

ISAIAH: The Salvation of the Lord

by Ray C. Stedman

Isaiah was the greatest of the prophets and a superb master of language. If you enjoy beautiful, rolling cadences and marvelous literary passages, you will enjoy this book for that reason alone.

Isaiah is the fullest revelation of Christ in the Old Testament – so much so, that it is often called the Gospel according to Isaiah. To acquaint yourself with these magnificent, prophetic passages looking forward to Christ is to experience much of the richness and depth of Scripture.

Also, the prophetic nature of the book of Isaiah is one of the great proofs that the Bible is the word of God, for Isaiah lived some 724 years before Christ. The many passages looking forward to the Messiah point so clearly to Christ and are fulfilled in him, and thereby constitute an unanswerable argument for the divine inspiration of the book.

Any time we approach a new book, we always want to look for a key. I am afraid, however, that this is sometimes a rather weak approach. Sometimes these Bible books seem like locked houses, barred and shuttered, so that you can't get anything out of them unless you find the key. And some people feel that the only duly-licensed real estate agents are the Bible teachers, who alone have the keys to the Scripture's "real estate."

But scriptural books are not like that. They are more like national parks. They are open to everyone to roam in, and are a delight to explore all by yourself. But each park has a characteristic peculiar to itself that distinguishes it from the others; and you appreciate a park better if you know what that characteristic is. I have learned to appreciate some of the distinct characteristics of the great national parks in the West. For instance,

- If you want to see nature's various moods, go to Yellowstone Park. There she pulls all the tricks out of her bag and throws everything together.
- If you want to see mountain grandeur and cool lakes, Glacier Park in Montana is the place to go.
- If you want to be awed and humbled and stirred, then go to the Grand Canyon.
- If you are looking for a quiet valley in which to rest and reflect, Yosemite fills the bill – that is, any time other than midsummer, when some twenty thousand people are in the valley with you.

Sometimes I think of these books of the Bible like this. The book of Revelation is to me very much like Yellowstone National Park. It is full of spouting geysers and all kinds of weird symbolism and a variety of formations. The Gospel of John is more like Yosemite; quiet and deep and reverent. But there is no question that the book of Isaiah is the Grand Canyon of Scripture. Geologists tell us that the Grand Canyon is a miniature history of the earth – a condensed history, a pocket volume of the past – just so, the book of Isaiah has long been recognized as a miniature Bible.

I am very inclined to think that the order in which the books of the Bible occur is divinely inspired, because of their unique arrangement. By no means are they placed in an order we would expect them to be, and I think this is highly significant. It is particularly interesting that the book of Isaiah is

exactly in the middle of the Bible. It comes right at the center and is often 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, and therefore twenty-seven in the New Testament. And the book of Isaiah divides exactly in that way. The first half of the book comprises thirty-nine chapters. There is a distinct division at Chapter 40, so that the remaining twenty-seven chapters constitute the second half of this book.

The New Testament begins with the history of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, as he came to announce the coming of the Messiah, and it ends in the book of Revelation with the new heaven and the new earth. Chapter 40 of Isaiah, which begins the second half, contains the prophetic passage that predicts the coming of John the Baptist:

A voice cries:

**“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” {Isa 40:3 RSV}**

And this, John says, was fulfilled by himself when he came. And when you read on to the end of the book you will find that Chapter 66 speaks of the new heavens and the new earth that God is creating. So you find here in the book of Isaiah a remarkably close analogy that parallels the entire Bible.

Visitors to the Grand Canyon are always astonished by one thing when they go there. They stand at the rim and look out over the vast, jumbled, silent canyon – down to the Colorado River, which seems but a silver thread more than a mile below them – and sooner or later some tourist cries in amazement, “I don’t understand how a tiny thing like that river could have carved a canyon like this!” They are amazed by that concept.

Now if you read the book of Isaiah thoughtfully and carefully, you sense immediately the grandeur and the power of God. You hear the powerful, rolling cadences of this book’s language. You sense the insignificance of man when compared with the might and the wisdom and majesty of God. And if you ask yourself, “How could Isaiah, just a human being like myself, write a book like this?” to answer seems impossible.

We know very little about Isaiah himself. He lived during the reigns of four kings of Judah – Ussiah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. His ministry began some 740 years before Christ when the ten tribes that formed the northern kingdom of Israel were being carried away into captivity by Sennacherib, the Assyrian invader. And Judah, the southern kingdom, was plunged into idolatry toward the end of Isaiah’s ministry in 687 B.C., and was carried captive into Babylon. So the ministry of this prophet spans the time between the captivity of the northern kingdom and the captivity of the southern kingdom – about 50 years. Isaiah was a contemporary of the prophets Amos, Hosea, and Micah. And tradition tells us that Isaiah the prophet was martyred under the reign of Manasseh, one of the most wicked kings recorded by the Old Testament. The story is that he hid in a hollow tree to escape the reign of Manasseh, and the king’s soldiers, knowing he was in that tree, sawed the tree down. Thus, he was sawn in half. Some scholars feel that when the epistle to the Hebrews, in its great chapter about the heroes of faith, lists being sawn in two as one of the ways the prophets were martyred, that it refers to the prophet Isaiah (Heb 11:37).

He was the human author of this book, and it is indeed amazing to think that a man could write language as beautiful as this and reveal the tremendous things found here. But, when visitors go down the long trail to the Colorado River, they are no longer amazed that a river could carve out the great canyon, because they can actually hear the grinding rocks being swept along by the force of the current, and they can sense the powerful and invisible force of this river. The book of Isaiah is something like that. Here is a man carried along by an amazing force and speaking magnificent prophecies because of it.

In his second letter, Peter says of the Old Testament prophets,

“First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because,” [he says,] “no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God,” (2 Pet 1:20-21 RSV)

and this explains how Isaiah could speak and write as he did.

Now the amazing thing is that prophets who spoke like this were very much aware that an invisible power within them was speaking through them and that what they spoke and wrote was greater than their own. They actually searched through their own writings to discover hidden truths, and in this sense they ministered to themselves. They studied their own writings. Peter says the same in his first letter:

The prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired about this salvation; they inquired what person or time was indicated by the Spirit of Christ within them when they predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things which have now been announced to you by those who preached the good news to you through the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look. {1 Pet 1:10-12 RSV}

Now if any key is needed to this book, this is it. Isaiah was a man who was searching for something. Peter says he was searching after the salvation that was to come from God. And the interesting thing is that the name *Isaiah* means “The salvation of Jehovah.”

Now what sets this man searching? Why does he pore over his writings, puzzling over this matter? Well, when you read this book you can see his problem. Isaiah lived in a time of national stress, when man’s true nature was visible and was exposing itself for what it was just as in our day. He was terribly bothered over man’s innate rebelliousness, as he cries out in the opening chapter. The nation has deliberately forsaken the ways of God and their stupid obstinacy is simply beyond his understanding. “Why,” he says, “even the ox knows its owner, and the ass its master’s crib...” (cf, Isa 1:3). Even an animal knows where its bread is buttered, where it gets blessing and help. But he says, “Not Israel. They don’t know where to go.” They are wandering off stupidly, ignorantly, and this amazes him. He simply cannot understand their stubborn refusal to turn back – and the other nations around are just as bad.

Then God gives Isaiah a vision. He sees God in his awful purity and holiness. This amazing

revelation of God is in Chapter 6, Verses 1 through 3:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

**“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”
{Isa 6:1-3 RSV}**

Imagine this! As he is in the temple one day, he sees God. In the year King Uzziah died, when the throne was vacant, he saw the throne that was never vacant. He saw a God of wrath and power. As you read on, you see beautifully described how God has power to shake the earth to its foundations – an immense God, infinite and mighty, speaking in thunder and moving in strength. Isaiah asks, “How can such a God do anything but destroy the rebellious creatures that are men? Where is salvation for men like this?”

His problem grows worse as, in the second part of this book, he is made aware of man’s helplessness. Chapter 40 begins on that note. Here is the prophetic passage concerning John the Baptist:

A voice says, “Cry!” {Isa 40:6a RSV}

Go to this nation and cry, cry.

And I said, “What shall I cry?” {Isa 40:6b RSV}

God said, cry that,

**“All flesh is grass,
and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. {Isa 40:6b RSV}
The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand for ever.” {Isa 40:8 RSV}**

Man is just like the grass. He is temporary – here for only a little while. His life spans but a brief period of time and then ends. Isaiah sees in this man’s utter impotence and helplessness as he blindly stumbles on to his doom.

But then Isaiah begins to see the answer. Woven beautifully throughout this book is the ever-growing revelation of God's love, of Jehovah's salvation, found in the figure of someone who is to come – the Messiah, the servant of God. At first it is dim and shadowy, but gradually it grows brighter and still brighter until, in Chapter 53, the figure of Christ steps right off the page and fills the whole room and you realize that he is the answer.

But what Isaiah was given to show especially was that the God of transcendent glory that he saw in Chapter 6 – the God who frightened him so much that he cried out, "I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips;" (Isa 6:5b RSV) – is the same God who would one day be,

**despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with
grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
... {Isa 53:3a RSV}**

**But he was wounded for our transgressions,
he was bruised for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that made
us whole,
and with his stripes we are healed... {Isa
53:5 RSV}**

**He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth; {Isa 53:7a
RSV}**

And Isaiah saw how God's love would break the back of man's rebelliousness and meet his helpless need.

Then, at last, he sees beyond the darkness and gloom of the centuries yet to come, to the day when there will come a morning without clouds, the day of righteousness, when all God's glory will fill the earth. And man will make war no more, and they will beat their swords into pruning hooks and their spears into plows, and nothing shall hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain.

You can find these two themes, or characteristics of God, brought together in the book of Revelation. In the fourth chapter, John tells us of a mighty vision of God: "And lo, a throne stood in heaven..." (Rev 4:2). Then, in Revelation 5:6 he says, "And between the throne and the four living creatures ... I saw a Lamb ..." There, then, are the

two themes of Isaiah: a throne and a Lamb. In Isaiah 6:1 you see the throne: "I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up..." And you find the Lamb in Chapter 53, Verse 7:

**like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is
dumb,
so he opened not his mouth. {Isa 53:7b
RSV}**

This is God's plan, you see. God doesn't choose to come with power and might and warfare to wipe men off the face of the earth – although that is the way we try to solve our problems! As God declares to Isaiah (55:8-9):

**"... my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, says the
Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the
earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts."
{Isa 55:8-9 RSV}**

God's method is to break through man's rebelliousness not by might, not by power – but by love, by love that suffers. And when he does, and the heart responds by opening up, then all the majesty and the power of God are poured into that life to bring to it the fulfillment that God has intended for human hearts.

It is remarkable how up-to-date this book is. The first part of the book presents the threat of the king of Assyria; the last half of the book describes the threat of the kingdom of Babylon; and the middle part of the book, Chapters 37 through 39 are the "filling" in this historical sandwich – an interlude carrying us from Assyria to Babylon. These two nations – Assyria and Babylon – are in the world today and have been since before the time of Isaiah.

The king of Assyria stands for the power and philosophy of godlessness – the idea that there is no God and that we can live as we please; that we are in a deterministic, materialistic universe that runs on in its clanking, grinding way and there is nothing we can do about it but try to enjoy ourselves and make the most of things. It is the philosophy that might makes right, and that man has no one to answer to but himself. This is the Assyrian philoso-

phy so prominent in our own day, and it is also the philosophy behind Communism.

The second force is the power of Babylon. In Scripture, Babylon is always the symbol of apostasy, of religious error and deceit. Again, this is what we experience today, on all sides. The voices from which we should be able to expect guidance – the voice of the church itself in many places – are often voices crying out against God, by preaching the things that encourage wrongdoing and destruction in human life. So we are living in the very times described in Isaiah.

The dominant characteristics of human life are basically rebellion and helplessness. Have you ever noticed how true that is? I read recently in the papers of a man who was given a speeding ticket. When the officer handed him the ticket, the man read it, handed it back to the officer, threw his car into gear, and sped off. The officer jumped into his car and they wound up in a high-speed chase in which 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. Now what made him do that? Wasn't it simply that same innate rebelliousness of the human heart which does not want to be confronted with authority? That is the problem with all of us, isn't it?

People often say to me in counseling: "I know what I ought to do, but I have to confess that I don't want to do it." Why not? We all have this problem don't we? Rebelliousness and helplessness. It is reflected in the growing despair and sense of futility that grip so many people today – the loneliness and apparent meaninglessness of life. And twice in this book – once in the beginning and once toward the end – you find the great words that God addresses to a world that is gripped by rebellion and helplessness. God says in Chapter 1, Verse 18:

**"Come now, let us reason together ...
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool."
{Isa 1:18 RSV}**

He offers forgiveness, pardon. Again, in Chapter 55, Verse 1:

**"Ho, every one who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and he who has no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price."
{Isa 55:1 RSV}**

You see, God's message to man is not condemnation. His message to man is, "Come, come; the salvation of Jehovah is available to all." And when a man accepts what Isaiah says –

**All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all. {Isa 53:6 RSV}**

– he will discover the answer to his deepest need; that the rebellion can be cured and the helplessness canceled and man can become what God intended him to be.

I often think of what occurred years ago to one of England's Bible teachers. As he hurried down to catch a train after one of the services at which he had been speaking, a man ran along the platform after him and caught him just as he was about to board the train. And the man said, "Oh, sir! I was in your meeting tonight and I heard you tell about a way by which man can find peace with God. I need help. I want to find my way to God. You help me." The teacher said, "I'm sorry. I haven't time. I've got to catch this train. But I will tell you what to do. Take this Bible and go to the nearest lamppost. Turn to Isaiah 53:6. Stoop down low and go in at the first *all* and stand up straight and come out at the last *all*." Then he boarded the train and off he went. The man stood there for a minute, puzzled. He didn't know what to make of it. Then he said, "I'll do what he said." He took the Bible that the teacher had given him and went over to the nearest lamppost. "Now what was it he said?" he thought. "Oh, yes, find Isaiah 53:6." He found it. "All we like sheep have gone astray." What did he say to do now? "Stoop down low and go in at the first *all*, stand up straight and come out at the last *all*. 'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way.'" "Oh," he said, "I see what he meant. I'm to admit that's the case with me. Stoop down low and go in at the first *all*. Acknowledge that I've gone astray, that I've turned to my own way. Well, then what? Well, I'm to

stand up straight and come out at the last *all*. ‘But the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.’ He bore it.” In a moment the man saw it. The next night at the meeting he came up, handed the Bible to the teacher, and said, “Here is your Bible, and I want you to know that I stooped down and went in at the first *all*, and I stood up straight and came out at the last *all!*”

Well, that is Isaiah’s message. It is the message of the Bible – the message of the Word of God. Let’s stand up straight and come out at the last all.

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for the ministry of this great prophet of old. When we think that this book was written over seven long centuries before the Lord Jesus ever appeared on earth, yet so beautifully and accurately describes every aspect of his ministry, we can see that your hand is behind it, and that you have provided for us this great deliverance from ourselves. All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned every one to his own way. Thou hast laid on him our iniquity. He bore our transgressions. Because of this we are accepted in your sight and can discover all the wonders that you have for us. We thank you in Christ’s name. Amen.

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JEREMIAH: A Profile of Courage

by Ray C. Stedman

What if some present-day preacher stood in his pulpit and persistently declared that God was on the side of the Communists? That God was against America and that he was raising up the Communists to be his people and his servants? That God cared nothing for the Declaration of Independence or the American Constitution or the long heritage of religious worship that our nation has had? In fact, that the things we emphasize were an offense to God? And what if this preacher even advocated that Christians renounce their loyalty to their country and join the Communist Party? And what if the preacher – subjected to house arrest, or flung into prison, or slapped in the face in public and his writings burned, or half-drowned in a pit of slime – would not only stubbornly refuse to take back one word of what he had said but would only repeat it again?

Well, this is something like the situation that is recorded in the book of Jeremiah. This is exactly what Jeremiah was called to do.

Imagine yourself as that preacher. Imagine how you would feel when no one listens to you and persecution hounds you every step of the way. You are unable to seek comfort in marriage because the days are too difficult and God has said to remain unmarried. You feel abandoned, and alone; all your friends turn from you.

And if you try to quit, and refuse to be this kind of a preacher, you find that you cannot quit – that the word of God burns in your bones and you have to say it whether or not you want to. And despite the message that you are called upon to deliver, your love for your country is genuine and deep – as you see it surrounded by its enemies and ravished and conquered and despoiled, you are overcome by a deep sorrow that breaks out in grief's lamentations.

Now, perhaps, you can understand why Jeremiah, of all the prophets, was unquestionably the

most heroic. Isaiah wrote more exalted passages and perhaps saw more precisely the coming of the Messiah and the fullness of his work. Other prophets speak more precisely concerning some of the future events that were to be fulfilled, but Jeremiah is outstanding among the prophets as a man of heroic, dauntless courage. For many years he endured this kind of persecution in his life without quitting. That is an amazing record, isn't it? As you read through this book you can see that here indeed is an amazing man.

Jeremiah lived in the last days of a decaying nation. He was the last prophet to Judah, the southern kingdom. Judah continued on after the ten tribes of the north had been carried into captivity under Assyria. (Isaiah prophesied about sixty years before Jeremiah.) Jeremiah comes in at the close of the reign of the last good king of Judah, the boy king Josiah, who led the last revival the nation experienced before it went into captivity. (This revival under King Josiah was a rather superficial matter; in fact, the prophet Hilkiah had told him that though the people would follow him in his attempt to reform the nation and return to God, they would only do so because they loved him and not because they loved God.)

Jeremiah, then, comes in right in the middle of the reign of King Josiah and his ministry carries us on through the reign of King Jehohaz, who was on the throne only about three months. And then came King Jehoiakim, one of the most evil kings of Judah, and then the three months' reign of Jehoiachin who was captured by Nebuchadnezzar and taken into captivity in Babylon. And Jeremiah was still around at the time of Judah's last king Zedekiah, at the end of whose reign Nebuchadnezzar returned, utterly destroying the city of Jerusalem and taking the whole nation into Babylonian captivity.

Jeremiah's ministry covered about forty years, and during all this time the prophet never once saw

any signs of success in his ministry. His message was one of denunciation and reform, and the people never obeyed him. The other prophets saw in some measure the impact of their message upon the nation – but not Jeremiah. He was called to a ministry of failure, and yet he was enabled to keep going for forty long years and to be faithful to God and to accomplish God’s purpose: to witness to a decayed nation.

Two important things are woven into the fabric of this entire prophecy. One concerns the fate of the nation, and the other concerns the feelings of the prophet. And both of them are instructive.

First of all, the prophecies of Jeremiah that have to do with **the fate of the nation** reflect the familiar theme of all the prophets. Jeremiah reminds this people that the beginning of error in their lives was their failure to take God seriously. They looked lightly upon what he said. They did not pay much attention to what he had told them, and they did what was right in their own eyes rather than carefully examining their behavior in the light of God’s revelation and word.

As we read in the historical books, they had sunk so low in the early days of Josiah’s reign that they had actually lost the copy of the Law. As far as we can tell, no one in the land of Judah any longer had access to the Word of God, and the copy which was in the temple – and which ought to have been in the central place of worship – was lost somewhere in the back room. Only by accident was it finally found, and its discovery stimulated the revival led by Josiah.

But that is how far off base the nation had gone. They had actually lost contact with the Word of God. They had adopted the dangerous principle of doing what was right in their own eyes. What they thought was right. Many people do what they know is wrong in the sight of God. That is bad enough. But it is equally dangerous to judge for ourselves what is right for we have no ability to judge properly – and this is what was happening in Israel.

As a result, they adopted the values of the worldlings around them and ended up worshipping the gods of the other nations. This brought on, as it always does, a torrent of bickering and strife and lowered morals and perverted justice. They made military alliances with godless nations around

them, and the country gradually sank deeper and deeper and lower and lower on the moral scale.

It was to this people that Jeremiah came. And the message that he was told to proclaim was judgment: that the national rebellion would lead to national ruin. Throughout this whole book you find these prophecies clearly delineated as he told exactly how God was raising up a terrible and godless people, a fierce and cruel people, who would sweep across the land and destroy everything in their path. They would be utterly ruthless; they would break down the walls and destroy the temple and take all the things that the nation valued and Israel would be carried away into captivity. Thus God would judge Israel.

But Jeremiah also makes very clear throughout these passages of judgment that God judges with a sorrowing heart, a weeping heart, and then the prophet looks beyond the 70 years of captivity he predicts. (Later on, while reading this very book of Jeremiah, the prophet Daniel realized that God had predicted that the captivity would last exactly 70 years. That is how Daniel knew that the end of the time was coming and he could look forward to seeing the nation restored again to the land.) Jeremiah looks beyond the captivity to the restoration of the people and then, in that peculiar way that prophets suddenly extend their view from immediate to far-distant events, he looks even further beyond – to the ultimate dispersion of the peoples of Israel, and then to the final regathering of the nation into the land. He looks to the days that will usher in the millennial reign when Israel – restored and blessed and called by God – shall be the world’s center.

In the middle of this book, in Chapters 30 through 33, is an amazing and beautiful prediction written when Jeremiah was in a dungeon. He was in a deep slime pit, the mud two or three feet thick on the bottom and only a little bit of daylight trickling through from above. In the midst of those depressing and deplorable circumstances, the prophet was led of the Spirit of God to write the flaming vision of the days when Israel will be called back again, and God promises to be their God and to walk among them and put away their sins. There in the middle of Chapter 31 is the great promise of the new covenant which will be made with Israel.

These words are picked up by the writer of the letter to the Hebrews (cf, Heb 8:8-12). Also, our Lord himself referred to this same prophecy when

he gathered with his disciples on the night before the cross and instituted the Lord's Supper. As he took the cup after the bread and held it up to them, he said, "For this is my blood of the [new] covenant," (Matt 26:28a). He was referring back to the days of Jeremiah's prophecy of the covenant that God would make with his people in that far-off day yet to come.

Now in the ultimate sense the fulfillment of that covenant is still in the distant future. God is fulfilling it today among the Gentiles in the church (which is made up of both Jew and Gentile), but the ultimate fulfillment of it for the nation Israel remains in the future, as Jeremiah predicted:

"Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." {Jer 31:31-34 RSV}

What a wonderful picture that is. This is the fulfilling of the vision that was given to Jeremiah, in Chapter 18, when God told him to go down to the potter's house. That is a strange place for a prophet to go but that is where God sent him.

As Jeremiah watched the potter at work, he saw him making a vessel on his wheel, and as the wheel turned the potter shaped the vessel. And as Jeremiah watched, the vessel in the potter's hand was marred and broken. Then the potter took the vessel and once more pushed it all down into a lump of clay, and shaping it the second time, made it into a vessel after the potter's heart.

All through this book you will find visual aids, or object lessons. The prophets are good at giving such lessons, and Jeremiah does that here. This is God's great object lesson of what he does with a

broken life. He takes it and makes it over again – not according to the failures and foolish dreams of an individual, but after the potter's heart, for the potter has power over the clay to shape it as he wishes. Jeremiah speaks a prophecy of ruin – of desolation and destruction and judgment – but beyond that is the hope and glory of the days when God shall reshape the vessel. This applies not only to the nation but to the individual as well.

Now, the second theme in Jeremiah relates to **the feelings of the prophet**. There is a great lesson for us in Jeremiah's honest reactions to the situations he faces. You will find that he constantly fights a battle with discouragement. Who wouldn't with a ministry like his? He sees absolutely no signs of his ministry's success and the grim specter of discouragement and depression dogs his footsteps through all those forty years.

One of the amazing things about this prophet is that when he is in the public eye, he is as fearless as a lion. He speaks to kings and murderers and captains who hurl enraged threats against him, and he is utterly fearless. He looks them right in the eye and delivers the message of God that speaks of their own destruction. But when he is by himself, all alone with God, he is filled with discouragement and depression and resentment and bitterness, and it all comes flooding out. The prophet turns to God and cries:

**Why is my pain unceasing,
my wound incurable,
refusing to be healed? {Jer 15:18a RSV}**

That is, "This problem just keeps after me all the time. It never stops. It never gets better; it is unceasing, refusing to be healed." And then he says to God:

**Wilt thou be to me like a deceitful brook,
like waters that fail? {Jer 15:18b RSV}**

Or, as another translation has it,

**Wilt thou be to me like a liar,
like waters that fail?**

He is accusing God of being a liar and undependable. Strong words? Undoubtedly. Honest words? Absolutely. He is pouring out exactly how he feels. He has begun to wonder if the trouble

might after all be with God that he cannot be depended upon. As you look back through this brief account, you will see that what is bothering the prophet first of all is persecution:

**O Lord, thou knowest;
remember me and visit me,
and take vengeance for me on my persecutors. {Jer 15:15a RSV}**

Here is a man who is being hounded everywhere he goes. Not only does he suffer persecution but also mocking scorn, and contempt:

**In thy forbearance take me not away;
know that for thy sake I bear reproach.
{Jer 15:15b RSV}**

The third element of his problem is loneliness:

**I did not sit in the company of merry-makers,
nor did I rejoice;
I sat alone, because thy hand was upon me,
for thou hadst filled me with indignation.
{Jer 15:17 RSV}**

Aren't these usually the ingredients of discouragement for us? We feel put upon. We feel persecuted. We feel that we have tried to do the right thing but everybody either just disregards it or comes back to make trouble for us. Or they mock and deride us and we are weighed down by loneliness and depression of spirit. We feel forsaken.

Ah you say, "I know the trouble with this man. He's obviously permitted himself to backslide." Disobedience – that is the quick and easy answer we glibly hand somebody who is suffering like this. But that isn't the case with Jeremiah. Notice that this is a man who is praying:

**O Lord, thou knowest;
remember me and visit me. {Jer 15:15a RSV}**

And he is feeding on the word:

**Thy words were found, and I ate them,
and thy words became to me a joy
and the delight of my heart;
for I am called by thy name,
O Lord, God of hosts. {Jer 15:16 RSV}**

He is reading his Bible, feeding on the word. And he is witnessing.

**know that for thy sake I bear reproach.
{Jer 15:15b RSV}**

He has been talking to them about the Lord. And he is separated. Look again at Verse 17:

**I did not sit in the company of merry-makers,
nor did I rejoice; {Jer 15:17a RSV}**

This is not a backsliding man, is it? For these are the very things you need to do if you get discouraged and depressed. You need to pray and read your Bible and witness to others and keep away from evil. Isn't that the answer? Isn't that the formula? But here is a man who is doing all these things and he is still defeated, still discouraged. Well, what is the problem?

The problem is that he has forgotten his calling. He has forgotten what God has promised to be to him. So God calls him back to it:

**Therefore thus says the Lord:
"If you return, I will restore you, ..."
{Jer 15:19a RSV}**

In Scripture, God always gives that answer to a heart that has grown discouraged. "Come back," God says. "Return. Go back to the beginnings, to the original things." And he says:

**"If you return, I will restore you,
and you shall stand before me.
If you utter what is precious, and not what
is worthless,
you shall be as my mouth.
They shall turn to you,
but you shall not turn to them.
And I will make you to this people
a fortified wall of bronze;
they will fight against you,
but they shall not prevail over you,
for I am with you
to save you and deliver you,**

**says the Lord.
I will deliver you out of the hand of the
wicked,
and redeem you from the grasp of the
ruthless." {Jer 15:19b-21 RSV}**

That is what God said to him at the beginning. Notice this man's call back in Chapter 1:

**Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,
"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you:
I appointed you a prophet to the nations."
{Jer 1:4-5 RSV}**

And Jeremiah said:

**"Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth." [He was probably about seventeen years of age when this call came to him.] But the Lord said to me,
"Do not say, 'I am only a youth';
for to all to whom I send you you shall go,
and whatever I command you you shall speak.
Be not afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,
says the Lord."
Then the Lord put forth his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me,
"Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.
See, I have set you this day over nations
and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to break down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant." {Jer 1:6-10 RSV}**

And when from a mire of depression and discouragement, the prophet is called back to the promise of God; when he is reminded that God is greater than circumstances and that no matter how

depressing they may be, or how negative, the God who calls him is the God who is able to sustain him in the midst of it; when he gets his eyes off himself and back on to God (like Peter walking on the water), he begins to walk again.

And in the strength he receives through this lesson he continues with his ministry, through all the discouraging circumstances, to at last be taken as a prisoner to Egypt, where he died. We have no record of his death, but Jeremiah was faithful to the end as he learned to walk in the strength of the Lord his God. And he gives us this wonderful prophecy of the grace of God in restoring lives and taking broken, battered, wounded, defeated spirits and making them over again into vessels pleasing to him.

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for the encouragement of this great prophet as we see the decay in our own nation, and the defeat of so many endeavors undertaken for your name's sake. We see the scorn and contempt for your word and for the things concerning you. We pray that you will help us to realize and remember that you are the God who opens and no man shuts and who shuts and no man opens, who does your will in the nations, who sets up and overthrows, who builds and plants, and who accomplishes all your purposes. May we get our eyes off ourselves and our circumstances and on to you and to your great purposes and be strong in you and in your power. We ask it in your name. Amen.

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LAMENTATIONS: The Therapy of Trouble

by Ray C. Stedman

The book of Lamentations is sandwiched between the books of Ezekiel and Jeremiah. This unusual book properly follows the book of Jeremiah the prophet and priest because it was written by him. It is the Lamentations of Jeremiah as he wept over the city of Jerusalem following its desolation and captivity by Nebuchadnezzar. In the Septuagint version of this – the Greek translation of the Hebrew – there is a brief notation to the effect that as Jeremiah went up on the hillside and sat overlooking the desolate city, he uttered these lamentations.

As you read through this book, you will find many foreshadowings of our Lord weeping over the city of Jerusalem. In the Lord's last week, when he went up to the Mount of Olives and sat looking out over the city, he wept over it saying,

“O, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” {Matt 23:37 RSV}

The tears ran down his face as he looked out over the city that had rejected him; this people that did not know the hour of their visitation, and had turned their backs upon the one who was their Messiah and their deliverer.

You will also find several foreshadowings of our Lord's ministry in the book of Jeremiah's Lamentations. For example, Chapter 1:

**How lonely sits the city
that was full of people!
How like a widow has she become,
{Lam 1:1a RSV}**

This is highly suggestive of our Lord's weeping over the city. Farther on we read:

**“Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?
Look and see
if there is any sorrow like my sorrow ...”
{Lam 1:12a RSV}**

This would certainly bring to the believing heart an immediate remembrance of the cross and those who watched the Lord as he hung there on it.

Then in Chapter 2, Verse 15:

**All who pass along the way
clap their hands at you;
they hiss and wag their heads
at the daughter of Jerusalem;
{Lam 2:15a RSV}**

This recalls the mockery of the multitudes at the cross. Then in Chapter 3, Verses 14 and 15:

**I have become the laughingstock of all
peoples,
the burden of their songs all day long.
He has filled me with bitterness,
he has sated me with wormwood.
{Lam 3:14-15 RSV}**

Again in Verse 19 of Chapter 3:

**Remember my affliction and my bitterness,
the wormwood and the gall!
{Lam 3:19 RSV}**

And Verse 30 of that chapter:

**let him give his cheek to the smiter,
{Lam 3:30a RSV}**

This recalls Isaiah's prophecy, "I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;" (Isa 50:6). This was fulfilled by the smiting of the Lord by the soldiers when Jesus was brought before Pilate for judgment. So this little book captures the agony and sorrow that was so much a part of our Lord's ministry at the cross that it earned him the title, "A man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief," (Isa 53:3).

The book of Lamentations is also unusual in the way it is put together. There are twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet, which begins with *aleph*, the equivalent of our 'a' and ends with *tau* which is the equivalent of our 't.' (The letter 'z,' by the way, comes around the middle of their alphabet.) In this book of Jeremiah's Lamentations, Chapters 1, 2, and 4 form an acrostic, each chapter consisting of twenty-two verses, and each verse beginning with one of each of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, beginning with aleph and ending with tau. Chapter 3 is interesting in that it consists of sixty-six verses in triads, or triplets, in which every verse making up each triad begins with the same letter of the alphabet, so that there are twenty-two groups of three altogether, one for each letter of the alphabet. These chapters have been written very, very carefully, according to the rules of Hebrew poetry. Chapter 5 does not follow this acrostic plan, although it does have twenty-two verses.

This is certainly an intriguing structure, but the real interest of this book is in its content. It is a study in sorrow, a hymn of heartbreak. This is the kind of book you might read when sorrow strikes your own heart, and sorrow comes to all of us at times. As Jeremiah was looking out over Jerusalem, he saw its desolation and he remembered the terrible, bloody battle in which Nebuchadnezzar had taken the city and sacked it, destroying the temple and killing the inhabitants.

Each chapter stresses and develops a **particular aspect of sorrow**:

Chapter 1 gives us a description of the utter depths of sorrow, the desolation of spirit that sorrow makes upon the human heart, the sense of abandonment, of complete loneliness. Here you can see how vividly the prophet has captured this feeling as he pours out the feelings of his own heart. The people have been vanquished and taken

into captivity; the city has been set on fire and totally destroyed. Verse 16:

**"For these things I weep;
my eyes flow with tears;
for a comforter is far from me,
one to revive my courage;
my children are desolate,
for the enemy has prevailed."**

{Lam 1:16 RSV}

Chapter 2 describes the thoroughness of judgment. At the beginning of this chapter you have a description of how the armies of Nebuchadnezzar utterly devastated the city. Jeremiah, however, does not attribute this destruction to the armies of Nebuchadnezzar, but to the Lord. He looks behind the immediate circumstance to what God is doing. As you read through the chapter you can see how he points out that everything has been destroyed, nothing is left. There is nothing he can put his hand on that has been preserved because of the thorough judgment of God.

Then in Chapter 3 – this long chapter of 66 verses where you have the triads of the alphabet – the prophet speaks of his own reaction, his personal pain as an individual contemplating this devastation. He begins with these words:

**I am the man who has seen affliction
under the rod of his wrath;
he has driven and brought me
into darkness without any light;
surely against me he turns his hand
again and again the whole day long.
He has made my flesh and my skin waste
away,
and broken my bones;
he has besieged and enveloped me
with bitterness and tribulation;
he has made me dwell in darkness
like the dead of long ago.**

{Lam 3:1-6 RSV}

In Chapter 4 you have what we might call the incredibility of judgment, an attitude of unbelief as the prophet remembers all that happened. Anyone who has been through this knows about these aspects of the times of grief. First, there is a sense of utter desolation. Then comes an awareness of complete devastation and deep personal pain, and then, as Jeremiah seems to feel, a kind of unbelief that this could happen, a sense of incredulity as he

contemplates the destruction of Jerusalem.
Verse 2:

**The precious sons of Zion,
worth their weight in fine gold,
how they are reckoned as earthen pots,
the work of a potter's hands! {Lam 4:2 RSV}**

As he looks out and sees the bodies of the sons of Israel – these precious young people who have been destroyed, turning to clay and dust in the streets – he says:

**Happier were the victims of the sword
than the victims of hunger [There had
been a terrible famine in the city],
who pined away, stricken
by want of the fruits of the field.
{Lam 4:9 RSV}**

And so devastating had this siege been that,

**The hands of compassionate women
have boiled their own children;
they became their food
in the destruction of the daughter of my
people. {Lam 4:10 RSV}**

This was of the most terrible sieges of all time. As the report went out, it was unbelievable (Verse 12):

**The kings of the earth did not believe,
or any of the inhabitants of the world,
that foe or enemy could enter
the gates of Jerusalem. {Lam 4:12 RSV}**

In Chapter 5 there is the utter humiliation of judgment, the feeling that Jeremiah has been thoroughly disgraced. He hardly dares lift up his head again. He says (Verses 1-5):

**Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us;
behold, and see our disgrace!
Our inheritance has been turned over to
strangers,
our homes to aliens.
We have become orphans, fatherless;
our mothers are like widows.
We must pay for the water we drink,
the wood we get must be bought.
With a yoke on our necks we are hard
driven;
we are weary, we are given no rest.
{Lam 5:1-5 RSV}**

He describes how in Verse 13:

**Young men are compelled to grind at the
mill;
and boys stagger under loads of wood.
{Lam 5:13 RSV}
The old men have quit the city gate,
the young men their music. {Lam 5:14
RSV}
The joy of our hearts has ceased; ... {Lam
5:15a RSV}
The crown has fallen from our head;
woe to us, for we have sinned! {Lam 5:16
RSV}**

What a description of the utter despair of the human spirit in the grip of deep distress and sorrow! And yet, in each of these chapters an insight is revealed, a lesson that God teaches through sorrow that otherwise would never have been learned. That is what we should look for in this book.

The book is designed to teach us through what might be called the therapy of trouble, what sorrow teaches us. All through Scripture we are told that pain and suffering are God's instruments by which he teaches us. Through suffering comes strength of character. Do not be surprised that this is true. We read in Hebrews of the Lord Jesus, "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered," (Heb 5:8 RSV). There were things the Lord Jesus had to learn and could learn only by living as a man through times of suffering and sorrow. If he was not exempt, why should we expect to be?

This is why it is never right for a Christian to say, as so many of us do, when trouble strikes, "Why should this happen to me?" Well, why shouldn't it happen to you? As Hebrews 12, Verse 10, reminds us, it is a mark of God's love. He sent it to discipline us, to teach us, and to train us.

Each chapter also reveals one particular aspect of sorrow as **teaching one particular lesson of grace:**

In Chapter 1 there is the sense of desolation and abandonment in spirit, when suddenly the prophet says in Verse 18:

**"The Lord is in the right,
for I have rebelled against his word;"
{Lam 1:18a RSV}**

While he was looking out over Jerusalem and feeling this awful sense of desolation, he suddenly realized that this was a sign that God is right. So he says, "I have rebelled against his word."

That is the problem, and the lesson. Most of us are in the habit of blaming God, either directly or indirectly, for whatever happens to us, and our attitude is usually, "Well, I don't know why this should happen to me! After all, I have been doing my best. I have been trying hard, and still these kinds of things happen." And our implication is that God is unjust, God is not right.

The Apostle Paul says, "Let God be true though every man be false," (Rom 3:4 RSV). It is impossible for God not to be right. It is impossible for man to be more just than God, because our very sense of justice is derived from him. It is impossible for man to be more compassionate than God, for our feelings of compassion come from him. You see, it is impossible for us ever to sit in judgment on God. God is right. When Jeremiah saw the utter desolation around him he learned this. As long as he had anything to prop himself up with, he could find fault with God, but when he was left utterly desolate he realized that the Lord was right.

In Chapter 2 he gains more insight into this truth. He is made aware of the thoroughness of judgment, of how meticulously God has used the armies of Nebuchadnezzar to lay everything to waste. In fact, how ruthless the Lord has been. But then he learns another insight (Verse 17):

**The Lord has done what he purposed,
has carried out his threat;
as he ordained long ago,
he has demolished without pity;
he has made the enemy rejoice over you,
and exalted the might of your foes.**
{Lam 2:17 RSV}

In other words, God is faithful. Suddenly Jeremiah realizes that this is consistent with the character of God. If he says he is going to do something, he will do it. Nothing can make him change. If you look back over the history of Israel you discover that in the book of Deuteronomy, God had said to Moses, "Moses, if my people walk in obedience to me and love me and follow me, I will pour unlimited blessing upon them. I will open the windows of heaven and just simply bless them until they can't stand it. But if they turn, if they go

aside, I will plead with them and send prophets to them and work with them and have patience with them." (And the record is that for four hundred years, God put up with the intransigence of Israel.) But God also promised that if Israel followed after other gods, he would raise up a nation to come in and devastate the land. That is exactly what God said and that is exactly what he did.

It is interesting that Jeremiah predicted how long that captivity would last. It would last seventy years (Jer 25:11). Why seventy? Well, in the Law, God required Israel to allow the land to rest fallow every seventh year. They were not to plow the soil or use it; they were to let it rest. (This is a very practical principle of agricultural conservation.) During the sixth year, to make up for the lack of food, the Lord would bless them with a superabundance of crops so they would have enough food to carry them through that seventh year. But Israel never obeyed that command. They continued using the land from the time they entered it. In a sense they robbed God of seventy years of rest for the land. They used it continuously for 490 years so God sent them out of it and rested the land for 70 years.

How faithful God is to his promise. The Lord is utterly faithful. There is a widespread belief that God is so loving, so tenderhearted, that he just gives in when you pressure him a little, that he won't do what he says he is going to do. But that idea has been put to rest forever by one of the greatest verses in the Bible (Rom. 8:32): "He who did not spare his own Son..." Think of that. When he was made sin for us, God did not spare him. That is how unflinching God is in following through on his word. "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all..." And yet that verse ends in glory, doesn't it? "... will he not also give us all things with him?" One side of it is just as true as the other. Jeremiah learned that God is faithful by the thoroughness of judgment.

Then in Chapter 3 where you read of Jeremiah's personal pain, we come to a tremendous passage. Suddenly, in the midst of a long wail, he says (Verse 22-33):

**The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is thy faithfulness.**
"The Lord is my portion," says my soul,

“therefore I will hope in him.”
The Lord is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul that seeks him.
It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the Lord.
It is good for a man that he bear
the yoke in his youth.
Let him sit alone in silence
when he has laid it on him;
let him put his mouth in the dust –
there may yet be hope;
let him give his cheek to the smiter,
and be filled with insults.
For the Lord will not
cast off for ever,
but, though he cause grief, he will have
compassion
according to the abundance of his stead-
fast love;
for he does not willingly afflict
or grieve the sons of men.
{Lam 3:22-33 RSV}

In many ways, this is one of the most beautiful passages in all the Bible. It reveals the compassion of the heart of God. Judgment, as Isaiah says, is his strange work. He does not like to do it. He does not willingly afflict or grieve the sons of men. His mercies are fresh every morning. In his own pain Jeremiah remembers this: that behind all the desolation is the work of love. God destroyed Jerusalem because it was heading the wrong way. He destroyed it so that he could restore it later, and build it up again in joy and peace and blessing. The Lord does not cast off forever; though he causes grief, he will have compassion.

At the end of Chapter 4, the prophet says in Verse 22:

The punishment of your iniquity, O daugh-
ter of Zion, is accomplished,
he will keep you in exile no longer;
but your iniquity, O daughter of Edom, he
will punish,
he will uncover your sins.
{Lam 4:22 RSV}

The daughter of Zion is Israel. The daughter of Edom refers to the country bordering Israel that was always a thorn in their flesh. Edom is always used in scripture as a picture of the flesh. The Edomites were related to Israel. They were the children of Esau, who is always a picture of the flesh. The prophet is saying, “God will set a limit

to the punishment of his own. He never drives them too far. He never disciplines them too harshly. There is a limit. The punishment is accomplished. He will keep them in exile no longer; but as to the flesh, it has been utterly set aside and Edom will be punished.”

Chapter 5 describes the humiliation of judgment, but in the end, Jeremiah comes to another flash of insight (Verse 19):

But thou, O Lord, dost reign for ever;
thy throne endures to all generations.
{Lam 5:19 RSV}

What does this mean? Well, it means that though man may even perish in sorrow, God endures. And because God endures, the great purpose and workings of God endure. God never does anything temporarily; all that he does endures forever. Jeremiah sees that what God has taught him in his grief will have a practical use. Even if he were to die in the midst of his grief, God’s purposes endure. God is simply preparing now for a work yet to come. God is not limited by time. He is eternal. His throne, his authority, endures to all generations. In practical terms, the prophet is realizing that after he has been through this time of grief, he will have learned a truth about God that will make him absolutely impervious to any other kind of test. Once he has been through this, nothing can reach him, nothing can upset him, nothing can trouble him, nothing can touch him or overthrow him. He is now ready for anything. And in God’s great purpose there will be an opportunity to use that strength.

I often think of those words of our Lord recorded in the fourteenth chapter of Luke when he tells his disciples the two parables about counting the cost. One involved the man who went out to do battle and met a king coming against him with an army. Jesus said, “What man of you will do that and not sit down first and count the cost?” Or, in the other parable about building a tower, who will not count the cost to see if he has enough to finish the building? Usually we interpret this as our Lord saying to us, “If you are going to become a Christian, you should think it through. You should count the cost. You should see if you really mean business and are going to carry this through.” Nothing could be further from the Lord’s meaning. What he is saying is, “I am the one who has to count the

cost. I, as your Lord and Master, do not go out to build a tower without sitting down first and counting the cost. Nor do I go out to do battle with a fierce king without first being sure that I have what it takes to win this battle.”

In this passage, Jesus is explaining why he said to the disciples, “Except a man forsake his mother and father and son and daughter he cannot be my disciple.” As they wondered at this, he said “You are wondering why I am so severe with you. I will tell you. It is because I am going out to do a great work of building. I will build my church and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it. I am going out to do battle with a great foe, a foe of cleverness and ruthlessness, and I have to be sure that the men who follow me are men on whom I can depend. I have to count the cost.”

In other words, “I have to get you ready for a battle that is going to go on far beyond this life. So I want men who will be mine, who will be absolutely, wholly mine so I can train them, prepare them, and bring them through trials and hardships, teaching them the great principles. When we finally get up against it, up against the real conflict, I will have men that I can depend upon. But I will have counted the cost.”

That is what he is talking about. When we learn our lessons here – when we learn how to handle sorrow and heartache and desolation of spirit in this limited way here – we will be prepared so that nothing can overthrow us; we will be unconquerable in the battle that God faces in the subjugation of the entire universe.

I often think of this: What lies beyond? Is not God preparing us now to do a mightier work in the future? Is he not getting us ready to carry on a conflict that will extend to the uttermost reaches of this vast universe of ours? Of course he is. God never does anything without a purpose. He never creates anything without intending to use it. And all this lies ahead of us. That is why it is so important that we learn how to face up to sorrow and to learn what God would have us to learn in the midst of it.

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for this book of Lamentations. for its lesson to our hearts, that we may learn to be strong for your name’s sake. to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might, to be ready for that great day and that greater conflict yet to come. In Christ’s name, Amen.

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EZEKIEL: Wheels, Bones, and Restoration

by Ray C. Stedman

A man was up on his roof fixing his television aerial when he slipped and began to slide down toward the gutters. He tried to catch himself, but he went over the edge. He managed to grab hold of the eaves troughs as he dropped, and he hung there, suspended from the eaves. He couldn't look down and he didn't know how far it was to the ground, and in his desperation he cried out. "Oh, God help me!" And a voice replied, "I am ready to help you." And he said, "Tell me what to do." The voice asked. "Do you trust me?" He said, "Yes, I trust you." The voice said. "All right then. Let go." And man asked, "Is there anybody else up there who can help me?"

This is always the problem of men who, because of circumstances, will not believe in God, who refuse to put their faith and trust in a God who has revealed himself to them as perfectly adequate and perfectly trustworthy and perfectly faithful. The French philosopher Montaigne, writing quite apart from Christian revelation, said, "Every man carries within himself the history of the world." By that he meant that history is simply a written record of what is already written in the confines of the human heart.

The history of the world is only an extension of any individual life. The book of Ezekiel traces the causes of the captivity of the nation Israel, and why it was in so much trouble. This is the story of the nation, but it is the story of any individual as well. And because it is the story of any individual, it is the story of the whole of mankind. The books of the Old Testament were written with this principle in mind. They are, therefore, extremely valuable

for us – what happens to the nation is exactly what happens to us. By looking carefully, we can see our problems and circumstances exemplified in the problems and circumstance set forth in these books.

Ezekiel was a captive in the land of Babylon. He had been carried away by Nebuchadnezzar when the nation of Judah was taken captive, as described by Jeremiah's great prophecy. So, Ezekiel is the first prophet of the captivity. There were two prophets during the captivity – Ezekiel and Daniel. Ezekiel was older than Daniel and prophesied during the first twenty or twenty-five years of that seventy-year period when Israel was held captive by Babylon.

The story of this book is the story of human life and the book begins with a tremendous vision of God, because all life starts with God. God is the greatest fact in existence, in history. If you are going to think about anything, you have to start somewhere. Anyone who wants to think logically about life must always begin with God. That is where the Bible begins. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," {Gen 1:1 RSV} This book of Ezekiel begins, then, with a mystic vision of God. The glory of the prophet Ezekiel was that he saw God more clearly than any of the other prophets. If your heart needs to be set on fire by the revelation of the character and glory of God, read Ezekiel. He is the great prophet who saw the glory of God.

The book opens dramatically with the vision that Ezekiel saw by the River Chebar in the land of Babylon:

As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, and a great cloud, with brightness round about it, and fire flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, as it were gleaming bronze. {Ezek 1:4 RSV}

That is a sight dramatic enough to arrest anyone's attention. Then he says,

And from the midst of it came the likeness of four living creatures. {Ezek 1:5a RSV}

And he describes these creatures to us. Each had four faces – the faces of a man, an eagle, an ox, and a lion. These four faces turned in every direction, faced every way. After he saw the four living creatures, he saw certain wheels. (These are described in an old song: “Ezekiel saw a 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 that these wheels were turning, one wheel within the other. As he watched he also saw a firmament above, shining in splendor, and above the firmament, as he lifted his eyes higher, he saw a throne. And on the throne sat a man.

Now, if you have read the book of Revelation you will recognize great similarities to what John saw. John also saw four living creatures. He, too, saw a throne, and on the throne a man. This, then, is a revelation of the greatness and the majesty of God, told in symbolic form.

We can't interpret all of this, because there is a mystery about the person of God. But what Ezekiel sees is, generally speaking, the power and the majesty of God. It is interesting that the four living creatures setting forth the character of God are always described as having the faces of a lion, a man, an ox, and an eagle. And throughout all of history these things have symbolically represented certain qualities. A lion is always a picture of sovereignty, of supremacy – “the king of the beasts.” A man is the picture of intelligence, of understanding. An ox is always the symbol of servitude, of sacrifice. And an eagle is the symbol of power and deity, of soaring over all creation. Now the significant thing is that the four gospels present exactly these same qualities in Jesus Christ:

- He appears first in the Gospel of Matthew as the king – the lion, the king of beasts, the sovereign of all.
- He appears in the Gospel of Mark as the servant, the ox.
- In the Gospel of Luke, he is man in his intelligence, in his insight, in his understanding of life.
- And in the Gospel of John he is deity.

These four reflect the character of Jesus Christ.

Now, even though Ezekiel doesn't understand this, even though he doesn't perceive the significance of his vision; he saw nonetheless the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (cf, 2 Cor 4:6). That is because God reveals himself through Christ. Ezekiel saw as clearly as he could the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

Then Ezekiel moves quickly into prophecies that have to do with the failure of man. And these are described at great length. As Ezekiel watches in visions, he sees the glory of God departing from the temple in Jerusalem, leaving the inner court and moving to the outer court, and then rising and moving out to the Mount of Olives, and rising up from there.

Of course, 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 that mountain into glory.

At this point there comes a lengthy passage where Ezekiel traces the degradation of man, the result of men's rejection of God's grace. And he tells how God struggles with those people, calling them; how he tries to win them, to waken them to the foolishness of turning their backs on the glory of God. At last they go through times of difficulty and heartache and punishment, as God seeks constantly to bring them to their senses, to waken them to what they are doing – to show them that man is made to fellowship with God and that without God he only goes farther and farther into weakness and folly and degradation.

The prophet is called upon to convey God's message in symbolic and dramatic ways. On one

occasion he is asked by God to lie on his left side every day for 390 days (that is more than a year of lying on his left side!), and then to lie on his right side for 40 days – all of which is a picture of the 390 years that God had struggled to try 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 to come in and sweep the people away, sacking the city and desolating the temple and taking all the people into the land of Babylon.

Here you find the reasons why man is debauched and degraded, and Ezekiel sets forth the righteousness of God's judgment. When man chooses to avoid the God who made him, what else is there but judgment? If we neglect God, who is utterly essential to our being, and we refuse to give heed to his love and his grace, then the only thing left for us is to experience the results of turning our backs to him.

The prophet sees through all the judgment that came upon this people, he sees through to the forces behind. In Chapter 28 there is a remarkable passage where the prophet speaks about the judgment upon the land of Tyre and Sidon. He speaks of the prince of Tyre and, behind him, an individual whom he calls the king of Tyre.

Most Bible scholars have recognized that, because of the height of vision from which this prophet speaks, he is talking not only about the actual prince of the city of Tyre – the man who was then on the throne in that seafaring city – but he is looking beyond him and the visible things of Tyre, to that sinister individual he calls the king of Tyre. This king symbolizes what are referred to in the New Testament as principalities and powers, the world rulers of this present darkness who manipulate things on earth and cause events we see recorded in our daily newspapers. In other words, these are the Satanic powers.

In Chapter 28 you have a passage that many Bible scholars think can be fully understood only as it applies to the fall of Satan himself. And this is one of only two passages in the whole Bible that describes the fall of Satan:

**“Your heart was proud because of your beauty;
you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor.**

**I cast you to the ground;
I exposed you before kings,
to feast their eyes on you.
By the multitude of your iniquities,
in the unrighteousness of your trade
you profaned your sanctuaries;”
{Ezek 28:17-18a RSV}**

The reason for Satan's fall is given in Isaiah 14, where the Prince of Darkness says “I will” five times {Isa 14:13-14}. And here God judges that pride, which exalts self instead of God.

Now the prophet turns to the restoring grace of God, and in Chapter 37 is the remarkable vision of the Valley of the Dry Bones. This, also, has given rise to well-known song. The prophet see this vision as he looks out over the valley of dry bones: the bones join together at the command of God, but there is no breath in them. And then God comes and breathes upon them and they come to life again. This picture of God's restoring grace illustrates what God intends to do with the nation Israel. As far as God is concerned, it has been lying now for more the nineteen centuries in a state of death, but a day is coming when God will breathe upon this nation. Like these dry bones, it will receive new life, and God will use it to re-establish his kingdom on earth.

In Chapters 38 and 39 the prophet sees into the far distant future to the last attack upon Israel, when enemies of the land will be met by heavenly forces that will judge them upon the mountains of Israel and bury them there.

Then, beginning in Chapter 40, the restoration of the millennial temple is foreseen. In this great vision the prophet is shown the temple in precise detail: the glory of God returning to the Holy of Holies, the Shekinah establishing itself in the Holy of Holies once more. The book closes with the wonderful passage in Chapter 47 that describes his vision of the throne of God. Underneath the throne comes the river of God, sweeping through the temple, out into the eastern side, down across the land, and into the Dead Sea to heal its waters. It is a marvelous picture of the Spirit of God in the day of the millennial kingdom.

Now that is the literal interpretation of this book – a prophecy of the restoration of Israel. But that does not by any means exhaust the meaning of this book. If we read this as referring only to that literal fulfillment, we will miss much of the value and all of the beauty of this book, for this entire

story can be applied to you as an individual. What God does on a large scale in the history of the world, he is ready to do on a smaller scale in the history of your life. As he is ready to call back out of death and to give life to a nation that turns to him in the midst of its degradation and weakness – as he was ready to do for Israel – so he is ready to do with an individual. Here, then, is a beautiful picture of the saving grace of Jesus Christ, making us alive in him, calling us back into the glory of the manhood and womanhood that God intends for us. Then follows a picture of the enemies we face, and how God goes before us and destroys them one by one as we walk by faith.

Finally, there is the wonderful picture of the restored temple in man. Now what is the temple in man? In the New Testament, Paul says that “we are the temple of the living God,” (2 Cor 6:16b RSV). But what in us is the temple in which God dwells? It is the human spirit. Our spirit was made to be a holy of holies in which the living God dwells. The secret, then, of a full human experience – an exciting life, a life of continuing significance and meaning – is a life in which the resources of the Holy Spirit are discovered. Now this is beautifully portrayed for us in this picture in the forty-seventh chapter of Ezekiel. I want to end with this, for I think this highlights the whole emphasis of the book:

Then he [the angel] brought me back to the door of the temple; and behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east); and the water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar. Then he brought me out by way of the north gate, and led me round on the outside of the outer gate, that faces toward the east; and the water was coming out on the south side.

Going on eastward with a line in his hand, the man measured a thousand cubits, and then led me through the water; and it was ankle-deep. Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water; and it was knee-deep. Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water; and it was up to the loins. Again he measured a thousand, and it was a river that I could not pass through, for the water had risen; it was deep enough to swim in, a

river that could not be passed through. And he said to me, “Son of man, have you seen this?”

Then he led me back along the bank of the river. As I went back, I saw upon the bank of the river very many trees on the one side and on the other. And he said to me, “This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah; and when it enters the stagnant waters of the sea, the water will become fresh. And wherever the river goes every living creature which swarms will live, and there will be very many fish; for this water goes there, that the waters of the sea may become fresh; so everything will live where the river goes.” {Ezek 47:1-9 RSV}

Does that remind you of anything? Do you read in that and hear in that our Lord’s words recorded in John 7 when he stood at the temple on the last day of the feast and said, “If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. ... ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’ Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive;” (John 7:37b-39a RSV). This is the resource of the Christian life.

Let us look at the various aspects of this resource:

1. First of all, there is the source of the river. Where does it come from? Ezekiel said, “I saw a throne and issuing out from under the throne came the river.” The waters of the Spirit come from the very throne of God, from the supremacy of his authority, the highest point in the universe, the place where our Lord Jesus received the promised gift of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

As the prophet watches, he sees that it takes its way down past the altar, the place of sacrifice. And one of the great things that we have to learn as Christians is that we can never drink of the river of the Spirit unless we are willing to do so by means of the cross of Calvary. It is only as we are willing to accept the judgment of death upon the flesh – the natural man and his abilities, ambitions, and desires – that we can drink of the river of the Spirit of God.

2. Then, notice 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 great, gushing, mighty torrent of life coming out from under the throne of God. As you read this, notice the experience of the prophet. He is led into this step-by-step; three times he says, “And he led me through.”

Is God leading you through? Have you ever had that experience?

- The first step is to the place where the waters are ankle deep. Isn't that a picture of a man who has experienced only a shallow sense of God's grace and power in his life? He is a Christian but he is what the Scriptures call a carnal Christian – still filled with bickerings and fightings and inner turmoils. He has not learned anything of the peace of God. He is disobedient. He fights against God's grace every time he turns around. He's in just ankle deep. And a lot of people stay there.
- But then the prophet says, “He led me through, and it was knee deep.” The waters get hold of his knees. Have the waters got there with you yet? Have you begun to hunger and thirst and to pray and to seek the face of God? Here is a man who is not satisfied any more with just being born again. He is hungering after something. He is on his knees. He is crying out to God, yearning for more.
- “And he led me through,” he says, and the waters come up to the loins. It is beginning to possess him. There is less of him now, and more of the grace of God. The loins are always the symbol of power and he has come, then, to the place where he has begun to grasp something of the power of God, to grasp the fact that it is “not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord” that the Christian life is lived (Zech 4:6b RSV). It is not his eager desire to do something for God, or his consecrated zeal to follow it through, but rather, his quiet dependence upon an indwelling Spirit that is the secret.

- Then he goes one step further and says, “He led me on and the water had risen and it had become a river to swim in.” Here is someone who is utterly committed. He is over his head. He is out there where he is swept along in the current of God's grace. And what is the effect of this river on the land? As the prophet is led back along the banks he says, “I see trees on either side of it” – fruitfulness. The barrenness of the land has been healed. The river is fertile; everywhere the river flows, things begin to live.

Have you learned this yet? All of this is written for us. John sees the same river, in Revelation. “Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God ... through the middle of the street of the city;” (Rev. 22:1-2a RSV). It flows right through the middle of life. Have you found the river of the Spirit yet? It is as we learn these mighty truths that Christian life begins to make sense. Until then, it is nothing but a plodding, dogged, difficult path, a struggle to try to keep things straight. But when we begin to experience the mighty, gushing torrent of the rivers of living water – the flow of the Spirit of God right through the center of life – everything begins to live, and life becomes significant and full for us.

The prophet sees this. And he closes this beautiful book with a description of the temple (which, by the way, may ultimately picture the resurrection body which is the new temple for God). But look at the last verse of the prophecy. He says:

The circumference of the city shall be eighteen thousand cubits. [Vast, unlimited, a great city.] **And the name of the city henceforth shall be, “The LORD is there.”** {Ezek 48:35 RSV}

That is what Ezekiel called it. The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch {cf, Acts 11:26}. They did not call *themselves* Christians. They were *called* Christians. *Christian* means “Christ-one” – one who belongs to Christ. And as the people in Antioch looked at these peculiar people, they called them “Christ-ones” because the Lord was there.

Prayer:

Our Father, we pray that this may be our experience, that we may see this mighty flow of the river of God in our lives and, discovering its power and its grace and its depth, commit ourselves to you so that there may be healing and fertility and escape from barrenness in our lives. Thank you, Lord, for this beautiful picture and for

the truth that lies behind it. Thank you that these things can be our experience right now through Jesus Christ our Lord, the one who is the fulfillment of the image of God – that as we look at him, we are changed from glory to glory, even into the same image. We thank you for these mighty things, and ask that they be true in our experience as well as in our faith. In Christ's name, Amen.

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DANIEL: On the Way to the Future

by Ray C. Stedman

Almost everyone looks at the book of Daniel with a sense of wonder and anticipation, because this is usually regarded as a prophetic book foretelling the future. This is true. The book of Daniel, together with the book of Revelation, marvelously unfolds future events as God has ordained them in the program of history. By no means has this book yet been fulfilled, neither has the book of Revelation. These two books, one from the Old and one from the New Testament, remarkably complement each other in their symmetry and harmony. The book of Revelation explains the book of Daniel. The book of Daniel lays the basis for the book of Revelation. If you would like to know God's program for the future, it is essential that you understand this book of Daniel.

But knowledge of the future can be a very dangerous thing. Imagine what would happen if any or all of us possessed the ability to know what is going to happen in the days ahead. Think what an advantage that would give us in the stock market, in the buying of insurance, and in other practical matters of life. By and large, God does not unfold the future to us – certainly not in detail and certainly not any individual's future. But what he does show us in the prophetic Scriptures is the general trend of events and where it will all end. Anyone who investigates this area thoughtfully, carefully, and scripturally will discover significant and helpful things about what is happening in our world today. Everything that is happening is working out God's purposes on earth. These will all end exactly as God has foretold. We can understand what is happening today if we know what the prophetic program is. God has taken two precautions in this matter of unveiling the future:

1. First, he has clothed these prophetic passages in symbolic language. He has given them to us

in figurative form. That is why in these prophetic books unusual things appear, strange beasts with many different heads and horns sticking out here and there, and images of all kinds, and other indescribable visions. You have the same thing in the Book of Revelation – bizarre beasts with strange combinations of characteristics.

These have always puzzled people. You can't just sit down with the book of Daniel and the book of Revelation and read them through and understand them as you would a novel. You have to study them, taking the whole of the Bible to interpret the symbols in the books of Daniel and Revelation. This is one of the locks that God has provided to keep curious minds from getting into these books without an adequate background in Scripture. You cannot understand what is going on in them without first knowing a great deal of the rest of the Bible. These symbolic things are signs erected by God, and signs are given to us so that we may understand facts that are otherwise hidden. God's program for the future is hidden from us until we spend time understanding the signs, and these books are full of signs.

2. A second precaution God has taken in Daniel, and even more especially in the book of Revelation, is that he doesn't introduce the prophetic section first, but brings us through six chapters into an understanding of the moral character he requires of the reader before the prophetic program can begin to make sense. In other words, you can't understand the last section of Daniel unless you have lived through and understood what is involved in the first six chapters.

There is no way to understand what the prophetic program means unless you first grasp the moral lessons of the first part of the book. There is no way to cheat on this. You can't just read it through, and then turn to the prophetic program and hope to understand. You will find that you get nothing out of it. You really have to carefully analyze these initial chapters, think them through, begin to walk accordingly, and experience them, before the prophetic program comes to life. That is the glory of God's book. You can't understand it with just the intellect.

You can sit down with the prophetic outlines of Daniel and of Revelation, draw charts, spend your time explaining to people what all these things mean and how God's program is going to work out, and analyze it down to a gnat's eyebrow – but unless you have incorporated these lessons of the first part of the book into your own life, you will discover nothing there to enrich your life.

The Lord Jesus himself points this out during the Olivet Discourse when his disciples asked him to name the sign of his coming and what the symbol of his return to earth would be. Jesus said, "So when you see the desolating sacrilege spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place then ... let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains," (Matt 24:15-16 RSV); "Get out of the city of Jerusalem, because things will happen there that will tremendously affect the people living in that area. Then is the time to flee the city, for the great tribulation will be upon you." When he said, "When you see the desolating sacrilege standing in the holy place," he added in parentheses these words, "let the reader understand," {Matt 24:15b RSV}. That is, don't read through Daniel superficially. Think it through. Give yourself to thought on this. You have to understand what he is talking about before you will be able to recognize the desolating sacrilege, or abomination of desolation, when it comes. This is why the Lord went on to say that the world in its superficial approach to truth will not understand when it cries, "Peace, peace, peace," for there will be no peace; sudden destruction will come upon them and they will be swept away just as the people of Noah's day were swept away when the flood came {cf, Matt 24:36-44}.

Now all of this is a warning to take the book of Daniel seriously and to endeavor to understand the structure of this book as we delve into it. This book divides very simply into two sections, as I have already suggested. The first six chapters are a history of the prophet Daniel himself and his friends in the land of Babylon – **men of faith in a hostile world**.

Let me tell you that there is no section of Scripture more helpful to someone who is trying to live as a Christian in difficult surroundings, than these first six chapters of Daniel. If you are working in a company surrounded by a godless crowd who are taking the name of God in vain every moment, who agree with the ideas and attitudes of the world and its ways, and who make fun of the things of God, showing little interest in what God says to mankind, then I suggest that you read carefully the book of Daniel.

The first six chapters are for you if you are a teenager going to school where you are surrounded constantly by those who seem to have no interest in what God is like, or in the things of God. Daniel and his friends were themselves teenagers when they were first taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar and carried off to the land of Babylon. As they began their career of faith, they did so with a total lack of understanding of life and with all the insecurity of a teenager in a hostile environment. The book records in these first six chapters the pressure they underwent as they stood for their faith in the midst of these difficult surroundings.

In Chapter 1 the young men are confronted with the necessity of changing their diet. Ordinarily, there would be nothing particularly significant in that. Many of us could stand that, perhaps frequently. But these young men already have been told by God what they are not to eat, and the very things that they were told not to eat are the things that are required eating for them as prisoners in the palace of the king of Babylon.

What are they to do? This king is the most powerful tyrant who shall ever have lived on earth. The Bible itself records that there was no king that had ever lived before Nebuchadnezzar or would ever live after him who was equal to him in authority. There were no restraints whatsoever upon what he desired to do. His word was absolute law. He could take any man's life at any time. Later on in his reign, he took the lives of the sons of the king of Judah as their father watched and then had the

father's eyes put out. Another man was burned to death over a slow fire. This king was an expert in torture. So these young teenagers facing this test know that they have to either comply with the king's demands or forfeit their lives.

What can they do? They feel all the pressure and they hear all the familiar arguments that any person hears today to try to get them to give up acting on the basis of faith. They surely hear the argument, in whatever form it took in those days, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." "Everybody else is doing this; what difference does it make what you eat? So what if you have a ham sandwich with these Babylonians? What's the difference?" After all, they are prisoners in a country far away from home. Their own country has been laid waste. Who will know, or care, what they do? They feel that pressure. But these young men stand fast and God honors them. God gives them the grace to stand despite that pressure, and as a result they are exalted and given positions of authority and responsibility in that kingdom. This story of repeated pressure goes right on through this book.

In Chapter 2 you see part of the reason for this kind of testing for these particular young men. It comes out more clearly here, in the story of the great dream vision of King Nebuchadnezzar. He dreams one night of a great image of a man with a strange body. He had a head of gold, shoulders of silver, mid-section of brass, legs of iron, and feet of a clay and iron mixture. But he forgets his dream. He calls in the wise men and asks them to tell him not only the interpretation, but the dream as well. (I've often wondered if this wasn't the beginning of that popular song, *You tell me your dream and I'll tell you mine.*) The astrologers and the soothsayers and the sorcerers of Babylon are totally unable to come up with anything. Obviously, if the king can't tell them the dream, then they can't dream up an interpretation. Thus their lives are forfeit.

Daniel is placed in the middle of this situation. Again God's man is pressured and threatened with death if he does not conform.

Again God's man comes through, as he always does when he is willing to stand and obey God despite the pressures. God overrules in the affairs of men. Life is never determined by mere superficial pressures. The outcome that seems logically inevitable as you face a situation is not necessarily the outcome that will happen if you are trusting in the invisible God who rules the affairs of men. And

that is the great lesson of this book all the way through. You find it beautifully expressed by Daniel in his prayer to God in Chapter 2:

**"Blessed by the name of God for ever and ever,
to whom belongs wisdom and might.
He changes times and seasons;
he removes kings and sets up kings;
he gives wisdom to the wise
and knowledge to those who have understanding;
he reveals deep and mysterious things;
he knows what is in the darkness,
and the light dwells with him."
{Dan 2:20-22 RSV}**

If you are in touch with a God like that, you don't need to worry what the crowd is doing. For that same God is able to carry you through and to work the situation out no matter how impossible it looks. That is exactly the story of Daniel, repeated five different times through these first six chapters.

And God gives to Daniel and his friends the privilege of obliging the most powerful man on earth to recognize the overall government of God. Do you know that this is exactly the position every believer is placed in today? 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. He is a great old man in the sky, off there somewhere, who doesn't really affect anything that happens down here. That is the world's philosophy.

But every believer is put into a position in which,

- if they walk faithfully,
- if they obey what God says despite the pressures that are put upon them,
- they are given the privilege of opening the eyes of men to the fact
 - that God exists,
 - that he is not dead,
 - that he is at work in the affairs of men, and
 - that he is a power to be reckoned with.

In Chapter 3 you have the story of the fiery furnace. The young men are commanded to bow down before the image which Nebuchadnezzar erected, pridefully thinking of the image in his dream. Because he was told that he represented the head of gold, that he was the great king of earth, in pride he lifted himself up and caused an image to be erected on the plain. It was a huge image, as tall as some of our rockets that we shoot into the sky, and the whole crowd is gathered on the plain, with these three young men among them.

All are ordered to bow down and worship the image. In order to encourage them, a great furnace was built at the other end of the plain, and they are told that if they don't bow down, that is where they will end. Now that is a lot of pressure for young people to bear, and they have some additional inducements as well. There is a band – and what a band! The instruments are given to us here and we don't even recognize the names of all of them. When the band plays – the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every other kind of instruments – everybody falls down and worships. All except the three young men.

When they are brought before Nebuchadnezzar, he orders them to fall down. Then they say these wonderful words, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter," (Dan 3:16b RSV). They are not being impertinent. They mean that they do not need to take any time to think over their answer. "We don't need to take any counsel. We know what to say."

"If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace; and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not," [Those are words of faith: "But if not – our God is able to, but we don't know the mind of God. His thoughts are greater than our thoughts. His ways are different than ours. It may be that he won't do it. But even if he doesn't,"] **be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods nor worship the golden image which you have set up."** {Dan 3:18b RSV}

Now these are young men who have learned that there are things more important than life. It is better to be dead and obedient to God than alive and disobedient to him. It is far more profitable to the individual concerned to walk with God at the

cost of life itself than to be disobedient to what God has said. God will never be in any man's debt, therefore he greatly honors these young men. As a result, they come out of the furnace without even the smell of fire upon them. You know the record. What an amazing story that is!

Then in Chapter 4 you have the conversion of Nebuchadnezzar. Did you know that this whole chapter is the testimony of the greatest king that ever lived, the greatest tyrant that ever ruled? It is the story of how God broke the pride of his heart, humiliated him, humbled him, allowed him to exercise his pride until it resulted in what always results when men live in pride – madness. He went out and ate grass in the field for seven years. His throne was preserved, but he acted like an animal. This is what always happens to man when he chooses to walk out of fellowship with the living God. He becomes animal-like, beastly, brutish. King Nebuchadnezzar became like an animal.

Then the king tells how his reason was restored to him by the grace of God, and his closing word in this chapter is a great testimony of his faith, of how God humbled him and brought him back:

Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven; for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to abase. {Dan 4:37 RSV}

Who brought him to this? Humanly speaking, it was Daniel and his friends; four young men were used of God to win the heart of the greatest king of the greatest empire the world has yet seen.

Now look at Chapter 5. Here is the story of the handwriting on the wall, the familiar story of King Belshazzar. Note the luxury and licentiousness and the lust of that kingdom – a degenerating, deteriorating kingdom – yet in the midst of it Daniel, having lived through three empires, is still prime minister. God uses him to interpret this strange figure of the hand that appears and writes upon the wall: the judgment of God upon that licentious king. This bears out the thesis of this book – that God is at work in the affairs of men, and any man who sees beyond the things that are seen to the things that are unseen, and acts accordingly, will find that God is with him, supporting him and strengthening him all along the way, bringing him out to the praise of his glory.

Chapter 6 tells of the lions' den and it is the same story told in still another way. Darius throws Daniel into the lions' den, but God sent his angel to shut the lions' mouths. Daniel is brought out again, delivered by the hand of God.

Chapter 7 begins **the prophetic section**, starting with the vision of the four beasts. It is interesting that these four beasts cover the same period of time as the four divisions of the image that Nebuchadnezzar had seen in Chapter 2. That image had a head of gold, symbolizing the Babylonian kingdom; shoulders of silver, for Media-Persia; the trunk of brass symbolizing the Grecian empire, and then the 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 clear past our own day, to the end of time and the return of Jesus Christ. For as the prophet watches, he sees a stone cut out without a hand strike the image on its feet, utterly demolishing it, and then grow to be a great mountain to fill the earth. Clearly this pictures the kingdom of God and the return of Jesus Christ.

In Chapter 7, then, the four beasts represent the same kingdoms, but from God's point of view. They are nothing but beasts growling and fighting and quarreling with each other. I think Dr. Scofield points out that all the symbols of modern nations are representations of birds or of beasts of prey. Our own nation is symbolized by an eagle, a bird of prey. The British Empire is a lion. Russia is a bear. The prophet sees these nations struggling together culminating in the powerful reign of a single individual over the whole of this Western world.

Then in Chapter 8 you see the movement of Western history. The ram and the he-goat come together, and this is a picture, as we are told later in Chapter 11, of the conquest by Alexander the Great and the rise of the kingdom of the Seleucids in Syria as opposed to the Ptolemies in Egypt. These two families occupied the center of history for centuries after that – the struggle between Syria and Egypt, with little Israel caught in the middle. The battle rages back and forth, and today Israel is the most fought-over country in all of history. More battles have occurred in the land of Israel than in any other spot on the face of the earth, and

it is in that very same area where the last great battle – the battle of Armageddon – is yet to be fought.

In the midst of this, in Chapter 9, is Daniel's wonderful prayer as he pours his heart out to God. The answer to his prayer, in the last section of the chapter, is one of the most remarkable prophecies in all the Bible: the prophecy of the seventy weeks. This is the timetable of prophecy concerning the nation Israel. It gives us the principle that is called "the great parenthesis" – God has interrupted his program for Israel and has inserted between the first coming and the second coming of the Lord Jesus the present age in which we live.

This indeterminate period, which has now spanned more than nineteen hundred years, comes between the sixty-ninth week of years and the seventieth of the 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 and is yet to be fulfilled.

Then Chapter 10 presents the things unseen which are behind the things that are seen. This is another great revelation of God's sovereign government in the affairs of men and is the explanation for the events of history. What causes the things that happen today? Well, there are unseen forces at work, and these forces are here clearly revealed to Daniel.

Chapter 11 is one of the most remarkable chapters in the Bible in that it records prophecy that, for the most part, has been fulfilled in detail. It foretells the struggle between the king of Syria and the king of Egypt which took place after Daniel's day. It is prophetically and historically fulfilled. These historic events are described in great detail and cover two or three hundred years of history. You can see that the prophecies here have been worked out exactly in the pattern of history. Among other outstanding individuals, Cleopatra appears in this chapter, prophetically foretold.

When you come to the thirty-sixth verse of the eleventh chapter, a noteworthy break occurs. It is introduced by the previous verse, in which the angel says to Daniel:

"... and some of those who are wise shall fall, to refine and to cleanse them and to make them white, until the time of the end,

for it is yet for the time appointed.” {Dan 11:35 RSV}

Here begins a passage that deals with that seventieth week of Daniel that is yet to be fulfilled – the time of the end, the last days, the ultimate arrangement of earth’s kingdoms just before the return of Jesus Christ. This remarkable 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 there on the mountains of Israel. This is also clearly described in the thirty-eighth and thirty-ninth chapters of Ezekiel and the second chapter of Joel. And you will find other prophetic references to this.

The beginning of Chapter 12 introduces the greatest event of history yet to be fulfilled: the coming again of Jesus Christ. It is not mentioned as such here, but this is what Daniel hears:

“At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people [Israel]. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time; but at that time your people shall be delivered, every one whose name shall be found written in the book.” {Dan 12:1 RSV}

This is followed by a resurrection:

“And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” {Dan 12:2 RSV}

And the final judgment of God:

“And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.” {Dan 12:3 RSV}

Then Daniel is given a sign of when this will occur:

“But you, Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, until the time of the end. Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase.” {Dan 12:4 RSV}

Many Bible scholars understand this to be an indication that as we near that time, transportation and knowledge will rapidly increase just as they have in our own time.

One last thing about this final chapter is important. Daniel asks certain questions of the angel who has revealed this to him, and then he is given to understand two great principles that are at work in human life. You and I often hear people discussing what is happening in the world, with newspaper commentators and others constantly pouring into our ears reports of terrible things. People often say, “What is happening? Is the world getting worse and worse or is it getting better and better?”

On one hand you will hear people describe things in such a way that you are bound to say, “Well, the world is getting worse and worse.” Then someone replies, “No it isn’t. Look at this, and this, and this. I believe the world is getting better. We are progressing.” Now the book of Daniel makes it very clear that we never will understand God’s word and God’s work until we believe both of those principles. For in the tenth verse of Chapter 12 Daniel is told:

“Many shall purify themselves, and make themselves white, and be refined [good will get better]; but the wicked shall wickedly; and none of the wicked shall understand [but evil will get worse]; but those who are wise shall understand.” {Dan 12:10 RSV}

Jesus said that the good seed has been sown, but the enemy has come and sown tares among the wheat. “Let both grow together,” he says, “until the harvest,” (Matt 13:30a RSV). I think this is certainly true in history. Today evil is worse than it has ever been. It is more subtle, more devilish, more satanic, more difficult to detect than it ever has been before in human history. But good is better than it has ever been before. Good is more powerful. Its effect in human society in relationship to the evil around it is far greater than it ever has been before.

These two principles are at work in human society, but neither shall overpower the other. Good is not going to become so triumphant that evil finally disappears, as once was thought at the turn of the century. Nor is evil going to be so powerful that good finally disappears. Both are going to

come into a headlong conflict, and the Bible everywhere records that at that precise moment in history God shall again intervene in human affairs. Of the ultimate clash of these two great principles working in human society, Daniel is told:

“Blessed is he who waits and comes to the thousand three hundred and thirty-five days. But go your way until the end; and you shall rest, and shall stand in your allotted place at the end of the days.” {Dan 12:12-13 RSV}

Here are prophetic words by Helmut Thielicke, the professor director of Hamburg University in Germany,

We men may do what we will. Nebuchadnezzar may come (and Genghis Khan and Mao Tse-tung) yet none of them can break God's plans, but rather must fulfill them – even against their will. Even though what we hear now is in mournful, minor tones, what is being played is still God's symphony and it will be played out to the end. The individual tones may think that they know what is what. They may want to assert themselves and swing out on their own, yet they have all been composed into a score in which God alone is in command and in which everything, when it is heard from heaven's vantage point, has its place in God's succession of tones that end in

his final chord. The rich of this world are in the process of going but the kingdom of God is in the process of coming. Don't ever think that anybody will ever be able to break away from serving him, though he renounce God ten times over. Even in the extreme perversion of authority, as in the tyranny of a totalitarian state, men are compelled despite themselves to preserve a remnant of God's order. They can never consistently succeed in devilizing and ruining his world. God says, “I who have the power of the whole world of space, should I not be able to encompass your little life, hear your questions and your groans and unravel the tangled skein of your threats?”

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for this reminder from the book of Daniel that you are a living God at work in the affairs of men; that we need not fear even though terrors reign on earth and men hide themselves for fear of them. You are in control of all, and he who walks with you will overcome. He who obeys you – not only in the great and glorious moments of victory, but also in the quiet hour when no one sees – is faithful to you, and shall at last triumphantly overcome as Daniel did and stand in his place in the last days. We thank you for this promise. Help us to walk in the strength of it. In Christ's name, Amen.

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HOSEA: The Prophet and the Prostitute

by Ray C. Stedman

Hosea was the first of the “minor” prophets.

Often, we do not recognize the derivation of these Bible names, but this prophet’s name would be “Joseph” in English. And his name is related to the name *Joshua*, which means “salvation.”

Hosea was a young preacher in the nation of Israel, the northern kingdom, and he was a contemporary of the prophets Isaiah and Amos. He 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 and the nation was going through a difficult time when Hosea was preaching. People were “living it up,” as we might say, and didn’t have much time for God. They wouldn’t have said that, of course, nobody ever says that when it is true. Instead they may have said something like we do – that it was just a case of not having quite enough time to meet the demands that God made upon them – they were so busy with so many other important things. The spirit was willing but the flesh was ready for the weekend.

So, as always, people didn’t pay much attention to Hosea. He spoke of judgment and of chastisement. He said that God was going to raise up the Assyrian nation to punish this people and that fierce and ruthless army would sweep across the land like a scourge. But the people paid little attention to him, and they said that Hosea’s God must be a pretty vengeful sort to talk like that. Hosea tried to tell them that wasn’t so. He said that God was a God of love and that his doing this was the very activity of love; that God wanted them to see what they were doing to themselves and that the only way he could get them to listen was to make things rough for them. But they didn’t pay any more attention than people do today about

things like that. Instead, they blamed God, and said, “If God is really a God of love, then why does he let things get in such a mess? How could a God of love ever send a ruthless people like the Assyrians down upon our land?”

And so young Hosea found that his audience was diminishing. People were polite to his face, I suppose, but they sneered behind his back. He found that he was being given the nice-and-harmless treatment. That is what people usually do to preachers.

When I was in England once, I met an Anglican clergyman who said that what bothered him most both before and during the time of the Battle of Britain were the signs in the public squares that read, “All persons must register for the draft except women, children, idiots, and clergymen.” He said he didn’t mind so much being included on that list, but he wished they had at least put him ahead of the idiots.

So Hosea is rather discouraged and in the opening chapter of this little book of prophecy we read a personal note about him. He went to God and God told him to do a strange thing. God said, “I want you to get married.” I think Hosea brightened up at that, because he was a bachelor, and God said, “I have a girl picked out for you.” When he mentioned her name, Hosea’s heart must have fluttered, because the name of this girl was Gomer, the most beautiful girl in Israel. Hosea was definitely interested.

But God said to him, “I want you to know the whole story about this girl. I want you to marry her, but she is going to be unfaithful to you; in fact, she will become nothing but a common street prostitute. But I want you to marry her anyway.” Now, undoubtedly Hosea was very puzzled by God’s strange command – just as Abraham was puzzled by God’s command that he take his son out

and kill him, put his own son to death. God does strange things at times, things we don't always understand, things we can't categorize, things that don't fit into what we think we know of him. And this is one of those strange things. He told Hosea, "I want you to marry this girl and she is going to be a harlot, a common street prostitute. But you are going to have three children, two boys and a girl. And when they are born I want to name them for you." Perhaps Hosea then began to understand a little bit of what God was doing. He knew it was customary in Israel to teach by symbols – God often used this method of instructing his people – and that names were very important. 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 his people.

This was happening also with his friend Isaiah down in the southern kingdom. Isaiah, also, had two boys. Their names are jaw-breakers to pronounce, but they mean something. The younger boy's name was Shearjashub, which means "a remnant shall return." That was God's promise to Israel that even though they were taken into captivity, a remnant would come back. The older boy's name was Mahershalalhashbaz. (I don't know how they ever called these children in for lunch in those days!) *Mahershalalhashbaz* means "haste to the prey" or "haste to the spoil," and it was God's prophetic way of telling the nation that they were in deep trouble. But he also comforted them with the words "a remnant shall return."

So Hosea went courting. Sure enough, Gomer was attracted to this shy young man, and at last he summoned up the courage to ask her to marry him. To his great relief, she said "yes," and they were married. At first it was heaven on earth. Hosea loved this girl. You can't read this prophecy without seeing that. They must have been wonderfully happy together, and 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 this boy. "What should we name the lad?" To his surprise, God picked the name Jezreel. Now *Jezreel* means "cast-away" and was a name of shame in Israel.

Do you remember the bloody story of Queen Jezebel and Ahab? Ahab cheated his neighbor out of his property and stole his neighbor's vineyard, and Jezebel was the wicked queen who put him up

to it. At last God's judgment fell upon her. She was looking out her upper story window one day when a general, Jehu, was down in the courtyard, and he ordered the servants to throw Jezebel out the window. They threw her out and she fell on the pavement and was killed, and the dogs ate her up, and the courtyard has been called Jezreel ever since (2 Ki 9:30-37).

Nevertheless, that was the name that God picked for Hosea's oldest boy, his first son. And that was the name Hosea gave to his baby, for he understood that God was thus warning his people: they too would be cast away if they didn't recognize the folly of their actions, if they didn't turn from going after idols and giving way to abominable practices and trying to be like everybody else around them. God was warning them with this baby's name.

In the course of time, another child, a daughter, was born to Hosea. This one was named Loruhamah, which means "not pitied." Imagine naming your little baby girl "not pitied." It meant that God would no longer have pity on his people if they continued their stubborn rebellion. His patience was wearing thin. After some hundreds of years of trying to reach this stubborn people, he was now warning them that they were getting near the end, that a time would come when he would no longer pity them but would hand them over to invading armies.

When this little girl was weaned, Gomer conceived again and bore a third child, another little boy. And this one God named Loammi, "not my people," for God was saying, "you are not my people and I will not be your God." God had said that he would name these children as a sign to his people, but there would come a day of restoration:

**"And I will have pity on Not-Pitied,
and I will say to Not-My-People, 'You are
my people;'
and he shall say, 'Thou art my God.'"
{Hos 2:23 RSV}**

So that even in this time when God was announcing judgment, his grace also was being shown.

Now after this there were no more children in Hosea's household, and Gomer began to fulfill the sad prediction that God had made when he had told Hosea to marry her. What a heartbreak it must

have been to this young preacher as he heard the whispers that began to circulate about his wife and about what happened when he was away on preaching trips. Perhaps even his own children may have unconsciously dropped some remarks about the men who visited when Daddy was away. And soon the children were left uncared for while Gomer wasted all her time running around with these other fellows.

One day Hosea came home and found a note from Gomer: she had decided to find the happiness she felt she deserved, and she was leaving him and the children to follow the man she really loved. You know how those notes go: "Dear John..."

About this time a new tone came into Hosea's preaching. He still warned of the judgment to come and the fact that God was going to send the Assyrians down across the land, but no longer did he announce it with thunder. He spoke to them with tears. And he began to speak of a day when love would at last triumph, when – after the bitter lesson was learned that the way of the transgressor is hard – Israel would yet turn back to the God who loved her. Instead of "Not Pitied," she would be called "Pitied" and instead of "Not My People," she would be named "My People" again.

But poor Gomer passed from man to man, until at last she fell into the hands of a man who was unable to pay for her food and her clothing. Her first lover had given her a mink stole, but this one made her clothe herself from the Goodwill store. News of her miserable state came to the prophet and he sought out the man she was living with. He knew where he would find him, down at the local tavern, and when he met this man, the conversation may have gone something like this: "Are you the man who is living with Gomer, daughter of Disblaim?" The man must have said, "If it's any of your business, I am." Hosea said, "Well, I am Hosea, her husband." A tense moment followed. But the man said, "What do you want? I haven't done anything wrong." Hosea said, "Listen, I'm not interested in causing any trouble. But I know that you are having difficulty making ends meet. 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 must have thought, "There's no fool like an old fool. If this sucker wants to help pay her expenses, that's all right with me." So he took the

money and bought her some groceries and went home.

Now you may say, "That's a foolish thing for a man to do!" But who can explain the madness of love? Love exists apart from reason and has its own reasons. Love does not act according to logic. Love acts according to its own nature. And so Hosea acted on the basis of love. Undoubtedly he 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 and to thank him for what he was bringing to her – the gifts that true love had provided, and that villainy offered, and that folly accepted.

Well, how long this went on we don't know for sure, but at last word came that the woman Hosea loved was to be sold in the slave market. Her current husband had tired of her and she was to be sold as a slave. The brokenhearted prophet didn't know what to do. He went weeping to God. And God said, "Hosea, do you love this woman in spite of all that she has done to you?" Hosea nodded through his tears, and God said, "Then go show your love for her in the same way that I love the nation Israel."

So Hosea went to the marketplace and he watched Gomer brought up and placed on the dock and there she was stripped of all her clothing and stood naked before the crowd. The auctioneer pinched her and prodded her and showed how strong she was, and then the bidding began. Somebody bid three pieces of silver and Hosea raised it to five. Somebody else upped it to eight and Hosea bid ten. Somebody went to eleven; he went to twelve. Then Hosea offered fifteen pieces of silver and a bushel of barley. The auctioneer's gavel fell and Hosea had his wife back.

He went to her and put her clothes on her and he led her away by the hand and took her to his home. And then follows what is perhaps the most beautiful verse in all the Bible. As Hosea led her away he said to her:

**"You must dwell as mine for many days;
you shall not play the harlot, or belong to
another man; so will I also be to you."
{Hos 3:3b RSV}**

He pledged his love to her anew. And that was all this poor woman could take. She had gotten down to the very dregs of shame and disgrace, but

the love of this man broke her heart, and from this time on Gomer was faithful to Hosea. She became an honest, industrious, faithful wife, and the rest of the book of Hosea simply goes on to tell the effect of this story on the nation of Israel. God said to them, "How can I give thee up?" He reminded them of his love for them all those years. He reminded them of his goodness, and of how again and again they had turned their backs on him. The final picture of the book is one of beauty and glory, for it looks to the day when Israel shall at last return to God – her true husband – and shall say, "What have I to do with idols? I have seen him and heard him and he has won my heart."

Certain outstanding passages in Hosea are remarkable predictions. One occurs at the close of Chapter 3, when right in line with this story of Hosea's personal life, God says about the people of Israel:

For the children of Israel shall dwell many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or teraphim. {Hos 3:4 RSV}

That prophecy is being fulfilled today. The children of Israel shall dwell many days without a king – without any open, acknowledged government. Ever since the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. at the hands of General Titus of the Roman armies Israel has been without a king or a prince without anyone who has the recognized right to reign over Israel. And they shall live without a sacrifice. When the Jews of the world celebrate the Passover supper they are remembering that supper instituted in Egypt when Israel was delivered from the hand of Pharaoh. And God had 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 had said that they shall live many days without a sacrifice, and since the destruction of the temple there has never been a sacrifice in Israel – nor a pillar, ephod or teraphim. And they shall live without idolatry. They shall live as a religious people but without giving themselves to idols.

Then after these days are ended,

Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God, and David their king; and they shall come in

fear to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days. {Hos 3:5 RSV}

What a wonderful prophecy that is! And another one similar to it is at the close of Chapter 5:

**I will return again to my place,
until they acknowledge their guilt and
seek my face,
and in their distress they seek me, saying,
"Come, let us return to the Lord;
for he has torn, that he may heal us;
he has stricken, and he will bind us up.
After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will raise us up,
that we may live before him.
Let us know, let us press on to know the
Lord;
his going forth is sure as the dawn;
he will come to us as the showers,
as the spring rains that water the earth."
{Hos 5:15-6:3 RSV}**

That is the hope of Israel – that their Messiah will yet come to them and water them and revive them and raise them up again.

In the closing chapters after all the sorrow in the heart of God you come at last to the final picture:

**Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God,
for you have stumbled because of your
iniquity. {Hos 14:1 RSV}**

After all it wasn't God who was to blame. He was simply trying to get them to see the truth. And the only thing that can relieve their agony is to return. That's always the case. God can't bless us or restore us until we come back. And so God says:

**Take with you words
and return to the Lord;
say to him,
"Take away all iniquity;
accept that which is good
and we will render
the fruit of our lips" [That is, praise.]
"Assyria shall not save us,
we will not ride upon horses [no military
power is going to avail]
and we will say no more, 'Our God,'
to the work of our hands [idolatry].
In thee the orphan finds mercy."
{Hos 14:2-3 RSV}**

God's response is:

**I will heal their faithlessness;
I will love them freely,
for my anger has turned from them,
I will be as the dew to Israel;
he shall blossom as the lily,
he shall strike root as the poplar;
his shoots shall spread out; his beauty shall
be like the olive,
and his fragrance like Lebanon.
They shall return and dwell beneath my
shadow,
they shall flourish as a garden;
they shall blossom as the vine,
their fragrance shall be like the wine of
Lebanon.
O Ephraim, what have [you] to do with
idols'? [A better rendering than "what
have I"]
It is I who answer and look after you.
I am like an evergreen cypress,
from me comes your fruit.
{Hos 14:4-8 RSV}**

And the prophet adds this lesson from his own heartache and yet in the joy of restored love:

**Whoever is wise, let him understand these
things;
whoever is discerning, let him know
them;
for the ways of the LORD are right,
and the upright walk in them,
but transgressors stumble in them.
{Hos 14:9 RSV}**

Can you see in this beautiful story all the elements of the eternal triangle? There is the loving God, the faithless human heart, and the deceptive attractiveness of the world.

This is your story, and my story, isn't it? So many times we try to satisfy ourselves with the ly-

ing idols of self-importance, or wealth, or a good time. Ours is the blindness that, like Gomer's, cannot distinguish between lust and love.

We try to run from God and drown our miseries in empty pleasures, or drink, or work, or social life, but, as surely as we think we have escaped, as surely as we think we have run far enough, God touches our sleeve with his love saying, "My child, my name and my nature are love and I must act according to what I am. When you tire of all your running, and your wandering, and your heartbreak, I'll be there to draw you to myself again."

That is the story of the Bible isn't it? At Bethlehem God entered the slave market where the whole human race was putting itself up for auction, prostituting itself and its humanity to a cheapened life. But on the cross the Lord Jesus paid the price, the full price for our freedom, and bought us back. This is the story of God's love and God's heart – his loving desire to make of his people the full persons he intended them to be.

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for this beautiful story from the Old Testament, and pray that it touches our own hearts and softens us. How we see the tenderness of your love, the irresistible nature of a love that waits and hurts and hungers and pursues. Lord, we pray that we may respond, that we may understand that no other answer can satisfy us, no other power can meet our need, no other love can heal. Help us to return to you, Lord, as Israel will one day turn to you, remembering that if we walk in the light as he is in the light, the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all unrighteousness and restores us by grace. We pray in his name. Amen.

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JOEL: The Revelation of God's Hand

by Ray C. Stedman

The little book of Joel is only three chapters long, and we should all read it. We ought to give ourselves to the reading of God's Word, as the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy and encouraged him to do. Now, while the prophecy of Hosea reveals the heart of God, the prophecy of Joel reveals the hand of God, the hand that controls destiny, the hand that moves history.

For centuries men have been looking for the principle upon which all the events of history turn, and ever since the dawn of history there have been many guesses about what that controlling principle is. Long ago, the great Greek philosophers came up with the idea that history moves in cycles; and a leading modern historian, Arnold Toynbee, agrees with that. Aristotle also said that history follows this kind of course. He said that first a tyrant rises, a man of iron, who seizes control of a nation or a group of people and rules until his dynasty ends. Then control gradually passes to a ruling family of aristocracy. And gradually their power deteriorates until control passes down to the people, and this is what he calls a democracy. But a democracy also deteriorates and gradually yields to the breakdown of all power, and anarchy ensues. Out of anarchy a tyrant again seizes control, and on goes the cycle of history. And there is a lot of truth in that theory.

Through the centuries other men have contributed guesses about the controlling principle of life. Thomas Jefferson thought it was political, and when he wrote the Declaration of Independence he incorporated that idea in the prologue – that human

governments recognize that certain inalienable rights are granted to men, and that, to preserve these rights, governments are instituted among men. He felt that the forces that shape human history and form the nations of earth are political in nature.

Back in the last century, Karl Marx dipped his pen into the acid of his own embittered spirit and wrote the great work that has dramatically influenced our modern times. His idea was that the controlling force of history was economics, that it is the need to meet the material demands of life that shapes the course of history. He called this force dialectical materialism – the principle of materialism arrived at through debate, through discussion of these issues. And this idea has so seized the minds of men today that all over the earth are millions who feel that economics is the controlling interest of life.

Others have said that the principle is sociological. H. G. Wells, for instance, was one of a great number of thinkers who said that evolution shapes the course of human destiny. It is often taught in schools today that behind all the events of human history recorded in our daily newspapers and by historians there is an evolutionary principle always trending higher and higher, making life better and better.

But the Bible says that all these are wrong. The Bible says that behind the whole course of human history is God. The hinge on which history turns is spiritual – God's Spirit is at work among

men, and you cannot understand human events if you do not first recognize that fact.

One of the most meaningful statements ever written in the Scriptures and one of the most terrifying things that can ever be heard by men was said at the time of the flood when God told Noah, "My Spirit shall not strive with man forever," (Gen 6:3 NAS). And whenever that statement is uttered it means that judgment is at hand. For God's Spirit strives with man by patiently restraining evil so that human life can go on. God tries to win men 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 either to an individual or to a nation, "My Spirit shall not always strive with men." And when he removes his Spirit – the controlling force of life – everything collapses. That is when catastrophe occurs and judgment strikes. And that is essentially the message of the book of Joel.

This young man Joel was a prophet to the kingdom of Judah, the southern kingdom. He was probably a contemporary of Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos. We don't know much about Joel, but he was one of the most far-sighted men who have ever written, even in the pages of the Word of God. Joel saw clear to the end of human history, far past our own day to the final stages of God's dealing with human events; and he links it all to a great dramatic occurrence in his own day.

The book opens with his call to the people to consider a tremendous thing that has happened in that land. He says:

**Hear this, aged men, give ear,
all inhabitants of the land!**
{Joel 1:2a RSV}

Whenever I read that it always reminds me of my days in the Navy. Whenever the Navy made an important announcement, it always began, "Now hear this!" And that is the way Joel begins:

**Hear this ...
Has such a thing happened in your days,
or in the days of your fathers?
Tell your children of it,
and let your children tell their children,
and their children another generation.**
{Joel 1:2-3 RSV}

There is going to be an event of such transcending importance that people will be talking about it for years and years to come. And what is Joel talking about? Well, he is talking about 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 were looking forward to the end of the war, calling it the day. Well, God has a day, what he calls "the day of the Lord," and it was given to Joel to describe this great day.

Now 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, at any time. But judgment is also culminating and building up into cycles to the great and terrible day of the Lord of which Joel speaks 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 {cf, Matt 24:21 KJV}. And it was given to the prophet Joel to see across the intervening centuries of time, and to describe it, and to illustrate it by events taking place in his own day.

Now the event that had occurred in his day was an invasion of locusts. I wonder if you have ever seen an invasion of locusts. I was in Minnesota years and years ago when there was an invasion of grasshoppers – insects very similar to locusts – and I can still remember how the sky was literally darkened by the great cloud of these insects. You could hear them descending into the standing grain of the fields like hail upon the ground, and there was a continual rustling of the noise of their wings as you walked through the fields. Within moments after they lit upon a field, every blade of grass, every bit of vegetation was gone, and the fields were left as though they had never been planted. That is what happened in Israel. A locust horde had descended upon the land and devoured every living thing. The crops were all ruined and a famine had come. And Joel is calling their attention to this event. They hardly needed that under those conditions. Everyone certainly was aware of what was happening – but what they didn't see was where it came from.

Joel says to them, "God is behind this." He describes how "the fields are laid waste, the ground mourns, because the grain is destroyed" (Joel 1:10a RSV), and then he says:

**Sanctify a fast,
call a solemn assembly.
Gather the elders
and all the inhabitants of the land
to the house of the Lord your God;
and cry to the Lord.
Alas for the day!
For the day of the Lord is near,
and as destruction from the Almighty it
comes. {Joel 1:14-15 RSV}**

God is behind this. This didn't just happen. This isn't just one of those freaks of nature. This happened in obedience to the command of God, working through the natural laws that govern human life, and there is a lesson for us in this. "Don't fail to heed the lesson," this prophet says, "for if you learn the lesson now – this minor-league example of the day of the Lord – you will save yourself the awful heartache that will come at last in the great and terrible day of the Lord." Joel is simply pointing out that God's hand is allowing catastrophes like this to occur to make people aware of the spiritual background to life. Life is not merely a cycle of eating and drinking and getting money to do so. For behind all the commonplace things of life there is the controlling hand of the Spirit of God. Man needs to wake up to the fact that God is talking to him, that God has something to say to him. God wants to bless man but man will not listen. That is the problem. And God shakes him up with something to make him listen.

Has that ever happened to you? Has God ever done anything to you, as you were complacently eating your Wheaties and doing fine, that made you suddenly aware? Perhaps some terrible thing happened to make you realize that things weren't as good as you thought they were; you began to listen, realizing that there was something you needed to hear. This is what God did in the first chapter of Joel.

In Chapter 2 the prophet leaps over a great span of time to the end days, using this invasion of the locusts as a picture of the invasion by a great army into the land of Israel 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 the invasion by an army of men instead of by an army of insects. But he goes on to

describe this, and again he calls it the day of the Lord:

**Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
for the day of the Lord is coming, it is
near,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness there is spread upon the
mountains
a great and powerful people;
their like has never been from of old,
nor will be again after them
through the years of all generations.
{Joel 2:1b-2 RSV}**

That sounds familiar, doesn't it? Again, that is the language that the Lord Jesus used: "It will be a time of trouble," he says,

**such as has not been from the beginning of
the world until now, no, and never will be.
(Matt 24:21 RSV).**

Then the prophet describes how the land is scorched behind them as this great army advances, and he describes the army itself: "Their appearance is like the appearance of horses," (Joel 2:4 RSV). Now fear grips the hearts of the people as they see this invading host drawn up for battle. Nothing can resist them. Nothing can stop them in their march. The earth quakes before them. The heavens tremble. And then we come to a very significant passage:

**The sun and the moon are darkened,
and the stars withdraw their shining.
{Joel 2:10 RSV}**

Now, anyone who spends time with the prophetic passages of Scripture soon learns to look for interpretational landmarks. Certain prophetic symbols occur again and again throughout various books of prophecy to give you a landmark so that you know where you are. This darkening of the sun and the moon and the stars withdrawing their light, is one of these landmarks. You remember that this is also part of Jesus' great discourse on the Mount of Olives. He refers to this time when the sun shall be darkened and the moon will not give light and turn to blood and the stars will fall from heaven, (Matt 24:29) It appears also in the book of Daniel. It appears in Isaiah. It appears in the book

of Revelation. It appears in several places throughout Scripture and it always marks the same event in human history. It is an interpretational landmark pointing to the last days before what is called "the great and terrible day of the Lord." This section, then, seems to describe the invasion of Israel that is also foretold and described by the prophet Ezekiel in Chapters 38 and 39 – a great army invades the land from the north and, sweeping down across the land, destroys everything there and captures the city of Jerusalem.

But God promises that this northern army will be dealt with in that land. Isaiah says so. Ezekiel says so. Daniel says so. Now Joel, also, adds his voice to the chorus of prophets, and God reveals the purpose behind this great invasion:

**"Yet even now," says the Lord,
"return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with
mourning;
and rend your hearts and not your gar-
ments."
Return to the Lord, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast
love,
and repents of evil.
Who knows whether he will not turn and
repent,
and leave a blessing behind him,
{Joel 2:12-14a RSV}**

After all, God does not delight in judgment. That isn't what he is after. He never enjoys judging anyone. What he seeks is a heart that will listen to him, heed him, and open the door for the blessings that God wants to pour in. In order to get that person or nation to listen and turn, God will permit all kinds of harsh things to obstruct their wayward path. But all he is after is that repentant heart. "Rend your hearts and not your garments."

When we see God dealing with us like this it is so easy to think, "Well, even if I won't give in inwardly, at least I can outwardly." Most of us are like that, aren't we? We are so like the little boy whose mother told him, "Now 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. Then he looked up at her defiantly and said, "I'm sitting down outside, but I'm standing up inside!"

Do you ever do that? Do you rend your garments but not your hearts? God says, "Don't try to fool me with your outside self. I'm not interested in that. Don't bother with hypocritical attitudes and actions. They don't impress me in the least. I want to see the heart rent." That is the thing. God is utterly unimpressed by our hypocrisy. We may fool others. We can even fool ourselves. But we don't fool him. Unless our heart is really rent before him, torn garments mean nothing. The prophet says:

**Then the Lord became jealous for his land,
and had pity on his people.
{Joel 2:18 RSV}**

And at last God says:

**"I will remove the northerner far from you,
and drive him into a parched and desolate
land,
his front into the eastern sea, [i.e., the Dead
Sea]
and his rear into the western sea; [the
Mediterranean]
the stench and foul smell of him will rise,
for he has done great things."
{Joel 2:20 RSV}**

You can compare this with the prophecy in Ezekiel 38 and 39 – the destruction of the invading armies on the mountains of Israel in the wilderness of Judea. It is the very same event.

Something that happens frequently in prophecy now occurs. After leaping over this great span of years to the end days, the prophet returns to the event of the present hour – the locust plague in the land. He tells the people that just as God in that great future day will deliver his people and drive away the northern armies, so today, in this present catastrophe, he will restore the land from its barren condition and its desolation.

**"Fear not, O land;
be glad and rejoice,
for the Lord has done great things!
Fear not, you beasts of the field,
for the pastures of the wilderness are
green;" {Joel 2:21-22a RSV}**

And in beautiful language he describes the restoration of the land:

**“The threshing floors shall be full of grain,
the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.”**
{Joel 2:24 RSV}

And God promises,

**“I will restore to you the years
which the swarming locust has eaten,”**
{Joel 2:25a RSV}

I will never forget the agony in the eyes of a young man who a number of years ago looked at me and said, “You know, I’ve become a Christian and it’s wonderful. But when I think back to what I’ve missed and the years of my life that I’ve wasted, my heart gets sick remembering it. If I’d only had the sense to come to the Lord before I did all those terrible things.” And I had the joy of being able to say to him, “Son, God says, ‘I will restore to you the years that the locust has eaten.’” That is God’s promise. He will make up for the barrenness of our lives when we turn back to him.

**“I will restore to you the years
which the swarming locust has eaten,
the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter,
my great army, which I sent among you.
“You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,
and praise the name of the Lord your
God,”** {Joel 2:25-26a RSV}

And so it happened in Israel.

But now, as is often the case with these prophets, Joel suddenly leaps ahead again and he writes the great passage that the Apostle Peter quoted on the day of Pentecost. That was a dramatic day. Suddenly a rushing, mighty wind visited the Christians as they gathered in the courts of the temple, and tongues of fire burst out over every head, and they began to speak in tongues. Gathered around them was a great multitude of people, who watched these Christians and heard them praising God in various languages. These people, who had come from all parts of the earth, said to themselves, “What is this? Here are these simple Galilean fishermen talking to us in our own tongues and praising God. What does it all mean? Why, these men must be drunk! I never saw anyone act like this before,” {cf, Acts 2:7-13}. At that moment Peter stood up; led of the Spirit of God, he said to them, “Men and brethren, these are not drunk as you supposed, seeing it is but the third hour (i.e.,

9 a.m.) of the day. It is too early to get drunk. But this is what was spoken of by the prophet Joel.” (cf, Acts 2:14-16). Then he quoted this passage:

“And it shall come to pass afterward [that is, after God has restored the land of Israel and given back the years that the locusts have eaten.],

**that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,**

**your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.**

Even upon the menservants and maidservants in those days,

I will pour our my spirit.”

“And I will give portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. And It shall come to pass that all who call upon the name of the Lord shall be delivered;” {Joel 2:28-32a RSV}

And here Peter ended his quotation.

Now what is all this about? Well, here is the prophet Joel. He has already seen beyond to the time of the invasion of Israel. And now he sees something different, a mystery still somewhat undefined to his vision. He says that following Israel’s restoration there is going to be an indeterminate period when God will pour out his Spirit on all flesh, when no distinctions will be made between classes or ranks of people, when even servants, menservants, and maidservants shall speak as the voice of God. They shall speak the word of God, as God pours out his Spirit upon all kinds of men everywhere.

Now we don’t have to remain in doubt, do we, as to what he was talking about? We know what that day is. It is the day of the Spirit in which we live, the day which began on Pentecost when God first poured out his Spirit; and that Spirit is being poured out throughout this whole age. Peter also quotes Joel concerning the sign of the end of that age, “The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord shall come.” That is the end of the age. We have the sign of the beginning and the sign of the end. No man knows how long this age will last, but during this time God is pouring out his Spirit

without distinction among men. The age of the Spirit is the age in which we are living.

In Chapter 3 the prophet returns to the end times and beyond. Other prophets as well had spoken on this matter. 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 the nations and bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat [of judgment] and I will enter into judgment with them there," {Joel 3:2a RSV}

Jesus said, "When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him" {Matt 25:31a RSV} ... "Before him will be gathered all the nations," (Matt 25:32). And then the Son of man shall judge them and shall say to the righteous, as a man divides the sheep from the goats, "Come and enter into the inheritance of my Father;" and to the unrighteous, "Depart from me" {cf, Matt 25:33-41}. This is the valley of judgment. In preparation for this God instructs the nations of the world with amazing words, startling words:

**Proclaim this among the nations:
Prepare war,
stir up the mighty men.
Let all the men of war draw near,
let them come up.
Beat your plowshares into swords,
and your pruning hooks into spears;
{Joel 3:9-10a RSV}**

Did you know that the Bible says this? Many times you have heard quoted, "Beat your swords into plowshares and your spears into pruning hooks." This is found in the third chapter of Micah; but in Joel quite the opposite is said. And Joel's prophecy comes first; the fulfillment of Joel's prediction comes first. That is why nations are at war. This is what God is saying to the nations today. And they will remain at war in one way or another until God says, "Beat your swords into plowshares and your spears into pruning hooks." Just as Jesus said "And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars" {Matt 24:6a RSV}; ... "nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom," (Matt 24:7a RSV). And so it shall be until the end. This is what Joel says.

Then we come to another verse that is often quoted:

**Multitudes, multitudes
in the valley of decision!
For the day of the Lord is near
in the valley of decision.
The sun and the moon are darkened,
and the stars withdraw their shining
[again, that familiar landmark]. {Joel 3:14-15 RSV}**

This is the great and terrible day of the Lord that is to come. What does this mean "Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision"? I have heard many evangelistic messages on this passage that present a picture of many thousands waiting in the moment of decision, hanging between the choice of heaven and hell. Perhaps it is justifiable to interpret it that way, but that isn't what this verse means. It isn't man's decision that is talked about here – it is God's. God will enter the valley of decision and the multitudes of the nations will be gathered before him. All the world will be there on this judgment day:

**And the Lord roars from Zion,
and utters his voice from Jerusalem,
and the heavens and the earth shake.
But the Lord is a refuge to his people,
a stronghold to the people of Israel.
{Joel 3:16 RSV}**

Now that is the day of the Lord – the final day of judgment of the living nations of earth at the return of Jesus Christ – and the effect will be as the prophet describes it:

**"So you shall know that I am the Lord your
God,
who dwell in Zion, my holy mountain.
And Jerusalem shall be holy ..."
{Joel 3:17a RSV}**

After all, that is what God is always seeking. Because that is what he desires for you, God deals with you in judgment. When things begin to go wrong with you, it is God's way of saying to you, "Look, you are not your own boss. You are not your own. You are bought with a price. I am God." He is waiting for you to realize that he is God – not you. You don't have the right to run your own life. You don't have the right to do with

your life whatever you please. He alone has that right.

**“And Jerusalem shall be holy
and strangers shall never again pass
through it.” {Joel 3:17b RSV}**

The final scene is a beautiful one:

**“And in that day the mountains shall drip
sweet wine,
and the hills shall flow with milk,
and all the stream beds of Judah shall flow
with water;
and a fountain shall come forth from the
house of the Lord
and water the valley of Shittim.”
{Joel 3:18 RSV}**

Water is always a picture of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, “He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water’“ (John 7:38 RSV) – rivers of blessing to satisfy man’s thirsty soul.

You see, the future is in God’s hands. It isn’t in men’s hands. If it were, we would make a mess of it. It isn’t in the Devil’s hands. If it were, we would be on our way to destruction – everyone, without fail. The blind principle of historical determinism isn’t guiding the future. If it were, there would be no meaning to life. The future is in the hands of one who is preparing something that eye has never seen and ear has never heard. Neither has it ever entered into the heart of man, the won-

derful things that God is preparing for those who love him. I believe that.

Every moment that God deals with us in judgment, he is capturing our attention, waking us up. Through these difficult things, God in grace is simply saying to us, “Look and listen. Stop and wait. Pay attention now, so that you will be ready for the great things yet to come.” There is truth from time to time in some of the words of the poets, you know. I always love these words by Robert Browning, but the words of Scripture give them a new meaning:

Grow old along with me.
The best is yet to be,
The last of life
for which the first was made.

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for giving us this picture of life and for invisibly guiding the affairs of men, the destinies both of nations and individuals. Grant to us, young and old alike, the wisdom to listen to you and to turn back from going our own way. Help us to yield our hands and hearts and lives to the one who loves us, who has given himself for us, and who is preparing us for a future so unbelievably wonderful that it takes our breath away. We thank you in Christ’s name, Amen.

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AMOS: God doesn't Play Favorites

by Ray C. Stedman

The message of Amos, one of the minor prophets of the Old Testament, is somewhat different from that of the rest of the prophets, and has been singled out as unique. The message of this book is basically to declare the impartiality of God. God plays no favorites. He makes no allowances for one person that he will not make for others as well. There is no such thing as being God's fair-haired boy. He does not give any more to one than he does to another, in accordance with the promises that he makes. Any who are willing to fulfill the conditions of the promises will find his blessing poured out upon them, regardless of who they are; and any who presume upon these conditions will find him sitting in judgment upon them and his Word condemning them no matter who they are. This is the message of Amos.

It is hard for us to believe that, isn't it? We are so conditioned to thinking that God reacts the way man does, and that if you get into his favor you can presume upon his goodness. Or we think that perhaps we can get by and not face the same kind of judgment that someone else will, or that we can win special positions, special privileges from God that no one else can have. Both extremes of this attitude are reflected in various groups and individuals from time to time.

The book of Amos, however, is a clear statement that God is not like this at all. Therefore, the message of this book can have the impact of a sudden fist in the face. If you really think that you are in a privileged position, especially with God, this book comes with brutal, shocking, breath-taking force. The tendency in human hearts is either to regard ourselves as favored individuals or the exact reverse – to say that we are such poor creatures and such miserable failures that God would never

look at us, that other people have all the right to God's favor. I think this tendency is universal among us. We are always saying to ourselves, "Why should this happen to me?" when tragedy strikes, or when someone else is honored, we say, "Why shouldn't it happen to me?"

I can't help but think of the story that a friend shared with me recently. It happened in New York City, during the time of the subway rush in the evening of a hot summer day. People were jamming into the subway cars as they were moving out of the station and each car was loaded to capacity. One man happened to be just the last man to push and jam his way inside of a car, and he stood facing the door. The doors closed and the car moved off. He stood there, packed against this door, pressed up against it with the awful push of humanity in the car. As it went down the tracks, waving and swaying, he began to feel a little sick. The further he went, the sicker he got, and just at the critical moment, the car came into a station and the door opened and he got sick all over the man standing on the platform right opposite him. But without anybody moving, the door suddenly closed and the car moved out of the station. The man on the platform stood there looking at himself, and then he shrugged his shoulders and said, "Why me?"

Now, when the prophet Amos came to the northern kingdom of Israel this was exactly the reaction he got. The people of that region looked upon him as though he had just vomited on them. They were disgusted with him. Their attitude was exactly that: Why us? Why not go someplace else? You can see this reflected in the biographical sketches that are given to us in this book.

The book opens with these words:

The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds [or herdsmen] of Tekoa which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake. {Amos 1:1 RSV}

That definitely dates this book and the prophet Amos as a contemporary of the prophet Hosea and also of Isaiah in the southern kingdom. He was one of the earliest of the prophetic writers. And the thing that marks this book is that he was not a trained prophet. He was a layman. Some suggest that since he called himself a herdsman, a cattleman – or, as it is translated here, “a shepherd” – he was the first of a long line of cowboy preachers. I don't know if that marked him with disfavor in the eyes of the people, but at any rate his message was not acceptable to them.

In Chapter 7 Amos adds another personal note. Here is the reaction to his message as he came to this northern kingdom:

Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent to Jeroboam king of Israel, saying, “Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said, ‘Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.’”
{Amos 7:10-11 RSV}

That was the burden of the prophet's message. God was going to exile Israel. God was going to judge the nation and the king.

And Amaziah said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there.” {Amos 7:12 RSV}

Amaziah says, “Don't come to us. God back to your home town. Go back to the country you came from and prophesy down there.”

“but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.” {Amos 7:13 RSV}

And sturdy, rugged Amos, with his country background and his bluntness said (Verse 14a):

“I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; ...”
{Amos 7:14b RSV}

That means, “I have not been to the school of the prophets.” He didn't mean that his father was not a prophet. He means that he had not been to the accepted school of the prophets.

“... but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees [a farmer], and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’” {Amos 7:14b-15 RSV}

Now you can see something of the opposition to the message of this man as he came declaring the burden of the Lord in the land of Israel in the northern kingdom. They found his message very hard to accept.

Amos went about delivering God's message in a very interesting way. If you had a map of Israel and could locate the countries that are mentioned here, and if you put Israel right in the center of the map, you would find that Amos is going around the boundaries of Israel in various directions, delivering a message concerning all the neighboring nations.

- He begins first in Chapter 1 with Damascus. That is way up in the northeast section above Israel. He delivers to Damascus a message showing Israel how God has judged Damascus, especially for the people's cruelty.
- Then he moves way down on the west coast to the ancient land of Philistia, or what is called here the land of Gaza. And once again he reminds Israel that God has judged this land. Why? Because the people have participated in an active slave trade.
- Then he moves back up the coast to the land of Tyre, on the northwest side of Israel, and here he points out how God had judged this country because the people had broken their agreements.
- Then he moves on down to the far south of Israel to the land of Edom, the ancient country of Esau, and here he points out how God's judgment had fallen upon this nation because of the

people's unforgiving spirit and their implacable hatred of Israel.

- Then he moves back up the east side of Israel to the land of Ammon. (By the way, Ammon is now the country of Jordan and its capital is the capital of ancient Ammon.) Here he points out that God had judged this section of the country because of its cupidity, its greed, its hunger for land of others.
- Then south to Moab, still on the side of Israel, God had judged Moab, he says, because of its hatred against Israel.
- And then he comes to the southern kingdom, Judah itself, and in a brief reference points out that because Judah has despised God's Law, the judgment of God had fallen on it.
- At last he arrives right at the ten-kingdom northern nation of Israel, and here he announces that God is going to judge them for corruption and for injustice in their hearts.

As you read this account, you can see that the people of Israel were quite untroubled as long as Amos was talking about the other nations. They took this very complacently, more or less with the attitude, "Well, they got what was coming to them." But when the prophet moved home to zero in on Israel, the people got angry and said, "Why don't you go away and preach someplace else?" This is almost inevitably the result when preachers are faithful to the message of God. But the rest of the book focuses on this northern kingdom of Israel.

Beginning with Chapter 3 you have the prophet's words that God addressed to this nation. He begins by pointing out to them that they were a people who had a special, privileged position before God:

Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up out of the land of Egypt: {Amos 3:1 RSV}

They are waiting now for Amos' message. And he says,

**"You only have I known
of all the families of the earth;"
{Amos 3:2a RSV}**

That is what they wanted to hear. This was the sign that they were the privileged people of God, the chosen people. They were the ones of whom God himself had said that he had known of all the families of the earth. You can see them swelling with pride and arrogance as the prophet says this. Ah, but then comes the fist in the face, the hammer blow:

**" therefore I will punish you
for all your iniquities." {Amos 3:2b RSV}**

Now see their faces fall. You see, that which was the mark of their pride was the very reason God says they were peculiarly subject to judgment. Light creates responsibility. Privilege exposes to the keenest of judgment. And as these people had been called into such a relationship, they were also, therefore, subject to the severest and sternest forms of judgment.

Now, this is what Peter means in the New Testament when he says, "the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God," (1 Pet 4:17 RSV). It always begins there. God always starts with his people, and then he moves out to those round about them. The prophet's word is that because we are people of God, this does not mean that God's word does not sit in judgment on the wrong in our lives. On the contrary, it is all the more apt to be borne home to us.

Then Amos points out how close this special relationship with God is in Chapter 3:

**"Do two walk together,
unless they have made an appointment?"
{Amos 3:3 RSV}**

Or, as it is usually rendered, "Can two walk together unless they be agreed?" {KJV}. Here is God's walk with his people. And then his talk with them:

**"Surely the Lord God does nothing,
without revealing his secret
to his servants the prophets."
{Amos 3:7 RSV}**

These were the things that marked their peculiar relationship and privilege before God. They

walked with God. They talked with God. But for this reason, the prophet says, God is going to send judgment.

Then he announces what it is. Do you remember the story of the two golden calves that were erected by King Jeroboam in the cities of Bethel and Dan? (1 Ki 12:28). Israel was sent to worship there and the people called those calves Jehovah. And they worshipped and bowed down before those golden images. Now those two calves represented two basic ideas in Israel, for which God was perennially in judgment against the people. Furthermore, they are ideas which are prevalent among people today.

- Those golden calves, in that they were made of gold, represented the hunger of this people for material gain, the love of wealth, materialism – the god of gold.
- And because they were calves, or young bullocks, they were representative of the pagan gods of sex, the fertility gods of the nations round about them who worshipped the bull as a sign of fertility or sexual potency.

So the worship of these twin calves made of gold was essentially symbolic of the people's worship of materialism and sex. That sounds awfully modern, doesn't it?

And the prophet's word to this people was that because of this kind of worship, the nation of Assyria was being raised up by God to come sweeping down from the north to carry Israel away into captivity.

Now, in the patience of God it was almost two hundred years before that took place. Yet God announced it this early so that the people might have space to repent. And he declared that this was certain to come unless they turned to him. Even in this account the prophet shows how God had patiently tried to awaken them.

In Chapter 4 we read of five different times when God had sent something to wake them up, to make them think, to jar them, to arrest them, and stop them in their downward course. He says:

**“I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities,
and lack of bread in all your places [i.e. famine],**

yet you did not return to me,”
{Amos 4:6 RSV}

**“And I also withheld the rain from you ...
I would send rain upon one city,
and send no rain upon another city,**
{Amos 4:7a RSV}

God was deliberately spacing the rain so that there would be an awareness that this was the divine hand.

“... yet you did not return to me,
{Amos 4:8b RSV}

**“I smote you with blight and mildew;
I laid waste your gardens ...
yet you did not return to me.”**
{Amos 4:9a RSV}
{Amos 4:9c RSV}

**“I sent among you a pestilence after the
manner of Egypt;
I slew your young men with the sword;
I carried away your horses; ...
yet you did not return to me,”**
{Amos 4:10a RSV}
{Amos 4:10c RSV}

**“I overthrew some of you,
as when God overthrew Sodom and Go-
morrah ... [that is, by volcanic action,
burning and so on] yet you did not return to me.”**
{Amos 4:11a RSV}
{Amos 4:11c RSV}

Again and again God says this. Here is an indication that God often sends things into our lives to shake us up, to awaken us. I have seen this happen so many times. Visiting someone in the hospital who has gone through some accident, I have often found that even though nothing directly indicated that this was perhaps a judgment of God, it was taken by the individual, and rightly so, as a warning or shaking up, as if God were saying, “Look now. Stop and think about where you are going and what is happening to you.” For God, in great patience, is constantly trying to make us see things the way they really are.

And then as the prophet moves on he puts his finger on the very thing that is wrong:

**Therefore because you trample upon the
poor
and take from him exactions of wheat,**

**you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not dwell in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.
For I knew how many are your transgressions,
and how great are your sins –
you who afflict the righteous, who take a
bribe,
and turn aside the needy in the gate.
Therefore he who is prudent will keep silent
in such a time;
{Amos 5:11-13a RSV}**

Now this is the reason this book is so loved by the liberal; Amos is called the prophet of social justice, the man who demanded that man treat their fellow-man rightly. Liberals love this book because of these thundering pronouncements against the social evils of Amos' day – and rightly so. God is always disturbed by social injustices. But what the liberals seem to miss in this book is Amos' appeal to these people. He doesn't just say to them, "Now stop doing these things." He does say that, but that isn't all he says. It is how to stop doing these things that is the important message, and you will find it plainly given twice in Chapter 5:

**For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel:
"Seek me and live." {Amos 5:4 RSV}**

"Don't go to Bethel. Don't go to those golden calves. Seek me and live."

**Seek the Lord and live,
lest he break out like fire in the house of
Joseph. {Amos 5:6a RSV}**

What is the answer to the wandering heart? The answer isn't just to clean up your life. It is to come back to God. It is to repent and to think again. Turn. Come back to the Lord of your salvation. Call upon him. Ask him to set you back on your feet and straighten out your life. That is the answer. That is always God's appeal. Come back into a relationship with one who loves and in patience tries to awaken us and bring us back to himself.

Now, the nation evidently went on resisting the appeal of the prophet, so he addresses two particular messages to these people, aimed at the two ex-

treme views among the people of Israel. They are almost contradictory views. First he says:

**Woe to those who desire the day of the
Lord! {Amos 5:18a RSV}**

And to the other group, he says:

**"Woe to those who are at ease in Zion,"
{Amos 6:1a RSV}**

Now here are two quite distinct views among the people. There were those whom we might call the pious hypocrites who first came under the judgment of God. "Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord!" What does this mean? Well, you see, there were some people who were going about saying, "Oh, isn't this a terrible day. Oh, God is so hard. Things are so terrible." They were wringing their hands, appearing to be mourning, and going through all kinds of rituals and religious ceremonies and saying, "Oh, there is no hope for anything. Oh, if God would only come at last! Oh, would that the day of the Lord would come. Would that we could go home to be in heaven." Did you ever hear that? And the prophet thunders: "Woe to you that desire the day of the Lord."

Amos says, "Do you know what that day will be like? Do you have any idea what you are saying? Why," he says, "it is darkness, not light. It is as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him; or he went into the house and leaned a hand against the wall and a snake bit him. You talk about the day of the Lord. Why, you don't know what you are talking about! Woe to you." And God says,

**"... I despise your feasts,
and I take no delight in your [religious
activities] solemn assemblies, {Amos
5:21 RSV}
your burnt offerings, ...{Amos 5:22 RSV}
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
... the melody of your harps ...
{Amos 5:23 RSV}
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an everflowing
stream." {Amos 5:24 RSV}**

Do we ever get away from this? God desires truth in the inward parts, in the center of life – not outward conformity. God sees through that sham and pretense without the slightest difficulty and it doesn't impress him when we go through religious

activity: "Thou desirest truth in the inward being;" (Psa 51:6 RSV).

Well, then there was another group that said, "We are not concerned about these things. Let's eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die. Let's have as good a time as we can and make the most of life; let's enjoy it to the full while we can." And the prophet says, "Woe to those who are at ease in Zion," {Amos 6:1a RSV}.

Amos asks, "How can you be so restful when the nation is so restless? How can you content yourselves with riches and wealth and the good things of life when people are lying in distress outside in the streets and judgment is taken away from your courts?" So there comes this powerful message:

**"Woe to those who lie upon beds of ivory,
and stretch themselves upon their
couches,
and eat lambs from the flock,
and calves from the midst of the stall;
who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
[in the midst of the threatening judgment
of God.]" {Amos 6:4-5a RSV}**

These are the two extreme groups. As Amos goes on, he shows in a series of visions that were given to him that the nation is rapidly ripening for judgment. At last there comes the final scene, almost always pictured by the prophets – a scene of beauty, peace, and glory. It reveals what God wants and, therefore, why God is angry at hypocrisy. Listen to these words:

**"In that day I will raise up
the booth of David that is fallen
and repair its breaches,
and raise up its ruins,
and rebuild it as in the days of old."
{Amos 9:11 RSV}**

Do you remember where that is quoted in the New Testament? In the first council at Jerusalem, in Acts 15, when they were wondering whether God would save the Gentiles without the Law of Moses, James stood up and quoted this verse from Amos: "The prophets," he said, "have declared that God is going to send his grace out to the Gentiles," and he quoted this verse (see, Acts 15:15-18). God's word was that he would raise up the tabernacle or the booth of David which had fallen, and repair its

breaches. That is a picture of the coming of Christ, representing the house of David. And in the raising up of the Lord Jesus, the word was to go out to all the peoples. God would bless the world through him,

**"that they may possess the remnant of
Edom
and all the nations [all the Gentiles] who
are called by my name,"
says the Lord who does this.
{Amos 9:12 RSV}**

Then comes this beautiful scene:

**"Behold, the days are coming," says the
Lord,
"when the plowman shall overtake the
reaper
and the treader of grapes him who sows
the seed;
the mountains shall drip sweet wine,
and all the hills shall flow with it.
I will restore the fortunes of my people Is-
rael,
and they shall rebuild the ruined cities
and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and drink their
wine,
and they shall make gardens and eat their
fruit.
I will plant them upon their land,
and they shall never again be plucked up
out of the land which I have given them,"
says the Lord your God.
{Amos 9:13-15 RSV}**

That is a picture, of course, of the millennial days when Israel shall at last be restored to the land, never to be removed again.

Now then, why is God so angry with this people?

- If cruelty makes him angry, it is because his heart is so set upon kindness toward man.
- If oppression stirs his wrath, it is because he wants men to live in love and peace.
- If pain inflicted upon others brings judgment from God, it is because his heart is set upon happiness and the well-being of humanity.

The message of this book is that God is relentless when he begins to deal with man. He will not make peace. He will not compromise:

- When he begins to deal with a nation, he insists on absolute values.
- When he begins to deal with an individual, he deals with absolute values.
 - Just the fact that we are Christians does not mean that we escape the condemnation of the judgment of the Word of God in those areas where we are attempting to compromise.
 - Just because we have been Christians for 40 years doesn't change the relentlessness of the Word of God as it searches and probes our hearts and lives. God doesn't change.

The word of this prophet is that we are dealing with a God of righteousness and of unbending, inflexible zeal who will not compromise in any way, and yet, our God is a God of patience and of love. The marvelous undertone of this book, as through all the prophets, is that of the outpouring of the love of God's heart moving toward the well-being and the happiness of humanity, breaking out every now and then into beautiful forms of expression.

Undergirding the whole book is the promise at last to bring Israel – and likewise all the people of God – into the day when man shall live in peace and joy, with blessings to fill the hearts of men. What a message of the impartiality of God's grace this is!

Prayer:

Father, we thank you for this look at yourself. We thank you that you are a God who does not change; you are absolutely without shadow or turning. When we deal with you Lord, we deal with one who is faithful to us. What joy this gives us as we find in our own hearts a hunger to be made pure, to be made right before you, to stop at nothing so that we might be what you want us to be. And yet, Lord, how this strikes terror also into our hearts in those moments when we are tempted to compromise, to water down the truth, to deceive ourselves, to think that perhaps we can get by just this once and you won't notice. Lord, teach us that your eye is ever upon us, not merely to search us out as a policeman, not merely to haunt us and to hound us, but to bless us and to remove us from that which is harmful to us and hurts us, and to heal us and restore us in grace. We thank you in Christ's name. Amen.

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OBADIAH: Death to Edom!

by Ray C. Stedman

Obadiah, the shortest book in the Old Testament, is the pronouncement of doom against an ancient and long-forgotten nation, the land of Edom. But there is more to this book than that. The Scriptures have that beautiful faculty of appearing to be one thing on the surface, but, on a deeper level, yielding rich and mighty treasures. That is certainly true of this amazing book of Obadiah.

We know very little about Obadiah except that he was one of the minor prophets. There is a reference to a prophet Obadiah in the days of Elijah and Elisha and there is some thought that perhaps he is the same man. The name Obadiah was a very common name among the Hebrews, though, and it is very likely this is not the same prophet, for in this book Obadiah mentions the day when Jerusalem was destroyed, captured by the alien armies, and that occurs long after the time of Elijah and Elisha. So most Bible commentators believe 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;” he fulfills the position of a servant. He comes and does his work and fades into the background; he delivers his message and he is gone. And that is about all we know about the man behind this book.

The book of Obadiah tells the story of two nations, the nation of Israel and the nation of Edom, the country to the south of Israel that is now usually referred to as the Negev or Negeb. Through this ancient land of Edom the Israelites marched as they came into the land of Israel out of the captivity and slavery of Egypt. As they came into the land they had difficulty with the Edomites; they were enemies of Israel from its very beginning.

But behind the story of these two nations, this book tells the story of two men. Every nation in the Bible is a lengthened shadow of its founder, and the two men behind the nations Israel and Edom were twin brothers. Do you know who they are? 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. God, in a sense, has put Jacob and Esau into an enlarger and blown them up to national size. As the prophet discusses this you can see that the story of these two men continues; Israel is still Jacob and Edom is still Esau.

Jacob and Esau were in perpetual antagonism. We read in the book of Genesis that even before they were born, they struggled together in their mother’s womb. That antagonism marked the lives of these two men, and, consequently, the lives of their descendants, the two nations of Israel and Edom.

And as you recall from Genesis, Jacob was mother’s darling and Esau was daddy’s little man, and there was one unending conflict between the two of them which did not end with the lives of these men. The nations carried on this same conflict, and all the way from Genesis through Malachi there is the threat of struggle and unbroken antagonism between them. In the book of Malachi (remember, Genesis records the beginning of these nations), the last book of the Old Testament, God says, “I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau,” (Mal 1:2b-3a RSV).

Why does the story of these two men come to a focus here in this little prophecy of Obadiah? What is so important about these two men and these two nations? Well, that is what the book of Obadiah makes very clear to us. In the New Testament we discover that there is a perpetual an-

tagonism within the nature of the Christian. In Galatians 5:17 we are told that the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh; they are opposed to one another.

God is a great illustrator. He is always using pictures for us so that we can understand truth more easily, more graphically. We are children in this respect. We like to have a picture. We would rather see something than hear it, so God has many pictures. He has taken these two men and the subsequent nations that came from them and used them through the Bible as a consistent picture of the conflict between the flesh and the spirit – Jacob and Esau, Israel and Edom.

(This, by the way, is a wonderful key to Bible study. Have you learned to recognize what we might call *interpretational constants* that run throughout the Scriptures? There are certain names and figures, or metaphors and similes that, once used to symbolize a thing, maintain that characteristic and that reference all the way through the Bible, wherever they are used. You know how this is true of certain items, certain material things, like oil:

- Wherever oil is used symbolically in Scriptures it is a picture of the Holy Spirit.
- Wine is always a picture of joy in the Scriptures.
- Leaven is always a picture of evil.
- These two men, Jacob and Esau, and the nations Israel and Edom, always appear as a picture of a struggle between the flesh and the spirit that is going on in our own lives as believers.

Esau lusts against Jacob, and Jacob against Esau; the two great principles are irreconcilably opposed to one another.)

Obadiah turns the spotlight first on Esau, who is the man of the flesh, and Edom, the proud nation that came from the flesh, and he answers the question “Why does God hate Esau?” The trouble with Esau, the prophet says, is this (Verse 3):

**The pride of your heart has deceived you,
you who live in the clefts of the rock,
whose dwelling is high,**

**who say in your heart,
“Who will bring me down to the
ground?” {Ob 1:3 RSV}**

The trouble with Esau is pride. Pride is the root of all human evil, and pride is the basic characteristic of what the Bible calls the flesh that lusts against, wars against, the Spirit. The flesh is a principle that stands athwart God’s purposes in human life and continually defies what God is trying to accomplish. Each of us has this struggle within us if we are Christians, and its basic characteristic is revealed here as pride. That is the number one identifying mark of the flesh.

Proverbs 6:16 says: “There are six things which the Lord hates, seven which are an abomination to him.” And what is #1 on the list? A proud look. And everything else that follows is a variation of pride. Those that are swift to run after mischief, he that spreads lies and slander and discord among brothers – all these things are manifestations of that single basic evil, pride. This is the satanic nature which 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 its importance, or its unimportance, to self. The universe centers around self, the rival god. That is pride. That is Esau; that is Edom. It can appear in our lives in ten thousand ways, but you will find some common expressions of it here in this book of Obadiah.

One way it may be expressed is in self-sufficiency (Verses 3-4):

**... who say in your heart,
“Who will bring me down to the
ground?”
Though you soar aloft like the eagle,
though your nest is set among the stars,
thence I will bring you down,” says the
Lord. {Ob 1:3b-4 RSV}**

Here is the man who says, “Nobody can touch me. Who is going to upset me? My plans are all laid out. I am able to carry through what I set out to do.” This attitude of self-sufficient ability is a mark of pride. And the Lord says that “though you soar aloft like the eagle, though your nest is set among the stars, yet I am able to bring you down.”

The reference in this book to “you who live in the clefts of the rock” is a very literal reference to the nation of Edom. If you have had the privilege

of visiting the Holy Land, you may have gone down into the Negev area and visited the city of Petra, the rose-red city of the dead. This amazing city is approached through a tremendous fissure that runs for a mile or more right through the rock, a narrow file only a few yards wide that brings you at last into an open place where temples have been carved out of the living rock – giant temples with doorways in them some 25-30 feet high. That was the capital of Edom. That was the ancient city, whose people felt that because of these natural defenses they were impregnable. They lifted up their hearts in pride and, as the Lord speaking through the prophet says, the pride of their heart is deceived; they thought that nothing could overthrow them, but God said it would be done. Just a few years after our Lord's day, the Romans came in and destroyed the cities of Edom and took this impregnable fortress. It has been in ruins ever since.

This kind of self-sufficiency is clearly evident in the man who says, "I don't need God. I can run my own life without God, in my own wisdom, my own strength, my own abilities, my own talents – that is enough, that is all I need to make a success in life." But self-sufficiency is also seen in the Christian who says, "Well, I need God, yes, in times of danger and fear and pressure, but I am quite able, thank you, to make my own decisions about the girl I am going to marry, or the career I am going to follow, or the friends that I have, or the car that I buy or anything else like that." That is the same spirit of self sufficiency, isn't it?

The thing that characterized the Lord Jesus Christ and marked him as continually opposed to this spirit of self-sufficiency was his utter dependence on the Father. We Christians have to learn that if there is any area of our life where we think that we've got what it takes to do without God, it is in that same area that we are manifesting the flesh, the pride of Edom. When you step into your office on Monday morning and you have been a fine Christian on Sunday and all through the weekend, but on Monday morning you say, "Now I am in charge. I know what to do here. I don't need the Bible. I don't need God. I don't need my religion to help me here. I know exactly how to run this business," you are manifesting this same spirit of Edom, this spirit of self-sufficiency. In many areas of their lives Christians live as though God were dead, they believe in God, but live as though he

were dead, they live without any sense of dependency upon his wisdom and his strength.

Another form of pride is found in this little book too (Verse 10):

**For the violence done to your brother Jacob,
shame shall cover you,
and you shall be cut off for ever.
{Ob 1:10 RSV}**

Violence is a form of pride; the man who strikes his wife, a child who has been beaten, a baby whose bones have been broken, and who has been damaged internally. What is behind this violence of the human heart? An unbroken ego, a spoiled and cowardly spirit. Pride is centered only on self and it strikes out against anything that dares to challenge its supreme reign in life. I have been in a Christian home and seen a woman with black eyes and bruises on her legs and arms because her Christian husband, who was a Sunday School teacher, had beaten her. Where does this violence come from? It is from Edom. It is the pride of the flesh.

Here is another form of pride (Verse 11):

**On the day that you stood aloof,
on the day that strangers carried off his
wealth,
and foreigners entered his gates
and cast lots for Jerusalem,
you were like one of them. {Ob 1:11 RSV}**
[You just stood and watched.]

Indifference is a form of pride. I think this is by far one of the major causes of marital difficulty. In the constant stream of people who have come to see me about problems in their marriage, almost invariably, somewhere along the line, I hear the complaint. "Well, he is simply indifferent to me. He doesn't care about me. He ignores me." Or, "She pays no attention to me. She isn't interested in the things that I am interested in." Isn't it strange that these things can be true in Christian homes? And how quickly it comes in after courtship. During the courtship it is, "What are you thinking about? Tell me what you would like?" But when marriage comes, it is, "Where's dinner? Where is the paper? What's on TV?" And the concern is entirely different. Why? Well, Esau is

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at work – that’s why. The force in human life that God hates is Esau.

There is yet another form of pride that we read about in Obadiah (Verses 12-13):

**But you should not have gloated over the
day of your brother
in the day of his misfortune;
you should not have rejoiced over the peo-
ple of Judah
in the day of their ruin;
you should not have boasted
in the day of distress.
You should not have entered the gate of my
people
in the day of his calamity;
you should not have gloated over his disas-
ter
in the day of his calamity;
you should not have looted his goods
in the day of his calamity.**
{Ob 1:12-13 RSV}

God charges Edom with the sin of gloating as a manifestation of this basic problem of pride. Notice how you hear this so frequently in children who haven’t yet learned to cover up what they feel with a subtle varnish of politeness: “Yay, yah, yah, good for you. You had it coming!” Did you ever say that in your own heart about somebody? “You had it coming.” You were gloating over them. Adults learn to disguise this sometimes, but it comes out once in a while. You hear that the boss is sick, and you say. “Nothing trivial, I hope.” What do you say when someone fails and you hear about it? Do you ever say, “Well, I told you so. I knew that would happen. I expected it all along”? That is the sense of gloating, you see.

I remember reading of the hypochondriac who had written on his tombstone the words: “I told you I was sick.”

Now, what causes this? Why do we like to rub salt on another’s wounds? What is behind this perverse delight we take in another person’s failure or his faults? It is Esau in us. The flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh. In our pride and unconcern we don’t care what happens to someone else, as long as everything is all right with us.

Another manifestation of pride is exploitation (Verse 14):

**You should not have stood at the parting of
the ways
to cut off his fugitives;
you should not have delivered up his survi-
vors
in the day of distress. {Ob 1:14 RSV}**

When calamity fell, Edom took advantage of it. The Edomites moved in on a fallen people, a captured people, took advantage of the fact that these were fugitives, and used their trouble and their misery to their own advantage. They delivered up the survivors in the day of Israel’s distress. They took unfair advantage. God hates it when we utilize another’s weakness or bad luck to our advantage.

Have you ever heard anyone say, “Well, I had a contractor bid on some work I would like him to do, and the fellow made a mistake and he has underbid this. But I am going to hold him to it. After all, I’ve got the contract. He signed it and I am going to hold him to it”? That is taking advantage of another’s mistake. We find this spirit coming up so easily when something like that happens. We say, “Oh, that is your hard luck. Finders keepers, losers weepers!” We try to move in and take advantage of another’s distress.

“Oh,” you say, “I could never do a thing like that!” Well, how many of you are on the lookout for some old coin, or some antique chair, or some widow selling her husband’s golf clubs who doesn’t know the value of them? What a bargain! Move in on that and take advantage of it!

Well, this is only a partial listing of the ways of Esau, the man God hates, but the worst thing, the tragedy of Esau, is back in Verse 3, where God says, “The pride of your heart has deceived you.” You are this way, but you don’t know it. Blind to your own problems, you go on thinking that everything is fine, but suddenly everything falls to pieces, just as it did here to Edom (Verses 6-7):

**How Esau has been pillaged,
his treasures sought out!
All your allies have deceived you,
they have driven you to the border;
your confederates have prevailed against
you;
your trusted friends have set a trap under
you –
there is no understanding of it.**
{Ob 1:6-7 RSV}

That is the terrible thing about pride. It traps us. It tricks us. It trips us up. We don't recognize it until we are too late. We go stumbling along in our pride and arrogance and vanity and we think we are doing fine. Everyone else can see the trouble we are having, but we go blissfully on, sawing away on the limb, totally unaware that the limb we are sawing on is the limb we are sitting on, until it falls down and we are suddenly exposed.

Remember the story of *The Emperor's New Clothes*? The emperor advertised throughout his kingdom for a tailor to make him an especially good suit, and a man came and told him he would make him the finest suit that had ever been made. He brought a piece of cloth and showed it to the emperor, only the trouble was, there was nothing there. He held up his hands as though holding a piece of cloth, and he said to the emperor, "You know, this cloth has a really remarkable quality. Only the pure in heart can see it. If you have an evil in your heart, you can't see this cloth, but if your heart is pure, then you can see it. Now, surely, sir, you can see it?" The emperor couldn't see anything, but he nodded his head and said, "What beautiful cloth! What remarkable cloth. That is exactly what I am looking for." And so the man made him a suit from this cloth and he came and put it on him and the poor emperor stood there naked, fancying he had these clothes on. He called his courtiers in to admire him (of course he told them of the special quality of the cloth) and they too said, "Oh my, what a beautiful suit!" No one would admit that he couldn't see a thing until the emperor, in his pride and his vanity, decided to go out to the public streets of the city so everyone could see him. There goes the poor ignorant fellow, strutting along in his nakedness, and the whole city out there admiring him – all but a little boy who stood up and said, "But the emperor doesn't have anything on!"

Now what can you do about this?

This is where we live, isn't it?

We all have this problem of the flesh within. Well, that is not the end of the story (Verses 15-16):

For the day of the Lord is near upon all the nations.

**As you have done, it shall be done to you,
your deeds shall return on your own head.**

**For as you have drunk upon my holy mountain,
all the nations round about shall drink;
they shall drink, and stagger,
and shall be as though they had not been.**
{Ob 1:15-16 RSV}

In other words, God has determined judgment upon Edom, and there is no escaping it. Does that sound like destruction?

Well, it is – for Esau. There is no hope for Esau; there is no way out. The judgment of God is absolutely inescapable for Esau. God is forever set against him. One of the grandsons of Esau was a man named Amalek, who withstood the Israelites on their way into Canaan. In Exodus 17:14-16 it is recorded that God said to Moses, "I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven," {Exod 17:14b RSV}. And Moses says, "The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation," {Exod 17:16b RSV}. That is what God is saying about the flesh. He will never make peace with it.

But the day of triumph is for Jacob (Verses 17-18):

But in Mount Zion there shall be those that escape [Mount Zion is Jerusalem, or Jacob],
**and it shall be holy;
and the house of Jacob shall possess their own possessions.**
**The house of Jacob shall be a fire,
and the house of Joseph a flame,
and the house of Esau stubble;
they shall burn them and consume them,
and there shall be no survivor to the house of Esau;
for the Lord has spoken.**
{Ob 1:17-18 RSV}

And finally (Verse 21):

**Saviors shall go up to Mount Zion
to rule Mount Esau;
and the kingdom shall be the Lord's.**
{Ob 1:21 RSV}

This is what you might call the ruthlessness of God. He has his heart set to destroy Esau. After all, that is the whole story of the coming of the Holy Spirit into the human heart; he has come to destroy Esau and all these characteristics of the

OBADIAH: Death to Edom!

flesh. He will destroy them in those who are his and bring Jacob into the full inheritance of all his possessions – and the weapon he uses is the judgment of the cross.

Isn't it interesting that when you get to the New Testament you find these same two principles personified again in two persons who meet in the pages of the Gospels face to face. In the last week of our Lord's sufferings, he stands before Herod. Herod, we are told, is an Idumean, which is another spelling of Edom – he is an Edomite. Jesus before Herod – the representative of Jacob and the representative of Esau face to face. Herod the Edomite, proud, arrogant and rebellious, watches the cruel mockery of the soldiers as they strip the Lord down and dress him in his royal robes. The Gospel writer says that Herod plied him with many questions, but for the son of Esau there is no answer from the son of Jacob. He has nothing to discuss with him. There can be no compromise. God has nothing to say to the flesh, nothing at all except judgment.

And what is the final issue of that account? The prisoner went out to a cross and a grave, and from it he emerged a king; but King Herod went on to disgrace, exile, and, finally, to a grave in a foreign country. Beyond that he is a prisoner, bound by chains of his own making, eternally.

Now which are you? A king, or a prisoner?

Is Esau, or Jacob ruling?

Do you know about this ruthless cross that denies you any right to self-sufficiency, to self-expression, to self-advantage, to self-exploitation, to all these things – denies you indifference, gloating, or self-righteousness?

- Have you learned yet to reign with Christ, not in heaven, but right now?
- Have you learned to possess your possessions – as Jacob is intended to do – so that the kingdom shall be the Lord's, the kingdom of your life?
- Or are you still a prisoner, like Herod,
 - fancying yourself to be free,
 - on a throne in authority,
 - but still bound by unbreakable chains

because you refuse to pass through the death that sets you free?

Prayer:

Our Father, search our hearts in this moment, as we see how vividly this Old Testament illustration sets before us the truth of the New Testament. As we stand face to face with the mirror of your Word, we have seen ourselves. May we not be as those James describes who look in the mirror and see themselves and go their way and straight away forget what manner of men they were. God grant to us the grace to yield to you and to the cross and its judgment upon all the self-life, that we may know the glory of this mighty truth and possess our possessions, so that the kingdom shall be the Lord's. In his name we pray. Amen.

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JONAH: The Reluctant Ambassador

by Ray C. Stedman

Probably the best known yet least understood book in the Bible is the book of Jonah. From the world's point of view, Jonah and the whale have become a part of literature, a part of mythical legendary history. Though the story has become a byword among people, the book is looked upon with ridicule and disbelief, and is laughed out of the Bible as being a kind of fable. It is not taken seriously, it is not taken historically. It is merely a great fish story.

It is also known for its reference to Jonah as a jinx or a bad luck charm. This is based on the time in the story when Jonah was on a boat on the way to Tarshish as he was fleeing from God, and a great storm arose. His companions asked what was causing the storm, and Jonah said, "It is me." So they threw him into the sea in order to get rid of the bad luck that was following the boat. The book is well-known because of that incident, and we sometimes call somebody who is a jinx "a Jonah."

All of this has obscured the true message of this book. Jonah was actually a historical character, and he is mentioned in other places in Scripture. The book of Second Kings refers to him as a historical prophet, a prophet ministering to Israel in the days of Jeroboam. He is referred to by the Lord Jesus Christ himself, who said, "as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth," (Matt 12:40 RSV). With this kind of backing, there can be no doubt that the book of Jonah is historically accurate.

The true message of this story is found in the last two chapters of this little book. There you have Jonah – after his encounter with the whale (or fish) – going to Nineveh as God had originally sent him and proclaiming the message that God sent him to proclaim. When you ask yourself, "Why did

Jonah originally refuse to go to Nineveh?" you get very close to the heart of this book's message. Why did Jonah refuse to go? You know how the story opens:

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; {Jonah 1:1-3a RSV}

When you are trying to run away from God, you will be amazed how often you find a ship right there, ready at hand. There is one special thing about this man Jonah I like. He paid his fare to Tarshish. If he was going to be disobedient, at least he wanted to be honest about it!

[And] so he paid the fare, and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. {Jonah 1:3b RSV}

Then came the great storm and the mariners cast him into the sea, and a great fish swallowed him.

The second chapter is his prayer to God to get him out of the belly of the fish. The fish got a terrible stomach-ache and vomited him up on the land. Then in Chapter 3, Verses 1 and 2, we are told:

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." {Jonah 3:1-2 RSV}

There is a note of sternness in God's command, isn't there? God has not changed his mind a bit. He finally has changed the prophet's mind – but he has not relented about what he wants Jonah to say to Nineveh.

What made Jonah so anxious to avoid this commission? Why did he not want to go to Nineveh? Why did he flee from God? Well, some suggest that he 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 is he could get out of the land, he would get away from God. I think that idea is scotched by Jonah's own reference to God. When the voyagers asked who he was, he said to them, "I am a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land," (Jonah 1:9 RSV). That does not sound like a tribal deity to me. No, this is not why Jonah avoided going to Nineveh.

The answer is that Jonah knew God too well and that is why he did not go to Nineveh. Does that sound strange? Well, look at the beginning of Chapter 4:

But it [Nineveh's repentance] displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the Lord and said, "I pray thee, Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil." {Jonah 4:1-2 RSV}

Because Jonah knew that God was that way, he would not go to Nineveh. This is interesting, don't you think? Look again at the last phrase. Jonah says, "I knew you God. I knew that you were the kind that repents from evil if you get a chance." God had said to this prophet, "Now go to Nineveh and announce to them 'forty days and the city shall be overthrown.'"

And that was exactly what Jonah wanted. He wanted to see this city destroyed. This was the great enemy of his people. Perhaps Jonah had actually seen these cruel, ruthless, bloody Ninevites periodically coming down into his land and raiding his people. Perhaps he had even suffered the loss of loved ones at the hands of these merciless people. In the ancient world, the record for the bloodi-

est and most vicious kinds of cruelty belongs, perhaps, to the Ninevites. They found more incredibly ingenious ways to be cruel than any other nation that has ever lived. They were brutal and godless and sinful – and Jonah hated them. The one thing that he wanted more than anything else was to see Nineveh destroyed. Yet when God told him to go announce to Nineveh its destruction, he said, "I know you too well, O God. If anybody, by repenting, gives you half a chance to be merciful, you'll change your mind and won't carry out your sentence upon them." So he fled to Tarshish.

That's amazing, isn't it? What a revelation of the knowledge of God and of the character of the God of the Old Testament! 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, a God of black thunderclouds and bolts of lightning, and that he was always killing people off. Well, do you find that here? That is not the kind of God that Jonah knew. He says, "I knew that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in love, and repentest of evil."

So that is what sent him to Tarshish. And even after his trip in the living submarine he was still reluctant. He still did not very much want to deliver this message, but he remembered the fish's belly and he went. He came to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord.

Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. {Jonah 3:3b RSV}

This city would take an average of three days to cross. A day's journey was reckoned to be about twelve miles, so a three days' journey would be thirty-six miles. That is a pretty good-sized city. It was a group of cities actually – much like Los Angeles – clustered together around the banks of the Tigris River and forming the capital of the Syrian Empire (Assyrian Empire). And Jonah came to declare the message that God gave to him. He began a day's journey through the city, crying:

"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" {Jonah 3:4b RSV}

“Forty more days and your city will be laid waste. Forty more days and God is going to destroy this city.”

Ordinarily that kind of a message would not get much of a reception. It would not today and it did not then. The Bible reports other prophets being sent with a message like this to people, who paid no attention to it. But an amazing thing happens in this story:

And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. {Jonah 3:5 RSV}

And when the king heard about it,

... he arose from his throne, removed his robe, and covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. And he made proclamation [sounds like they had a Christian leadership week going on, doesn't it?] and published through Nineveh, “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; let them not feed, or drink water, but let man or beast [even the animals were involved] be covered with sackcloth, and let them cry mightily to God; yea, but every one turn from his evil way and from the violence which is in his hands. {Jonah 3:6-8 RSV}

And they did it:

When God saw what they did [not just what they said], how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it. {Jonah 3:10 RSV}

This city was spared. Why did they listen to Jonah's message? Well, I think this would always be a mystery to us were it not for clues supplied by the Lord Jesus Christ himself. In the Gospel of Luke in Chapter 11, our Lord refers to this account: “For as Jonah became a sign to the men of Nineveh, so will the Son of man be to this generation,” (Luke 11:30 RSV). He said, “Jonah – the man, the prophet – was himself a sign to the city of Nineveh, and in just the same manner, I, the Lord Jesus Christ, will be a sign to the whole generation.” He referred to Israel, but he meant the whole

race of man beyond that; and as Jonah was a sign to Nineveh, so the Son of Man will be a sign to this generation.

There are Bible scholars who feel that what happened to Jonah was that his features were changed by his experience in the whale's belly. There are some interesting historically-verified incidents of men who have been swallowed by fishes, very much like Jonah was. I would recommend Harry Rimmers' book, *The Harmony of Science and Scripture*, in which he tells of an Englishman, a sailor, who fell overboard, and was swallowed by a fish. A day or two later the fish was seen floating on the surface of the water, and was taken ashore. When it was opened up, the sailors, to their amazement, found their shipmate alive. He survived the experience, but his skin had turned a chalky white and remained so for the rest of his life. Dr. Rimmer talked with him and learned the details of his experience. It was clearly verified. There have been other accounts like this, probably half a dozen altogether. It has happened to others besides Jonah.

The message of this book, of course, is not so much what happened to Jonah, but the results in Nineveh when Jonah rose up to preach. You can imagine what happened in this city if something like this occurred. If Jonah's face and body confirmed the remarkable story that surely this man had just gone through the harrowing experience of being swallowed alive by a fish and later vomited out, and that God had sent him to proclaim this message, you can imagine the effect upon the city. Jonah was living evidence – documentary proof in his own being – that God meant what he said and would do it. The city repented down to the last man, and the judgment of God was stayed.

Now do not trouble yourselves over the fact that it says God “repented.” This describes God's action from only a human point of view. God knew all the time that it would happen this way; but whenever God's message is believed, this always seems to “change” his mind. Actually, though, we know it simply carries forward his purpose. The city was spared, and not until more than a hundred years later did God carry out his judgment on Nineveh and destroy it. But they were spared for now by their repentance at Jonah's preaching.

In the last chapter, then, we have the encounter between Jonah and God. One might think the story would be over with in Chapter 3, the great city in

sackcloth and ashes, repentant before God. But this is not what this story is after. It is trying to get us into the very heart of God. So we read that Jonah was angry with God, and he announced why he had tried to run away. He said, "I know the kind of God you are, and sure enough you did exactly what I expected. When the city repented, you changed your mind, and," he says, "I am angry." And God asks him,

"Do you do well to be angry?" {Jonah 4:4b RSV}

Jonah did not even answer. He sat down on the rimrock above the city and waited to see what God would do. I don't know how much time had gone by, but he must have waited out there a few days. The first day,

And the Lord God appointed a plant, {Jonah 4:6a RSV}

The choice of words here is interesting: God prepared a plant, appointed it. And the plant grew up and covered Jonah's head, evidence of God's gracious provision. But on the second day God prepared a worm.

... God appointed a worm which attacked the plant, so that it withered." {Jonah 4:7b RSV}

Notice the carefully-designed details here. And then when the sun came up God appointed, or prepared, an east wind that blew the heat of the desert in upon Jonah; and the poor fellow sat there sweating and suffering and suffocating until he fainted and asked that he might die. And God said again to him, "Well, Jonah, are you ready to give me your answer? I asked you a question. 'Do you do well to be angry?'" {cf, Jonah 4:9a}. I am amazed how stubborn this prophet was. He said,

"I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." {Jonah 4:9b RSV}

You know, it is easy to point the finger at Jonah, but haven't you ever said that to God, too? Haven't you ever said to him, "I want what I want. I don't care what you do. Of course I'm angry. I don't like the way you're running things. Take me

away. Take me to heaven." Now notice what God said:

And the Lord said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night, and perished in a night. [You feel sorry about a plant, and sorry for yourself.] And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left," {Jonah 4:10-11a RSV}

That is a Hebrew way of describing children; one hundred and twenty thousand little children. He said, "You can take pity on a plant but you can't take pity upon a great city filled with children and people who don't know their way, who don't know their God." And the book ends abruptly. Why? Because that is where it is supposed to take us – to the revelation of the heart of God.

God loved these Ninevites, even though Jonah hated them. And I sometimes think that there is an awful lot of Jonah in us. Sometimes we act as though we would be delighted if tomorrow morning's paper reported that Moscow lay in smoldering, smoking ruins. Wouldn't we? But God loves the Russians and the Chinese and anyone else whom we for a time call our enemies. I am not trying to avoid facing facts – we do have enemies – but God loves them, just as he loved the enemies of Israel and would spare them whenever they repented.

And God has sent us to them to declare this word of Jonah. Do you see how suddenly and subtly the Holy Spirit has insinuated us into this picture? Around us are unsaved people – the "godless," we call them, the lawless and the disobedient. We dismiss them from our lives saying, "Revolted, disgusting, they deserve damnation!" We sing of God's tender grace and his mercy and his compassion, but we avoid saying anything to them.

Now, I am not sitting in judgment on you. I stand with you in the dock concerning this. I am asking your heart, as I ask mine, "Isn't there an awful tendency among us to be like Jonah?" Do we really demonstrate to others the heart of the God who loves a world that is staggering on in blind, willful ignorance and that does not know where it is going?

He has sent us men and women to be a sign to this generation. And what is that sign? It is the sign of Jonah, the sign of resurrection, the sign of people who once were dead who have been made alive in Jesus Christ. Isn't that why the Lord said, "As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth," (Matt 12:40 RSV). Isn't that the heart of our proclamation, that here is a God who can bring life from death, who can resurrect those who are swallowed up in the belly of a whale or fish – lost, hopeless – but redeemed? And the witnesses to this proclamation are the resurrected lives of those of us who, like Jonah, declare this message in our day.

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for this book and, through it, a look at our own hearts. How like this stubborn prophet we are, intent upon our own goals, our own comforts, and unconcerned about those around us whose hearts cry out for you and touch your heart of tender compassion. Lord, grant that we may feel like you feel, to have pity on the people who cannot tell their right hand from their left. And Lord, we pray that our hearts reflect your heart and show to them your love and compassion in declaring the message of truth, in Jesus' name. Amen.

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MICAH: Who is like God?

by Ray C. Stedman

Micah was a contemporary of the great prophet, Isaiah, and his book is of a similar style. Sometimes, in fact, this book is called “Isaiah in miniature” because it is a much briefer presentation of essentially the same message as the prophecy of Isaiah.

The theme of this little prophecy is found in the meaning of the prophet’s name. I hope you have a Bible that helps you with the meaning of Hebrew names for these names are often very significant. For example, in the book of Genesis the name of the man who gained fame as the world’s oldest man was itself a prophecy. In fact, when Methuselah was born, his father, Enoch, learned something that he never forgot – and it was hidden in the name of Methuselah. Methuselah lived 969 years, and his name means “When he dies, it will come.” The year he died the flood came, so that shows something of the significance of the Hebrew names.

The name *Micah* means “Who is like God?” or “Who is like Jehovah?” Therefore, this is his repeated question. Everywhere this man went, apparently, this is what he said: “Who is like Jehovah?” “Who is like God?” – until people began to call him this. There is some suggestion that this may even have been a nickname that was given to this man. You can imagine people looking around as Micah comes up the street and saying to themselves, “Here comes old Who-is-like-God.” Since this is what Micah is talking about in this book, the theme of this book is God-likeness and the great message of God to the world today is how to be like God. This is also the theme of Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians, and I think it is very instructive to put these two messages together so that we can see that the New Testament and the Old Testament teach the same truths in different ways. That is what makes the Old Testament so enlightening to us, and

if you do not understand the New Testament, read the Old Testament.

Do you remember the story about the Greek philosopher, Diogenes? He went around with a lantern looking for an honest man all through the day. Even in broad daylight he carried his lantern around to arouse curiosity. When anybody asked Diogenes, “What are you doing with a lantern in broad daylight?” he would reply, “I am looking for an honest man.” This is like Micah’s search (Chapter 1, Verse 1):

The word of the Lord that came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem. {Micah 1:1 RSV}

The book is divided into three parts. The first three chapters describe the failure of the nation. We get this theme in many of the prophets, but here in this book we have the picture of the lack of godliness. And then comes a wonderful section in chapters four and five that is a vision of the future one, the one who is Godlike. This is a predictive section that looks forward to the coming of Christ, the Messiah. The last three chapters give us the pleading of God to the nation.

In the first chapter there is a magnificent picture of God striding forth in judgment against this nation of Judah, because of their utter failure to be godly even though God provided them with everything it takes to be godly.

That sounds familiar, does it not? Why are we not godly? We have all it takes, in the Holy Spirit, to be godly. Therefore, this book comes right home to us because we are in the same boat.

MICAH: Who is like God?

In the first section you have a beautiful, poetic picture of God moving out (Chapter 1, Verses 3-5):

**For behold, the Lord is coming forth out of
his place,
and will come down and tread upon the
high places of the earth.
And the mountains will melt under him
and the valleys will be cleft,
like wax before the fire,
like waters poured down a steep place.
All this is for the transgression of Jacob
and for the sins of the house of Israel.
{Micah 1:3-5a RSV}**

Then God picks out the capitals of these two lands. What is the transgression of Jacob? Samaria. That is, the capital, the heart of the nation. And what is the sin of the house of Judah? Is it not Jerusalem? He says (Verse 6):

**Therefore I will make Samaria a heap in
the open country [a rubbish dump],
a place for planting vineyards;
and I will pour down her stones into the
valley, {Micah 1:6a RSV}**

All this is a picture of the destruction by the armies of Assyria which, within a hundred years, would sweep across the countryside and demolish everything. The prophet says that this is God's judgment.

In Verses 10 through 16 there is something very interesting, although it is hard to see in the English version. These prophets were punsters, and although some people say that a pun is the lowest form of humor, the Bible has many puns in it, but they are hard for us to see if we do not understand Hebrew. If you could read the original Hebrew, you would see that there is pun upon pun here in the names of these cities mentioned by Micah. Verse 10:

**Tell it not in Gath, weep not at all; {Micah
1:10 RSV}**

Gath means "weep" and the prophet plays on that name. And in this manner, all the way through, he picks up names of cities and then ties the judgment of God in with them. Here is how it would read:

In Weep Town, weep not; in Dust Town, roll yourself in the dust. [*Bathleaphrah* means "town of dust."] In Beauty Town, beauty will be shamed. [That is the meaning of *Shaphir* – "beauty."] In Zaanan [which means "march"] they'll march not forth. In Neighbor Town they will end up with a useless neighbor. In Bitter Town they will grieve bitterly. {cf, Micah 1:10-12}

Then in Verse 13 you have Lachish, which means horse – Horse Town, the one-horse town. Micah says, "Oh, inhabitants of Horse Town." One play on words after another.

Chapter 2 goes on to picture vividly the utter destruction of the people, including the rulers, the prophets, the women and the children.

Then in Chapter 3 you read the reason for this total judgment of God. Micah has been seeking godliness and he looks where he might expect to find it – among the rulers of the nation, among the representatives of God. But he finds corruption, oppression, bribery, and injustice everywhere. Micah exposes the mess in Jerusalem, and he says that the reason God is visiting judgment upon his people is that those who have been given the authority to act in God's stead have forgotten that they are responsible to God.

This always touches us, does it not? For whenever we are put in a position of authority we are told to remember that we also have an authority over us. It does not make any difference whether you are an authority in the church, as an elder, or in the city, as mayor or councilman, or if you have just been elected the president of your class, or the head of your group. The New Testament reminds us that masters are to remember they have a master in heaven as well, and God holds all authority responsible to him (Eph 6:9). The man who forgets this, therefore, turns to use his power for his own advantage. And that is what had corrupted the nation. The prophet sums it up for us in Chapter 3, Verse 11:

**Its heads [its rulers] give judgment for a
bribe,
its priests teach for hire,
its prophets divine for money;
{Micah 3:11a RSV}**

There are all three classes of rulers for the nation – the spiritual rulers, the civil rulers and the

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moral rulers. Although these are the ones who should have been godly, they are the most ungodly because they failed to recognize that whenever a man is in an office of any kind, he is there to represent God. That is true even for young people in school offices. You represent God in that office. Paul declared, "Those [powers] that exist have been instituted by God," (Rom 13:1 RSV). And that does not just stop with civil government, but it applies to any level. Paul calls them the ministers of God for good, and when rulers – civil, spiritual, or moral – recognize that they are representatives of God, there is always good government. But when they forget, then there is corruption, oppression, bribery, agony and tears.

In Chapter 4, in a passage of wonderfully exalted vision, the prophet lifts up his eyes and 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 with Martin Luther and the Reformation and John Wesley, and even past our own day, to the coming of one who is Godlike. This is one of the most beautiful Messianic passages in the Scriptures (Chapter 4, Verses 1-4):

**It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the Lord
shall be established as the highest of the
mountains,
and shall be raised up above the hills;
and peoples shall flow to it,
and many nations shall come, and say:
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the
Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and we may walk in his paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
{Micah 4:1-2 RSV}**

The passage then narrows to a person.

**He shall judge between many peoples,
and shall decide for strong nations afar
off;
and they shall beat their swords into plow-
shares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more;**

**but they shall sit every man under his vine
and under his fig tree,
and none shall make them afraid;
for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has
spoken. {Micah 4:3-4 RSV}**

That is yet to come. The nations will never forget how to make war, never obey this word to beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks until the one who knows how to rule in godliness comes.

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

Chapter 5 opens with a new thought. The prophet says to Israel (Verse 1):

**Now you are walled about with a wall;
[That was a picture of the Assyrian
army being gathered around the city]
siege is laid against us; {Micah 5:1a RSV}**

It is also a picture of that day when a greater Assyrian army out of the north shall come against Israel. The reason it comes is given here in this verse:

**with a rod they strike upon the cheek
the ruler of Israel. {Micah 5:1b RSV}**

Now that is a rather quick 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, and put a crown of thorns on his head, and a robe of purple on him, and bowed before him and mocked him, (Matt 27:27-30). They struck on the cheek the ruler of Israel.

Now the prophet suddenly sees where this ruler is to come from. This is one of the great predictive passages of the Old Testament (Verse 2):

**But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are little to be among the clans of
Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days. {Micah 5:2 RSV}**

Or literally, from eternity, from everlasting.

Remember when the wise men came out of the East looking for the one born king of the Jews? They said to the rulers of Jerusalem, "Where is he

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that is born king of the Jews?" And the chief priests said, "You will find him in Bethlehem," (cf, Matt 2:1-6). How did they know? Well, because 700 years before, Micah had said to them, "Thou Bethlehem Ephrathah (that is, Bethlehem in the land of Ephraim), though you are little among the cities of Judah, yet there shall come forth from you one who is to be the ruler in Israel, whose goings-forth (or origins) are from of old, from everlasting."

And then, in Verse 3, there is a parenthesis:

Therefore he shall give them up [the nation of Israel] until the time. {Micah 5:3a RSV}

And that is why Israel has been wandering in defeat without a king, without a temple, and without a sacrifice for centuries. One of the wonders of the world is that this nation of Israel maintains its identity despite its dispersion among the nations. "He shall give them up until the time."

**when she who is in travail has brought forth;
then the rest of his brethren shall return to the people of Israel. {Micah 5:3b RSV}**

And then looking again at the one he saw coming out of Bethlehem Ephrathah (Verse 4):

**And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. {Micah 5:4 RSV}**

Seven hundred years down the corridors of time Micah clearly perceived the one who would rise out of obscurity and fulfill these predictions. His goings-forth are from everlasting; he is the God-man, the only godly man that ever walked on earth, the Godlike one.

Now in Chapters 6 and 7, in a passage of power and beauty, Jehovah turns to plead with his people and to show them the way of God-likeness. We hear a lot about dialogue today that we need to talk with those to whom we are opposed. Well God had a controversy with his people and he talked it

over with them in this passage. The prophet says (Chapter 6, Verses 1-2):

**Hear what the Lord says:
Arise, plead your case before the mountains,
and let the hills hear your voice.
Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord,
and you enduring foundations of the earth;
for the Lord has a controversy with his people,
and he will contend with Israel. {Micah 6:1-2 RSV}**

That sets the stage. Now God speaks, and this is what he says (Verses 3-5):

**"O my people, what have I done to you?
In what have I wearied you? Answer me!" {Micah 6:3 RSV}**

"What have I done to you? Why do you reject me so? Why do you turn me aside? In what have I wearied you now? Tell me."

**"For I brought you up from the land of Egypt,
and redeemed you from the house of bondage;
and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.
O my people, remember what Balak king of Moab devised,
and what Balaam the son of Beor answered him,
and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,
that you may know the saving acts of the Lord." {Micah 6:4-5 RSV}**

What do you think the people are going to say to that? Well here is their answer (Verses 6-7):

**"With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?" {Micah 6:6-7a RSV}**

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“What do you want God? What can I bring you?
Do you want sacrifice? Is that what you want?”

**“Shall I give my first-born for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” {Micah 6:7b RSV}**

What do you want of me God? (Isn't that what people say so many times?) What are you asking of me anyway?

Now listen to God's gracious answer, one of the most beautiful verses in all the Bible (Verse 8):

**He has showed you, O man, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?
{Micah 6:8 RSV}**

That is the answer, isn't it? That is the way to God-likeness: to walk humbly with your God. After all he is the only one who can make us God-like. But the Israelites failed to do this, so again there comes the cry of judgment as God at last must wake them up to their folly and their weakness.

The description of judgment is resumed and continues until you come to the last of Chapter 7 where the prophet concludes the message with a most marvelous picture of God. Notice how it starts (Verses 18-20):

**Who is a God like thee, pardoning iniquity
and passing over transgression
for the remnant of his inheritance?
He does not retain his anger for ever
because he delights in steadfast love.
He will again have compassion upon us,
he will tread our iniquities under foot.
Thou wilt cast all our sins
into the depths of the sea.**

[As someone once put it “And then put up a sign that says ‘*no fishing.*’”]

**Thou wilt show faithfulness to Jacob
and steadfast love to Abraham,
as thou hast sworn to our fathers
from the days of old.
{Micah 7:18-20 RSV}**

What is the way to God-likeness? Putting away our wickedness confessing our guilt before God, looking to him to pardon our iniquities and cast all our sins into the depth of the sea. Isn't that just what the New Testament says? “If we confess our sins he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness,” (1 Jn 1:9 RSV).

Now how do you walk humbly with God? John answers that we should walk in the light as he is in the light, that is, to walk openly and in honesty. Do not try to hide anything from God. Do not pretend to be something you are not to him. “Walk in the light as he is in the light and the blood of Jesus Christ his son cleanses us from all sin,” (1 Jn 1:7 RSV)

Now Micah's question rings in our ears: Who is like God?

Well, the only one who is like God is the man who walks with the Lord Jesus Christ – who is God himself, the Godlike one.

Prayer:

Thank you, Father, for this look into your heart of love, even though, in faithfulness, you must judge your people to make them aware of their foolish ways. Yet your heart is ever pleading and beneath all the thunders of judgment, the darkness of destruction, is that heartbeat of love and concern, of readiness to forgive and restore, and to bring us back into fellowship with you. Help us then to remember this question “Who is like God?” We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

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NAHUM: The Terrible Wrath Of God

by Ray C. Stedman

The book of Nahum is one that is neglected because it is so obscure, and so small that it is seldom read and much less frequently understood. But every portion of Scripture is indispensable; each has its own contribution to make. This is why the Apostle Paul could say, "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work," (2 Tim. 3:16-17 RSV). And this little prophecy of Nahum is no exception.

When you read this you may feel that it is a rather dry account of ancient history, but, actually, this prophecy reveals something of God more clearly than any other book of the Bible. It is the job of the prophet to reveal to us the character of God. The prophets unfold for us the divine attributes and each sees God in a different light. As you read through the prophets, therefore, you are seeing one facet after another, flashing like a diamond in the sunlight, of the mighty character and attributes of an eternal God.

Now the attribute which the prophet Nahum was given to reveal was God's anger. There is no doctrine quite as repugnant to people today as that of the anger of God. This is one doctrine which many would like to forget. There are some who picture God as a kindly gentleman with a merry twinkle in his eye who cannot bear the thought of punishing anyone or judging anyone. Nevertheless, it was Nahum's task to unfold the anger of God and in this prophecy the God of Sinai flashes forth in awful fury, a God before whom man must stand silent and trembling. You cannot read this prophecy without sensing something of the solemnity of this tremendous picture of God.

As we begin this book it is important to know why and at whom God is so angry. This prophecy is directed against the city of Nineveh to whom

God sent the prophet Jonah. When Jonah preached in Nineveh, the city repented in sackcloth and ashes. God's anger was withheld from the city and he spared it, because from the king on down to the lowest citizen, they turned to God and repented of their sins.

The book of Nahum comes some one hundred years after the prophecy of Jonah. During this time, Nineveh had repented of its repentance, and had begun to do the same things again that called forth the threat of judgment through the prophet 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 capital city of Syria, Nineveh, invaded Israel at the time of the prophet Isaiah, and it was from this great city in the north that the armies of the Syrians frequently came against the land of Judah and of Israel. But God moved to protect his people and met and destroyed these enemies of the king overnight.

Nahum means "consolation, or comfort." And as the Assyrian army was spread out around the city of Jerusalem, the prophet was given a message of consolation. You can imagine how consoling it was – when the armies were right there with their terrible reputation as ruthless warriors, burning and destroying, raping and pillaging, killing the children and sparing no one – to have this prophet stand up in Jerusalem and declare to them that God would destroy Nineveh, the capital city of their enemies.

This is one of those parts of prophecy in Scripture which already has been fulfilled. Much of Scripture remains to be fulfilled, and many of the predictions of the Old Testament prophets look beyond our own day to a time when the Lord will come again. But as we look at this book, we see prophecies that have long since come to pass. This is one of the great proofs that the Book of God is

from God, for there is a description here of exactly how this destruction would occur, given years before it took place. Those who are interested in apologetics might use this in talking with some who challenge the fact that the Word of God is predictive.

We can divide the book of Nahum into four sections, and each of them is a description of the anger of God.

I think the simplest way to describe this first section, this vision of God in his wrath, is to simply use the Anglo-Saxon word “**terrible**.” These are beautiful poetic expressions, but they powerfully picture the wrath of God (Chapter 1, Verses 2-6):

**The Lord is a jealous God and avenging,
the Lord is avenging and wrathful;
the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries
and keeps wrath for his enemies.
The Lord is slow to anger and of great
might,
and the Lord will by no means clear the
guilty.**

**His way is in whirlwind and storm,
and the clouds are the dust of his feet.
He rebukes the sea and makes it dry,
he dries up all the rivers;
Bashan and Carmel wither,
the bloom of Lebanon fades.
The mountains quake before him,
the hills melt;
the earth is laid waste before him,
the world and all that dwell therein.**

**Who can stand before his indignation?
Who can endure the heat of his anger?
His wrath is poured out like fire,
and the rocks are broken asunder by him.
{Nahum 1:2-6 RSV}**

What a description that is! The prophet sees God in his anger looking at the hosts of Assyria. There are some men and women who live in a perpetual temper. Their hot tempers boil over at the slightest provocation, but the interesting thing is that people do not usually fear this kind of a person. They pity them or they make jokes about them. There are other people who are more quiet and peaceful by nature. It takes a long time to stir them up. They endure irritations for a long time,

but when their patience is exhausted and at last they are brought to a boil, watch out. They are terrible in anger.

That is the picture that the prophet gives here, of an infinitely patient God. As the prophet says, “He is slow to anger.” He does not move rapidly. He has given this city chance after chance to repent. He has sent prophet after prophet after prophet. They did believe one prophet and repented their evil ways, and God spared the judgment he said he would bring. But they repented from their repentance. That is one of the most terrible things that men can do. Having turned from their evil, they went back to what they had said they would forsake, and this is what evokes the judgment of God at last.

God is angry, and this is no temper tantrum. There is nothing capricious about the anger of God. There is nothing selfish about it. It is a controlled but terrible rage, fearsome to behold. You can get some idea of the awfulness of this divine anger in the fact that all the Hebrew words for wrath or anger are brought together in these six verses. The words are: jealous, vengeance, wrath, anger, indignation, fierceness, fury. All of them describe the anger of God.

Jealousy, that burning zeal for a cause felt so deeply in the heart. This is not the selfish, petty jealousy we exhibit sometimes, but God’s overwhelming concern for what he loves. His vengeance, or retribution; his wrath, that towering anger, the blackness of it, the darkness of it, is described here. The word for *anger* is the word that literally means “heavy breathing,” or “hot breathing.” And the word for *indignation* literally means “foaming at the mouth”! You can see how picturesque these words are. The word *fierceness* in Hebrew literally means “heat,” and the word *fury* means “burning.” And all this to describe a God who is terrible in his wrath, moved at last to the point of pouring out his wrath upon that which has awakened it. God in a white-hot passion, burning with a terrible, blistering rage.

The second section, beginning with Verse 8 of Chapter 1, brings before us another aspect of his anger. Here we learn that the wrath of God, or the anger of God, can be **personal**, for this is all directed against a single individual. In Verse 11 you have reference to Sennacherib, the general of the Assyrian armies.

**Did one not come out from you,
who plotted evil against the Lord,
and counseled villainy?
{Nahum 1:11 RSV}**

God's anger was all directed against this pagan king who deliberately plotted to destroy the people, after God had visited his city with grace and had saved them from his anger. Verse 12 refers to the visit of the angel of death when Sennacherib came down with his armies before Jerusalem. In Isaiah, Chapters 36 and 37, you have the description of how the Assyrian armies came down and spread out before the city of Jerusalem. Then with taunting challenges to King Hezekiah, they told him they were going to take the city and that there was no strength that could stand against them. Isaiah tells us how Hezekiah took these messages and spread them before the Lord and asked God to save the city, even with the armies of Assyria surrounding it. And that night, we are told, the angel of death went through the Assyrian hosts and slew 185,000 soldiers (Isa 37:36). That is referred to in Verses 12-13:

**Thus says the Lord,
"Though they be strong and many,
they will be cut off and pass away.
Though I have afflicted you,
I will afflict you no more.
And now I will break his yoke from off you
and will burst your bonds asunder."
{Nahum 1:12-13 RSV}**

As a result of this, the Assyrian armies went back and Jerusalem was saved. (There is an interesting construction there in the Hebrew. It says, "When they woke up in the morning behold they were all dead men." Of course, the ones who woke up in the morning were the Israelites and not the Assyrians.)

Verse 14 was literally fulfilled in the murder of Sennacherib. When the angel went through the camp the Assyrian general was spared, and he returned to Nineveh. But while he was worshipping 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. We read here (Verse 14):

**The Lord has given commandment about
you:
"No more shall your name be perpetu-
ated;
from the house of your gods I will cut off
the graven image and the molten image.
I will make your grave, for you are vile."
{Nahum 1:14 RSV}**

Years before that happened the prophet Nahum was told that God 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. In Verse 15 you have the joyful shout that went up from Jerusalem when the news came of Sennacherib's death:

**Behold, on the mountains the feet of him
who brings good tidings,
who proclaims peace!
Keep you feasts, O Judah,
fulfill your vows,
for never again shall the wicked come
against you,
he is utterly cut off. {Nahum 1:15 RSV}**

What a picture this is of the fact that God's wrath can be directed against a person. This is what people are so slow to believe. They say that God is a God of love. How can he possibly punish anybody? This is the argument. When it is mentioned that God's justice demands that he punish us, they say that this cannot be so. God's love is greater than his justice, they say, and therefore, under no circumstances can God's justice cause him to punish. There are many who are suffering under this delusion. But here is a man who was singled out, as the prophet tells us, to bear the brunt of the wrath of God, this man who was responsible for the depredations against Judah.

Now, there is a third section, comprising all of Chapter 2, which reveals still another aspect of God's anger: he is **thorough**. Here God is addressing Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, and he says (Verse 1):

**The shatterer has come up against you.
Man the ramparts;
watch the road;
gird your loins;
collect all your strength.
{Nahum 2:1 RSV}**

How dramatically this is put, as though the watchman is looking out and he 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 and this army is called the "Shatterer." "The Shatterer has come." Here is the way the account of the battle in the city begins (Verses 3-5):

**The shield of his mighty men is red,
his soldiers are clothed in scarlet.
The chariots flash like flame
when mustered in array;
the chargers prance.
The chariots rage in the streets,
they rush to and fro through the squares;
they gleam like torches,
they dart like lightning.
The officers are summoned,
they stumble as they go,
they hasten to the wall
the mantelet is set up.**

{Nahum 2:3-5 RSV}

This fourth verse sounds like it is describing the freeway: "The chariots rage in the streets, they rush to and fro through the squares; they gleam like torches, they dart like lightning." As a matter of fact, that verse has often been interpreted to be a prediction of automobiles, which is a very good example of the folly of removing a verse from its context. It has nothing to do with automobiles, although it can be made to describe them in "they gleam like torches, they dart like lightning." It is simply a predictive description of the battle that raged in the streets of Nineveh as the Babylonians came up against it.

In Verse 6 you have an amazing, direct prophecy of the manner in which the city of Nineveh would be taken:

**The river gates are opened,
the palace is in dismay; {Nahum 2:6 RSV}**

The Greek historian, Diodorus Siculus, recorded an account of how the city of Nineveh fell, and this is what he said:

There was an old prophecy that Nineveh should not be taken till the river become an enemy with 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 furlongs. Then the king [of Nineveh] thinking that the oracle was fulfilled and the river became an enemy of the city, built a large funeral pile in the palace and collected together all his wealth and his concubines and his eunuch, burnt himself and the palace with them all. And the enemy entered at the breach that the waters had made and took the city.

In other words, they came in through the river gates. The Babylonian armies came in through the place where the river had broken out and flooded the city and because of this mistaken idea of the king's, the Babylonians found them all gathered in the palace and there they put them to death. And this is exactly what Nahum had predicted years before.

**The river gates are opened,
the palace is in dismay. {Nahum 2:6 RSV}**

Now that is how thoroughly God's anger works when it begins to move in judgment. Nothing escapes. Remember that old saying, "Although the mills of God grind slow, they grind exceedingly small."

There is a story of the agnostic who made fun of a Christian farmer because he refused to work on his fields on Sunday. The agnostic always went out every Sunday to work in his fields, and at the end of the year he came to his Christian neighbor and taunted him. He said, "Look, you are a Christian and you don't work on Sunday, and you have had a fairly good crop, but look at the way God blessed me. I have worked every Sunday and look at the abundance of grain that I have. Why, this has been one of the richest October harvests that I have ever had." And the Christian farmer turned to him and said, "Yes, but God does not always settle his accounts in October."

When God begins to move, nothing escapes his grasp, nothing. We are in his universe. We are creatures here. There is no way to run away. There is no place to hide. We must deal with a God who says over and over again that if his grace is thwarted, he will rise in judgment at the last.

Now, the third section, in which God addresses the city of Nineveh. We have seen how he portrays

the overthrow of the city, and now he says (Verse 11-12):

**Where is the lions' den,
the cave of the young lions,** [This is a picture of the Assyrian lions, the symbol of the Assyrians, just as the bear is the symbol of Russia and the lion Britain's.]
**where the lion brought his prey,
where his cubs were, with none to disturb?** {Nahum 2:13 RSV}

This is a taunt at the overthrow of the city. If you had visited the site of the city of Nineveh 60 years ago you would have stood in the middle of a wilderness, never knowing that this was a site of a great and ancient city. Archaeologists have begun to unearth this city and we know now where Nineveh is located, but for centuries it was lost, buried under the shifting sands of the desert.

The last chapter reveals how **irresistible** the anger of God is. In Verse 4 we are told one of the reasons for Nineveh's destruction:

**And all for the countless harlotries of the harlot,
graceful and of deadly charms,
who betrays nations with her harlotries,
and peoples with her charms.**
{Nahum 3:4 RSV}

This is a reference to the witchcraft that was practiced in Nineveh. And in response to these practices, God says (Verses 5-7):

**Behold I am against you,
says the Lord of hosts,
and will lift up your skirts over your face;
and I will let nations look on your nakedness
and kingdoms on your shame.
I will throw filth at you
and treat you with contempt,
and make you a gazingstock.
And all who look on you will shrink from you and say,
Wasted is Nineveh; who will bemoan her?
whence shall I seek comforters for her?**
{Nahum 3:5-7 RSV}

And God reminds Nineveh of what had happened earlier to the Egyptian city of Thebes (Verses 8-10):

**Are you better than Thebes
that sat by the Nile,
with water around her,
her rampart a sea,
and water her wall?
Ethiopia was her strength,
Egypt too, and that without limit;
Put and the Libyans were her helpers.**
{Nahum 3:8-10 RSV}

Thebes also looked impregnable,

**Yet she was carried away,
she went into captivity;
her little ones were dashed in pieces
at the head of every street;
for her honored men lots were cast,
and all her great men were bound in chains.** {Nahum 3:10 RSV}

God controls history and when he decides to move against a nation, a city, or an individual, there is no escape. He is absolutely irresistible. In ironic language he urges the city to fortify itself (Verses 14,15):

**Draw water for the siege,
strengthen your forts;
go into the clay,
tread the mortar,
take hold of the brick mold!** [Do anything you like, anything you can think of. But]
**There will the fire devour you,
the sword will cut you off.
It will devour you like the locust.**
{Nahum 3:14-15 RSV}

Here we see pictured the anger of God – this terrible, personal, thorough, irresistible anger. Individuals today are in danger of this anger. All through the Scripture you see it. Flee from the wrath to come. Avoid the anger of God whose patience is outraged, whose grace is turned aside. The twin sins that will always call forth the wrath of God are pride and impenitence. When a nation or a person walks in pride and counts himself sufficient, saying he is able to handle his own affairs and run his own life, that nation, that person is doomed. When God shows mercy but that man or

that nation remains impenitent, then comes the blazing wrath of God.

What, then, is the message of Nahum to our own hearts?

Well, there is an interesting application here that is both national and individual. On the national level it is a message of comfort to us today. Just as Nahum's word brought comfort to a nation that was threatened by this godless, cruel foe, we have a somewhat similar facing us. For the interesting thing is that 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 who would threaten the peace of the earth and would play an important part on the stage of world history in the last days. The Assyrians in prophecy are a picture of the Soviet Union and the Communist nations, the peoples of the north. If you want an interesting study, I suggest you compare Ezekiel, Chapters 38 and 39, with this prophecy of Nahum. You notice in Verse 13 of Chapter 2 of Nahum God says,

Behold, I am against you, says the Lord of hosts, {Nahum 2:13 RSV}

And Verse 5 of Chapter 3,

Behold, I am against you, says the Lord of hosts. {Nahum 3:5 RSV}

And when Ezekiel opens his great prophecy against the king of the north, the Gog of the Land of Magog as he calls him, he opens with these very words:

Behold, I am against you, O Gog, chief prince of Meshech; {Ezek 38:3 RSV}

This is the word of comfort to us that predicts God's judgment and destruction of the peoples of the north on the mountains of Israel.

Now, there is an individual application as well. To those who think that God is only a God of love and never of wrath, let them learn from Nahum that a God who is never angry is a God who cannot love. Did you ever think of that? God's wrath comes from his love. It is because God loves that he is angry; because of love that wrath must blaze forth.

You can prove that to yourself: What moves you to anger? Isn't it almost always when some-

thing or someone you love is threatened or injured? It may be yourself. We all love ourselves. What makes us angry? Somebody injures us and because we love ourselves, we get mad at them. Or someone injures our child and our wrath blazes forth. And if you cannot get angry when you hear or see injury and injustice, it is proof that you are not capable of love, for the one who cannot be angry is the one who cannot love. If you can read stories of atrocities and oppression and the awful traffic in body-destroying and soul-destroying drugs and narcotics among young people and never be moved to burning anger, then I tell you there is something wrong with you. You are incapable of love. If God cannot smite, if he cannot destroy in vengeance, then he has no capacity for love.

It is certainly true that God loves the sinner but hates his sin, as we sometimes say. But that is only part of the story. The Bible tells us that if a man loves his sin and holds on to it at all costs, refusing the grace of God, then he becomes identified with his sin. And eventually, the wrath of God against his sin is also directed against the sinner.

I remember reading of a man who was convicted of stealing, but he argued before the judge that the sentence was unjust; he said it was not he who stole, it was his arm, and so it was unfair for the judge to sentence him to the penitentiary, he could only sentence his arm. Actually, he thought the judge should let him off because his arm had done the stealing and not him. The judge resolved the issue by sentencing the arm to thirty years in jail saying if the man wanted to accompany it, that was up to him.

We become identified with that to which we cling and this is what the Bible pictures. It is time to reassert that God has this capacity for anger, time again to warn men to flee from the wrath to come. Men have been saying that if you would only talk about a God of love, you could fill the churches; if only you would appeal to men about a God of love, they would turn from their wickedness and be drawn to him. But the facts prove exactly the opposite. For the last thirty years or more the message of the wrath of God has been almost totally absent in Christian pulpits. People have talked about a God of love. But that has been interpreted in the minds of men as a God of permissiveness; one who will let you do anything and get away with it. As a result, the churches are emptier than ever before and instead of turning toward God,

men have defied God, refusing to believe in God and turning away from him.

You cannot just preach the God of wrath without the God of love, but the wrath of God grows out of his love, 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." But what is the way to escape the anger of God? Well, Nahum tells you that too, back in Chapter 1, Verse 7:

**The Lord is good,
a stronghold in the day of trouble;
he knows those who take refuge in him.
{Nahum 1:7 RSV}**

No man who turns to God will ever experience his wrath. This complaint that God is a God of wrath seems to picture him as being vengeful without reason, as being determined upon the destruction of men, but it is never so. God only destroys, only exercises his wrath when men have rejected his love. There is a way of escape and there has been all along. We need not face the wrath of God. No one needs to. God's whole purpose has been to call men's attention to that way so that they might take it. And that way is given here: "He knows those who take refuge in him."

I remember years ago when my children were small, and one of my daughters and I had a disagreement one day and I spanked her hard. I was angry and she was crying and I did not know what

to do after I spanked her as she still seemed to be unrepentant. But all of a sudden she ran and threw her arms about my neck. Now what was I to do? Continue to beat her? Oh, no! I could not have lifted a finger against her because she had taken refuge with me.

God knows those who take refuge in him and for those his heart of love is always open. They will never know his wrath. That is what the Scriptures say. As the Lord Jesus put it, "he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life," (John 5:24 RSV).

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you that you know them that trust in you. God grant to us the wisdom and the simple good sense to believe you and to give up an attempt to try to evade your love and your grace; to feel that somehow we can get away with it, that somehow we will escape, that somehow we will be an exception. Lord, make us to understand that the very persistence and unchangeability that guarantees we will never escape is the same persistence that prompts your grace and reminds us that he who turns to you shall never come into judgment but has passed from death into life. We thank you in Christ's name. Amen.

HABAKKUK: History is in God's Hands

by Ray C. Stedman

The name *Habakkuk* means “embracer,” not in the romantic sense, but in a comforting sense and this is a great book of comfort. Comfort is probably the most distressing problem that human beings have to face: the great question of why God allows certain things to happen. I do not know any more up-to-date and relevant question than that one. As you read through this prophecy of Habakkuk you will discover that the problem he wrestled with and eventually learned the answer to – thus becoming a comforter and embracer of his people in their distress – is exactly the problem that you and I wrestle with today. For the prophet lived in a time very similar to our day – a time when everything was going wrong. He lived when there was great national corruption and distress, when the nation and land was filled with violence, with hatred, and with outbreaks of evil. His distress is reflected in the opening phrases of the book (Chapter 1, Verses 1-4):

The oracle of God which Habakkuk the prophet saw.

O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,

and thou wilt not hear?

Or cry to thee “Violence!”

and thou wilt not save?

Why dost thou make me see wrongs and look upon trouble?

Destruction and violence are before me;

strife and contention arise.

So the law is slacked

and justice never goes forth.

For the wicked surround the righteous,

so justice goes forth perverted.

{Hab 1:1-4 RSV}

Doesn't that sound like today? Why, Habakkuk says, does he have to cry “Violence!” and hear no answer? Here is the great problem of unanswered prayer. Here is a man who is disturbed about his nation. He sees everything going wrong. The people are living in wickedness; there is unrest, violence, injustice and oppression throughout the land. Those who have the responsibility to correct this do nothing about it. When the whole matter is brought before the courts, the courts themselves are corrupt. So Habakkuk is greatly troubled.

He is a man of God and he knows that the thing to do with a problem is to take it to God – and he has been doing that. He has been praying about his problem. But he does not get any answer. So his perplexed heart in bewilderment cries out, “Lord, how long do I have to keep this up, crying out to you like this? You do nothing about it. I have been watching for a change, watching for an outbreak of revival, watching for something to happen, yet nothing happens. How long must I continue?”

Have you ever felt that way? Look around at our nation and you can see everything breaking up, the shaking of long-standing foundations, people turning away from the faith and questioning things they never questioned before. People are expressing doubts, even outright unbelief, in circles where doubts have never been expressed before. Have you been praying for loved ones, wanting to see God change them and reach their lives, and nothing happens? This is the problem of unanswered prayer. It is a great problem and it perplexes the prophet.

But now God answers Habakkuk. The amazing thing about this prophecy is that it is not addressed to the people at all. Rather, this is a dialogue between a man and God. That is why it is so up-to-date. Every one of us is named Habakkuk

and each of us faces this problem from time to time. God answers (Verse 5):

**Look among the nations, and see;
wonder and be astounded.
For I am doing a work in your days
that you would not believe if told.
{Hab 1:5 RSV}**

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 do not know how to recognize my answer. I have been answering but the answer is so different from what you expect that you will not even recognize it or believe it when I tell you. But let me tell you what it is." Then God goes on (Verse 6 ff):

**For lo, I am rousing the Chaldeans,
that bitter and hasty nation,
who march through the breadth of the
earth,
to seize habitations not their own.
Dread and terrible are they;
their justice and dignity proceed from
themselves.
Their horses are swifter than leopards,
more fierce than the evening wolves;
their horsemen press proudly on.
Yea, their horsemen come from afar;
they fly like an eagle swift to devour.
They all come for violence;
terror of them goes before them.
They gather captives like sand.
At kings they scoff,
and of rulers they make sport.
They laugh at every fortress,
for they heap up earth and take it.
Then they sweep by like the wind and go
on,
guilty men, whose own might is their god!
{Hab 1:6-11 RSV}**

Does that sound like anyone you know? You could substitute the Communists, or in the last generation you could have replaced Chaldeans with Nazis. Here is God's answer to the prophet's problem: God says that he is preparing to raise up this nation of the Chaldeans. Now at the time Habakkuk wrote, the Chaldeans were not an important people. (Another name for Chaldeans is the Babylonians.) These names are used interchangeably in the Old Testament but at the time the prophet wrote, the great nation that frightened all

the other nations and ruled as the great tyrant of the world of that day was the Assyrian nation. Their capital was Nineveh, referred to in previous prophecies.

But here is a little nation that is beginning to rise up in world history and God says to the prophet, "I am behind this. These people are a very strange people. They are bitter, hostile, ruthless and cold-blooded. They are going to be as powerful as any nation on earth has ever been and they will sweep through lands conquering everything, and it will look as though nothing can stop them. These people will not have any god at the center of their life. They believe that their own might is their god, and they trust in their own strength. I am behind the rise of this people, and this is the answer to your prayer."

Now that is a little astounding, isn't it? Evidently Habakkuk did not know what to make of this. There is a moment of silence here and then he begins to reflect. If he thought he had a problem to start with, he really has one now. Now he is battling in the major leagues when it comes to problems, for how will God solve the original one by creating such a major problem as this?

This is what bothers many people as they look at what is happening in the world. The thing that has threatened the faith of many has been the problem of history. Why does God allow things to happen the way they do? Why does he permit such terrible events to occur in human history? I recently saw the results of a survey of the questions that non-Christian students were asking on campuses around our country. Number one on the list was: "How can a just or loving God allow men to suffer? Why would God create us and then allow disease and starvation and all those other terrible things?"

Now there are many who ask that question today and many whose faith is actually faltering because of this. They are saying, "How can this be? What kind of a universe do we live in?" Of course, others are quick to supply an answer. They say, "Well, the answer is that there is no God and it is no use thinking there is one. We are living in a machine-like universe, with ponderously clanking gears, and nobody really knows what makes it operate. Chance put it all together. You only fool yourself when you imagine a father image out of the desire of your heart, and you call it God."

The reason they say this is because of the apparent inactivity of God. That is one of the mysterious things about God, isn't it? The poet, William Cowper, said, "God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform." And the ways of God are full of mystery to us. We have to recognize that there are times when we just cannot understand how God is moving. It does not seem to make sense, and the instruments he chooses are sometimes so out of the ordinary. God is so unorthodox. He is always doing things the wrong way, and picking up the wrong people and operating in the most surprising fashion. One of the things that you learn about God after you live with him for a while is that he is always doing the unexpected. It is not because he delights to puzzle us, but because the variety of his workings are so infinite that our feeble human minds cannot grasp them.

Now that was the problem that afflicted Habakkuk. He was puzzled by this strange silence and then when he heard how God was moving, he could not understand that either. But now he does a very wise thing and the next section of this book is a most important passage because it tells us how to handle this kind of a problem. What do you do when you are confronted with this sort of a threat to your faith? When you see what looks like inaction on God's part and then maybe you see that he is acting, but in a way that seems utterly unbelievable, what do you do? One of the great needs in our Christian life is to understand the method of approaching problems like this. And the method can be outlined very simply. There are four very simple steps and as we go on you will see how the prophet follows them through:

- First of all, stop and think. Do not react emotionally to the problem. Do not let panic grip you, or some terrible fear come over you. Stop and think. All right, think about what?
- Second, restate to yourself the basic things you know about God. Do not try to solve the problem immediately. Back away from it and begin with God. Go back to what you know about God and his character as it has been revealed to you in revelation and by experience.
- Then, take what you know about the character of God and bring it to bear on the problem. That is the third step.

- And, finally, if you have not come to an answer, leave the rest with faith in God and ask him to show it to you.

That is the way. Notice how the prophet does this. First, he starts thinking about God (Verse 12):

**Art thou not from everlasting,
O LORD my God, my Holy One?
We shall not die. {Hab 1:12 RSV}**

Habakkuk has reminded himself of some great things in that statement, "Art thou not from everlasting?" The first thing that he thinks about is that the God he knows is an everlasting God. God sits above history He is greater than any span of human events. He created history. He is from the beginning and he is at the end. He preceded the beginning; he lasts beyond the end. He is the God of eternity. That is the first thing the prophet reminds himself of. When these Chaldeans come, they will trust 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 covers history, who himself governs these events, the everlasting God."

Second, the prophet reminds himself that God is the self-existent one because he uses a very special name for God. He says,

**Art thou not from everlasting,
O LORD my God? {Hab 1:12a RSV}**

When the word "Lord" is all in capital letters as it is here, it is a translation of the Hebrew word for Jehovah. *Jehovah* means "I am that I am." The great name that God revealed to Moses when he was in Egypt. At that time he said to him, "Go down to Egypt and tell Pharaoh that 'I am that I am' sent you," (cf, Exod 3:14). Do you know why Habakkuk reminded himself of this? Because there were people in his day going around saying that God was dead. There always are. There is absolutely nothing new in this. Let us get rid of this egotistical idea that we are the first generation that has had any problems. They have happened to all the people before us. There is nothing new. While people went around saying that God was dead, Habakkuk went right 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 that I am."

Third, Habakkuk reminds himself of the holiness of God: "My Holy One." Now, what does holiness mean? I dare say most of us use this word without any idea of what it means. Does it mean that he is some sort of a fearsome being and that we had better be careful not to get too close to him because he is holy? No, *holiness* is "wholeness," "completeness," it is being "a whole person." It means essentially that God is consistent with himself. He is always what he is. He is never anything different, never a phony. He never pretends or puts on. That is holiness.

You can find this reflected all through the Scriptures – the unchangeability of God. The writer of Hebrews says, "Thou, Lord, didst found the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of thy hands ... they will be changed. But thou art the same, and thy years will never end," (Heb 1:10, 1:12b RSV). Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and for ever, {Heb 13:8 KJV}. With him there is no shadow of turning {cf, Jas 1:17}, no changeability at all.

After the prophet reminds himself of this, he immediately adds these words, "We shall 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 raise up a nation that would forever be his people and that he would never allow them to be eliminated from the earth. The prophet is reminding himself of that, in the face of this fearsome threat. The Chaldeans are going to come rolling across this land. He will see his own beloved Jerusalem ravished and captured and his people led away into captivity. But there is the reminder that God is not going to let the worst happen. They will not die. They will not be eliminated. God's faithfulness remains. He is unchangeable.

So the prophet comes now to a conclusion that settles at least the first part of his problem. He says (Verse 12):

**O LORD, thou has ordained them as a judgment;
and thou, O Rock, hast established them for chastisement. {Hab 1:12b RSV}**

"Now I understand why you are raising up the Chaldeans; it is your way of waking my people up

to their folly, to their awful stupidity in turning away from you. They think they can live without you, and yet how many times have you sent prophets to them, pleading, begging and reminding them of your word? You have poured out blessing after blessing upon them, and still they go on in their senseless folly, taking it all for granted, thinking they can go on living without you. Now I see what you are doing. You are raising up a people to shock them into reality, to awaken and chastise them. I understand this now."

Is there any question that God does this in history? Doubtless this is why the Nazis were allowed to come so suddenly to power, to ravish Europe and then be suddenly struck down again. It was to awaken the Western world to its greediness, its covetousness, its wickedness, and to its departure from the things of truth and of God. God is saying something through this. He is shaking the nations. This is God's pattern throughout history.

Then the prophet says, "I see that, but now I have another problem." He goes on (Verse 13):

**Thou who art of purer eyes than to behold
evil
and canst not look on wrong,
why dost thou look on faithless men,
and art silent when the wicked swallows
up
the man more righteous than he?
{Hab 1:13 RSV}**

And Habakkuk goes on to describe the wickedness of the Chaldeans. "Now," he says, "I can see how you are raising up this nation to punish these people, but I don't understand this. Despite the wickedness of my own people, they are not as bad as these Chaldeans. How is it that you are using a wicked, godless, ruthless people like this to punish your own people? This I don't understand."

Have you ever heard that? Have you ever heard anybody say, "It is true that America has problems, and maybe are kind of a wicked people, but we are not as bad as the Communists (or the Nazis, or whoever else might be our enemies at the time). God won't let these people take over here, because after all, they are far worse than we are."

So the prophet says, "I don't understand this." And since he does not know what to do, he follows the fourth step; he just leaves the problem with God. Now that is a very wise thing to do because our human minds do not grasp all the intricacies of

history. There is so much that we do not understand. So at this point many people say, "It must mean there isn't any God" or "God is not like the Bible says he is" or "I can't believe this. If God won't explain to me what he is going to do, I can't believe in him any longer."

But the prophet says, "Well, I don't understand, but then you are mightier than I, and I will just wait for you to reveal it to me." Notice how he begins Chapter 2:

**I will take my stand to watch,
and station myself on the tower,
and look forth to see what he will say to me,
and what I will answer concerning my
complaint. {Hab 2:1 RSV}**

That is a wise thing to do. First, Habakkuk says that he is going to get away from the problem for awhile. "I am going to leave the matter with God and wait for him to take the next step. I have gone as far as I can. I have reasoned from the character of God. I know that he has eyes purer than to look upon evil. He does not like evil. He has no complicity with it. I know that. And yet he is raising up these evil people. I don't understand, but I will let God explain it to me and I will wait for an answer."

Can you do this? When you bring a problem to God and explain it all to him in prayer, do you get up and start worrying about it again? (How is this going to work out? What do I do next?) That is the thing that defeats us so many times. But the prophet leaves it there. He says, "It is up to you." Verse 2:

**And the LORD answered me
"Write the vision;
make it plain upon tablets,
so he may run who reads it."
{Hab 2:2 RSV}**

In other words, "Habakkuk, I am going to tell you the answer. Now I want you to write it down and I want you to write it so plainly that anyone who reads it will be able to immediately tell the answer abroad, spread it all over the land." Then God adds these significant words (Verse 3):

**"For still the vision awaits its time;
It hastens to the end – it will not die.
If it seem slow, wait for it;**

**it will surely come, it will not delay."{Hab
2:3 RSV}**

God is saying, "Habakkuk, this isn't going to happen right away. There is going to be a lapse of time, but it will come." This is the character of God's revelation. First God says that an event will happen. Then he says, "Don't you worry about what happens in between. Even though it looks like everything is going wrong, what I have said will happen is going to happen, and if it seems to delay, wait for it. It will come."

Then God goes on to state a principle that is quoted three times in the New Testament and forms the basis for the greatest movements that God has ever had among human beings. He says these words (Verse 4):

**"Behold, he whose soul is not upright in
him shall fall,
but the righteous shall live by his faith."
{Hab 2:4 RSV}**

These words are quoted in the New Testament in Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews. This is the word that lit a fire in the heart of Martin Luther, "The righteous shall live by faith." Not by circumstances, or by observations, or by reasoning, but by faith in what God has said will happen.

In these words the prophet is shown that there are only two possible outlooks on life. There are only two attitudes by which we can face life. Either we face it in faith depending upon God, or we face it in unbelief depending upon our own ability to reason out everything. These are the two fundamental attitudes, and they are the only two. You can only have one or the other. If you look around you will see that every human being on the face of the earth can be put into one of these two categories. Either they are trusting in the wisdom of the human mind to study events and arrange solutions, and they try to analyze the writings of clever men and come to conclusions about human events based on these sources, or they take what God has said and believe that when he has said a thing will happen, it will happen and that all of history converges into, and hinges on, that promise.

Now that is the difference between a man of faith and a man who lives by his reason. One of the saddening things to me is to see how many Christians are being trapped into actually living by reason, and by the cleverness of the human rational

processes, in the name of Christianity. There are many who say that the job of the church is to organize people who are disadvantaged in some way so they can exercise political influence and power, bringing pressure to bear on the leaders of the nation to correct abuses, and that this is the Christian thing to do. Now I am not suggesting that it is wrong to help people in need. This is entirely right, as God leads. But the processes of depending upon pressure blocks and picket lines and so on is not even remotely Christian. That is not what the Word of God says to do at all. In contrast, look at the stories of the men and women in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews. How did they change the world of their day? It says that they endured as seeing one who is invisible. They were not expecting man to do anything. They were expecting God to work and God always did work. As he worked, things began to change, and the history of that kind of working is the amazing success story of men and women who stopped the mouths of lions, subdued kingdoms, toppled thrones, won empires and changed the course of history by faith – not by counting on man to work but on God.

Throughout the rest of the chapter, then, there is a very interesting analysis of the Chaldeans and what God plans to do with them. To summarize, God says to the prophet, “Now. Habakkuk, don’t you worry about the Chaldeans; it is true that I have purer eyes than to behold evil and it is also true that I am raising up this people to judge the nation of Israel, but in turn I will judge the Chaldeans. The very thing in which they trust will prove to be their downfall. Their very gods will overthrow them.”

And he pronounces five woes on these people (Verse 6):

“Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own {Hab 2:6b RSV}

[Woe to the man who lives by the philosophy, “I will get everything I can and it doesn’t matter how I do it.”]

Verse 9:

**Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house,
to set his nest on high,
to be safe from the reach of harm!**

{Hab 2:9 RSV}

[Woe to the fellow who is devoting all his efforts towards being secure and safe in his

old age. God says that he will find the foundations pulled out from under him and everything he has invested himself in will be swept away.]

Verse 12:

**Woe to him who builds a town with blood,
and founds a city on iniquity!**

{Hab 2:12 RSV}

[Woe to those who trust in violence to achieve what they want.]

Verse 15:

**Woe to him who makes his neighbors drink
of the cup of his wrath, and makes them
drunk,**

to gaze on their shame! {Hab 2:15 RSV}

[Woe to the man who creates fear in those around him in order to rule over them, and to gain from them.]

Verse 19:

**Woe to him who says to a wooden thing,
Awake; {Hab 2:19a RSV}**

[Woe to the man who trusts in a false god, who thinks that the forces around him are able to control him, give him life and fulfill his desires.]

Finally, in Chapter 3 the prophet concludes with a most remarkable prayer. Here he has seen his answer. God is the God of history and he is moving; he has everything under control. The thing we need to remember is that these forces and the problems created by them are not solved by trying to come to grips with only the immediate problem. That is like taking aspirin to cure cancer. It will never work. No, these problems can be solved only by the relationship of man to God. Habakkuk says (Verse 20):

**But the LORD is in his holy temple;
let all the earth keep silence before him.
{Hab 2:20 RSV}**

Then he begins this mighty prayer (Chapter 3, Verse 2):

**O LORD, I have heard the report of thee,
and thy work, O LORD, do I fear.**

**In the midst of the years renew it;
In the midst of the years make it known,
in wrath remember mercy.
{Hab 3:2 RSV}**

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 wrath remember mercy. I see you are working Lord, but remember in the midst of it that you are still a God of mercy." That is all he has to say; there is no more philosophy, no more theology, no more arguing with God.

This prayer is one of the most remarkably beautiful, poetic passages in all the Scriptures. Read it and see how the prophet is doing nothing more or less than 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 which cannot be questioned or taken away or shaken in any way; the great fact that God has already moved in human history. And this is where faith must rest. We do not live by blind faith. We live with a God who has acted in time and space, who has done something, who 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 here how God moved (Verses 3, 4):

**God came from Teman,
and the Holy One from Mount Paran.
His glory covered the heavens,
and the earth was full of his praise.
His brightness was like the light,
rays flashed from his hand;
and there he veiled his power.
{Hab 3:3-4 RSV}**

Remember how he hid his power from Pharaoh, and then flashed out in sudden acts of miraculous intervention? The prophet says (Verse 5, 6):

**Before him went pestilence,
and plague followed close behind,
He stood and measured the earth;
he looked and shook the nations;
then the eternal mountains were scattered,
the everlasting hills sank low.
His ways were as of old.
{Hab 3:5-6 RSV}**

He remembers how the people of Israel were afflicted and in the wilderness, and how in the land of Midian they trembled. Then he thinks of the crossing of the Red Sea and how God made a way through the waters, and he is reminded of how the Jordan River was rolled back when they came into the land (Verse 10):

**the deep gave forth its voice,
it lifted its hands on high.
{Hab 3:10b RSV}**

Habakkuk recalls how at the request of Joshua (Verse 11):

The sun and moon stood still in their habitation {Hab 3:11a RSV}

This is the kind of God we have. The God who actually moves in human history to accomplish events that no man can duplicate. As the prophet thinks of all this, his mind goes out to the greatness of God and this is the way he concludes (Verse 16):

**I hear, and my body trembles,
my lips quiver at the sound;
rottenness enters into my bones,
my steps totter beneath me.
I will quietly wait for the day of trouble
to come upon people who invade us.
{Hab 3:16 RSV}**

He sees the problem and he knows it is coming. The fearsomeness of it grips him, and he feels the pressure. But that is not all. He adds (Verses 17-19):

**Though the fig tree do not blossom,
nor fruit be on the vines,
the produce of the olive fail
and the fields yield no food,
the flock be cut off from the fold
and there be no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will joy in the God of my salvation.
God, the LORD, is my strength;
he makes my feet like hinds' feet,
he makes me tread upon my high places.
{Hab 3:17-19 RSV}**

Have you discovered that? That though the problem remains and the pressure is still there, there can be a strengthening of the inner man that

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ZEPHANIAH: The Day of the Lord's Wrath

by Ray C. Stedman

It was Zephaniah's lot to speak on the most unpleasant subject in the Bible – the judgment of God. This is not the only place where this theme occurs, of course, but it is the most concentrated treatment of the judgment of God as the whole book is devoted to this one theme.

There are many people who would like to rule this subject of judgment out of the Bible entirely. There are those who tell us that the God of the New Testament, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is the kind of a God who can never move in judgment. His heart is so tender, his love is so gracious, his patience is so infinite that there never will be a time when God will move in vengeance.

It is remarkable, though, that in the New Testament the Lord Jesus spoke very frequently about the judgment of God. In the fourth chapter of Luke we are told that the Lord came back to his home town after preaching in Judea for many months. He had done many miracles and the word of his miracles had preceded him, so all the folks in Nazareth were very anxious to see him. He had not behaved like this when he was a boy growing up, and they were keen to see if he was going to do some mighty work when he came home. Luke tells us that Jesus went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and he was given the book of the prophecy of Isaiah to read. Opening the scroll he found the place (which happens to be the sixty-first chapter of our version of Isaiah) where it read, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor," (Luke 4:18 RSV). That passage predicts the ministry of the Messiah. Then he stopped right in the middle of a sentence, right at a comma, and his last

word was that he had come to "proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord," (Luke 4:19 RSV). But Isaiah goes on to say, "and the day of vengeance of our God," (Isa 61:2a RSV). Now, the Lord did not read that because it was not the time to proclaim the day of vengeance of God. But the day of vengeance is coming, and it was the Lord himself who described the day of the Lord (recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke), and it is this day particularly that Zephaniah is talking about.

Zephaniah means "hidden of the Lord" and the prophet is speaking as if he were a representative of the remnant of faith – those relatively few people who will remain true to God and be faithful to his word through the time of trouble that is to come upon the earth. They will be hidden, as it were, by God himself among the nations of the earth and God will watch over them to keep them in faith during this time. And it is about these people that the book of Zephaniah is written, and, especially, of that coming day, the day of the Lord, which is vividly described by the prophet.

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 one of the kings of Judah (Verses 2-6):

**"I will utterly sweep away everything
from the face of the earth," says the Lord.
"I will sweep away man and beast;
I will sweep away the birds of the air
and the fish of the sea.
I will overthrow the wicked;
I will cut off mankind**

**from the face of the earth,” says the Lord.
“I will stretch out my hand against Judah,
and against all the inhabitants of Jerusa-
lem;
and I will cut off from this place the rem-
nant of Baal [the false god of the peo-
ples around Israel]
and the name of the idolatrous priests;
those who bow down on the roofs
to the host of heavens; [the star worship-
ers]
those who bow down and swear to the Lord
and yet swear by Milcom; [one of the other
gods the surrounding nations]
those who have turned back from following
the Lord,
who do not seek the Lord or inquire of
him.” {Zeph 1:2-6 RSV}**

And Zephaniah says (Verse 7):

**Be silent before the Lord God!
For the day of the Lord is at hand;
{Zeph 1:7 RSV}**

There is a great deal of difference between *the day of the Lord* and *the Lord's day*. Sunday is “the Lord's day,” the day of resurrection, but *the day of the Lord* is something different and we should never confuse these terms. (It is like the difference between a horse chestnut and a chestnut horse.) *The Lord's day* was the day when our Lord arose from the dead and that is why we celebrate it on Sunday. But *the day of the Lord* is the day of the manifestation of God's hand directly in human affairs.

Notice the personal pronoun all through that passage: “I will sweep away everything.” I will sweep away man and beast.” “I will cut off mankind.” 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 the affairs of men again.

A reference to this time, in the words of Jesus himself, is found in Matthew, where our Lord speaks of a time of great tribulation:

**“Then they will deliver you up to
tribulation, and put you to death; and you
will be hated by all nations for my name's
sake.” {Matt 24:9 RSV}**

And the Lord goes on to describe this time. But still, this is not the day of the Lord that Zephaniah is talking about, because this is a time when the nations will still be moving against one another in warfare. Then Jesus says (Matt 24:21-22):

**“For then there will be great tribulation,
such as has not been from the beginning of
the world until now, no, and never will be.
And if those days had not been shortened,
no human being would be saved;” {Matt
24:21-22a RSV}**

This is right in line with Zephaniah's prophecy. God says he will sweep everything off the face of the earth, “but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened,” {Matt 24:22b RSV}. Then Jesus says (Matt 24:24):

**“For false Christs and false prophets will
arise and show great signs and wonders, so
as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.”
{Matt 24:24 RSV}**

And he says plainly (Verse 25):

**“Lo, I have told you beforehand.” {Matt
24:25 RSV}**

In other words, do not get excited about this. Then we come to the description of *the day of the Lord* (Matt 24:29-31):

**“Immediately after the tribulation of
those days the sun will be darkened, and
the moon will not give its light, and the
stars will fall from heaven, and the powers
of the heavens will be shaken; then will ap-
pear the sign of the Son of man in heaven,
and then all the tribes of the earth will
mourn, and they will see the Son of man
coming on the clouds of heaven with power
and great glory: and he will send out his
angels with a loud trumpet call, and they
will gather his elect from the four winds,
from one end of heaven to the other.” {Matt
24:29-31 RSV}**

The Apostle Paul speaks somewhat similarly and he uses the very term “the day of the Lord.” In First Thessalonians you will find one of several references that Paul makes to this great event. In Chapter 5, Verses 1-6, he says:

But as to the times and seasons, brethren, you have no need to have anything written to you. [Why not? Well, because they already had it in the Old Testament.] For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When people say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape. But you are not in darkness, brethren, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all sons of light and sons of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. {1 Th 5:1-6 RSV}

There are many other passages that also refer to *the day of the Lord* and they all agree that

- in the time when men are proclaiming peace, but preparing for war;
- in a time when they are holding to a form of godliness but denying the powers thereof;
- in a time when they are declaring that the problems of life are being solved, but when, actually, they are in greater danger than they have ever been before,

then the day of the Lord will come.

Now let us return to Zephaniah and see what he has to say about this (Chapter 1, Verses 7-9):

**Be silent before the Lord God!
For the day of the Lord is at hand;
the Lord has prepared a sacrifice
and consecrated his guests.
And on the day of the Lord's sacrifice –
"I will punish the officials and the king's
sons
and all who array themselves in foreign
attire ...
every one who leaps over the threshold,
and those who fill their master's house
with violence and fraud."
{Zeph 1:7-9 RSV}**

Now, what is this feast, and who are these guests that are invited to the day of the Lord?

Well, this is the great supper of God that is also described in Revelation 19, Verses 17-20, where John says:

Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly in midheaven, "Come, gather for the great supper of God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great." And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who sits upon the horse and against his army. And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had worked the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast ... {Rev 19:17-20a RSV}

This is the great supper of God. It is the birds and the vultures that are invited, to feast upon the bodies of men. There is another description of this in Ezekiel 39. The guests are the buzzards, the vultures, and the eagles called to feed upon the dead, the millions that are slain in this terrible day when God again moves directly in human affairs.

"Well, now," you say, "How can this be? How can the God of love – the God of the New Testament – do a thing like this? How can God, who loves mercy and is slow to anger, ever come to this place?" And there are many who tell us that we should eliminate these passages from the Bible. They say we should read our Bibles in much the same way that we read literature.

For instance, we read in Robert Louis Stevenson's novel *Treasure Island* of a character named Long John Silver. We read that he is a cruel, rapacious, untrustworthy individual. Now if, after reading that, somebody tells us that Long John Silver is really a great guy, that he is kind to his mother, and is a nice fellow once you get to know him, we do not believe this because we know Long John Silver and we know that he is not that kind of a man. Therefore, if anybody tells us that, we will not believe him. Someone with this attitude might go on to say, "I have come to know God as the God of love and the God of grace. Therefore, when I read in the Bible something that says he is a God of vengeance, and that he is going to destroy people, I just don't believe it. I just wipe that out. I say that

someone else has insinuated that, because that is not the kind of God I know.”

It is this kind of reasoning that suggests we should go through our Bibles and tear out every part that does not agree with our concepts of God. But what we have left, of course, is nothing more than what we like, what we think God ought to be like.

You can see how such an argument defeats itself. The very book that tells us that God is a God of love also says he is a God of vengeance. And any one who thinks carefully about himself and about love will understand why a God of love has to be a God of vengeance. For if we love someone, we hate everything that injures that person. We are against whatever threatens or destroys what we love. And the very love that moves the heart of God to pour himself out over the centuries in an unceasing effort to awaken man to his need and to hear the call of grace, is the same love that at last prompts him to eliminate those who refuse all the province of his grace, and identify themselves with that which is opposed to his will and to his work among men. Then he has nothing left to do but to destroy them. And that is why the prophet speaks so plainly about this.

Continuing in Zephaniah now, we read (Chapter 1, Verses 14-18):

**The great day of the Lord is near,
near and hastening fast;
the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter,
the mighty man cries aloud there.
A day of wrath is that day,
a day of distress and anguish,
a day of ruin and devastation,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness,
a day of trumpet blast and battle cry
against the fortified cities
and against the lofty battlements.**
{Zeph 1:14-16 RSV}

And God says in stark frankness,

**I will bring distress on men,
so that they shall walk like the blind,
because they have sinned against the
Lord;
their blood shall be poured out like dust,
and their flesh like dung.
Neither their silver nor their gold
shall be able to deliver them**

on the day of the wrath of the Lord.
{Zeph 1:17-18a RSV}

Now it is not easy for God to speak this way. He himself says that he takes no delight in the death of men. He says that he does not delight in judgment. Judgment, the prophet says, is his strange work. His heart delights in mercy. But eventually,

- if his will is to be done,
- if earth at last is to break out into the glorious freedom of the promises of the prophets concerning man,
- if the dreams that lie hidden away in the hearts of men of a warless world,
 - a time of prosperity,
 - a time when joy floods the earth,
 - when men live together in glorious harmony,
 - when even the animals lose their enmity toward one another, and
 - peace shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea –
- if that is ever to come,

then God must deal with the entrenched evil of men.

This is why the coming of the day of vengeance of our God is absolutely certain. The prophets warn of this and the word speaks very clearly, all through the New Testament as well, that when God's grace is turned aside, God's judgment awaits.

In Chapter 2 we trace **the extent of God's vengeance.** Certain nations are named (Verses 8, 9):

**“I have heard the taunts of Moab
and the revilings of the Ammonites,**
{Zeph 2:8a RSV}

**“Moab shall become like Sodom,
and the Ammonites like Gomorrah,**
{Zeph 2:9b RSV}

The Ethiopians are mentioned in Verse 12 and the Assyrians in Verse 13. The interesting thing is that although all these nations are long since lost in the dust of history, the promise of this day of the Lord is in the future. How can this be? Why are these nations mentioned here when they have long been buried in antiquity? How can they yet be destroyed in a day to come? The answer is, of course, that these nations are used symbolically throughout the Scriptures as well as literally. They were literally destroyed in the course of history, but they are used symbolically with reference to the full and final meaning of the day of the Lord:

- Moab, for instance, is always a picture of the flesh of man – his dependence upon his own resources.
- The Ammonites picture the same thing.
- Ethiopia is a picture of the stubbornness, or the intransigence of man. “Can the Ethiopian change his color?” the Scriptures say.
- And Assyria is man in his arrogance and his pride.

Now God says he is against all these things, and as he moves at last in judgment on the human race, these are to be eliminated.

In Chapter 3 you will notice **how extensive God's wrath is** (Verses 1, 2):

**Woe to her that is rebellious and defiled,
the oppressing city!
She listens to no voice,
she accepts no correction.
She does not trust in the Lord,
she does not draw near to her God.
{Zeph 3:1-2 RSV}**

This could be said of almost all the cities of the earth. As you read on you see that this is a world-wide matter (Verse 8):

**“Therefore wait for me,” says the Lord,
“for the day when I arise as a witness.
For my decision is to gather nations,
to assemble kingdoms,**

**to pour out upon them my indignation,
all the heat of my anger;
for in the fire of my jealous wrath
all the earth shall be consumed.”
{Zeph 3:8 RSV}**

What for? What is God after? Is he just interested in getting even, wreaking his vengeance at last upon the stubbornness and willfulness of men? Is he visiting the earth with this terrible hurricane of destruction in order to leave it nothing but a smoking ruin, barren and desolate, without inhabitants? No, that is what men would do if there were another world war. We would leave the earth desolate, but God will never leave it that way.

After you read the description of all the darkness, gloom, and slaughter – after the desolation and the destruction, what is the next word? Verse 14:

**Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter of Jerusalem!
{Zeph 3:14 RSV}**

Why? You see, this is the new order that is to follow. This is why God is dealing with men, so that he might bring out songs instead of sorrow, service instead of selfishness, security instead of slavery. This will be the consequence of God's judgment. And we are told that the Lord God is in the midst of the people, not for judgment, as he is in Chapter 3, Verse 5:

**The Lord within her is righteous,
he does no wrong; {Zeph 3:5a RSV}**

But here in Verse 17:

**The Lord, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing
as on a day of festival.
{Zeph 3:17-18a RSV}**

Furthermore, the Lord says (Verses 18-20):

**“I will remove disaster from you,
{Zeph 3:18b RSV}
... deal with all your oppressors.
And I will save the lame**

**and gather the outcast, {Zeph 3:19b RSV}
... change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.
 {Zeph 3:19c RSV}
At that time I will bring you home,
 {Zeph 3:20a RSV}**

What a picture this is!

Specifically, of course, it has to do with the remnant of Israel, but it is a picture of God's loving care during any time of despair or darkness. It is my personal belief that this is something that the church does not see. The church is caught away before these events occur but, in the time that follows, God calls back the remnant of Israel to himself and they will at last break out into the song of the redeemed. Now the singing here is led by the Lord himself in a marvelous, glorious melody of joy. It reminds me of that beautiful passage in the Song of Songs:

**For lo, the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth,
the time of singing has come.
 {Song 2:11-12a RSV}**

That is what follows the time of judgment. But no one but the redeemed can join in that song.

Elizabeth Browning, in her poem, *The Seraphim*, describes the angels watching the work of the Son of God on earth, and, at last, seeing with stupefied amazement the incarnation and ultimately the cross, one angel looks at this host of ransomed souls and he says to the other, "Hereafter shall the blood bought captives raise their passion song of blood." And the other one replies, "And we extend our holy, vacant hands toward the throne and cry,

'We have no music.'" You see, only the redeemed can sing like this. After the darkness, after the slaughter, after the terrible destruction comes the time of the singing. That is what God is after in your life. That is possible on the level of the Spirit right now when God deals death's stroke against the flesh within us and brings us through that painful experience of saying "No" to the ego and the self-life. There follows the time of the singing, the time that he is after, the reason he takes us through the pain and the darkness. What you see to be true of the individual life will also be true on the whole wide canvas of history as God brings human history to an end.

That is what Zephaniah tells us about. Although it is a painful scene, one that begins in darkness and gloom, it ends in joy and gladness and singing.

Prayer:

Our Father, we know that these words are true, and how they make us tremble, how they make us solemn and quiet before you. What a God – a God who sees everything, who deals in righteousness, a God who loves but who cannot be turned aside, who will not water down his precepts, who will not cater to our weakness though he supplies us with fullness of strength. Lord, help us to walk softly before you and to love you with all our heart and mind and strength. We pray that in our own lives we may come to the day of singing when our hearts are filled with gladness as we anticipate this coming day when the earth shall break forth into beauty and glory. We thank you in Christ's name. Amen.

HAGGAI: Some Words to Discouraged Carpenters

by Ray C. Stedman

When you read this book you will notice that the theme of the prophecy of Haggai is “get busy and build the Lord’s house.” Now, although you may be crowded in your church, and have need of more space, the church building is not the house of God. In Haggai’s day it was a picture or shadow of the true house of God. These shadows (as we learned in the New Testament) pointed toward the true house of God which is the believer, and, collectively, all believers – forming the great house of God which is the church, the place where God dwells. That is what God is interested in building.

In Haggai’s day the Lord’s house was the temple, and you may remember that they had some difficulty building the temple after the Babylonian captivity. (This prophecy should be read in connection with the historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah which appear much earlier in the Old Testament.) As many of the prophets had prophesied, the Babylonian nation was raised up and came sweeping down across the land of Israel. They captured Jerusalem, the king was taken captive, his eyes were put out, and he was also carried as a captive to Babylon and there, just as the prophecy of Jeremiah had foretold, the people stayed in bondage exactly 70 years. This, by the way, is one of those remarkable prophecies which have already been fulfilled, so you can see how God speaks through the prophets what no man could speak on his own.

After the 70 years were fulfilled, Daniel, who prophesied in Babylon, tells us that God began to move to bring the people back to the land. They came first under Zerubbabel, who is mentioned in the opening verse of this prophecy of Haggai. Zerubbabel, who was descended from kings, was the captain of the remnant that came back from Babylon. When they came to Jerusalem, they

found the city in ruins. The walls were broken down and the temple was utterly destroyed.

They began work first of all on the temple. Although they were still under the domain and rule of the Babylonians, they had permission from the king of Babylon to begin work on this temple. They started working, and they managed to lay the foundations and perhaps just one row of stones – a much smaller temple than the original one that Solomon had built. Then the work began to lag, and after a while it ceased altogether and for 15 years nothing was done on the temple. It is at this point that Haggai the prophet rises up to speak.

Haggai delivers four messages to these people – all within the space of about a year and a half, all concerning the building of the temple. But their deeper message, as I have already suggested, applies to us, the temple or the great house of God that he has been building for 20 centuries now. So we will read this prophecy not only as a message of the prophet to the people of his day about building the temple, but also as a message to the people of God everywhere concerning their responsibility in building the great house of God, the temple that the Holy Spirit has been building out of human hearts.

In this prophecy there are four messages dated by the calendar. Each one reveals an excuse given by the people for not working on the temple – both their excuse and the real reason behind that excuse.

The first message includes all of Chapter 1. We read (Verses 1 and 2):

In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah [governor under the King of Babylon] and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, “Thus

says the Lord of hosts: This people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord.” {Hag 1:1-2 RSV}

The prophecy was addressed to the civil governor and to the religious heads, Joshua and Zerubabel, and in this verse the prophet repeats the excuse that the people gave for leaving the temple abandoned for 15 years. They were saying “Why, the time has not yet come. There has been a mistake in figuring the 70 years that Jeremiah prophesied. There’s no use doing anything now because God is not ready yet.” But read the answer God gives to their excuse (Verses 3-5):

Then the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, “Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Now therefore thus says the Lord of hosts Consider how you have fared.” {Hag 1:3-5 RSV}

In other words, God says, “Is the problem really that you think it’s not yet time for me to work? Well, it’s amazing that you think it is time for me to work in helping you to build your house. How about mine?” And he rather ironically suggests that the real reason the work of God has lagged is that they are all wrapped up in their own affairs. They have put God’s work second and their own needs first.

They had forgotten something. The fact that they were there in the land at all proves that God’s time had come. They would not have been back there if those 70 years had not been fulfilled. The real reason, therefore, was that they were not willing to put God first. Their own comforts, and their own convenience and their own desires came first.

Now God says that he wants them to see what the results are. Three times he says, “Consider ... consider ... consider.” Notice in Verses 5 and 6:

“Consider how you have fared. You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and he who earns wages earns wages to put them into a bag with holes.” {Hag 1:5-6 RSV}

They had inflation in those days too! He is saying that all this labor and work that they put out did not give them what they expected. “You are

trying to get prosperous,” God says “but prosperity eludes you. You are trying to satisfy yourself, but you never find fulfillment. There is always something missing.” Verses 7-11:

“Thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider how you have fared. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may appear in my glory, says the Lord.” {Hag 1:7-8 RSV}

Why?

“You have looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? says the Lord of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while you busy yourselves each with his own house. Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought upon the land and the hills, upon the grain, the new wine, the oil, upon what the ground brings forth, upon men and cattle, and upon all their labors.” {Hag 1:9-11 RSV}

God says, “I am behind this.” Why did he do this? Why did he short-circuit all their efforts to achieve prosperity? Was it because he was trying to punish them? No, God never punishes in that sense. He was trying to wake them up. He was trying to show them that there was an infallible rule that runs all through Scripture and all through life, that men are constantly trying to reverse, that says, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well,” (Matt 6:33 RSV). The way to have what you need in terms of physical food and material shelter and the necessities of life is to give your major concern and interests not to these, but to advancing God’s work. That is what you are here for. You have a Father in heaven who knows your needs along this line, and he is perfectly able to supply them, and he will as long as your interest is first of all in his work.

That is right up to date, is it not? That is calling us back to this great principle that the New Testament is reminding us of that we are not our own, but we were bought with a price {cf, 1 Cor 6:19b-20a}. We belong to him. We are here to advance his cause, his interests. We are here to build the house of God. That is why God has left us here in this world, so that we might be his in-

struments in this work of erecting a great temple of human beings which will be and is a habitation of God, the dwelling place of God.

Is that first in our interests? Is that what we live for? Or is it that we might get a new color TV set or a better automobile or a more beautiful home or better drapes or a softer rug? Not that all those things are denied to Christians. Let us understand that. God, in his grace and goodness sometimes gives wealth to Christians and they are to use it, as Paul reminds us in his letter to Timothy, in being generous, giving richly and freely.

But God has called us primarily to put the building of the house of God first – not the brick and mortar building, but the church of God. There are people all around us that the Holy Spirit intends to add to the house of God if we are his instruments and channels of his working. And the great question that Haggai confronts us with is: how can we find time to advance our interests so eagerly, so carefully, so thoughtfully – spending so much time thinking about advancing our own material gain and then excuse ourselves from the work of building the house of God by saying, “It isn’t time yet”?

Do you remember that story of William Carry, the father of modern missions, who in 18th century England got concerned about India, far across the sea, and prayed that God would somehow reach those poor, benighted heathen who had never heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. He tried to stir up interest in the churches of England, but he met everywhere with adamant resistance to his idea. In one meeting, Carry made an impassioned plea to be sent out as a missionary. Even though he was a simple cobbler and uneducated, he was willing to go. One of the elders of the meeting pointed his finger at Carry and said, “Young man, sit down. When God wants to evangelize the heathen, he’ll do it without your help!” This was the kind of stubborn resistance that Carry met with, but he was a man who could not be defeated. He was used of God to begin the great modern missionary movement that has not stopped yet, because he was one who was concerned about God’s work. There is an excitement that comes into our lives when we really, genuinely put the affairs of God first, and do not even bother to think about the provision of our own needs. This is why God says, “Now is the accepted time, today is the day,” {cf, 2 Cor 6:1-2}.

So we read that they started this work (Verses 12-15):

Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the Lord their God had sent him; and the people feared before the Lord. Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, spoke to the people with the Lord’s message [and what a message], “I am with you, says the Lord” [you can count on that]. And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the ... governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month. {Hag 1:12-15 RSV}

How long did the work last? Three weeks. And then it ground to a halt again. Notice the calendar (Chapter 2, Verses 1-3):

In the second year of Darius the king [that is, the same year] in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, [21 days later] the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, “Speak now to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to all the remnant of the people, and say, “Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?” {Hag 2:1-3 RSV}

Now God was repeating what the people were saying. They had gotten started and the temple had begun to go up. There was a bustle of excitement until an old man came down to watch the work. He had been a child when they were carried captive into Babylon and had seen the temple of Solomon in all its great glory, and as old men sometimes do, he was living in the past. And he said, “Do you call this a temple? This heap of ruins here? I saw Solomon’s temple, and what you are building here is nothing compared to that. All the gold and silver that was in that temple – it was amazing! And you don’t even have any gold or silver. How are you going to decorate this temple?” The people got discouraged and they said, “You know, he’s right. We don’t have any gold or silver. We don’t have

anything to make this temple beautiful. What's the use? Why work?" So they quit.

But the Lord said (Verse 4):

"... take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the Lord; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the Lord;" {Hag 2:4b RSV}

On what basis, Lord?

"Work, for I am with you," {Hag 2:4c RSV}

That is always God's answer. "Work, for I am with you. Don't worry about the fact that things don't look as good as they ought to." Verses 5 and 6:

"according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit abides among you; fear not. For thus says the Lord of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all nations," {Hag 2:5-7a RSV}

When God says he will shake the heavens and the people and the earth, he is not speaking literally, but figuratively. He means that he is going to rearrange the whole historical picture (Verses 7 and 8):

"... so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine." {Hag 2:7b-8a RSV}

"You don't need to worry about that. I've got all we need of that. And if I wanted this house decorated with gold and silver, I could stack it up in piles here on your back step. But that isn't the kind of glory I have in mind. I am going to fill this house, so that (Verse 9):

"The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts." {Hag 2:9 RSV}

God is like that. He says, "Look, you are discouraged because you think what you are doing

won't amount to anything. But don't stop the work because of that. I have a different plan in mind. This house, little as it is, unpretentious as it is, without gold or silver, is actually going to have greater glory than the glory of the previous temple."

Now those words were fulfilled. Do you know how? Into that house one day came one who found it filled with money changers, and overthrowing the tables, he drove them out and said, "You make it [my Father's house] a den of robbers," (Matt 21:13b RSV). And he cleansed it and made it a place of prayer. And he filled it with the glory of his teaching, standing in the midst of it and saying things such as people had never heard before. And he utterly changed the whole life of that nation and every nation in the world by what he said. And from out of that house, changed and altered a little by Herod, but the same house, there went forth a glory that has never ceased, a different kind of glory.

Do not stop the work because it does not compare with something that was there in the past. This is one of the problems of God's people. We are always looking back to the past. We say, "Oh, for the days of D. L. Moody. Oh, for the days of the church where we came from. Oh, what we did then." And we are wistful and long to have it just that way.

But the great lesson that God wants to impress upon us is that God always does a new and different work. The thing that is coming in the future is always better for our present situation than the past. We do not need to hang on to these things of tradition. God is saying, "Keep on working, I am with you. And when I am in your midst you don't need to worry about how it is going to turn out. It may be different but it will always be better."

Well, that took effect for awhile, and then what? Well, they quit again. In Verses 10-12 we read:

On the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month [that is, two months later] in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, "Thus says the Lord of hosts: Ask the priests to decide this question, 'If one carries holy flesh in the skirt of his garment, and touches with his skirt bread, or pottage, or wine, or oil, or any kind of food, does it become holy?'" {Hag 2:10-12a RSV}

This was in accordance with the Law of Moses. If you get into a situation, Moses said, where you do not know what to do, go ask the priest to declare the appropriate principle and then make an application from that. It is the same thing we are told to do. When you get into a situation that you do not know how to handle, go to the word of God and get the principle that covers that situation.

And this was the question they were to ask the priest. "If you have something clean (holy) about you and you touch something else – a bit of bread or wine or oil – does that become holy because you've got holy flesh on you? Does the unclean thing become holy?" And the priests answered correctly, "No." Well, then he put another question (Verse 13):

Then said Haggai, "If one who is unclean by contact with a dead body touches any of these, does it become unclean?" {Hag 2:13a RSV}

The priests answered, "Yes, it does." What is this all about? What is the problem here? Well, as we read on we will see (Verses 14-18):

Then Haggai said, "So is it with this people, and with this nation before me, says the Lord; and so with every work of their hands; and what they offer there is unclean. Pray now, consider what will come to pass from this day onward. Before a stone was placed upon a stone in the temple of the Lord, how did you fare? When one came to a heap of twenty measures, there were but ten; when one came to the winevat to draw fifty measures, there were but twenty. I smote you and all the products of your toil with blight and mildew and hail; yet you did not return to me, says the Lord. Consider from this day onward, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month. Since the day that the foundation of the Lord's temple was laid, consider." {Hag 2:14-18 RSV}

What does he mean? If you read between the lines, you can see again what the people were saying. They were saying, "Look, we've been working on the temple for two months. You said that the reason we were having such a hard time materially

and physically was that we weren't working on the temple. We have been working on the temple now for two months, 21 days, and we are still having a hard time. What is the matter? Why work? Nothing is happening. It doesn't work." They were the same kind of people we are. They wanted instant results: "I straightened everything out yesterday. Today everything ought to go great."

One time when a couple came to see me for marital counseling, the man said, "We just can't live together. She is always blowing up and exploding and bawling me out about everything." I examined the situation and found out that the major problem was that here was a man who paid no attention to his wife; he utterly neglected her and she would take it just so long and then she would blow up. So I told him this and he said, "I think you are right." So he went home to do something about it. The next morning he called me up and said, "Well, I took her out to dinner last night and we had a great time. She enjoyed it so much I was sure you were right. But this morning she blew up again. The thing doesn't work." I had to say to him what Haggai said to these people. Do you think the deep pollution of sin that has been going on for years is going to be cured overnight when you start doing the right thing? Do you think that all these habits of wrong thinking that have been deeply ingrained in your mind are suddenly going to be eliminated simply because you begin to operate on the right basis? No, we need time and patience. "Let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart," (Gal 6:9 RSV).

Now notice this word of encouragement (Verse 19):

"Is the seed yet in the barn? [You plant your seed and you do not expect instant results, do you? You expect to wait until the harvest. It takes time for the seed to grow.] Do the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree still yield nothing. From this day on I will bless you." {Hag 2:19 RSV}

Do not worry. Keep on. Do not stop work just because you do not see instant results. If you are doing the right thing, keep on doing it and the results will come.

Once again, on the very same day, they needed a little encouragement and so another message came, the last one (Verses 20-24):

The word of the Lord came a second time to Haggai on the twenty-fourth day of the month, "Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, I am about to shake the heavens and the earth, and to overthrow the throne of kingdoms; I am about to destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations, and overthrow the chariots and their riders; and the horses and their riders shall go down, every one by the sword of his fellow. On that day, says the Lord of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel my servant, the son of Shealtiel, says the Lord, and make you like a signet ring [the sign of authority]; for I have chosen you, says the Lord of hosts." {Hag 2:20-24 RSV}

Now here was a special word of encouragement to the leader while the people were yet under the authority of Babylon, although they were back in the land and building the temple again, they were still beset by many problems. Everywhere they looked there was the sign of the authority of the foreign power. They saw chariots everywhere and soldiers marching through the streets and all the signs of bondage, and their hearts grew fearful and they said, "When will it ever be: Are we ever going to be free?" God says, "Don't worry. I have a program going that will reverse the whole order of things. I will destroy the power of this kingdom. I will bring their chariots to naught. I will break you loose from the bondage of this people and I am going to take Zerubbabel, the man who stands as the leader of the people and make him a signet ring." Now Zerubbabel was of the royal line, the line of David, and, though these words were not literally fulfilled in Zerubbabel, they were spoken of his descendent who was Jesus of Nazareth. In Jesus, God fulfilled all these words. He took the son of

David and made him a signet ring by which all the nations shall ultimately be ruled.

Now in what way is all this a word to us?

It is a word of encouragement in a day of darkness, a word of rising up and acting now:

- Build now. Do not wait. The work of God needs to be done now.
- Not next year.
- Not ten years from now.
- Now!
- Are your homes open?
- Are your lives ready?

A great harvest field is before us here and around the world. Opportunities abound as they never have before. Is this first in your prayers? Is it first in your interests that this great harvest may be reaped? Are your homes open to the students that throng our campuses that they might come to Christ? And to your neighbors so that they can come in and find a friendly heart and a ready smile and a ready ear to listen?

How much are we ready to build the house of the Lord?

This is always the key, is it not?

This is the work of the Spirit.

When all that man has done around us crumbles into nothing and all the vast civilizations and great secrets of nature are forgotten, the one thing that will last is the work of the Lord, the house of God that he is building now.

Are we investing in eternal things? That is Haggai's word.

Prayer:

Our Father, we pray that we may listen with keen ears to these words and hear them anew in our own lives, making application to our own hearts as the Spirit of God prompts us in this moment. We ask in Christ's name, Amen.

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ZECHARIAH: You Return To Me, ... I'll Return To You!

by Ray C. Stedman

The book of Zechariah has been called the Apocalypse of the Old Testament. Like the book of Revelation, Zechariah is a book of prophecy. Its theme is to set forth the program of God, which is also the theme of the book of Revelation. The difference is that in Zechariah Israel is in the foreground and the Gentile nations in the background, while in the book of Revelation the Gentile nations are in the foreground and the continuous thread that ties them together is the nation of Israel.

The first verse of Zechariah reveals in a very interesting way this focus on the nation Israel:

In the eighth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to Zechariah the son of Berechiah, son of Iddo, the prophet, {Zech 1:1a RSV}

We usually read through these opening verses without thinking of them as having much significance, but remember that Hebrew names mean something. The most outstanding example, perhaps, of the significance of Hebrew names is Methuselah, the name of the oldest man who ever lived. His name means "when he dies it will come" – and when he died, the flood came, just as that name prophesied.

Here, we have three names that are very significant. Zechariah means "God remembers" and Berechiah, his father's name, means "God blesses" and his grandfather's name Iddo, means "At the appointed time." That is the theme of the book of Zechariah. It is a book of encouragement to the people of Israel.

Zechariah was a contemporary with Haggai, one of the prophets who ministered to the remnant who had returned from captivity in Babylon. Although they were back in Jerusalem rebuilding the temple and the city, they were still vassals of

Babylon, still subject to the Gentile nations around them, without much hope for the future. It was a discouraging, depressing time, and a spirit of dark pessimism gripped these people. And Zechariah comes to them in the midst of their depression, with this announcement that is even wrapped up in his name and ancestry: Jehovah blesses, Jehovah remembers at the appointed time. What an encouragement those names must have been.

At the beginning of the first chapter there is a brief outline of the book. This is often true of the Bible, and if you look for these little outlines, you can often find a brief summary of the message of the book in the opening sections. Here it is broken up in a dramatic way by the name of God, the Jehovah of hosts. It is one of the unusual names of God. Jehovah of hosts, that is, the God of the masses – the God of all the armies, whether they be angel armies, human armies, demonic armies, makes no difference. The stars are also called the hosts. This is the God who is sovereign over all the masses, whoever they may be. And this name is repeated three times (Verses 2-3):

"The LORD [Jehovah] was very angry with your fathers. Therefore say to them, Thus says the LORD [Jehovah] of hosts: Return to me, says the LORD of hosts, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts." {Zech 1:2-3 RSV}

Three times that name is repeated. What is said before each of those repetitions marks the divisions of this book. It falls into three brief sections. The first one is included in,

"The LORD was very angry with your fathers." {Zech 1:2 RSV}

ZECHARIAH: You return to Me, ... I'll return to You!

That marks the first division, comprising just the first six verses which describe God's displeasure with his people. Then we have,

“Return to me.” {Zech 1:3b RSV}

And that marks the second division, covering from Chapter 1, Verse 7, clear over to Chapter 6, Verse 15, speaking of God's deliverance of his people. Then, Chapters 7 through 14 make up the third division which is an exposition of these words:

**“and I will return to you, says the LORD.”
{Zech 1:3d RSV}**

That is always God's way. If you find yourself straying away from his presence and, as a result, your life grows cold, your faith grows dim, you grow discouraged, you are defeated, you find yourself exposed to all types of temptations and prey to every evil thought, what must you do? “Return to me, says the LORD, and I will return to you.” If you want God back in your life, with all the glory of his presence, then come back to him. That is always the formula.

As I have indicated, the first six verses are just a brief resume of God's quarrel with his people, the fact that they have displeased him, as we have seen all through the Old Testament. There is no need to dwell upon this. God is always displeased when his people turn from him, whether we are looking at God's people of Israel or God's people of the church.

Then, beginning with Verse 7, **a most remarkable vision** was given to the prophet. A vision that is divided up into a series of eight, which were all given to Zechariah on the same night, and these also fall into major divisions. These three divisions are like three acts in a great drama that was revealed to the prophet. You might think of them as God's *First Nighter Program*, because they all came on one night to the prophet. As we read them, we can imagine we have been invited to attend this drama that God is unfolding to the prophet. God is the author, Zechariah is the producer, and we are the audience.

The vision covers all the time from Zechariah's day through the present, clear on to the coming of the Lord.

1. The first act is made up of two visions:

- One is a vision of a watcher looking out over the people in the valley. The watcher is riding upon a horse and with him are gathered other riders upon horses. And the angel of the LORD interprets the vision to the prophet. The meaning of this is simply that Israel was that people down in the valley, symbolized here for us by the lowly myrtle shrub, and they could see that they were in a shadowed place. It was a time of despair and difficult days. But what they could not see – what the prophet was revealing to them – was this unseen one who was watching the whole procedure and saw what was going on and had with him the great resources to meet their need in the hour of despair.
- Now the second vision in the first act speaks of four smiths, or workmen – actually, carpenters. It was a vision of four horns and four smiths. This is also interpreted to the prophet. He sees that like the riders in the vision before, these are divine agents, angels perhaps, who are sent out to terrify the nations. So we see that this is a picture of the desperate need of Israel to return to God. Israel was discouraged at the display of the powers and forces in opposition against them. But what they did not see was the resources. They were unconscious of the divine agents that were there to move on their behalf and that is what God revealed to them.

2. So the curtain falls at the end of Act One, and, in the second chapter, it rises on Act Two, which is one single vision:

It is a vision of a man with a measuring line in his hand who went out to measure the city of Jerusalem and as he did this, the interpreting angel said to the prophet (Verses 4-5):

**“... ‘Jerusalem shall be inhabited as
villages without walls, because of the**

multitude of men and cattle in it. For I will be to her a wall of fire round about, says the LORD, and I will be the glory within her.” {Zech 2:4b-5 RSV}

This is followed by a beautiful description of the days of blessing that are to come upon Israel, all to be literally fulfilled as Israel would be brought some day back into the place of blessing in the land of Israel.

This is the picture of God's promise to those who return. It is always one of blessing. Come back, and blessing flows from that act of return, for God is the center of blessing. Blessing can come from no other source.

If your life is empty, you need God. If you are a Christian and your life is empty, you need to return to God. It is out of the resources of God that blessings come. The man with a measuring line is simply a very descriptive symbol of the unlimited, measureless blessing that God is ready to pour out into the life of one who comes back into a relationship with him.

3. Act Three now opens with five more visions. Here is the way to return to God, acted out for you in these five visions.

- In the first scene, Joshua the high priest is revealed, standing before God. Opposed to Joshua is Satan, the adversary. Now the people could see the adversary. They knew that Satan was against them. But what they could not see was the advocate, the one who stood on their behalf and who ministered for them. Then we see, in this wonderfully moving vision, how Joshua is cleansed; his filthy garments are taken off and he is clad in new, clean garments and the statement is made that God would do this simply because he chose to do so. “I have chosen Jerusalem,” he says, just as he says of us. Why does he bless us? Because he has chosen to do so.

Then in the latter part of this Chapter 3 is a wonderful vision that looks forward to the work of Christ upon the cross (Verse 8):

“Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who sit before you, for they are men of good omen: behold, I will bring my servant the Branch. For behold, upon the stone which I have set before Joshua, upon a single stone with seven facets, I will engrave its inscription, says the LORD of hosts, and I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day.” {Zech 3:8-9 RSV}

This is a marvelous prophecy of the coming of the one who would be Jehovah's servant, the Branch. One who would have the marks of the crucifixion and who would be the instrument by which the guilt of the land was removed in a single day. And in that day blessing would flow out as God's manifestation of his right to cleanse the sinner without charging him, accusing him, or condemning him. Cleansing is the first step in the way back.

- Then in Scene Two we see what follows the cleansing of God – the power of the Holy Spirit – in the vision of the lampstand and the olive tree. It pictures the Spirit-filled life. Oil always refers to the Holy Spirit, and here were olive trees continually dripping oil out of their branches into a lampstand, and it was burning brightly. What wonderful symbolism of the fact that the Lord within us is constantly supplying that inner strengthening that makes it possible for us to burn brightly as light in the midst of a dark generation.
- Scene Three opens on a flying scroll, a gigantic scroll with Scriptures written on both sides, and with curses against the thieves and the blasphemers among the people. It pictures the judgment of Israel, the going forth of the Law in the midst of corruption. Now they could see the corruption but they could not see the Law. So this is God's encouragement in the hour of darkness when all they could see was corruption, and everything going to pieces. What they could not see was God's agency

working to bring a curse upon that lawlessness to bring it to an end.

- Then, in Scene Four, Zechariah sees a woman in an ephah. An ephah is like a big bushel basket, and while the prophet and the angel watched, wings were given to this basket and it flew away to the land of Babylon. What does this strange thing mean? If you had a vision like that you would wonder what you had been eating the night before! But the prophet knows that a meaningful vision has been given to him. As he meditates upon it, he can understand it because it contains terms that are used elsewhere in the Scripture. Whenever a woman appears symbolically in Scripture, there is always reference to something wrong in the realm of religion. (I did not invent that, the Scriptures did.) Here, then, is the picture of the judgment of the false faith, the false church, very much as we find in the book of Revelation where a woman who is the false church is called Babylon the great. Zechariah sees the same thing; God's judgment upon hypocritical religion, false faith.
- Then in the final scene, the prophet sees the four chariots which rode out upon the earth, very much like the vision in Revelation of the four horsemen who ride and bring judgment upon the world. The curtain rings down, then, on this great drama of redemption of the future. It is God's great symbolic play of the way back to him – first by cleansing, then by the filling of the Holy Spirit, then the putting away of evil in its various forms and finally the judgment of the entire earth as God brings the evil of men to the seat of judgment.

Chapter 7 marks a **new division** in the book and in this chapter we find God speaking in a different way. Instead of using visions, he speaks to the prophet in a direct address. The heart of this section is the prophet's announcement in Chapter 8, Verse 3:

“Thus says the LORD: I will return to Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem,

and Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the LORD of hosts, the holy mountain.” {Zech 8:3 RSV}

Here is a picture of God dwelling in the midst of his people. One day this is going to be fulfilled on the earth. In the land of Israel, what has been predicted is taking place, one startling event after another. The return of Jerusalem to Jewish control has prepared the way for the rebuilding of the temple on its old site. Scripture has long predicted that this would be one of the opening signs that God was about to move again to restore Israel at last to its place among the nations.

So we can read this section with great interest because it pictures something that is historically coming to pass, but we can read it with even greater interest because of what is spiritually symbolized in our own lives – God in the midst of us. What will the result be? God dwelling in us, renewing the inner man, a fountain of blessing pouring out in our lives, making us fruitful and effective and a blessing to all with whom we come in contact. That is the picture of these last scenes.

Chapters 7 and 8 link together in a plea of God to the people to be honest and open before him. It is again a rehearsal of their failures in his sight and then a reminder that while he is unflinching in his mercy and grace, he is unchanging in his standards. He always supplies what is necessary but he never lowers the standards. The people react as people often do, in these three ways:

- First (Chapter 7, Verse 11):

But they refused to hearken, and turned a stubborn shoulder, and stopped their ears that they might not hear. {Zech 7:11 RSV}

That is always the first step. They pretend not to hear.

- And then (Verse 12):

They made their hearts like adamant lest they should hear the law and the words which the LORD of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets. {Zech 7:12a RSV}

They deliberately disobeyed.

- And then, finally, they began to play the hypocrite. The chapter opens with a question of the people, "Shall we keep on with these feasts that we began in Babylon?" And God's word to them is, "Why are you doing it? Are you celebrating these feasts because you mean to worship, or simply for a religious show?"

These are some of the very ways that we avoid the will of God today.

I remember years ago, one of my daughters was told by her mother to put on a green dress. It was interesting to watch her. She pretended at first not to hear. Then after her mother repeated the request several times, she openly rebelled and just said, "No. I don't want to wear that dress." And then, when it looked as though she would have to wear it, she came up to her mother and said, "Mother, I want to wear the green dress, but it is just too dirty," which was not true at all. In other words, she followed exactly the program that is outlined here. She pretended not to hear, she directly disobeyed, and then she played the hypocrite, and pretended that it was right and proper that she should disobey in this way.

How accurately this catches up the inherent deceitful tendencies of the human heart!

But now God goes on to point out that the result will be a blindness to truth; that ultimately, they will lose the ability to see and hear. This is set forth for us in Chapters 9 and 10 – the picture of the blindness of the people, and right in the midst of this, you have the first of several amazingly accurate glimpses of the coming of the Messiah (Chapter 9, Verse 9):

**Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on an ass,
on a colt the foal of an ass.**
{Zech 9:9 RSV}

And you recall how those words were literally fulfilled in the New Testament when our Lord sent his disciples to find a colt and an ass and he mounted the ass and rode in triumph in the streets of Jerusalem with the people going before and shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Matt

21:9a RSV). Exactly and unconsciously fulfilling this prophecy of Zechariah, "Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious," and you will know him because he is riding on an ass accompanied with a colt. And yet, they did not know him and they did not recognize him when he came even in such a remarkable way. And as he drew near to Jerusalem, he wept as he looked out over the impenitent city and he said these remarkable words, "Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace. But now they are hid from your eyes," (Luke 19:42 RSV).

That is what happens when God moves in your life and you do not listen; you lose the ability to hear, and these things are hid from your eyes. And the judgment of blindness came upon these people.

In Chapter 11, after many rebuffs, the Messiah, again speaking through the prophet, says these amazing words (Verse 12):

Then I said to them, "If it seems right to you, give me my wages; but if not, keep them." And they weighed out as my wages thirty shekels of silver. {Zech 11:12 RSV}

How much did Judas contract for in betraying our Lord? Thirty shekels of silver. According to the Law if a slave was gored by an ox, the man who owned the ox could settle the whole matter by paying his neighbor thirty shekels of silver. Here the Messiah says to these people, "All right now, look if you want me, say so, but if you do not, give me my wages. What do you think I am worth to you?" And they weighed out for his price thirty shekels of silver.

Then comes the second result of an unrepentant heart and life (Chapter 11, Verses 15-17):

Then the LORD said to me, "Take once more the implement of a worthless shepherd. For lo, I am raising up in the land a shepherd who does not care for the perishing, or seek the wandering, or heal the maimed, or nourish the sound, but devours the flesh of the fat ones, tearing off even their hoofs.

**Woe to my worthless shepherd,
who deserts the flock!**

**May the sword smite his arm
and his right eye!**

**Let his arm be wholly withered,
his right eye utterly blinded!"**

{Zech 11:15-17 RSV}

In other words, if you refuse the true shepherd, God will allow you to have a false shepherd.

Again, it was the Lord Jesus who said to the Pharisees, the blinded Pharisees of his day, "I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive," (John 5:43 RSV). This is that character whom Paul tells us about in Thessalonians called the man of lawlessness who comes to Israel as their deliverer and is received as the Messiah, but turns out to be the anti-Messiah, what we know as the anti-Christ, the false shepherd who comes when they reject and refuse the truth (cf, 2 Th 2:3 ff).

I have often wondered at the number of people who fall into anti-Christian cults that abound today. Why is it? Time after time I have found that they have done so because they have rejected some opportunity to hear the truth, and the result is that they fall into the clutches of what sounds like truth but is a lie. As Paul says, "God sends upon them a strong delusion to make them believe what is false ... who did not believe the truth." (2 Th 2:11-12 RSV).

Then we come to the last section, Chapters 12 through 14, where we have this beautiful picture of God finding a way to come back into the lives of his people. It opens with these words (Chapter 12, Verses 2-3):

"Lo, I am about to make Jerusalem a cup of reeling to all the peoples round about; it will be against Judah also in the siege against Jerusalem. On that day I will make Jerusalem a heavy stone for all the peoples; all who lift it shall grievously hurt themselves. And all the nations of the earth will come together against it." {Zech 12:2-3 RSV}

According to the Scriptures, the darkest days for Jerusalem lie yet ahead. It shall become a burden to the nations, a grievous stone of stumbling, the prophetic Scriptures say. The peoples of the nations shall be gathered together about the city and Zechariah tells us that God will not allow himself to be ignored. He vows that he will break through into human consciousness and it will come about this way (Verses 9, 10):

"And on that day I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem.

"And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of compassion and supplication, so that, when they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a first-born." {Zech12:9-10 RSV}

Isn't that amazing? Israel in its blindness refusing its Messiah, refusing to recognize the one that God sent, never realizing that the one whom they pierced is coming again. And when he comes, he will speak these words (Chapter 13, Verse 6):

"And if one asks him, 'What are these wounds on your back?' [or, as other versions say, "in your hands"]" he will say, "The wounds I received in the house of my friends." {Zech 13:6 RSV}

This ties in with the vivid, descriptive sequence in Chapter 14 (Verses 1-4):

Behold, a day of the LORD is coming, when the spoil taken from you will be divided in the midst of you. For I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city shall be taken and the houses plundered and the women ravished; half of the city shall go into exile, but the rest of the people shall not be cut off from the city. Then the LORD will go forth and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle. On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives ... {Zech 14:1-4a RSV}

You remember that was the place that Jesus stood on this earth. He went out with his disciples on the Mount of Olives and as they watched him, he was taken up out of their sight into the heavens, and an angel standing there said to them, "This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11b RSV).

On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives which lies before Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley; so that one half of the Mount shall withdraw northward, and the other half southward. And the valley of my

mountains shall be stopped up, for the valley of the mountains shall touch the sides of it; and you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. {Zech 14:4-5a RSV}

Geologists have long known that one of the greatest faults in the earth's surface runs right through the Mount of Olives. The mountain shall be split in half, and then what? Well, when Israel has seen its Messiah and mourned for the one whom it pierced and has recognized with great mourning that it had turned its back upon the one sent of God, then we read (Chapter 14, Verses 8-9):

On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea; it shall continue in summer as in winter.

And the LORD will become king over all the earth; on that day the LORD will be one and his name one. {Zech 14:8-9 RSV}

This is picturing the glory of the earth in the days when God shall reign through his Son as king.

The book closes then with these beautiful words (Verses 20-21):

And on that day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, "Holy to the LORD." And the pots in the house of the LORD shall be as the bowls before the altar; and every pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the LORD of hosts, so that all who sacrifice may come and take of

them and boil the flesh of the sacrifice in them. And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day. {Zech 14:20-21 RSV}

Every commonplace thing is made to be holy unto the Lord.

Do you know that that is what God is promising to you? Every moment of your life, every commonplace thing is touched with the glory of his presence when he is in the center of your life. It will be visibly true on the earth someday. It can be spiritually true right now.

Prayer:

Our Holy Father, we thank you for the beauty of this vision and for the truth of it. We know that you are forever reminding us that your word is true. How foolish it is that we should ever turn from it or cast it aside or be indifferent to it or act as though it were of little importance. Lord teach us to examine ourselves and to walk in earnestness and honesty before you and to realize that all this is designed so that we may come into the understanding and the experience of a time of glory within such as we have never know before. Make these words to be the experience of each of us as we learn to walk before you our living God, and to know what it means to have the glory of the Lord within. We ask in Christ's name, Amen.

MALACHI: Think Upon His Name

by Ray C. Stedman

Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, is separated from the book of Matthew by a silent period of more than 400 years, and yet, these two books tie together in a remarkable way. Historically, there was a long, long time when no voice spoke for God, no prophet came to Israel. There were no Scriptures being written. There was no encouragement from God. The heavens were silent. Still, history was going on, and remarkable things were taking place in Israel and among the Jews. New institutions were being formed that appear in the opening of the New Testament, but none of this is recorded for us in the sacred history. Malachi is the last of the Minor Prophets and the last prophetic voice to speak to Israel.

The last three books of the Old Testament – Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi – were all written after the return of the Israelites from their captivity in Babylon. The people did not come back from Babylon in one great big happy throng. There was a straggling return in two or three groups, the first one beginning in about 535 B.C. At that time, a handful of Jews fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah that the captivity would last for 70 years and they came back to the desolated, stricken city of Jerusalem. There they began to lay the foundations of the temple and it was Haggai's ministry fifteen years later to stir them up to continue that work and carry it through. The temple was completed during Zechariah's ministry and Ezra the priest then led another group back from Babylon.

The people had changed their entire way of life by that time. While they were in Israel, before the captivity, they had been sheep keepers for the most

part. But in Babylon they learned to be shopkeepers, and they have been merchants and shopkeepers ever since. So Ezra led this group back and again they had difficulties which are recorded in the historical book of Ezra.

Finally, the last return was accomplished under Nehemiah who in 445 B.C. led a group back to begin the laying of the walls of Jerusalem. The fascinating book of Nehemiah records the exciting experience of building the walls once again. Shortly after Nehemiah finished this task, Malachi appears, and it is interesting to compare the book of Nehemiah with the book of Malachi. Nehemiah is the conclusion of the historical section of the Old Testament which begins with Genesis. That is all history. Following Nehemiah are the poetic books, and then the prophetic books; in Malachi we come into the same period as is covered by Nehemiah.

This prophecy of Malachi was given by a man whose name means "my messenger." It is most suggestive that this last book of our Old Testament centers around the theme of a messenger of God and a prediction of the coming of another messenger. In this, therefore, we have a direct tie between Malachi and the New Testament. Chapter 3, for instance, begins with this prophecy:

"Behold, I send my messenger [in Hebrew that would be "Behold, I send Malachi"] to prepare the way before me, ..."
{Mal 3:1a RSV}

And as you discover in the book of Matthew, that messenger was John the Baptist. He came to prepare the way of the Lord and to announce the

coming of the second messenger from God. That second messenger is here in this prophecy in the next phrase:

“... and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant ...” {Mal 3:1b RSV}

It was the work of the Lord Jesus on the closing night of his ministry to take wine and bread with his disciples and holding the cup up to say, “This is my blood of the [new] covenant,” (Matt 26:28 RSV). The messenger of the covenant is the Lord Jesus himself.

“... in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap, [That is, ‘he burns and he cleanses.’] he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, till they present right offerings to the LORD.” {Mal 3:1c-3 RSV}

Now that was the trouble with the people in Malachi’s day. They had forgotten the great and central message of God and, as we go back to the start of the book, we see that the prophet opens on that note (Chapter 1, Verse 1):

The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi. “I have loved you,” says the LORD. {Mal 1:1-2a RSV}

And that is always the message of God’s prophets. “I have loved you,” says the LORD. But the amazing thing is that these people answer the prophet with the words, “How hast thou loved us?” This entire book is a series of responses on the part of the people to the challenges of God. Seven times you will find them saying, “How? How does this happen? Prove it.” As we go through them you can see how they reveal the state of this people’s heart. Here is an outgoing God – and God is always this way, pouring out love – but here is a callous people who have become so indifferent and so unresponsive to God that in perfect sincerity they can say, “We don’t see this. What do you mean? Why do you say these things to us?” Throughout the book, this is the theme.

Now God’s answer to their question, “How have you loved us?” is to remind them that he loved them even back in the beginning of the race with Jacob and Esau. He says, “Take a look at the whole race. Esau’s history has been one of continual disturbance and disaster and trouble because,” he says, “I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau. If you want to understand my love, look at one who has not been enjoying my love. Look at Esau and see how different his story is from yours, even though Jacob and Esau were twin brothers.” Verses 2, 3:

“Is not Esau Jacob’s brother?” says the LORD. “Yet I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau;” {Mal 1:2c-3a RSV}

That troubles many people, but you find the explanation in the book of Hebrews in the New Testament. There we are told that Esau was a despiser of his birthright and therefore was one who placed no value on spiritual matters (cf, Heb 12:16). He treated God with utter indifference. He viewed the things that God regarded as valuable as if they were trivial, and he treated them that way. It is because of Esau’s attitude that God says, “I have loved Jacob but I hated Esau.”

If you had known these two men, you would probably have loved Esau and hated Jacob. Jacob was the schemer, the big time operator, the supplanter, the usurper, the untrustworthy rascal. Esau was the big outdoor man, hearty, open, frank, strong, boasting in his exploits as a hunter and as a man of the out-of-doors. Of the two, he appears much the better man, but God says, “I loved Jacob because in the heart of Jacob is the hunger after the deeper things of life; Jacob wants something more than what is on the surface.” That always draws out the heart of God. And this is characteristic of the nation as well.

God goes on to charge the Israelites with specific problems and each time their response is, “What do you mean?” (Verse 6):

“A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name.” {Mal 1:6a RSV}

That is God's charge. You despise my name. They said, "How have we despised your name? We don't see this. What do you mean?" And the Lord answers (Verse 7):

**"By offering polluted food upon my altar."
{Mal 1:7a RSV}**

"Your attitude and your actions toward me are shoddy. You are content to give me just the trash, the defiled things." But they pursue it further:

'How have we polluted it?' {Mal 1:7c RSV}

And again God makes it very clear. Whenever you ask God how, he will tell you. God says (Verse 8):

"When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that no evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that no evil? Present that to your governor; ..." {Mal 1:8a RSV}

"Will you get by with that?" God says, "You people that are content to be shoddy about your religious experience, try living that way in your business life and see if you get by with it. And yet you say you are honoring my name. You are claiming to worship me and to be my people." The God of reality always cuts right through all the excuses and all the flimflam of hypocrisy right down to the real issue.

You see it again in the charges that he lays against them concerning their attitudes in worship. They were being professional about their worship. They were utterly bored (Verse 13):

"What a weariness this is,' you say, and you sniff at me, says the LORD of hosts. You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering!" {Mal 1:13a RSV}

Now what is wrong here? Where has all the excitement gone? Well, these are always the symptoms of a people who think God will be content with something less than love. The great commandment is, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. ... and your neighbor as yourself," (Matt 22:37, 22:39b RSV). Nothing else will satisfy God. But here is a people who have been surrounded by God's love and the recipients of his

grace for centuries and yet their hearts have become so blinded that they cannot even see how they are offending him and insulting him with what they do. The reason this is so is that their own love for him has died. The death of love is always reflected in a callous attitude and this is what you see here.

As you continue, you see that they were being hypocritical. God lays that charge against them in Chapter 2 and says that their hypocrisy was actually malignant. Their influence was turning others astray (Verse 8):

"But you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by your instruction, ..." {Mal 2:8a RSV}

"You are telling them things that are wrong because you do not even know that they are wrong." This is the horrible aspect of this kind of living.

Then God charges them with having failed in their moral standards. They had begun to intermarry with the tribes around them and forgot that God had called them to be a special people. Divorce was prevalent throughout the land (Verse 13):

And this again you do. You cover the LORD's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards ... or accepts [the offering] with favor. {Mal 2:13a RSV}

And they ask, "Why does he not accept this?" Verses 14, 15:

Because the LORD was witness to the covenant between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Has not the one God made and sustained for us the spirit of life? And what does he desire? Godly offspring. So take heed to yourselves, and let none be faithless to the wife of his youth. "For I hate divorce, says the LORD the God of Israel." {Mal 2:14b-16a RSV}

Sounds modern, doesn't it? Malachi had to minister to a nation in which divorce was widespread, and more than that, to a society in which moral confusion and cynicism was rampant. The prophet says (Verse 17):

You have wearied the LORD with your words. {Mal 2:17a RSV}

They are amazed at this charge. They say (Verse 17):

“How have we wearied him?”
{Mal 2:17c RSV}

The answer comes right from the shoulder:

By saying, “Every one who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD,”
{Mal 2:17d RSV}

Just recently I picked up an article that suggested that obscenity, pornography, the free expression of toilet language and filthy words (and so on) is good to have out in the open, that it is wrong to suppress this kind of language or to censure it in our literature. Another article said that parental discipline is an evil thing, that it does harm to children and destroys their incentive, and takes away their ability to develop properly.

All this sort of thing clearly reflects the moral confusion of our own day. And this is always the result when people offer anything less than a fervent love for God, when they think that ritual and religious hocus pocus is going to satisfy the heart of the Eternal. These people were asking (Verse 17):

“Where is the God of justice?”
{Mal 2:17f RSV}

Where is the God of judgment? Why, anybody can get by with anything! What do you mean? There aren't any standards. Everything is relative. There is no God of justice who says what is right and wrong. You see, we think all this is new, but even four hundred years before Christ, it was already old.

Then comes the great prophecy we have already looked at. Malachi lifts his eyes and sees that the heart of these people was so hardened that they could not be awakened even by these charges from God. They were utterly unaware that these things were happening. They had nothing to measure them against. So the prophet, looking across what turned out to be four hundred years, says,

The Lord will take care of this. He will send one to you who will wake you up, one who will tell you the truth. He will be a refiner's fire; he will burn through all the hypocrisy and the outward perfunctoriness of your religion and cut right through to the very heart of it. He will be like fullers' soap to those who are willing. He will cleanse them and set things right. You will be able to recognize him because a messenger will go before him to prepare the way, and then he will suddenly come to his temple. {cf, Mal 3:1-5}

And of course, all of this is beautifully fulfilled in the New Testament.

Then comes another series of charges in which the Lord speaks again about their lives. He says to them (Verse 7):

“Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts.” {Mal 3:7b RSV}

And the people say, “How shall we return?” {Mal 3:7c RSV}. “We haven't gone anywhere. What do you mean return? We are serving you in your temple; we are bringing the proper sacrifices and offerings and we are going through the ritual, just as you outlined it. What do you mean, return to you?”

In this response, they indicate the utter blindness of their heart. They did not realize that though the outward form is right, the heart is far from God.

Then God said, “You are robbing me,” {Mal 3:8b RSV}. They said, “How are we robbing you?” {cf, Mal 3:8c}. God's answer was, “In your tithes and offerings,” {Mal 3:8d RSV}; “The whole nation of you is robbing me. You are using the money that I had blessed you with for your own purposes. Bring the tithes into the storehouse that there may be food in my house,” {cf, Mat 3:9-10}.

Now that verse is often wrenched from this Old Testament Scripture and used to establish a legalistic pattern of bringing in all the offerings into the church as the storehouse. Well, that is a distortion. This verse is addressed to Israel, within the limits of the system under which Israel lived in the Old Testament, and yet the principle is exactly true of the church. We should never take all that God has blessed us with and use it for our own advancement.

And God says, “When you do that, you are robbing me. You are robbing me of my right to use you to advance my cause.” That is what man is here for. It is quite possible for all of us as Christians to be quite perfunctory about fulfilling our religious obligations within the church and yet to live our lives out fulfilling nothing but our own self-centered goals. We may even achieve them and rise to the very top, but someday we will have to stand before the one who says, “All your life you have robbed me of my right to be myself in you.” That is why the appeal of the New Testament is to present your bodies as a living sacrifice unto God; that is what we are here for. That is what we are called for, and anything less is robbing him of his inheritance in the saints.

He goes on to charge them with still other offenses (Verses 13, 14):

“Your words have been stout against me, says the LORD. Yet you say, ‘How have we spoken against thee?’” {Mal 3:13 RSV}

The answer comes:

**“You have said, ‘It is vain to serve God.’”
{Mal 3:14a RSV}**

“What is the use of serving God? He does not do anything for me. I do not get anything out of this. What is the good of keeping his charge or of walking in mourning before the LORD of hosts?” {cf, Mal 3:14b}.

This sounds familiar, doesn't it? “Why, I have been trying to serve God; I have been a Christian now for ten years and I haven't gotten anything out of it.” This betrays the philosophy that God exists for man, not man for God, which is really blasphemy. Now that is one side of the picture.

But beginning with Verse 16 of Chapter 3 there is a wonderful little spotlight turned on a remnant, a group within, who were pleasing God. Thank God these are always there, and God's searchlight can always find them.

They are described this way (Verses 16-18):

Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another; the LORD heeded and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared

the LORD and thought on his name. {Mal 3:16 RSV}

Then this beautiful verse:

“They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, my special possession on the day when I act, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. Then once more you shall distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.” {Mal 3:17-18 RSV}

Notice the two things that mark those who are faithful in the day of apostasy:

- First, they “spoke with one another.” This does not mean that they just talked to each other. It means that they opened up to each other. They shared with one another. They encouraged each other. They confessed their weak points and prayed for one another. They let others see what they were like. Ah, yes, but that was on the horizontal level, wasn't it?
- But there was also the vertical: they “thought on his name.” That is always the great resource of the people of God. The name of God stands for all that he is, just as your name stands for all that you are. You sign a check and all that you are is laid on the line to the amount of that check because of your name. They thought on his name.

There is not a week that goes by that there is not a flood of propaganda crossing my desk, telling me what is wrong with the church, analyzing its weakness, and presenting some gadget or gimmick that will take all the blood and sweat and tears out of living as a Christian. We are being assaulted today with solutions for the problems of the weakness of the church that are not solutions at all. Here is the answer to the weakness of the church – “to think upon his name,” to reckon on the resources of God. You can take away all the props of the church, its buildings, its visual aids, its committees, its programs and everything else, and if you have a people who have learned to reckon on the name of God, you have not lost a thing. That is what this age needs to hear again.

Someone suggested recently that if we would introduce some of the electronic marvels that are available to businesses today, the job of preaching the gospel could be done electronically, and in just a few short years the whole world could be converted and our job would be done, electronically. I have also heard the suggestion that what we need to do is to take the words of the hymns and put them to popular, or rock music, and that is what the church needs. Now I know that many people would agree with this approach. They say we need to capture the spirit of the age and move with it and get modern – that is the missing element. Oh! No. God is the missing element. We are to think on his name, reckon on his power. The church is never so strong as when in utter weakness it casts itself back upon the resources of God and moves in dependence upon him.

Now the prophet lifts up his eyes again to see the day that is coming, not only the day 400 years later when the Lord Jesus will stand on the earth, but beyond that, across the great reaches of the centuries to the second coming of Christ, when all of God's program will be fulfilled (Chapter 4, Verse 1, 2):

“For behold, the day comes, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.” {Mal 4:1-2a RSV}

Now that is one cause with two effects. The Son of Righteousness shall rise. And for those who refuse him, there is a burning. But toward those who receive him, there is a healing. It is the same Son. (Verses 2-6):

“You shall go forth leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts. {Mal 4:2b-3 RSV}

“Remember the law of my servant Moses, ... {Mal 4:4a RSV}

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse.” {Mal 4:5-6 RSV}

You will recall that it was the last verse that was troublesome to the disciples and they said to the Lord, “How is it that the prophecy says that Elijah the prophet must first come?” And the Lord's answer was, “Elijah has already come and you did not recognize him.” He saw the look of astonishment on their faces and he made it clear that it was John the Baptist who came “in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17b) and fulfilled his ministry in the initial coming. But he put it in such a way as to leave the clear inference that Elijah the prophet would still come before the second coming, (cf, Matt 17:10-13). Many identify the two witnesses in the eleventh chapter of Revelation as Elijah and Moses. How true this is, I will leave to you to decide. But at least there is the suggestion here that in some remarkable way, God intends to supply a ministry like Elijah's before the second return of the Lord Jesus.

Now notice this last thing:

- It is not without significance that at the end of all the literature of the Old Testament, the last word is “curse.” It is not a definite prediction, however, but a warning. This prophecy begins “Behold, I have loved you,” says the LORD,” and it ends with the warning that if the message of love is not received, the result is a curse.
- Now compare that with the last word of the New Testament. Leaving out the final salutation, it is the name of Jesus, the Lord Jesus. “Come, Lord Jesus!” {Rev 22:20b RSV}.

That is God's answer to the curse, isn't it? – his answer to the curse of the Law. He has “redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us,” {Gal 3:13 KJV}.

MALACHI: Think upon His Name

Thus the full answer of God is grace and love that pours out even more blessing, bringing us into the light and the knowledge of Christ. All the blessing that is wrapped up in that name is to be ours, and that is why the task of a Christian is to learn to think upon his name.

Prayer:

Our Heavenly Father, thank you for this reminder of the evil of being perfunctory

about faith, of being shoddy and hypocritical and bored with our faith. Lord, help us to know that your heart of love is never content until it obtains a response of love from us; may we love the Lord our God. May we love him in purity; may we love in joy and in sincerity, and remember that your name is our adequate resource in every situation. We ask in Christ's name. Amen.

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