



DEAD PREACHERS

The Old Testament Prophets
Speak To Us Today

Biblical Research Library

Roger E. Dickson

***By faith Abel offered to God
a more excellent sacrifice than Cain,
through which he obtained witness
that he was righteous,
God testifying of his gifts.
And by faith he being dead still speaks.***

(Hebrews 11:4)

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DEAD PREACHERS

For the sake of the present and future existence of our faith, Paul made one statement that should move us to search our Bibles. He wrote, “*Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come*” (1 Co 10:11). We know that Jesus nailed to the cross the Sinai law that God had given to Israel. But in nailing the Sinai law to the cross, He did not assume that we should discard Old Testament history and wisdom. God raised up preachers (prophets) in the days of Israel’s rebellion. From the Holy Spirit-recorded documents of these preachers, we have a historical account of things that happened to God’s people from the beginning of time. From these people, God expects us to learn in order that we do not follow any example of their rebellion, but follow after those who remained faithful. Paul wrote to Christians in Rome, “*For whatever things were written before were written for our learning ...*” (Rm 15:4). Those things that happened then are often so strikingly similar to things we experience today. They are so similar that we are compelled as preachers to cry out for repentance. We feel compelled to cry out to a generation today that seems to be bent on the repetition of history. So we caution ourselves not to repeat the sins of the fathers. We see so many similarities between then and now that we should be on our knees in repentance in order to restore our souls to the Father who is bringing all things to a conclusion. Therefore, in order to keep ourselves in a spirit of restoration, we seek to listen to the dead preachers of the past who continue to live today through the record of their inspired documents.

INTRODUCTION

It was the task of God’s prophets to keep Israel pointed in the direction of God’s purpose for the existence of Israel. In times of rebellion and apostasy, it was especially significant that the prophets preach a clear message of repentance and judgment to a people who seemed to be determined to go in their own direction, a direction of rebellion against the will of God. Though the prophets ministered the word of God throughout the history of Israel, the “writing prophets” ministered pri-

marily after the dividing of the twelve tribes into two nations. In this division into two kingdoms, the ten tribes of the north were commonly referred to as Israel (the northern kingdom). The southern two tribes were referred to as Judah (the southern kingdom). The mission of the prophets was the following:

Yet the Lord testified against Israel and against Judah by the prophets and by all the seers, saying, “Turn from your evil

ways and keep My commandments and My statutes, according to all the law that I commanded your fathers [at Mount Sinai], and which I sent to you by My servants the prophets (2 Kg 17:13).

A. The prophet:

The term “prophet” is probably one of the most confused terms used by modern-day religionists. When the term is used today, most people believe that reference is to someone who can tell us something that is going to happen in the future. And then there are those prophets today who presume to prophesy the end of the world. These religious charlatans come and go without their predictions of the end being fulfilled. Nevertheless, fickle people simply wait for the next prognosticator to come along in order to have their ears tickled with “end-of-time” predictions (2 Tm 4:3). And thus, the religious world today is *“tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of teaching, by the trickery of men in cleverness to the deceitfulness of error”* (Ep 4:14).

The presumptuous prophets of today find their validation in a misunderstanding of the ministry of the writing prophets of the Old Testament. When most hear the word “prophet,” they think of one who is foretelling the future. This was certainly true with some of the prophets whose writings are part of the Old Testament. However, this was only a small part of their ministry as a prophet.

The word “prophet” meant “a spokesman for God.” And as God’s

spokesman, it was the work of the prophet to do what God intended him to do, as is explained in the preceding statement of 2 Kings 17:13. Prophets were to go among God’s people in order to preach the commandments and statutes of the law that God revealed on Mount Sinai and delivered through Moses. Their ministry was in preaching and teaching. In reference to their call for repentance in the times of Israel’s apostasy, they proclaimed the future captivity of the people if they did not turn from the error of their ways. This was not a new message. The prophets simply stated what God knew they would do, and thus, recorded the warning in the law (Dt 31:14-21).

During the days of Saul and David, there was a “company” of prophets who ministered the word of God to the people (1 Sm 19:20; see 1 Kg 20:41; 2 Kg 2:3). It was the work of the “sons of the prophets” to go among the people in order to teach, exhort and admonish. It was not their primary work to foretell the future. They spoke of destruction in the future only if the people moved away from the law of God (See Dt 31:14-21).

Because many today have determined that their ministry as a prophet is taken from the example of a few Old Testament prophets who wrote of future events, they conclude that the primary ministry of the prophet is to speak of future events. But this is a twisted understanding of the ministry of the Old Testament prophets. Though God gave “short term” prophecies to be fulfilled in order to confirm a prophet, the prophet’s ministry was not in foretelling the future. It

was in preaching the word of God to the people in order to encourage repentance. Those who did not know the Sinai law were not, and could not, be prophets of God. The same would be true today. Anyone who would presume to be a prophet/preacher today, but does not read and study his Bible, cannot be a prophet/preacher.

Almost all the prophets who moved among the people of God throughout the history of Israel never wrote one inspired piece of Old Testament literature. Throughout the history of Israel, there were hundreds of prophets. We have only a few whose prophecies of future things in the history of Israel were recorded. These written prophecies are a part of our Bible. But we should never think that this was the extent of the prophet's work in order to keep the people of God directed to the Messiah who was to come. Therefore, when considering the recorded prophets of the Old Testament, we must not conclude that what is stated in the writings of the recorded prophets was the primary message of the prophets. If we do this, then we will have a distorted view of the ministry of the prophets (preachers) as they worked among the people of God throughout the history of Israel.

It is interesting to note that most of the prophets were products of rural Palestine. When the twelve tribes entered the land around 1,400 B.C., every tribe was allotted a portion of land that they were to put into production for the livelihood of their families. God intended that Israel be a rural-farming society in which every

person was to live off the land from the fruits of his own labors. The Levites were given the cities. The farmer/herdsman supported the Levites in their allotted cities. The rural economy of Israel went well for over 500 hundred years after the Israelites first settled in the land.

God called many of His prophets from their farms. He knew that the farmers and herdsman had remained close to Him in nature, and thus, the farmer/herdsman had the spiritual heart of where He wanted the people to be in their relationship with Him. The solitude of the farm culture produced a person whose focus was more on spiritual things, than the social-material overload of the city. And as this author has experienced, there is a connection with God through nature that is unique in farm life, and not available in the concrete jungles of urban centers. Urban centers produce a social and material overload that distracts from the simple life of the farm.

The farmer/herdsman's connection with the Creator is not something that can be produced as effectively in a complex social/business urban environment wherein inhabitants are struggling to survive. We feel that the unique rural personality that was developed in the solitude of nature was more suitable for God's use in representing Him before a people who had disconnected with Him. We affirm, therefore, that most of the prophets originated from the rural areas of Palestine. They were men and women who could write material as Psalm 23. These were words that could only come from a herdsman prophet, and thus, explain the

relationship that God intends for each of us to have with Him.

B. Test of a prophet:

God knew that there would always be those who would rise up among His people and presume to be prophets for the people. Since the people would have a difficult time separating the false prophets from the true prophets, He gave two tests that would determine if one were a true prophet of God, or simply some self-proclaimed religionist who wanted to be someone special among the people. Since there are always too many of those who have too much pomp and pride, and thus, want to proclaim themselves to be a prophet of God, the people of God must always resort to these tests by which they can determine if a self-proclaimed prophet is a fraud, or truly one who is sent from God. If people today would simply use these two tests of a prophet, there would be few problems in sorting out the assortment of self-proclaimed prophets who stand up today and assume that they are speaking for God:

1. *The foretold events of the future must come to pass:* As you read through the following test by which a prophet was to be judged a true prophet, think of all those modern-day, self-proclaimed prophets whose prophecies of future events never came to pass. According to the following test of a prophet, they would be judged false prophets:

But the prophet who will presume to

*speak a word in My name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who will speak in the name of other gods, **even that prophet will die.** And if you say in your heart, "How will we know the word that the Lord has not spoken?" When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, **if the thing does not follow or come to pass, that is the thing that the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously.** You will not be afraid of him (Dt 18:20-22).*

The above was written by Moses before Israel went in to possess the land of promise. Before any prophets were raised up among them, they were given this test of a prophet. Many years later, after Israel had listened to hundreds of presumptuous false prophets, who eventually led them into captivity, God again reminded the people that the fulfillment of prophecy was the real test of a true prophet:

The prophet who prophesies of peace, when the word of the prophet will come to pass, then will the prophet be known that the Lord has truly sent him (Jr 28:9).

The historical context of this statement occurred when the false prophet Hananiah said there would be peace in the land. However, Jeremiah was saying that the Babylonians were about to conquer the city of Jerusalem. The people had listened to the false prophets for so long that it was too late to repent and escape the impending termination of the theocracy of Israel in the land of Palestine. Because they listened to the false prophets, they

would never again reside as an independent theocratic nation in the land of promise. They would not because they listened to self-proclaimed prophets who spoke well of their rebellious behavior and beliefs.

We believe the same religious environment exists today among those who are obsessed with prophecies upon which to base their faith. There are too many self-proclaimed prophets today who presumptuously speak of future events. And because the people are so fascinated with these predictions, they will not, as the Israelites, turn away from the exciting stories about end-of-time predictions. When our faith is based more on what could happen in the future than what happened in the past on the cross, then we will go from one prophet to another in search of some validation for our faith.

The test to determine a true prophet is so simple. Regardless of the simplicity of the test, however, the test is ignored in the religious world today as it was ignored among the apostate Israelites during the latter years of Israel. The true prophets of God were given short-term knowledge of future events in order that they be validated as true prophets of God. But this opportunity was not given to self-proclaimed predictionists who claimed to be prophets. Nevertheless, the people still listened to the false prophets, rather than the true prophets of God.

When the people did accept false prophets who presumptuously spoke their predictions, God challenged these prophets to be brought forth before the people in order that their claims be tested (See

Is 43:9,10). If what was spoken by a certain predictionist did not come to pass, then that person was a false prophet. And to emphasize the seriousness of presuming to be a prophet of God, false prophets were to be put to death (Dt 18:20-22).

Some will wonder why the people were so eager to listen to the false prophets. There is a simple answer to this problem about which the apostle Paul wrote.

For the time will come when they will not endure sound teaching. But to suit their itching ears, they will surround themselves with teachers who will agree with their own desires (2 Tm 4:3).

“Itching ears” means that the people seek to create a religion after their own desires. And in order to feel good in their religious behavior, they seek those who will condone their beliefs and behavior. Therefore, the people will surround themselves with those who proclaim that they are the prophets of God, and thus, these false prophets will speak those things the people want to hear. What Paul is saying is that presumptuous men will simply take advantage of the opportunity that is presented by people who no longer have a desire to be taught the sound teaching of the Bible.

We know when we are in apostasy, therefore, when there arises among us so many prophets (predictionists) who presume to be speaking for God. The presumptuous false prophet is only the manifestation of the apostate state of the people who no longer study their Bibles. The people find it easier to listen to some

self-proclaimed prophet, than to open their Bibles and be noble minded as the Bereans who daily searched the Scriptures (At 17:11).

We must always keep in mind that there are some very crafty people in the religious world who have a great deal of skill in deceiving people. Therefore, in order not to be spiritually immature in the faith, and thus *“tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of teaching, by the trickery of men in cleverness to the deceitfulness of error;”* we must open our Bibles (Ep 4:14).

Those who have a tendency to be tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of teaching concerning prophecy must remember one very important point: **If a Bible interpreter develops from his own interpretation some calculated theory that is unique concerning the signs of the times, or end of time, then we can be assured that he is wrong.**

Understanding prophecy has always been a group matter, not an individual opportunity. Though the people of the Old Testament did not understand all that was revealed in a particular prophecy, they as a group at least knew that no one individual had an advantage to understand any particular prophecy. Prophecy was given for the benefit of the group to understand, not for any particular individual to interpret.

There was no such thing as inspired interpretation of the prophecies of the Old Testament. Neither does such exist today. If one would presumptuously assume that he has a particular insight into proph-

ecy that others do not have, then we know that such a person is not interpreting prophecy according to the common means by which God intended the common person to read the prophecy and understand. Again, there is no such teaching as *“inspired interpretation.”* The Bible was written to common folks, who, upon study can understand the word of God (See 2 Tm 2:15). Some things may be hard to understand, but they are not impossible to understand (See 2 Pt 3:15,16).

The person who has a tendency to be tossed to and fro should remember all the presumptuous seers of the past who based their interpretation of prophecy on some presumed date of fulfillment. The date came and went without the fulfillment of the prophecy of some end-of-time event. One should ask himself if he is now tossed to another prophet in order to believe his presumptuous predictions of the end of the world.

2. *Speak according to the will of God.* This second test of a true prophet is objective. It is a solid foundation upon which one can determine if one is either a true or false prophet. **A true prophet would never speak anything that was contrary to the already revealed word of God.** A true prophet would always speak according to what Peter wrote: *“If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God”* (1 Pt 4:11).

God is not a God of contradictions. He would never speak anything that contradicted that which He had already revealed. In the early church, and in absence of the yet-to-be written New Testament books, the disciples were given the

miraculous gift of testing the word of those who claimed to be spokesmen for God (1 Jn 4:1). As a result of this testing, some were proved to be liars (See Rv 2:2). When Peter made the statement, *“If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God,”* He had in mind a list of false prophets who had throughout history led the people of God astray with their presumptuous predictions.

As in the first century, we will always have this most powerful test of anyone who would claim to be a prophet of God. This test is particularly in reference to obedience to the gospel. Paul defined the gospel (good news) as the death of Jesus for our sins, His burial, and resurrection for our hope (1 Co 15:1-4). He also revealed that disciples are immersed in water (baptized) in order to obey the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus for the remission of sins (At 2:38; Rm 6:1-6). And if one does not obey the gospel for remission of sins, then he will be separated from God for eternity (2 Th 1:6-9). **If one professes to be a prophet of God today, but does not teach this message of the gospel, then he or she is a false prophet!** We should then listen to the words of Moses: *“The prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You will not be afraid of him”* (Dt 18:22). Any self-proclaimed spokesman for God who does not preach the gospel, and obedience thereof, cannot be a true spokesman for God.

We are blessed today with the written word of God. For this reason, every Christian can have a copy of the Bible by which to know the word of God and test

those who presume to be teachers of the word. Having a copy of the Old Testament law was not always possible during the era of the Old Testament prophets. Therefore, the people could know the law only as it was taught them through the teaching ministry of the Levites and prophets. The preachers (prophets) were inspired to know the will of God, and thus, they preached to the people by inspiration. The Levites studied the law, and then they taught it to the people when the people came with their sacrifices.

In the first century, and before the writing and distribution of numerous copies of the New Testament Scriptures, the gifts of the Holy Spirit were given to the early disciples by the laying on of the apostles' hands (See At 8:18,19). One of these gifts was the testing of the spirits (1 Co 12:10). But when copies of the written Scriptures were circulated throughout the churches, there was no more the need of the directly inspired New Testament prophets. And thus, there was no more the need for the miraculous gift of testing the prophets (1 Jn 4:1; Rv 2:2). Every Christian today has the privilege and opportunity to test any prophet (preacher) by the New Testament that he has in his hand.

The fact that most people do not study their Bibles today has laid the foundation for many self-proclaimed prophets to arise and take advantage of the innocent. As long as people refuse to study the Bible there will always exist those opportunists who seek a following by leading others to and fro with their meaningless predictions. The only way to bring

down the opportunistic prophet is to do what God's people of old did. They tested the prophets by the existing word of God. People today must be encouraged to study the word of God and test every self-proclaimed prophet. A finger on a passage and a smile on one's face will always lead to the vanquishing of false prophets.

C. Prophecy and Prediction:

During the era of the Old Testament prophets, prophecy was generally unique with the faith of Israel. Buddhism, and other religions that are not focused on the Bible, did not resort to prophecy in order to gain supporters or validate the faith of the supporters. **The prophets of these religions were believed because the religion of the prophets was first believed.** But with Israel, the prophets existed **because the people had forsaken the law of God.** In the religious world today, Christendom abounds with "prophets" who purport to pronounce teachings and end-of-time events outside the clear teachings of the word of God, but according to the religion of self-proclaimed prophets. The people believe such prophets because they believe the religion of the prophets.

We live in an era of predictionists, who, through their practice of deceiving their adherents into believing their assumptions, are eager to gain an audience for the benefit of financial gain. The definition of two words will help clear up most of the confusion, and thus, aid faithful truth-seekers to make a distinction between the true prophet of God, and the

opportunistic and self-appointed predictionist. As we venture through a study of the prophets of the Old Testament, we must keep the following definitions in mind as the Holy Spirit sought to make a distinction between the true prophets of God and the false prophets who stood against God's men.

1. Prophecy: When forth-telling something in the future, the true prophet of God announced something that was often totally new and without any hints by immediate surroundings. In fact, when the Old Testament prophets announced events concerning the future, it was usually events that involved a new paradigm of how God would be working among His people. The new paradigm was so different, that the prophets' immediate audiences had a difficult time believing what the prophets were saying.

In the historical context of the writing prophets, the prophet usually proclaimed (A) that once the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel were terminated, a remnant of Israel would return to the promised land in order to identify again the people of Israel until (B) the new paradigm of the Messianic age of the Branch was revealed. The immediate audience could have hope in the prophecy of a remnant, but they had little understanding of the gospel age of the Messiah that was coming. And because they had little understanding of the coming of the Messiah, they did not understand the details of Messianic prophecies. The prophecies were understood only when they were fulfilled. The New Testament,

therefore, is our “dictionary” of fulfilled prophecy.

2. Prediction: Prediction of future events is based on hints of surrounding events. The predictionist bases his proclamations of future events around the present circumstances in which he lives. For example, in 1994 we could have made the prediction that the African National Congress (ANC) would win all the elections of the country for the next twenty years. But our prediction would have been based on the fact that the country of South Africa was at least 75% ANC, and would remain close to that percentage for the next twenty years. If we had made the prediction based on the advantageous percentage of the ANC, then would we now be proclaimed a “prophet”? Some have self-proclaimed themselves to be prophets in a similar manner. What is unfortunate is that people know their Bibles so little that they cannot make a distinction between true prophecy and prediction.

Now when a predictionist becomes bold and arrogant, he will often make proclamations of events outside the indicators of his present circumstances. He will take his calculator or computer and go to the Scriptures in order to calculate the end of the world. Multitudes upon multitudes of such predictionists have plagued Christendom for centuries with their presumptuous postulations in reference to the end of times. But the calculated dates of supposedly end-time events have come and gone without being fulfilled. Nevertheless, faithful, if not gullible adherents to their favorite predictionists, buy the books

and wait for the next prognosticator to come along and tease their imagination. Such is the religious world in which we now live, which religious world has existed since people have refused to use the Bible as the foundation of their faith.

In our study of the prophets, we must at least learn that the religious environment in which the true prophets of God lived, is similar to that in which we live today. There were more false prophets in existence throughout Israel at any one time than there were true prophets of God. In fact, the situation was so dire at one time in the history of Israel that the false prophets outnumbered the true prophets by a ratio of 850 to 1. One true prophet, Elijah, stood alone against the proclamations of 450 Baal prophets and 400 Asherah prophets who were working against him (See 1 Kg 18). The opposition is no less today as true preachers of the word of God stand against the horde of false predictionists who pass themselves off as prophets of God. We are willing to work with such ratios of opposition simply because we know that the word of God will always prevail over those prophetic practitioners who seek to inflate pomp and purse at the expense of a “itching-ear” people who are willing to be led about by crafty men (Ep 4:14).

D. Major and Minor prophets:

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel are considered the major prophets. They are classified as major only because of the length of their books, and sometimes

by the length of their ministry. The minor prophets were often contemporary with the major prophets. When the major and minor prophets ministered at the same time in history, both delivered their message from different locations and to either the northern or southern kingdoms, though Jonah directed his message to Nineveh and Obadiah to Edom. The message of the minor prophets often complemented the ministry and message of the major prophets. The minor prophets had the task of delivering a short message to their God-ordained audience in order to warn the people of impending doom because of their state of apostasy. The major prophets ministered over a lengthy period of time in order to preserve the people from further digression into moral and social apostasy.

The minor prophets, whose writings we have in the Bible, ministered between about 786 to 400 B.C. Their ministry began before the dividing of the twelve tribes of Israel into the northern (Israel) and southern (Judah) kingdoms. They preached through the time of division after the death of Solomon, and then into the time when the Jews were taken into captivity. Their ministry extended through the Assyrian, Babylonian and Medo-Persian Empires. Their work among the Israelites concluded some time after the final return of captives to the land of Palestine in 444 B.C.

E. Message of the prophets:

There is a general pattern to the message of each book of the minor prophets.

Within each book there is (1) a call for repentance in view of impending judgment, (2) a message of judgment and doom if there was no repentance, (3) a promise that there would be a remnant who would return to the promised land after the captivity, and (4) hope for a messianic future when God would consummate Israel with the coming of the Messiah.

Statements concerning these four points are scattered throughout the writings of the prophets. But one common theme of the message of the prophets permeates all the Old Testament. That message is the Bright and Morning Star that would eventually rise in the future of Israel. This would be the Righteous Branch who would signal the consummation of Israel through the revelation of the eternal plan of God to save man. Though this theme was difficult to discover by the immediate recipients of the prophets' message and ministry, the very reason for God's call of the prophets was to preserve an identity of Israel until the promises of the Blessing to the fathers was fulfilled in Christ (See Gn 12:1-4).

All the ministry of the prophets was to come to the climax of what Jesus stated to the apostles after His resurrection and immediately before His ascension to the right hand of God:

These are the words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled that were written in the law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms, concerning Me (Lk 24:44).

F. Preaching from the prophets:

The apostasy of the people of God from His word gave rise to the necessity of the prophets. The religious world today is not unlike the religious environment in which the prophets ministered.

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge [of the word of God], I will also reject you so that you will be no priest to Me. Seeing you have forgotten the law of your God, I will also forget your children (Hs 4:6).

Because history often repeats itself in reference to our relationship with God through the knowledge of His word, what the prophets addressed during their day is often strikingly similar to situations throughout history. It is certainly true today. We believe, therefore, that the message of the prophets to God's people in the Old Testament should never be considered as simply good Old Testament literature. The prophets' message to those who are in rebellion against God will never be irrelevant in a world where there are those who refuse to know the word of God. When people stop studying their Bibles, then we know we are in the midst of a worldwide apostasy.

As disciples of Jesus who are venturing through the message of the prophets, our first response is to immediately examine social and religious structures today that are parallel to those that led to the fall of Israel. In the immediate historical setting of the prophets in their time, however, God would bring judgment on Israel through captivity. But now, God is

waiting for the final doom that will arrive with the coming of His Son. The application of the principal message of the prophets, therefore, is relevant today as preachers stand up before the people with a call to repentance. And thus, the dead preachers of the Old Testament still speak today because their message has not lost its relevance (Hb 11:4). Such is what Paul wrote to Timothy:

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness ... (2 Tm 3:16).

When Paul used the word "Scripture," reference was directly to the Old Testament Scriptures. It was true that he was writing Scriptures to Timothy (See 2 Pt 3:15,16). But the New Testament was simply added Scriptures to the canon of all Scriptures. So when Paul said that all Scripture is inspired, he was referring to the Old Testament Scriptures, which Scriptures were still profitable to Timothy for teaching, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness.

Preachers today have the responsibility to remind themselves of the ministry of the preachers of the Old Testament because "*whatever things were written before were written for our learning, so that we through patience and encouragement of the Scriptures [of the prophets], might have hope*" (Rm 15:4). What happened to Israel as a result of their lack of repentance should be a warning to all those today who have forgotten the word of God.

Now these things happened to them [Israel] as an example, and they were written [by the prophets] for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come (1 Co 10:11).

If there is no repentance among those today who have followed after the crafty teaching of false prophets, then they too will go into the destruction of an eternal separation from God (2 Th 1:6-9). Israel went into a captivity from which

only a remnant returned. Unfortunately, this is where the parallel message of the prophets ends for us today. There will be no remnant taken from captivity and returned to the land. What is coming for those today who have rejected a knowledge of the word of God is the following message of doom from Jesus: “*Depart from Me you cursed into everlasting fire that is prepared for the devil and his angels*” (Mt 25:41).

Chapter 1

JONAH

God sometimes uses the most unlikely people to accomplish His work. In the case of Jonah, He used someone who was proud, ethnocentric, stubborn, arrogant, self-centered, and a pouting nationalist. If Jonah were typical of the Israelites at the time of his mission in the early reign of Jeroboam II, then we would understand why the Israelites as a nation of priests failed in their national responsibility to minister the God of all humanity to the world.

A. Historical/social background:

At this time in history, around 780 B.C., Israel, the northern kingdom of ten tribes, had digressed to the attitude of what was characteristic of the attitude of the reluctant missionary Jonah. It was a time when nationalistic pride was on the rise, for during the reign of Jeroboam II, the northern kingdom had extended its bor-

ders to the extent they claimed during the reigns of David and Solomon. Once again, they had restored national pride and prosperity. But there was danger looming in the future, danger that would come upon them because of their departure from the law of God and any identity that they were the people of God. Their national pride would bring them down, for they trusted in themselves and not in God.

The book of Jonah is primarily about Jonah himself. God was working in preparation for the future, and thus, Jonah’s mission and story were recorded by Jonah in order to remind Israel throughout the centuries to come, that God was still on their side regardless of their rebellion. As all Jews during these grand years, Jonah was certainly patriotic to his homeland, so much so, that he rebelled against his call to go to Nineveh to a people he knew one day would fight against his own people. God had asked him to pray for

and preach to his enemy. Jonah found it very difficult to believe that God would forgive a nation that would within about sixty years wipe Israel from the face of the Palestinian map. His mission was just too emotionally difficult for him to accept. Jonah believed that God was asking too much for him to preach to a nation against which he felt so much resentment because they were Israel's enemy.

Jonah knew what would happen if he preached to those against whom he was so prejudiced. He later wrote, "*For I knew that You [God] are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness, and One who relents from doing harm*" (Jh 4:2).

And herein may be the reason for the mission of Jonah. It was a time in history when God was closing the book on the northern kingdom of Israel. This would eventually happen in 722/21 B.C. with the conquest of Samaria. Amos and Hosea were prophets sent to the northern kingdom who would immediately follow Jonah. The rebellious religious leaders in the north would run Amos back to his farm in Judah. They would slander and reject Hosea. It may have been a time in history, therefore, that God wanted Israel to know that the nation that He would use by proxy to terminate the northern kingdom of Israel, **was more God-fearing at the time than Israel**. As the story turned out, if the message that Jonah preached in Nineveh were preached in Samaria, they would have run Jonah out of town.

At the time of Jonah's commission to Nineveh, Nineveh was a city "*wherein*

are more than 120,000 persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand, and also many animals" (Jh 4:11). Since the great repentance took place in the city from the simple prophetic message that Jonah preached, then the repentance of the people of Nineveh would be a testimony against the rebellion of Israel. Nineveh repented, but Samaria did not. Jesus preached this message to His unrepentant generation of Jewish religionists:

The men of Nineveh will rise up in judgment with this generation and will condemn it, because they repented unto the preaching of Jonah. And behold, someone greater than Jonah is here (Mt 12:41).

So when Jonah eventually made his reluctant way to Nineveh, he preached a message of eight words: "***Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown***" (Jh 3:4). And the result was that ...

... the people of Nineveh believed God. And they proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them (Jh 3:5).

The Ninevites knew that there was an impending danger of falling to their enemies. They repented unto the message of Jonah, whereas Jonah's own countrymen continued to rebel against the same message of obedient repentance. The people of God who had all the privileges and blessings from the time they were delivered from Egyptian captivity, should have been ashamed of their wayward

ways. But they were not, neither in Jonah's time, nor during the ministry of Jesus. Subsequently, Samaria, the capital of Israel, was destroyed in 722/21 B.C. And in Jesus' day, Jerusalem, the capital of national Israel, was destroyed in A.D. 70. The religious and political scenarios were the same, both in the days leading up to the destruction of Samaria and the destruction of Jerusalem. When nations are patriotic in their own pride as a nation, but forget the God who led them to where they are, then doom lies in the future. No nation on earth has continued without end on earth.

B. Jonah preaches to us:

The record of Jonah's ministry is filled with lessons for us. This short four-chapter book is loaded with messages that should stir our lives into taking ownership of our mission to the lost, as well as checking our own attitudes toward the lost. We should find comfort in the fact that God is working in history in order to bring about His goals.

Jonah was the first missionary to the Gentiles, being the only Old Testament prophet of God who spoke exclusively to a foreign nation with a call to repentance. In his failures and reluctant successes, we are encouraged by God's work in his life in order to work in the affairs of this world to bring the Redeemer into the world through a restored remnant of Israel. Jonah's mission was a small piece of the historic puzzle that is quite encouraging when fitted in with God's work in history to bring His people to the cross.

1. God's presence is inescapable.

God gave to Jonah the command to go, "*but Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord*" (Jh 1:3). But that did not work. We believe in an omnipresent God. He is not a God who is either here or there, but as Paul stated to the Athenian philosophers, "*... in Him we live and move and have our being ...*" (At 17:28). Any god we would create after our own presence would be a false god of location. He would be a god from whose presence we could flee as Jonah thought he could possibly flee from the God of Palestine. It may have been that Jonah had momentarily forgotten the message of one of his ancestral kings.

Where will I go from Your Spirit? Or where will I flee from Your presence? If I ascend up into heaven, You are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there (See Ps 139:7-12).

In his flight to Tarshish in Spain, Jonah was thinking as a human. He was possibly running more away from duty than God. If he could flee duty, then possibly, he might have assumed, he could flee the command of God to go to Nineveh. He momentarily forgot that God-given duty is not linked to any location. Palestine was not the home of God, and thus, when he fled Palestine he could not flee his duty.

Jonah knew better, for he knew he could not escape the presence of the God in whom he believed. He said as much to his sailing companions who were about to perish as he: "*Take me up and cast me out into the sea. Then the sea will*

be calm for you. **For I know that for my sake this great tempest has come upon you**” (Jh 1:12).

It was not only the presence of God from which we might deceive ourselves into believing that we can flee, but His presence that is manifested by His power. The tempest of the sea was not an ordinary occurrence of nature at this particular moment in time. There was something about the ferocity of this storm at sea that even the unbelieving sailors concluded that “the gods” were at work. When Jonah finally confessed up, they too believed. *“For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the Lord because he had told them”* (Jh 1:10). Their belief was that each particular nation had its own personal god. As long as one was within the borders of his nation, then he was under the protection of his nationalistic god. If Jonah thought that he was fleeing from the presence of God by leaving Palestine, then Canaanite beliefs of Palestine may have damaged his theology.

When Jonah finally realized that he could not escape the presence and power of the God of the universe, then from the belly of the prepared fish he cried out in repentance (Jh 2). It was only in repentance that Jonah submitted to his destiny. And such is often the case in the lives of too many. It takes the depths of tragedy to awaken many of us to remorse over our struggle against God. In our mourning over our neglect of duty, we eventually relent to His destiny for us. Such was the case of the persecutor Saul when he looked into a bright light on a road to Dam-

ascus. Out of the light came the words, *“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads”* (At 26:12). Saul needed to be shocked into reality. He knew the facts about Jesus. But he needed the addition of a personal encounter with Jesus in order for him to be set on the right road of going into all the world.

It may have been the same situation with Nineveh. The Ninevites knew the facts of their impending doom. They just needed someone from a respected nation to tell them so. Jonah knew this. He knew what would result from his short message. So he fled in order not to give them the opportunity to repent. He “kicked against the goads.” So it took a storm at sea and a great fish to take him into the deep before he would cry out to God in repentance. It was then that he headed for Nineveh. After a similar experience, repentant Paul headed for Arabia and the Gentiles.

2. God-given duties are inescapable. Jonah’s mission was given in one statement: *“Go to Nineveh”* (Jh 1:2). Jonah had two options: (1) Nineveh, which was the call of duty and destiny, or (2) Tarshish, the destiny of refusal to take ownership of one’s duty. Any call to duty always has options to either neglect the call or accept one’s duty. Jonah took the option to neglect duty. But when he did, he was ridden with guilt.

Jonah initially took the second option to flee to another location where gods did not make such demands. In taking this option of life, he **went down** to Joppa to find a route of escape (Jh 1:3). After

finding a route of escape, he **went down** into the ship in order to sleep off his call to duty (Jh 1:3). And then, in the belly of the great fish, he **went down** to the bottom of the mountains in the sea (Jh 2:6). We must always keep in mind that when we neglect our duty as disciples of Jesus, it is always a road down.

Roads to victory always go up. But when we rebel against our duty to serve the Lord, the road always goes down. When we do not do that which we know we should do, there is always a sense of guilt that lies deep in our hearts. We seek to grow spiritually, but we always stumble over our guilt of not doing that which we know we should be doing. This is the problem about which John wrote the statement: *“My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and truth”* (1 Jn 3:18).

If we do not walk the commands of Jesus, then we will never be on the road that leads to spiritual victory. If we are true to our hearts, then we will do our duty as disciples of Jesus. When we claim to be disciples of Jesus, the old saying is always true: “Destiny calls.” Once we have worn ourselves out in dealing with the guilt of not doing that which we know we should, then it is time that we relinquish to our duty. And it is then that we start looking for opportunities by which we can follow our Lord into service. Paul explained, *“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, especially to those who are of the household of the faith”* (Gl 6:10). Duty-oriented disciples start looking for opportunities to serve.

It is not that doing our duty delivers

us out of sin. That is the job of the grace of the cross. But doing one’s duty does deliver us out of the den of despair and guilt. When we relinquish to service, we begin to understand what Jesus meant when He stood before His disciples with a dirty towel in His hand, and said, *“If you know these things, happy are you if you do them”* (Jn 13:17).

Now in reference to our duty that is parallel with Jonah’s, we too must figure out some way to go into all the world and preach the gospel. The goal upon which all our duty as Christians is based is to populate heaven. And to do this, we must preach the gospel to the world (See Mt 28:19,20; Mk 16:15,16). Most Christians are satisfied with sleeping in the bottom of a ship, while the ship goes down in the tempest of religiosity that is created after the desires of lukewarm Christians. Recent survey figures reveal that the Western church is going down in numbers. While “sleepers” sleep on church pews, the storm of a material life is taking down the ship into the depths of oblivion. We need sea captains today to cry out as the shipmaster did to Jonah,

What do you mean by this, O sleeper? Arise! Call on your God, if possible your God will be concerned about us so that we not perish (Jh 1:6).

Lest the ship sink, we must do as Jesus commanded the disciples, *“Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look on the fields, for they are white already for harvest”* (Jn 4:35). *“Therefore, pray to the Lord of the harvest so that He*

will send laborers into His harvest” (Mt 9:38). We must ask ourselves, “When was the last time we prayed that God send harvesters into the harvest?” It may be that as Jonah, we are reluctant to make this prayer because we feel that we might be the answer.

When all is said and done, we would conclude that there are three types of disciples. There are those **rowboat** disciples who just move along at their own leisure. There are **sailboat** disciples who are carried about by the wind of where the majority is going. And then there are **steamboat** disciples who have thrown in the coal (the Spirit), and now, are feeding off the power of the Spirit to get the job done. If one finds himself out of steam, and at the bottom of the sea, then it is time to cry out to God. If one is a rowboat or sailboat Christian, and thus content to be such, then we would suggest that he start looking out for a great fish encircling his boat.

3. God’s concern for the world cannot be ignored: By chapter 4 in the book we learn why Jonah boarded the “ship of escape.” In his ethnocentric pride concerning his own nation, he confessed, “*I knew that You are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness, and One who relents from doing harm*” (Jh 4:2).

Jonah knew that if he preached to Nineveh, then God would spare the nation upon its repentance. But this was that great nation about which both Hosea and Amos said would eventually destroy his own nation. He could not, therefore, preach salvation to his enemies lest they repent and be spared. If they were

spared, then they would be spared in order to bring God’s judgment on Israel. Jonah certainly thought that this would not be patriotic.

It was now time for an illustration that was simple, but effective in bringing Jonah to his spiritual senses. God did not explain the teleological (end purpose) for Jonah’s mission. He did not explain that upon Nineveh’s repentance, the captives of his own people would eventually end up in Assyrian captivity after 722/21 B.C. They would end up among a God-fearing people who were more righteous than Israel at the time of Jonah’s preaching. But at this time in his ministry, it was time to walk by faith in God, trusting that God had a purpose for sending him to Israel’s enemy.

And now we are beginning to understand why Jonah was sent to Nineveh. What else would we expect of a loving God who loved His people. He was preparing the spiritual bed for His people whom He would eventually send into Assyrian captivity in about sixty years. Jonah was sent to prepare the bed for a backslidden people who were less spiritual at the time than the nation into which they would eventually be led as captives. At least at the time of Jonah’s ministry, Nineveh repented and Samaria would not.

God illustrated His love for all people, without ever whispering one word to Jonah concerning the purpose of his mission. But the illustration of the gourd was enough to at least bring some spiritual sense to Jonah. In chapter 4:6-11, Jonah was selfishly concerned about the gourd that brought him comfort, a plant for

which he did nothing to plant and nurture. But God was concerned about the people and animals of Nineveh. Jonah certainly did nothing to earn the comforts of the gourd. But God had worked for centuries to create the great Assyrian nation. Jonah was concerned for a gourd which cost him no labor. God was concerned for a people who cost Him a great deal of preparation in order to eventually use them in proxy judgment against His rebellious people.

The theme of Jonah's ordeal is certainly expressed in John 3:16 with reference to God's love of all His creation:

For God so loved the world [Nineveh included], that He gave His only begotten Son, so that whoever believes in Him should not perish [by destruction in Nineveh's case], but have everlasting life (Jn 3:16).

4. *Jonah was not unlike us.* Jonah could not see the whole picture. God did not have to explain to Him that He was preparing the religious culture of the Assyrians in order to make things better for His people once they were led in captivity to Nineveh. Therefore, Jonah needed to walk by faith in the fact that God knew what He was doing. If Jonah had known what was going to transpire a little over sixty years later, then he may have been more willing to make the bed of captivity more comfortable for his descendants. But the fact that God asked him to walk by faith did not excuse his flight from his mission.

We too know some facts about what

God is doing now for the future.

Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons. But in every nation he who fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him (At 10:34,35).

The irony of this statement is that it was made by a "New Testament Jonah." The very Jewish Peter believed that the Gentiles would eventually destroy his nation. He believed what Jesus said in Matthew 24 concerning the destruction of Jerusalem. The historical scenarios of both the Jewish Jonah and Jewish Peter were the same.

The early Jews, including Peter, were reluctant to preach to the Gentiles, especially to anyone who represented the Roman government. Cornelius was a centurion of the Roman army to whom God sent Peter (At 10:1). It took a special vision, and some argument from Peter, in order to get Peter into the Gentile house of Cornelius.

Peter possibly knew that within about twenty years this centurion would have to submit to his superiors in order to take up arms to destroy national Israel and Jerusalem in A.D. 70. No wonder it took a vision to get the Jewish Peter into the Gentile house of one who would be a part of the army that would lead to the destruction of his Jewish nation. We are sure that Peter at the time started reflecting much on the book of Jonah.

But Peter went to his "Nineveh," as Jonah to his. In both cases, God was working. In the case of Jonah's Nineveh, God was seeking to make the transition

of Israel out of their homeland to a foreign nation as easy as possible. In the case of Peter's "Nineveh," God was preparing an escape for Christians who would be trapped in Jerusalem during the Roman siege of A.D. 70. According to historical records, there is no evidence that any Christian died in that siege, for Titus, Rome's commander in the siege, gave everyone in the city an opportunity to surrender. And many did. Would it not have been an overwhelming emotional outpouring of brotherhood when Titus stopped the siege for a period of time in order to allow many Jewish Christians in Jerusalem to hand themselves over to the Roman

army. Most assuredly, some of the Jewish Christians walked out of Jerusalem into the loving arms of some of the spiritual descendants of Cornelius who were there as Christian Roman soldiers waiting for them. We must never think that God does not know what He is doing in taking care of His people.

*For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, **will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord** (Rm 8:38,39).*

Chapter 2

AMOS

The meaning of the name Amos defines the ministry of every preacher. The name means "burden bearer." Preachers have the burden to keep the word of God before the people, regardless of whether it is received or rejected (See 2 Tm 4:1-5).

Amos was a farm boy from Judah. He was a herdsman of sheep and goats in the small mountain village of Tekoa south of Jerusalem (Am 7:14). Because of his farming culture, we can understand why God called him to preach judgment to the cities of the northern kingdom of Israel. Since the cities often lead the culture of a nation, the task of preaching to the cities is the task of saving the nation. For this reason, God used a farmer preacher in order to get the city people

back on track with the word of God.

As a herdsman, it is interesting to note how God called Amos. "*And the Lord **took me** as I followed the flock and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy [preach] to My people Israel'*" (Am 7:15). Though we do not understand what "took me" implies, we can assume that the moral degradation of the city society of the northern kingdom of Israel was enough to move the farmer preacher into action. His could have been the same emotion that cut through the heart of Paul when Paul first stepped foot in Corinth. "*Paul was **compelled in the spirit and testified ...***" (At 18:5).

Amos was "taken" from his flocks around 760 B.C. and continued his ministry to 750 B.C. He began preaching in

Bethel of the northern kingdom. But because of the straightforward nature of his message and preaching—as is the case with most farmer preachers—this did not last long. He was driven from the cities of the northern kingdom back to his homeland of Judah. Those who rejected his message, said to him,

Go, you seer. Flee away into the land of Judah and there eat bread and prophesy there. But do not prophesy again anymore at Bethel, for it is a sanctuary of the king and a royal residence (Am 7:12,13).

So off to the farm in Judah Amos fled. We assume that it was in Judah where he wrote the words of the book that is part of the Scriptures we now study.

A. Historical/social background:

There was peace among nations at the time of Amos' ministry to the northern kingdom of Israel. Judah and Israel were at peace with one another. Under the reign of Jeroboam II (786-746 B.C.), the northern kingdom of Israel had secured its borders to as far north as Damascus. Under the kingship of Tiglath-pileser III, the Assyrian Kingdom was building up in the east. This would be the force of the east that would eventually be God's proxy to bring judgment upon Israel. But at the time of Amos' preaching, the northern kingdom, under the forty-year reign of Jeroboam II, was prospering. It was prospering to the point of establishing an economy that was close to

what Israel experienced during the reigns of David and Solomon.

Unfortunately, the prosperity of the society created a morally digressed social environment that necessitated God's call of Amos. Wealth had moved from the rural to the urban, and subsequently, the cities of the north were overpopulated with the rich. The rich in the cities "*sold the righteous for silver and the poor for a pair of shoes*" (Am 2:6). "*They [the rich] pant after the dust of the earth on the head of the poor and pervert the way of the meek*" (Am 2:7). Amos' irony that they "pant after the dust on the head of the poor," reveals the extreme to which the rich exploited the poor for their own prosperity. Their extreme greed manifested their social injustice.

Morally, "*a man and his father will go in to the same girl to profane My holy name*" (Am 2:7). God's accusation against the society of the rich and oppressive and immoral was that ...

... they lie down by every altar on clothes taken in pledge. And they drink the wine of the condemned in the house of their god (Am 2:8).

The distorted economics of the society led to the corruption of the society. The control of the future of the nation rested in the hands of the rich. The rich were so powerful in controlling the economy of the nation that they economically exploited the poor. This digressed to the point that justice was twisted for the sake of the rich. Amos cried out, "*You [rich] who turn justice to wormwood,*

and cast down righteousness to the earth ...” (Am 5:7). The minority rich, therefore, would face their judgment.

Therefore, because you trample on the poor and you take from him tribute of grain, and have built mansions of hewn stone, you will not dwell in them. You have planted pleasant vineyards, but you will not drink wine from them (Am 5:11).

In some places, the early church came into such a socioeconomic moral condition in the first century. James and Amos had audiences with similar dysfunctions. James condemned the rich Sadduceans among the early Christians with the words,

But you [rich] have despised the poor. Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into courts? Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called? (Js 2:6,7; see Js 2:1-7).

When money becomes the standard by which a society determines the function of relationships, then all sorts of corruption destroys the society. The level of corruption of any society determines the level of focus that a society places on money. And in the case of the society with which Amos was dealing, bribes became the standard upon which judgments were made. Listen to what Amos said was happening in the society:

For I know your many transgressions and your mighty sins. They afflict the just. They take a bribe, and they turn

aside the poor in the gate (Am 5:12).

Because the economic culture of the people was based on idol worship, wherein the worshipers created a religion after their own greed, there resulted all sorts of economic injustices that prevailed throughout society. They became a society that was totally influenced by the Baal worship of the Canaanites, which idolatry centered around gold and greed.

We must not misunderstand the idol worship of Baal as simply a religious apostasy. Idol worship was directly connected to riches. In the absence of banks, idols were made from gold and silver. An owner’s unique formation of his idol was known in the community, and thus, no one could steal a gold or silver idol simply because of the unique form of the idol identified its owner. So when the Old Testament speaks of idol worship, it was the worship of their riches, not simply some religious dogma that they had written and proclaimed. Paul explained this definition of idolatry in Colossians 3:5: “... *put to death your members that are on the earth ... covetousness, which is idolatry.*” Idolatry in Israel was the coveting of the riches. This was manifested in their worship (covetousness) of their gold and silver idols.

In their wanton behavior and luxurious living, Amos’ audience felt no remorse about the plight of the poor which the rich had created because of their greedy business dealings. The thinking of the rich became so corrupt that they had no empathy for the poor of the city, or those on the farms from where the rich drew their

wealth. The farmers and herdsmen simply became the indentured servants of the city rich who had the power to determine the prices of all their labors and commodities. The rich of the cities simply sought ways by which they could continue their exploitation of the poor farmers and herdsmen who produced all the commodities for what God originally intended should be a rural nation of farmers and herdsmen.

Israel became an urban society that used the poor rural farmers and herdsmen for the sake of their own materialistic gratification. When a society digresses to the point where there is no consideration for those who produce the sustenance of the society, then the society becomes dysfunctional. Exploitation to feed greed becomes the culture of the economy. And in the case of the northern kingdom of Israel during the time of Jeroboam II, God judged that it was time to take this society out of existence because it no longer represented God among the nations. It was no longer a benevolent society that represented a benevolent God.

B. Amos preaches to us:

The message of Amos to Israel is relevant today. As the world moves into a greater separation between the rich and poor, no greater message could reveal what God thinks about societies that favor the rich over the poor, to the point that the poor are exploited for the sake of the rich. Amos' message is universal. It does not deal with one nation alone, for what

was happening in Israel is often a national problem with many nations throughout the world today. In order to preach this message of God to the world, God instructed Amos to deal with all the nations, not just Israel. Though Israel majored in the sins that Amos pointed out, she was not alone in her socioeconomic inequities.

1. God sees sin wherever it is: He thus brought judgment on the nations around Israel for their sins against humanity. Amos first asked a question that we can answer: *"If a calamity occurs in a city has not the Lord done it?"* (Am 3:6). With this question, Amos leads us into concluding that the calamities that had befallen the nations were the work of God. God will judge Moab to the east and Judah to the south (Am 2:1-5). The Amorites would also suffer the judgment of God (Am 2:9). Judgment was pronounced upon Edom (Am 1:11,12). Though these nations eventually suffered the judgment of God, the lesson to us is that at the end of time judgment will come on this generation of nations, for God *"has appointed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained"* (At 17:31). *"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that everyone may receive the things done in the body ..."* (2 Co 5:10; see Jn 5:28,29).

2. God does not accept man-made worship: There seems to be a striking similarity between what God condemned through Amos concerning worship and much of what the religious world today masquerades as worship. The judgment

of God in **Amos 5:21-23** is direct and meaningful.

a. Assemblies for self: *“I hate, I despise your feast days. And I will not take delight in your solemn assemblies”* (Am 5:21). How could God hate and despise feasts and assemblies that He had commanded? The answer is that the people had mingled what God had commanded them to do with the pagan Canaanite practices that surrounded them. Their gatherings had become depraved because their feasts and assemblies were directed toward the satisfaction of themselves, and not an occasion to honor God. The deception of such self-gratifying assemblies was in the fact that the people felt good, but in reality, there was no focus on the God of heaven. Narcissistic assemblies are not for worship of God. If one comes away from an assembly for worship and says that he did not get anything out of the assembly, then he is narcissistic in his worship. His worship is vain. Worship is not about what we get, but what we give. It is not about entertaining our interests. It is about pouring our hearts out to God.

b. Legal offerings without remorse: *“Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them. Neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts”* (Am 5:22). In the Sinai law, they were commanded by God to make all these offerings (See Lv 2–7). They were commanded to make these offerings for sin. But when one persists in a walk that is contrary to the word of God, he is arro-

gant and self-condemned (See Ti 3:9-11). Any offerings in such a walk are useless. Keeping the legalities of what is commanded profits nothing if one’s heart is far removed from the command. Paul spoke of similar people when he wrote,

*Let no man disqualify you of your reward by delighting in **false humility** and the worship of angels, intruding into those things that he has not seen, **vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind*** (Cl 2:18).

Israel was guilty of a syncretism, that is, blending Canaanite Baal religion with those things they were commanded to do in the Sinai law. Paul explained:

*These things have indeed a show of wisdom in **self-made religion** and self-abasement and neglect of the body, but not in any value in restraining the indulgence of the flesh* (Cl 2:23).

Doing the legal actions of what God commands, while at the same time thinking about Baal, leads one to create a “self-made religion.” We only deceive ourselves into believing that God would accept our offerings when we are thinking about something that is foreign to the offer He desires. There is no acceptance by God of any legal obedience to religious rites without the heart of the worshiper. But also, legal religious rites are not made right before God by the good hearts of those who walk contrary to the word of God.

c. Songs that become only noise: *“Take away from Me the noise of your*

songs, for I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments” (Am 5:23). They had created a concert of instrumental noise that appealed to them, but was empty of their heart. They assumed that if their songs would appeal to them, then certainly they appealed to God. But in reality, what appealed to their ears was only obnoxious noise to God.

Apostasy is so easy in the area of music because of the appeal of music to the human ear. We feel good about the music, and thus, simply because Bible words about Jesus and God are placed here and there in the lyrics of the music, we assume that the music is according to the word of God. But Paul instructed, **“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs ...”** (Cl 3:16).

If one has forgotten the word of Christ, then the teaching of the song becomes vain because we are not teaching the word of Christ in the song. And since Israel was in a state where the people had forgotten the word of God (Hs 4:6), then they could not determine if their songs were directed to God or Baal. The only way to determine if one is singing according to the word of God is to open the word of God and study.

It is so easy to develop assemblies around the noise of songs that are designed to appeal to the ears of the audience, but are not for the praise of God. When assemblies become narcissistic, then the lyrics of the songs are only an irritating and obnoxious noise to God.

What could be said of those in the

northern kingdom of Israel at the end of their existence as a nation, was the same that Jesus said of the religious leadership of Israel during His ministry and the end of national Israel:

Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, “This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. In vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrine the commandments of men.” For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the traditions of men... (Mk 7:6-8)

d. God does not honor indifference: “Woe to those who are at ease in Zion” (6:1). The text of 6:1-6 should awaken every idle Christian to the fact that when things seem to be economically fine for ourselves, we should be cautioned about lukewarmness settling into our Christianity. We remember the Christians in Laodicea who were in the same socio-economic situation. The result of the social environment in which they lived was devastating to their faith. Jesus pronounced judgment upon them:

I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. ... because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of My mouth (Rv 3:15,16).

Prosperity often leads to indifference and lukewarmness in reference to our faith. Indifference to the needs of others often curses those who live within the cocoon of their own wealth. When such happens within a society, God says

that the society has lost its heart. When such happens within the fellowship of the disciples of Christ, they may have a name that they live, but they are dead (Rv 3:1). Amos pronounced that these “*will go captive with the first who go captive. And those who recline at banquets will be removed*” (Am 6:7).

And what message would Amos have for the rich and famous who have no concern for the poor?

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on Mount Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, “Bring now, that we may drink.” The Lord God has sworn by His holiness, “Behold, the day will come on you when He will take you away with hooks and your posterity with hooks” (Am 4:1,2).

Israel became economically strong. In the movement of wealth in the economy, some became economically rich because of their exploitation of the poor, specifically the poor farmers and herdsmen who produced the sustenance for the nation. In the comforts of life, Israel’s spiritual house was morally and spiritually on fire, but they had no fire extinguisher. They had heart disease without life insurance. So of the rich, Amos wrote,

And I will smite the winter house with the summer house. And the houses of ivory will perish, and the great houses will have an end” (Am 3:15).

God thus warned,

Therefore, thus I will do to you, O Israel. And because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel (Am 4:12).

3. God warns before punishment:

God is a just God. He does not punish without warning those He would punish. And Israel knew what their punishment would be if they forsook the Creator of their nation. God warned them of their apostasy before they entered Palestine after the wilderness wanderings (See Dt 31:14-22). He reminded them, “*You only have I known of all the families of the earth. Therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities*” (Am 3:2). And through the prophets, the warning came. “*Surely the Lord God will do nothing without first revealing His plans to His servants the prophets*” (Am 3:7).

And so it is with the world today.

And the times of this ignorance God has overlooked, but now He commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day in which He will judge the world ... (At 17:30,31).

There is an end coming. Almost all religious faiths of the world have a concept of the “end of the world,” but not in reference to final judgment. The origin of the concept of an end may be far removed from the many statements concerning the end that are described in the New Testament. Nevertheless, there is still the belief among religious people throughout the world that this world will in some way come to an end.

It is in the context of God’s an-

nounced end of Israel that the statement was made, “*Can two walk together, except they have agreed?*” (Am 3:3). The context of this statement was that Israel was not walking spiritually in agreement with God. They strayed to their own path. God’s judgment was: “*Yet you have not returned to Me*” (Am 4:6,8,9,10,11). They had turned aside to walk with other gods. And because they were not walking in the commandments of God, their walk would lead to their end. So Amos cried out, “*Prepare to meet your God, O Israel*” (Am 4:12). No man can expect to walk with God into eternity if he is not walking with God on earth (See 1 Jn 1:7).

Amos pronounced a funeral dirge over the nation in chapter 5:1,2. In 722/21 B.C. the northern ten tribes of Israel would be taken into Assyrian captivity. As an independent nation, they would cease to exist. It would be almost two hundred years in 536 B.C. before a remnant of the northern kingdom would again set foot in the land of Palestine, but not as an independent nation. The good news was that in the years of captivity, idolatry would be totally eradicated from the religious culture of Israel.

4. God gives hope in times of judgment and calamity: One of the most significant prophecies of the Old Testament is found in Amos 9:11:

In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that has fallen and close up its breaches. And I will raise up its ruins and I will build it as in the days of old.

This prophecy is embedded in the hope that is given to the people who were destined for captivity. It is addressed to the northern kingdom, which ten tribes separated themselves from the temple of Jerusalem. But reference here was made to the “tabernacle of David,” though in the statement reference could also be to the temple that also represented the presence of God in Israel. However, we must keep in mind that the temple did not exist during the days of David. David had the desire to build the temple, but Solomon fulfilled his dream.

Until the temple was built by Solomon, the tabernacle was the tent that was moved throughout the tribal territories of Israel for four hundred years before the building of the temple. The tabernacle represented the presence of God among the people during the wilderness wanderings. It carried on with the same meaning during the time of its existence as it was annually moved throughout the tribal areas of Palestine. However, Solomon replaced the mobile tabernacle with the stationary temple. But the significance of the tabernacle and temple was the representation of God among **all the twelve tribes of Israel**. Amos’ prophecy of raising up the tent of the tabernacle looked past the time of the temple. It looked back to a time when all twelve tribes of Israel were equally united as one nation of people under God.

Because reference is made to the tabernacle, and not to the temple, we would not assume that there was a fulfillment of the prophecy in the rebuilding of

the temple by Zerubbabel after the Babylonian captivity. The temple was certainly rebuilt, but in the prophecy of Amos God is pointing the audience of Amos far beyond Solomon's temple. In this prophecy, God takes the minds of Israel far into the future, about 750 years from the time the prophecy was made by Amos.

About 750 years after Amos, and when James stood up among all those who were gathered in Jerusalem, and also about fifteen years after the beginning of the church in A.D. 30, the Holy Spirit reminded the people of God of the fulfillment of Amos 9:11. James proclaimed to the multitude of disciples,

And with the words of the Prophets agree, as it is written, "After this I will return and will build again the tabernacle of David that is fallen down. And I will build again the ruins of it. And I will set it up, so that the rest of mankind

may seek after the Lord..." (See At 15:15-18).

The tabernacle (tent) of God's people at the time of Amos' prophecy was eventually blown down by the winds of the sin of Israel. It was blown to the ground in captivity. But when Peter stood up on the day of Pentecost in A.D. 30, he announced the gospel message for the first time in history. On that day about 3,000 people were baptized into the body of Christ, and the presence of God among the people (the tabernacle) began to rise and spread into all the world (At 2:41). And indeed, the announcement of James was correct. The tabernacle of David (the church of the Son of David) had been raised up again from Israel's remnant. It is now the witness unto all the world that God dwells on earth among His people (Mt 5:16).

Chapter 3

HOSEA

Little is known of Hosea's early years. He was a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel during times of great international turmoil. He was born in the north and his ministry began during the reign of Jeroboam II of the northern kingdom (770-749 B.C.). It extended into the reign of Hezekiah of the southern kingdom of Israel (728-697 B.C.). His ministry could have extended throughout the latter part of the reign of Jeroboam II, thus making his ministry one of the longest of

the prophets. This made Hosea contemporary with both Isaiah and Micah who prophesied to the southern kingdom.

Hosea's name means "salvation," the same meaning as the names Joshua and Jesus. Since the ministry of Hosea extended through the fall of the northern kingdom, we assume that his name is also prophetic of the salvation of the remnant that would come almost two hundred years later with the return of the first Jewish captives in 536 B.C.

Hosea is considered the “apostle John” to the northern kingdom which was destined for captivity. In order that he understand how God felt that His love was betrayed when the people went after Baal, God commanded Hosea to marry Gomer. After the marriage, Gomer forsook Hosea and gave herself over to prostitution. Regardless of her unfaithfulness, Hosea, upon God’s command, was willing to take her back as his wife in order to rebuild his marriage. Though Gomer had broken his heart, Hosea, as God, was willing to take again his bride because of his devotion to her (See Ez 23). Likewise, the remnant of Israel would be taken from captivity by God in order to be His bride once again.

Hosea fathered three children with Gomer (Hs 1:3-9). The first was named Jezreel, meaning “vengeance.” The name was prophetic in that **God would bring judgment upon the house of the wicked King Jehu**. The second child was named Lo-ruhamah, meaning, “no pity.” This name was also prophetic in that **God would have no mercy on the existing Israelites who had forsaken Him for idol gods they had created after their own worldly desires**. The third child was named Lo-ammi, meaning “not my people.” This name was prophetic in that **Israel had backslidden so far away from God that He could not claim them as His people**. Because the northern kingdom (called “Ephraim” after the largest tribe) played the harlot, God cast her away into Assyrian captivity. The key word of this book, therefore, is judgment. Ephraim was doomed to termination. It would be as Amos proph-

esied, “*The virgin of Israel has fallen. She will rise no more*” (Am 5:2). It would be a tragic end to a beautiful story of a nation that had a special covenant relationship with the Creator of the universe. Israel would cease to exist as an independent theocratic nation of God in Palestine.

Those who assume that the present state of Israel in Palestine is a God-ordained state, need to take another look at the prophecy of Amos 5:2. An independent state of Israel does exist in Palestine, but it is not a nation state with which God has a special covenant relationship. The covenanted nation of Israel no longer exists. The possession of Palestine by the theocratic nation of Israel ended with the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities. This is what Amos was prophesying. The remnant of Israel that returned after the Babylonian captivity remained under the Sinai covenant and law until the coming of the Messiah. But the covenant ended in Christ as prophesied by Jeremiah (See Jr 31:31-33; Hb 8:7-13; 9:15). And when the covenant ended, then the nation ceased to exist as a special people in the eyes of God.

A. Historical/social background:

Because of the length of Hosea’s ministry, he lived through the final years of the fall of the northern ten tribes of Israel, and the beginning of the fall of the southern two tribes. There was chaos in the leadership among the kings of the north prior to their fall. In the few years before he began to preach the end of Ephraim,

Jehu had killed King Joram (2 Kg 9:21-28). Jehu also slaughtered the heirs of the wicked Jezebel and Ahab (2 Kg 9:30 – 10:28). Then came Jehoahaz (2 Kg 13:1-9) and Jehoash (2 Kg 13:1). King Jeroboam II finally brought some stability during his forty-one-year reign (2 Kg 14:23-29). It was sometime during the reign of Jeroboam that Hosea and Amos began together to preach the end of Israel. The people eventually ran the former preacher, Amos, back to Judah, but the local preacher, Hosea, continued to be God's representative in the north until and after the end of the northern kingdom.

It was after the death of Jeroboam II that the northern kingdom fell into a state of chaos among its leaders. After Jeroboam, Zechariah reigned only six months before he was murdered by Shallum (2 Kg 15:8-12). Shallum reigned only one month before Menahem deposed him (2 Kg 15:13-16). Menahem fortunately died a natural death, but only after ten years on the throne (2 Kg 15:17-22). However, during his reign, the Assyrian King Tiglathpileser invaded Israel. After Menahem came Pekahiah who reigned only two years before he was murdered by Pekah (2 Kg 15:23-25). Pekah recruited help from the Egyptians to defend Israel against the Assyrians. He then made an alliance with Rezin of Syria in order to overthrow Ahaz of the southern kingdom, Judah. But Pekah was eventually murdered by King Hosea, who in turn paid tribute to the Assyrians in order that he might continue his reign.

Shalmaneser V, the king of Assyria,

eventually arrested King Hosea, which began the fall of the northern kingdom. The successor to King Shalmaneser, Sargon, conquered the capital of the northern kingdom in 722/21 B.C., Samaria, and thus ended the existence of the ten tribes as an independent nation of God in the land of Palestine. The nation was gone forever as an independent nation, having given up their right to exist as a God-covenanted nation because they had forsaken the word of God. Nevertheless, God promised that only a remnant of the southern two tribes, with a remnant of the ten tribes of the north, would eventually be restored to Palestine. The remnant would return to the land in order to reestablish the identity of Israel. However, they would return to a land that no longer belonged to them. It would belong to the Medo-Persian Empire.

Hosea was a preacher for God during these years of international turmoil and moral decline. It was an era of history in which it was not easy to be a spokesman for God. It was a time of social chaos and religious confusion, simply because the Israelites had long ignored the word of God. In doing so, they as a whole ceased being the moral people of God. It was only when God rescued a remnant of Israel out of captivity that they were able to bring the Messiah into the world in fulfillment of the promises that were made to the fathers of Israel.

1. *Social chaos:* Instead of trusting in God for help, as they promised when they accepted the Sinai covenant at the beginning, Israel began to trust in their

own strength and the strength of other nations. They thus forsook loyalty to God. They were guilty of Divine treason. They did not trust that God would deliver them from all their enemies.

Justice was perverted because bribery became the accepted means by which favors could be extracted from officials (Am 5:12). The prophet Micah explained the social conditions of the nation: "*Her heads judge for a bribe and her priests teach for hire. And her prophets divine for money*" (Mc 3:11). Micah added, "... *the prince and the judge ask for a bribe. And the great one utters his mischievous desire*" (Mc 7:3). They had certainly forgotten the law of the covenant that they accepted at Mount Sinai, for one of the laws of the covenant was: "*And you will take no bribe, for the bribe blinds the wise and perverts the words of the righteous*" (Ex 23:8).

When the culture of government falls into the evil of bribery, it has judged itself dysfunctional as a government of justice for the people. No fair judgment can be given in a culture of bribery. A culture of bribery always marginalizes the poor, for the poor do not have the means by which to bribe officials in their favor. A superficial democracy with a culture of bribery can exist only insofar as those in power can deceive the poor majority that the officials are for them. In a culture of bribery, the officials of the government have themselves at heart, and thus, use the people as the occasion to satisfy their lust for power and greed for gain. When a society curses itself with a culture of bribery, it has fallen out of favor with God.

Bribery is paying someone in order to have a favor done for the one who gives the bribe. Corruption is paying someone in view of the fact that the favor has been done. These two moral flaws make a society morally dysfunctional. Both practices handicapped individuals within a society, particularly the poor. Corruption is bribery that is masked in the guise of the misappropriation of public funds for selfish use. The greater the corruption of a nation, the more the government of the nation is out of favor with God, for it is a nation whose government is controlled by the love of money. It is a nation whose government has forgotten its responsibility to make sure that the people as a society take care of the poor. And any government that does not lead the nation as a whole to take care of the poor, is an unrighteous government in the eyes of God.

2. Religious corruption: Since Hosea began his prophetic ministry in times of national prosperity, everything in the function of the society was based on the exchange of money. Both civic officials and religious leaders did their work on the basis of extracting money from someone. They had all run greedily after the example of Balaam who sold his prophetic gift for money (2 Pt 2:15; Jd 11). When money becomes the moral standard by which a society functions, then the society becomes corrupt. Volunteerism and charity are very low in those societies where money is the moral standard by which the individuals of a society relate with one another.

Of the priests, God judged, "*And as*

gangs of raiders wait for a man, so the company of priests murder in the way by consent, for they commit lewdness” (Hs 6:9). The religious culture of the Canaanites was well entrenched in the behavior of Israel by the time of Hosea’s ministry. The sensual cult worship of the Canaanites became the religion of the people. The fertility gods of Baal worship were initially instituted in the northern kingdom by Jeroboam I when the ten tribes separated from the south after the death of Solomon. Since the deities of the Canaanites were symbolized by the bull, Jeroboam I set up a bull altar in Dan and another in Bethel (1 Kg 12:28,29). Canaanite religion included occult rites of drunken parties, prostitution and wanton behavior by those who participated in all sorts of sexual sin. Even a century after the ministry of Hosea, prostitution and sodomy became associated with the temple in Jerusalem during the days of Hezekiah (2 Kg 23:7).

Hosea’s indictment of Israel was the description of a totally depraved social and religious culture.

You have plowed wickedness. You have reaped iniquity. You have eaten the fruit of lies, because you trust in your way, in the multitude of your mighty men (Hs 10:13).

B. Hosea preaches to us:

All the social and moral degradation that existed during the days of Hosea was because the people were determined to live contrary to all that God would have

them be. “*And My people are bent on backsliding from Me*” (Hs 11:7). When that which is considered to be right by a society, is actually contrary to the word of God, then the society has judged itself evil in the sight of God.

1. Destroyed for lack of knowledge of the word of God: All the social and religious calamity of Ephraim was the result of one thing.

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge [of My law], I will also reject you so that you will be no priest to Me. Seeing you have forgotten the law of your God, I will also forget your children (Hs 4:6).

Their lack of knowledge of God through His word had gone to the extreme of rejection. They considered the message of Hosea and the other prophets a strange teaching. “*I have written to him the great things of My law, but they were counted as a foreign thing*” (Hs 8:12). It was evident that the priests among the people had certainly failed in their duty to teach the people the law of God (Lv 10:11). When those whom we presume should know their Bibles, stand before the people, but know nothing of the Bible, then we allow ourselves to be led astray into apostasy. And such we see prevalent throughout the religious world today. Pastors and priests around the world know little of the Bible. They are presumptuous to stand before the people and profess to be leaders of the people for God.

They are as blind guides, leading the blind into destruction. It is as Jesus said: *“They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into the ditch”* (Mt 15:14).

The religious environment of Christendom today is not unlike the religious environment of Hosea’s day when the people were destroyed for lack of knowledge. It was not that they became unbelievers. On the contrary, they remained religious. In the absence of a knowledge of the law of God, however, they simply created a religion after their own desires that was void of the word of God. For example, when they became covetous of the things of the world, then they created a religion that soothed their guilt about being greedy. They thus felt guiltless when they exploited the poor for the sake of their own lusts. This is idolatry. Again, it is as Paul wrote that we put to death our *“members that are on the earth ... covetousness, which is idolatry”* (Cl 3:5).

2. Legal worship is useless. Hosea reveals what most legalists can never understand. Since the legalist feels that He is justified before God through his legal obedience to the laws of God, then he cannot understand why God would under any circumstances reject his obedience to law.

Legal obedience without a heart for God is vain. Legal obedience with a lifestyle of mercy to others, is also vain. God said, *“For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings”* (Hs 6:6). If one is not merciful to others, then he is not desired by God. If one does not have a

knowledge of God’s word, then he is not desired by God. Mercy refers to our relationship with our neighbor, and a knowledge of God through His word refers to our relationship with God. Without either, legal obedience to commanded ordinances of worship are in vain. Having a knowledge of God through His word means that one is listening to God and learning His will.

Those who would be sought by God are those who are diligently seeking direction from Him through a study of His word. One cannot find God if he is not searching for Him through His word. If one does not obsess after God speaking to him through His word on earth, then certainly he will not be one of those who will listen to God throughout eternity in heaven. Bible study is mental preparation to be able to sit in the eternal Bible class of God in heaven. If one will not study his Bible on earth, then certainly he should not expect to be enrolled in the heavenly Bible class. When the Holy Spirit used the word “noble minded” when describing the character of the Bereans in their search of the Scriptures, He was defining the type of person God seeks to have in eternity (See At 17:11).

3. The sin of unfaithfulness: The first three chapters of Hosea detail Hosea’s marriage to Gomer and her subsequent unfaithfulness. Gomer’s sin was unfaithfulness, and thus this was the true life story that Hosea needed to feel in reference to Israel’s unfaithfulness to God.

When one quits loving God, he quits obeying God. When God made the Sinai covenant with Israel, His first command

was the following: *“And you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might”* (Dt 6:5). Jesus said to His disciples, *“If you love Me you will keep My commandments”* (Jn 14:15). Israel had fallen out of love with God. Unfaithfulness is simply defined as one falling out of love with God. John explained, ***“For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments”*** (1 Jn 5:3).

Israel had fallen so far out of love with God that they forgot His commandments (Hs 4:6). In fact, His commandments had become a strange thing to them. John was very specific in reference to the connection between loving God and obedience to His commandments. *“He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar. And the truth is not in him”* (1 Jn 2:4). The deduction from this statement would be that if one does not know the commandments of God, and yet professes to love God, then he is a liar. If one says he knows God without a knowledge of the commandments of God, then he is a liar. When Israel refused to listen to the word of God, they created a god after their own imagination who would listen to them. And since they lived among the Canaanite gods of Baal, they developed a corrupted concept of a god to whom they could dictate their desires to live immoral lives.

Christianity is defined by those who know the word of God, and out of love, seek to obey it to the best of their ability. Religiosity is simply carried on as one expresses emotional feelings in ignorance of

the Bible. Thus one can be religious in total ignorance of the word of God, but he cannot be Christian. A good Buddhist monk can be very dedicated and religious without any knowledge of the Bible. But he is simply religious, not Christian. There is thus no true faithfulness to God when one is ignorant of the word of God. No matter how much one may cry out “Lord, Lord,” if there is no knowledge of and obedience to the word of God, then all such cries are in vain in reference to establishing a relationship with God (See Mt 7:21-23). Paul still said that Jesus is coming to take *“vengeance on those who do not know God ...”* (See 2 Th 1:7-9).

4. *The way of repentance and salvation:* God instructed Hosea to take Gomer back after she had given herself over to harlotry. And Hosea did. The lesson God wanted to teach Hosea is that He is a loving and merciful God who will restore His relationship with Israel even though He had been betrayed. He would take back an unfaithful nation who gave Him up for the gods of the Canaanites. God wanted Hosea to walk in His shoes in reference to betrayal and restoration.

It was certain that the apostate Israelites would go into Assyrian captivity. They had manifested their unfaithfulness by committing spiritual adultery with idolatrous gods. Those immediate idolaters who were actually taken into the Assyrian captivity in 722/21 B.C. would never again see the land of milk and honey. They would die in captivity. But a remnant of their great, great grandchildren would be allowed to return to the land in 536 B.C. God would accept them back into His fold

because they repented in their captivity.

Idolatry separated Israel from God, and it was idolatry that the Jews in captivity committed themselves never to be guilty of again. A father once told his son the story of how a sheep jumped through the hole in a fence and lost his way. The sheep was later found and brought back into the fold. The son commented, "Did the farmer patch up the hole in the fence?" Israel patched up the hole in their spiritual fence, and to this day idolatry has never been a problem with the faith of Israel.

We certainly serve a God who is beyond the limitations of our ability to forgive. When the Bible says of God, "*Their sins and their iniquities I will remember no more*" (Hb 8:12), we can trust that God chooses not to remember the unfaithfulness of those who once turned their backs on Him, but have repented. The apostle of love of the New Testament said of God,

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 Jn 1:9).

It is this God that Israel forsook for gods they created after their own material and sensual desires to follow wealth and wanton behavior. But upon repentance, it is this God who will accept anyone back into the fold of His love. This God is as Paul wrote:

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out (Rm 11:33).

Paul would conclude, "*I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities ... will be able to separate us from the love of God ...*" (Rm 8:38,39).

Chapter 4

JOEL

We move now to the southern kingdom of Israel. Joel was a prophet of Judah sometime before either Jonah, Amos or Hosea, who were prophets to the northern kingdom. Some have believed that Joel's ministry of the word of God was somewhere between 830 to 814 B.C. But in view of the message of Joel 2:28-32, and other prophetic statements of the book, a probable date would be sometime in the seventh century B.C., possibly after the fall of the northern kingdom, but

before the fall of Jerusalem.

The name Joel means "the Lord is God," and thus, the theme of the book corresponds to the Lord's working in the history of His people in order to preserve a remnant for the future fulfillment of prophecy. Joel speaks of the great day of the Lord that was to come. And since Judah as a whole had moved into a state of apostasy that would ultimately lead to its doom, the "day of the Lord" meant judgment. It indicated a time when the people

had to pay for their rejection of the Creator of their nation.

A. Historical/social background:

The environmental circumstances that laid the foundation for the preaching of Joel was a devastating locust plague that had just occurred throughout the land. This worst ever locust plague, combined with a severe drought, prepared the minds of the people to be receptive to the word of God. The “punishment” of hard times presented the right opportunity for God to send His prophet to an otherwise stiff-necked people who were bent on turning away from Him and His word.

As other prophets, Joel sought to turn Judah from their digression into sin that would eventually result in the termination of the nation. Though the final end of Judah would not come until a few years after his ministry, we see in the message of Joel that God was very patient with His people in preserving them as long as possible as an independent theocratic nation in their own land. They were warned of their first captivity in 601 B.C., and then again with a second captivity in 597 B.C. Nevertheless, the people were fast moving away from God, though the southern kingdom prophets as Isaiah, Micah and Obadiah, would delay the termination of the nation by their ministry of preaching.

The people were following the moral economic culture of religious compromise for material gain. This socioeconomic culture was introduced by Solomon who committed spiritual adultery with foreign gods for the sake of economic gain. Such

a compromise almost always leads to the moral ruin of a nation. It was for this reason that Paul wrote to the Christians in Colosse, “*Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth*” (Cl 3:2). Invariably, when this priority of focus is reversed, people move away from God. And such did all the tribes of Israel in her final years. Because Israel was situated in the main trade route between Europe and Africa, they just could not resist the temptation to enrich themselves as traders of the north and south passed through Palestine on their journeys.

Through Joel, God did not want the people to think that the seemingly natural disasters of the locust plague and drought were the normal cycle of nature. The natural disasters were God-generated in order to stimulate a desire to return to His directions. They were calamities to prepare the people to hear the judgments of God (Jl 1 – 2:11). And since they were signs from God, God, through Joel, was issuing a call for repentance (Jl 2:12-17). But what is characteristic with God’s call for repentance is also a warning of impending doom if they did not repent. But with the coming judgment was a promise of a new world order in reference to God’s relationship with man (Jl 2:18 – 32).

What is unique about the message of Joel is that about twenty-seven of the seventy-three verses of the book are parallel in thought to other prophets. It is as if Joel wanted to remind the people what God had said through the other prophets. He wanted his audience to know that all the prophets were in harmony concerning the end of Judah and the theocratic

existence of Israel in Palestine. He wanted them to understand completely the reason why they were being sent into captivity.

B. Joel preaches to us:

The message of Joel was directed specifically to those who were contemporary with him, and thus living through the calamity of the locust plague and drought. By the time he reaches the end of the book, he preaches one of the most significant messages in the Bible in reference to a paradigm change to the Messianic age of the gospel.

1. God sent natural calamity to encourage repentance. The statement of Joel 1:2 is significant in the sense that what to many in Judah believed was just a bad locust plague, was actually the direct working hand of God.

Hear this you old men, and give ear all you inhabitants of the land. Has this [locust plague] been in your days, or even in the days of your fathers?

It was as if the people were passing the plague off as the worst they had ever experienced, but not the intervention of God in nature. This is a significant point in reference to both natural and international events surrounding Israel in Palestine. Those natural calamities or international events among the nations were considered only the normal occurrence of historical events by the people who were living through them. The people were living

normal lives, having no awareness that such events were the work of God in order to direct them on the right path, or to warn them of impending doom that was in their future.

These intervention acts of God through natural calamity and international affairs continued throughout the ministry of the prophets. We must understand, therefore, that it was only through the prophets that the people were made aware that such events were an act of God, not simply the natural occurrences of the world around them. They were the work of God to produce repentance, and thus delay their final termination as a theocratic nation in the land of Palestine.

So the locust plague of Joel's day was not just another natural calamity in Judah. It was an act of God. Joel's question in 1:2 was a call to them to ponder the catastrophe of the locust plague, and then come to the conclusion that God had His hand in the matter. And if God worked through the plague, then they must determine what God was trying to communicate to the people? This is where they needed to listen to the prophets.

Joel uses the locust plague metaphorically in order to reveal the future of an unrepentant Judah. He portrays the coming of the locust as a marching army into the land. The locust are the soldiers (Jl 2:7), with horses and chariots (Jl 2:4,5). The Assyrian army of locust marched in from the north to defeat the northern kingdom of Israel in 722/21 B.C. In 601, 597, and finally in 586 B.C., the Babylonians would march in from the north and take Judah into captivity. The final captivity

of 586 B.C. would be the time when the temple and Jerusalem would be destroyed. This would be the date of the final termination of the independent theocratic nation of all Israel in Palestine. In the centuries to come, the land would be in the possession of the Babylonians, then the Greeks, and finally, the Romans.

Joel called on the people to gather for a solemn assembly in order that the end not come. If they repented, they would be spared.

Consecrate a fast. Call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the Lord your God and cry out to the Lord (Jl 1:14).

God continued to plead through Joel, “*Now, therefore, says the Lord, turn to Me with all your heart, and with fasting and with weeping and with mourning*” (Jl 2:12). They were called on to “*rend your heart and not your garments*” (Jl 2:13). They needed to remember the concept that Paul repeated to the Corinthians: “*Godly sorrow works repentance to salvation that is not to be regretted*” (2 Co 7:10). The people needed to do more than tear their garments in remorse over their sins. They needed to change their lives. Nothing short of total repentance would suffice in order to avoid of the judgment that was coming. They needed to do as Peter commanded Israel’s generation during his time:

... repent and be converted so that your sins may be blotted out, in order that the

times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord (At 3:19).

The repentant must keep in mind that there is a difference between being sorry for one’s sin, and being saddened that one was caught in his sin. When we are caught in our sins, we often want to confess someone else’s sin, and not our own. And thus, in ignoring our own sinful way of life, we fail to change our behavior. What God was calling on Judah to do was more than a conversion of the head. He sought for a conversion of the heart. Their behavior had to change.

The moral condition of Judah and Israel in Joel’s day was prophetic of the religious conditions of Israel during the ministry of Jesus. In fact, Jesus quoted Isaiah, who spoke of the religious condition of Israel during Judah’s time of apostasy, and applied it to the religious leaders of His day. Jesus applied the moral conditions of Joel and Isaiah’s time to that of the religious leadership of the scribes and Pharisees.

This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. In vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men (Mk 7:6,7; see Is 29:13).

Jesus’ call was the same as Joel and Isaiah: “*I tell you, no. But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish*” (Lk 13:2). They did not repent, and thus, they perished. They refused to repent and return to the word of God, and thus, they were destroyed, as Hosea said, “*For lack*

of knowledge” of the word of God (Hs 4:6). That which happened to Israel of old, happened to the Israel that existed during the time of Jesus. The Assyrians and Babylonians terminated the independent theocratic Israel of old according to the prophecy of Joel and Isaiah. The Romans terminated national Israel of Jesus’ day during the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem. If those of Joel’s day would have repented, God would have driven the invading armies into the sea (Jl 2:18-20). Unfortunately, neither Joel’s Israel nor Jesus’ Israel heeded the call to repentance.

Someone once said, “Real repentance thinks God’s thoughts about sin and hates it; takes God’s side against self and dies to it; turns to God Himself and serves Him.” But when it comes to repentance and turning to God, it is more as Mason said, “If we put off repentance another day, we have a day more to repent of and a day less to repent in.” The great Bible commentator Matthew Henry said, “True repentance is never too late, but late repentance is seldom true.”

Joel gave the people of God the opportunity to repent in order to avoid national doom. Since he was calling for national repentance, those individuals who certainly did heed his call were outnumbered by the majority who determined the moral nature of the society. Regardless of efforts to repent on the part of the minority, the majority prevailed, and thus, the nation as a whole was terminated.

2. In view of no repentance, God announced the day of judgment. In Joel 2:21, there is a transition from a call to

repentance to a promise of hope. Though the immediate generation of Joel’s audience did not repent, and subsequently died in their national apostasy, there would be a generation born in captivity to repentant parents who would return to the land as a repentant remnant.

We must keep in mind that Joel and the prophets were addressing the people as a whole. Their messages were directed to the nation of people, not the individual citizens. It was the sin of the majority of the society that led to the captivities of both the northern and southern kingdoms, which captivities ended them up in Assyrian and Babylonian captivity. It was in captivity that they would nationally repent by forsaking all forms of idolatry. It would be then that they would experience the great time of glory that Joel announced: “*Do not fear, O land. Be glad and rejoice, for the Lord will do great things*” (Jl 2:21).

But before the “great things,” there would be a great national tragedy. Joel then introduces us to the judgment phrase, “the day of the Lord” (Jl 1:15; 2:11). The context in which this phrase is used defines the meaning. The day of the Lord is a day of judgment and destruction. It is a day of termination as a result of rebellion against God. In the prophecy of Joel, there would be a paradigm change in reference to God’s work through Israel. God would change from working through national Israel to produce the new paradigm of salvation through the Branch who was to come. God now works through the new paradigm of the spiritual Israel in order to take the gospel into all the world.

Throughout the rest of the prophecies of the Old Testament, therefore, we must not forget this biblical definition of the day of the Lord. This is necessary because some modern-day “end-of-times” enthusiasts seem to conclude that the day of the Lord is always a reference to the final end of all things at the end of time. But in the historical context of Joel’s introduction and use of the phrase, “the day of the Lord” was a time **in time** wherein God would bring judgment on His people, Israel, in order to move them into a new paradigm. The new paradigm would eventually be a time of faith and grace that would be manifested at the cross and announced on the day of Pentecost in A.D. 30. It was a phrase that was used in reference to God’s work with Israel, not God’s work with the human race. Therefore, when we see the phrase used in the Bible, we must first seek to understand what God was doing in time in order to preserve a remnant of Israel in order to usher in His redemptive work through Israel. In the New Testament the phrase “day of the Lord” is used in reference to the end of all things (See 1 Co 5:5; 2 Co 1:14; 1 Th 5:2; 2 Th 2:2; 2 Pt 3:10). The phrase is always used to express the finality of all things at the end of time.

In order to help us not to take the day of the Lord out of the historical context of God working through Israel in the Old Testament, Joel gives an interpretative hint to remind his readers that he was not talking about something that would take place at the end of time. *“Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for*

the day of the Lord is coming, because it is close at hand” (2:1).

“Close at hand” in Joel’s historical context meant that something would soon transpire. The captivity of the northern kingdom of Israel had already taken place. The phrase “at hand” indicates that Joel was preaching to the people just before the beginning of the fall of the southern kingdom. In 601 B.C., the Babylonians came from the north and took the first Israelites of Judah into captivity. This initial captivity was a warning, but it was a warning that the people did not heed. As Judah plunged further into moral degradation, the final judgment of God was “close at hand.” Joel’s message referred to the final end of the last two tribes in Palestine, which tribes were about to be extracted from the land in 586 B.C.

3. In national restoration, God announces a new spiritual paradigm shift: One of the most significant prophecies of the Old Testament is Joel 2:28-32. It is significant because it points specifically to the time when God would reveal His purpose for the existence of Israel and the reason why He sent His prophets to Israel.

The purpose of the nation of Israel was to preserve a segment of world society in order to prevent what happened in Genesis 6:5: *“... the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”* Except for eight souls, the world population was destroyed by the flood of Noah’s day because it had lost its purpose for existence, that is to populate heaven. Israel was

made a nation that supposedly would not forget the God of heaven. The prophets, therefore, were sent to remind the Israelites of their Creator, and then preserve them until the coming of the Blessing that was promised to the fathers. From the time Noah and His family took that first step out of the Ark, all history was directed to the time when Jesus took His first step in bearing a cross to Calvary.

Peter's quotation of the prophecy Joel 2:28-32 on the day of Pentecost in A.D. 30 reaffirmed the purpose for the existence of national Israel, and the returned remnant. It also was a validation of God's work to bring the Redeemer into the world through Israel (At 2:17-21). Just before Jesus bowed His head in death on the cross, He declared, "*It is finished*" (Jn 19:30). There is more in that three-word statement than we usually assume.

Peter's quotation of the prophecy of Joel 2 establishes one irrefutable fact. The Holy Spirit was pronouncing the Joel 2 prophecy fulfilled by the events that took place on that day of Pentecost in A.D. 30. Any interpreter who would move the fulfillment of the Joel 2 prophecy past that time is simply twisting the prophecy to conform to his own speculations.

We must not be deceived. There are some crafty speculators in the religious world today who are skilled in Scripture manipulation to produce sensational pronouncements of future events. They are able to do their manipulations because of the fickle nature of many in the religious world who seek to hear something shocking about what may transpire among the nations of the world prior to the com-

ing of Jesus. So Paul warned that we should grow up in our knowledge of the word of God in order that we "*no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of teaching, by the trickery of men in cleverness to the deceitfulness of error*" (Ep 4:14).

Peter's quotation of Joel 2:28-32 is from the Greek Septuagint, which was a translation from Joel's Hebrew. Our English translation of Acts 2 is from the Greek, and thus, there are some differences to translations from the Hebrew of Joel 2. We must remember that the Holy Spirit was the origin of Joel's original statement in Hebrew, as well as Peter's quotation from the Greek Septuagint. The Holy Spirit, therefore, sanctioned Peter's quotation, which quotation was inscribed as Scripture when Luke wrote the book of Acts. So when we study through the text of the prophecy in Joel, and its quotation in Acts, we understand that both contexts originated from the Holy Spirit.

a. Afterward: Joel used the word "afterward" to point his readers to a time that would follow the captivity. That about which he prophesied would take place after the Israelites had gone through the purification of the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities before they returned to Palestine as a remnant.

When considering the fulfillment of all prophecy of God's plan of redemption, we must always keep in mind the statement of Jesus when He began His ministry: "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand*" (Mk 1:15). This

was the fulfillment of all the prophecies concerning the time when God sent His Son into the world to finalize the eternal plan of redemption (Lk 24:44; Gl 4:4). It was the time when the remnant of Israel had already returned to Palestine. Therefore, the remnant was in Palestine awaiting the fulfillment of these prophecies and the hope of Israel (See At 26:6; 28:20).

b. In the last days: In referring to the prophecy of Joel 2, Peter stated, “*And it will come to pass in the last days*” (At 2:17). Joel’s “afterward” was Peter’s “in the last days.” Therefore, **the last days were in existence while the remnant was waiting for the coming hope of Israel.** The last days were in existence at the time the prophecy of Joel 2 was fulfilled. And because the last days were in existence at the time of the fulfillment of Joel 2, any efforts to twist Joel’s prophecy to refer to our time today is simply erroneous.

What is significant about Peter’s statement is that he used the word “in.” In other words, the events that Joel stated would transpire after the remnant returned to the land. This would be the time of the last days. It would be in these days that the fulfillment of the Joel 2:28-32 prophecy would take place. When Jesus said, “The time is fulfilled,” we understand that God was consummating His plan for Israel by pouring out His Spirit on all flesh in Acts 2:1-4. In Peter’s announcement to all nations in Acts 2 that the Jews now had the opportunity to be a part of the new spiritual Israel, we understand that the prophecy of Joel 2 was fulfilled.

Jesus’ ministry was in the last days

of national Israel. In these days, Peter announced in Acts 2 the new paradigm that all who were baptized into Christ were “*neither Jew nor Greek*” (See At 2:38,41; Gl 3:26-28). The announcement was made in the last days of national Israel, which days would be finalized with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Those who became a part of the new Israel came under the new law and covenant of Christ, while the old Sinai law and covenant that God made with national Israel on Mount Sinai was fading away (See Hb 8:13; 12:28).

When Peter used the phrase “in the last days,” he was not referring to the beginning of the last days. He was speaking of finality, not beginning. And thus, Joel’s prophecy was a prophecy of finality in which God would do great things. So Peter reminded his audience, “... **this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel**” (At 2:16). What we conclude from Peter’s quotation of Joel 2, therefore, **is that everything that is mentioned in the prophecy of Joel must find its fulfillment in the consummation of national Israel in the last days in which Peter and the other apostles lived.** There is nothing left for enthusiastic eschatologists today to use in reference to the end of the world.

When Joel made the prophecy of Joel 2, he was comforting his immediate audience with hope that they would need after the “locust army” devoured Israel. The hope was for them, not for us today. We would not, therefore, steal their hope from the prophecy in order to generate some excitement today that the world is

coming to an end according to the prophecy of Joel 2. Within the hope given to Israel at the time of Joel, Joel spoke of a new and exciting time when the Spirit would be poured out. Peter said that he and the apostles lived through that experience. And if Peter correctly interpreted the experience of Acts 2:1-4—and he did—then there is no time in the future when the Spirit will be poured out again as it was on the day of Pentecost in A.D. 30. **Therefore, all of Joel 2:28-32 was in the first century, beginning with the outpouring of the Spirit in Acts 2:1-4.**

Biblical interpreters must always remember that if they steal away the hope of a prophecy that was made to an immediate audience of an Old Testament prophet, they are accusing the Holy Spirit of giving a false hope to the people to whom the message was initially delivered. In fact, they are accusing the Holy Spirit of lying to the people because He was supposedly making the prophecy for us today, while leading the immediate audience to believe that the hopes of the prophecy were for them.

c. Pour out My Spirit: When Peter said “this is that” in Acts 2:16, the “this” referred to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:1-4, and “that” referred to the prophecy of Joel 2:23-32. Peter connected prophecy and fulfillment in order not to leave any doubt in anyone’s mind that the prophecy of Joel 2 was fulfilled in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in A.D. 30. In making this statement, he confines the fulfillment of the prophecy to the first century.

d. All flesh: The Holy Spirit would

not be limited to the prophets as in the Old Testament era. At the end of the last days, the Spirit would be poured out on all classes of people as sons and daughters, old and young, male and female, and bond-servants and free.

The prophecy of Joel must be understood as a contrast to what was experienced in Joel’s day to what would happen when the prophecy was fulfilled. The speaking of the word of God through the direction of the Holy Spirit was limited to a few prophets at the time of Joel’s ministry. These were prophets (preachers) who spoke the word of God to the people, though a vast number of false prophets presumed to be true prophets of God. But because the true prophets were gifted with the Spirit, they could speak to the people for God.

There were no circulated Bibles in those days. Only the prophets were circulated in order to verbally teach the people. But at the end of the last days, teachers, men and women, young and old, would go forth to teach the word of God throughout the world (Mt 28:19,20). It would no longer be that God spoke exclusively through the fathers (Hb 1:1). On the contrary, in every place there would be those who would teach the gospel.

e. Prophecy: There were few times when the Old Testament prophets actually spoke of future events. Speaking of the future was not the primary focus of their ministry. Such was only the conclusion to their sermons. When the prophets wrote their messages, they focused on recording those statements of future events that would transpire if there

was no positive response to their message of repentance. They did this for the benefit of those who would come later and read what they had written concerning future events. It was on this basis, therefore, that the people fully believed that what the prophets wrote was from God. The primary work of the prophet was to speak forth God's word, not to foretell future events. People today want to reverse this order in order to be some self-proclaimed prophet of future events. But if they would pattern their ministry after the ministry of the Old Testament prophets, then they would be studying and preaching the word of God in order that people understand and follow God.

f. Wonders: Joel 2:30-32 is a series of metaphors that explain what would be happening among world nations at the time of the consummation of national Israel in the last days. In Old Testament figures of speech, celestial bodies metaphorically represented earthly kingdoms. The fall of these bodies metaphorically represented the termination of kingdoms (See Is 13:9,10; 34:4; MI 4:1,5,6). The sun represented the king of the kingdom. The moon and stars were metaphorical of the governors, princes and military leaders of the nations who received their light (authority) from the sun (king). Since they received their power from their king, when the king fell, therefore, they fell.

Isaiah's prophecy against the Babylonian Empire in Isaiah 13:1-17 is a good example of how this metaphorical language of celestial bodies was used in reference to the fall of kingdoms. The context of this prophecy was specifically

against the Babylonians. In verse 17 God said, "*Behold, I will stir up the Medes against them [the Babylonians]*" This one statement places all the pronouncements of Isaiah 13 in the context of God's judgment of Babylon. We must understand the following statement of Isaiah in the context of God's punishment of the Babylonian Empire, which Empire in history was eventually overthrown by the Medo-Persian Empire:

For the stars of heaven and its constellations will not give their light. The sun will be darkened in its going forth, and the moon will not cause its light to shine (Is 13:10).

Isaiah used the heavenly bodies as metaphors to picture the fall of the powers of the Babylonian Empire. Joel did the same in reference to the fall of many world governments at the time God would bring an end to national Israel, but begin a new and exciting spiritual Israel that would encompass the world (See Dn 2:44; 7:13,14).

At the time Peter stood up on the day of Pentecost in A.D. 30, the Roman Empire had brought one world kingdom after another to a close. The Roman Empire brought down governments throughout the world as it spread its power to conquer the nations of the world. It was a time whenever the Roman army returned to Rome, news went out to the residents of the Empire that another nation had been subdued and brought under the control of Rome. The constellations of governments throughout the world

were falling, and thus it was the fullness of time.

But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under law (Gl 4:4).

In the prophecy of Joel 2:30-32, Joel was speaking of the termination of national Israel during the period of history when Rome was bringing down the constellations of world governments. The context of his prophecy was not of some supposed natural events that some would twist to indicate the end of the world. Joel was speaking to an immediate audience of Israelites who needed hope. The hope would be signalled by the outpouring of the Spirit. But when the hope was fulfilled, there would also be a termination. There would no longer be any kings and princes of national Israel. The old order of how Israel was governed at the time Joel spoke would give way to only one King, which King would reign from heaven over all things (Mt 28:18; Jn 13:2; Ep 1:20-23; see Dn 2:44; 7:13,14). There would be a termination of Israelite kings and princes on earth in order that Jesus be the only King of kings and Lord of lord of all things (1 Tm 6:15).

Joel 2:32 is a perfect picture of the Pentecost of Acts 2.

*And it will come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be delivered. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance as the Lord has said, **even among the remnant whom the Lord will call.***

At the time the Spirit would be poured out, there would be a remnant called from the remnant. At the time of Joel's prophecy, God said that His people would go into captivity. However, He always promised that a physical remnant of Israel would return to the land before the coming of the Redeemer. A remnant of national Israel did return in 536 B.C. after the Babylonian captivity. It was this remnant that would wait four hundred years before another spiritual remnant would choose to be called out of the remnant of national Israel.

Luke recorded the following concerning the birth of this spiritual remnant that took place in A.D. 30 on the day of Pentecost: "*Then those who received his word were baptized. And the same day [of Pentecost in A.D. 30] there were added to them about three thousand souls*" (At 2:41).

This was only the beginning of the spiritual remnant. Luke also recorded, "*And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved*" (At 2:47). The spiritual Israel was born on that day of Pentecost in Jerusalem and continues to this day, growing as individuals volunteer to become citizens of the kingdom through their obedience to the gospel.

National Israel passed away in the birth of the new spiritual Israel of God. This is what the Holy Spirit wanted the judaizing teachers of Galatia to understand when He wrote the following:

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is nei-

ther Jew nor Greek. There is neither bondservant nor free. There is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise (Gl 3:27-29).

Those who would claim that there remains a national Israel unto this day that is recognized by God, have denied what the Holy Spirit said in the preceding statement. **There are not two Israels today who are God's people, one national and the other spiritual.** All those who have been baptized into Christ today are of Abraham's seed and heirs of the promise that was made to national Israel when it was in existence. National, physical Israel, however, is gone in reference to the promises of God. National Israel fulfilled her purpose of bringing the promises to fulfillment. And when her purpose was fulfilled in Christ, she was no longer needed. In Christ ...

... there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bondservant nor free. But Christ is all and in all" (Cl 3:11; see 1 Co 12:13).

4. There is no escape from judgment for sin: What the Holy Spirit said in 2 Corinthians 5:10 in reference to all men at the end of time was true of sinful Israel in time:

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that everyone may receive the things done in the body, ac-

ording to what he has done, whether good or bad.

The above passage was speaking of judgment at the **end of time**, but Joel's prophecy was speaking of judgment **in time**: *"Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision. For the day of the Lord [judgment] is near in the valley of decision"* (Jl 3:14).

The people of God would be judged for their sin, and subsequently, they would go into Assyrian and Babylonian captivity as punishment. But now, those nations that devastated the people of God would themselves be judged.

For behold, in those days and at that time, when I will bring again the captivity of Judah and Jerusalem, I will also gather all nations and will bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. And I will enter into judgment with them there for My people and for My heritage Israel whom they have scattered among the nations and divided up My land (Jl 3:1,2).

The name "Jehoshaphat" means "the Lord judges." The tables have now been turned. Those whom God used by proxy to judge Israel assumed that by their own power and will they conquered and scattered Israel. The Assyrians and Babylonians had no idea that God was using them to punish His people. But by the time God brings the remnant back into the land, the Babylonian Empire will have defeated the Assyrian Empire. The Medo-Persian Empire will have defeated the

Babylonians (See Dn 2 & 7). The Assyrian and Babylonian Empires, therefore, will have gone out of existence as God's punishment of them for their arrogance against His people. Their extinction would be their judgment for gloating over their scattering of the people of God and land-grabbing of Palestine.

Joel's picture is of judgment of all those who had devastated the people of God during their years of judgment. Tyre, Sidon, Egypt and Edom, who joined in on the plunder of Israel, would also be taken down. They would reap the captivity that they had sown among the defeated Israelites.

Joel writes these prophecies for posterity. When the fulfillment transpired after the return from captivity that began in 536 B.C., then the nations of the world would know that God worked a marvelous thing with the preservation of the rem-

nant of Israel. Embedded in the promise was that "*Jerusalem will be holy, and there no foreigners will pass through her anymore*" (Jl 3:17). No conquering nations would devastate Jerusalem again until God had consummated His purpose for the existence of Israel. It would be after the fulfillment of the prophecy of 2:28-32 that God would allow the Romans to destroy the nation in A.D. 70. However, no nation could touch the new spiritual Jerusalem, the church, that would be revealed from heaven. This new Israel would be victorious on earth, and then transition into eternal dwelling in the presence of God. No foreigners would pass through this Jerusalem, for this Jerusalem would be composed of all peoples of the world, who would become citizens through their obedience to the gospel (Mk 16:15,16; Gl 3:26-29).

Chapter 5

MICAH

Micah was a farmer preacher from the small village of Moresheth Gath about thirty kilometers from Jerusalem. Nothing is known about Micah except what is mentioned by him in his book, as well as Jeremiah's mention of him (Jr 26:18; see Mc 3:12). His ministry was in the countryside of Judah, and he was contemporary with Isaiah and Hosea (See Zp 3:19; compare Mc 4:1-4 with Is 2:2-4).

The duration of his ministry was somewhere between 738 to 700 B.C., during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah of the southern kingdom. His

ministry extended through the fall of the northern kingdom in 722/21 B.C. He thus had for his audience in the south, a vivid illustration of God's judgment. If they did not repent, they too would suffer the same consequences for apostasy as their sister to the north.

A. Historical/social background:

At the time of Micah and Isaiah's preaching, the socioeconomic structure of both the northern and southern kingdoms had changed. The two kingdoms had

changed from being rural economies that were centered around the farming community, to being urban-oriented where the aristocrats of the cities economically exploited and marginalized the poor farmers. And since Micah was a farmer preacher in the rural areas of Judah, he was especially straightforward in his message about the economic injustices of the poor by the rich city dwellers.

In their message to Judah, both Micah and Isaiah had the example of the northern kingdom that was coming to an end, as a warning to the southern kingdom. These were not easy times concerning all international affairs. The winds of change were in the air, and thus, the international turmoil among the surrounding nations led to a very discomfoting feeling among the Israelite residents of Palestine of the day.

In 734-732 B.C., Tiglath-pileser of Assyria made war against the Syrians, Philistia, and the regions of Israel and Judah. In 734 the Syrians made an alliance with the northern kingdom in order to overthrow Ahaz of Judah. The reason for this was that Ahaz would not join in an alliance with the Syrians to fight against Assyria. Assyria had already conquered Galilee and Gilead. Their next military target was Samaria and Jerusalem.

The Assyrians were eventually successful against Samaria and the northern kingdom in 722/21 B.C. At the same time, they placed Judah under heavy tribute. But in 701 Hezekiah refused to pay any more tribute to Assyria, and in response, King Sennacherib sent his Assyrian army to Jerusalem. Isaiah was in Jerusalem at

the time. He encouraged Hezekiah to be strong against the Assyrians, stating that they would not step one foot in the city (See 2 Kg 15:29 – 19:37; 2 Ch 29 – 32).

With the death of 185,000 of Assyrian soldiers outside Jerusalem in one night, Sennacherib was humiliated by God, and thus he returned to Nineveh. Nevertheless, Jerusalem continued to morally decay, which decay eventually led to her eventual fall to Babylon in 586 B.C.

The religious/social environment of Israel and Judah at the time of Micah's ministry, had become a society of people who were antagonistic of anything that represented the presence of the one true and living God. They were not unlike many societies today who have a disdain for anything pertaining to religion. In their moral digression, they went from tolerating religious people to scoffing those who would maintain any form of faith.

Culturally, the leaders had digressed to the point that they were haters of good, but lovers of evil. The prophet said of the leaders of the people, *"You who hate the good and love the evil, who strip their skin from off them and the flesh from off their bones"* (Mc 3:2).

When a society develops cultural norms that are contrary to the principles of the word of God, it is past repentance. It is past repentance because it has forgotten that to which repentance must be made. It is a society that has lost its moral conscience of what is right according to the word of God. Some individuals within the society may repent. Unfortunately, the majority who are behaving according to those principles that are contrary to the

standards of the will of God, establish the identity of the culture. The repentant are thus working against the norms of the culture.

The behavior of wayward religious leadership was reflected in the injustices of their culture. The religious leaders were preaching profiteers, which may explain why many within the society rejected anything that had reference to faith in God's law. Micah wrote of the profiteering preachers, "*If a man walking in the spirit and falsehood lie, saying, 'I will prophesy to you of wine and of strong drink,' he will even be the spokesman to this people*" (Mc 2:11).

The preachers were not unlike some today who will promise a miracle for a contribution. They will proclaim, "God will bless you," if you will only drop in the money as the collection coffer passes by. The people were not so much the victims of the profiteering preachers, but they sought for themselves those who would soothe their consciences by preaching what they wanted to hear. They were as those about whom Paul wrote:

For the time will come when they will not endure sound teaching. But to suit their itching ears, they will surround themselves with teachers who will agree with their own desires (2 Tm 4:3).

This is the spirit of idolatry. One first lives according to his own lusts, and then he creates a god in his mind who condones his unrighteous behavior. He then seeks for a preacher who will soothe the desires of his heart and validate the un-

righteous behavior of his life. If he cannot find such a person, then he rejects all religion.

These were times in which it took brave men to stand up and represent God. It was the worst of times to be a preacher. We are sure that the Hebrew writer reflected on times as these when he wrote of those preachers who had to endure them.

And what more will I say? For the time would fail me to tell of ... the prophets, who through faith ... stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword. And others were tortured ... others had trial of mockings and scourgings ... bonds and imprisonment ... were stoned ... sawn asunder ... slain with the sword ... afflicted, tormented ... (Hb 11:32-38).

Regardless of the trials of the day, the farmer preacher Micah boldly pronounced the judgment of God against both Israel and Judah (Mc 1 – 3). After the pronouncement of judgment, there was a message of hope (Mc 4,5). And finally, there was a message of salvation for a remnant who were born of those who had lost their way before the captivities in their own rebellion against God (Mc 6,7). After the captivities, there was a way home to the land of promise, but also a way home to a renewed fellowship with the eternal God their forefathers had forsaken. It was by the grace of God that a remnant of Israel was to return in order to reestablish the identity of the people of God.

B. Micah preaches to us:

There are two principal lessons that come to us from the pen of Micah. One is in reference to giving hope to the people of God who were going into captivity, and the other is in reference to the behavior of life that God desires that the restored remnant maintain in order to represent the heart of God among the nations of the world.

1. *Micah reveals the new paradigm of peace:* As finite biblical interpreters who are subject to know only that which has transpired in our past, and what is happening in our present. And because we are so limited, we must not question the foreknowledge of God.

Foreknowledge is a realm of awareness that is beyond our wildest capabilities. But with God, knowing the future is only natural. And because God sees the future, He is working in the events of the present in order to carry to an end the purpose for which He created the world. And the purpose for which He created the world is to populate heaven. We must never forget this teleological purpose for which this world is here.

By understanding the purpose for which Israel was created in the midst of a world population of free-moral and finite beings, we can understand why God was so patient with Israel in her apostasy. It was not that God failed to foresee Israel's apostasy. It was that He worked with their apostasy in order to accomplish the destiny of Israel for the world. God thus did not deal with Israel

out of frustration, for He knew they would backslide.

God's work with His rebellious children was as a loving Father dealing with children who were struggling to deal with their own spiritual frailties. His work with their frailties eventually gave birth to the Redeemer of the world, which Redeemer would accomplish the destiny for which the world was created. And according to the ministry of the prophets, everything was working according to His foreknowledge and plan. This is why we do not discover any frustration by God in the messages of the prophets. We see a loving Father working with the best He could find among humanity in order to produce a faithful remnant through whom He could bring the Redeemer into the world. The entire effort was a revelation of God's grace.

In fact, as we contemplate the entirety of the messages of all the prophets, we are almost driven to conclude that God's attention was always to focus on a remnant of faithful people. He has always worked with faithful men as Abraham and Noah in order to begin again a spiritual lineage of faithfulness. After the captivity of Israel, He worked with the faithful Jewish remnant that would stand ready in the first century to receive into their arms the Bright and Morning Star who was born in a barn in a small village of Palestine.

God built a nation upon a promise that He made to Abraham (Gn 12:1-4). Through this nation, He was not only bringing the Redeemer into the world, but also taking the message of the Redeemer

into all the world. Through the captivities of the twelve tribes of Israel, He was laying the foundation for the international opportunity that the gospel later be preached to all the world.

We have written of this in other books (See *The World As It Is*, ch. 7, Biblical Research Library, Book 56). In Micah's prophecy of 4:1-3, we see God's plan for world evangelism being set up as captives from the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel are scattered throughout the world. Through these exiled captives, God was establishing His people throughout the nations of the world in order to implement the strategy of **Micah 4:1-3** (See also Is 2:1-4). We must not, therefore, see the captivities as a national tragedy of Israel. On the contrary, we must see in the captivities the eternal plan of God to preach the gospel to the world. By understanding this strategy, we come to the context of the prophets with the knowledge that God was allowing history to play out in time that which He already knew would happen.

The apostasy of the seed of Abraham was not a surprise to God. He knew it would happen. In fact, because of the nature of men to rebel against God, we now assume that in a world where there are always conflicts between nations for power and territory, it is revealed why God sought to establish a nation through a man as Abraham, by whom He would bring the Redeemer into the world. We understand that through the remnant of this nation, the gospel would be preached throughout the world.

Since God knew Israel could not

remain nationally faithful, He was actually using the remnant of the faithful who would come from Abraham as the means by which the promised Blessing would go into all the world. Individuals can remain faithful as Abraham. But it is impossible for nations as a whole to remain faithful. And because God knew this, He foreplanned the use of an apostate nation to bring both the Blessing into the world, but also to take the Blessing into all the world. At least when we survey the history of Israel, this is what happened. If we think that this was all a surprise to God or historic coincidence, then we are being quite naive concerning the omniscience of God. So in the prophecy of Micah 4:1-4, we need to see this taking place in history according to the foreknowledge of God. And while we study through this remarkable prophecy, we must not forget one humbling statement of Paul:

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out (Rm 11:33).

a. In the last days: Joel said that these things would take place "afterward" (Jl 2:28). Peter quoted Joel 2:28 and said that he and the other apostles were in the last days of the existence of Israel when the Spirit was poured out (At 2:1-4,16,17). Therefore, Micah and Isaiah were looking to the time of the consummation of national Israel, which consummation took place four hundred years after the Babylonian captivity. It would be in these days

when God would initiate His worldwide plan for world evangelism. It was the last days of national Israel, but the beginning of the spiritual Israel that came into existence when the first person was baptized into Christ on the day of Pentecost in A.D. 30.

b. Mountain of the house of the Lord: “Mountain” is a metaphor that refers to government power. In this case, the power of God’s heavenly government would be established above all governmental powers on earth. The promised Blessing would ascend to the heavenly throne, from which He would exercise all authority over all things (Mt 28:18). Daniel expanded on this meaning in his prophecy of this event that took place in the last days of national Israel.

And in the days of these [Roman] kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed. And the kingdom will not be left to other people. It will break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms. And it will stand forever (Dn 2:44).

Daniel further explained the One who would ascend unto the Father. His reign would be from heaven, not on this earth (See Dn 7:13).

And there was given Him dominion and glory and sovereignty, so that all peoples, nations and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away. And His sovereignty will not be destroyed (Dn 7:14).

This would happen in the last days of national Israel. It would be a time, as Micah said, when “*He will teach us of His ways and we will walk in His paths*” (Mc 4:2).

c. House of the Lord: Paul explained that the new house of God was the church of our Lord (1 Tm 3:15). It was a spiritual house of all those who would come into the presence of the Lord through their obedience to the gospel (Gl 3:26-29). The meaning here is parallel to what Amos prophesied, and to what Peter stated was fulfilled in the establishment of the body of Christ in A.D. 70 (See Am 9:11; At 15:15-18). The one universal house of God was established in the last days of national Israel.

d. People will flow unto it: People from all nations, not just Israel, would come into the house of the Lord. This would be the result of the early disciples’ going into all the world and preaching the gospel to every creature (Mt 28:19,20; Mk 16:15,16). In this flow of humanity, people from all walks of life, not just those of the remnant of Israel, would come into the house of the Lord. God’s promise to the remnant was that they would be the first to establish the spiritual house of the Lord by their obedience to the gospel. But at that time, the Gentiles would also be grafted in through their obedience (See Rm 9-11). It would be a house composed of all nations, not just those of Israel.

e. Let us go up to the mountain of the Lord: During the regular Passover/Pentecost feast, Jews came to Jerusalem from the nations to which they had been scattered during the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities. On the Pen-

tecost of A.D. 30, there were Jews in Jerusalem from at least sixteen nations (At 2:9-11). It was on this particular Passover/Pentecost that God had a surprise for these sojourners, for this was the beginning of a new spiritual paradigm of God's work with the faithful of the world.

This part of Micah's prophecy is worded as if the one making the proclamation is outside Jerusalem. It is stated in the same manner in the parallel statement of Isaiah (Is 2:3). After the Pentecost of A.D. 30, the first converted Jews returned to their synagogues throughout the nations from which they came. In their synagogues they announced that the Messiah had come. They thus urged their fellow Jews that the following year when they went to the Passover/Pentecost, that they too should go with them to Jerusalem. We are sure they were reading this prophecy to the Jews in the local synagogues in order to convince the people to go.

It may have been that a greater number of Jews went to the A.D. 31 Passover/Pentecost feast than the one in A.D. 30. At least this would have been typical of God's mission to always begin small and then work through the few in order to go to the masses. This also helps us to understand why the apostles stayed in Jerusalem for at least fifteen years after the A.D. 30 Passover/Pentecost, for they were still there in Acts 15. Every year a new group of sojourning Jews came to hear the confirmed word of the apostles (Mk 16:20). And every year those who were baptized into Christ went into all the world when they returned home. By A.D.

61,62 Paul affirmed that the gospel had gone into all the Roman world (Cl 1:23). God had laid the foundation for world evangelism by scattering His people into all the world through the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities. He then sent His people into all the world with the gospel in order that the world might be delivered from the captivity of sin.

f. The word of the Lord went from Jerusalem: The fulfillment of the Joel 2:28-32 passage was in the last days of national Israel. This took place in Jerusalem. It was initially manifested when the Spirit was poured out on the apostles on the day of Pentecost in A.D. 30 (At 2:1-4). The gospel was then announced publicly for the first time. The house of God was established with all those who were present when the audience on that day of Pentecost obeyed the gospel (See At 2:41; Gl 3:26-29). As a result of the outpouring, the Spirit went to all who were baptized in the name of Jesus (At 2:38). From this original beginning, the first disciples went everywhere preaching the gospel (At 8:4). All these beginnings were in fulfillment of what Jesus had said to His disciples during His ministry.

*Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins would be preached in His name among all the nations, **beginning at Jerusalem** (Lk 24:46,47).*

2. Micah reveals the righteous behavior that God requires. In chapter

6, Micah presents questions concerning himself as an individual. The questions lead us as individuals to what we would present to God in order to have a relationship with Him.

Micah begins by asking questions concerning obedience to legal commands that were required by God under the Sinai law. *“With what will I come before the Lord and bow myself before the High God?”* (Mc 6:6). After this initial question, Micah takes us through a series of those Sinai law offerings that were to be offered for one’s sin. *“Will I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?”* (Mc 6:6). Micah’s question would call for a negative answer. And then he moves into hyperbole. *“Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousand rivers of oil? Will I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”* (Mc 6:7). And again, the answer would be no. The debt of our sin is so great that we cannot be absolved with legal offerings. Our spiritual bankruptcy is so deep that we cannot repay with ten thousand sacrifices. We simply have no spiritual savings to pay ourselves out of bankruptcy. We can offer no security on our own behalf. The assets we have are useless in taking away the sin that stands between ourselves and God. We are hopelessly lost because of our spiritual inadequacies.

The conclusion to which Micah wants us to come is that legal obedience to either God’s commands, or the offering of man’s inventions, **will not obligate God to forgive that which separates**

us from Him (Is 59:1,2). Any relationship that a man would have with God can only be through the offering of His grace. There is no such thing as legal atonement, either in obedience to law or by the offering of assets and deeds.

When we come to the conclusion that we are so far away from God that there is no possible way to make our journey back to Him on our own, then we are humbled to mourning over that which separates us from Him. And in our mourning over our inabilities, our sin, we are blessed (Mt 5:3). We are blessed when we seek God’s way back. What God desires is an obedient walk with Him in the realm of His righteousness. He does not seek legal obedience through offerings, for in such the heart is often lost. But if the heart is first offered, then the obedience will follow. It is not the offering that brings the heart close to God. The heart must precede the offering through mourning. And when the heart is close to God through mourning over our sin, the offering naturally follows. Our close walk with God is manifested through our mourning.

“He has shown you, O man, what is good and what the Lord requires of you, but to do justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mc 6:8).

This would be Micah’s reference to Deuteronomy 10:12,13, when God stated to Israel in their very beginning what He required of them:

And now, Israel, what does the Lord your

God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways, and to love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, to keep the commandments of the Lord and His statutes that I command you this day for your good?

a. “Do justly”: There is no prejudice in justice. Justice is without respect of persons. There is no partisan spirit expressed in justice. In the implementation of that which is right, favoritism to friends and family has no part. Justice is blind to that which would disqualify it as justice.

Dictionaries define justice to be that which is morally right and good. It is doing right in our relationship with God and man. When defining the character qualities of those who would lead the body of Christ, it is not surprising that the Holy Spirit would say, *“For an overseer must be ... just ...”* (Ti 1:7,8). He must show an example of doing right with people.

In some translations the word “righteous” is sometimes used for justice. Joseph, the husband of Mary, was *“a righteous [just] man”* (Mt 1:19). Because of his obedient relationship with God, he was just in his relationship with others. Those who are just (righteous) are those who live in a just manner with their neighbors. If one would live righteously (justly) with his neighbors, then he must do that which is right toward his neighbor.

b. “Love mercy”: In the context of Matthew 9, Jesus rebuked the self-righteous Pharisees in reference to this principle of attitude and life that God requires

of His people. When socially despised tax collectors, and those the Pharisees considered “sinners,” *“came and sat down with Him and His disciples”* (Mt 9:10), the Pharisees questioned why He would eat with such people. Their question was based on their judgment that tax collectors and “sinners” were in no possible way justified before God.

Jesus’ rebuke of the Pharisees was indirect, but also in some ways, direct. *“Those who are healthy do not need a physician, but those who are sick”* (Mt 9:12). The Pharisees thought that they were “healthy” before God because of their legal obedience to the law and their self-imposed religious traditions (See Mk 7:1-9). Those they proclaimed to be sinners and spiritually sick were such because of their lack of obedience to the Pharisees’ strict traditions surrounding the law of God. If they were spiritually sick, as the Pharisees so claimed, then Jesus justified His ministry to them on the basis of what certainly the Pharisees would claim to be correct. The sick do need the physician.

However, Jesus’ statement was a judgment against the Pharisees. Since they believed that they were legally healthy, then actually they were the ones who were spiritually sick. Those who do not mourn over their spiritual bankruptcy are spiritually sick. The problem is that they do not realize that they are sick. And thus, Jesus challenged the Pharisees with the statement, *“But go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners”* (Mt 9:13). Those

who mourn over their sins know what Jesus meant. It is they who can hear the call of Jesus.

When we realized that we can never obey the law perfectly, then we understand that Jesus came for us. When we understand that through works of law no person can be justified before God, then we know that Jesus came for us. When we mourn over our spiritual sickness, then we rejoice over the coming of our healing Physician. It is then that our lives are transformed. It is then that we are blessed: *“Blessed are the merciful, for they will obtain mercy”* (Mt 5:7). If we would be identified as having *“the wisdom from above,”* then we will be *“full of mercy”* (Js 3:17). It is only when we are full of mercy, because we mourn over our own sin, that we will have assurance when we are presented before Him. *“For judgment will be without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy”* (Js 2:13). Alexander Pope was right when he worded the following for all of us:

Teach me to feel another’s woe,
To hide the fault I see;
That mercy I do others show,
That mercy be shown to me.

It is a merciful spirit that would lead us to repeat the words of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

Being all fashioned of the selfsame dust,
Let us be merciful as well as just.

c. “Walk humbly with God”:
James explained what Micah had in mind.

“Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up” (Js 4:10). Arrogance leads us to believe that we can direct our own walk. We can make it on our own by doing it our way. We lead ourselves to believe that we need no lifting up by God if we can lift ourselves up. It is for this reason that *“God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble”* (Js 4:6). A self-lifted person feels no need for Divine upliftment.

Our mourning over our inability to justify ourselves before God through either law-keeping or good works should move us to cry out for mercy from God. This is where Israel went wrong. They had puffed themselves up in their own religiosity, and thus felt self-justified. There was no mourning over sin, for they saw themselves as just in their own eyes. The curse of the spirit of idolatry is that when one creates a religion that conforms to his own desires, then he feels no reason for mourning over laws that are not a part of his idolatrous religion. If by chance there is some area where guilt is felt, then the created religion is revised to conform to the desires of the idolater so he will feel no guilt.

When one establishes the standards for his own religiosity, then he feels no need to repent. This is especially difficult for those religious groups that function on the foundation of emotional subjectivity. The objective standard for direction through the word of God has little place in such religions. If it feels right, such religionists believe that it must be right. The result is that religion has been established on the subjective foundation of feel-

ing, not on an objective conclusion from what is stated in the word of God.

Subjective religion is thus defined as an idolatrous religion because one's own emotionality has become the standard of atonement for sin. And thus, adherents to such religions show up every Sunday to atone for their sins through emotional hysteria. They go home feeling good and validated because they experienced self-atonement through an emotional experience of losing control or "speaking in tongues." But worship is not an emotional outburst for self-atonement. Worship results from knowing that we have continued atonement (cleansing) by the blood of Jesus because we are walking in the light of His word (1 Jn 1:7). Worship is our response to God for what He worked for us, not what we have worked for Him.

Micah's plea to Israel in Micah 6:8, therefore, was that of Peter whose ministry was also to Israelites. *"Yes, all of you be submissive to one another and be clothed with humility, for God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble"* (1 Pt 5:5). God cannot give grace to those who do not feel that they have need of it. The proud are self-justified. And the self-justified feel that they need no grace. So Peter and Micah's plea

to the self-justified would be, *"... humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God so that He may exalt you at the proper time"* (1 Pt 5:6).

If anyone would seek to be lifted up to God, he must never forget that only God can do the lifting through His grace. When the humble saint realizes this, then he begins a walk of fellowship with God.

If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin (1 Jn 1:6,7).

One of the most beautiful endings of all the prophets through whom God pronounced judgment on His backslidden children, is Micah's statement of 7:18-20. It is the identity of the character of God. In one verse we find comfort in our hour of grief over our sins.

Who is a God like unto You, who pardons iniquity and passes by the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever because He delights in mercy (Mc 7:18).

Chapter 6

OBADIAH

Obadiah was a prophet to the relatives of Israel, the descendants of Esau. He was a prophet who was specifically chosen to announce the termination of a

culture of people and nation. Edom would be added to the graveyard of nations because of how he treated his brother, Jacob.

A. Historical/social background:

In the historical planning of God to bring into Palestine His chosen people through whom would eventually come the Messiah and Savior of the world, God surrounded Israel with the descendants of Abraham. With Edom to the south, Moab and Ammon to the east of the Jordan River, and the descendants of Terah, Abraham's father, to the north, God in His eternal wisdom sought to build a buffer of faith around the children of Israel from the invading influence of pagan nations. He gave Israel the most strategic trading route of the ancient world. And so Israel was established in the land of Palestine until the coming of the One through whom the world would be blessed (See Gn 12:1-3).

But as we know, Israel failed to carry out her responsibilities of the covenant. In reference to the buffer nations, Edom became one of the most insidious adversaries of Israel because of a legacy of resentment that was embedded in the culture by the father of the nation, Esau. And now at the time of the prophets, it was time for the buffer nations to also pay the price for not maintaining their purpose to protect their brother Israel through whom the Redeemer would be born into the world. The price that they would pay would be their extinction from history, while the remnant of their brother, the Israelites, would return as a people to the land of promise after paying for her own sin. The remnant of Israel would still bring the Redeemer into the world, but the Redeemer would come into a world where the relative nations through

Abraham would no longer exist.

The animosity between the sons of Israel (Jacob) and sons of Esau dated back to an event when the mother of Jacob used deception to steal away the blessing that would come naturally to the firstborn (Gn 27). In the deception, Isaac unwittingly gave the blessing to Jacob, instead of his firstborn, Esau. Esau subsequently migrated from the land of promise into a territory south of Palestine that was eventually called Edom (Gn 25:30; 36:1,8). The animosity that Esau held against Jacob became the cultural identity of the Edomites, and thus, throughout the centuries the Edomites expressed an unforgiving spirit toward the sons of Jacob.

The lesson from history is that a culture of the people is based on the events of the history of the people. If unfortunate events in the history of any society have developed cultural traits that are contrary to the word of God, those cultural traits must be sacrificed for the betterment of the people in the present. No one has a right to disobey the word of God with the justifying statement that "this is our culture."

Culture must always be sacrificed for obedience, which thing the Edomites were not willing to do. They culturally could not get over losing the blessing of the birthright of Esau their father because Esau's father, Isaac, had been craftily manipulated. They were always jealous that they could have been resting in the land of milk and honey instead of the desert territory of the Sinai Peninsula. Combine their loss of the blessing from Isaac with

the foolishness of Esau's selling of his birthright to Jacob for a pot of porridge. Instead of blaming their father Esau for selling his birthright for a pot of porridge, they took out their resentment on the house of Jacob (Gn 25:29-34). Regardless of Esau's misfortunes, it was always in the plan of God to work through Jacob, and not Esau. It may have been that they could not accept this fact, even though the prophets said that "God loved Jacob," but turned Esau away (Mt 1:2,3; Rm 9:13).

The descendants of Esau subsequently ended up in the region south of Palestine. When the children of Jacob came out of Egyptian captivity on their way to the land of promise, Edom refused to allow them to pass through their land, possibly thinking that it could have been them whom God could have been blessing with the land of milk and honey (Nm 20). It had been over four hundred years since their father had sold his birthright to Jacob, but they just could not move on. Because the Edomites were relatives of the Israelites, God did not allow Israel to war against the Edomites. If He had, then they could have possibly become an extinct nation before they had a second chance to prove their purpose. Nevertheless, punishment would be reserved for the centuries to come because they did not consider the need of their brother. The preaching of Obadiah was of the time when Edom had to reap her punishment.

Edom's enmity against Israel was so great that they fought against the Israelites during the years that Israel worked to drive out the Canaanites from the land of Palestine. About 350 years after

Israel's conquest of the land of Palestine, David eventually subdued the Edomites, and Solomon kept them in check throughout his reign. But in the days of King Ahaz (2 Ch 28:16-18), Edom rebelled and continued to be an antagonist against the Israelites. God thus called Obadiah because He was determined that it was time to take this nation from the history of nations of the world.

The theme of the prophecy of Obadiah is the complete destruction of the nation of Edom for his sins against his brother to the north. God announced the reason why they were to be destroyed (vss 1-14). He then revealed that the day of the Lord would mean the future preservation and glory of Israel, but the termination of Edom (vss 15-21). The remnant of Israel would live on in history in order to complete her destiny for her creation as a nation. But Edom would pass from history because he failed to complete his purpose to be a buffer nation for his brother.

B. Obadiah preaches to us:

God's judgment against Edom teaches two lessons: (1) God reveals the sin that pride generates, and thus, pride is the downfall of those who believe that they are secure. (2) God reveals His feelings concerning the indifference of those who could help in the time of another's troubles, but would rather sit idly by and do nothing.

1. *Downfall through pride:* The capital of Edom was the naturally pro-

tected city of Petra. Petra was seated at the end of an entrance way through clefts that were over 200 meters (700 feet) high. The temple of the Edomites that was at the end of the entrance, was carved into solid rock. The narrow entrance way to the temple and city was about a kilometer and a half long and twenty meters wide. This was the only access to the city. The city was impenetrable by enemies. It was only natural, therefore, that the Edomites took great pride in their defenses and existence as a nation that had existed for four hundred years before the arrival of the recently freed Israelites at their border.

The Edomites were too proud and resentful to allow the Israelites to pass through their land on their way to the land of promise, which they believed should have been theirs. They were confined to living in a desert region of the Sinai peninsula, when the descendants of Jacob were headed for the land of milk and honey. It was a land they could have received if the Israelites' father, Jacob, had not cunningly jilted their father, Esau, out of his blessing as the firstborn. It was just too much for the Edomites to show mercy and forgiveness to their brother, the Israelites. Their pride and unforgiving spirit was their downfall, and eventually, their resentment toward their brother led to their doom. God judged them,

The pride of your heart has deceived you, you who dwell in the clefts of the rock, whose habitation is high, who says in his heart, "Who will bring me down to the ground?" (vs 3).

Though they resided in a secure location, God, through Obadiah, said He would condemn them, "*though you exalt yourself as the eagle, and though you set your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down*" (vs 4). So the final verdict of their sin would be, "*For your violence against your brother Jacob, shame will cover you and you will be cut off forever*" (vs 10).

They would suffer the consequences of pride and arrogance. Someone said, "That which first overcame man, is the last thing man overcomes." Their unforgiving spirit had brought them to a destiny of doom and their pride kept them under the sentence of termination until their end. They were a nation that proved the statement, "*Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall*" (Pv 16:18).

The problem with the Edomites' pride was that it led them to do all sorts of evil throughout their history. Solomon wrote, "*Only by pride comes contention*" (Pv 13:10). We wonder if Solomon's statement was not made specifically of the Edomites whom he at the time kept under subjection. At the time of their subjection by Solomon, they needed to remember his statement, "*A man's pride will bring him low, but honor will uphold the humble in spirit*" (Pv 29:23).

God's message through Obadiah to the Edomites was the same as the Holy Spirit's to some arrogant Corinthians: "... let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Co 10:12). When it comes to comparing ourselves with ourselves,

Paul's following advice was from the Spirit: *"For if anyone thinks himself to be something when he is nothing, he deceives himself"* (Gl 6:3).

We seek to be disciples of Jesus. Being a disciple means that we seek to emulate in our lives the life of Jesus. In doing this, there are some very important things about Jesus' life that we must consider if we would be His disciple.

If we take pride in our position in life, or some self-appointed rank among the disciples, we must remember that Jesus was a carpenter's son (Mt 13:55). If we take pride in our wealth, we must remember that the Son of God did not have a place of His own to lay His head at night (Mt 8:20; Jn 1:46). If we take pride in the fine clothing with which we attire ourselves to parade before others on Sunday morning, we must remember that Jesus had no looks that would draw people to Him (Is 53:2). And if we would associate with the rich, famous and powerful in order to promote ourselves, then we must remember that the One after whom we would call ourselves a disciple was a friend of tax collectors and sinners (Mt 11:19).

And before we paste our Bible diplomas on the walls of our offices and take pride in our educational status, we need to remember what the Jews said of Jesus: *"How has this Man become learned, having never been educated?"* (Jn 7:15). Lest we preach our own knowledge, we must remember His example: *"I speak to the world those things that I have heard from Him"* (Jn 8:26). And before we seek to seat ourselves in the chief seats before a grand

audience, we need to remember that the One after whom we would call ourselves a disciple, *"poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded"* (Jn 13:5).

And if our thirst to be accepted is so great that we would compromise our behavior and beliefs, then we must remember that our friend Jesus *"came to His own and His own did not receive Him"* (Jn 1:11). In fact, *"He was despised and rejected by men"* (Is 53:3). When we are so confident in our own abilities and knowledge, we must remember what He said while on earth: *"I can of My own self do nothing"* (Jn 5:30). And when we want to presumptuously do our own will, we must remember His behavior in reference to His Father. *"I do not seek My own will, but the will of the Father who sent Me"* (Jn 5:30).

And finally, if we would be His disciple, then we too must follow Him to a cross. *"He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross"* (Ph 2:8). If there is pride anywhere in our efforts to be a disciple of Jesus, surely we will fail to attain unto our desires. When Paul said, *"Let this mind be in you that was also in Christ"* (Ph 2:5), he was speaking in the context of our Discipled, *"who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God"* (Ph 2:6).

It is unfortunate that the world seems to be moving into a generation of religionists who are "me-deep" into themselves. It is a generation that is consumed with itself, and thus, a generation whose

thinking is totally contrary to the spiritual nature of the God who humbled Himself from heaven, and then, allowed Himself to be humiliated to the cross.

2. Judgment based on indifference: God's judgment of Edom was clear. "*For your violence against your brother Jacob shame will cover you and you will be cut off forever*" (vs 10). Their violence was that they joined in with the enemies of Israel in the final days of Israel's calamity.

In the day you stood on the other side, in the day that the foreigners carried away captive his forces and foreigners entered into his gates and cast lots on Jerusalem, even you were as one of them (vs 11; see 2 Kg 8:20-22; 2 Ch 21:8-10).

When his brother was in trouble, Edom chose to be neutral. And so, "*he who gloats over calamity will not be unpunished*" (Pv 17:5). Edom not only gloated over the calamity of Israel, but he also "*cast lots on Jerusalem*" (vs 11) Edom participated in taking spoils from his brother. Edom should not "*have spoken proudly in the day of their distress*" (vs 12). But when their brother was fleeing the calamity of Judah, the Edomites delivered them up to their captors (vs 14). As the Edomites had done to Israel, so it would be done to them.

For the day of the Lord is near on all the nations. As you have done, so it will be done to you. Your reward will return on your own head (vs 15; see Jr 49:7-11; Ob 1-9).

Times often come in our lives when we must choose between that which is right and that which is wrong. If we choose to be neutral, we have chosen that which is wrong. It is as Jesus said, "*He who is not with Me is against Me. And he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad*" (Mt 12:30). When we must choose between the world and God, then we cannot remain neutral.

No man can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to the one and despise the other (Mt 6:24).

It was the sin of the Laodicean church to remain indifferent. Their indifference judged them to be a lukewarm group of disciples (Rv 3:15). Therefore, Jesus judged them with the statement, "*So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of My mouth*" (Rv 3:16).

The day of the Lord, therefore, meant that Jacob would be saved, but Esau would be spewed out. The Edomites found themselves fighting against the people of God, and in so doing, they found that they were fighting against God. And when one finds himself fighting against God, he knows that he will lose. This was Gamaliel's advice to the early opponents of the apostles. He cautioned the Jewish religious leaders,

You men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do concerning these men [the apostles] (At 5:35). And now I say to you, stay away from these men and

let them alone. For if their purpose or this work is from men, it will come to nothing. **But if it is from God, you can-**

not overthrow it, lest you even be found fighting against God (At 5:38,39).

Chapter 7

NAHUM

The name Nahum is a shortened version of the name Nehemiah. The literary style of the book of Nahum is poetic. It is poetic prophecy of the downfall of Nineveh, and thus, the conclusion of the Assyrian Empire.

A. Historical/social background:

During the final years of the northern kingdom of Israel, Assyria became God's judgment by proxy of His people. God used the Assyrians to judge the northern kingdom, but now it was time for Assyria to be judged. Through Nahum, God pronounced the termination of this empire, which termination eventually came when the Babylonians, Medes and Scythians formed an alliance and conquered Nineveh in 612 B.C. Nahum had prophesied that Nineveh would fall as the city of No (Thebes, Egypt) that the Assyrians themselves had overthrown in 663 B.C. As they arrogantly assumed that it was by their own power that they conquered the people of God, God used other nations to judge them.

Contemporary with Jeremiah and Zephaniah, Nahum ministered the word of God during times of great international turmoil. The book was written somewhere between 663 and 612 B.C. The wicked

reign of King Manasseh of Judah ended in 641 B.C. After Manasseh came Amon, and then the good reign of Josiah (639 - 608 B.C.).

The Assyrian military behaved cruelly toward their enemies in order to terrorize their enemies into surrendering. In 722/21 B.C., they conquered Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel. In the same campaign they took forty cities of Judah. According to the records of King Sennacherib of Assyria, the Assyrian army took over 200,000 Israelites into captivity. These captives were sold to the general population of the country of Assyria in order to pay the wages of the soldiers. But that was in 722/21. It is now over one hundred years later. Judgment time had arrived for Assyria.

The Assyrian records of archaeology depict captives being staked to the ground and skinned alive by the Assyrian soldiers in order to terrorize their enemies. The military was a cruel culture within itself, not unlike some of the descendants of the same people today who thrive on creating terror among their enemies through cruelty. The Assyrian soldiers took pride in the fact that they could terrorize a population by their cruelty. The more people they terrorized into surrendering, the more money they made when

they sold their captives back home.

This helps us understand why Nahum wrote with excitement concerning the fall of the Assyrian military. When King Sennacherib brought his soldiers up against Jerusalem during the days of Hezekiah, 185,000 of the cruel soldiers were judged and killed by God. The soldiers were judged for their cruelty of Judah's sister nation to the north which the Assyrians had just overthrown.

We do not judge the people of Assyria, therefore, by the cruelty of the Assyrian military. However, by the time judgment was pronounced through Nahum, it seems that the general population had regressed into much of the moral degradation from which they had repented in the days of Jonah over one hundred years before. The repentance of Jonah's ministry was only temporary, but it was sufficient in order to prepare the way for the thousands of Israelites who came their way as captives after the 722/21 B.C. defeat of the northern kingdom. But Nahum now speaks of the end of the nation of Assyria, which end would take place a little over one hundred years later in 612 B.C. The final blow would be delivered in 605 at the battle of Carchemish (Jr 46:2; 2 Ch 35:20).

B. Nahum preaches to us:

Both Nahum and Zephaniah prophesied of the end of Nineveh (See Zp 1:1; 2:13). In the first part of the book, Nahum paints a poetic picture of the majesty of God (Nh 1:2-15). The last half of the book is a graphic poetic picture of the over-

throw of the Assyrians (Nh 2:1 – 3:19).

In all the judgments that God made against the Assyrians, His judgment was justified on the basis of the statement, “*I will make your grave, for you are vile*” (Nh 1:14). When cultures become vile, they lose their right to exist in the global community of nations. Therefore, in reference to God's just judgment of the Assyrians, Nahum preaches to us today the following lessons:

1. *God's vengeance will come upon the wicked.* Those who would fight against God's people should memorize the beginning of Nahum's book concerning the outpouring of God's judgment.

God is jealous and the Lord revenges. The Lord revenges and is furious. The Lord will take vengeance on His adversaries and He reserves wrath for His enemies (Nh 1:2).

Those who would terrorize God's people through cruelty need to be aware of the One who will eventually terrorize them with just vengeance. At the end of national Israel, and during the ministry of Jesus and the apostles, when the religious leaders of the nation had themselves digressed to using terror and threats against Jesus and His disciples, it was again a time for God's vengeance to be poured out. When Jesus spoke of the termination of national Israel in A.D. 70, He said of the days, “*For these are the days of vengeance ...*” (Lk 21:22). They were days of vengeance on an apostate Israel who persecuted the new spiritual Israel of God,

the church. God would use the Roman army to bring vengeance on those who persecuted the early disciples.

Until the final end of national Israel, God reminded the early Christians to leave vengeance to Him. In their desire to render vengeance to their persecutors, Paul reminded the persecuted Christians, *“Dearly beloved, do not take revenge ...”* (Rm 12:19). Instead, they were to *“give place to God’s wrath”* (Rm 12:19). When considering whose responsibility it is to render vengeance on those who persecute the children of God, we must always remember that this is God’s business. It is not the business of the people of God. So Paul reminded the Christians in Rome of what the Lord said, *“Vengeance is mine, I will repay”* (Rm 12:19; see Hb 10:30).

In the years to come, Rome would unleash cruel persecution against Christians. The persecution began with the personal vendetta that Nero unleashed against Christians during the 60s, but this would lead to state persecution by Rome that would be terminated only by the Edict of Toleration at the beginning of the fourth century A.D.

Until the time when God determines that He should unleash His vengeance, persecuted Christians should do the following: *“If your enemy hungers, feed him. If he thirsts, give him drink, for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head”* (Rm 12:20). In other words, *“do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good”* (Rm 12:21).

Christians must always remember what God included in the Sinai law that

He gave to Israel: *“To Me belongs vengeance and retribution”* (Dt 32:35). Therefore, we must remember that Jesus is coming *“in flaming fire, taking vengeance on those who do not know God and who do not obey the gospel ...”* (2 Th 1:8). God is storing up vengeance for the last day. Those who would lift their hand against God’s people must remember that *“it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God”* (Hb 10:31). If one does fall into His hands, he will suffer *“the vengeance of eternal fire”* (Jd 7).

The tragedy of the story of Nineveh is that 150 years before Nahum, the city had repented as a result of the preaching of Jonah. At that time, the nation had a heart for God. The repentance of the Nineveh population took place during Jonah’s ministry. But over one hundred years later, the Assyrians had backslid into the degradation they were in before the arrival of Jonah. In the prophecy of Nahum, it seems that after about 150 years, the majority of the Ninevites had digressed to a state of moral degradation that justified their termination as a nation in 612 B.C.

2. A just God must bring vengeance on the wicked. The righteous seek to live righteously before God. If God is to reward justly the righteous, then there must be punishment for the unrighteous. God would not be fair if He rewarded the unrighteous with the same reward with which He rewarded the righteous. The justice of God, therefore, stands on the fact that vengeance will eventually be poured out on the unrighteous.

teous. God is a just God. He is just because He will eventually pour out vengeance on the unrighteous.

One hundred and fifty years before, a generation of Ninevites repented at the preaching of Jonah. But those who repented failed to pass on to their descendants a repentant heart. At the time of Obadiah's pronouncements, it was now time for the nation to reap the reward of unrighteousness. God had been merciful to Nineveh during the time He used them in proxy judgment upon the wickedness of the northern kingdom. However, the mercy and longsuffering of the Lord had come to an end a little over one hundred years after the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel (See Ex 34:6). It was now time for Assyria to suffer the vengeance of God.

3. *God works among the nations.*

The minor prophet Nahum reveals a major work of God among the nations of the world. We would conclude from the rise of the Assyrian Empire that it was a magnificent nation among the nations of the world. Assyria had conquered great nations throughout the Middle East, reaching as far south as Thebes in Egypt. From the Assyrian archaeological artifacts that have been preserved to this day, it was a nation that made its mark on history from Egypt to India.

At the zenith of its power and domination of the Middle East, a lone man about whom we know nothing, other than what we read in his book, arises alone and pronounces the fall of the great Assyrian Empire. At the time Nahum wrote these words, the people surely mocked his state-

ments concerning the fall of such a great empire. There were no hints in the Assyrian Empire of impending danger. False prophets would base their predictions on current events. But a true prophet was known by the fact that when he pronounced judgment against a particular nation, the nation itself was at the time of the prophecy often at the zenith of its power.

What the people did not realize at the time of Nahum's prophecy was that it was God who was working among the nations for the preservation of His people and evangelization of the world. And in order to accomplish this work, the Assyrian Empire had to go. It had to go in order to allow the rise of the Babylonian Empire.

We must see the 200,000 Israelites that Assyria took into captivity at the fall of Samaria in 722/21 B.C. as the beginning of an international network that God was setting up to take the name of His Son into all the world. The captive Israelites were sold throughout the Assyrian Empire. In their captivity, there was repentance on the part of Israel. But also, they maintained their identity as the sons of Abraham until the time when God would bring only a remnant of their great, great, grandchildren back to the land of promise. With a remnant of the captives of the Babylonian captivity, they too would return to Palestine as a remnant in 536 B.C.

During the Passover/Pentecost of A.D. 30, those of Israel who remained in the land of their captors would come as a remnant of all Israel to Jerusalem from

as far south as Egypt and Ethiopia to as far east as India. And when the Messiah showed up in history, His gospel message would be carried back to Israelites in all these countries to which the initial captives had established themselves in anticipation of the coming Messiah. God was working among the nations during the ministry of the prophets, not simply to pro-

nounce judgment upon those who fought against His people, but also to turn the work of Satan against himself for the salvation of people throughout the world. When we read of kingdoms as Assyria and Babylonia, therefore, we must understand that God was working among these nations in order to bring about the preaching of the gospel to the world.

Chapter 8

HABAKKUK

Nothing is known of Habakkuk outside the book that carries his name in this book of the Old Testament Scriptures. He was a prophet of Judah, having a name that means “love’s embrace” or “he who embraces.” He was possibly a Levite in Jerusalem who was in the company of the musicians (See Hk 3:19). Most Bible students have concluded that his ministry occurred during the rise of the Babylonian Empire, possibly at the beginning of the Empire. He was contemporary with the prophets Jeremiah, Huldah and Zephaniah, and thus ministered the word of God during the reigns of Jehoahaz and Jehoiakim (612-605 B.C.).

A. Historical/social background:

At the time Habakkuk ministered the word of God, the temple was still standing in Jerusalem (Hk 2:20; 3:19). And in view of his statements in 1:5,6, it seems that the Babylonian Empire was still developing in the east as a major power of the Middle East. The Empire rose to

prominence once it defeated the Assyrians in 612 B.C., and the Egyptians at the battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C. This was a major battle of the Middle East for it signalled a change in Middle East empire dominance from the Assyrians to the Babylonians.

At the time of Habakkuk’s ministry, the “wicked” in 1:4 is probably a reference to the Chaldeans (Babylonians). The northern kingdom of Israel had already fallen, and because of the digression of the southern kingdom into the same moral degradation and social injustices as her northern sister, Habakkuk warns of the Babylonians who would eventually terminate the independent theocracy of the southern kingdom. This eventually took place in 586 B.C. This ended forever the presence of Israel in Palestine as an autonomous free state.

B. Habakkuk preaches to us:

The unique dialogue of the book is in the style of God giving a message to

Habakkuk for the people to ask in complaint to God. The primary complaint that the people would offer to God is in reference to the suffering of the people. The people complained as to why their prayers were not answered in the midst of great suffering. In reference to their suffering at the hand of the unbelievers (the Babylonians), the people complained concerning why God would use unbelievers to bring suffering upon the believers.

There is no answer given to either the people or Habakkuk as to why God would use the unbelievers to punish His people. The fact that the unbelievers would prosper at the expense of the believers, leaves a question in the minds of the people that is not specifically answered by God. God's only answer is that He is God, and thus, His people must have faith in Him that He knows what He is doing in the affairs of the nations of the world.

In the first two chapters of the book, Habakkuk is perplexed concerning the violence and sin of the people. The people had lost their moral identity as the people of God because they had forsaken the direction of His law. Though it was not revealed to Habakkuk how God would cure His people of their idolatry, Habakkuk wondered why the wicked were not punished (Hk 1:2-4). Habakkuk complained,

Why do You show me iniquity and cause me to behold injustice? For plunder and violence are before me. And there are those who raise up strife and contention (Hk 1:3).

bring the Chaldeans (Babylonians) from the east in order to bring judgment upon Judea (Hk 1:5-11).

God's answer to cure the sin of the people perplexed Habakkuk. So Habakkuk complained again:

Why do You look on those who deal treacherously and hold Your tongue when the wicked devours the one who is more righteous than he? (Hk 1:13).

Habakkuk had a difficult time understanding why God would use the unrighteous to punish His people who were more righteous than those who would bring judgment upon them (See Hk 1:12-17). But Habakkuk needed to be patient. God would eventually bring the proud conquerors, the Chaldeans, into judgment for their mistreatment of His people (Hk 2:1-20).

Though Habakkuk is perplexed concerning the work of God among His apostate people, and the proxy judgment of the Chaldeans who would bring God's judgment on His people, he defines the judgment of God in a poetic theophany (appearance of God) that justice will be done. And thus Habakkuk concludes the book by giving His allegiance to God, regardless of his inability to understand all that God does in His relationship with His people (Hk 3:16-19). In reference to the work of God among those of the world, and the necessity that believers trust in Him, there are two very important lessons that Habakkuk still preaches today.

God's answer was that He was about to **1. The suffering of the righteous affirms the justice of God.** As Job, Ha-

bakkuk presented what to many unbelievers is the primary argument against the existence of the God in which the Christian believes. It has been said that these two Old Testament personalities reflect on what is referred to as the evidence for the atheist. The argument is this: The Christian believes in an all-benevolent God who is all-powerful (omnipotent). Now if God is all-benevolent, and yet allows evil and suffering to exist, and is not able to relieve the righteous of evil and suffering, though He might will to do so, then He is not all-powerful. And, if God is all-powerful, and can relieve the righteous of evil and suffering, but does not, then He cannot be benevolent. Therefore, the atheist concludes, the God of the Christian does not exist. He cannot exist since He would be a logical contradiction between being benevolent and omnipotent at the same time. This supposed dilemma for the believer was presented millennia ago by Epicurus (341-270 B.C.) in his *Aphorisms*:

The gods can either take away evil from the world and will not, or being willing to do so cannot; or they neither can nor will, or lastly, they are both able and willing. If they have the will to remove evil and cannot, then they are not omnipotent. If they can, but will not, then they are not benevolent. If they are neither able nor willing, then they are neither omnipotent nor benevolent. Lastly, if they are both able and willing to annihilate evil, how does it exist?

The atheist simply replies to the above that

the believer's God is a logical contradiction, and thus, **cannot exist**.

And indeed, the believers of old struggled with this supposed logical contradiction. Elijah questioned why God would allow suffering to come upon the widow of Zarephath who had helped him survive. "*O Lord my God, have You also brought evil on the widow with whom I sojourn, by slaying her son?*" (1 Kg 17:20). And Gideon questioned, "... *if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us?*" (Jg 6:13). And finally, Job was left in question as to why he was allowed to endure so much suffering when he had sought to live righteously before God (See Jb 10:1-3). Habakkuk wondered why God would look on those who were evil, but allow suffering to come upon the righteous by the works of the evil (Hk 1:13). There are answers to this supposed contradiction concerning the Christian's belief in a benevolent, omnipotent God. Consider the following:

a. The atheist must answer the reason as to why good exists in a totally material world. The dilemma for the atheist is that if all that exists is matter in motion, then he must explain from where good originated among human organisms that supposedly evolved from inanimate matter. The believer must answer the question as to why evil exists in a world that was created by a benevolent God. But the atheist must answer how there could be benevolence in an amoral material world without the existence of a benevolent God.

b. We must confess the limits of our knowledge and understanding.

God answered Job and Habakkuk in a manner that forced both to reflect on their inability to know all that God was doing to work out His plans according to His will. God questioned Job concerning who he thought God was in his infinite knowledge. If God is who He reveals Himself to be in the world around us, then we must understand that our knowledge is limited concerning the purpose of all things. In our limited knowledge of how God is working all things together for His purpose (Rm 8:28), the finite must trust the Infinite. It is sometimes as Herbert Farmer concluded, “Christianity has never claimed to take the sting out of evil by explaining it, but rather by giving victory over it.”

We can understand the necessity of the existence of evil and suffering. James essentially stated that we can understand to the point of even rejoicing when we fall into different trials (Js 1:1,2).

If we could understand as God, then we would be God. Therefore, we must content ourselves with the limited knowledge we have of things in order to trust in Him who is working His plan through the existence of the temporary in order to take us into the eternal. But we must be clear on this matter in reference to Christian belief. We can understand enough about this matter that we can trust that God is working all things together for our good.

The atheist must not assume that we are here dodging a supposed logical contradiction, nor that we have our heads in the sand. To say that we do not under-

stand all that God is and does is not a weakness in the theology of the believer. The fact is that if there is a God—and there is—then we must suppose that we do not fully comprehend the totality of who He is, or the extent of His ways. His ways, as Paul wrote, are simply past finding out (Rm 11:33). If we were to understand all that God is and does, then He would be a god who was limited to the limits of our imagination. And if He were limited to our thinking, then truly He would only be a god of our invention. He truly would not exist, and the atheist would win the argument.

c. The believer must determine that which is actually good or evil.

Simply because something brings pleasure does not mean that it is good. That which brings pleasure can often be evil. Ask a drunk driver who has just ruined his life with alcohol.

Pain does not always indicate that something is evil. Our body expresses pain in order to protect itself. It is sin, not suffering, that is the only real evil. It is obedience to God, not fleshly pleasure, that is the only real good. However, rebellion against God brings all sorts of evil and suffering into our lives (See Gl 6:7). We would not conclude, therefore, that all suffering is evil. We cannot attribute to God the result of the consequences we suffer when we violate His principles within the environment we live.

d. Wrong reactions sometimes confuse our definitions.

A bee sting may bring pain, but the bee must protect the honey. The same sun that causes a sunburn, also produces vitamin D in the

body. When defining that which is suffering, we must consider the fact that natural laws of both the organic and inorganic world are necessary for the existence of order and the continuation of life on earth. The balance of nature and the circle of life are processes of life that are necessary to continue life as we know it. If we violate the laws of nature, and subsequently suffer for our violations, we cannot define our suffering as evil. The same gravity that keeps us from floating into space is the same gravity that will cause death if one were to leap from a ten-story building.

Natural laws are necessary for the preservation of life. Natural laws are necessary for the continuation of the universe of which we are a participant. When the laws that hold the universe together are violated, there is suffering. But we cannot assume that this suffering is an argument against the Creator of these laws. In fact, the existence of the laws of order are an evidence that the eternal Designer of order does exist. At least this is what Paul affirmed in Romans 1:20:

For the invisible things of Him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made”

e. A free moral individual cannot exist without being in an environment that allows choice. God is love, and in order for Him to pour out His love on those whom He created, the created must be able to respond with love. Robots express no love. There would be no

meaning in preprogrammed individuals who would supposedly love their Creator. There is no such thing as programmed love. Therefore, man must be a truly free-moral individual in order to express true love.

But being truly free to make moral decisions of love comes with a tremendous risk. It comes with the risk that the individual can freely make the worst possible decisions to be evil. However, this truly free individual can also make the best decisions to do good. And in order to make either decisions to do evil or good, the free-moral individual must be placed in an environment wherein choices can be made to the extremes of either good or evil. So we wonder how many evil decisions are made within this environment that lead to war, and theft, and a host of other evils with which the righteous must endure. God cannot be blamed for the evil that results from the bad decisions that are made by free-moral individuals who choose to do evil.

We believe that God created the best of all possible environments in which a truly free-moral individual can dwell. We can think of no better environment. So in order for the God of love to bring individuals of this environment into eternal dwelling with Him, He was willing to take the risk of doing that which only love can do. Love must create. Love must be poured out in creation in order that eternal reward can lovingly be given to those who have suffered through the ordeal of an environment that often goes wrong because some free-moral beings make bad decisions. Such is the cost of

love. But in view of this cost, the reward for those who truly make the choice of obedience to their Creator has to be something awesome beyond the imagination of the created. We believe that both Habakkuk and Job came to this conclusion, for both decided to walk by faith in the One who had control over all things. They were content to exist in what may appear to us to be a flawed environment, than not to exist. They concluded, therefore, that it is better to believe than disbelieve.

The awesomeness of the reward possibilities far outweigh any suffering we must endure in order to receive the crown. Paul was right: *“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that will be revealed to us”* (Rm 8:18).

f. God can do only that which can be done. He cannot create round squares. Likewise, a truly free-moral individual could not exist without being in an environment in which he could not choose between right and wrong. And so we wonder as to how much evil exists in this world where free-moral individuals have chosen to do evil. But if we would argue that it would have been better for God not to create, then we would ask if it would be better to have existed with the possibility of eternal existence with a loving Father, than not existed?

Then consider also the definition of God. Can a loving God exist without creating a free-moral individual who has the choice to respond to love with the statement, “I love you, too”? We exist because God is love. We exist as free-moral individuals because of the action of true

love on the part of God. God could not be love if we did not exist. And thus, the fact that we do exist as loving creatures is evidence that a loving God does exist.

If we concluded that it would have been better for God not to create, then we would be atheists in reference to the God in which we believed. A god who would not create would certainly not be a God of love. To think that a God of love who not create that which would respond with, “I love You, too,” would truly be the god of a logical contradiction.

2. The just will live by faith. Because Habakkuk concluded that God had all things under control, though he did not understand the teleology of God’s plan, he was willing to live by faith. In 2:4 he wrote, *“But the just will live by his faith.”*

Habakkuk 2:4 is an incredibly important statement simply because of the contexts in which it is quoted in the New Testament. It is a statement that expresses the very foundation upon which the believer has a relationship with God.

In **Romans**, Paul argues against the legalistic Jewish brethren who would impose on the disciples of Jesus the necessity of being justified before God by law-keeping. Paul comes to the following conclusion after arguing his case against meritorious justification by works of law:

And if by grace, then it [salvation] is no more by works, otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it is by works, it is no longer grace, otherwise work is no longer work” (Rm 11:6).

Paul's conclusion concerning self-justification was clear: "... *by works of law no flesh will be justified in His sight ...*" (Rm 3:20).

Paul's arguments in Romans, that we are saved by faith through grace, brought his readers to the conclusion of Habakkuk 2:4: "*For in it [the gospel] is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith, as it is written 'The just will live by faith'*" (Rm 1:17).

In **Galatians**, Paul is also arguing against the same legal theology that was promoted by some in Rome. Paul's aggressiveness in the book of Galatians inferred that Christianity was in danger of losing its identity if the judaizing teachers of the area had their way by enforcing legal obedience to law as a means by which one is justified before God. So Paul was direct when he approached Peter at a time when Peter manifested in his behavior that which was contrary to the grace of the gospel:

... knowing that a man is not justified by works of law, but by the faith of Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus so that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by works of law, for by works of law no flesh will be justified (Gl 2:16).

In the context of this statement against legal justification, Paul quoted Habakkuk 2:4: "*But that no one is justified by law in the sight of God is evident, for 'the just will live by faith.'*" (Gl 3:11).

In **Hebrews**, some who had been Christians for several years were intimi-

dated into returning to the Sinai law that was given to Israel. Though the Roman and Galatian disciples were not moving away from Christ in this manner, they were imposing a system of law-keeping on the disciples that was contrary to the grace of the gospel. The Hebrew Christians were thinking about abandoning Christ for the Levitical priesthood of the Sinai law. So again in the same context of legal justification that Paul addressed in both the Roman and Galatian letters, the Hebrew writer quoted Habakkuk 2:4: "*Now the just will live by faith. But if any man draws back [to law], My soul will have no pleasure in him*" (Hb 10:38). So the Hebrew writer concluded his arguments against drawing back to justification by law by stating, "*But we are not of those who draw back to destruction, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul*" (Hb 10:39).

Habakkuk 2:4 reveals that salvation has always been based on faith and grace. Ephesians 2:8 is a New Testament passage, but the principle has always been true since the creation of Adam, the first free-moral person. "*For by grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.*" From the beginning of time, salvation could never be of ourselves. All have sinned (Rm 3:23). And the wages of sin is separation from God, and thus, death (Rm 6:23). And because we sin, we have no atonement for sin that originates from within ourselves. We cannot offer good deeds for our imperfect obedience.

The offer of good deeds in atonement for lawbreaking has led to all sorts

of evil among religionists, which evil prevailed throughout the Dark Ages of humanity. Men offered money in order to have the right to sin. Such was called “the sale of indulgences,” meaning that one could indulge in sin if money were paid to the church. Similar beliefs are often seated in the minds of many religionists today who believe that their salvation is based on an equal-arm scale system of salvation. In other words, one’s sins of the day can be atoned for tomorrow by being a better person tomorrow than today.

Habakkuk wanted Israel to understand that God’s creation of the remnant of Israel was based on grace. Those na-

tions that God used to judge Israel were terminated. They would no longer exist in the world. And though Israel was given so much, but gave up for sin all her advantages, she would still survive as a remnant. This is the grace of God being played out in history. If God had handed out to them that which they deserved, then there would have been no remnant to receive God’s grace into the world through the cross (See Ti 2:11). The existence of the remnant is a manifestation of the grace of God. Instead of rightful national extinction, there was undeserved and unmerited salvation from national extinction. It was because of grace that grace was revealed.

Chapter 9

ZEPHANIAH

According to the genealogy that is stated in 1:1, Zephaniah was in the lineage of the Davidic kings. He was a prophet to Judah, ministering sometime during the restoration of King Josiah (690 – 640 B.C.). He was a prophet of love and judgment, and thus describes the judgment of the great day of the Lord that would eventually come to the southern kingdom of Israel. However, in the context of a dim future, Zephaniah gives hope for the future glory of the people of God.

A. Historical/social background:

Judah’s sister to the north had already been taken into Assyrian captivity in 722/21 B.C. The Assyrian Empire grew until it reached its zenith under the reign

of Assurbanipal. However, when he died in 626 B.C., the empire began a rapid decline. At the same time in history, and under the kingship of Nabopolassar, the Babylonian Empire was rising to the south of Assyria. A major battle between the Assyrians and Babylonians eventually took place in 612 B.C., which battle marked the beginning of the end of the Assyrian Empire. After the battle, a remnant of Assyrians fled to the city of Carchemish in order to join forces with the Egyptians. However, the Babylonians pursued them, and at the battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C., the Assyrians were finally subjected to the rule of the Babylonians and the Egyptians defeated. The Babylonians were now the prominent empire of the Middle East, which empire God would later use to bring

judgment on Judah.

It was during these years when the Assyrian Empire was coming to a close that Josiah became the king of Judah (2 Kg 22). He was the young king of restoration. After a copy of the book of the law was found during some reconstruction work on the temple, Josiah set his course to eradicate Judah of foreign gods and idols, and restore the offerings according to the law of God. In order to do this, he had to destroy everything that was associated with idol worship.

And they broke down the altars of the Baals in his [Josiah's] presence. And the images that were on high above them, he cut down. And the wooden images and the carved images and the molten images, he broke in pieces. And he made powder of them and scattered it on the graves of those who had sacrificed to them. And he burned the bones of the priests on their altars and cleansed Judah and Jerusalem (2 Ch 34:4,5).

Josiah initiated a great restoration to the authority of the law of God throughout Judah. And because of his zeal to restore Judah, God promised that he would go to his grave in peace, meaning that no one would usurp his authority as king. Neither would Jerusalem suffer the invasion of the Babylonians during his lifetime (2 Ch 34:28).

Being a young and zealous person, however, Josiah met his death in battle with Pharaoh Necho who came up from Egypt to help the Assyrians in their war against the Babylonians. In 609 B.C., and

in his efforts to stop Necho from joining the forces with a remnant of Assyrians, Josiah was killed in battle (2 Ch 35:20-25). His legacy of restoration, nevertheless, was recorded in 2 Chronicles 34:33:

Then Josiah took away all the abominations out of all the country that belonged to the children of Israel. And he made all who were present in Israel to serve, even to serve the Lord their God. And all his days they did not depart from following the Lord, the God of their fathers.

Josiah's restoration was too brief to change the religious culture of the people. Only in his days did the people serve the Lord. When he died, Judah's spiritual and moral behavior plummeted. It was only twenty-three years after his death that God terminated the theocratic nation of Israel in Palestine. In 586 B.C. the Babylonians besieged and conquered Jerusalem, and the last captives of Israel were taken into captivity. This date ended forever the independent theocratic state of Israel in Palestine. Though a remnant of faithful Israelites would return to the land after the Babylonian captivity, Palestine would after 586 B.C. always be an occupied land governed by foreign powers. Zephaniah's message of judgment and hope was proclaimed possibly during the latter years of Josiah's reign, for he prophesied of the great day of the Lord that was coming in only a few years.

Zephaniah stood up and proclaimed, *"The great day of the Lord is near! It is near, and coming very quickly. Listen! The cry of the day of the Lord"*

(Zp 1:14). The day of the Lord was a day of judgment. And since it was only a little over twenty years in the future, it was near. Zephaniah was speaking of judgment in time. And for biblical interpreters, he defines the “day of the Lord” to be the judgment of God in time.

In his message to the people, Judah was charged with digression into sin (See Zp 1 – 2:3). She would be judged for her rebellion against God. However, Zephaniah also speaks against the surrounding nations who inflicted suffering on the people of God (Zp 2:4-15). Once God had judged all the nations that brought suffering on His people, He would restore a remnant of His people to their land. While all the surrounding nations would be terminated from history, Israel would survive (Zp 3).

B. Zephaniah preaches to us:

Zephaniah preaches to us through the fall of Jerusalem. His message is negative, and thus, it is given as a warning to God’s people throughout history that we should learn from her ways in order to avoid the judgment of God (See Rm 15:4; 1 Co 10:11). The reasons for God’s judgment of the people is outlined in one verse:

She does not obey the voice. She does not receive correction. She does not trust in the Lord. She does not draw near to her God (Zp 3:2).

These four statements of judgment are linked. In her rebellion, the people

did not obey, receive, trust, and thus, draw near to God. The lack of obedience is a sign of not accepting the directions of God, and thus, one is not trusting in the Lord for guidance. And in such a state of rebellion, there is no relationship with God.

1. “*She does not obey the voice.*”

God faithfully raised up preaching prophets in order to detour His people from leaving Him. Through the prophets, He sought to guard them from following after their own self-imposed religiosity. But they would not listen to the voice of the prophets (2 Kg 17:13). The same scenario developed again among some of God’s people about six hundred years later with the early church. Zephaniah’s contemporary audience was refusing to hear the voice of the preaching prophets, and during the time of the Hebrew writer, the same was taking place with some Jewish Christians who were refusing to hear the voice of Jesus.

God, who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son ... (Hb 1:1,2).

Those to whom the Hebrew writer inscribed these words were considering a return to the Judaism from which they had been converted through their obedience to the gospel. They had purified their souls in obedience to the gospel (At 22:16; 1 Pt 1:22). But they were seeking to go back under a system of law where there was no remission of sins through the blood of bulls and goats (Hb 10:1-4).

Josiah restored the authority of the word of God during his reign. However, though there may be a legal restoration to the law, the people must be obedient to the law from their hearts. Since Josiah's restoration did not continue, we learn that it takes more than restoring legal obedience to law in order to remain faithful. People's minds and hearts must be changed when there is a true restoration. It is as James wrote, "*But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves*" (Js 1:22). One can hear the word of God, but if there is no obedience from the heart, then the hearing is useless.

With many in the end it will be as Jesus said, "*Not every one who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven*" (Mt 7:21). If one is not doing the "will of My Father," then Jesus will eventually say to that person, "*Depart from Me you who practice lawlessness*" (Mt 7:23). Knowledge of the word of God without obedience will lead one to destruction.

2. "She does not receive correction." Through the prophets, God sought to correct the error of their ways. But they would not receive His instructions. Their spirit of rebellion was manifested in the fact that they wanted to create a religiosity that conformed to their own desires. When one changes the focus of his life from God to mammon, he will change his religion. He will change his religion in order that faith takes second place to that which one would consider most important in his life. This is the foun-

ation upon which Paul made the following statement:

For the time will come when they will not endure sound teaching. But to suit their itching ears, they will surround themselves with teachers who will agree with their own desires (2 Tm 4:3).

When God's people stop studying their Bibles, they have passed the point of repentance, for they forget that to which they must repent. A refusal to learn what God wants in our lives is an indication that we have left a desire to allow God to direct our ways. The result is the example of backslidden Israel. God subsequently judged His people destroyed because of their lack of knowledge of His word (Hs 4:6). They remained religious, but their religion was created after their own desires.

Assemblies are filled with people today who sit and listen faithfully to prophets who speak no Bible, but are highly motivational in their "ear tickling" messages. Bible preachers preach the Bible. And one is a Bible preacher only when he preaches the Bible. When one refuses to follow the Divine road map to the obedient life, then there is no hope of restoration to the right ways of God. This was the general message of the prophets to Israel who had forsaken their focus on the word of God. Backslidden Israel simply looked for preachers (prophets) who would preach what they wanted to hear.

"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable ... for correction, for instruction in righteous-

ness" (2 Tm 3:16). But when one throws away his Bible, he will eventually be thrown away by God after hearing the words, "*Depart from Me you who practice lawlessness*" (Mt 7:23). Our primary motive for studying the word of God is to receive instruction by which we can have life. And our primary reason for hearing instruction from the word of God is to prevent ourselves from creating a religiosity that conforms to our own desires. Without instruction from God, we will lose our way, and subsequently, we will lose our salvation. No one can claim that he is following God if he is refusing to study the word of God.

3. "She does not trust in the Lord." One shows his lack of trust in God by following after his own desires. And one knows that he is following his own desires when he has laid his Bible aside and studies it no more.

Jeremiah stated a truth in reference to man that is fundamental to this point: "*O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself. It is not in man who walks to direct his steps*" (Jr 10:23). The arrogant and proud do not believe this statement. But we must remember that this is the way God made man. If one would seek to trust in himself in order to establish his relationship with God, then he will be disappointed. There are no self-paved roads to God. As a free-moral individual, it is simply not possible for any person to devise any means by which he can morally direct his own way to God. When the honest and sincere person realizes this, it is then that he seeks to trust in God. But one must come to the real-

ization that he cannot find his way to God without God's road map, the Bible.

Trust in God must also find its way into our hearts in reference to all that transpires in the environment in which we live. The psalmist explains:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth is removed and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea (Ps 46:1,2).

In the case of Zephaniah's audience, the nations surrounding Judah were in chaos, and thus, the danger of the destruction of Israel was looming just over the horizon. The nation was in its final years as a nation. After the end, the people would remember all that the prophets had spoken to them over the last 150 years. But in order to delay the inevitable, it was a time when they needed to put their trust in God. Unfortunately, they put their trust in political alliances with other nations. They thought that through military power they could preserve their nation. But when God is working against a nation to bring it down, no military power will keep it from falling.

On the eve of their termination, the Israelites were putting their trust in the false pronouncements of false prophets and imagined gods. It was as Jeremiah preached in their final days:

"This is your lot, the portion of your measures from Me," says the Lord, "because you have forgotten Me and trust in falsehood" (Jr 13:25).

The problem was that they “*did not believe in God and did not trust in His salvation*” (Ps 78:22). And because they did not trust in the salvation of God from all calamity, they would suffer from calamity.

4. “*She does not draw near to her God.*” If one does not obey the voice of God, then certainly he is not inclined to receive God’s correction. And because one is not inclined to receive the correction of the Lord, he is certainly not trusting in the Lord. The conclusion is that one is moving away from God. Israel had wandered so far away from the source of her origin that she could not find her way back. And because she could not find her way back to God, the prophets proclaimed that she no longer represented God among the nations. James possibly had their example of apostasy in mind when he wrote the following words:

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners. And purify your hearts, you double-minded (Js 4:8).

5. *God promises joy in the midst of judgment:* Zephaniah closes his message with the sentiment that is expressed in the words of James 1:2: “*My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials.*” Israel was about to fall into the various trials of captivity. However, embedded in the message of despair in captivity, there was the promise of restoration over which they could rejoice.

And I will save the lame and gather the

outcast. And I will give them praise and honor in every land where they were put to shame. At that time I will bring you again, even in the time that I gather you. For I will give you fame and praise among all people of the earth when I return your captives before your eyes, says the Lord (Zp 3:19,20).

This was a promise that was to take them through the years of captivity. As Christians would eventually emerge from the years of Roman persecution, the captives were to remain faithful until God gathered them from the nations and restored them to the land. But as a nation of people they first had to endure tribulation, as John wrote to the early Christians: “*And you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life*” (Rv 2:10).

Though the Israelite captives who went into captivity died in the land of their captors, their descendants would be restored to the land, and thus perpetuate the identity of Israel. They would return to reestablish Israel in Palestine in hope of the Messiah to come. Zechariah’s message of hope was directed to these descendants. The comfort that Zechariah’s immediate audience gained from his message was that their grandchildren would be restored to the land. Their captivity would not be the end of Israel.

At the time of the end of Israel in the land with the Babylonian conquest, the Israelites did not understand all the purposes behind God’s work with them. Because He did not explain all the details, they needed to trust that He was working

all things together for the good of those who would believe. When their descendants returned from captivity, they would be a different people, never more follow-

ing after religions of the nations that surrounded them, for the nations that surrounded them would all be gone.

Chapter 10

HAGGAI

The captivity is now past. It is the time of restoration and rebuilding. The remnant, who are the descendants of the twelve tribes that were taken into both the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities, now begin the process of restoring themselves as Israel in the land of Palestine. It is the time for the fulfillment of the promise of God that a remnant of all twelve tribes would return. The freed captives thus begin the process of restoring the identity of Israel in Palestine in order that the promises concerning the Blessing that would come into the world would be fulfilled (See Gn 12:1-4).

A. Historical/social background:

The Medes and the Persians eventually overthrew the Babylonians, and subsequently took possession of all the previous territory that was ruled by the Assyrians, and then by the Babylonians. This vast territory extended from Ethiopia to India. All the territory was now the governing possession of the Medo-Persian Empire.

What is significant is the fact that the territories to which the ten northern tribes of Israel were taken in the Assyrian conquest were now under the control

of the Medes and Persians. When King Cyrus of the Medo-Persian Empire followed his humanitarian policy that people would better serve the Empire if they were in their own homelands, he allowed those who were taken in former captivities to return to their original homelands. In the case of all the Israelite captives that were taken in both the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities, it was time to go home. Therefore, a remnant of Israelites from both the former northern and southern kingdoms of Israel were allowed to return their homeland of Palestine.

It is significant to understand the above because some have wrongfully concluded that those of the northern ten tribes of Israel were lost among the nations of the world, and thus, never returned as a remnant to the land Palestine as God had promised through the prophets. It is assumed by some that there are still ten tribes of Israel still lost among the populations of the world who will somehow make their way back to Palestine in a presumed millennial reign of Jesus on earth.

If there were ten lost tribes yet to be returned to Palestine, then the prophets lied to the people, both in reference to the promise of a return of the remnant, as well as in the fact that representatives of

all twelve tribes of Israel were in Palestine at the time of the incarnation of the Son of God.

The prophets stated that only a remnant of all the twelve tribes would return. Hosea prophesied that Judah **would come with Israel back to the land** (Hs 1:11). All the children of Israel would return and seek the Lord (Hs 3:5). Isaiah prophesied that a remnant would come from Assyria, Egypt, Pathros, Cush, Elam, Shenar, Hamath and the islands of the sea (Is 11:11; see 19:23,24). Jeremiah prophesied that **God would restore Judah and Israel** (Jr 23:5-8; 29:14). Ezekiel prophesied that God would take His people from among the nations and bring them again into the land (Ez 36:10,24). **The whole house of Israel would be united and returned** (Ez 37:11,12,16).

In the context of Haggai and Zechariah, both prophets announced that the house of Judah and the house of Israel had been rescued from their former captivity of the Assyrians and Babylonians (Zc 8:13). It was a time now for the Israelites to be strengthened in the land (Zc 9:13-16). Zechariah reminded the people of God's promise of restoration:

I will also bring them again out of the land of Egypt and gather them out of Assyria. And I will bring them into the land of Gilead and Lebanon, until no place will be found for them (Zc 10:10).

This was what was happening in history at the very time the first captives returned in 536 B.C. Haggai and Zechariah began their ministry of exhortation on the

basis that the people had not yet completed the purpose of reestablishing the identity of the people of God in the land. This particular purpose was to signal to the world that Israel was back. And the best signal the remnant could give to the world was that their temple was rebuilt.

Haggai and Zechariah had been in Palestine for about sixteen years, but the temple still remained in ruins. They were probably very young men in 536 B.C. when the first captives returned to the land. God, therefore, waited until 520 B.C. to stir up the people by calling the two prophets into action. God gave the people time to act on their own, but they failed to act. Now it was time to get on with the work. It was time that the temple be rebuilt in order to establish the restored identity of Israel in the land.

If the identity of Israel was not restored, then the promises to the fathers could not be recognized as fulfilled when the Messiah came. God, therefore, raised up both Zechariah and Haggai to stir the people into action. Haggai stood up first to inspire the people to rebuild the temple. The date was 520 B.C. Within a month after the encouragement of Haggai, the foundation of the temple was completed. Soon after, Zechariah added his encouragement to the voice of Haggai (Zc 1:1-6). Of these events, Ezra recorded,

Then the prophets, Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them (Ez 5:1).

This was the time when Zerubbabel “*rose up and began to build the house of God that is at Jerusalem*” as a result of the encouragement of the prophets (Ez 5:2). Zerubbabel was the leader of the first captives who returned in 536 B.C. Once he was encouraged by the prophets to accomplish the rebuilding of the temple, things started to happen.

After the initial captives returned to Palestine, they established the altar and sacrifices. But because of opposition from the locals, they stopped their work of rebuilding the temple. In the meantime, however, they built lavish houses for themselves (Hg 1:4). During this lapse in rebuilding the temple, the kings of the Medo-Persian Empire changed. Cyrus II, who allowed the first captives to return to the land, died in 530 B.C. (See Is 44:28; 2 Ch 36:23). He was succeeded by his son Cambyses II (“Ahasuerus” in Ez 4:6), who reigned from 530 to 522 B.C. Then came Darius I who encouraged the Jews to continue their reconstruction of Jerusalem (See Ez 5,6; Hg 1,2; Zc 1–6). It was in the second year of the reign of Darius I that Haggai and Zechariah stood up to both rebuke (Hg 1) and encourage the people to accomplish the mission of rebuilding the temple (Hg 2).

The construction on the temple had stopped because of opposition and confusion in authorization. Sheshbazzar had been appointed governor of Palestine by Persia (Er 5:14). But then some confusion concerning confirmation of the rebuilding was brought into question by those local residents who opposed the rebuilding of the temple (Er 5:16,17). A mes-

sage was then sent to Babylon to the king in order to search for the original commission of Cyrus to rebuild the temple. Though the foundation of the temple had been laid, the people procrastinated in waiting for confirmation from Babylon. It was not until 520 that God had to raise up Haggai and Zechariah in order to spur on the people to get the job done. Though the records were found in Babylon that authorized the rebuilding, lethargy had already set in and the people lost their enthusiasm to rebuild (Er 6:1,2).

Procrastination and indifference had delayed the process too long, and now, it was time to move on with the work. Knowing what must be done, but failing to do it, is not good enough in the eyes of God. It is work well done that will be rewarded, not good intentions (See Mt 25:21,34-46).

B. Haggai preaches to us:

From the two chapters of Haggai, there are two very important lessons that must be preached to the people of God. Both lessons reflect on the nature of God’s people in reference to their attitudes and behavior.

1. Discouragement does not justify idleness. Twenty years before Haggai, the people were excited about returning to the land and rebuilding the temple. It was a dream come true after the seventy years of captivity. But opposition came from the local residents in Palestine who were left in the land by the Babylonians when the city fell in 586 B.C.

There was much intermarriage between local Jews who were left from the northern captivity and those Gentiles who were imported into Palestine from other nations of the world (See 2 Kg 17:24-29). Therefore, the local residents were not true Israelites. They would later in history be called the Samaritans (See Mt 10:5; Lk 9:52; 10:33; Jn 4:9,39,40). At the time of Haggai and Zechariah, they were jealous of the Jews. They had lost their national identity through intermarriage. They thus stood in opposition to everything the Jews were doing to restore the identity of true Israel. This conflict played itself out during the ministry of Nehemiah.

It was difficult for the local residents to accept the fact that the Israelites, now called the Jews, had the task of reestablishing the identity of true Israel. They were intimidated by the fact that the returning remnant was so committed to identify again true Israel that they had put away their foreign wives in the land of their captivity in order to return to Palestine (Er 9). But the locals could not and would not do this. The commitment of the returned remnant was a daily sermon of their non-commitment. Subsequently, great opposition by the local residents discouraged the returned remnant. The opposition was so great that the Jews began to believe, *“The time has not come, the time that the Lord’s house should be built”* (Hg 1:2). They led themselves to believe that it was not the responsibility of their generation to take ownership of rebuilding the temple. So they gave up the task, thinking that sometime in the future the job would be done by someone else.

By the time of Haggai and Zechariah, it had been sixteen years since the people had made any effort to rebuild the temple. As a result, indifference had set in and the people accepted the fact that everything should just remain as it is in order not to cause any future animosity with the locals.

However, their indifference toward building the temple did not discourage them from putting all their efforts into building fine houses for themselves. Haggai shamed them: *“Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses and this house [of God] lies waste?”* (Hg 1:4). The reason for the Lord’s displeasure with them was simple. The Lord’s house was *“in ruins while each of you runs to his own house”* (Hg 1:9). And now, according to the call of Haggai, it was time to repent of indifference and discouragement and get on with the task of rebuilding the temple. Some of them had made great sacrifices in order to return to Palestine to reestablish the identity of Israel. As stated previously, some had even made the sacrifice of putting away their foreign wives for this purpose (See Er 9). It was now time that their sacrifices not be wasted in idleness.

We must not confuse ourselves with the God-ordained task that they should rebuild the temple by thinking that God needed a house in which to dwell. *“The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands”* (At 17:24). God needs no sanctuaries or church houses. What the temple signified was the restoration of

Israel to the land. And unless they rebuilt the temple, the nations of the world would not believe that the remnant of God's people, as promised, had been restored to the land of Palestine.

The opposition of the local residents proved that they had moved on from this identity. And thus, they saw that the rebuilding of the temple would separate them from the returned remnant. Nehemiah specifically said to the locals,

Then I [Nehemiah] answered them [the locals] and said to them, "The God of heaven, He will prosper us [the returned remnant]. Therefore we His servants will arise and build. But you have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem (Ne 2:20).

Nehemiah made a distinction between the locals and the returned remnant. In making this distinction, he was reaffirming the purpose of God to identify again that the remnant was the true Israel that was restored to the land. The locals, who had intermarried with the Gentiles, "had no heritage" with true Israel because they had lost their identity as Jews.

We would connect the building of the physical temple of God as a metaphor that signified the building of the spiritual house of God that would come many years later. At least both Amos and James made this metaphorical connection (Am 9:11,12; At 15:16,17). The spiritual house of the Lord was established in A.D. 30 on the day of Pentecost (1 Tm 3:15). It continues to this day as the witness of God's presence among the people of the world. God used

Zerubbabel to lead the people into action as a result of the motivation of both Haggai and Zechariah. Zerubbabel was of the Davidic lineage, and is named in the lineage of Jesus by both Matthew and Luke (Mt 1:13; Lk 3:27). However, when the remnant returned to Palestine, they had repented of their desire to have a king over them as the nations around them. Zerubbabel, therefore, only remained a leader among the people without assuming the position of a king. That position was reserved for the King to come. And when the rightful heir to the throne of David came, He built the house of God (See Mt 16:18,19; 1 Tm 3:15).

The spiritual temple of the Lord's house today is faced with the same challenge as the physical house during the time of Haggai and Zechariah. If the spiritual temple is not organically functioning and growing, then it is dysfunctional and dying. It is simply the nature of the people of God that they should grow. But if there is no work, then the body is not fulfilling its purpose. Paul explained,

But speaking the truth in love, we may grow up into Him in all things, who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working of each part, causes growth of the body to the edifying of itself in love (Ep 4:15,16).

We must ask ourselves as someone said, "Are we launching out into the deep or dabbling around in the wading pool?" If we are dabbling, we must remember

that a church that will not launch out will eventually go out of existence. Non-growth is a signal of death. And once non-growth sets in, indifference to work occurs.

Our faith cannot be void of works. *“Even so faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead”* (Js 2:17). What James was saying is that a body that is not functioning is simply dysfunctional. It is dead. And thus, the only way to prove that there is life in the body is by a faith that is working through love (Gl 5:6).

Life must be demonstrated through an active faith. James challenged the indifferent members of the body, *“Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works”* (Js 2:18). His challenge was to show our connection with the body by our works. Works is the signal of life and connectivity with the body. The lack thereof is a signal of death. The body is not saved by its works, but without works it is not identified as the body.

The result of Haggai’s exhortation was that within four years—from 520 to 516—the people finished the temple. It is not enough to know that a job must be done. It is not enough to pray about getting the job done. What is important at the end of all planning and prayer is that we go to work in order that the job gets done. Eventually, we must hear announced, *“And this house was finished on the third day of the month Adar, that was in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king”* (Ez 6:15). God does not reward plans and prayers. He rewards jobs in progress or jobs completed. Is this

not what Paul said in the following statement?

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord (1 Co 15:58).

The exhortation of Haggai and Zechariah to rebuild the physical temple of God in Jerusalem is one of the most misapplied statements of Scripture. Both the contextual and historical meaning of the prophets’ message are missed by those today who wish to construct some grand physical identity of the church of our Lord in their communities. The misappropriation of the message of these two prophets indicates a failure to understand that the temple of Jerusalem was physical and the temple of our Lord is spiritual.

We must not miss the metaphor of the New Testament writers who used the physical to illustrate the spiritual. Paul metaphorically spoke of the temple in 1 Corinthians 3:16: *“Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?”* “You” in this verse means people, not bricks and mortar. The Spirit dwells in people, not bricks. And thus, the word “temple” is taken from the physical temple of the Old Testament in order to metaphorically refer to the spiritual body of Christ.

Both Amos and James help us understand the metaphorical use of the physical to symbolize the spiritual. Amos prophesied that the remnant of Israel would return and rebuild the tabernacle

of God that had fallen down (Am 9:11,12). Though Amos referred to the tabernacle tent, not the physical temple of bricks, He still had in mind the reestablishment of the identity of the presence of God with the returned remnant in Palestine. When the remnant rebuilt the physical temple, it was a statement that Israel was back in business. However, when James quoted the prophecy of Amos in Acts 15:16,17, as he appealed to the gathered church in Jerusalem, he interpreted the prophecy of Amos 9:11,12 to refer to the church, the spiritual house of God (1 Tm 3:15).

What many today do not understand by misapplying the words of Amos, is that the first recipients of the message thought of something physical, but James interpreted it to refer to something that was spiritual. The prophecy, therefore, was metaphorical of the church, the spiritual temple of God. In fact, James' quotation in Acts 15 of the Amos prophecy leaves little room for the interpretation of Amos 9 to refer to the Jews' rebuilding of the physical temple after the Babylonian captivity in 536 B.C. There are other prophecies that cover that project. Nevertheless, we feel that the Jews had this prophecy in mind as they laid one stone upon another during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah when the temple was being rebuilt.

By the time of the events of Acts 15, the church had been in existence for about fifteen years. But there were no physical church buildings of the church until the early part of the fourth century. The church existed and grew rapidly, therefore, without the existence of any

physical structures. Though the physical temple of Israel, and the early tabernacle, were the signal of the presence of God among the people of Israel, **God meant that the spiritual body of His people, the church, be the signal today of His presence among the people of the world.** To build a church building for the purpose of signalling to the people of a community that the church exists is to work backwards to something small, located and physical. It is often a backward step to focus the community on something physical and not spiritual. And those who do not have the privilege of building themselves an "identity" with a physical structure, therefore, are sometimes classified as not truly being God's people in the community.

The more obsessed with the physical we become, the less we focus on the spiritual. In fact, in church growth studies, it is often true that the more people are obsessed with the physical building in which they sit, the less the building of the spiritual house becomes.

By the time of James, and the meeting of the church in Acts 15, the church was still identified as Jesus said it would be, that is, by loving people in action in their communities. By love in action the world identified those who were of the body of Christ (Jn 13:34,35). The early church was thus identified as people lovingly helping one another and others as servants (Gl 6:10). The members of the body were called Christians (At 11:26), or those of the Way (At 19:9). But never was the church identified by some physical structure on 5th and Main.

(Sometimes with zeal the leaders inspire their members within a village to build a “church building.” In wrenching the texts of Haggai and Zechariah out of their historical context, they exhort the members to build in order that the church be identified in the village by a structure, and thus signal to the local residents that the church is here to stay, though they see nothing as this in the church of the New Testament.

So the members gather wood poles and grass and build with zeal their “temple.” When it is completed, everyone sits proudly on benches, and then they wait for the people of the community to come. But Sunday after Sunday it is the same old group of builders who sit in the midst of their accomplishment, patting themselves on their backs that they have a “church building” as the identity that they are the true church in the village. But then they begin to wonder why God is not blessing them with multitudes to come to their new building since they sacrificed so much to build it. They even scratch around in their Bibles in order to find some “biblical name” to nail on the main post in order to convince the people that they were truly the church of the Bible.

And then one unfortunate day a bush fire ravages through the village. It devastates the village. Fathers, mothers and children run for their lives in order to escape the ravaging fire. All the huts of the village, with the grass church building, end up as a heap of ashes. Everyone is so discouraged and disheartened by the devastation.

So the leaders of the church stood

up to encourage the members to build again the identity of the church in the village. But something changed in the hearts and thinking of some of the members. Certainly, there were those members who again started gathering poles and grass to rebuild their “temple.” They were convinced that if they could rebuild their church building before the other religious groups in the village, they would gain some of the members of the other groups.

But there were some members—and often only a few members—who realized that something was certainly wrong with their focus. They started listening to their hearts and not looking on something physical as the identity of the body of Christ. They asked themselves what Jesus would do in a situation as this. So they ignored the voices of those who were trying to usher all the members to rebuild a physical identity of the church. Instead, they started helping their neighbors rebuild their huts and lives. They went to work helping their neighbors collect poles and grass for their huts in order that their lives be put back together. They helped them find food and make sure that all their needs were served. They even gave them some of their own clothing.

The focus of the religionists identified themselves by first focusing on the burned down church building. But the Christians of the group thought first of their neighbors whose huts had burned to the ground and whose lives were devastated by the fire. The identity of the religionists was in their building, but the identity of the Christians was in their loving service to help their neighbors.)

When people start identifying the church by a physical structure, then we know that we have missed the point of Jesus' exhortation that we be identified by our love of one another and service to the communities in which we live (See Gl 6:10). In fact, the more we place emphasis on the building as the identity of the existence of the church in our communities, the less the church grows in the community. People may see a physical structure, but they feel love. Church buildings often become "sitting rooms" of the indifferent sick who are waiting on the call of the Great Physician. We must remember that the Physician is on call out in the fields of labor for those who have fallen because of their toil of love to help others. He is not in the "sitting room" answering the cry of those who would sing out, "Come now Lord Jesus and fetch us out of the midst of these bricks, or grass, or whatever."

2. Indifference breeds procrastination. In the beginning, the Jews became so discouraged by the local opposition that they led themselves to believe that it was not the right time to rebuild the temple (Hg 1:2). And once the discouragement spread among the people, the job that they knew they should do was simply put off for another time. And thus they convinced themselves that another day would do.

Paul exhorted the Corinthian disciples, "*Behold, now is the acceptable time. Behold, now is the day of salvation*" (2 Co 6:2). Someone once said, "The only things you can be sure of accomplishing are the things you do today."

When we consider the task of building the temple of God today through the preaching of the gospel to the lost, there can never be any attitudes among us that tomorrow will do. But because of our procrastination, it seems that tomorrow is always going to be a busy day.

It is not that we need a prophet today to stir our spirits to work. We must listen to the dead preachers of the past. We must open our Bibles and listen to Haggai and Zechariah and others who stirred the people into action. We must follow the example of allowing the Lord to stir us up through the prophets. "*Then the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel And they came and worked on the house of the Lord of armies their God ...*" (Hg 1:14).

We must never allow opposition and discouragement to put us to sleep for Jesus. Lethargy is a sign of weakness for the Lord. We must always remember the encouraging words that the Lord said to Zerubbabel, "*... be strong all you people of the land ... and work, for I am with you*" (Hg 2:4). "*Do not fear*" (Hg 2:5). And to every Christian the Lord would say, "*Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life*" (Rv 2:10). We must be faithful unto death, knowing that Jesus is with us every step of the way (Mt 28:20). And because of our acute sense of His awareness in our lives, we can "*be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might*" (Ep 6:10). As we stand before any task that must be done for the Lord, we must always remember the encouraging words that God gave to Joshua as he stood ready to

assume the task of taking the land of promise for Israel:

Only be strong and very courageous so that you may observe to do according to

all the law that Moses My servant commanded you. So do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may prosper wherever you go (Ja 1:7).

Chapter 11

ZECHARIAH

There are several men in the Old Testament who had the name Zechariah. But the Zechariah who wrote this book of Zechariah was both a prophet and priest (Zc 1:7). He was the grandson of Iddo, who was one of the priestly families of Israel (See Ne 12:4,16). Both he and Haggai possibly returned to Jerusalem as young men with their parents when the first captives were permitted to reestablish Israel under the authority of the Persian king, Cyrus. This first return was led by Zerubbabel and took place in 536 B.C. It was not until sixteen years later in 520 that God called them to stir up the people to rebuild the temple which had been allowed to remain in ruins since the return in 536 B.C. Though the first returnees restored the foundation, opposition from the local residents led to discouragement, delay and indifference.

Zechariah 1:7 – 6:8 is a series of visions that are climaxed by the crowning of Joshua as a symbol of the Branch/Messiah who would build a future spiritual temple and reign as priest and king (6:9-15). In the section of 9:1 – 14:21, Israel's enemies are judged with the coming of the Prince of Peace (9:1-17). The evil shepherds that led Israel to spiritual ruin, would give way to God's leader (10:1-

12). The Good Shepherd would be rejected by the flock, and then, He would suffer from the attack of an evil shepherd (11:1-17). Jerusalem is then in distress, and subsequently, looks to the One who was pierced (12:1-14). Prophecy is terminated when the Good Shepherd opens the fountain that cleanses sin (13:1-9). The series of visionary exhortations is then concluded by the judgments of the kingdoms of the world by God (14:1-21).

A. Historical/social background:

As with the call of Haggai, so was the purpose for the calling of Zechariah. Zechariah was called to encourage the people because of great things that were yet in their future. His was a series of visions that portrayed the glory of Israel if they completed their task of rebuilding the presence of God in Israel.

The first return of the remnant occurred in 536 B.C. Work started on the reconstruction of the foundation of the temple, but it soon ceased once the locals opposed their efforts. Their reconstruction efforts were idle for sixteen years until God called both Haggai and Zechariah in 520 B.C. to reignite the flame to work. So with the encouragement of the

two prophets, and the leadership of Zerubbabel, the temple was completed in only four years after the people went to work.

B. Zechariah preaches to us:

Zechariah gave a message of prophecy of great things to come if the people completed the task for which they were commissioned to do upon their return. Since the message of the prophecies was directed to their immediate audience, it was not a message for us today of things in our future. We participate in the outcome of the fulfillment of the prophecies in that we now enjoy the blessings that came through the Branch who is now reigning as priest and king over all things.

It would be an interpretive mistake to steal away the message of prophetic hope that Zechariah gave to his immediate audience in order that we might speculate concerning supposed events in our future. In reference to our time, the Messiah has already come. The Branch has been revealed. He has offered His blessing of salvation to all the world.

The remnant that was enduring the hostility of the local opposition during Zechariah's ministry needed to hear a relevant message in prophecy for their encouragement in order that they have hope in their efforts to reestablish the identity of Israel in Palestine for the coming of the Branch/Messiah. Zechariah's prophecy of great things to come gave them purpose for rebuilding the temple, and later, purpose for rebuilding the walls of the city. The prophecies of the Messi-

anic age encouraged them to build for more than just reestablishing national Israel. They were building for world salvation, though they did not fully understand all the implications of the prophecies that Zechariah made at the time. Nevertheless, they did understand enough in reference to the coming Branch that they were inspired to build.

1. Self-oriented faith does not please God. During Israel's seventy years of Babylonian captivity, and the sixteen idle years while the temple laid in waste, a religious culture developed among the people that was nationalistic and self-centered. In chapters 7 & 8, God saw through their legal religiosity by which they soothed their consciences. It seems that their fasting during the captivity was over the loss of their land and temple. It was somewhat void of mourning over their sin of rebellion. So God began His self-awareness examination of their faith with a question: "*When you fasted and mourned ... even those seventy years [while in captivity], was it actually for Me that you fasted?*" (Zc 7:5). The question was a direct admonition of their twisted reason for fasting.

God knew that their fast was really over the destruction of Jerusalem. It was more about their nationalistic pride being bruised than their rejection of the one true and living God and His word. God awakened them to this reality by posing another question concerning their eating and drinking after their fast: "*And when you ate, and when you drank, did you not eat for yourselves and drink for your-*

selves?” (Zc 7:6). Their faith became self-oriented. Instead of focusing on God through those things God commanded that should stir their thoughts of Him, they focused on their own appetites when they came together to feast.

They fasted because their nationalistic pride had been bruised by the destruction of Jerusalem. God’s judgment of their attitude was that they should have been mourning over their sin and crying out for a restoration of the word of God in their lives. God’s accusation was clear: *“Should you not hear the words that the Lord has cried out by the former prophets when Jerusalem was inhabited and in prosperity ...?” (Zc 7:7).*

The lesson is pointed. When we are in mourning, we should search deep in our hearts and determine the real reason for our mourning. It is sometimes like the mourning of a criminal who has been caught. He mourns over the fact that he was caught, not over the fact that he was violating the law. In order to shock Israel into the reality of why they ended up in captivity, God reminded them that they not fall into the same moral degradation that their fathers did before the captivity. Through the former prophets before the captivity, God called on them to change their behavior and conform to His directions.

Execute true justice and show mercy and compassion everyone to his brother. And do not oppress the widow, nor the fatherless, the foreigner, or the poor. And do not allow any of you to imagine in your heart evil against his brother (Zc 7:9,10).

When these principles are violated, then it is time to fast. But their fathers had rejected these moral principles, and subsequently gave up their right to represent God among the nations. As a result of their rebellion, the nation of Israel was terminated in Palestine and the residents sent into captivity. It was as God said,

But they refused to hearken and turned a stubborn shoulder. And they stopped their ears so that they would not hear. Yes, they made their hearts as flint, lest they should hear the law and the words that the Lord of armies had sent in His Spirit by the former prophets. (Zc 7:11-12).

But now things had changed. It was a time for rejoicing because God had returned the remnant to the land (Zc 8:1-17). Their fast that was for sorrow over the loss of their nationhood, should now be turned to *“joy and gladness and cheerful feasts for the house of Judah” (Zc 8:19).* If this is done, a marvelous thing will happen in their present and in their future. Their zeal to follow the instructions of God to rebuild the temple and city will be a signal to the world that God was again with His people. The oppressing nations that afflicted His people before the captivity were all gone. But since Israel was being resurrected after their destruction and captivity, they were a signal to the people of the world that God was with Israel as in the days of old.

In those days it will come to pass that ten men from every language of the na-

tions will take hold of the garment of him who is a Jew, saying, "We will go with you, for we have heard that God is with you" (Zc 8:23).

2. We must be inspired by hope to build for the future. One of the exciting messages of Zechariah is that it is a book filled with encouragement that inspired the returnees to restore the identity of Israel for the sake of God's work that was yet in their future. The message of both Haggai and Zechariah was that the people should build, though they did not understand all the reasons for the building.

God discouraged their thinking about fasting over the loss of their past. It was now time to fast in hope of the future. Something was coming that would eventually reveal the purpose for which God originally established the nation of Israel. So through Zechariah specifically, and later through Malachi, God wanted the returnees to know that they must build with faith in the future.

God was working toward the consummation of national Israel, but this consummation (end) of Israel would be for the salvation of the world. When the immediate audience of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi understood this purpose through prophecy, then with zeal they would have purpose in building. Their zeal was not based on simply building a physical structure in which they could take pride. Their building was based on the fact that they needed to identify again the nation of the fathers, in order that the promises to the fathers be fulfilled in the coming of the Branch/Messiah and the

new paradigm of God's work among men. Embedded in Zechariah's message are several great prophecies in reference to the future when God would eventually reveal His eternal plan of salvation.

We must remind again those zealous futurists of today not to steal away this hope from the Jews to whom these prophecies of hope were first delivered. They were prophecies in reference to the restoration of national Israel after the captivity in order to usher in the Messianic age to come over four centuries later. They were not prophecies for us today that God is going to usher in another Messianic age or supposed millennial reign of Jesus on earth.

For us, the prophecies have been fulfilled. For the immediate audience of Zechariah, they were unfulfilled prophecies, but prophecies that contained hope for their future. Let us not selfishly steal away the hope of the prophecies from the first recipients in order that we might have some twisted speculation concerning our future. We need not make God a liar to them by stealing the hope of the prophecies from them in order to make the prophecies apply to us. Our encouragement from the prophecies is that God fulfilled them with the coming of the Messiah in the first century. We live in the time of their fulfillment.

Have you ever considered what was actually happening in the context of the expectant Berean Jews in the context of Paul's teaching in Berea that is recorded in Acts 17:11? We need to read carefully what Luke recorded concerning their reaction to Paul's statements that the proph-

ecy concerning the Christ were fulfilled.

These were more noble-minded than those [Jews] in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind and searched the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.

The word “Scriptures” in this text refers to **the Old Testament Scriptures**, for the New Testament Scriptures were not yet written. In the context, Paul was teaching that the prophecies of the Old Testament Scriptures were fulfilled. The Jewish Bereans searched these Scriptures every day to see if what Paul was saying was true. If they determined that what Paul was saying concerning the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Scriptures in their time, then they would have considered him a false teacher, and subsequently, rejected him. But the text continues, “... many of them believed” (At 17:12). They believed that the prophecies were fulfilled in reference to Christ and His building of the temple (the church). They then believed that Jesus was the fulfillment of all the prophecies of the prophets concerning the paradigm shift from the old covenant to the new covenant of Christ (See Lk 24:44). If they had not believed Paul’s teaching that all the prophecies were fulfilled, then they would not have believed Paul’s message concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul was not teaching the Bereans that God was leaping over them in the fulfillment of the prophecies to some time that was yet over two thousand years in their future.

The New Testament gives us hope

in the fact that God will fulfill His promises that He has made specifically to Christians. Our faith is in Him to fulfill His promises to us because He fulfilled His promises to Israel before the cross. We remember Hebrews 6:18:

... so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong encouragement, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us.

We have hope in the promises that God has given to us in the New Testament because He fulfilled the promises He made to His people in the Old Testament. We have so much hope in the New Testament promises that we do not have to steal the hope of the promises that were given to God’s people before the cross.

We must not forget what God stated through Zechariah in 13:2,3. It was a warning to any would-be prophets today who would presume to stand up and prophesy of future events.

“And it will come to pass in that day [our day],” says the Lord of armies, “that ... I will also cause the prophets and the unclean spirit to pass out of the land. And it will come to pass that when any would still prophesy [of the future], then his father and his mother who begat him will say to him, ‘You will not live, for you speak lies in the name of the Lord.’ And his father and his mother who begat him will thrust him through when he prophesies.”

The seriousness of this statement cannot be overemphasized. God is serious about those who presumptuously stand up and say they are prophets of future events, but are actually liars. He is so serious that if one does presume to be a prophet of future things, his parents were to do him some serious damage.

Regardless of this stern warning, however, it seems that we today still have to endure the nonsense of so many self-proclaimed prophets who are proclaiming the end of times. They make their lies concerning the future, nothing happens, and gullible people will still follow them. It is because people are as children tossed to and fro by every self-proclaimed prophet who would through prophecies concerning blood moons, eclipses and star alignments, predict future events. The supposed dates of prophecies come and go, while the prognosticators smile on their way to the bank after making millions of dollars on the sale of books that should have been burned as those in Ephesus (See At 19:18-20). We have found that regardless of the unfulfilled prophecies of the modern-day liars, people will still follow them. People are indeed gullible as what Paul wrote. They are as children tossed to and fro by every wind of teaching (Ep 4:14).

Nevertheless, the prophecies of Zechariah were very encouraging to the people to whom they were initially addressed. They are encouraging to us because we live on this side of their fulfillment. We know that Zechariah did not lie to the people. We read our New Testaments with joy because the Spirit testi-

fies to the fact that every detail of the prophecies of Zechariah were fulfilled in the first century.

We must not miss the point of what God said in Zechariah 13:2,3. Since the prophets of future events would pass out of the land, the “prophets” of the New Testament **were not** prophets as those of the Old Testament. They were not in the business of making proclamations of future events. The gullible people of the Old Testament sought to listen only to false prophets of future events. God said through Zechariah that these prophets would no longer exist among His people. And since there would no longer be any Isaiahs or Jeremiahs, Daniels or Ezekiels, then there would never be among God’s people any foretelling prophets who would falsely assume to be a prophet of future events. Therefore, anyone today who would profess to be a prophet of future events is simply a liar to the people. He is not counted among God’s people.

When we read of the prophets of the New Testament church, therefore, **we conclude that these were not prophets of future events**. They were inspired teachers of the word of God in the absence of the written word of God (See Ep 4:11-16). When the word of God was eventually written and circulated among the disciples, there was no longer any need for inspired teachers among the people.

Zechariah’s message was filled with hope for the returned remnant. His message was filled with hope in the Messianic future of great things that was yet to come in their future. The following are some of the primary messages of hope

that were given to those who faced great opposition in rebuilding the temple:

a. Zechariah 6:12,13:

*Behold, the Man whose name is the Branch. He will branch out from His place, and, and He will build the temple of the Lord **He will sit and rule on His throne. And He will be a priest on His throne. And the counsel of peace will be between them both.***

This prophecy was for hope in a new priest and king to come. The Branch would be both a priest and king upon His throne. The Hebrew writer affirmed that this prophecy was fulfilled in Christ Jesus:

Seeing then that we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession (Hb 4:14).

Now consider that if Jesus were on earth, **He could not be a priest.** God had promised David that He “*would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne*” (See 2 Sm 7). This promise was fulfilled in that God raised up Jesus and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places to reign on the throne of David (See Ep 1:20-22; Ph 2:9-11). In the Hebrews 4:14 passage above, the verb is past tense. At the time the passage was written, Jesus was already our high priest after the order of Melchizedek (Hb 5:6; 7:14,21-28). It is at this time, therefore, that “*we have such a high priest who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Maj-*

esty in the heavens” (Hb 8:1).

It was prophesied by Zechariah that Jesus would be both a priest and king on David’s throne. His function as a priest and king would occur at the same time. He is now a priest and king on His throne. Zechariah’s prophecy has been fulfilled.

Hebrews 8:4 presents a problem to those who say that Jesus is coming again in order to reign as a king on this earth. “*For if He were on earth, He would not be a priest*” If Jesus did come again to reign on this earth, then He would have to give up His priesthood. But He is a priest forever. He will never give up this intercession for us as our high priest. Therefore, we know that when Jesus does come again, He will not be coming to reign on this earth because He is our priest forever and will not give up His priesthood for us (See Hb 7:3,23,24).

God wanted Zechariah’s audience to understand that there was a new high priest coming, One who would not pass away. He would not pass away because He would also be a king upon the throne of David. And since the King now has all authority (Mt 28:18), He guarantees by His authority that He will be a priest while He reigns.

This hope was given to Zechariah and his contemporaries. Their kings and priests of the past were often morally corrupt, and sometimes simply wicked. But the kingship and priesthood of the Branch would be different. We are now living in the reality of Zechariah’s prophecy that was fulfilled in Jesus. The prophecy will not be reversed in the future when Jesus comes again. He came first to be-

come our priest. He is not coming again to give up His priesthood. He remains a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, whose priesthood had neither beginning nor ending.

b. Zechariah 9:9:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion. Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem. Behold, your King is coming to you. He is just and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

What Jesus did on His last trip into Jerusalem fulfilled this prophecy. The prophecy was quoted by Matthew in order to convince his Jewish readers that what Zechariah prophesied was fulfilled in Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey (Mt 21:5).

c. Zechariah 11:12:

Then I said to them, "If you think good give me my wages, and if not, refrain." So they weighed for my wage thirty pieces of silver.

In prophecy, it was often difficult to understand the meaning of the prophecy until the time of fulfillment. Since this statement was embedded in the context of prophecies concerning the coming of the Branch out of Israel, then the immediate audience assumed that there was some significance to it in reference to the coming Messianic age. At the time of fulfillment, therefore, when thirty pieces of silver were weighed into the hands of Judas who betrayed Jesus, the light bulb

came on in the minds of the Jews (See Mt 26:15). They understood that Zechariah's statement was a prophecy of an event that would take place during the betrayal of the Messiah.

d. Zechariah 12:10:

Then I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplications. And they will look on Me whom they have pierced and they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son. And they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn.

We have no doubt about the fulfillment of this prophecy. John quoted it in John 19:37. It was Jesus they looked upon and over whom they mourned and wept. The prophecy was fulfilled in the crucifixion of the firstborn Son of God who came in fulfillment of the prophecy that God would set One upon the throne of David (See At 2:33-36).

e. Zechariah 13:7:

Strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered.

Previous to His betrayal and arrest, Jesus said to His disciples, "All of you will fall away this night because of Me, for it is written, 'I will strike the Shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered'" (Mt 26:31). Since Matthew directed his book to the Jews, Jesus' Jewish disciples knew exactly to whom the prophecy of Zechariah referred. They then determined that Zechariah's state-

ment was a prophecy of their behavior at the time Jesus was betrayed, for they all fled the scene.

Zechariah's prophecy of 13:1 explained the purpose for God's struggle throughout the centuries to preserve Israel until the coming of the Seed that would crush the head of Satan.

In that day there will be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness (Zc 13:1).

In that day, the day about which Joel prophesied in Joel 2:28-32, those who mourned over their sins could do as Peter instructed when all these prophecies were fulfilled in the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus:

Repent and be baptized everyone one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins (At 2:38).

All that God had worked to complete throughout the centuries, from the fall of

Adam to the revelation of the Branch—the Redeemer—was fulfilled in Christ. We live in the era of enlightenment in reference to the fulfillment of these prophecies. We are blessed with the privilege to live in the time when we can enjoy the cleansing of our uncleanness through the blood of Jesus (1 Jn 1:7).

We cannot bypass the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament that were made specifically in reference to the Redeemer who came into the world over two thousand years ago. We must keep in mind that every effort to make the prophecies of the Old Testament bypass their fulfillment at the cross of Jesus, weakens the impact of their fulfillment and the joy that we experience today by their fulfillment in Christ. In the prophecies, God gave hope to the immediate recipients. Their hope, however, was not in reference to what would transpire at the end of the world. Their hope was in God's work to use them as the seed of Abraham to bring the promised Blessing of Abraham into the world for the salvation of all men.

Chapter 12

MALACHI

According to the content of this book, it was the last prophetic material that was written by the Old Testament prophets of God. Since the offering of sacrifices at the temple had carried on for some time before the book was written, including the fact that the returnees were still under the control of a Medo-Persian

governor (Mi 1:8), the book was probably written sometime in the fifth century B.C., possibly during the ministry of Ezra and Nehemiah.

The name Malachi may have been a Hebrew noun, and thus, what was emphasized by the use of the word was the message of the book and not so much a

specific prophet. The name is a shortened version of the name Malachiyah which means “the messenger of the Lord.”

Within the contents of the book, reference is made to three different messengers of the Lord: (1) If the name refers to an individual, then reference was first to the prophet, who was the messenger of the Lord in reference to the message of the book. (2) There is also the messenger of John the Baptist who would go before the Lord as one crying in the wilderness. (3) There was also the messenger of the Lord who would be the Messiah, the one who would bring both salvation and judgment.

A. Historical/social background:

Led by Zerubbabel, the first returnees settled in Palestine in 536 B.C. This initial group of returnees was joined by a second group under the leadership of Ezra who returned in 457 B.C. Another group returned in 444 B.C. during the ministry of Nehemiah.

The initial returnees completed the reconstruction of the temple. At the time of Malachi’s ministry, the sacrifices at the temple were being conducted (MI 1:7-10; 3:8). Unfortunately, it was a time when their offerings were unacceptable to God because they offered them contrary to the law (MI 1:8-10). They were offered by a people who performed the legalities of the offerings, but their heart was not right with God. Even the priests were neglecting their duties by not requiring that the people offer sacrifices according to the law (MI

2:7,8). Add to this the fact that the people failed in their responsibilities to give tithes and offerings (MI 3:8-10).

One practice in which they had involved themselves worked contrary to the very purpose for which God brought them back to the land as a remnant. They were putting away the wives of their youth and marrying foreign women (MI 2:10-12). This may help us better understand the commitment of those who returned with Ezra. As an example of what God wanted, these returnees put away their foreign wives in the land of their captivity before returning to Palestine where their fellow Jews were involved in marriage with foreign women (See Ez 9). Since it was the mission of Ezra to restore allegiance to the law of God, we can only imagine the message that this small group of returnees preached to previous returnees who had married Gentile women. Ezra and his group sought to restore the identity of Israel in order that the promises to the fathers be known to have been fulfilled when the final Messenger of God came. But the locals were in the process of marrying into obscurity the identity of Israel.

B. Malachi preaches to us:

There are two principle messages that Malachi delivered to the people that are applicable to God’s people throughout history: (1) Malachi speaks of the sin of insincere worship whereby the people failed to comply with the spirit of obedience to the law of God (MI 1,2). (2) Judgment comes upon those who backslide

from the will of God, but the faithful will enjoy the promises of God (MI 3,4).

1. *The sin of insincere worship:*

Before God pronounced His judgment on their forefathers who lived before the captivities, He wanted to remind them that they were a chosen nation. What their forefathers had given up was not simply obedience to commandments, but the forsaking of a covenant of love. *“I have loved you,”* the Lord reminded them (MI 1:2). He loved them long before the making of the Sinai covenant, for He loved them through the choosing of Jacob over Esau (MI 1:2). And as history was played out in the nation of Edom, Esau’s descendants, Edom was judged to terminate as a nation of people. However, Edom’s brother, Israel (Jacob), remained alive in the remnant that returned to Palestine (MI 1:3).

Regardless of any efforts on the part of the remnant of the Edomites to rebuild their nation, God said, *“I will throw down”* (MI 1:4). They would be as God said, *“The people against whom the Lord has indignation forever”* (MI 1:4). But the remnant of Israel would live on. Nevertheless, God had some things against the remnant at the time Malachi ministered God’s judgments.

God’s first judgment was against the religious leaders. They allowed the people to offer blemished animals as sacrifices (MI 1:7). In doing so, they were saying to God, *“The table of the Lord is contemptible”* (MI 1:7). If they offered such animals to the Persian governor who was over the land, he would be displeased (MI 1:8).

In 1:11 it seems that Malachi moves into the future in reference to the name of God being glorified among the nations:

For from the rising of the sun even to the going down of the same My name will be great among the Gentiles. And in every place incense will be offered to My name and a pure offering. For My name will be great among the nations.

By spurring them to jealousy, and taking their minds beyond their Jewish heritage, God spoke of a time when His name would be great among the Gentiles. *“In every place,”* as opposed to the location of the temple in Jerusalem, there will be offerings to God (See Jn 4:20,21). The name of the Father would be praised with sincerity among the nations, for all who would come into a covenant relationship with the Father would come on a voluntary basis as an individual.

The offerings of Malachi’s audience were given grudgingly. Of their offerings, they said, *“Behold, what a weariness it is”* (MI 1:13). Because their offering at the table was weariness, God said, *“And you bring the stolen, the lame and the sick”* (MI 1:13). The priests who were given the responsibility to make sure the offerings were without blemish, were held accountable for the unholy offerings.

If you [priest] will not hear, and if you will not take it to heart to give glory to My name ... I will even send a curse on you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have cursed them already because you do not take it to heart (MI 2:2).

The problem was that the religious leaders did not follow the example of Levi. God said of Levi, "... *he feared Me and was afraid before My name*" (Ml 2:5). When religious leaders have no fear of violating the law of God, they will allow the people to establish their own laws. God exhorted the religious leaders, "*For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law from his mouth. For he is the messenger of the Lord of armies*" (Ml 2:7). The leaders should know the law of God in order that the people have a source of knowledge from God. But when the religious leaders do not know the law of God, they are under the following indictment from God:

But you have departed out of the way. You have caused many to stumble at the law. You have corrupted the covenant ... (Ml 2:8).

2. Emotional worship without obedience to the law is worthless. God judged the insincere with the following words:

*And another thing you do: you cover the altar of the Lord with tears, with weeping and with crying out, inasmuch that **He does not regard the offering anymore, nor receive it with goodwill from your hand*** (Ml 2:13).

No matter how many emotional tears one may pour out before God in worship, the worship is in vain if one is not obedient to the word of God. Their worship

was in vain because they had brought before the Lord blemished offerings that were contrary to the law. They had created an offering of worship after their own desires, and not according to the word of God.

This concept of worship carried on unto the time of Jesus, for Jesus judged the religious leaders of His day with the words, "*In vain they worship, teaching as doctrines the commandment of men*" (Mk 7:7). **If one would offer worship to God today according to his own desires, his worship is vain if it is not according to the word of God.** Human emotionality is no replacement for obedience to God's word.

Jesus said that many will cry out ...

... Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and performed many wonderful works in Your name? (Mt 7:22).

And indeed, there are many religious people today who pose as Christians by doing many mighty works in the name of Jesus. But Jesus' answer to self-justified religionists, as indicated in the preceding cry of some worshipers, is judgment: "*And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you. Depart from Me you who practice lawlessness'*" (Mt 7:23).

Such was the scenario of the vain worship that was administered by the religious leaders of Malachi's day. The people could claim that they did the offerings. However, the offerings were not according to the law. They offered animals that were blemished, and thus, not

acceptable to God. Their tears, with the offering of blemished animals, did not validate before God that they were sincere worshipers. Sincere worshipers are validated as such because they offer worship according to the word of God.

The same principle still holds true in reference to worship of God today. One may plead his case that he has performed many wonderful works, but if his works (worship) are not according to the word of God, then they are lawless works in reference to pleasing God. One cannot do lawless works with tears and expect the works to be accepted by God.

Those who do not know the word of God cannot offer worship that is according to the word of God. This truth is embedded in the statement of Jesus in John 4:24: *“God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.”*

The lesson is that we do not come to God on our own terms. We come to Him on His terms, and the only way to know His terms is through His word. Worship and service is not a one-way street. It cannot be our way to Him. It is a two-way street. He first comes to us through His word, and then we go to Him according to His desires.

3. *God hates divorce:* The remnant of Jews was still in a covenant relationship with God (MI 2:10). However, some of those of the remnant were doing something that violated the covenant of the fathers. Malachi explained. *“For Judah has profaned the holiness of the Lord that he loved and has married the daughter of a foreign god”* (MI 2:11).

If one married another who was not in a covenant relationship with God, Malachi judged, *“May the Lord cut off from the tents of Jacob the man who does this ...”* (MI 2:12). They were putting away the Jewish wife of their youth in order to marry a Gentile woman (MI 2:14). They were thus dealing treacherously with the brides of their first marriage. God was continuing the development of the identity of Israel through the marriage of one Israelite to another, but they worked against this purpose by marrying foreign women (MI 2:15).

The people were in the process of annihilating the existence of Israel through their marriage of women who were not in a covenant relationship with God. It is interesting to note that if a Jew married a Gentile, such did not automatically sanction the Gentile to be a Jew. It was the marriage of a Jew to a Jew by heritage and genealogy that validated the continuation of the offspring as Jews in a covenant relationship with God. But their divorce and marriage to foreign women was becoming so common, that the identity of Israel was again on the brink of obscurity.

Influenced by the local people of the land who had intermarried, the returnees were adopting the local culture of intermarriage. If such continued, there would be no national Israel four hundred years later that could be identified as Israel. And if there was no Israel at the time of the coming of the Messiah, then there would be no proof that the promises made to the fathers were fulfilled. So the solution to the problem was clear: *“I hate divorce,”*

God said. Stop the divorce of the wives of their youth and the problem of destroying the identity of Israel would be solved.

4. Justice will not be detoured. Some complained, “*Where is the God of justice?*” (MI 2:17). There was a day of purification coming. We are not told in the context exactly who this messenger of justice is, but we are told that when He comes, He will rectify the problems that are described in the first two chapters. Since He is coming to His temple (MI 3:1), we thus assume that reference here is to Jesus who would come as a refiner’s fire. When He comes, it will be a time of great purging.

Then I will come near to you for judgment. And I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers and against the adulterers and against perjurers and against those who exploit wage earners, the widow and the fatherless, and those who turn aside the foreigner and do not fear Me (MI 3:5).

The purpose for the purging of sin was to restore the people again to the will and work of God. The purging, therefore, was a means to identify again the nation in preparation for the establishment of the new spiritual Israel. Out of the purging would come a new Israel that would be purified by the fire of judgment.

5. Cessation of God robbers: “*Will a man rob God? You have robbed Me*” (MI 3:8). The sin of their robbery is based on the fact that they had within their power the opportunity to hold back that which actually belonged to God. While

the tithe was under their control, it still belonged to God. The robbery took place when they used the tithe that belonged to God for something that satisfied their own desires. The robbery, therefore, was not simply in the fact that they did not give the tithe. It was also in the fact that they used what belonged to God for their own selfish means.

They robbed God of two things: (1) tithes and (2) offerings. Tithes would refer to the ten percent that they were obligated to give in support of the Levitical priesthood. Offerings were in reference to the animals without blemish from their flocks, and grain, that they were also commanded to give to the priests. They held back on their tithes, and offered blemished animals as offerings.

Their robbery was in not giving the ten percent as they should, but also in giving the blemished animals to God. They offered animals that not even the Persian governor of the land would accept. Therefore, when one would consider giving his junk to the Lord, he should think twice. Can you imagine the Philippian disciples sending with the things they offered to Paul in prison, old coats full of holes and sandals with worn soles? (See Ph 4:18).

If Malachi’s audience rectified their tithes, animal and grain offerings according to the law, then God would make it known among the nations that they were truly His people.

Bring all the tithes into the storehouse so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this, says the Lord of armies, if I will not open to you the win-

dows of heaven and pour out a blessing on you so that there will not be room enough to receive it (Ml 3:10).

We must note in this context that the priests were not doing their job in making sure that the people made their offerings according to the law. Nevertheless, the people were still obligated to keep the law in reference to tithes and offerings, regardless of the neglect of the priests. Simply because the priests failed in their duties did not justify the people to rob God by not giving what they were obligated to give.

The problem may have been more with the stingy people, than with the priests. The priests, who received the insufficient grain and blemished animals, simply succumbed to the selfishness of the people. In this scenario, Malachi wrote to the priests to stop accepting insufficient offerings from the people. The people were rebuked for not giving the required tithes in support of the priests. In reference to bringing the worst animals to be offered to the priests, the priests were commanded never to receive blemished animals again.

6. *The promise of deliverance through consummation:* Chapter 4 is indeed a prophetic picture of rectification. There was a day coming that would burn as an oven (Ml 4:1). We see in these words the termination of those who would in their pride reject the “Sun of Righteousness.” The generation about which Malachi speaks is identified by the words of Jesus in reference to the religious leaders of His day:

You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not abide in the truth because there is no truth in him (Jn 8:44).

These were the proud and arrogant religious leaders which Jesus brought down by the example of those who humbly submitted to Him. The religiously proud of Jesus’ day simply could not do what the Holy Spirit required:

Yes, all of you be submissive to one another and be clothed with humility, for God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble (1 Pt 5:5).

Malachi 4:3 surely spoke of the time when God would bring down the wicked among His people. At the time of the fulfillment of this statement, the Israel that existed was filled with a wicked religious leadership that would eventually crucify the Messiah.

The proud eventually led the nation of Israel to extermination in A.D. 70 at the hand of the Roman Empire. Malachi stated concerning the coming Messenger:

And you will tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I will do this, says the Lord of armies (Ml 4:3).

Until that time came, Malachi encouraged his readers to “*remember the law of Moses*” (Ml 4:4). It would be that law that would carry them through to the time when God would do the following:

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord (Ml 4:5).

And Elijah came as the voice of one crying in the wilderness.

In those days John the Baptist came

preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt 3:1,2; see Is 40:1-3).

And so, it was now time for the dead prophets of Israel to preach their faith to the new spiritual Israel of God.