 587 BC.

Isaiah was a contemporary of the prophets Amos, Hosea, and Micah. Tradition tells us that he was martyred under the reign of Manasseh, one of the most wicked kings of the Old Testament (until Manasseh’s conversion in 2 Chronicles 33:11–13). According to this

GOD’S BULLDOZER



The Old Testament prophet Isaiah predicted that the message of John the Baptist would be like a great bulldozer, building a highway in the desert so that God would be able to come reach isolated human souls in the midst of the wilderness. “Every valley shall be raised up,” says Isaiah 40:4, “every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.” Without a road, you cannot drive out into the desert to help those who are wandering and lost. So John the Baptist was the highway-builder—God’s bulldozer—making a path in the desert with the message of repentance and forgiveness.

Repentance is the great leveler. It fills in the valleys and depressed places of our lives—the places where we beat ourselves down and torture ourselves with guilt—and it fills them in and lifts them up. It also brings down all the high peaks of pride that we stand on when we refuse to admit we are wrong. Repentance takes the crooked places, where we have lied and deceived, straightens them out and makes the rough places plain. Isn’t that beautiful imagery to describe the role of repentance in our lives?

Ray C. Stedman

*The Servant Who Rules:
Exploring the Gospel of Mark, Vol. 1
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tradition, Isaiah hid in a hollow tree to escape Manasseh. The king's soldiers, knowing he was in that tree, sawed the tree down—cutting Isaiah in half. Some scholars feel that the reference in Hebrews to heroes of faith who were “sawn in two” includes the prophet Isaiah (see Heb. 11:37).

Isaiah is the human author of this book, and it is amazing to think that a person could write in such beautiful language and reveal such tremendous insights. But in the same way, when visitors to the Grand Canyon go down the long trail to the Colorado River, they are no longer amazed that a river could carve out the great canyon. They can hear the force of the current and sense the power of the river. The book of Isaiah is like that. Here is a man carried along by an amazing force, speaking magnificent prophecies as he is moved by the mighty Spirit of God.

As Peter observes, the prophecies of the Old Testament are not the product of human imagination but of God's own Spirit (see 2 Peter 1:20–21). Nothing less than divine inspiration could explain how Isaiah could speak and write as he did.

Here is a brief outline to help you catch a glimpse of the breathtaking panorama of this deep, rich book:

A Vision of the Lord

As you read through this book, you'll see that the prophet Isaiah was searching for something. Peter says he was searching for the salvation that was to come from God (see 1 Peter 1:10). It's interesting, then, that the name Isaiah means “the salvation of Jehovah.”

Isaiah lived during a time of national stress, when man's true, ugly nature was

readily apparent. As the book opens, Isaiah is livid over the rebelliousness of his nation. The obstinacy and disobedience of his fellow Israelites is beyond his ability to understand or tolerate. He angrily laments: “The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand” (1:3).

Even an animal knows where its bread comes from, but not Israel! His people wander stupidly and ignorantly. Isaiah is beside himself with frustration and amazement.

In chapter 6, God gives Isaiah a vision of His awesome purity and holiness:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the LORD seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

*“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory”
(6:1–3).*

It's significant that this vision occurs in the year of King Uzziah's death, when the throne was vacant, because in his vision, Isaiah sees the throne as never vacant. As you read on, you find that God has power to shake the earth to its foundations. He is a mighty God, speaking in thunder and moving in strength. In the presence of God, Isaiah responds:

“Woe to me! . . . I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty” (6:5).

Isaiah wonders how a sinful human being can stand in the presence of such righteous Perfection. Where is salvation for a man of unclean lips who comes from a people of unclean lips?

In chapter 40, the prophet returns to the issue of the helplessness and unworthiness of sinful human beings in the presence of Almighty God. In a prophetic passage that points to the coming of John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah, Isaiah writes:

*A voice says, "Cry out."
And I said, "What shall I cry?"
"All men are like grass,
and all their glory is like the flowers of
the field.
The grass withers and the flowers fall,
because the breath of the LORD blows
on them.
Surely the people are grass.
The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of our God stands forever"
(40:6–8).*

We human beings are like the grass. Isaiah sees that the human race is impotent, impermanent, and helpless, stumbling toward oblivion. But that, he soon discovers, is not the end of the story.

Woven throughout the book is the ever-growing revelation of God's love, of Jehovah's salvation, expressed in the Person who is to come: the Messiah, the servant of God. At first, the image of Messiah is dim and shadowy, but gradually the image grows brighter, clearer, and more detailed until, in Isaiah 52 and 53, the figure of Christ steps right off the page and fills the whole room.

Isaiah's image of the Messiah is not what

we, in our limited human imaginations, would expect. In Isaiah 52:13, we see that he "will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted," yet in the very next verse we also see that "his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness." The pre-Christian Jews must have been puzzled by these apparent contradictions.

How did God's exalted Servant come to be so horribly marred and disfigured? Why was He "despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering" (53:3)? Why was He "pierced for our transgressions . . . crushed for our iniquities" (53:5)? Why was He "oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth" (53:7)? And why was He "cut off from the land of the living . . . stricken . . . assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth" (53:8–9)?

It must have baffled ancient Jewish scholars to contemplate this image of the Messiah: not a radiant Messiah coming in might and power but a Messiah who "poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors," a Messiah who "bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors" (Isa. 53:12). In this seemingly contradictory (yet divinely inspired) image, the prophet Isaiah saw how God's love would break the back of human rebelliousness and meet us in our hopelessness and need.

The "Revelation" of Isaiah

Ultimately, the prophet Isaiah peers beyond the dark centuries yet to come and sees the dawning of the day of righteousness,

when God's glory will fill the earth. Isaiah 61 announces the year of the Lord's favor, when Jesus is anointed by the Spirit of the Sovereign Lord to "preach good news to the poor . . . to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners" (61:1).

Chapter 62 proclaims a new name and a new peace and prosperity for Zion, the redeemed and holy people of the Lord. Chapters 63 through 66 announce God's day of vengeance and redemption, His gift of salvation, judgment, and hope. Also in chapter 65, we see an image of the new heaven and new earth that is also envisioned by John in the book of Revelation. Then this prophecy of Isaiah will be fulfilled:

He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. 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 (2:4).

In both Isaiah and Revelation, you see two opposite characteristics of the Lord Jesus—His great power and His great humility—together. In Revelation 4:2, John tells us of a mighty vision of God, a vision of a throne shining in heaven. Then he says, "I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne" (Rev. 5:6). In these verses we see the throne and the Lamb, power and humility, a King and a Servant.

We see these same contrasts brought together in Isaiah. In Isaiah 6:1, we see "the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted." Then, in Isaiah 53:7, we see the Servant—who

is also the Lord!—"oppressed and afflicted," and "led like a lamb to the slaughter."

This is God's plan. He doesn't solve the problem of sin on earth the way you and I probably would, with warfare, scorching and scourging the wicked human race from the face of the earth. Here we see convincing evidence of God's declaration in Isaiah 55:

"My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (55:8–9).

God's method is to break through human rebelliousness not by might, not by power, but by love—a costly love that suffers and endures great pain and shame. When God comes to the human race as a suffering Servant rather than as a mighty conqueror, something beautiful takes place as the human heart responds, opening to God as the petals of a flower open to the sun.

Into that open heart, God pours His everlasting life.

The Kingdoms of Assyria and Babylon

While the first part of the book presents the threat of the king of Assyria, and the last part of the book describes the threat of the kingdom of Babylon, the middle part of the book, chapters 37 through 39, record the filling in this historical sandwich. Chapters 37 through 39 may be understood as an interlude bridging the space between Assyria and Babylon. These two nations—Assyria and Babylon—are in the world today and

ASSYRIAN AND BABYLONIAN INVASIONS OF ISRAEL



have been since before the time of Isaiah. It is remarkable how up-to-the-moment the book of Isaiah truly is! Where do we see these two kingdoms today?

The king of Assyria stands for the power and philosophy of godlessness. “Assyria” is the arrogant human assertion that there is no God; that we can live as we please, accountable to no higher moral authority. “Assyria” is the claim that we inhabit a mindless, materialistic universe that heedlessly grinds humanity to insignificant dust; that we can do nothing in this life except enjoy our time until we die. It’s the philosophy that might makes right and that man is accountable to no one but himself.

The Assyrian philosophy is still prominent in our own day. It is the root philosophy behind Communism and other materialistic “isms” in the world—but it is also a dominant philosophy in North America and the rest of

the Western world. Marvin Olasky, editor of *World* magazine and author of *Fighting for Liberty and Virtue*, once said, “Materialist philosophies that treat human beings as machines or animals possess the high ground in our culture—academia, the most powerful media and many of our courts.”

The second force we see in Isaiah is the power of Babylon. In Scripture, Babylon is always the symbol of apostasy, religious error, and deceit. Again, this philosophy is strong today. The voice from which we should expect guidance—the voice of the church itself—is often raised against God, against the inerrant truth of His Word, against the morality and godliness that is proclaimed in the Scriptures. Today, we hear churches and religious leaders rationalizing false doctrines, justifying and defending sinful lifestyles, and ordaining people into the ministry who, by

their own admission, engage in behavior that is biblically intolerable. We are living in the very times described in Isaiah.

The dominant characteristics of the human heart are rebellion and helplessness. I once read a newspaper account of a man who was stopped by a police officer for speeding. When the officer handed him the ticket, the man read it, tossed it back at the officer, threw his car into gear, and sped off. The officer jumped into his car and pursued the lawbreaker at high speeds. The man finally ran his car off the road and destroyed it, killing both himself and his six-year-old daughter who was in the car with him. What made him do that? Wasn't it the innate rebelliousness within a human heart when confronted by authority? The same rebellion lurks in us all; this man only took it to a fatal extreme.

People often say to me in counseling: "I know what I ought to do, but I don't want to do it." Why not? Because of rebelliousness and helplessness. It's reflected in the growing despair and futility gripping so many lives today, and the apparent meaninglessness of life. Twice in Isaiah, God offers His promise to a world enslaved by rebellion and helplessness—a promise of cleansing, forgiveness, and a new beginning:

"Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool" (1:18).

And:

"Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money,

come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost" (55:1).

God's message to humanity is not condemnation but grace and forgiveness. He calls to us, "Come! The salvation of Jehovah is available to all! It is a free gift, no strings attached!" And when we accept the gospel according to Isaiah, we discover the answer to our deepest need, the cure for the rebellion and helplessness of our lives, the victory over the Assyria and Babylon in our hearts, the freedom and fellowship that God intended each of us to experience with Him.

The First and Last "All"

Some years ago, one of England's Bible teachers had just finished speaking at a week long series of nightly evangelistic meetings. Following the meeting, he hurried to catch a train home. At the station, as he was about to board, a man ran up to him and asked to speak to him.

"Sir," the stranger said, "I was in the meeting tonight and I heard you say that we can find peace with God, but I didn't understand all that you said. Could you please stay and talk with me? I need your help!"

The whistle blew. The train would be pulling out of the station in moments. "I'm sorry," said the Bible teacher. "This is the last train tonight, and I mustn't miss it. But I will tell you what to do." He handed the man his battered King James Bible and said, "Take this Bible and go to the nearest lamppost. Turn to Isaiah 53:6. Stoop down low and go in at the first 'all,' then stand up straight and come out at the last 'all.' " Then he stepped onto the train as it began to pull away.

The man looked bewildered. “Where did you say . . . ?”

“Isaiah 53:6!” the teacher repeated, shouting over the clatter of the train.

The man watched the train pull away. Then, shrugging, he took the Bible to the nearest lamppost and opened it to Isaiah 53:6. He recalled the teacher’s advice: Stoop down low and go in at the first “all,” then stand up straight and come out at the last “all.”

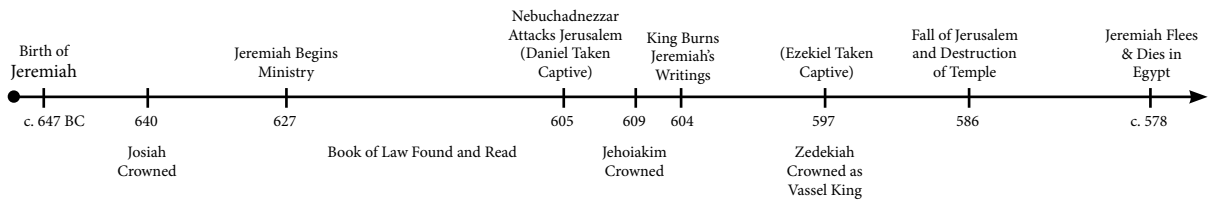
He read aloud, “ ‘All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way.’ Oh, that’s the first ‘all.’ I see now. I need to stoop down low and go in at the first ‘all.’ I need to admit I have gone astray, that I’ve turned away from God and gone my own way.”

Then he read further, “ ‘And the LORD

hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.’ Oh! Now I’m to stand up straight and come out at the last ‘all.’ That’s it! All my sin has been laid on Him, and I don’t have to carry that load anymore. I can stand up straight because He has taken all my sin away!”

The next night, the man returned to the meeting and handed the Bible back to the teacher. “Here’s your Bible,” he said. “Last night under that lamppost, I stooped down and went in at the first ‘all,’ and I stood up straight and came out at the last ‘all.’ ”

That is the gospel according to Isaiah, the gospel story of the Old Testament—and it’s the very same gospel we find in the New Testament. If you know the Messiah of Isaiah’s gospel, you can stand up straight and come out at the last “all.”

A Profile in Courage

During the German occupation of Denmark in World War II, King Christian X demonstrated defiant courage in the face of Nazi oppression. One morning, the king looked out his window, and saw the hated Nazi flag flying over a public building in Copenhagen. He called the German commandant and angrily demanded that the flag be removed.

The amused commandant refused. “We Germans do not take orders,” he replied. “We give them.”

“If you do not have it removed this instant,” said the king, “a Danish soldier will take it down.”

“Then he will be shot,” snorted the Nazi officer.

“Fire away, then,” said the king. “For I shall be that soldier.”

The Germans removed the flag.

That is a profile in courage, the courage to stand up for a higher cause than life itself. There are many profiles in courage throughout the Old and New Testaments: men and women who took a courageous, costly stand for

God. One of the most courageous of all was the prophet Jeremiah.

The Prophet Hero

Imagine for a moment you are Jeremiah the preacher. You live during the last days of a decaying nation, in the time of evil King Jehoiakim. You preach to the nation and call your people to repentance but no one listens. You are threatened and opposed at every turn. You have no wife, no companionship, because the days are evil and God has told you not to marry. You feel abandoned and alone. Even your friends have turned away from you.

You wish you could quit but you can't. The Word of God burns in your bones, and you have to speak it regardless of the consequences. You love your nation and your people, but you see disaster looming. You see the enemy massing on the border, ready to

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

The goal of this chapter is to present the reader with a heroic picture of the courageous prophet Jeremiah, who lived in times like ours—times when the nation was crumbling due to moral decay and spiritual decline. The lessons of the life of Jeremiah are relevant and applicable to the times in which we live.

LEFT: Old City of Jerusalem

conquer your land and carry out the judgment of God—and you are powerless to prevent it. Instead of heeding your warnings of coming destruction, the nation turns on you and seeks to destroy you, God’s messenger!

Now, perhaps, you understand the heroism of Jeremiah. Isaiah wrote more exalted passages and saw more clearly the coming of the Messiah. Other prophets spoke more precisely of future events. But Jeremiah stands out as a man of heroic courage with an iron determination to speak God’s message regardless of the cost.

Jeremiah was the last prophet to Judah, the southern kingdom, as the nation was crumbling due to moral and spiritual decay. He lived about sixty years after the days of Isaiah, and continued his ministry in Judah after the ten tribes of the north had been captured by Assyria. Jeremiah’s prophetic ministry began during the reign of Judah’s last good king, the boy-king Josiah, who led Israel’s last revival before its captivity. The revival under Josiah was rather superficial. The prophet Hilkiah had told Josiah that the people would follow him in his attempt to return the nation to God, but it was only because they loved the king—not out of a true love for God.

Jeremiah’s ministry lasted from the middle of Josiah’s reign, through the three-month reign of King Jehoahaz, the miserable reign of evil King Jehoiakim, and the three-month reign of Jehoiachin. Jeremiah continued to carry on God’s work during the reign of Judah’s last king, Zedekiah. It was at this time that Nebuchadnezzar returned, destroyed the city of Jerusalem, and took the nation into Babylonian captivity.

Jeremiah’s ministry lasted about forty years, and during all this time the prophet never saw any sign that his ministry was even slightly successful. His message was one of denunciation and reform, and the people did not obey him. He was called to a ministry of failure, yet he never gave up. Despite the frustration of forty years of failure, he remained faithful to God and to his mission. He never wavered from his calling as God’s witness before a dying and disobedient nation.



Judgment and Sorrow

Two themes permeate the book of Jeremiah. The first concerns the fate of the nation, which is judgment. The second concerns Jeremiah's sorrow over his people's disobedience.

First, Jeremiah repeatedly reminds the people that their first error was their failure to take God seriously. They didn't pay attention to what God had told them, but instead did what was right in their own eyes—not what was right in the light of God's revelation. As we read in 2 Chronicles 34, the nation had sunk so low that for many years, the law of Moses was completely lost. It had been tossed into a storage room in the back of the temple and forgotten.

Decades later, Hilkiah the priest was cleaning the temple and found the book of the law. He was astounded. For years, the nation had been completely without the Word of God, and suddenly the Word was rediscovered.

Hilkiah took the book of the law to King Josiah and read it to him. Hearing the words of the law, the king tore his clothes in grief and anguish over the years that the Law had been lost. He had the book read to the entire nation and made a covenant before the Lord to keep His commandments (2 Chron. 34:29–31). The rediscovery of the Word of God stimulated a great national revival led by Josiah. The rediscovery of God's Word is always the first step to revival and restoration.

It's a dangerous thing to lose contact with God's Word. When we shut our eyes and close our ears to God's voice and His Word, we end up on the perilous road of doing what is right in our own eyes. Many people, of course, do

what they know is wrong in the sight of God; that's bad enough. But it's just as dangerous to judge for ourselves what is right without consulting God's Word. Without an objective source as our yardstick, how can we properly determine what we should do?

The Bible is our moral and spiritual reality check. Without it, we become unrealistic and misguided, and our judgment is impaired. We easily find ourselves in the same state of decay and deterioration that characterized the people of Jeremiah's day.

In neglecting God's Word, the kingdom of Judah gradually adopted the values of the nations around them. They formed political and military alliances with godless nations, and soon they even worshiped foreign gods. Their idolatry and disobedience led them into internal strife, external threats, perverted justice, and moral disintegration. These were the conditions when Jeremiah came to call the nation to repentance—or judgment.

Throughout the book, Jeremiah issues clear and detailed prophecies, telling exactly how God would raise up a terrible and godless people who would sweep across the land and destroy everything in their path. They would be ruthless, breaking down the city walls and destroying the temple, taking away all the things the nation valued and dragging the people themselves into bondage. Thus would God judge Israel.

Jeremiah also makes clear that God takes no pleasure in dispensing judgment. He judges with a sorrowing, weeping heart. When God disciplines a nation or an individual, He does so because He is a God of love. He is a loving father who repeatedly instructs his erring children in the way of obedience but who

finally and reluctantly must correct them. We see His fatherly, sorrowing heart described in numerous passages, such as this one:

*“I myself said,
“How gladly would I treat you like sons
and give you a desirable land,
the most beautiful inheritance of any
nation.’
I thought you would call me ‘Father’
and not turn away from following me”
(3:19).*

Here we see that God is not so much enraged as He is wounded and grieved. The Lord is gracious and merciful, but when we trample His mercy underfoot He reaches the point where He must give us the discipline and judgment that we have been asking for. It is as if He is saying to us, “This is going to hurt Me more than it does you.” Every loving father says that to his children sooner or later,

but no father ever meant it more sincerely than God the Father.

Jeremiah was one of the greatest prophets in the Bible, living during the darkest, most shameful days in the history of Israel and Judah. The nation has become characterized by idolatry, immorality, apostasy, and the degeneration of worship and faith. For forty years, Jeremiah proclaims God’s judgment against the erring nation of Judah. He issues prophecies that foretell events of the near future and of future millennia. Jeremiah himself lives to see many of his prophecies come true, including the destruction of Jerusalem. He will later write his feelings about that destruction in the book of Lamentations.

Twelve Prophetic Sermons

Most of the book of Jeremiah consists of a series of prophetic sermons. The first, from Jeremiah 2:1 to 3:5, laments the willful sins of

TWELVE PROPHETIC SERMONS OF JEREMIAH		
Sermon 1	Jer 2:1–3:5	laments the willful sins of Judah
Sermon 2	Jer 3:6–30	coming judgment and destruction that will result if Judah does not repent
Sermon 3	Jer 7–10	Jeremiah’s own grief over the nation’s sin and details the nation’s hypocrisy and idolatry
Sermon 4	Jer 11–12	nation’s faithlessness in breaking its covenant with God
Sermon 5	Jer 13	Jeremiah uses a ruined sash, or belt, and wineskins to symbolize God’s judgment
Sermon 6	Jer 14–15	coming judgment in terms of drought, famine, and war
Sermon 7	Jer 16–17	explains why he is unmarried and that disaster is looming because of the people’s idolatry, sin, and disregard for the Sabbath
Sermon 8	Jer 18–20	compares God’s power over Israel to a potter’s control over clay speaks against the evil kings of Israel
Sermon 9	Jer 21–22	all-out attack on the false prophets of the nation
Sermon 10	Jer 23:9–40	contrasts the good people who have been exiled to Babylon with the evil leaders of Judah who remained behind
Sermon 11	Jer 24	peers into the future and foresees seventy long years of Babylonian captivity for Judah
Sermon 12	Jer 25	

Judah. The second, from 3:6 through chapter 6, warns of the judgment and destruction that will result if Judah does not repent. The third, chapters 7 through 10, expresses Jeremiah's own grief over the nation's sin and details the nation's hypocrisy and idolatry. The fourth, chapters 11 and 12, deals with the nation's faithlessness in breaking its covenant with God.

The fifth sermon, chapter 13, uses a ruined sash, or belt, and wineskins to symbolize God's judgment. The sixth, chapters 14 and 15, describes God's coming judgment in terms of drought, famine, and war. In the seventh sermon, chapters 16 and 17, Jeremiah explains why he is unmarried and that disaster is looming because of the people's idolatry, sin, and disregard for the Sabbath. When society is disintegrating, he says, it is better to be unmarried.

In his eighth sermon, chapters 18 through 20, God speaks through Jeremiah, comparing His power over Israel to a potter's control over clay. God is omnipotent, and the entire nation is as clay in His hands. He has the power to make, unmake, and reshape the Jewish nation. In this sermon, God tells Jeremiah to go to the potter's house and watch the potter working at the wheel. The prophet sees the potter making a clay pot; as the wheel turns, the pot becomes marred and broken. The potter squashes the pot into a shapeless lump and patiently begins shaping it the second time, after which it emerges in a shape that is pleasing to the potter.

This is one of a number of powerful word pictures that Jeremiah, inspired by God's Spirit, uses throughout this book. The potter and the clay symbolize not only God's power,

but His loving intent and His desire to make something beautiful from a broken life. He takes our brokenness and deformity, the result of our past sin, and remakes it according to the creative vision of His artist's heart.

Here, Jeremiah speaks not only a fateful prophecy of ruin and desolation but also of the hope and beauty of the coming days when God will reshape Israel. We can find comfort and encouragement in realizing that the word picture of the potter and the clay applies not only to the Jewish nation but to our lives as well.

In his ninth sermon, chapters 21 and 23, Jeremiah speaks against the evil kings of Israel. Then he predicts the coming of a righteous King, a righteous branch from David's family tree (23:1–8). This, of course, is a prediction of the righteous reign of King Jesus. Because His millennial reign is still in our future, Jeremiah is looking toward events that have not yet been fulfilled.

His tenth sermon, 23:9–40, is an all-out attack on the false prophets of the nation. His eleventh sermon, chapter 24, contrasts the good people who have been exiled to Babylon with the evil leaders of Judah who remained behind, comparing them to good figs and bad figs. In his twelfth sermon, chapter 25, Jeremiah peers into the future and foresees seventy long years of Babylonian captivity for Judah.

Later, when we study the book of Daniel, we'll meet the prophet Daniel who lived during the Babylonian captivity that Jeremiah foresees. In that book, Daniel reads Jeremiah 25 and discovers that Jeremiah had prophesied that the Babylonian captivity would last exactly seventy years. Thus, Daniel knew that

the end of the captivity was approaching, and he could look forward to seeing the nation restored.

In Jeremiah 25, the prophet looks beyond the time of captivity to the restoration of the people. Then his gaze leaps far beyond the events of the next seventy-odd years to a far-distant time, hundreds and even thousands of years ahead. He foresees the ultimate dispersion of Israel when the Jews were driven out of Palestine in the first and second centuries AD. He also foresees the final gathering of the Jews back into the land: the reestablishment of the state of Israel in 1948. He looks beyond even our own era to the days that will usher in the millennial reign when Israel—restored and blessed and called by God—will be the world’s cultural, political, economic, and spiritual hub.

Jeremiah’s twelve prophetic sermons are followed in chapters 26 through 29 by details of several conflicts that Jeremiah experienced: conflicts with his own people, the nation of Judah, and conflicts with the false prophets Hananiah and Shemaiah. In this section, we see Jeremiah’s boldness and courage as he opposes the civic and religious leaders of Jerusalem, prophesying the coming destruction of the city. This is an act of defiance against Jerusalem’s corrupt human authorities—and his defiance causes them to seek to kill him.

The New Covenant

In chapters 30 through 33, we come to an amazing and beautiful prediction of Jeremiah concerning the future restoration of Israel and Judah. Not only will the city of Jerusalem be rebuilt and refurbished, but God will make

a new and lasting agreement with the people of restored Israel. In Jeremiah 31, we read:

*“The time is coming,” declares the LORD,
“when I will make a new covenant
with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah.
It will not be like the covenant
I made with their forefathers
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them,”
declares the LORD.
“This is the covenant I will make with the
house of Israel
after that time,” declares the LORD.
“I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people” (31:31–33).*

While Jeremiah was being pursued and persecuted, he was led by the Spirit of God to write this shining vision of Israel’s future restoration. In this vision, God promises to be their God and to walk among them and put away their sins.

Most significant of all, this passage contains the great promise of a new covenant to be made with Israel. This is the same new covenant spoken of so powerfully in Matthew, which our Lord Himself referred to when He gathered with His disciples the night before His crucifixion and instituted the Lord’s Supper. After breaking the bread, which symbolized His broken body, He then took the cup and said, “This is my blood of the [new] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28).

The ultimate fulfillment of the new

covenant still lies in the distant future. God is fulfilling it today among the Gentile nations through His church (made up of both Jewish and Gentile believers). But the final fulfillment of the new covenant for Israel will not take place until the millennial reign of Jesus the Messiah.

In chapter 37, King Zedekiah, son of good King Josiah, is installed on the throne by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Unlike his father, Zedekiah had no regard for God. Though Zedekiah does not actively oppose Jeremiah and often listens to his words, he is a weak and cowardly puppet-king who lacks the will to stand up to the officials in his government who actively persecute the prophet.

First, Zedekiah tacitly allows Irijah, the captain of the guard, to arrest Jeremiah and throw him into a dungeon. Then, when the governmental officials (who supposedly owe their allegiance and obedience to King Zedekiah) approach the king, asking that Jeremiah be put to death, Zedekiah acquiesces, saying, "He is in your hands. . . . The king can do nothing to oppose you" (Jer. 38:5). So the governmental officials have Jeremiah tossed into a cistern filled with slimy mud. Only a small amount of light trickles in from above, vaguely illuminating the cistern where Jeremiah stands covered in ooze.

When another royal official comes to Zedekiah and complains of the unjust treatment of Jeremiah, the cowardly king again changes course, sending thirty men to rescue Jeremiah from the pit. The king secretly has Jeremiah brought to him so that he can question God's prophet about his own fate and the fate of the nation. The spineless

king swears Jeremiah to secrecy concerning their conversation.

Chapters 39 through 45 tell the grim story of the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonian invaders, just as Jeremiah had prophesied. In chapters 46 through 51, we have a series of prophecies against the various heathen nations and cities that oppose God and His people: Egypt, Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Edom, Damascus, Kedar, Hazor, Elam, and Babylon. In chapters 50 and 51, Jeremiah details the defeat and desolation that will ultimately engulf Babylon.

Jeremiah 52 sets forth the last days of Jerusalem: the capture and destruction of the city and the forced exile of its people to Babylon. Thus are the dire prophecies of Jeremiah fulfilled.

Battling the Specter of Discouragement

Throughout the book of Jeremiah, you see the prophet in a constant battle against discouragement. Who wouldn't be discouraged in the face of constant persecution and failure? For forty long years, he labors and preaches but never perceives even the tiniest hint of success.

We can learn a great lesson through Jeremiah's honest reactions to opposition and failure. In his public role as a prophet of God, he is as fearless as a lion. He confronts kings, captains, and murderers with ferocity and boldness. He looks them right in the eye and delivers the message of God, heedless of their threats.

But alone, Jeremiah is just a solitary human being like you and me. When he prays, he pours out the same prayer you or I would pray in that situation. He is honest

about his emotions of anger, bitterness, discouragement, and depression. He doesn't sugarcoat his feelings. He spreads it all out before the Lord—even his disappointment with God!—and says:

*Why is my pain unending
and my wound grievous and incurable?
Will you be to me like a deceptive brook,
like a spring that fails? (15:18).*

Strong words? Honest words? Absolutely. He is pouring out his true feelings. He has begun to wonder whether if he can truly depend on God. He is troubled by persecution, scorn, loneliness, and discouragement. He feels forsaken.

Some people would say, "I know the trouble with this man! Jeremiah has allowed himself to fall out of fellowship with God. His faith is sagging." That's a glib and superficial diagnosis—and it's the wrong diagnosis. Jeremiah is holding fast to God while wrestling with God. He's carrying on a relationship with God—a stormy relationship at times—but a living, dynamic relationship. As Jeremiah prays:

*You understand, O LORD;
remember me and care for me.
Avenge me on my persecutors. . . .
When your words came, I ate them;
they were my joy and my heart's delight,
for I bear your name,
O LORD God Almighty (15:15–16).*

This is a man who feeds on God's Word, who witnesses to God's truth, who publicly bears the name of God, the Almighty. Jeremiah is doing all the things that one should do in times of discouragement and depression. He prays. He meditates on

God's Word. He witnesses to others about the truth of God. He does all these things, yet he still feels defeated and discouraged. What is the problem?

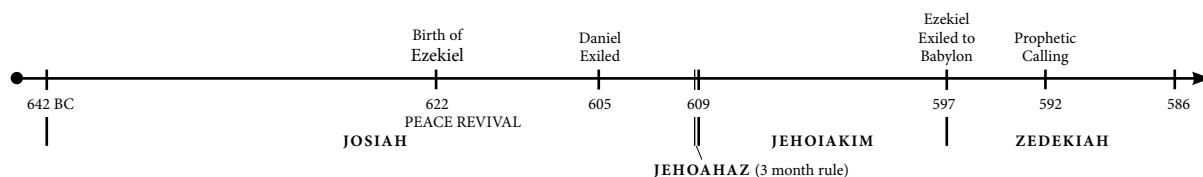
Simply this: Jeremiah forgot his calling.

He has forgotten what God promised to be to him. So God reminds Jeremiah that He called him to be a prophet, to speak His words. God didn't call Jeremiah to be successful. He didn't call Jeremiah to win a popularity contest. He called Jeremiah to be faithful and to be His representative, period.

Why should Jeremiah be discouraged? So what if he is rejected? So what if kings and captains oppose him? So what if he isn't successful in the eyes of the world? Jeremiah needs to concern himself with only one standard of success: God's standard.

If Jeremiah is faithful and obedient, if he speaks God's words with boldness and clarity, then it doesn't matter if those words produce results, from a human perspective. It doesn't matter if the people repent, if the nation turns back to God. Results are God's department. Obedience is Jeremiah's department. As long as he keeps in view the goal of obedience to God, he will be depression-proof. The same is true for you and me.

God is greater than our circumstances, our setbacks, our disappointments, and our opposition. He is bigger than anything and everything else in our lives. No matter how depressing life may seem, the God who calls us is the same great God who will sustain us. If we take our eyes off our circumstances and fasten them firmly on God, then we will be strengthened to rise and achieve true success—steadfast obedience to God.

Flaming Wheels and Living Bones

The French philosopher Montaigne once observed, “Every man carries within himself the history of the world.” In other words, history is simply a record, inscribed upon the world, of what is already written in the confines of the human heart. The history of the world is only an extension of human life—and human life is a microcosm of the history of the world.

The book of Ezekiel demonstrates this principle by telling the story of not only Ezekiel, but also the story of the nation of Israel and the human race. In addition, it is also the story of your life and mine, which is why this book is so immensely important and practical for our lives today.

The prophet Ezekiel was a captive in the land of Babylon who had been carried away by the forces of King Nebuchadnezzar when Babylon conquered and captured the nation of Judah. Ezekiel was also the first of two great prophets of the captivity who prophesied during the first twenty or twenty-five years of the seventy-year period of Israel’s captivity (the other was Daniel).

The book begins with a tremendous

vision of God, because all life starts with God. The greatest fact in all of human existence is God. Anyone who wants to think logically about life must begin with God. That is, of course, where the Bible begins: “In the beginning God . . .”

The book of Ezekiel begins with a vision of God. If your heart needs to be set on fire by the revelation of the character and glory of God, read Ezekiel—the prophet who saw the glory of God.

Ezekiel’s Revelation of Christ

The book opens with the dramatic vision God gave to Ezekiel by the river Chebar in the land of Babylon:

I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north—an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter examines the dazzling visions and far-reaching prophecies of Ezekiel, the prophet who saw the glory of God. It is a powerful book that gives us glimpses into the invisible spiritual war going on all around us, the shape of events to come here on earth, and the glories of our eternal dwelling place in the heavenly city.

light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures (1:4–5).

These are among the strangest creatures described in Scripture. Each has four faces—the face of a man, the face of an eagle, the face of an ox, and the face of a lion. These four faces looked out in all directions.

After seeing the four living creatures, Ezekiel sees wheel-shaped objects. You may recall the words of the old spiritual, based on these verses: “Ezekiel saw the wheel, way up in the middle of the air; The big wheel ran by faith and the little wheel ran by the grace of God, a wheel in a wheel, away in the middle of the air.” Ezekiel saw the wheels turning, one wheel within the other. As he watched he also saw a firmament above, shining in splendor. Higher than the firmament, as he lifted his eyes, he saw a throne. Seated on the throne was a man.

You may have already noticed the profound similarities between Ezekiel’s vision

and John’s vision in the book of Revelation. John also saw four living creatures. He, too, saw a man on a throne (see Rev. 4:1–6). In both Ezekiel and Revelation we have visions of the greatness and majesty of God told in rich symbolic imagery.

It’s only natural to wonder what all of these symbols mean. Yet, as much as we would like to, we simply can’t interpret all of these symbols and images because there is a mystery to the person of God. Some of these symbols can be unlocked by comparing them with other passages of Scripture; others are more difficult and obscure. But one thing is sure: In even the most obscure of these symbols, we know that Ezekiel is glimpsing the immensity, authority, and power of God.

The four living creatures illuminate God’s character for us, as symbolized in the faces of the lion, man, ox, and eagle. Each face represents a certain quality in Scripture. The lion depicts sovereignty and supremacy—“the king of the beasts.” The man is the picture of intelligence, understanding, and wisdom. The ox is the symbol of servanthood and sacrifice. And the eagle represents power and deity, soaring over all creation.

It’s significant that the four gospels in the New Testament present exactly these same qualities in their portrayal of Jesus Christ. He appears first in the gospel of Matthew as a lion, as the sovereign king.



Matthaus Merian's painting of Ezekiel's Vision

Next, in the gospel of Mark He is presented as a servant, the ox. In the gospel of Luke, He is the perfect man in His intelligence, insight, and understanding of life. And finally in the gospel of John, He is deity, depicted here as an eagle. These four symbols, taken together, reflect the character of Jesus Christ.

Even though Ezekiel, from his limited Old Testament vantage point, cannot fully understand the significance of all that he sees, we know from our New Testament perspective that he glimpsed the glory of God as revealed in the face of Jesus Christ. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:6, "God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."

In the first three chapters, God commissions Ezekiel as His prophet by disclosing to him a powerful, soul-shattering vision of His own glory and majesty. In these opening chapters, God instructs Ezekiel and gives him a mantle of responsibility.

Human Degradation

In chapters 4 through 24, Ezekiel moves through a series of prophecies dealing with the failure of the human race in general and the nation of Israel in particular. As the vision continues, Ezekiel sees the glory of God departing from the temple in Jerusalem, leaving the inner court and moving to the outer court (chapter 10), then rising and moving out to the Mount of Olives and toward the sky (chapter 11).

This prophecy was fulfilled when our Lord moved out of the temple, down across the Kidron Valley, up the side of the Mount of

Olives, and into the Garden of Gethsemane. And later, after the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, He ascended from the Mount of Olives and departed into glory.

In chapters 12 through 24, Ezekiel tells how God struggles with His people, how He seeks to win them and awaken them to the foolishness of turning their backs on Him. They go through experiences of heartache and punishment as God seeks to bring them to their senses and show them their need of fellowship with Him. Without Him, they are doomed to sink deeper into folly and degradation.

God charges the prophet to convey His message in various symbolic and dramatic ways. On one occasion, in chapter 4, God asks Ezekiel to lie on his left side for 390 days (more than a year!) and then to lie on his right side for 40 days; symbolizing the 390 years that God struggled to bring this nation to its senses and the final 40 years when judgment was imminent. God kept His hand back from judgment all those years, until at last He allowed Nebuchadnezzar's forces to come in, sack the city, desecrate the temple, and sweep the people away to the land of Babylon.

When human beings choose to disregard the God who created them, He must pronounce judgment. If we neglect God, who is essential to our being, and we refuse to respond to His love and grace, the only thing left for us is the consequences of turning our backs on Him.

Principalities and Powers

In this prophecy, Ezekiel pronounces judgment on both visible and invisible forces. He sees through the outer appearances of

people and nations to the spiritual forces that motivate and drive them. In chapter 28 we find a remarkable passage in which the prophet declares judgment upon the kingdoms of Tyre and Sidon. He speaks of the prince of Tyre and of a personage behind this prince—the king of Tyre.

Many Bible scholars have concluded that Ezekiel is talking about both the prince of the city—a ruling human being—and a sinister spiritual being that he calls the king of Tyre. This king symbolizes the principalities and powers mentioned in the New Testament—the world rulers of this present darkness who manipulate people and events on earth, producing the daily horrors we witness in our newspapers and on TV. The king of Tyre is a satanic power.

Chapter 28 also contains a passage that many Bible scholars believe represents the fall of Satan himself. This is one of only two passages in the Bible that describes the fall of Satan:

Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor. So I threw you to the earth; I made a spectacle of you before kings. By your many sins and dishonest trade you have desecrated your sanctuaries. So I made a fire come out from you, and it consumed you, and I reduced you to ashes on the ground in the sight of all who were watching (28:17–18).

The reason for Satan's fall is given in Isaiah 14, where the Prince of Darkness says "I will" five times. The will—whether a human will or a demonic will—is the source of sin and destruction whenever it is set against the good and perfect will of God. The defiant

statement "I will" is a statement of pride, and in Ezekiel 28, we see how God judges pride, the rebellious exaltation of the self above God and against God.

Dry Bones

Next, the prophet turns to the grace of God, which restores the dead to life. In chapter 37, Ezekiel relates the amazing vision of the Valley of the Dry Bones. He sees the bones join together at the command of God—yet there is no breath in them. It is only when God breathes on them that they come to life! This is a picture of what God intends to do with the nation Israel.

From God's viewpoint, Israel is a valley of bone-dry death. But a day is coming, says the Lord, when God will breathe upon this nation. Like those dry bones, Israel will receive new life, and God will use the nation of Israel as the cornerstone of His reestablished kingdom on earth.

In chapters 38 and 39, the prophet looks into the far-distant future, to the last attack upon Israel. In that battle, Israel's enemies will be met by heavenly forces. There, on the mountains of Israel, the godless nations will be judged, destroyed, and buried for all time.

Then, beginning in chapter 40, Ezekiel describes the restoration of the temple of the Lord's millennial kingdom. In this vision, the prophet is shown the temple in precise detail: The Shekinah glory of God returns to the Holy of Holies and is established there once more.

The book closes with a wonderful passage in chapter 47 describing Ezekiel's vision of God's throne. From beneath the throne comes the river of God, flowing majestically through

the temple, out the eastern side, down across the land, and gently spilling into the Dead Sea to heal its waters. It is a marvelous picture of the healing, cleansing, restoring Spirit of God in the day of the millennial kingdom.

A River of Living Water

The literal interpretation of Ezekiel is that it is a prophecy of Israel's restoration. But that does not exhaust the meaning of this book by any means. The entire story can be applied not only to Israel's history and future, but to our own lives in an intensely practical way. What God is doing on a large scale in the history of the world, He is also ready to do on the intimate scale of your life.

God wants to call the dry bones of your empty existence together and breathe life into your soul. He wants to reverse the process of disintegration in your life and heal you by the grace of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. God wants us to experience the abundant life every day.

Through this passage, God invites us to experience the glorious ideal manhood and womanhood that He intended for us from the beginning of creation. He wants us to rise up and walk in His power, alive and energized by the Holy Spirit, conquering His enemies by His arm of strength, demonstrating His power by the way we live our lives.

Finally, in chapter 47, we see a wonderful picture of God's restored temple—and we see it restored in the lives of human beings. In the New Testament, Paul says:

What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I

will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people" (2 Cor. 6:16).

God has chosen to make the human spirit a holy of holies where He can take up residence. The secret of a rich, full, satisfying life—a life of genuine excitement and continuing significance—is to live by the limitless resources of the Holy Spirit of God. The entire thrust of the book of Ezekiel is summed up in this passage:

The man brought me back to the entrance of the temple, and I saw water coming out from under the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was coming down from under the south side of the temple, south of the altar. He then brought me out through the north gate and led me around the outside to the outer gate facing east, and the water was flowing from the south side.

As the man went eastward with a measuring line in his hand, he measured off a thousand cubits and then led me through water that was ankle-deep. He measured off another thousand cubits and led me through water that was knee-deep. He measured off another thousand and led me through water that was up to the waist. He measured off another thousand, but now it was a river that I could not cross, because the water had risen and was deep enough to swim in—a river that no one could cross. He asked me, "Son of man, do you see this?"

Then he led me back to the bank of the river. When I arrived there, I saw a great number of trees on each side of the river. He said to me, "This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, where

it enters the Sea. When it empties into the Sea, the water there becomes fresh. Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live” (47:1–9).

What does this passage remind you of? I hear an echo of the Lord’s words from John 7, when He stood at the temple in Jerusalem:

On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.” By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive (John 7:37–39).

These streams of living water are the primary resource of the Christian life. This imagery deserves our deeper attention and exploration.

As the prophet Ezekiel watches, he sees a river of living water making its way past the altar, the place of sacrifice. One of the great truths that we need to learn as Christians is that we can never drink of the river of the Spirit unless we are willing to do so by way of the cross of Calvary. Jesus was sacrificed on the altar of Calvary, and we must be willing to crucify our own fleshly desires, sins, pride, and ambitions on that same altar. We cannot receive the water of life by our own efforts or our own righteousness. It pours from a fountain of Calvary.

Notice also the power of this river. It has quickly grown large enough to swim in, yet

there is no other river adding to it. No tributary streams are coming in. It is a gushing, mighty torrent of life that comes directly from God.

God leads Ezekiel into this revelation step-by-step: Five times in this passage, he says, “He led me” Is God leading you? Have you ever had that experience? Ezekiel is led one step at a time, and each step takes him into deeper and deeper water.

The first step is to the place where the waters are ankle deep—a picture of the individual who has experienced only a shallow sense of God’s grace and power in his or her life. This person is a Christian, but only a carnal Christian as Paul writes in Romans 8. Such a person has not learned how to live the Spirit-derived life—a life of obedience, trust, surrender, and peace. A lot of people want to wade ankle-deep into the grace of God. They don’t want to go in all the way.

Next the prophet says, “He . . . led me through water that was knee-deep.” You may have experienced “knee-deep” Christianity, the place of hungering and thirsting for God, the place of seeking His face. At this stage, a Christian is not satisfied with being merely born again, but hungers for something deeper.

As Ezekiel does go deeper he is led “through water that was up to the waist.” Now the waters of the Spirit are beginning to possess him. There is less of him and more of God’s grace. The King James Version uses the word loins, which are a symbol of power. Ezekiel has come to a place where his own power has been swallowed up in the waters of God’s power. He understands that it is “not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,” says the LORD Almighty” (Zech. 4:6) that one lives for God.

But Ezekiel has not gone as far as he needs to go. He has to take the final plunge into the river of God's life: "Now it was a river that I could not cross, because the water had risen and was deep enough to swim in—a river that no one could cross." Here is a man who is utterly committed. He's in over his head, he's going deep. He is swept along in the current of God's grace.

Notice how this river affects the land. As the prophet reaches the riverbank, he says, "When I arrived there, I saw a great number of trees on each side of the river." The land has become fruitful. The barrenness of the land has been healed. Everywhere the river flows the trees bloom and hum with life.

John sees the same river in Revelation: "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city." (Rev. 22:1–2). The river flows right through the middle of life. Have you found the river of the Spirit yet?

Until we have taken that plunge, life is nothing but a plodding, difficult path full of

frustration and spiritual defeat. But when we immerse ourselves in the mighty torrent of the river of living water, and the Spirit of God flows through us like a life-giving river, then the entire Christian life begins to make sense.

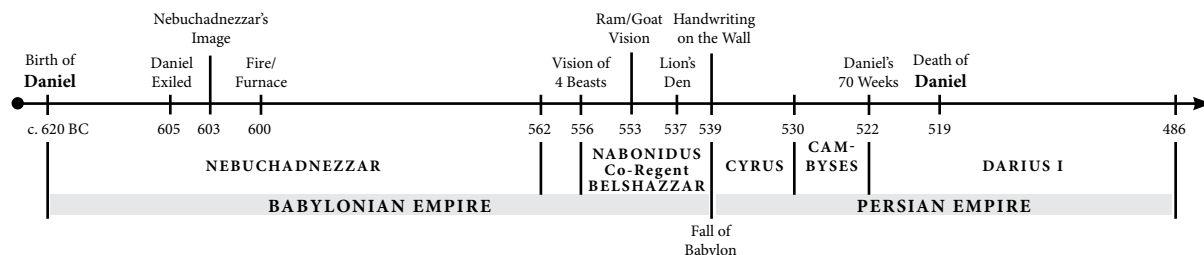
The prophet Ezekiel understood this and closes this visionary book with a description of the temple (which may ultimately symbolize the resurrection body, the new temple of God). Look at the last verse of the prophecy:

"The distance all around will be 18,000 cubits.

And the name of the city from that time on will be:

THE LORD IS THERE" (48:35).

May this be our goal: to become God's city, God's eternal dwelling place, God's temple through which His river of life flows. May we plunge ourselves fully into the river of His Spirit, immersing ourselves in the refreshing coolness of its life-giving depths, discovering its healing power for our lives today—and for the life to come.

On the Way to the Future

People are endlessly fascinated by Bible prophecy. The prophecies of Daniel and Revelation have been sensationalized into bestselling books and major motion pictures. They have been exploited (in grossly distorted form) in the headlines of supermarket tabloids. People want to know what the future holds—especially if the future is filled with events as bizarre and sensational as a science-fiction movie, as many of these books and films make it seem.

But biblical prophecy is serious business. God did not send visions to men like Ezekiel, Daniel, and John just to provide us with thrilling entertainment. God gave us the prophetic books of the Bible as guides to His program of history. They are meant to inform us about the future—but more than that, to instruct us for the present. God gave us these books so that we would know how to live today with tomorrow in mind. He gave them to us to sober us and ground us in His eternal perspective on both human and heavenly events.

The books of Daniel and Revelation have not yet been fulfilled. These two books, one from the Old Testament and

one from the New Testament, remarkably complement each other in their symmetry and harmony. The book of Revelation explains the book of Daniel, whereas the book of Daniel lays the basis for the book of Revelation. If you want to know God's program for the future, you must first understand the book of Daniel.

How to Understand Prophecy

Knowledge of the future can be a dangerous thing. Imagine what would happen if you possessed the ability to know what would happen tomorrow or next week. Think of the advantage it would give you in the stock market, in buying insurance, and in other practical matters of life.

But would you really want to know in advance all the sorrows and hurts that would

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter seeks to clear away the sensationalism that often surrounds Daniel's prophecies so that we can truly appreciate the life-changing instruction and eternal meaning of this great prophetic book. If you want to understand God's program for the future of the human race, and your own future, take time to understand the book of Daniel.

LEFT: Valley of Meggido

DANIEL: ACCURATE PROPHECY—AND ACCURATE HISTORY



No book of the Old Testament has been as mistreated and scorned by critics as the book of Daniel. Liberal commentators have questioned its authorship, claiming it wasn't written by the prophet Daniel but by an unknown writer who lived no more than 100 to 160 years before Christ. In addition, the prophetic content of the book has been denied and ridiculed. In many ways, it has been more viciously attacked than any other book in the Bible. . . .

But the liberal critics of Daniel have a number of problems. For example, if Daniel was written at around 100 BC, then the book of Ezekiel, which cites the prophecy of Daniel, must also have a late and spurious origin. Yet there is very good evidence that Ezekiel is much older than that. Also, recent archaeological discoveries confirm the accuracy of Daniel as a historical record.

For example, the discovery of an inscribed clay tablet called 'the Chronicle of Nabonidus' confirms Daniel's historical validity and dashes critics' claims that the kings named in Daniel's prophecy never existed. The Dead Sea Scrolls contain eight copies of Daniel, more than any other manuscript, which affirms the high esteem that was accorded the book by the strict Essenes who hid the scrolls. . . .

Jesus regarded the book of Daniel as a valid and true prophecy, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and accurate in every detail. . . . The word of our Lord is true, and so is the prophetic word He spoke to us through His servant, Daniel.

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come your way in life? Jesus had good reason for saying, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matt. 6:34).

God does not unfold the future to us in specific detail. He does not tell your individual future or mine. What He does show us in the prophetic books of the Bible is the general trend of events, the outline of His program, and the way His program is sure to end. Anyone who investigates prophecy in a careful, objective way will find helpful information about both future and present

events. We can understand the present only in light of God's prophetic program.

While unveiling the future in His Word, God has taken two precautions. First, He has clothed these prophetic passages in symbolic language and given them to us in figurative form. That's why we see such strange and frightening images in Daniel and Revelation—startling signs in nature, strange beasts with many different heads and horns sticking out here and there, images of shattering worldwide events, and more.

These prophetic symbols have always puzzled people. You can't just sit down with

Daniel or Revelation and read them like a novel. You have to study them, taking the whole of the Bible into account in order to interpret the symbols in these books. This is one of the “padlocks” God has placed on these books to keep the merely curious and sensation-seeking minds from unlocking the holy secrets of His future agenda.

A second precaution God has taken in Daniel, and even more especially in Revelation, is that He doesn’t introduce the prophetic section first. Instead, He brings us through six chapters of moral teaching. He wants to lead us into an understanding of the moral character He requires of us before the prophetic program can begin to make sense. To understand what the prophetic program means, you must first grasp the moral lessons of the first part of the book. There are no shortcuts.

After you grasp the first six chapters intellectually, you must integrate them experientially into your life. That’s the beauty of God’s Word: It can’t be understood by intellect alone, but must be understood by the entire being. You can sit down with prophetic outlines of Daniel and Revelation, draw charts of future events, and analyze eschatology and doctrine down to a gnat’s eyebrow—but unless you have incorporated the spiritual lessons of the first part of Daniel into your own life, you’ll find nothing in the rest of the book to enrich your life.

The Lord Jesus Himself made this clear during His Olivet Discourse when the disciples asked Him what the symbol of His return to earth would be. Jesus said, “When you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken

of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.” In other words, “Get out of the city of Jerusalem, because horrible things will happen there. If you stay in that city, great tribulation will be upon you” (Matt. 24:15-16).

Note that when the passage says, “let the reader understand,” it means, “Don’t read through the prophetic passages carelessly or superficially. You have to grasp the full import of Scripture if you are to recognize the abomination of desolation when it comes.” The world, in its superficial approach to truth will be uncomprehending when that day comes. People will cry, “Peace, peace!” when there is no peace, and destruction will come upon them. They will be swept away just as the people of Noah’s day were swept away by the flood. Jesus does not want us to be destroyed in our ignorance, so He encourages us to seek a real understanding—a practical, applied, and experiential understanding of the truths of Scripture.

The Structure of Daniel

This book easily divides into two sections. The first six chapters, which are devoted to moral and spiritual instruction, are a history of the prophet Daniel and his friends in the land of Babylon. It is a story of faith lived out in the fiery crucible of a hostile world.

If you find yourself struggling to live the Christian life amid the pressures, temptations, and persecutions of this non-Christian world, then the first six chapters of Daniel are must reading for you. If you work in an office surrounded by godless coworkers who continually take the Lord’s name in vain;

if your employer pressures you to commit unethical acts on the job; if your friends challenge you to compromise your faith or your morality; or if the law of the land says you cannot be a witness to your Lord or read your Bible—then the first six chapters of Daniel will guide and comfort you.

These chapters are especially valuable to teenagers who must stand against peer pressure and temptation, because they record the actions of a group of teenagers who were taken captive by King Nebuchadnezzar and carried off into the land of Babylon. As they began their career of faith, they did so with all the insecurities that are normal for teenagers in a hostile environment. Just as today's youth must stand against peer pressure, drugs, illicit sex, and occultism, these teenagers had to take a life-or-death stand against the king himself. Daniel and his teenage friends are perhaps the strongest, most encouraging role models in all of Scripture for today's youth.

Standing under Pressure

In chapter 1, three young men—Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (respectively renamed Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego by their Babylonian captors)—are pressured to change their diet. Ordinarily, diet would not be a particularly significant issue, but God had already instructed these young men as to what they could and could not eat. The foods God had told them not to eat were the very foods the Babylonians *required* them to eat as prisoners of the king of Babylon.

What could these young men do? King Nebuchadnezzar was an immensely powerful tyrant. The Bible records that no human king

ever had or ever would command as much authority as King Nebuchadnezzar.

What kind of character did this king have? Later in his reign, he demonstrates his absolute cruelty in killing the sons of Judah's king before their father's eyes—then had the father's eyes put out so that this horror would be the last thing he saw. Nebuchadnezzar had another man roasted slowly to death over a fire. This king was an expert in torture; his cruel imagination fueled his evil deeds. And Nebuchadnezzar's word was law. So Daniel and his three friends faced this moral test knowing they had to comply with the king's demands—or risk death by torture.

What could they do? Under such pressure, should they heed the advice, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do"? It's the same argument people use today: "Everybody else is doing it." What would be so wrong with eating a ham sandwich with the Babylonians? Especially if it would save you from torture and death? Who would know? Who would care?

Yet, laying their lives on the line, they chose to stand fast in honor of God. And God gave them the grace to maintain their stand despite that pressure. Daniel asked that he and his friends be given nothing but vegetables to eat, and after ten days, they looked healthier than those who had eaten the royal food.

As a result, Daniel and his friends were exalted and given positions of authority and responsibility in the kingdom of their captivity. The king found their wisdom and advice to be superior to that of the Babylonian magicians and enchanters. This turn of events reminds us of the way God exalted Joseph in Egypt when he maintained his integrity and obedience to God.

We'll see, however, that the pressure does not end for these young men. It continues and intensifies as we proceed through the book of Daniel.

A Troubling Dream

In chapter 2, we see part of the reason why God allows these young men to come under such intense testing. King Nebuchadnezzar dreams one night of a great image of a man with a strange body. The image had a head of gold, shoulders of silver, midsection of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of clay and iron. The next morning, the king calls in the wise men and orders them to tell him not only the interpretation but the dream as well. If they fail, they will be executed.

It's a brilliant test. The astrologers, soothsayers, and sorcerers claim to have supernatural power to discern mysteries and secrets. Well, if they truly have such powers, then they surely can tell the king's dream as well as interpret it. If they couldn't describe the dream, then they must be frauds. The so-called "wise" men couldn't come up with the king's dream—so they were condemned to death.

Though Daniel had not been asked to interpret the king's dream, he is considered one of the king's wise men, so he is under the execution order as well. Daniel asks the captain of the king's guard why he and the others are to be executed, and the captain explains the situation. Daniel pleads for the lives of the other wise men and asks to be brought before the king to reveal and interpret the dream.

The night before Daniel is set to appear before the king, he and his three Jewish

friends pray together, asking God for mercy and an answer to the king's question. Later that night, God reveals the king's dream to Daniel in a vision.

So the next day, Daniel appears before the king, reveals the dream, and interprets it—and he humbly gives God all the credit. "There is a God in heaven," Daniel said, "who reveals mysteries." When King Nebuchadnezzar heard Daniel describe and interpret his dream, he fell on his face before Daniel and honored him and his God. "Surely your God is the God of gods," said the king, "and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery" (2:47).

So once again, God's man came through, proving that he was willing to stand and obey God in spite of the threat of torture and death. God delivered Daniel because Daniel trusted in the invisible God who rules visible human affairs. That's the great lesson of the book of Daniel. As the young prophet expressed in his prayer of thanks to God:

"Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning. He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him" (2:20–22).

If you are intimately linked with the living God of the universe, you need not fear the wrath of kings. The same God who created the world is able to work out every situation and circumstance of your life, no matter how impossible it may seem. That same theme is repeated five different times through these first six chapters of Daniel.

Daniel's revelation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream has a profound impact on the king. The most powerful ruler on the planet is so awestruck that he is forced to humble himself before Daniel and acknowledge, "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery."

You may not realize it, but you are in exactly the same position today that Daniel was in so long ago! The world lives with the idea that there is no God or that if He does exist He has no real power. He doesn't do anything. He doesn't change history. He doesn't affect human lives. He doesn't enter into situations and make any difference. That's the world's philosophy.

But if you walk faithfully, if you obey what God says regardless of threats, temptations, or pressure, He will place you in a pivotal position. He will give you the privilege of opening the eyes of men and women to the fact that He exists, that He is active and involved in human events, and that *He must be reckoned with*.

This is the message of Daniel for your life and mine.

Tested by Fire

In chapter 3, we have the story of the fiery furnace. The young Hebrew men were commanded to bow down before the image Nebuchadnezzar had erected, a prideful creation of the image in his dream. Because Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar that the head of gold symbolized his reign, Nebuchadnezzar proudly commanded this statue be erected on the plain of Dura. It was as tall as a NASA booster rocket.

The king gathered the crowd, including these faithful young men, on the plain. All were ordered to bow down and worship the image. In order to "inspire" their worship, a great furnace was erected at the other end of the plain. All who refused to bow to the image would die in the fire. A band played a variety of instruments—horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes. At the first chord from the band, all the people were to fall down and worshiped the image.

As planned, at the sound of the music everyone fell to the ground and worshiped the image. Everyone, that is, except three men—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. When these young Hebrew men were brought before Nebuchadnezzar he ordered them to fall down and worship the image, but they respectfully replied that they could not:

"If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (3:17-18).

Notice that while they expected God to rescue them—they added, "even if He does not . . . we will not serve your gods." They decided entrust to their fate to God. They valued obedience to God above life itself. Whatever happened, even if it meant perishing in the flames, they would not worship the Babylonian gods nor the golden image Nebuchadnezzar has erected.

These young men had learned that it was better to be dead and obedient to God than alive and disobedient. An individual profits

more from walking with God and dying with God than by living apart from Him. God honored these men in a mighty way, taking them safely through the furnace.

The king ordered that the three men be place in the furnace and that it be made seven times hotter. The fire was so hot that the soldiers who threw them in the furnace were killed. King Nebuchadnezzar looked into the furnace and saw not three but four men walking in the fire—unharméd—“and the fourth,” he said, “looks like a son of the gods.”

Nebuchadnezzar called to the three Hebrews and ordered them out of the furnace. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego emerged safe and sound, their skin not toasted, their hair not singed, and without even the scent of fire on them.

Again the king was moved to worship God. “Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego,” he said, “who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king’s command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way.”

And the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to even more responsible positions in the kingdom.

The Testimony of the King

In chapter 4 we witness the conversion of Nebuchadnezzar. Once again, the king dreams—and again Daniel reveals and

interprets the dream. The message of the dream is that the king will be driven into madness, and he will eat grass like cattle, and live with the wild animals—but his kingdom will be returned to him when he acknowledges God, renounces sin, and shows kindness to the oppressed.

Just as Daniel prophesied, the king went mad for seven years, eating grass in the field with the animals. His throne was preserved, but he acted like an animal. Why did God use this particular way of getting the king’s attention? Because He wanted to show what happens to human beings who reject fellowship with the living God: They become beastly and brutish.

When the king’s reason was restored to him by the grace of God, Nebuchadnezzar issued a statement of faith—his testimony of how God had humbled him, allowed him to tumble into madness, then brought him back to sanity. He concluded:

Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble (4:37).

Who brought the great king to his senses? God, of course. Yet God chose to use Daniel and his friends to win the heart of the greatest king of the greatest empire that the world has ever seen.

And He wants to use you and me to do great things for Him as well.

The Handwriting on the Wall

As chapter 5 opens, we see the luxury and licentiousness of the kingdom of Babylon. Yet

amid all this pleasure seeking and selfishness, Daniel (who has lived through three empires) is still the prime minister. In this chapter, God uses Daniel to make another crucial interpretation.

As the chapter opens, King Belshazzar, son of Nebuchadnezzar, throws a party. The king, his wives and concubines, and his guests defile the gold and silver chalices that had been taken from the temple in Jerusalem. They drink wine from them and use them to toast and praise their false gods.

Suddenly a disembodied human finger appears and writes on the plaster of the wall, frightening the king and his guests nearly to death. The king calls for his magicians and astrologers to decipher the handwriting on the wall, and Daniel is brought before him. Daniel interprets the inscription which reads: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PERES. It was a judgment on Belshazzar for his arrogance:

Mene: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.

Tekel: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.

Peres: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians." (5:26–28).

That night, God's judgment is carried out and Belshazzar dies; King Darius ascends to the throne.

This chapter bears out the thesis of the entire book: God is at work in human affairs, and anyone who sees beyond the visible to the invisible and acts accordingly will find that God provides all the strength and support that is required for success.

Daniel and the Lions

Chapter 6 is yet another demonstration of God's provision in seemingly hopeless circumstances; namely, Daniel's ordeal in the lions' den. In an effort to destroy him, Daniel's jealous rivals manipulate King Darius into issuing a decree forbidding anyone from pray to any god or king except Darius himself. They know it is a decree that Daniel cannot obey. In fact, Daniel seems to go out of his way to be "caught" praying, because he prays three times daily at his open upstairs window. Once discovered, Daniel's enemies report him to the king.

King Darius valued Daniel and when the accusations are brought to him, he tries to find a way to rescue Daniel. But Daniel's enemies slyly remind the king that, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, even the king cannot change his own decree.

So the king reluctantly sends Daniel to the den of lions with these words: "May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!" (6:16). Daniel was sealed up in the den with the lions, and the king spent the night unable to eat or sleep. At dawn, the king got up, went to the den, and called to Daniel—

And Daniel answered! He said, "O king, live forever! My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, O king" (6:21–22).

So Daniel is released and King Darius issues another decree—this time exalting Daniel's God as the one, true God.

The Prophetic Section Begins

The future-focused section of Daniel

begins in chapter 7 with a vision of four beasts. These four beasts cover the same period of time as the four divisions of the image that Nebuchadnezzar saw in chapter 2. That image had a head of gold, symbolizing the Babylonian kingdom; shoulders of silver, for the Medo-Persia kingdom; a trunk of bronze, symbolizing the Grecian empire; two legs of iron, representing the two divisions of the Roman empire; and terminating at last in a broken kingdom, characterized by feet of mingled iron and clay. This great prophetic passage outlines history from Daniel's day to a future that is still beyond our own day, to the very end of time and the return of Jesus Christ.

As the prophet watches Nebuchadnezzar's dream, he sees a stone—a stone that has been cut without the aid of human hand—strike the image on its feet and utterly demolish it. The fragments blow away on the wind like chaff, but the stone grows to become a great mountain that fills the entire earth (Dan. 2:34–35). This indicates that when the last kingdom is shattered by a divine agency (not of human hands), it will usher in the worldwide kingdom of God and the reign of Jesus Christ.

In chapter 7, then, the four beasts represent the same kingdoms—but from God's point of view. They are not mighty powers in God's sight. They are merely beasts growling and quarreling with each other. Daniel sees these nations struggling against each other, and their struggle culminates in the powerful reign of a single individual over the entire Western world.

In chapter 8 we see the movement of Western history. The ram and the he-goat

come together in battle—a picture, as we are later told in chapter 11, of Alexander the Great's conquest and the rise of the Seleucids' kingdom in Syria, in opposition to the Ptolemies in Egypt. These two families occupied the center of history for centuries after the time of Daniel—a mighty struggle between Syria and Egypt, with little Israel caught in the middle. The battle rages back and forth, and today Israel continues to be the most fought-over piece of real estate in the world. More battles have occurred in the land of Israel than in any other spot on the face of the earth, and the last great battle—the battle of Armageddon—will be fought in this region.

In the midst of this prophecy, in chapter 9, Daniel pours his heart out to God in prayer. The answer to his prayer, in the last section of the chapter, is one of the most remarkable prophecies in the Bible: the prophecy of the seventy weeks. This is the timetable of prophecy concerning the nation of Israel. It gives us a principle that has been called “the Great Parenthesis”—the scriptural interpretation proposing that God has interrupted His program for Israel and has inserted this present age in which we live between the first coming and the second coming of the Lord Jesus.

This indeterminate period, which has now spanned some 2,000 years, comes between the sixty-ninth week of years and the seventieth week of Daniel's prophecy. The seventieth week, a week of seven years, is yet to be fulfilled for Israel. As you read of this, you will see that this is what the book of Revelation and other prophetic passages call “the great tribulation,” the time of Jacob's

trouble. It lies ahead. It has been broken off from the other sixty-nine weeks and is yet to be fulfilled.

The Invisible Reality

Chapter 10 shines a light on the invisible reality that lies beyond this visible world. This is another great revelation of God's sovereign government in the affairs of humanity—and it is the explanation for the events of history. What causes the events that happen in our world today? Clearly, there are unseen forces at work, and these forces are starkly revealed to Daniel.

As the chapter opens, Daniel has gathered some of his friends together beside the Tigris River for a prayer meeting. He wants to seek God's will as he prepares to stir up his people to return to Israel. As they pray, something amazing happens:

On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, as I was standing on the bank of the great river, the Tigris, I looked up and there before me was a man dressed in linen, with a belt of the finest gold around his waist. His body was like chrysolite [a yellow-green gemstone], his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude (10:4–6).

Who is this amazing figure? We are reminded of the experience John the Apostle had on the isle of Patmos at the beginning of the book of Revelation:

. . . and among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden

sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance (Rev. 1:13–16).

For both Daniel by the Tigris River and John on the island of Patmos a curtain had dropped—the curtain that separated them from the invisible spiritual kingdom with its unseen warfare. Daniel and John were able to actually see the One to whom they had been praying moments before. That Person was there all the time. He had not suddenly appeared. But He was invisible until the curtain dropped and their eyes were opened. I believe that it is unquestionably the Lord Jesus Christ who is revealed in both Daniel 10 and Revelation 1.

The prophet Daniel is being prepared to learn something remarkable from the man dressed in linen—a lesson in the mystery of prayer. The man says:

"Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia. Now I have come to explain to you what will happen to your people in the future, for the vision concerns a time yet to come" (10:12–14).

A second being now appears, an angel

sent to help Daniel, described only as “one who looked like a man.” He touches Daniel and helps him to his feet. The New Testament tells us that angels are “ministering spirits sent forth to serve those who will inherit salvation” (Heb. 1:14). They are at God’s beck and call, aiding His people and carrying out His will on Earth.

I once heard the story of a soldier in the Vietnam War whose life was saved when an enemy bullet was stopped by a copy of the New Testament and Psalms he carried in his pocket. The bullet passed right through the four gospels, Acts, the Epistles, and Revelation, stopping at Psalm 91—the passage that promises:

*You will not fear the terror of night,
nor the arrow that flies by day . . .
For he will command his angels concerning
you
to guard you in all your ways
(Ps. 91:5, 11).*

That was no accident. That was an angel. The invisible ministry of angels occurs continually, though we are unaware of their activity in our lives.

Daniel 10:2 tells us that Daniel spent three weeks fasting and praying. When the man in linen appeared, he said, “Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days.” In other words, God heard Daniel’s prayer on the very first day and sent an answer—but the answer Daniel sought was delayed while the man in

linen battled the demon-prince of Persia for three weeks.

The lesson here is that when we pray, the answer is on its way the minute we begin to ask. The answer may not arrive instantly because God is working out all the circumstances which must be altered in order for that prayer to be answered. But God answers prayer immediately. Prayer is not (as we generally think) the means of getting God to do our bidding. Rather, prayer is the means by which we enlist ourselves in the thrilling activity of God, in carrying out His agenda for the world.

God desires our involvement in His eternal plan. He wants us to ask Him to do what He says He will do—and He often will not do it unless we ask Him. That’s why James says, “You do not have because you do not ask” (James 4:2). If you ask, God will do what He has promised.

Though God’s answer to prayer is immediate, delays are possible. Why? In part, because we live in a fallen world, which is infested with fallen spirits—demons—who oppose God’s work. These evil spirits are related to the nations of the earth. Once we understand that the events we read about in the newspapers are being stirred by warring angels behind the scenes of history, the evil events in the world—from street violence to riots to terrorism to wars between nations—all become easier to understand.

As Paul tells us, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph. 6:12). That’s what the man in linen and the

angel tell Daniel: Behind the affairs of Earth is an invisible hierarchy of evil, which has authority over kingdoms. Without doubt, there are evil angels that have authority over the nations of our world today, stirring up trouble, seeking to thwart God's eternal plan.

Chapter 11 is one of the most remarkable chapters in the Bible. It records a prophecy that, for the most part, has already been fulfilled in detail. It foretells the struggle between the king of Syria ("the king of the North") and the king of Egypt ("the king of the South") that took place after Daniel's time. These historic events are described in great detail and cover two or three hundred years of history. A number of outstanding historical figures are predicted here, including Cleopatra, "the daughter of the king of the South" (11:5).

These two kingdoms, Egypt and Syria, fought back and forth over the course of about 130 years. Poor Israel was caught in the middle and became the battlefield of these armies. Jerusalem was captured and sacked by both sides from time to time throughout the conflict. To live in Jerusalem in those days was to be like wheat being ground up between two millstones.

God gives us this account of these kingdoms because of Israel's unwilling involvement. God is primarily concerned about Israel, and for her sake He gives us this detailed prophecy which history has confirmed in every detail.

The Seventieth Week

We come to an interesting break in Daniel 11 where the angel says:

"Some of the wise will stumble, so that they may be refined, purified and made spotless until the time of the end, for it will still come at the appointed time.

"The king will do as he pleases. He will exalt and magnify himself above every god and will say unheard-of things against the God of gods. He will be successful until the time of wrath is completed, for what has been determined must take place" (11:35–36).

Here we begin the discussion of the seventieth week of Daniel, the tribulation period that is yet to be fulfilled—the last days, the ultimate arrangement of Earth's kingdoms just before the return of Jesus Christ. This passage predicts an invasion of Palestine and a counter-invasion from Egypt in the south, and then the meeting of two great armies in the land of Israel and the ultimate destruction of those armies among the mountains of Israel. This is the same event that is described in Ezekiel 38–39 and Joel 2.

The beginning of chapter 12 introduces the greatest event of history yet to be fulfilled: the second coming of Christ. This event is revealed in symbolic language and is described as follows:

"At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered" (12:1).

This is followed by a mass resurrection of the dead:

“Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt” (12:2).

Then comes the final judgment of God:

“Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. But you, Daniel, close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge” (12:3–4).

Many Bible scholars understand this to be an indication that as we near the last days, as described in this passage, the means of transportation, information, and knowledge will rapidly increase. Clearly, in this age of jet travel, mass media, and the Internet, we see the fulfillment of this prophecy.

The Clash of Good and Evil

In this final section, chapter 12, Daniel asks questions to the angel who has revealed these things to him. In return, he is allowed to understand that there are two great forces at work in the world: good and evil. You and I often hear people discussing current events, with newspaper commentators and others constantly pouring into our ears reports of terrible, frightening events. People often ask, “What is happening? What is going on in this world? Is the world situation getting progressively worse or progressively better?”

Some people make the case that humankind is progressing, that education is advancing, and that technology is making life

better and better. Others make an even more convincing case that advancing technology only gives us more advanced ways to kill ourselves, to take away our privacy and freedom, to complicate our lives and strip away our humanity.

Yet the book of Daniel makes it clear that we will never understand God’s Word and work until we accept the reality of the contest between good and evil—and the fact that evil forces war against God behind the scenes of history. As the man in linen tells Daniel:

“Go your way, Daniel, because the words are closed up and sealed until the time of the end. Many will be purified, made spotless and refined, but the wicked will continue to be wicked. None of the wicked will understand, but those who are wise will understand” (12:9–10).

Today evil is more widespread than it has ever been. Our current era, with two world wars during the past century, genocidal assaults on humanity, the spread of terrorism, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, is the most murderous, blood-drenched era in human history. The evil of our age is widespread and Satan inspired.

But against this dark backdrop, godliness and good stand out even more clearly. The righteousness of God, embodied in His people, lived out by their obedient witness, contrasts sharply with the immorality and evil of this age.

These two contrasting forces are at work in human society, and neither shall overpower the other until the end of the age. Both good and evil are headed for a final conflict. The Bible records in various passages that, at one

precise moment in history, God will directly intervene in human affairs. There will be a final and decisive clash between these two contrasting principles, good versus evil. Of that conflict, the man in linen says:

“From the time that the daily sacrifice is abolished and the abomination that causes desolation is set up, there will be 1,290 days. Blessed is the one who waits for and reaches the end of the 1,335 days.

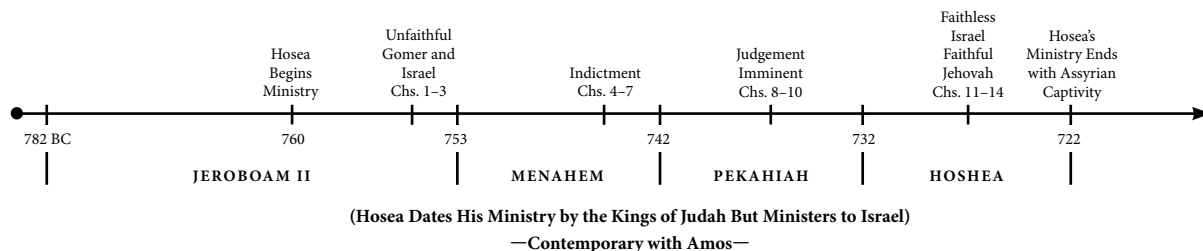
“As for you, go your way till the end. You will rest, and then at the end of the days you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance” (12:11–13).

Ultimately, every nation and every individual serves God. Some serve Him willingly—and some unwittingly and unwillingly. Even if a king renounces God ten times over, our God is sovereign. His eternal plan cannot fail. He works all events, all human choices, all satanic chaos into His purposes.

Nebuchadnezzar, Darius, Alexander, Cleopatra, Caesar, Herod, Caiaphas, Pontius Pilate, Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Khrushchev, Saddam—none of these leaders could resist the will of God nor interfere with His agenda. The purposes of God roll irresistibly through time and space, encompassing billions of lives, including yours and mine.

The choice you and I must make is the choice between being willing tools in God’s hand—or unwilling. We choose whether to receive the blessings of obedience—or the judgment that comes from rebellion? The good news of Daniel is that God is alive and at work in the affairs of people and nations. We need not fear evil men or evil nations. The lions cannot consume us, the fiery furnace cannot scorch us, tyrants cannot separate us from the love of King Jesus.

As we step into the last days that Daniel describes in this prophecy, may we step boldly and triumphantly in the strength of our God.

Love and the Unfaithful Bride

While in England some years ago, I met an Anglican clergyman who told me about his experiences during the Battle of Britain in World War II. “What bothered me most,” he said, “were the signs in the public squares regarding conscription. They read, ‘All persons must register for the draft except women, children, idiots, and clergymen.’ As a clergyman, I didn’t so much mind being included on that list, but I do wish they had at least placed me ahead of the idiots!”

This is where the prophet Hosea finds himself. He is a preacher whose audience is polite to his face but treats him with contempt behind his back. His message is greeted with snickers of derision. He is considered nice-but-harmless, on the same list with the idiots. That’s how people often treat preachers.

Hosea, however, is not the nice-but-harmless person everyone thinks he is. He is a towering figure in Scripture, and his story and message deserve our attention today, just as in his own day. Hosea spoke of judgment, of the disciplining of the nation of Israel, and warned that God would send the Assyrian nation to destroy the people. The people challenged him

and accused him of characterizing God as a vengeful and angry deity.

Hosea tried to explain God’s love to them—that genuine love is also a tough and disciplining love. This God of tough love wanted the people to see what they were doing to themselves. If the only way He could get them to listen was to make life hard for them, He would do so.

The people responded exactly as people respond today when they are told of God’s tough love. They blamed God and said, in effect, “If God is really a God of love, then why does He allow things to get in such a mess? How could a God of love ever send a ruthless enemy like the Assyrians down upon our land? If God really loves us, He will excuse our sins, not discipline us.”

Sounds familiar, doesn’t it? Clearly, the book of Hosea is a book for today.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

In this chapter, we examine the obedience of Hosea, who illustrates God’s love for unfaithful Israel by marrying a fallen woman. In this story, we also see the relationship between the Lord Jesus and His sometimes sinning and straying followers in the church, the bride of Christ.

LEFT: Mount Arbel

Hosea is the first of the twelve “minor prophets” of the Old Testament. They are called minor, not because their message is unimportant, but simply due to the length of their content. I avoid making a strong distinction between the major and minor prophets because I do not want to perpetuate the mistaken idea that these twelve short, but powerful books, are any less relevant than the other books of the Bible. Each has a powerful life-changing message for our fast-paced lives.

God’s Strange Command to Hosea

Hosea was a young preacher sent to the northern kingdom of the nation of Israel. He was a contemporary of the prophets Isaiah and Amos, and composed this book around 755 to 715 BC. Hosea lived, as we are told in the first verse, during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah—kings of Judah, the southern kingdom, and during the reign of Jeroboam, the son of Joash, the king of Israel.

Jeroboam was one of the wicked kings of Israel. As such, the nation was in a sad moral and spiritual state when Hosea preached. The people were too busy living hedonistic lives to give much thought to God. They didn’t think of themselves as rebellious people. Instead, they would probably say what most of us say: “My life is so busy. I’d like to have more time for God, but I’ve just got too much on my plate right now.” The spirit is willing but the flesh is ready for the weekend.

This is the cultural attitude confronting Hosea, so it’s not surprising that he’s discouraged as we meet him in the opening chapter. In his discouragement, he goes to God—and God gives him strange instructions.

It might have sounded something like this: “Hosea, I want you to get married.” Hosea, being a bachelor, probably perked up a bit upon hearing that.

Then God said, “I have a woman picked out for you.” When He mentioned her name, Hosea probably felt a surge of excitement because the woman God had told him to marry was Gomer, the most beautiful woman in Israel. Hosea was definitely interested.

But there was a catch. God then said to Hosea, “You need to know the whole story about this woman. After you marry her, she will be unfaithful to you. But I want you to marry her anyway.”

Hosea must have been puzzled by God’s strange command. God does inexplicable things at times, and we quickly discover that His ways are not our ways.

Meaningful Names

“Your wife will become a common street prostitute,” God went on to say, “but she will bear you three children—two boys and a girl. And when they are born I want to name them for you.” Hosea then began to understand a bit of what God was doing. He knew it was customary in Israel to teach by symbols, and that names are very important symbols. God often used the meanings of names to teach Israel certain truths. And now God was planning to use this prophet and his family as an object lesson for Israel.

At about the same time, Hosea’s friend Isaiah, down in the southern kingdom of Judah, was undergoing a similar experience. Isaiah also had two sons who were given significant names. The older boy’s name was (are you

ready for this?) Mahershalalhashbaz—a name that means “haste to the prey” or “haste to the spoil.” It was God’s prophetic way of telling the people of Israel that they were in deep trouble. The younger boy’s name was Shearjashub, which means “a remnant shall return.” That was God’s promise to Israel that, even though the nation was being taken into captivity, a remnant would come back. Through the names of Isaiah’s two sons, God gave Israel both a warning of trouble and a comforting promise that a remnant would return. In the same way, the names of Hosea’s sons would be significant.

In obedience to what God had told him, Hosea went courting. Gomer was attracted

to this young man and agreed to marry him. At first, their marriage was heaven on earth. Hosea loved this woman. You can’t read the prophecy without seeing that. They must have been wonderfully happy together.

Then they had their first child. It was a boy, as God had said. Hosea’s heart was filled to bursting, and he went to God for the name of the boy. God shocked Hosea by telling him the boy’s name should be Jezreel, meaning “castaway”—a name of shame in Israel.

In 2 Kings 9:30–37, you find the story of wicked Queen Jezebel, who is judged by God, thrown from a window, dashed to her death in a courtyard, and eaten by dogs. The name of that courtyard from then on was Jezreel,

a name of disgrace—and the same name as Hosea’s firstborn son. The name Jezreel was a warning to the people to turn from their sin and abominable practices, or they would be “castaway.” They would no longer be Israel; they would be Jezreel.

In time, another child was born to Hosea and Gomer—a daughter whom God named Lo-Ruhamah. The name means “not loved.” Imagine naming your baby girl “not loved.” The name signified that God would no longer have mercy and love for His people if they continued their stubborn rebellion. His patience was wearing thin. A time was coming when He would no longer offer mercy to them but would hand them over to invading armies.

When this little girl was weaned, Gomer conceived again and bore a third child, a boy whom God named Lo-Ammi, meaning “not my people.” God was warning Israel that they were not His people. God had said He would name these children as a sign to His people, but there would come a day of restoration:

“I will show My love to the one I called ‘Not My loved one.’ I will say to those called ‘Not My people,’ ‘You are My people’; and they will say, ‘You are my God’ ” (Hos. 2:23). Even while God was pronouncing judgment, He was offering and demonstrating His love and grace.

A Story of Shame—and Redemption

After this there were no more children in Hosea’s household. Gomer began to fulfill the sad prediction God had made when He told Hosea to marry her. What a heartbreak it must have been to this young preacher as he heard the whispers that circulated about

his wife. Perhaps his own children mentioned the men who came by the house when daddy was away. Soon the children were left uncared for while Gomer ran around with other men.

One day Hosea came home and found a note from Gomer: She was leaving him and the children to be with the man she really loved.

About this time, Hosea’s preaching took on a new tone. He still warned of the judgment to come and that God would send the Assyrians across the land—but he no longer announced it with thunder. He spoke to them with tears. And he began to speak of a day when love would triumph at last, when Israel’s bitter lesson would be learned, and the nation would turn back to God.

The unfaithful wife of Hosea became a vivid, shocking object lesson of what was about to take place in Israel. It unfolded something like this: As Gomer passed from man to man, at last she fell into the hands of a man who was unable to pay for her food and her clothing. It’s as though her first lover gave her a mink stole, but this one made her clothe herself in rags from the city dump.

News of her miserable state came to the prophet Hosea and he sought out the man she was living with. He knew where he could find him, down at the local tavern. When he met this man, he asked, “Are you the man who is living with Gomer, daughter of Diblaim?” The man must have said, “If it’s any of your business, I am.”

“Well, I am Hosea,” said the prophet, “her husband.”

A tense moment followed. Then the man responded that he hadn’t done anything wrong and didn’t want any trouble. Hosea

replied, in effect, “Listen, I’m not interested in causing any trouble. But I know you need money. I want you to take this money and buy Gomer some clothing and see that she has plenty of food. If you need any more I will give it to you.”

The man probably thought, “There’s no fool like an old fool. If this sap wants to help pay her expenses, that’s fine with me!” So he took the money and bought Gomer some groceries and went home.

You too may say, “What a foolish thing to do!” But who can explain the motives of love? Love has its own reasons that reason itself does not know. So Hosea acted on the basis of love. He probably watched from a distance to catch a glimpse of the woman he loved as she rushed out the door to take the groceries from this man’s arms—the gifts of Hosea’s own love.

We don’t know how long this situation went on. But finally, word reached Hosea that the woman he loved was to be sold in the slave market. The man she lived with was tired of her and wanted to get some cash for her. The brokenhearted prophet wept before God, and God told him:

“Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes” (3:1).

We can picture the scene as Hosea goes to the marketplace. He sees his wife brought up and placed on the auction block. She is stripped and shamed before the crowd. The bidding begins. Somebody bids three pieces

of silver and Hosea raises it to five. Somebody ups it to eight and Hosea bids ten. Somebody goes to eleven and Hosea bids twelve. Finally, Hosea offers fifteen pieces of silver and a bushel of barley. The auctioneer’s gavel bangs, and Hosea has redeemed his wife.

He takes her down from the auction block, clothes her, and lovingly takes her home. Then we read one of the most tender and beautiful verses in the Bible:

Then I told her, “You are to live with me many days; you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man, and I will live with you” (3:3).

He pledges his love to her again. She has fallen into the gutter of shame, disgrace, and poverty—but the steadfast, unconditional love of Hosea breaks her willful heart and raises her up again. From then on, Gomer is faithful to Hosea.

In the rest of the book, Hosea describes the effect of this story on the nation of Israel. God said to the people, “How can I give you up?” He reminded them of His love for them all those years, even though they had turned their backs on Him. It is a story of God’s redemptive love for a people who had sold themselves into sin, bondage, poverty, and shame.

This is much the same story we read in the New Testament, in which Jesus comes and pays the price for our redemption. Why? So that He can take His bride, the church, down from Satan’s auction block and out of bondage—and so that He may restore her to a place of honor and faithfulness.

The Prophecies of Hosea

We find some remarkable predictions in Hosea. Following the story line of the life of Hosea and his unfaithful bride, God says of the people of Israel:

The Israelites will live many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred stones, without ephod or idol (3:4).

That prophecy is still being fulfilled today. The people of Israel have lived many days—indeed, many centuries—without a king. Ever since the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 at the hands of General Titus of Rome, Israel has been without a king or a prince, without anyone who has the undisputed right to rule over Israel.

Israel also lives without sacrifice. When the Jews of the world celebrate the Passover supper, they remember the supper instituted in Egypt when Israel was delivered from the hand of Pharaoh. God told Israel that every time they ate the Passover they were to kill a lamb. But for two thousand years the Jews have never killed a lamb. Why not? Why do they offer a bone, a burned bone for a sacrifice?

God said that they would live many days without a sacrifice, and since the destruction of the temple there has never been a sacrifice in Israel, nor an ephod or idol. God predicted that they would live exactly as we see the nation of Israel living today: as a religious people but without giving themselves to idols. Then, after these days are ended, something exciting will happen:

The Israelites will return and seek the LORD their God and David their king. They

will come trembling to the LORD and to his blessings in the last days (3:5).

There is a parallel prophecy to this one at the close of chapter 5:

“I will go back to my place until they admit their guilt. And they will seek my face; in their misery they will earnestly seek me.”

“Come, let us return to the LORD. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence. Let us acknowledge the LORD; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth” (5:15–6:3).

That is the hope of the Jewish people—the promise that the Messiah will yet come to them, revive them, and raise them up again.

Return to God

In the sorrowing, loving heart of Hosea, we see a picture of the sorrowing, loving heart of God. At the close of the book, we come to His final plea to Israel—and to you and me:

Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God. Your sins have been your downfall! (14:1).

We tend to blame God when we suffer the consequences of our own sin and error. But God deserves no blame for Israel's downfall—or ours. He is simply trying to get His people to see the truth. Israel needed to experience the pain of God's tough love, and so, at times, do we. The only thing that

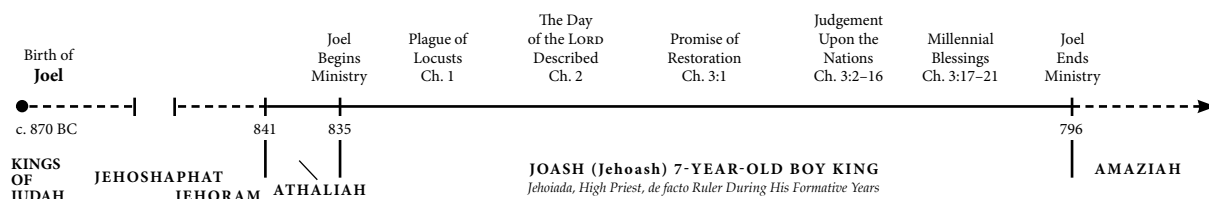
can relieve our suffering is to return to the comfort of God's merciful love. Like the father of the Prodigal Son, God eagerly awaits our return, wanting nothing more than to restore us to the blessings of being His children. But God cannot bless us or restore us until we come back to Him.

Can you see in this beautiful story all the elements of the eternal triangle? There is the Lover, our loving God. There is the beloved, the bride, the human heart, which is tragically prone to stray from God's love. And there is the seducer, the deceptive attractiveness of the world that tries to separate us from God's love. This is your story and mine, isn't it? So many times we try to satisfy ourselves with the lying idols of ego, pleasure, or materialism. Ours is a blindness

like Gomer's that cannot distinguish between lust and love.

But the Bible tells us how to break the triangle and restore the beautiful, faithful union God intended us to experience with Him. At Bethlehem, God entered the slave market where the whole human race had sold itself into bondage, prostituting itself, shaming itself in naked sin. At Calvary, the Lord Jesus paid the full price of our redemption, restoring us to a right relationship with Himself—a relationship of a beautiful bride to a loving husband.

Hosea is the story of God's love—a love that restores you and me. His love erases our shame and transforms us into the complete and beautiful beings He created us to be.

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

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

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

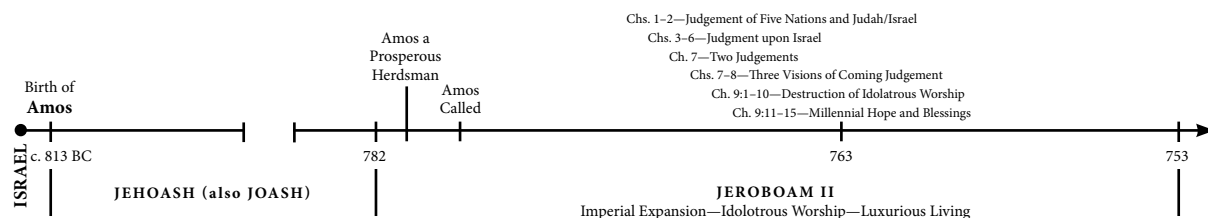
the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him” (John 7:38). He speaks of spiritual rivers of blessing to satisfy a person’s thirsty soul.

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.

God Doesn't Play Favorites



Coach Vince Lombardi became an American legend by spurring his Green Bay Packers football team to five NFL championships. One of his players was interviewed by a reporter who asked, “Is Coach Lombardi impartial and fair, or does he play favorites with his players?”

“Oh, Coach doesn’t play favorites,” the Packer said. “He treats us all like dogs.”

Well, God doesn’t play favorites, either—but He doesn’t treat us like dogs. He regards us as men and women of dignity and worth because we are made in His image. That is the message of Amos: the impartiality of God.

The message of Amos is an immensely practical and relevant message for our times—and it is distinct from that of any of the other prophetic books. Amos tells us that God does not play favorites; He makes no allowances for one person that He will not make for another as well. Anyone who is willing to fulfill the conditions of God’s promises will find God’s blessing poured out in his or her life, regardless of status, position, gender, race, or ethnicity.

In Amos, as throughout Scripture, we find ample proof that God’s ways

are not our ways. Whether we are rich or poor, powerful or powerless, the message of Amos confronts us with the fact that in God’s sight no one is higher or lower than anyone else. What an encouragement for those who struggle with feelings of unworthiness or inferiority.

Why Me?

The truths of Amos are very applicable in times of crisis, loss, or suffering. Our tendency in such times is to ask ourselves, “Why me?”

I’m reminded of a story a friend once shared with me. It happened in New York City, during a summer rush hour on the subway. People jammed the subway cars as the train moved out of the station, and one man—the last man to board—was squeezed in against the door, facing outward. As the subway train moved away from the station, the walls of the tunnel passed before his eyes, moving faster and faster. The hot, stuffy train swayed and

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter unlocks the core message of the book of Amos—the message of God’s impartiality. It’s a message filled with lessons and implications we can apply to our lives today.

LEFT: Eastern Gate in Jerusalem

bumped—and the man became motion sick.

When the train pulled into the next stop, the door opened—and the man threw up on an unfortunate man who happened to be waiting to board the train. For several seconds, nobody moved. The sick man, the people on the train behind him, and the unfortunate man on the platform all stood and stared at each other in horror.

Then the doors of the subway car suddenly closed and the train move out of the station. Looking at the mess that covered his suit, the man on the platform wailed, “Why me?!”

The cosmos didn’t single this man out for punishment. It wasn’t because he had done anything to deserve it. He just happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. It might have just as easily happened to someone else—and then that other person’s question would have been, “Why me?”

If we see ourselves as being in some privileged position with God, then that is a reasonable question: “Why me?” But if God is completely impartial, then a more reasonable question emerges: “Why *not* me?” If bad things happen to some people, then why shouldn’t they happen to you and me as well? If God is impartial, as Amos tells us, then we shouldn’t expect to be exempt from suffering. We should expect bad things to happen to us, just as bad things happen to other people.

Amos, the Shepherd Prophet

The opening verse of Amos gives us the date and setting for the book, pegging Amos as a contemporary of the prophets Hosea and Isaiah. Amos, according to the indicators in this verse, is one of the earliest of the prophetic writers:

The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa—what he saw concerning Israel two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of Israel (1:1).

One unique feature of the book of Amos is that it was written by a man who was not a trained prophet. He was an ordinary person. He was, you might say, a “cowboy preacher.”

In chapter 7, Amos adds another personal note. Here is the reaction to his message as he came to the northern kingdom of Israel:

Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent a message to Jeroboam king of Israel: “Amos is raising a conspiracy against you in the very heart of Israel. The land cannot bear all his words. For this is what Amos is saying:

‘Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land’ ” (7:10–11).

That was the burden of the prophet’s message. God was going to judge the nation and the king, and send Israel into exile. Amaziah the priest responds by saying, in effect, “Don’t come to us. Go back to your hometown. Go back to the country you came from and prophesy down there.” But sturdy, rugged Amos, the blunt and countrified cowboy preacher, said, “I was neither a prophet nor a prophet’s son, but I was a shepherd” (7:14).

Now, in saying this, Amos doesn’t mean his father was not a prophet. He means that he has not been to the accepted school of the prophets. He says he is a rancher, a farmer, a cowboy who is simply going where God tells him to go and doing what God tells him to do.

Now you can see something of the opposition to the message of this man as he comes declaring the burden of the Lord in the land of Israel in the northern kingdom. The people find his message hard to accept.

The Travels of Amos

Amos delivers God's message in an interesting way. Comparing this account with a map of ancient Israel, you find that Amos goes around the boundaries of Israel in various directions, delivering a message

concerning all the neighboring nations.

He begins in chapter 1 with Damascus, in the northeast section above Israel (which we now know as Syria), and delivers a message that God has judged Damascus, especially for the people's cruelty.

Next he moves down the west coast to the ancient land of Philistia, or what is also called the land of Gaza. Again he reminds Israel that God has judged this land. Why, because the people have participated in slave trade.

Then he moves back up the coast to Tyre, on the northwest side of Israel. There he says

that God has judged Tyre because the people broke their agreements.

He continues on to the land of Edom, the ancient country of Esau, where he points out how God's judgment has fallen on that nation because of the people's unforgiving spirit and their hatred of Israel.

Amos then moves up the east side of Israel to the land of Ammon—what is known today as Jordan. Amman, the capital of Jordan, was also the capital of Ammon in the time of Amos. The prophet declares God's judgment against this nation because of its greed for the land that belongs to others.

As Amos travels south, he pronounces God's judgment on Moab because of their hatred of Israel.

Next, he comes to the southern kingdom of Judah. There he declares that because Judah has despised God's law, judgment has fallen on the nation. Finally, he journeys to the heart of the ten northern tribes of Israel, where he announces that God is going to judge them because of the corruption and injustice that was in their hearts.

Amos's message reminds me of a story of an old and overweight country elder who sat in church Sunday after Sunday, smiling and nodding as his pastor preached about such sins as swearing, drinking, and smoking. But one Sunday, the minister preached against the sin of gluttony—and the fat old elder was incensed. After the service, he stamped up to the preacher and said, "You have ceased to be a-preachin' and have started to be a-meddlin'!"

As you read the account of Amos, you can see that the people of Israel were quite untroubled as long as he was talking about the

sins of other nations. But when the prophet zeroed in on the sins of Israel, then he had ceased to be a-preachin' and had started to be a-meddlin'. The people said, "Go preach someplace else!"

This always happens when preachers are faithful to the message of God.

Walking and Talking with God

The rest of the book focuses on the northern kingdom of Israel. Beginning in chapter 3, the prophet points out that the people had enjoyed a privileged position before God:

Hear this word the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel—against the whole family I brought up out of Egypt: "You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth" (3:1-2).

The people of Israel were the ones God Himself had chosen among all the families of the earth. So the next words Amos spoke must have come like a hammer blow:

"...therefore I will punish you for all your sins" (3:2).

The very source of their pride—the fact that they had been chosen by God—was the reason God held them to a high standard and subjected them to judgment. They had received the light of the knowledge of God, and that knowledge creates responsibility. Privilege exposes us to judgment. As Jesus said, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Luke 12:48).

The people of Israel were chosen not because they were such wonderful people compared to any other race. God chose Israel because He had a purpose for this nation in His eternal plan—and the message of Amos was that the people of Israel were not living up to God's purpose for them. So they were about to be judged. They were going to be held responsible for the light God had given them.

This is what Peter means in the New Testament when he says, "It is time for judgment to begin with the family of God" (1 Peter 4:17). God always starts with His people and then moves out to others. The prophet Joel makes this principle clear: Just because we are people of God does not mean that His Word no longer judges our lives. On the contrary, God's Word increases our responsibility, so that we are likely to be judged even more severely, based on the responsibility we bear because of the knowledge we have received.

Amos describes the relationship between God and His people as two walking together:

Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so? (3:3).

Amos then describes God's talk with his people:

Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets (3:7).

These were the facts that marked the Israelites' peculiar relationship and privilege before God: They walked with God, they talked with God—yet even with these advantages, they had turned their backs on

God. For this reason, the prophet Amos says, God would send judgment.

Events Sent to Awaken Israel

In chapter 4, Amos shows the people how God has patiently tried to awaken them through five separate acts of discipline. For years, God has been trying to awaken them and halt their downward course. He had sent:

- Famine and drought (4:6–8);
- Blight and mildew to destroy the gardens and vineyards (4:9);
- Plagues (4:10);
- War (4:10);
- Fire and natural disaster—as in Sodom and Gomorrah (4:11).

All of these terrible things happened to the people. "Yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD" (4:11). Then comes the most ominous and frightening statement in the book of Amos—and perhaps in all of Scripture:

"This is what I will do to you, Israel, and because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel" (4:12).

Prepare to meet your God! The words send a chill of terror down our spines. Who of us is ready, according to our own righteousness, for such a meeting? How can we, who have accumulated such a load of sins and failures, ever hope to stand in the presence of the One who created time and space itself? His righteousness burns like a white-hot blast furnace at the heart of the universe. And so the prophet Amos tells us, "Prepare to meet your God!"

Thank God, we are clothed in the righteousness of Jesus and not in our own righteousness. Our eternal souls are saved and secure—yet we should do everything we can in this life to make sure that we never have to endure the discipline of God. We can rejoice in the fact that God’s tough love draws us back to Him through the pain of harsh circumstances.

This is not to say that when bad things happen to us, it is always the judgment of God. No, bad things do happen to godly people, even while they are walking in fellowship with Him. But whenever pain comes into our lives, we should reflect and rededicate ourselves to godly living. Tragedies and brushes with disaster—a near-fatal accident, a cancer scare, a criminal assault, a fire, the death of someone close—these events awaken us from our spiritual sleepwalking, and force us to see life as it really is.

Amos—the Prophet of Social Justice

Amos is called the prophet of social justice because his message strongly demanded that people deal justly and compassionately with one another. He said:

You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine. For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts. Therefore the prudent man keeps quiet in such times, for the times are evil.

Seek good, not evil, that you may live.

Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is. Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts. Perhaps the LORD God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph (5:11–15).

These are powerful and thundering pronouncements against the social evils of Amos’s day—and rightly so. God is always disturbed by social injustice. But what many seem to miss in this book is Amos’s appeal to these people. He tells them to stop treating each other unjustly, but that isn’t all he says. His core theme concerns how to stop doing these things, and we find it stated twice in this chapter:

This is what the LORD says to the house of Israel: “Seek me and live.” . . . Seek the LORD and live, or he will sweep through the house of Joseph like a fire (5:4, 6).

What is the answer to the wandering heart? The answer isn’t just to clean up your life. It is to *seek the Lord* and live. Repent and return to God. Call upon Him. Ask Him to set you back on your feet and straighten out your life. That is God’s appeal to us.

Social action, seeking justice, fighting racism, showing compassion to the poor—all these are good and worthwhile activities that God has commanded us to do. But they mean nothing if our hearts are not right with Him.

If we seek justice without seeking God first, we will simply become ideologues and demagogues, fighting for political causes while accomplishing nothing of eternal value in our own lives or the lives of others. But if we seek God first, desiring nothing more than to be obedient to Him, then justice and

compassion will naturally flow from our hearts. Then and only then will the words of Amos 5:24 become real in our lives:

*But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing
stream!*

The Restoration to Come

Amos closes his prophecy in much the same way that Joel and so many other prophets do: with a scene of beauty, peace, and glory. This scene reveals what God wants to produce in the world and in our lives. Amos writes:

“In that day I will restore David’s fallen tent. I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be, so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name,” declares the LORD, who will do these things (9:11–12).

These words are quoted in the New Testament in Acts 15:16–18, in the account of the first council at Jerusalem. As the Jewish Christian leaders wondered whether God would save the Gentiles without the law of Moses, James stood and quoted this verse from Amos. The statement that God will restore David’s fallen tent is a prophetic picture of the coming of Christ, representing the house of David. James uses this passage to show that God, as He had promised through the prophets, would bless the world through Jesus.

Then comes this beautiful scene:

*“The days are coming,” declares the LORD,
“when the reaper will be overtaken by the*

plowman and the planter by the one treading grapes. New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills. I will bring back my exiled people Israel; they will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them. They will plant vineyards and drink their wine; they will make gardens and eat their fruit” (9:13–14).

Compare Amos’s statement that “new wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills,” with the concluding image from the prophet Joel:

“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).

Both Amos and Joel depict a glorious millennial future when Israel will at last be restored to the land—and the land will flow with luscious, delightful splendor and goodness.

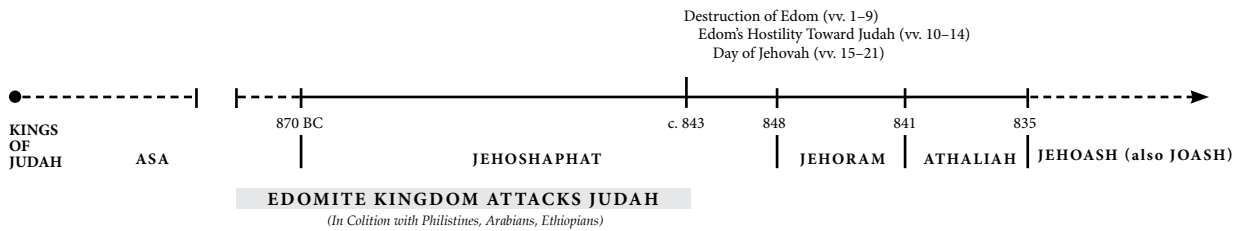
Here we see God’s heart of kindness toward the human race. That’s why He is often so angry with humanity, which is so bent on injustice, greed, and destruction. Human cruelty makes God angry because He wants us to be kind and compassionate toward one another.

The message of this book is that God is relentless in His pursuit of our absolute best. He will not compromise with our sin, our excuses, or our hypocrisy. The word of Amos to us is that we are dealing with a God of righteousness—yet He is also a God of patience, mercy, and love. He is totally impartial. He does not play favorites. If we seek Him, we will live—

truly live! We will enjoy the blessings He desires to pour into our lives. If we ignore Him, if we go our own way, then His message to us is the message of Amos 4:12—“Prepare to meet your God.”

Whether we seek Him or avoid Him, we cannot escape Him. One day, we will meet our God. If we heed the call of Amos, we’ll be able to meet Him confidently, because we will have sought Him with all our hearts.

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

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

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

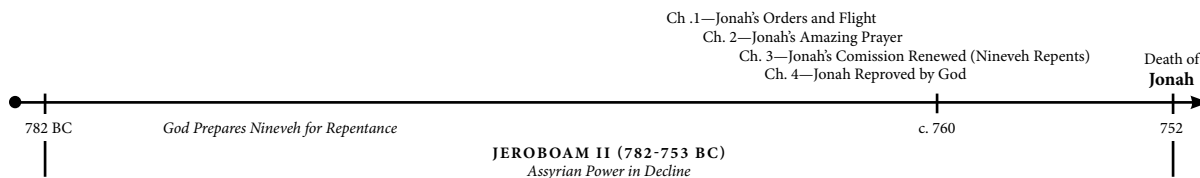
face-to-face. King Herod the Edomite was proud, arrogant, and rebellious; he watched the cruel mockery of the soldiers as they stripped the Lord and dressed Him in His royal robes. King Jesus, the Spirit-filled Israelite, was humble and obedient; He went willingly to His death by torture, which was inflicted 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.

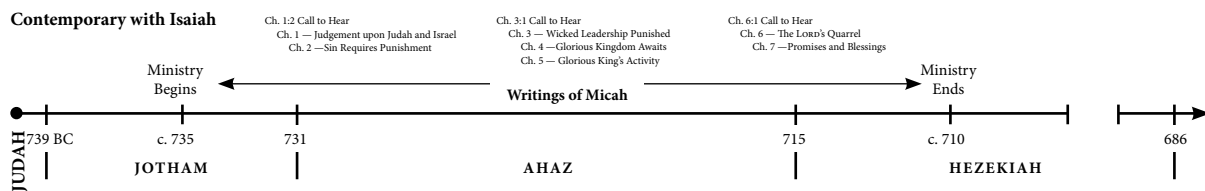
God has sent us to the world to declare the word of Jonah—a word of warning and a word of mercy. All around us are unsaved people. We may find them godless and disobedient. We may dismiss them from our lives as disgusting people, deserving damnation. But spiritually, they are like children, not knowing 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 Zaanen (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.

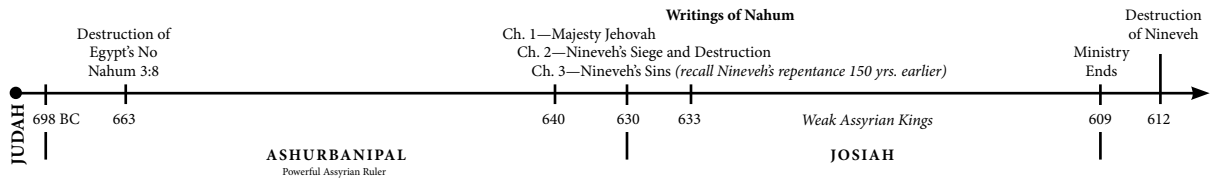
Remember the meaning of Micah's name? "Who is like God?" This is the question, the meaning of Micah's name, that keeps ringing in our ears: Who is like God?

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.

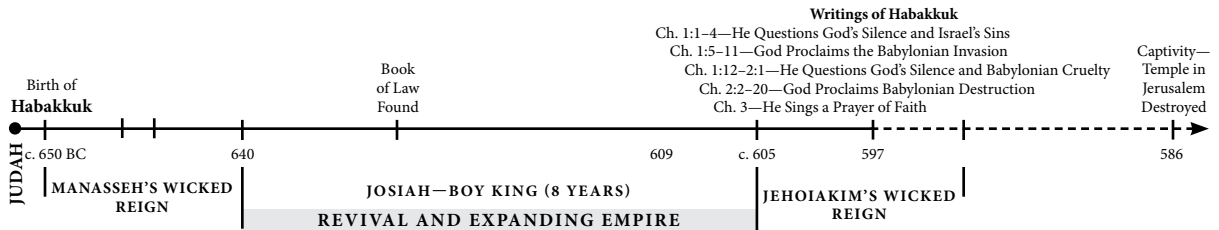
Years ago, when my children were small, one of my daughters and I had a disagreement about her behavior. I spanked her (yes, I believe that spanking—administered in love and sorrow, not in anger—is biblical and effective). Afterwards, she remained defiant and unrepentant for a time—and I wondered what 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).

A Prophet for Our Times



Habakkuk lived in an age much like our own and he struggled with one of the central questions of our age: Why does God allow bad things to happen? Habakkuk lived in a time of great national corruption, when crime, hatred, and division were on the rise, and when evil and immorality were flaunted openly and when ethical standards and family values were breaking down.

Looking at the injustice that permeated society in that time, Habakkuk questioned God. And the questions the prophet asked are the same questions that you and I ask of Him today.

In the opening lines of his book, the prophet looked out across the land and expressed his horror at what he saw:

*The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet received.
How long, O LORD, must I call for help,
but you do not listen?
Or cry out to you, "Violence!"
but you do not save?
Why do you make me look at injustice?
Why do you tolerate wrong?
Destruction and violence are before me;
there is strife, and conflict abounds.*

*Therefore the law is paralyzed,
and justice never prevails.
The wicked hem in the righteous,
so that justice is perverted (1:2-4).*

Here is a man who is disturbed about his nation. He sees everything going wrong. The people are living in wickedness. Civil unrest, rioting, violence, injustice, and oppression permeate the land. When issues of injustice are brought before the courts, the courts themselves are corrupt.

Habakkuk cries out to God, "Violence!" and hears no answer. He faces a problem common to us all—the problem of unanswered prayer. So in his bewilderment and pain, he cries out, "Lord, how long do I have to keep this up? When are you going to do something?"

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter finds practical and contemporary application in the timeless truths in the prophetic words of Habakkuk. The prophet lived in times much like our own, and he asks the same questions people ask today. He boldly approaches God with the tough questions of our existence—and he ends the book with resounding praise. Habakkuk is a book for our times.

God's Answer

Beginning in verse 5, God answers Habakkuk's questions. What follows is a dialogue between God and a single hurting human heart, the heart of Habakkuk. The prophet Habakkuk represents each of us. His questions are our questions. His pain is our pain. His perplexity is our perplexity. So the answers God gives Habakkuk are truly aimed at your heart and mine:

*"Look at the nations and watch—
and be utterly amazed.
For I am going to do something in your
days
that you would not believe,
even if you were told" (1:5).*

In other words, God says, "I have been answering your prayer, Habakkuk. You accuse Me of silence, but I have not been silent. You just failed to recognize My answer. The answer is so different from what you expect that you

will not even believe it when I tell you." Then God proceeds to explain His answer to the prophet Habakkuk in specific terms:

*"I am raising up the Babylonians,
that ruthless and impetuous people,
who sweep across the whole earth
to seize dwelling places not their own.
They are a feared and dreaded people;
they are a law to themselves
and promote their own honor.
Their horses are swifter than leopards,
fiercer than wolves at dusk.
Their cavalry gallops headlong;
their horsemen come from afar.
They fly like a vulture swooping to devour;
they all come bent on violence.
Their hordes advance like a desert wind
and gather prisoners like sand.
They deride kings
and scoff at rulers.
They laugh at all fortified cities;
they build earthen ramps and capture
them.*

*Then they sweep past like the wind and go on—
guilty men, whose own strength is their
god” (1:6–11).*

Here is God’s answer to the prophet’s problem: He is preparing the Babylonians, also known as the Chaldeans. At the time that Habakkuk wrote, the Babylonians were not an important people. But God allowed them to rise up so he could use this evil nation to judge other evil nations.

At the time the prophet wrote, the nation that terrified and intimidated all other nations of the region were the Assyrians, whose capital was Nineveh. Assyria was the superpower of that day. Yet God decided to raise up this little nation that was just beginning to come to prominence in the affairs of the world—the nation of Babylon.

God said, in effect, “I am behind this. These people are strange, violent, and ruthless. They will be as powerful as any nation on earth has ever been and they will sweep through land after land, conquering everything before them. They will seem invincible. Their own political and military strength will be their god. And even though they do not know or worship Me, I will nonetheless control their destiny, and they will be the answer to your prayer.”

Now that is astounding, isn’t it? Habakkuk did not know what to make of this. A moment of silence interrupts the narrative as the prophet reflects. What has he gotten himself into? By seeking a solution to the Assyrian problem, Habakkuk’s prayers may have stirred up an even bigger problem—the Babylonians!

This is what bothers many people as they



Wall relief from Babylon

look at what is happening in the world today. This is what threatens the faith of many who view the problem of history. Why does God allow things to happen the way they do? Why does He permit such terrible events to occur?

Why has God permitted the terrors and atrocities of the Spanish Inquisition? The Black Death? Why does He permit the suffering caused by cancer, Alzheimer’s disease, and AIDS? Why did He allow the horrors of the slave trade? Why did He permit the Holocaust of World War II? What was God thinking of when the death-screams ascended to heaven from Auschwitz, from Pearl Harbor, from Bataan, from Dresden, from Hiroshima, from all the burning cities and sinking ships of a world at war? Why

did He permit the suffering of Vietnam, Bangladesh, Cambodia, the two Gulf Wars, Somalia, Bosnia, and 9/11?

A survey of non-Christian college students revealed the number one question on most students' minds: "Why would a loving God allow people to suffer?" For some of those students, the answer was simple—and fatalistic: "The answer is that there is no God. It's pointless to ask why a nonexistent being would allow suffering. You live and you die—and you never know the reason why. Don't try to figure it out. The point is, there is no point."

The poet William Cowper said, "God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform." And the ways of God are deeply mysterious to us. One thing that you learn about God after you live with Him for a while is that He is always doing the unexpected. It's not because He delights in puzzling us, but because the variety of His workings are so vast that our finite human minds can't grasp them.

What to Do When Your Faith Is Challenged

What do you do when you are confronted

FOUR SIMPLE STEPS WHEN YOUR FAITH IS CHALLENGED

- 1) Stop and think
- 2) Restate the things you know about God
- 3) Bring your knowledge of God to bear on the problem
- 4) Be patient

with this sort of a threat to your faith? Habakkuk offers four simple steps to revive our faith relationship with God when these and other questions assail us.

Step 1: Stop and Think. Avoid reacting emotionally to the problem. Don't let panic get the best of you. Use your God-given reason—and think.

Habakkuk approaches his questioning the same way: He stops and thinks about the problem. He reminds himself of God's nature. "O LORD," he asks, "are you not from everlasting?" (Hab. 1:12). The first thing he remembers is that God is an everlasting God. He is greater than the span of human events. He created history. He is from the beginning and is at the end. He is the God of eternity.

When the Chaldeans come, they will be trusting in their own might as their god. "Oh, yes," Habakkuk says, "but my God is not like that. My God is not one of these localized tribal deities. He is the God who governs all events." Habakkuk's approach begins with a willingness to pause and apply reason to the situation.

Step 2: Restate the Things You Know about God. Think about the nature of God Himself. Don't rush to resolve your dilemma immediately. Back away from the problem and begin with God. Go back to what you know about God and His character as it has been revealed to you in Scripture and by experience.

That is what Habakkuk does—he reminds himself that God is the self-existent and eternal One. Notice that he uses a special name for God. He says, "O LORD, are you not from

everlasting?” Whenever you find the word LORD in small caps as it is here, it is a translation of the Hebrew word for Jehovah (Yahweh or YHWH). Jehovah means “I am who I am,” the name God revealed to Moses in Egypt. At that time God said to him, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you’ ” (Ex. 3:14).

Why did Habakkuk remind himself of God’s everlasting nature? Because there were people in his day who said God was dead. Some people think the “God-is-dead” theology began with Friedrich Nietzsche in the late 1800s. In reality, “God-is-dead” theology has been around since Old Testament times, and it still pervades our society today. As Solomon has observed, there is really nothing new under the sun.

To counter this kind of thinking and to strengthen his own faith, Habakkuk goes back to what he had learned about God: God is self-existent and cannot die. It is impossible for a self-existent person to die. “I AM who I AM.” In our own dilemmas of faith, we must do what Habakkuk did: Back away from the problem and begin with God.

Step 3: Bring Your Knowledge of God to Bear on the Problem. As you apply your biblical and experiential knowledge of God to the problem, you’ll begin to see the problem more clearly. Habakkuk applies this principle by reminding himself of God’s holiness:

*O LORD, are you not from everlasting?
My God, my Holy One, we will not die.
O LORD, you have appointed them to
execute judgment;
O Rock, you have ordained them to
punish (1:12).*

“My God, my Holy One,” says the prophet, reminding himself of the holiness of God. What does holiness mean? I suspect that many of us use this word without any idea of what it means. To put it simply and accurately, holiness is wholeness or completeness. A holy person is a whole person. God is holy and He is whole. God is consistent with Himself. He is always what He is. He is never phony and never in conflict or in contradiction with Himself. That is holiness.

You can find this truth reflected throughout the Scriptures—the wholeness, consistency, and unchangeable quality of God. The writer of Hebrews says, “In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end” (Heb. 1:10–12). God, like His Son, Jesus Christ, is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

After the prophet reminds himself of this, he immediately adds these words, “We will not die.” What does he mean? He is thinking of the fact that God has made a covenant with Abraham. God promised Abraham that he would be the father of a nation that would forever be God’s people and that Abraham’s nation would never be eliminated from the earth. The prophet reminds himself of that promise in the face of this awesome threat.

The Babylonians will roll across this land, and Habakkuk will soon see his own beloved Jerusalem conquered and his people led away into captivity. But he reminds himself that God’s promise stands: His people

will not die. They will be chastised, but they will not be eliminated because God's faithfulness remains.

I pray that God will not have to use such drastic measures in our own society to awaken us to our spiritual and moral need—but I am not hopeful that we can escape it. As America becomes ever greedy, materialistic, and morally corrupt, the probability becomes greater and greater that this pattern will be repeated.

Step 4: Be Patient. Finally, if you have not come to an answer, patiently leave the problem with God and ask Him to show you the answer. Continue to act on the mustard seed of faith that you possess until God provides the answer. You will see your faith and trust in Him strengthened as you patiently wait for God to speak to your heart.

We see an inkling of this response in the prophet's words:

*Your eyes are too pure to look on evil;
you cannot tolerate wrong.
Why then do you tolerate the treacherous?
Why are you silent while the wicked
swallow up those more righteous than
themselves? (1:13).*

Habakkuk says, in effect, "I can see how You are raising up this cruel nation to punish my people, but I don't understand it. Despite the wickedness of my own people, they are not as bad as these Babylonians. You cannot tolerate evil. How, then, can You use an evil people to punish Your own people? God, I don't understand this."

Habakkuk's mind could not wrap itself

around this huge problem—so he follows the fourth step: he leaves the problem with God. Now that's a wise thing to do. No human mind—not yours, not mine, not the prophet Habakkuk's—is capable of fully grasping the purposes of God. We reach a point where we must say, "God, I will patiently wait for Your answer."

Most of us, unfortunately, lack that patience. "God," we say, "I have to understand this problem right now! If You don't explain it to me, then maybe You just don't exist. If You don't explain it to me, if You don't make this problem understandable to my finite mind, then I refuse to believe in You."

In humility, the prophet says, "I don't understand this, but You are mightier than I. All I can do is patiently wait for You to reveal Your truth to me." Notice how he begins chapter 2:

*I will stand at my watch
and station myself on the ramparts;
I will look to see what he will say to me,
and what answer I am to give to this
complaint (2:1).*

Habakkuk says, in effect, "I'm going to leave the matter with God and wait for Him to take the next step. I'll stand my watch and do my job. Later, if God in His grace gives me the answer to the problem, then I'll be grateful. But that's up to God. I have gone as far as I can in my own strength and wisdom. All I can do now is be patient." And God rewards the prophet's patience:

*Then the LORD replied:
"Write down the revelation
and make it plain on tablets*

*so that a herald may run with it.
For the revelation awaits an appointed
time;
it speaks of the end
and will not prove false.
Though it linger, wait for it;
it will certainly come and will not
delay” (2:2–3)*

God is saying, “Habakkuk, the answer is coming. It won’t happen immediately, but continue to be patient and wait for it.”

By Faith

Then God goes on to state a principle that is quoted three times in the New Testament and forms the basis for the Reformation. God says,

*“ . . . the righteous will live by his faith”
(2:4).*

These words are quoted in the New Testament in Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews. This is the idea that lit a fire in the heart of Martin Luther. God has designed us to live *not* according to our circumstances, *not* according to our own reasoning, but by *faith* in what God has promised.

The entire human race can be divided into two categories: those who live in dependence on God, and those who live in utter self-reliance. One of the saddest things that I have ever seen—and I have seen it all too often—is a Christian who has chosen to live by his or her own reasoning and strength—yet does so in the name of “Christianity.” We do this in so many ways.

We rely on studies, surveys, and polls to direct a church’s ministry. We exercise

political power, pressure tactics, and clever strategies rather than spiritual authority in an effort to bring about social change. We seek the input of experts and authorities instead of seeking the face of God in trying to expand the church and evangelize the world. We are not living by faith. We are living by sight, by our own human reasoning ability. That is not how the Word of God says we should live.

Read Hebrews 11 and examine the stories of the great men and women of faith who are listed there. These are people who changed their world, increased God’s kingdom, advanced God’s message, and healed human hurts—and they did it all by faith in the power of God alone. They didn’t hire consultants. They didn’t read books on marketing and management. They lived by faith—and in the process, by God’s power, these men and women of faith stopped the mouths of lions, subdued kingdoms, toppled thrones, won empires, and changed the course of history, to the glory of God.

The remainder of Habakkuk 2 reveals an interesting analysis of the Babylonians and what God plans to do with them. God says, in effect, “Habakkuk, don’t worry about the Babylonians; it’s true that I can’t tolerate evil, and it’s true that I am raising up this people to judge the nation of Israel—but be sure of this, I will judge the Babylonians in turn. The very thing in which they trust will prove to be their downfall. Their own gods will overthrow them.”

God goes on to pronounce five woes on the Babylonians—woe upon them for their thievery; woe to them for attempting to build a false foundation for themselves, piling up material “security” without regard to spiritual

FIVE WOES AGAINST BABYLON

- 1) Woe against thievery
- 2) Woe against false material security
- 3) Woe against violence
- 4) Woe against enslavement of others
- 5) Woe against idolatry

security in God; woe to them for building their cities out of blood, violence, suffering, and sin; woe to them for unjustly ruling and enslaving their neighbors; and woe to them for their idolatry, for saying to idols of wood and silver, “Come to life! Wake up!”

Lessons from History

In chapter 3, the prophet concludes the book with a remarkable prayer. He has seen his answer. The Lord is the God of history and everything is under His control. The problems of humanity can be solved only as human beings come into a faith relationship with God. Habakkuk prefaces his prayer with this invocation:

*The LORD is in his holy temple;
let all the earth be silent before him
(2:20).*

Then he prays:

*LORD, I have heard of your fame;
I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD.
Renew them in our day,
in our time make them known;
in wrath remember mercy (3:2).*
Habakkuk began this book by saying,

“Lord, why don’t you do something?” Now he says, “Lord, be careful! Don’t do too much! In your wrath, don’t forget to show mercy.” That is all Habakkuk has to say. There is no more philosophy, no more theology, no more arguing with God.

The prayer of Habakkuk in chapter 3 is one of the most remarkably poetic passages in all of Scripture. Read it, and you will see how the prophet is going back and remembering what God has done in the past. That is what convinces Habakkuk that God can be trusted. He rests upon events that have already occurred, events that cannot be questioned or taken away. God has already moved in human history.

And this is where faith must rest. We live by faith—but not *blind* faith. We believe in a God who has acted in space and time and has indelibly recorded His will in the progress of human events. The prophet looks back to God’s action in Egypt when Israel was in trouble and remembers how God moved in those days:

*God came from Teman,
the Holy One from Mount Paran. Selah.
His glory covered the heavens
and his praise filled the earth.
His splendor was like the sunrise;
rays flashed from his hand,
where his power was hidden (3:3–4).*

Remember how God hid His power from Pharaoh and then exploded forth in sudden acts of miraculous intervention? The prophet writes:

*Plague went before him;
pestilence followed his steps.*

*He stood, and shook the earth;
he looked, and made the nations
tremble.
The ancient mountains crumbled
and the age-old hills collapsed.
His ways are eternal (3:5–6).*

Habakkuk remembers how the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness and how in the land of Midian they trembled. He thinks of the crossing of the Red Sea and how God made a way through the waters. He recalls how God rolled back the Jordan River when the Israelites came into the land and how at the command of Joshua (by faith in the power of God) the sun and moon stood still in the sky.

This is the kind of God we have—a God who moves in human history to accomplish events that no human being ever could.

The Secret of Triumphal Living

As the prophet considers all this, his mind goes out to the greatness of God, and he concludes:

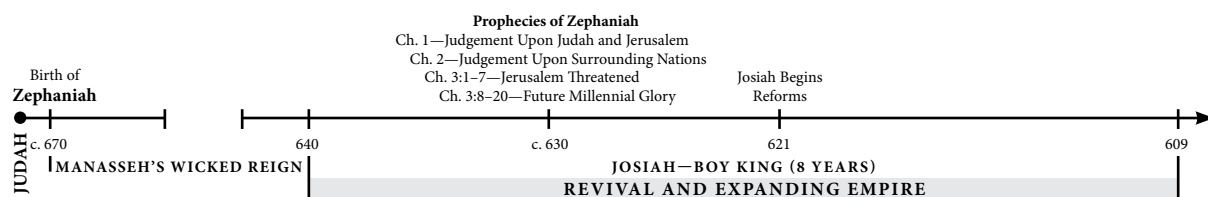
*I heard and my heart pounded,
my lips quivered at the sound;
decay crept into my bones,
and my legs trembled.
Yet I will wait patiently for the day of
calamity to come on the nation invading
us (3:16).*

Habakkuk sees the problem and knows calamity is coming. The horror of it grips him—but that is not all:

*Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.
The Sovereign LORD is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to go on the heights
(3:17–19).*

Have you discovered that kind of life? Habakkuk describes a quality of joyful, triumphant living, even in the midst of struggle and stress. That is the discovery Habakkuk has made, and it's the deepest, most practical truth we can learn as children of the living God. No matter what trials come our way, even if those trials won't be removed, still we can rejoice in the fact that our God is the great eternal Lord of the universe, and all things are ultimately under His control.

“In this world you will have trouble,” said Jesus. “But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

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:

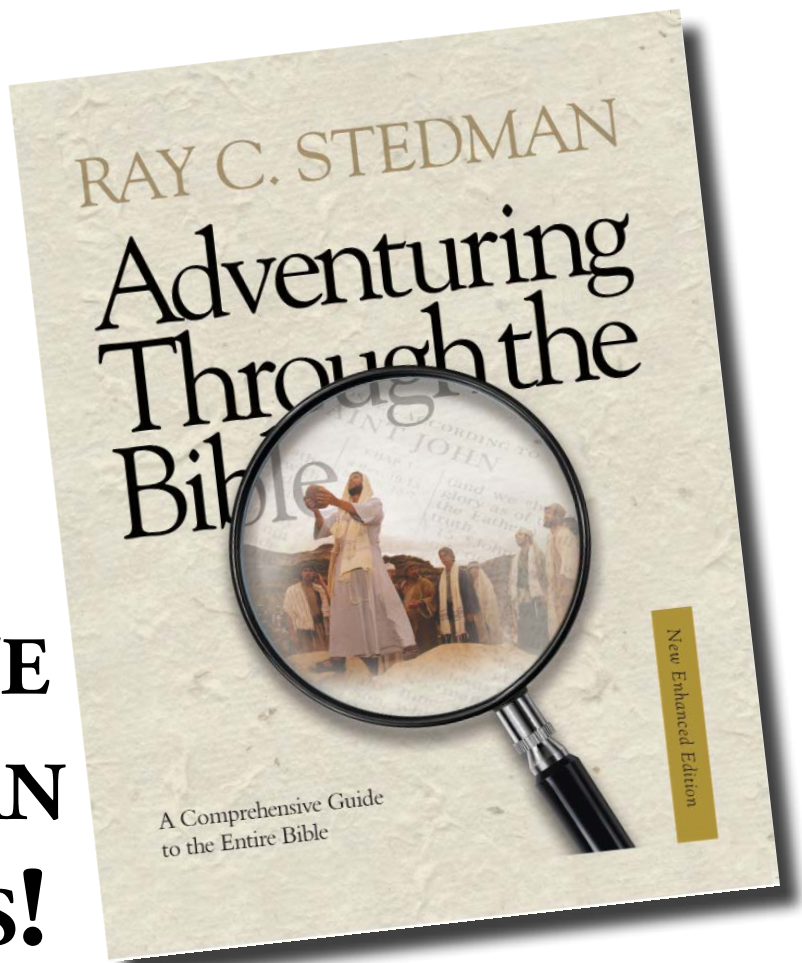
*"Flowers appear on the earth;
the season of singing has come,
the cooing of doves
is heard in our land" (Song 2:12).*

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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