



Foundations

THE MINOR PROPHETS

Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk,
Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi

STUDY BOOKLET

The Minor Prophets

The Minor Prophets: Overview

We now begin our survey of the last twelve prophets, who are sometimes referred to as Minor Prophets. This designation simply means that their books are shorter than the prophetic books we have already surveyed. Since the last twelve prophets wrote later in Hebrew history, they were sometimes designated as the later prophets. The ancient scribes kept these later prophets in a unit designated, "The Twelve" because they highly valued and did not want to lose any of them.

The twelve historical books of the Old Testament present the historical context in which the prophets, who wrote books, lived and preached. To maintain your historical equilibrium, you should try to make a chart that would show where the prophets should be placed in the Hebrew history you learned when we surveyed the history books of the Old Testament. While this is not an academic, but a devotional study of the Bible, let me remind you of the seven facts of Hebrew history you should hold in perspective as you read these prophets:

1. The kingdom
2. The divided kingdom
3. The Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom
4. The extinction of the Northern Kingdom
5. The Babylonian captivity of the Southern Kingdom
6. The Persian conquest of Babylon
7. The return from the Babylonian captivity

Chapter One

The Prophecy of Hosea

Most of us know that God is love, but how many books have you seen or read on the subject of the love of God? The Book of Hosea is the inspired book in God's sacred library on the love of God. Hosea was commissioned by God to be the prophet of the love of God to the ten tribes that were known as The Northern Kingdom, and were also simply called, "Israel." He preached the love of God to them when they had turned away from God and were worshipping idols.

The first truth we learn from the prophet Hosea is that when God calls us to do a great work for Him, He often prepares us for that work through our own life experiences. God uses every day we live to prepare us for every other day we are going to live and serve Him.

An Agonizing Allegory

God considered Hosea prepared to preach the love of God to an unfaithful people, because Hosea had married a harlot named, "Gomer." (1:2, 3) Hosea loved her and made her the mother of his children as if she were the finest lady in the land. After many years, when Gomer returned to her lovers, God led Hosea to receive her back into his home once again, and to continue to love her (3:1). All this was at least permitted by God to prepare Hosea to preach to Israel the unconditional love and acceptance of God.

Though they did not deserve it, Israel had been chosen by God to be His people, much as Gomer was chosen by Hosea to be his wife though she was a harlot. An allegory is a story in which people, places, and things have a deeper meaning that instructs us morally and spiritually. Hosea's marriage was an

agonizing allegory of the unconditional love of God for Israel.

The Preaching of Hosea

Idolatry was the continuous, chronic sin of the people of the Northern Kingdom when Hosea preached his bold and relevant sermons there. There was great immorality associated with their idol worship. Hosea was very blunt and plainspoken when he preached.

Here are some paraphrased excerpts of his preaching that will acquaint you with his preaching style: "The men of Israel finish drinking their wine and off they go to find some whores. Their love for shame is greater than for honor ... Wine, women, and song have robbed my people of their brains. For they are asking a piece of wood to tell them what to do. ... They are like a crooked bow that always misses targets. They have planted the wind and they will reap the whirlwind. ... Israel is destroyed; she lies among the nations as a broken pot. The glory of Israel flies away like a bird."

Because they were the chosen people of the one true God, Hosea considered their turning to other gods "spiritual adultery" against God: "My people consult their wooden idols, and their diviner's wand informs them; for a spirit of harlotry has led them astray, and they have played the harlot, departing from their God."

"They are all adulterers; as a baker's oven is constantly aflame, except while he kneads the dough and waits for it to rise, so are these people constantly aflame with lust. My people mingle with the heathen, picking up their evil ways; thus they become as good-for-nothing as a half-baked cake." When Hosea preached: "Like priest, like people," he shouted, "Priest, do not point your finger at someone else. I am pointing my finger at you!"

As a consequence of their idolatry, they were going to be taken into captivity: "Israel is swallowed up; they are now among the nations like a vessel in which no one delights. For they have gone up to Assyria." (8:8-9) The Assyrian captivity was fatal for the Northern Kingdom, for she would never return to her native land and be a kingdom again. Those who survived the Assyrian conquest and captivity would be scattered among the Gentile nations of the world.

The Unconditional Love of God

Israel would enter into captivity, yet God would love them and bring them back to a spiritual restoration to Himself: I will make you my wife forever, showing you righteousness and justice, unfailing love and compassion. I will be faithful to you and make you mine, and you will finally know me as LORD. (2:19-20) This spiritual return of Israel, which several prophets preached, has not yet been fulfilled. We will have to wait for the end times to see the fulfillment of this prophecy.

Hosea eloquently preached the love of God: "I do not want your sacrifices, I want your love; I do not want your offerings, I want you to know Me." To get their hearts right with God, Hosea preached like Jeremiah did: "Plow the hard ground of your hearts, for now is the time to seek the Lord, that He may come and shower salvation upon you. Oh, come back to God, and always be expecting much from Him, your God." (10:12; 12:6)

The Personal and Devotional Application

Although we must wait for the fulfillment of the spiritual return of Israel, we do not have to wait for our own personal spiritual return to our loving God. My favorite passage from Hosea is a good way to conclude this brief summary of the broadcasts you have heard on the prophet Hosea:

"Come, let us return to the Lord; it is He who has torn us, He will heal us. He has wounded us and He will bind us up. He will set us on our feet again, to live in His kindness. Oh, that we might know the Lord! Let us press on to know Him, and He will respond to us as surely as the coming of dawn or the rain of early spring." (6:1-3)

Chapter Two

The Prophecy of Joel

Joel is the second of the twelve Minor Prophets. The message of the prophet Joel is focused in an expression he and other Minor Prophets use: "The Day of the Lord." Joel calls a dreadful plague of locusts that invaded the Southern Kingdom, "The Day of the Lord." While he is labeling that literal locust plague as "The Day of the Lord," he also relates this plague to the impending Babylonian captivity. Like the Major Prophets, he mixes his prophecies about the Babylonian captivity with prophecies about the Second Coming of Christ.

Many are familiar with Joel because of his remarkable prophecy about the Day of Pentecost. Those who were present on the birthday of the church asked the question, "Whatever could this mean?" Peter began his sermon on the Day of Pentecost by telling them, "This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel." (Acts 2:12,16) Joel preached that the Day of the Lord for you and me exists in all the past, present, and future days of our lives.

The Plague of Locusts

Joel's book opens by describing a swarming plague of locusts that was invading the Southern Kingdom. Joel preached: "What the gnawing locust has left, the swarming locust has eaten; and what the swarming locust has left, the creeping locust has eaten; and what the creeping locust has left, the stripping locust has eaten." (1:4) The plague of locusts moved through the land, stripping the earth of vegetation and leaving nothing in its wake but devastation.

When Joel referred to this plague of locusts as "The Day of the Lord" (1:15), he was making The Day of the Lord a present event. Precisely what did Joel mean when he referred to The Day of the Lord in this way? When he saw the terrible plague and attributed the source of that plague to the Lord, he was telling us that God is sovereign even in our calamities. Joel then agrees with a whole chorus of biblical authors who have told us that God can be the power behind adversity as well as prosperity. Because that terrible invasion of locusts most likely made the people think God had deserted them, Joel declared God present even in that day, meaning that sometimes even the day of calamity can be "The Day of the Lord" for those who love God and are called according to His purposes (Romans 8:28).

The Babylonian Captivity

A swarm of locusts works like an army, teaming together and destroying everything in its path. Joel used the total devastation of an "army" of locusts to get the attention of the people of Judah and prepare them for his prophecy of the eventual devastation they were going to experience through the invasion of the Babylonian armies. Joel wrote: "They (the locusts) run like mighty men, they climb the wall like soldiers;

every one marches in formation, and they do not break ranks... They rush on the city, they run on the wall; they climb into the houses, they enter through the windows like a thief." (2:7, 9)

The Day of Pentecost

After Joel proclaimed the swarm of locusts to be the present day of the Lord, and declared the Babylonian captivity to be a future day of the Lord, he began to speak of yet another day of the Lord—the Day of Pentecost. Sharing prophetic words of God, Joel wrote: "It will come about after this that I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind; your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions." (2:28)

This prophecy was at least partly fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). We read that the Holy Spirit descended on those who were assembled together on the Day of Pentecost. When the people saw the cloven tongues of fire sitting on the heads of the apostles, heard them speaking in one language that was understood by people who spoke many languages, and heard "the noise of a violent rushing wind," they asked Peter, "What does this mean?" Peter responded: "This is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel." (Acts 2:16)

The Second Coming of Jesus Christ

Observe that through Joel's prophecy of Pentecost, God is telling us things about the Day of the Lord in the latter days that did not take place on the Day of Pentecost:

"I will display wonders in the sky and earth, blood, fire and columns of smoke. The sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And it will come about that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." (2:30-32)

Joel clearly prophesied the Day of Pentecost, and if you study his prophecy of Pentecost closely, you will see that he was also predicting events that were not fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost. One scholar of the Minor Prophets wrote that this prophecy of Joel was pre-filled on the Day of Pentecost, but will be fulfilled in the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

As with all the prophets, when Joel's prophecies of events like the Babylonian conquest or Pentecost are fulfilled so literally, we can be excited about the literal fulfillment of his prophecies concerning the Second Coming of Christ.

Peter called this future Day of the Lord "The Great and Terrible Day of the Lord." When Peter writes of this day, he is focusing only one of many events that will be part of the Second Coming of Christ. According to Peter, when this day arrives, "The elements will melt with an intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up." (II Peter 3)

The Personal Application

Joel not only preached the present day of the Lord and the future Day of the Lord. He exhorted us as the people of God to tell our generation, and through telling our children, future generations about the day of the Lord (1:2-3). He exhorts us to realize that each day—past, present, and future—should be considered the day of the Lord. When we remember how God has worked our past circumstances together for good, we should carry that confidence into our present circumstances (Romans 8:28).

Why does God want us to know about that great and awesome future Day of the Lord? So that we will think about what manner of persons we ought to be. Listen to Peter's personal application when he tells us about the future Day of the Lord: "Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless,

and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.” (II Peter 3:14-15a) When we look ahead to the coming Day of the Lord, Joel and all the prophets make applications like those with which Peter challenges the followers of Christ.

Chapter Three

The Prophecy of Amos

Amos was a fig picker and a shepherd who lived in the small town of Tekoa, about twelve miles south of Jerusalem. God called him from the Southern Kingdom to prophecy against the Northern Kingdom, fifty years before the Assyrian captivity. We are told that Amos ministered during the reign of King Uzziah in the Southern Kingdom, under whom the nation of Judah was prosperous, both militarily and materially. They believed that no enemy loomed on the horizon or posed a threat to them. But Amos' prophecy would speak against the prosperous nation of Judah, as well as the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

The Judgment of God Is Coming

Amos began his prophecy by speaking words the citizens of the Northern Kingdom wanted to hear—he told them God would judge their enemies (1:3-2:3). As he named those enemy nations and the judgments that would come upon them, those who heard his preaching would have been delighted by his message — they would have liked to hear how God was going to punish those they hated. But once Amos got their attention with these sermons, he told them the bad news: Judah and Israel were also going to be judged (2:4-8). He blamed Judah for rejecting the law of the Lord and

not keeping God's statutes, and he blamed Israel for greed, social injustice, and immorality that profaned the name of the Lord.

Amos continued his prophecy against Israel by foretelling the Assyrian captivity:

"Flight will perish from the swift, and the stalwart will not strengthen his power, nor the mighty man save his life. He who grasps the bow will not stand his ground, the swift of foot will not escape, nor will he who rides the horse save his life. Even the bravest among the warriors will flee naked in that day." (2:14-16)

The Northern Kingdom would have scoffed at this message, for they were living in prosperous times and the military of the Northern Kingdom excelled in the abilities Amos profiled in this sermon. But, within fifty years the Northern Kingdom of Israel was defeated and all the people were taken captive by the Assyrian army.

God tried to avert the Assyrian captivity by offering Israel opportunities to repent (4:6-13). He sent them hunger, withheld rain, sent wind and mildew and pestilence, but even so, as God told them through this prophet, "You have not returned to Me." (4:8, 9, 10, 11) Because Israel did not heed God's calling them to repentance, Amos prophesied God's judgment upon them, and this judgment would be permanent - Israel would never return to the land from their Assyrian captivity.

Amos predicted the judgment of God by preaching five visions God gave him. The judgments profiled in the first two visions, which depicted a plague of locusts and a consuming fire were averted when Amos pleaded for God's mercy (7:1-6). The third vision, that of a plumb line that measures the straightness of a wall, showed why God had reason to be angry—His people were not a "straight" people, living according to

God's statutes, but were a "crooked" people, rejecting God's law and incurring His wrath.

The fourth vision, that of a basket of over-ripe fruit, showed that the judgment was long overdue, and God's judgment against them was predicted in the fifth vision, where He stood at an altar and cried out, "Smite the capitals so that the thresholds will shake, and break them on the heads of them all! Then I will slay the rest of them with the sword; they will not have a fugitive who will flee, or a refugee who will escape." (9:1) In this vision, God showed that His judgment upon Israel would be final. Not one would escape, and not one would be spared. Furthermore, God's punishment was imminent.

Spiritual Advantage Increases Responsibility

Amos did not isolate Judah or Israel from the judgment of God upon the nations. Instead, he told them their judgment would be more severe than that of the pagan nations. Their sins were of greater consequence because they had been spiritually advantaged with their knowledge of the Word of God, yet they did not abide by the statutes and commandments of the Word of God. According to Amos, spiritual accountability is measured in direct proportion to spiritual advantage, and our spiritual advantages should dynamically influence the way we live our lives.

What we do about what we know is far more important than what we know. We need to be reminded that living according to our knowledge is more important than acquiring more knowledge. While the secular world has always believed that knowledge alone is virtuous, the prophets preached that it is the application of knowledge, or wisdom, that makes one virtuous.

Promise of Restoration

Amos, like the other prophets, preached the eventual restoration of the people of Israel: "I will raise up the fallen booth of David, and wall up its breaches; I will also raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old; that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by My name." (9:11-12)

This prophecy speaks of a spiritual return of Israel to her God. This spiritual restoration of Israel has not yet happened. We have seen the return of Jews who were scattered all over the world, and we have seen a political restoration of Israel, but we have not yet seen a spiritual return of the Jews fulfilled today.

Chapter Four

The Prophecy of Obadiah

"Thus says the Lord God concerning Edom. ... 'Behold, I will make you small among the nations; you are greatly despised. The arrogance of your heart has deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rock, in the loftiness of your dwelling place, who say in your heart, "Who will bring me down to earth?" Though you build your nest high like the eagle, though you set your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down.'" (Obadiah 1: 2-4)

This is the way the book of Obadiah begins. What was Obadiah talking about when he referred to proud people living in cliff dwellings, thinking nobody could bring them down from their nest? Some say this book should warn those of us who live

in the twenty-first century about our expeditions to discover life on other planets. In past generations, these verses have been interpreted and applied to the fact that God does not want us to live in tall buildings. In the twenty-first century, some translate these verses to mean, "If we become proud about science and technology and try to live on other planets in space, God will humble us and bring us down to earth again."

Obadiah was not writing about tall buildings or outer space. He was burning with a holy rage, and addressing this shortest of all the prophetic books to a very hostile people, who had committed terrible acts against the people of Judah when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians.

The Way of Edom Is Condemned

God spoke through Obadiah to condemn a nation called "Edom." This nation of people lived in a place you can visit today that is known as "The Rose Red City of Petra" in the country of Jordan. Red stone cliffs, with large empty spaces carved in them rise seven hundred feet high on both sides as you ride on horseback into a large canyon. These large open spaces were once the city that was home to the people to whom Obadiah is writing.

After these people raided and plundered the cities of their enemies, or caravans of wealthy traders, they would climb up rope ladders and then hide themselves in their cliff dwellings, far beyond the reach of their enemies. Their high dwellings made them think they were indestructible. That is why Obadiah writes: "The arrogance of your heart has deceived you . . . you who say in your heart, 'Who will bring me down to earth?'"

(3)

Exactly who were these people? They were the descendants of Esau, Jacob's brother. The Book of Genesis told us that

Jacob and Esau were twins, but they had opposite values and they lived opposite life styles. While Jacob was rascally but spiritual, Esau was profane, unspiritual, and what we would call today "a secular man". This is pictured allegorically in the Book of Genesis when Esau sells his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of soup.

While the descendants of Jacob receive their name (Israel) from him and become the Jews, Esau fathered the people of Edom, the sworn enemies of the Jews. The people of Edom were very zealous anti-Semites, and continuously sought for opportunities to ally with other nations to kill Jews.

Obadiah wrote his very short prophesy to predict the fall of Edom, a fall that would be a direct consequence of their hatred and persecution of the Jews. Obadiah thundered out eight specific accusations against Edom. Eight times we hear him charge: "You should not have!" (The people of Edom had obviously done all these things.)

"You should not have gloated over the day of your brother, the day of his calamity. You should not have rejoiced over the day of his ruin. You should not have boasted in the day of their distress. You should not have entered his gate on the day of his calamity. You should not have looked down on him in his disaster. You should not have looted his goods. You should not have stood at the crossroads to cut off his fugitives. You should not have delivered up his survivors in the day of his distress. And because you should not have done that, the day of the Lord is coming upon you."

Scholars believe Obadiah was condemning Edom's behavior during the fall of Jerusalem under Zedekiah, when the city was razed to the ground and the people of Judah were either slaughtered or taken captive to Babylon. The people of Edom had assisted the Babylonians in the siege of Jerusalem, and they had

taken part in the looting of the city. When Jews escaped from the calamity, the people of Edom captured and returned them to the Babylonians.

Obadiah turned from this chastisement of Edom to join other prophets and preach about the Day of the Lord. He told the people of Edom, "As you have done, it will be done to you." (15) When this day he prophesied was fulfilled, the nation of Edom would be completely wiped out. He even predicted the precise vehicle God would use to destroy them. Their allies would turn against them, and there would be nothing left of the nation of Edom: "The house of Jacob will be a fire and the house of Joseph a flame; but the house of Esau will be as stubble. And they will set them on fire and consume them, so that there will be no survivor in the house of Esau." (18) This prophecy was literally fulfilled. The nation of Edom disappeared from the pages of history, when it was completely annihilated by the Romans, in 70 A. D.

The Devotional Application

All through the Bible, the godly man is contrasted with the ungodly man (Psalm 1; Matthew 7:13-27; I Corinthians 2:14-16). If we are familiar with the story of Jacob and Esau in the Book of Genesis, and the commentary on that story by the Apostle Paul, it is not difficult for us to realize that this short prophecy of Obadiah also allegorically contrasts for us the life of the spiritual man and the unspiritual, natural man (Genesis 25:29-34; 27; Romans 9:10,11). Jacob's life is an example of the spiritual man because he earnestly sought after God and spiritual values and blessings.

We also learn in the Book of Genesis that when Jacob "wrestled" with God, his name was changed to Israel: "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with

God and with men and have prevailed." (Genesis 32:28) Esau, on the other hand, is a picture of the natural, unspiritual man. By selling his birthright (the inheritance of the oldest son), for a bowl of soup, Esau revealed his immaturity and his flawed spiritual priorities. We should not be surprised to find that the values and lifestyle of "Esau" leads to "Edom" - a nation in hostile opposition to the people, spiritual values, and purposes of God.

When we first meet Jacob and Esau, they exist together in the womb of their mother, Rebekah. An allegorical, devotional application to this could be that an Esau and a Jacob potential exists in each of us today.

Paul profiles these two potentials superbly in his letter to the Galatians. He writes that the Spirit and the flesh war against each other because they are opposites. When Paul uses the term, "flesh," he means, "our human nature, unaided by God." The Holy Spirit gives us the potential to be spiritual like Jacob, but when the Holy Spirit comes to live in us, our flesh, or our human nature, is not displaced. Someone, Who is determined to make us spiritual, has been added to our flesh. This gives us those two (Jacob and Esau) potentials. The dynamic Prophecy of Obadiah challenges us with this question: Which potential are we going to cultivate?

Chapter Five

The Prophecy of Jonah

The Book of Jonah tells us about a prophet who was called by God to preach repentance and salvation to his enemies. He

knew enough about the character of God to know that if he responded to God's call, his enemies would be saved. It was his personal knowledge of the unconditional love of God that moved Jonah to decide that he did not want to go to Nineveh, and because he did not want to go to Nineveh, he also decided he did not want to come to God. Instead, he tried to run away from God and board a ship that was not only headed in the opposite direction, but was headed for a port that was as far, as a human being in his day could travel, away from the city of Nineveh (1:3; 4:2,3).

The city of Nineveh was the capital city of the worst enemies of the ancient Jews. The brutal cruelty of the Assyrians was without equal in ancient history. Jonah or members of his family could have been victims of that cruelty. He probably had very good reasons for his hatred of the people who lived in the city of Nineveh. To gain historical perspective, imagine God commissioning a Jew in the early 1940s to go to Berlin in Germany, where the death of every Jew in the world was being planned, and preach the judgment of God upon that city if they did not repent of their sins. Would that Jew have run from that assignment?

Jonah Is Not Going and Jonah Is Not Coming (Chapter 1)

The Old Testament prophets and devout people in general followed a pattern in their relationship with God. I mentioned this pattern when we considered the ministry of the prophet Isaiah. They had meaningful experiences of coming to God, and then they had fruitful experiences going for God. Jonah's God story shows us this pattern in reverse.

In the first chapter of this short prophecy of Jonah, we read that when God commissioned Jonah to go to Nineveh, he refused to go, and when he decided that he was absolutely

unwilling to go to Nineveh, he showed us that he believed in these two dimensions of coming to God and going for God. Jonah knew that it was because he had a profound experience of coming to God that he had received his commission to go to Nineveh for God. Since he could not, or would not do that, he announced that he was not going to Nineveh for God and, consistent with that decision, he was not coming to God either.

Because Jonah was attempting to hide from God when he boarded that ship, he went down into the hold of the ship and fell into a deep sleep (1:5). We read that the Lord caused a terrible storm that almost sank the ship. While the sailors were terrified and praying to their gods, Jonah was sleeping, attempting to run from his problems by sleeping. Jonah was attempting to flee from Nineveh, from God, and from his problems.

When the captain of the ship confronted Jonah for sleeping through the storm, Jonah acknowledged that his God was the God Who made the sea, and his God was angry with him. He had sent the storm because He had commissioned Jonah to go to Nineveh and Jonah had refused to go (9-10). Jonah also told the captain that the only way to appease the wrath of his God was to throw him overboard, which the sailors eventually, though reluctantly did (15). Immediately, the raging sea became calm.

That calm sea made believers out of the pagan sailors on that ship. Even while Jonah was fleeing from God, and from what God wanted him to do, God used him to bring to faith the sailors on that ship. We read: "Then the men feared the Lord greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows." (1:16) We also read that God had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. He was in the belly of that fish for three days. Jonah does not call this great fish a whale. This great fish was a

miraculous provision of God that was supernaturally prepared for this rebellious prophet.

Jonah Is Coming to God (Chapter 2)

The Book of Jonah teaches us that even though there is a sense in which God never makes us do anything – He allows us to exercise free will in the decisions that lie before us – He will lean on us like an elephant through our circumstances until we decide that His will is the only reasonable thing for us to do. You can write across chapter one of this prophecy the words, “I will not!” But you can write across chapter two the words, “I will!”

It took three days in the belly of a great fish to bring Jonah to repentance for running from God’s call. To repent means, “to think again,” or “to have a change of mind, heart, will, and direction.” The significance of chapter two is that Jonah did repent in the belly of that great fish. Jonah prayed in that fish’s belly. He recalled every Scripture he could think of in that terrible place. In his prayer, he quoted or made reference to more than sixty verses of Scripture, from Job, Lamentations, I Samuel, Jeremiah, I Kings, and many verses from the Psalms. This means that his mind was saturated with Scripture, and that he sang every hymn he could remember when he was in the belly of that great fish.

The important thing about this very biblical prayer was his repentance. Jonah went from saying, “I will not,” to saying three times, “I will.” He told God, “I will look again to Your Holy Temple,” (4) “I will sacrifice to You,” (9) and, “That which I have vowed I will pay.” (9) As a result of Jonah’s repentance, God “Commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah up onto the dry land.”

Jonah Is Going for God (Chapter 3)

In chapter 3 we read: "Now the Word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time." (1) Out of God's patient character, Jonah heard God's call a second time – a call that remained the same: "Arise, go to Nineveh that great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you." (2)

This time, instead of running away, Jonah obeyed the call and went to Nineveh. He preached God's message of judgment by proclaiming: "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown!" (4) The entire city – even the king – was converted and believed in God (5, 6). Because the city repented, "God changed His mind concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it." (10) When Jonah finally said, "I will," the result was the greatest evangelistic crusade in the history of God and man.

Jonah is Coming and Going for God (chapter 4)

The heart of the message of the Book of Jonah is found in the last chapter where we see how Jonah responded to the repentance of Nineveh. Though we would think that Jonah, as a prophet of God, would be ecstatic that an entire city turned to God, he was not happy. In fact, he is so angry, he would rather die than see God save the population of Nineveh – and he tells that to God! Instead of praising God, Jonah told God: "Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness, and One Who relents concerning calamity. Therefore now, oh Lord, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life." (2, 3) In other words, "I would rather be dead than to see You save these people!"

The Prejudiced Prophet

What in the world is wrong with Jonah? The answer to that question is that Jonah hated the people of Nineveh, and it was his prejudice that had kept him from responding with praise to God for the miracle he had experienced in the capital city of the Assyrian World Empire. His prejudice is verified by Jonah's confession at the beginning of chapter four, that he fled from God and this assignment, because he knew God was a loving God and would save the city of Nineveh if he obeyed God and preached there.

In response to Jonah's anger, God gave Jonah an object lesson. While Jonah was indulging in his fit of temper and pouting because God had saved his enemies, he constructed a small booth on a hill overlooking Nineveh. He still believed, or at least hoped, that God would destroy this wicked city. The extremely hot sun was scorching Jonah when the Lord caused a great leaf to grow over the booth, which sheltered Jonah from the hot sun. This pleased Jonah greatly. But then God sent a worm to eat the roots of the plant. The worm destroyed the leaf and Jonah immediately went into another outburst of anger.

Then God told Jonah, "You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?" (4:11) Scholars believe these persons are the babies in Nineveh who have not yet reached what we think of as an age of accountability. The important truth here is that God was challenging the values and priorities of a very prejudiced prophet.

The Problem Obstacle

You may remember in my approach to these prophets, I shared with you that one of the functions of a prophet was to remove problem obstacles that were blocking the work of God in the world. In the Book of Jonah, the problem obstacle that was blocking the miraculous work God wanted to do in Nineveh was the prejudice of the prophet Jonah.

As we learned from Hosea, the love of God is unconditional and not based on the positive or negative performance of the one being loved. If God loves a people and the prophet hates those same people, how can God use that prophet to proclaim His love to them?

Personal Application

Do you see yourself in this story? Are you running from the call God has placed on your life? What must God send to bring about your willingness to obey Him? Learn from the prophet Jonah's life – the prophet who did not want to go to Nineveh and who did not want to come to God – that God uses the circumstances of our lives to guide us into His will for our lives, despite, and sometimes because of our unwillingness to follow Him. Make the observation that this short book of prophecy is filled with references to the providence of God: the Lord sends the great storm, prepares the great fish, grows the leaf, and sends the worm. Do you see the providence of God working in the circumstances of your life?

The most dynamic dimension of this powerful little prophetic book is focused when we realize that Jonah wrote this book, which frankly makes him look very foolish. Jonah is writing the most important chapter in his life and ministry as a prophet of God. He is telling us, in a very self-effacing way,

how he learned in the city of Nineveh about the unconditional love of God for wicked sinners - and the prejudice in his own heart that blocked the expression of that love.

Jonah is sharing the true confession of an honest prophet in this very short book that bears his name. Essentially, he is confessing: "I was not agape love when I was in Nineveh, but God was, and He was with me. I discovered that I could not love the wicked people of Nineveh, but God could, and He was with me. I did not want to love the wicked people of Nineveh, but God wanted to love them, and He was with me. I did not love the people of Nineveh, but God did love them through me because He was with me."

Is it possible that God wants to love some ungodly, unlovely, wicked sinners through you, but your prejudice and intense dislike for those people is blocking the love and salvation God wants to share with those people? Can you see yourself in this candid and honest confession of a very prejudiced prophet?

Chapter Six

The Prophecy of Micah

The Book of Micah records three great sermons of the prophet Micah. He was born and raised in farm country but he was called by God to preach in the capital cities of Samaria and Jerusalem and to speak God's words to the political and spiritual leaders of the capital cities of both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel and Judah. He joined many of the other prophets in placing the blame for the moral and spiritual

corruption of the people of God on the spiritual and political leaders of both those Kingdoms.

The First Sermon of Micah (1:3-5)

This first of Micah's three sermons was addressed to all the peoples of the earth and invited them to watch the "whipping" of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Because God's people were choosing not to follow His ways, He was planning a future chastisement: "Behold I am planning against this family a calamity from which you cannot remove your necks; and you will not walk haughtily, for it will be an evil time." (2:3) This verse is obviously referring to the Babylonian and Assyrian conquests and captivities. Through these captivities, God would chastise Israel and Judah, and this chastisement would be an expression of His holiness, by showing His intolerance for wickedness, and of His love as the faithful Father of His rebellious children.

God's chastisement of His chosen people for their idolatry, immorality and spiritual decline would show the whole world that He requires a behavioral standard of purity. God's glory would also be revealed through the ultimate restoration of His people, which Micah preached at the end of this first sermon: "I will surely assemble all of you, Jacob, I will surely gather the remnant of Israel." (2:12)

The Second Sermon of Micah (3:1-5:15)

Micah's second sermon was addressed to three levels of government: the priests, the prophets, and the political rulers. The primary function of the priest was to teach, the primary function of the prophet was to exhort the people to obey, and the primary function of the ruler was to enforce the moral laws of God. In Micah's day, the problem-obstacle that was blocking

the work of God was that all three levels of this God-ordained leadership structure were corrupt.

Instead of teaching and fulfilling the moral law of God to the people, the priests were choosing to "instruct for a price", or to "teach for hire". (3:11) They were turning the calling of being priests into a profession, and their primary concern was the money they earned. Micah was disturbed by this secularization of the priesthood, whose teaching for a price made them apostate professionals.

Similarly, the prophets were compromising the call of God to be a prophet by choosing to "divine for money". (11) They had not only turned the call of the prophet into a profession, but into sorcery. They were preaching their own dreams, rather than prophetic revelations, and they were using their reputation as prophets to earn a profit. If they were paid little they would prophesy terrible judgments on people, and if they were well paid, they would prophesy good things in the lives of those who paid them well.

The civic leaders were also corrupt, choosing to "pronounce judgment for a bribe". (11) Based on the money they were paid, the civic leaders would sway their judgments favorably or unfavorably on the one who was paying them. The corruption of political civic leaders always has been, and is prevalent all over the world today.

The primary concern of Micah is, that when the priests teach for hire, the people become confused because they are not learning the Word of God. When the prophets divine for money, God's people are not hearing the Word of God. When the civic leaders are corrupt, the people become disillusioned and lose confidence in government, law and order.

Micah emphasized the truth that God delegated the function of government to people, but a God-ordained government could

only work if those responsible for making that government work were aligned with God's plan for spiritual and political government on these three levels. If the leaders on these three levels are corrupt, God's purposes for the government collapse. Since the spiritual and political leaders in Micah's day were not aligned with God's purposes, he was blaming them for the spiritual and moral decline of the nation.

Gods Final Solution

After forcefully addressing the failure of government in Israel and Judah, Micah preached a message of hope for the people of God and all the nations of the world through a Messianic prophecy. He foretold the coming of Christ, Who would "Arise and shepherd His flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord His God. And they will remain, because at that time He will be great to the ends of the earth. This One will be our peace." (5:4-5)

Where human government had failed in Jerusalem and Samaria, Christ's ultimate authority would not fail, and He would bring true peace to His people. He will be the perfect example of a Prophet, Priest, and King. The end of Micah's second sermon presented Christ as the perfect Ruler. He will usher in a new kingdom that will never face demise or corruption. For this reason, when Christ came to earth, the disciples often questioned Him about when He would institute His perfect and everlasting kingdom (Acts 1:6).

The Third Sermon of Micah (Chapters 6 and 7)

In Micah's third sermon, he presents an allegorical court case between God and man. He preaches: "Hear now what the Lord is saying, 'Arise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Listen, you mountains, to the

indictment of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth, because the Lord has a case against His people; even with Israel He will dispute." (6:1-2)

As Micah presents God's case against Israel, God reminds Israel of His kindness to her in bringing her up out of Egypt and giving her Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to represent her (4).

Because the people of Israel responded to God's goodness by seeking after other gods and fulfilling their own selfish desires, Micah represented man's predicament before God's court: "With what shall I come to the Lord and bow myself before the God on high? Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings, with yearling calves? Does the Lord take delight in thousands of rams, in ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I present my firstborn for my rebellious acts, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" (6:6, 7)

Micah's indictment of Israel's sins in response to God's goodness rendered her unfit to defend herself. Micah makes the case that no sin offering would ever sufficiently cover Israel's sins.

The predicament Micah presents in this great court case prepared his hearers for the conclusion of his message: "He has told you, oh man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." (8)

After making His accusations against the people and then asking what they might do to appease Him, God showed Micah that man could not do anything to atone for his sins. It is only through the grace God offers the contrite heart that man is granted forgiveness for his sins.

Micah finished his third sermon with yet another prophetic revelation. In the last days, he said to Israel: "Nations will see and be ashamed of all their might. They will put their hand

on their mouth; their ears will be deaf. ... To the Lord our God they will come in dread and they will be afraid before You." (7:16, 17)

Here again we see the fulfillment of a Messianic Leader Who will rule the nations. And, as Micah prophesies, this Ruler will be merciful to His chosen people: "He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in unchanging love. He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea. You will give truth to Jacob and unchanging love to Abraham, which You swore to our forefathers from the days of old." (18-20)

The God of Micah's message is a God of compassionate and merciful, unconditional love. This means we cannot win, or achieve God's love by a positive performance – it is only extended by grace – we also cannot lose God's love by a negative performance.

Properly understood, the message of the prophets is a message of hope that is built on the foundation of the love and grace of God. However, the love and grace of our heavenly Father is balanced with His justice – a justice that could only be satisfied by the payment of His Son's perfect death, so that we might enjoy that perfect love and grace of God for eternity.

Chapter Seven

The Prophecy of Nahum

Some Historical Perspective

The prophets who wrote the prophetic books of the Old Testament record the conquest of four cities: Jerusalem, Samaria, Babylon, and Nineveh. Jerusalem and Samaria were the capital cities of the Southern and Northern Kingdoms of Judah and Israel, respectively, while Babylon and Nineveh were the capital cities of their enemies. As we have seen, the preaching of Jonah brought repentance and salvation to Nineveh. The prophecy of Nahum proclaims the doom and annihilation of that same city. Nahum follows Jonah historically by approximately 120 years.

While the Book of Jonah recorded the repentance of the capital city of Israel's cruelest enemies, sixty years after Nineveh repented in response to the dynamic preaching of Jonah, the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel and took those ten tribes of Israel captive into Assyria. Approximately sixty years after that Assyrian captivity, Nahum prophesied the coming judgment and extinction of Nineveh. These awesome prophecies of Nahum were literally fulfilled twenty-three years after Nahum preached them.

The Assyrians conquered and enslaved all the nations of the world with indescribable cruelty. Their barbarism was unprecedented in ancient history, and, as they became a great world empire, the entire world feared their brutality. The centerpiece of the Assyrian Empire was the city of Nineveh, which was known as the Queen City of all the earth. It was the annihilation of this great Queen City of all the earth that was predicted by the prophet Nahum.

Nahum Declares the Destruction of Nineveh (chapter 1)

The first chapter of the Book of Nahum declares the fall of Nineveh. Though two rivers protected the city on both sides, Nahum predicted Nineveh's fall would be "With an overflowing flood (that) will make a complete end of its site." These two rivers gave strength to the city by protecting its perimeter, but Nahum prophesied that the Lord would cause the city's source of protection to rise up against it, overflow it, and destroy it. (1:8)

Nahum's name means "full of comfort," and his message did bring much comfort to the Southern Kingdom. The Assyrians had already conquered the Northern Kingdom, and the Southern Kingdom feared that the Assyrians would turn south and also conquer them. After the Assyrians conquered and took captive the Northern Kingdom, they did indeed move south to conquer the Southern Kingdom. They conquered forty-six walled cities and took 200,000 people captive.

As we learned when we surveyed the prophecy of Isaiah, when they arrived at the gates of Jerusalem, through the ministry of that great prophet, the Southern Kingdom was saved. Despite that one victory, the Southern Kingdom still feared an invasion by Assyria. You can see how Nahum's prophecy that, "Though they are at full strength and likewise many, even so, they will be cut off and pass away," offered comfort, peace, and hope to the land of Judah (11).

Nahum Describes the Destruction of Nineveh (chapter 2)

In the second chapter of Nahum's prophecy, he describes the fall of the city in detail. He describes the color of the enemy army's uniforms and the way the sun reflects off their shields (3). He vividly describes the rush of chariots and men in the streets to escape the chaotic events of a city that is being

annihilated (4). He predicts the way these soldiers leave the city and the country without ever looking back (8). In Nahum's account, the queen is stripped and paraded in chains into captivity (7). Knees quake and hearts melt in horror, and the people stand aghast, pale-faced and trembling (10). This detailed account solidified for the Southern Kingdom how God would bring peace and comfort to their land through the destruction of the capital city of their enemies.

Nahum Defends the Destruction of Nineveh (chapter 3)

Nahum listed a number of reasons why the wrath of God was being poured out against Nineveh. He accused them of shedding blood, telling lies, pillaging cities, and committing harlotry. Scholars of ancient history report that the Assyrians deported conquered people to other lands to destroy their nationalistic pride, and that they performed atrocious brutalities against their captives. They skinned their captives alive, and when they conquered a city, they would massacre half the population, and place a huge mound of skulls at the gate of the city to terrorize those they permitted to live.

Because every nation in the land had suffered at the hands of the cruel Assyrians, as His response to their godless brutality, Nahum spoke these words of the Lord for them: "'Behold, I am against you,' declares the Lord of hosts; 'And I will lift up your skirts over your face, and show to the nations your nakedness and to the kingdoms your disgrace.'" (3:5), "There is no relief for your breakdown, your wound is incurable. All who hear about you will clap their hands over you." (3:19) Nineveh's fall would be a source of comfort to all the nations who were living in fear of their atrocities.

Nahum Defends the Character of God

This small book instructs us about the love and wrath of God. In Hebrew, the word for the wrath of God conveys the concept of crossing over. The idea is that the essential character of God is love, but there are times when the wickedness and godlessness of people forces Him to enforce another side of His character, which is holiness and absolute justice. At that point, He "crosses over" into wrath and judgment because, ultimately, wickedness cannot co-exist with the holiness of God.

I have seen a loving, gentle, father who had to be held down by several policeman when a man, who had murdered and raped his seven-year-old daughter, was brought into the police station. If that father had a character that could cross over from love and gentleness to rage, is God capable of that same cross over in His character?

We might therefore define the wrath of God as: "The permanent, consistent, and ultimate attitude of absolute holiness toward sin and wickedness." We might also say that the wrath of God is: "The annihilating reaction of absolute Love toward that which is destroying His love objects." In this case, God's love objects were all those people the Assyrians were mutilating, like the captives in the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Like the people of God in the Southern Kingdom of Judah, we can take comfort in the assurance that our God, Who is the absolute essence of perfect love, will ultimately "cross over" and express His wrath on behalf of His oppressed people. He will annihilate the wicked through the absolute and total expression of His holiness and justice.

Chapter Eight

The Prophecy of Habakkuk

Those who are familiar with this little prophet Habakkuk, think of him as the prophet who had no answers, but many, many questions. It almost seems as if he has a brain that has been bent into a question mark. In the three short chapters of his prophecy, he cries out to God again and again with his "why" questions. For this reason, some have labeled Habakkuk as "The Agnostic Prophet."

An agnostic is a person who believes that we do not know about God and the questions philosophers and theologians have been asking for thousands of years. Someone has described the agnostic as a person who says, "I do not know; you do not know, and nobody else knows. But, it is intelligent to think about it!" My question for an agnostic has always been, "If it is impossible to know, how can you know that you cannot know?"

In my approach to the prophets, I made the observation that God called these prophets from every imaginable walk of life. We learn in the history books of the Old Testament that David appointed four thousand priests to do nothing but praise the Lord on instruments which he himself had made for that purpose (I Chronicles 23:5). These Levite ministers of worship and music wrote many of the psalms. Habakkuk was one of those Levite musicians. He was what in many of our cultures we call a choir director or a worship leader today.

The Watchtower of Habakkuk

"Preachers are always answering questions nobody is asking and scratching people where they do not itch." Sometimes those

of us who are preachers must plead guilty to that accusation because there is enough evidence to convict us. That was not the case with Habakkuk.

Habakkuk was a contemporary of Jeremiah. He had observed the harsh treatment of that great prophet. I believe Habakkuk reasoned, that if the people of Judah had treated a great prophet like Jeremiah the way they did, how would they treat a choir director who claimed that he had a message from God for them?

I am persuaded that Habakkuk devised a very clever literary form in which to proclaim his prophecy that would earn him a hearing, and prepare the people of Judah to receive the Word God had given him for them. I am also convinced that when Habakkuk asked his questions, he was asking the questions the people of Judah were asking God, and each other every day.

The people of Judah in the city of Jerusalem were expecting the Babylonian armies to show up soon. Their watchtowers were manned and everyone was watching and listening for the first signs and sounds of the dreaded Babylonians. Habakkuk announced that he was going to build a spiritual "watchtower". He was going to station himself in that watchtower, and he was going to ask God all his (really, their) questions. Then he was going to watch, listen and wait for God to answer his (and their) questions.

I imagine the people encouraging Habakkuk to go to his "watchtower" and ask God these questions that weighed heavily on all their hearts. When Habakkuk was in place in his watchtower, he questioned God's use of a wicked nation - Babylon - to destroy His chosen people. He asked: "Oh Lord my God, my Holy One, you who are eternal - is your plan in all of this to wipe us out? Surely not! Oh God our Rock, you have decreed the rise of these Babylonians to chasten and correct us for our awful

sins. We are wicked, but they far more! Will you, who cannot allow sin in any form, stand idly by while they swallow us up? Should you be silent while the wicked destroy those who are better than they?" (1:12,13)

Habakkuk (and the people of Judah), were aware of the harsh reality that God was using the Babylonians to punish Judah for her sins, but it was still difficult for him (them) to understand why God would use an ungodly nation to reprove His people. After all, he (they) reasoned, the godlessness of the Babylonians exceeded the ungodliness of the people of Judah. Why would God use an ungodly nation to chastise His people?

These were the questions and this was the context in which Habakkuk was asking the questions that were not only on his heart, but were on the hearts of all the doomed people of Judah on the threshold of the Babylonian conquest and captivity. He was watching, listening, and waiting for answers from God to his (their) questions. He announced: "I will stand on my guard post and station myself on the rampart; and I will keep watch to see what He will speak to me, and how I may reply when I am reproved." (2:1)

The Message of Habakkuk

Imagine the excitement of the people when Habakkuk announces that he has heard from God in his watchtower! What a clever and intriguing literary form this prophet chose for his timely message. Habakkuk preaches that God has answered his (their) questions. Though God was using an ungodly nation to chastise Judah's wrongdoing, God answered Habakkuk that the Babylonians would not be a world empire for long. As we have learned, the Babylonian world empire only lasted for seventy years.

In his watchtower, God told Habakkuk that the Babylonians had the seeds of their destruction in their hearts. He writes that God told him the Babylonians were crooked in their hearts. Essentially, God told Habakkuk what Jesus taught when He said, "All who draw the sword will die by the sword." (Matthew 26:52) They would be destroyed by their brutal and cruel ungodliness: "Behold, as for the proud one, his soul is not right within him; but the just (righteous) will live by his faith. Furthermore, wine betrays the haughty man, so that he does not stay at home. He enlarges his appetite like Sheol, and he is like death, never satisfied. He also gathers to himself all nations and collects to himself all peoples." (2:4-5)

Babylon was obviously the "proud one" God spoke of here, whose heart or soul was crooked, or not right within him. Only the just, or the righteous ones – the ones who know God and therefore live by faith in His promises – would live (4).

"The just shall live by faith" has one interpretation but many applications. Literally, through this response to Habakkuk's inquiry, God was promising a future hope for Judah. If they had the faith to believe the prophets, like Isaiah, and especially Jeremiah, they would live as a people and be returned to their land. This was a hope that meant the godless nation of Babylon would not be the final victor. But the righteous ones would live if they had the faith to believe the promises of God they had heard through their faithful prophets.

A secondary, though dynamic application is found in the New Testament where this verse from Habakkuk is quoted three times. The Protestant Reformation was born when a Catholic priest named Martin Luther found this verse in the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans, while he was having his early morning devotions (Romans 1:17). The theology of that reformation was articulated by Luther's commentaries on the letters of Paul to

the Romans and the Galatians, where this verse is also found (Galatians 3:11). The third place this verse is quoted in the New Testament provides the context for the great faith chapter of the Bible (Hebrews 10:38).

The Hymn of Habakkuk

We have no record that tells us what became of this very courageous choir-director prophet. When cities like Jerusalem fell, often half the population was massacred and the survivors were taken in chains into captivity. Though Habakkuk knew the Babylonian conquest and captivity were imminent, and would last for seventy years, he ended his message with a hymn of praise. He had no way of knowing what the future held for him, but he knew that the future of his nation was hopeful. Judah would return after seventy years, Babylon would fall, and Judah would continue to be the chosen people of God.

Habakkuk began his prophecy with what appeared to be a sigh of despair and doubt, but he concludes his prophecy with a hymn of praise, worship, and resolve. By the way he concluded his prophecy, he showed the people of God in every generation and culture how to turn their sigh of despair into a song of praise.

The hymn and the example of Habakkuk as he writes his hymn profiles the opposite of a utilitarian believer. A utilitarian believer is a believer who uses God, when he wants to, as we use utilities like electricity, water, or public transportation. The closing hymn of Habakkuk profiles a man of faith who knew God, and knew that God would not forsake His plan to usher in the Messiah through His chosen people. If God's words were true, as Habakkuk believed, then the people of God could not be completely forsaken. They may go forth in exile and they may be chastised for their sins, but they would never be extinguished completely if the Messianic prophecies were to be fulfilled.

As God gave a wonderful revelation to Job in his deepest suffering, and to Jeremiah as he composed his Lamentations, God gave this magnificent hymn to Habakkuk in the darkest hour of his life. This is a short excerpt from that hymn:

"Oh Lord, now I have heard your report,
And I worship you in awe
For the fearful things you are going to do.
In this time of our deep need,
Begin again to help us, as you did in years gone by.
Show us your power to save us.
In your wrath, remember mercy.

Even though the fig trees are all destroyed,
And there is neither blossom left nor fruit,
And though the olive crops all fail,
And the fields lie barren;
Even if the flocks die in the fields
And the cattle barns are empty,
Yet I will rejoice in the Lord.

I will be happy in the God of my salvation.
The Lord God is my Strength,
And He will give me the speed of a deer
And bring me safely over the mountains."

(Habakkuk 3:2; 17-19)

(A note to the choir director: When singing this verse, the choir is to be accompanied by stringed instruments.)

The Personal Application

Although very few of us face the kind of crisis that was facing Habakkuk, when we have problems that overwhelm us, we can

focus all our physical, emotional, and spiritual energies on our problems, or we can build a spiritual watchtower and we can watch until we see how God is working in our lives. We can listen until we hear from God how He is working in our lives. Then, like Habakkuk, we can worship God, Who is working in our lives.

Have you ever built a spiritual watchtower - a place where you watch, wait and listen until you hear from God? The Book of Habakkuk teaches that we can and should build a spiritual watchtower and approach God with our questions. He will answer us in our silent times of watching, listening, and waiting for Him. A godly pastor of another generation said: "I have been told that God does not speak to His people today as he spoke to Habakkuk. It would be more accurate to say that God's people do not listen for God as they did in the day of this gifted and godly choir director."

Chapter Nine

The Prophecy of Zephaniah

Like the prophet Joel, Zephaniah was the prophet of the day of the Lord. Whereas Joel emphasized the day of the Lord in the past, present, and future, Zephaniah concentrated his prophecy exclusively on the final Day of the Lord that will be one of those last things of which Jesus, the prophets, and the apostles told us.

The Content of the Day of the Lord (Chapter 1)

When Zephaniah preached about the Day of the Lord, he

described a catastrophic event that would take place on every level of creation. Through Zephaniah, God proclaimed, "I will completely remove all things from the face of the earth. ... I will remove man and beast; I will remove the birds of the sky and the fish of the sea, ... and I will cut off man from the face of the earth." (1:2-3)

According to Zephaniah, the Day of the Lord is going to be final and cataclysmic. It will not only concern the people of Judah and their Babylonian captors; it will affect every man and beast on earth, as well as the birds and fish of the sea.

Like other prophets, Zephaniah mixed his prophecy of the final Day of the Lord with his prophecy of the Babylonian captivity when he spoke these words of God in the next verses: "So I will stretch out My hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Then it will come about on the Day of the Lord's sacrifice that I will punish the princes, the king's sons and all who clothe themselves with foreign garments. And I will punish on that day all who follow heathen customs and fill the house of their Lord with violence and deceit." (1:4, 8-9)

Zephaniah joined the prophet Micah and focused blame and condemnation on the spiritual and political leaders of Judah for the spiritual apostasy and moral corruption of the people. As a consequence of the sins of the spiritual and political leaders, God was bringing judgment on the entire people, according to these two Minor Prophets. This judgment of God on the leadership down to the common people shows God's emphasis on the responsibilities leaders hold before God for the well being of their people.

The Character of the Day of the Lord (Chapter 2)

Though Zephaniah primarily proclaimed God's judgment on Judah for her sins, he also prophesied the Day of the Lord that

will come against all the nations, especially those who had persecuted the people of Judah: "In that great and final day, all the men of the earth will be held accountable for their deeds on earth, and God will make that final determination. Zephaniah proclaimed that only those who worshiped the one true God in their lifetimes would escape the wrath of God in that final day."

In the context of this truth, Zephaniah exhorted the nations to repent: "Gather yourselves together, yes, gather, oh nation without shame, before the decree is issued, and the Day shows you to be like chaff, before the burning anger of the Lord comes upon you, before the day of the Lord's anger comes upon you. Seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth who have carried out His ordinances; seek righteousness, seek humility. Perhaps you will be hidden in the day of the Lord's anger." (2:1-2)

Though the ungodly nations had been used by God to carry out His punishment against Judah, they were not children of the one and only true and living God. Zephaniah called them to repentance to save them from the fire that God will bring on that final Day of the Lord.

The catalyst for the Day of the Lord will be the ungodliness and sin of the nations. In his description of both the people of Judah and the ungodly nations, Zephaniah profiled the sins of affluence, indifference, unbelief, disobedience, rebellion, and godlessness. These sins of the people of God and the ungodly nations will arouse the wrath of God and be the catalyst that causes the final Day of the Lord, according to Zephaniah.

Zephaniah also predicts that God's judgment will fall on the seacoast nations, going so far as to say that, "the coast will be for the remnant of the house of Judah. They will

pasture on it. ... For the Lord their God will intervene for them and return their captives." (7) He also preached against Moab and Ammon, as well as the Ethiopians and Assyrians, doing all this to show that the ungodly nations would not survive the judgment of the Lord.

The New Creation on the Day of the Lord (Chapter 3)

Though Zephaniah rebuked Judah for her corrupt leaders and resistance to God (3:1-4), claiming that the Babylonian captivity will be the consequence of her doing so, he also spoke of the hope she could carry into the final Day of the Lord. In that day, all the nations of the earth will acknowledge the Lord as God (8-11), and the remnant of Israel will be found faithful: "The remnant of Israel will do no wrong and tell no lies, nor will a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths; for they will feed and lie down with no one to make them tremble." (13)

Despite the failure of the people of Judah to remain faithful to Him, Zephaniah foretold that God would preserve, and call out of captivity and into the final days, a faithful remnant, who will remain forever faithful to Him, a new and beautiful creation. We see that prophecy partly fulfilled in the history books of Ezra and Nehemiah, and the last three prophets we will survey. These are the post captivity prophets that minister to a remnant of those who survived the Babylonian Captivity.

Since the prophecy of Zephaniah primarily focuses on the final Day of the Lord, many believe his prophecy of a remnant that is meek, humble, and righteous is fulfilled in the church of the living, risen Christ. All the apostles were Jews, and Paul writes that all Gentiles who are born again are sons of Abraham (Galatians 3:7). Paul also becomes a prophet when he predicts that God will return the Jewish nation to Himself and

"All Israel will be saved." (Romans 9-11; Romans 11:26)

Chapter Ten

The Prophecy of Haggai

All the prophets you have now read lived and preached before or in the Babylonian captivity. The prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are called "the post-captivity prophets" because they preached to the Jews who returned from the captivity in Babylon. The twelve history books of the Old Testament provide the historical context in which all the writing prophets lived and preached. To appreciate the historical setting for the last three prophets, read the Book of Ezra, or my booklet of notes on that historical book (Booklets 3 and 4), which will remind you of what we learned about the three separate returns from the Babylonian Captivity.

Haggai and Zechariah preached to those who were part of the first group of exiles who returned from Babylon. The first return took place shortly after the Babylonian Empire fell to the Medes and Persians. That first return from captivity had a very clearly defined job description. The vision statement of the first return was to rebuild the Temple of Solomon. That mission objective will be the heart and soul of the messages of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah.

In fulfillment of a miraculous prophecy of Isaiah, Cyrus the Great, the Emperor of the Persian World Empire, issued a decree giving the exiles permission and supplies to rebuild the Temple. Although the return to rebuild the Temple was a glorious miracle, their actual return was not all that glorious.

Fifty thousand ragged-looking refugees returned to rebuild the Temple. They probably looked very much like the refugees we hear so much about today.

They were once a powerful army of six hundred thousand fighting men, who were greatly feared by people, like those who lived in the fortified cities of Canaan (Joshua 2:9-14). Now they have no army, and they were not even a nation. Add to this the shock and disappointment when they discovered their land had been populated by a pagan people who did not wish them well. We have now put in perspective the historical setting and the challenge faced by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah.

The Message of Haggai

The people the exiles found living in Jerusalem and Judea had been conquered by the Babylonians and deported from their country to the land of Judah. They bitterly opposed the rebuilding of the Temple. Convinced the dynamic that once made these Jews a powerful nation was in that Temple, they harassed and persecuted the people of Judah once reconstruction began. The people of Judah were so threatened by this hostile opposition they stopped working on the Temple for fifteen years! Totally distracted from their mission objective, they became absorbed with building their own homes. Enter the prophet Haggai!

Remember that the function of a prophet was to cry out against any obstacle that was blocking the work of God until that obstacle was removed and the work of God was being accomplished again. The work of God when Haggai lived and preached was the rebuilding of that Temple. The lost priority focus of the people of Judah was the problem-obstacle that was blocking that work of God. Haggai preached four great sermons that literally preached up that Temple.

The First Sermon of Haggai: "Focus Your Priorities!" (Chapter 1)

Half of the short Book of Haggai records, and then describes the results of Haggai's first sermon. In this sermon, Haggai challenged the people of Judah: "Consider your ways!" The message of the entire Bible can be reduced to two words: "God First!" Haggai's challenge to these exiles was essentially "Consider your time and God's time. You have time for your houses, but you have no time for the house of God."

Speaking for God, Haggai then preached: "Consider My ways! You look for much, but behold, it comes to little; when you bring it home, I blow it away. Why?" declares the Lord of hosts, "Because of My house which lies desolate, while each of you runs to his own house!" (1:9) One translation quotes Haggai as saying that they were putting their money in a sock that has holes in it. When the prophet challenges them to consider the ways of God, the Word from God is that He is the One Who is putting the hole in their sock.

Haggai is challenging these exiles to consider what they are doing, and what God is doing. As a consequence of their flawed priorities, God has called for a drought on all their work and on the people of Judah themselves (10,11). He did not send them rain but instead sent them famine. All their hard work produced nothing, and it was all a direct result of their refusal to put God first.

Haggai must have been a powerful preacher because the people were stirred to obedience. They focused their priorities and resumed work on the Temple. The first sermon of Haggai actually came in two parts. The second part was in response to their obedience. The essence of part two was: "I am with you says the Lord!" (13) Once they realigned their priorities, God

was with them. God blessed them and their work when they put God first.

The Second Sermon of Haggai: "Focus Your Perspective" (2:1-9)

The original Temple of Solomon was built with very costly materials, like gold, silver and precious jewels. All the glory that was Solomon's and all the wealth of Solomon had provided the materials that had built the original Temple. When the remnant of the people of Judah rebuilt the Temple of Solomon, they were poor refugees. The only material resources these returned exiles had were taken from the rubble of the original Temple, or supplied by the Persian emperor, Cyrus the Great.

Many of those building the second Temple had never seen the first Temple, because they had been born during the exile. The older people who had seen the original Temple could do nothing but weep over a Temple that would never be as glorious as the first one (Ezra 3:12,13).

In the second sermon of Haggai, the prophet addressed the sorrow and discouragement the older refugees were experiencing. Haggai reminded them that the significance of the Temple was spiritual and not material or physical. (The Tabernacle in the Wilderness was a tent!) Haggai also reminded these exiles that God's Spirit was with them.

Haggai's second sermon addressed the people's need to focus their perspective. The word "perspective" means, "to look through." There are times when the Scripture exhorts us to remember, and there are times when the clear instruction of the Scripture is to forget the things that are behind.

Sometimes looking back is so devastating for us that God uses prophets like Haggai to challenge us to have a kind of "tunnel vision" that, oblivious to all the obstacles and distractions, simply sees through in the present, and into the

future, what God wants us to do for Him. That was the essence of the message of Haggai's second sermon.

The Third Sermon of Haggai: "Focus Your Motivation" (2:10-19)

After the Hebrew people began working to rebuild the Temple, they wanted to see immediately the blessing on their work that God had promised through the second part of Haggai's first sermon. They worked for months, through the fall and winter, and had not yet received the blessing they had expected.

Haggai proposed two questions to the people in their disappointment. Since the priests answered the people's questions about the Scripture, he addressed his two questions to the priests. First, he asked, "If a man carries holy meat in his garment, will the things he touches become holy? To this question, the priests responded, "No." Second, he asked, "If a man is unclean, will the things he touches become unclean? To this question, the priests responded, "Yes."

By way of these questions, he was illustrating the change that had taken place in the people since their return from exile. Before the exile, they were like the unclean man. As a consequence of their sins, everything they touched was unclean. But through the chastisement of the exile, they had been cleansed, and now their actions in rebuilding the Temple were considered holy.

What they needed to understand, however, was that holiness is not communicated immediately, like a disease. Sin is communicated that way but it takes time to become holy. If blessings were granted simply through our obedience, then God's blessings would be the result of our works, not His grace. Our motivation for holiness should be out of our reverence for God alone, not our desire for blessing. In his third sermon, Haggai was challenging them to focus their motivation for serving God

by restoring the Temple.

The Fourth Sermon of Haggai: "Focus Your Fears" (2:21-23)

When they returned to Jerusalem, they had no means of protecting themselves and after seventy years of captivity and slave labor, they feared being taken captive and enslaved by nations again.

Haggai's fourth sermon addressed their fears. He prophesied God's overthrow of the nations they feared and His plans to shake the heavens and the earth.

In his fourth sermon, Haggai prophesied that God is going to shake the earth until the only things that will be left on earth will be those things that cannot be shaken. The author of the Book of Hebrews quotes from Haggai's second sermon and then tells us that we have received a kingdom that cannot be shaken (Hebrews 12:26-29). That is the essence of the fourth sermon of Haggai.

The Personal Application

Apply the preaching of this great prophet to your life today. What are your priorities? Is God blessing your work? And how are you doing in your spiritual life? The worst part of the judgment of God on the flawed priorities of these exiles was that God had called for a drought upon men, and the works of their hands. Have you ever felt that you yourself were experiencing a spiritual drought? If God is not blessing the hard labor of your hands, and if you find yourself in one of those spiritual dry places, then the devotional message of Haggai for you is: "Consider your ways," and "Consider God's ways."

How is your perspective? Do you have the right kind of tunnel vision? Are you continuously looking back and comparing

the past work of God in your life when God wants you to focus on the work He is doing today and tomorrow?

What are your motivations for serving the Lord? Do you look for immediate blessings as you serve the Lord? Are you doing the work of God because you expect to be rewarded immediately?

What are your fears? Haggai joins Peter in assuring you that you may cast all your cares on Him because He cares for you (I Peter 5:7). Because you have read the prophecy of Haggai, let your faith focus your priorities, your perspective, your motives, and your fears.

Chapter Eleven

The Prophecy of Zechariah

As Haggai preached his four dynamic sermons, you can almost hear the much younger prophet Zechariah saying to the older prophet Haggai, "But Haggai, when defenseless and vulnerable people have no way of defending themselves; when hopeless and discouraged people have reached the point of despair; when helpless and defeated people are frightened and threatened by persecution; those people need to hear more than 'Be strong and work! When people are despairing because they are experiencing a crisis or a tragedy, all they can see is the tragic circumstances of their crisis."

Prophets were called "seers" because they could "see" God working behind, beyond, and in a crisis. A seer saw what other people did not see, because a seer saw God. Zechariah is one of the greatest examples of a "seer" in the entire Bible.

Zechariah believed that the broken people of Judah needed a vision of an omnipotent God, Who was with them, Who could strengthen them, and Who would fight for them. God used the preaching of Zechariah to give those defeated, discouraged, and despairing refugees that kind of a vision of God Himself.

The Literary Form of Zechariah

The heart of Zechariah's prophecy is eight visions he shares with these exiles and with you and me. He will focus a problem that was feeding the discouragement and despair of these Jewish survivors of captivity. Then he will pull back an imaginary veil and share a revelation of how God is working behind the scenes of that problem. He will do that eight times in this dynamic prophecy. That is the literary form of the Book of Zechariah.

The Message of Zechariah

The message of God through Zechariah was, "Return to Me ... and I will return to you." Like the Jews in Israel today, these exiles were experiencing a return to their land that was prophesied by several prophets. Through the preaching of Zechariah, God was asking His people for a spiritual return, not to a city or a Temple, but to Himself. While that has clearly not yet happened to the Jews of the Israel of today, Zechariah, other prophets, and the Apostle Paul, predict that spiritual return when, "All Israel will be saved." (Zechariah 8:20-23; Romans 11:26; Isaiah 59:20,21)

Fifty-three times Zechariah uses the expression, "Lord of Hosts" which presents God as the Lord of angelic hosts, the stars, and all the forces of nature, which God uses to accomplish His purposes in this world. There is a sense in which this expression summarizes all the prophecies of Zechariah

because all the visions of Zechariah will tell us that he saw God as the "Lord of Hosts" at a time when the people of God were politically and militarily impotent.

Zechariah saw the Lord of Hosts working in three ways on the behalf of the people of God. First, there was the Lord of Hosts, Himself. The second and most important way God will provide for people to come back to Him will be through the One Zechariah calls "The Branch." With the exception of the sixty-six chapters of Isaiah, the fourteen chapters of Zechariah have more Messianic prophecies than any other prophet. When the Messiah came in fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah, the Christ told the people of God very clearly and emphatically, "I am the Way (back to God) ... and no man can come to the Father but by Me!" (John 14:6)

The third way Zechariah preached that God will return to us and bring us back to Himself is the familiar Pentecostal promise: "Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of Hosts." (4:6) Zechariah predicted the great miracle of Pentecost and all the blessings on the people of God of that great day.

In this way, Zechariah painted a beautiful portrait of the Trinity. The Lord of Hosts is God the Father; the way back to God the Father is through the Branch, Who is the Son. When the people of God come back to the Father by way of the Son, the Son will give them the Pentecostal power of the Holy Spirit.

The Eight Visions of Zechariah

The word "apocalypse" is the Greek word for "revelation." A revelation means an unveiling. The word "apocalypse" means, "To pull back a veil and reveal that which could otherwise never be known." Zechariah pulls back the veil eight times and shows the people of God what God was doing behind the veil of the way

things appeared to be. God gave those visions to Zechariah for the strengthening of an impotent people of God, and to give hope to a despairing people of God.

Vision Number One: The Vision Of The Shady Place (1:7-17)

According to many Bible scholars, the man standing among the trees in the ravine represents the difficult experience of transition that was being experienced by these exiles. The transition period between their miraculous return from slave labor and captivity in Babylon, and the challenge of converting rubble into a Temple, was an extremely discouraging time for these people. In other words, they found themselves at the bottom of a ravine. The visible problem-obstacle "before the veil" that was discouraging them was the undeniable reality that they were not a nation, but a pathetic-looking bunch of poor refugees. They were in one of those dreadful times of transition we all experience.

When Zechariah pulled back the veil he saw what he called, "The Watcher", Who was the Lord of Hosts. God was aware and God was watching over the transition of His people. After all, God had supernaturally ended the captivity of His people. In His time and in His way, God will fulfill His plan for them with a full and complete restoration of His people to their land, and of their souls to their God.

When God wants to do a new thing in our lives, when He wants to call us to a new place, most of us, most of the time, present Him with three obstacles. Since we are primarily security-oriented creatures, we do not want to leave the old secure nest in which we are now living and serving. He must therefore get us out of the old place before He can lead us into the new place. That is why a call of God often has two dimensions - a pull from the front and a kick from the rear. In

other words, God has to blast us out of the old so He can lead us into the new. Can you think of times when He worked that miracle for you? I call those miracles "divine interventions".

When we are between the old and the new, our God must keep us going so He can pull us through our transition. Then He must get us right so He can settle us into the new place and the new thing He wants to do in our lives and ministries. When the children of Israel were in Egypt and God wanted them in the Promised Land, God described that miracle this way: "I brought you out that I might lead you in." (Deuteronomy 6:23)

Vision Number Two: The Four Horns (1:18-21)

In the Bible, horns are a symbol of power. The Visible problem-obstacle before the veil that was feeding their fears was the awesome power of world empires that had conquered and enslaved them when they were a strong nation. World powers could easily conquer and enslave them again.

When Zechariah pulled back the veil, what he saw behind the veil and showed these exiles gave them courage and hope. Behind the veil, Zechariah revealed the world powers the Lord of Hosts was going to use to destroy those "horns" or world powers they feared would conquer and enslave them.

Vision Number Three: The City Of Jerusalem (2:1-4, 10-13)

The Visible problem before the veil was the rubble that was once the beautiful city of Jerusalem. When Zechariah pulled back the veil, what he saw behind the veil and revealed to the people was a beautifully restored city of Jerusalem. This revelation showed them, that what was now only rubble was going to be so great a city that it could not be measured, and so well-defended by the Lord of Hosts, this Jerusalem would need no walls.

Jerusalem and the Temple were restored into the city and Temple visited many times by Jesus. Forty years after Jesus, Rome completely destroyed the city to the ground and it was restored into the city it is today. The entire liturgy that accompanied the offering of animal sacrifices was abandoned when Rome destroyed Jerusalem in A. D. 70. While this prophecy of Zechariah was partially fulfilled when Jerusalem was restored before Christ, and again after that awful destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, the complete fulfillment of this prophecy will be the New Jerusalem that is prophetically profiled by the Apostle John (Revelation 21: 2).

Vision Number Four: The Accuser of the Brethren (3:1-2; 8-10)

The problem Zechariah focused before the veil that was discouraging the exiles was a vision of Joshua their high priest who is wearing soiled garments. In this vision, Satan is accusing Joshua. The terrible stain of the sin of idolatry, which was forgiven and purged through the captivity experience, is more than likely the focus of these accusations of the evil one.

Satan the accuser uses the consequences or stains of sins that have been forgiven to accuse the brethren day and night. We are told in the Book of Revelation that when this function of the evil one is put down, then the salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ will come (Revelation 12:10).

When Zechariah draws back the veil, he sees, and reveals to the people, his Trinity revelation of - the Lord of Hosts, and the coming expressions of God's love and power, through the Messiah, Whom he calls "the Advocate". He also sees the Holy Spirit, and future miracles that will be part of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

**Vision Number Five: The Lamp Stand of Gold with Sources of Oil
(4:1-7)**

The problem before the veil in this vision that was contributing to the low morale of the Jewish exiles was their God-given responsibility to share the Word of God with the whole world. Since they were the people who received the Word of God for the whole world, they had the responsibility to live that Word before the world and communicate that Word to the world. The rubble of the Temple, the city, their nation, and their own personal lives made them feel that they were miserable failures as examples or teachers of the Word of God.

Have you ever been in a spiritual desert through illness, depression, or other forms of spiritual defeat when the evil one made these accusations against you? Has he ever whispered to you in those vulnerable times, "And you are supposed to be an example for the whole world to see - the salt of the earth and the light of the world?"

When Zechariah removed the veil, he saw the Holy Spirit Who was represented by the sources of oil: "Not by might nor by power but by My Spirit, says the Lord of Hosts (4:6). This vision assured them that God will enable them to be what He was calling them to be, and to do what He was calling them to do, through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is where, like the prophet Joel, Zechariah gives us a marvelous prophecy of the miraculous Day of Pentecost.

Vision Number Six: The Flying Scroll (5:1-4)

The problem focused before the veil in this vision is that the returned exiles were overwhelmed with the problem and power of evil. When times are bad in the time and the part of the world in which we live, it is easy, though unwise, for us to be

overwhelmed with the awesome power of evil. This obsession and oppression with the terrible power of evil was convincing the people of God that the forces of good and of God would never overcome the awesome power of the forces of evil.

When Zechariah removed his imaginary veil again, he saw behind the veil, and he revealed to the people through his preaching, the Lord of Hosts Who could equip the people of God to overcome the forces of evil. According to this vision of Zechariah, God controls, limits, and somehow uses evil for His glory, and to fulfill His purposes. Even though there is nothing good about evil, God fits evil into a plan for good where His people are concerned (Isaiah 45:7; Romans 8:28)

Vision Number Seven: A Woman Sitting In a Basket (5:5-11)

The problem focused by Zechariah before the veil is drawn back in this vision was dishonesty in the marketplaces of the world. When Zechariah removed the veil, he revealed the truth that dishonesty in the marketplaces of the world is limited by the Lord of Hosts - and ultimately restricted by Him.

Though we do not understand it, like all the evil in this world, God uses evil to accomplish His purposes and glorify Himself. As a jeweler uses a black velvet background to display his diamonds, God uses the dark background of evil in the market places of this world to display His unconditional love. That love was expressed in the forgiveness and deliverance of His people from captivity, and will be exhibited through the salvation through which we can return to God and He will return to us.

Vision Number Eight: The Four Chariots (6:1-8)

The problem Zechariah focuses in this vision that was feeding the fears and nurturing the despair of God's people was

that human government is so corrupt that the people of God had lost faith in human government. All over the world today, there is so much paying-off and corruption in the politics of human government, that people of integrity have lost trust and confidence in the political process, and their political leaders.

What Zechariah saw behind the veil is similar to the message of the prophet Micah. The only pure form of government is the kingdom of God. Until the King of kings and Lord of lords reigns, there will be no government that is not in some degree guilty of corruption. However, as in the two previous visions, God is in charge. The Lord of Hosts is sovereign. The government of God's kingdom is and will be very structured, organized and in perfect harmony.

The Messianic Prophecies of Zechariah

Many of the leaders of God's people did not believe in a Messiah-Deliverer, and they were a discouragement to those who did. The Messianic prophecies of Zechariah showed that God will ultimately enthrone the King of kings and Lord of lords, Who will unite the offices of Prophet, Priest and King in His millennial reign.

Some examples of Zechariah's Messianic prophecies that predicted the First Advent of the Messiah are: 3:8; 9:9, 16; 11:11-13; 12:10; 13:1, 6). Some examples of Zechariah's Messianic prophecies, that predicted the Second Advent of the Messiah are: 6:12; 8:20-23; 14:1-9). One of these references is a prophecy of Zechariah that prophetically profiles the spiritual return of the Jews. Conservative scholars believe this prophecy may have been partially fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost and will be fulfilled in the last days (8:20-23).

Chapter Twelve

The Prophecy of Malachi

In recent years in North America, there has been an epidemic of spiritual leaders who have experienced moral and spiritual failure. The last book of the Old Testament has a message for spiritual leaders. Hosea made the accurate observation: "like priests, like people." (Hosea 4:9) This is what makes the fall of a spiritual leader so very devastating to the people of God, to the work of God, and to the glory of God. Malachi presents an anatomy of the fall of a spiritual leader. His purpose is to show those who lead God's people how to prevent that deadly process and how to restore their relationship with God when they do fall.

Malachi followed Haggai and Zechariah by at least one hundred years, and the ministry of Nehemiah by about ten years. He confronted the same problems as Nehemiah, like epidemic divorce, immorality, and a corrupt priesthood (Nehemiah 13:23-25). Since he joined other prophets by attributing those problems to a corrupt priesthood, he addresses most of his message to the priests who were the spiritual shepherds of the people of Judah.

This courageous prophet will charge that the priests had left God's paths, they were not obeying God, they were causing many to sin by their ungodly counsel, the behavior of the priests was disgraceful in the eyes of all the people, and they were turning the "priesthood into a grotesque parody." (2:7-9)

He was a prophet when the people of God were going through the motions, with a form of religion that lacked substance, and

denied the reality of a relationship with God. They were spiritually cold and apathetic to the point that it caused agony for this devout prophet. The prophecy of Malachi was a warning to the spiritual leaders of the people of Judah that order and form without life could be one way of describing a corpse.

The last prophet in the Old Testament did not preach visions as Zechariah did, or like Haggai, challenge the people of God to build a Temple. The burden of his heart and message was that God wanted to have a love relationship with His people, but the priests and the people of Judah were not interested in knowing and loving God. Like Hosea, Malachi believed the people of God were committing spiritual adultery with this world.

When the risen, living Christ wrote a letter to the first generation church in the city of Ephesus, He rebuked them because "You have left your first love." (Revelation 2:4) The problem-obstacle addressed by this devout prophet is that the people of Judah, especially their priests, had left their first love - their relationship with God - and they were living sinful lives.

He begins his prophecy with these beautiful words: "The burden of the Word of the Lord through Malachi: 'I love you,' says the Lord." (1:1,2) As they read through the Bible, many people do not expect to read about the love of God until they get to the New Testament, especially the Sermon on the Mount. They would never expect to find the concept of the love of God in the prophets. The love of God is actually the theme of prophetic writings like the Lamentations of Jeremiah, and the Books of Hosea, Jonah, and Malachi.

According to these Old Testament men of God, God loved His people with a love that was not won by a positive performance, or lost by a negative performance. The burden of Malachi's prophecy was that God loved the priests and people of Judah. As

Malachi shared the burden of his heart, he joined those I have referenced and proclaimed that God loved His people anyway and unconditionally and He wanted to have a love relationship with them.

Although God's love is unconditional, because their hearts were cold toward God, and they were living in sin, Malachi preached that the priests and the people of Judah were wounding the loving heart of God. The burden of Malachi was to show an apostate, cold-hearted, sinful priesthood and people of Judah, how their relationship with God had broken down, and how that relationship could be restored. The mission objective of Malachi's prophecy was a revival in the hearts of the priests and those they were responsible to shepherd.

The Literary Form of Malachi

Malachi used a literary form that was very similar to that of Habakkuk and just as clever. If you have ever tried as a parent to communicate with a rebellious teenager, you will appreciate the literary form Malachi chose to communicate the message God gave him for His people. Like the literary form chosen by Habakkuk, you could call the literary form of Malachi a literary "forum" or debate.

In Malachi's prophecy, He makes a charge in which he tries to tell the priests and the people of Judah where and how they had departed from their relationship with God. Each time he does this, the people of God deny the charge and, like a teenager being confronted by a parent, the people ask, "Who, me?" or, "When did we ever do that?" The prophet implies that God is making these charges. The people deny all the charges and refuse to acknowledge the hard reality of these accusations of their heavenly Father through this faithful prophet.

There are seven examples of this talking back, which are the literary forum and become the outline of this book. A wonderful Bible professor, who opened my understanding of the prophets, called these seven examples of backtalk, "Seven Whispers of a Heart Growing Cold Toward God."

Chapter Thirteen

Seven Whispers of a Heart Growing Cold Toward God

Whisper Number One: To Doubt the Love of God (1:1-5)

When Malachi begins his prophecy with that declaration: "The burden of the Word of the Lord through Malachi, 'I love you' says the Lord," the talking back begins with the response: "Really, when was that?" In response to this backtalk, the prophet suggests many evidences of the love of God for the people of Judah.

Every love relationship has two dimensions. Those two dimensions are the giving and receiving of love. A subtle question is implied here. That question is: "If you are not as close to God as you once were, who moved?" Or "If you do not have a love relationship with God, but you once did, who stopped loving?" When we doubt the love of God for us that means there is something wrong with our love for God.

In the Book of Revelation, the leaders, who have been the shepherds of God's people for millennia are pictured as twenty-four elders who are seated on little thrones around a large throne in heaven. These elders are described as wearing white robes, and crowns of gold on their heads. We read that each of

them also has a harp, and vials full of incense (Revelation 4:4; 5:8).

The white robes of these elders represent their moral purity, or the fact that they have run well to the end. Their crowns of gold symbolize their spiritual victories of faith. We are told that their vials full of incense are the prayers of the people of God for them, and the fact that each of the elders has a harp makes the statement that they are worshipers.

Since Malachi is addressing his prophecy primarily to corrupt spiritual leaders whose hearts have grown cold toward God, we might say he is telling each of these spiritual leaders that their gradual progression into apostasy began when they "lost their harps." He was terribly burdened about the awesome consequences of spiritual leaders growing cold in their relationship with God. Spiritual leaders who have no private devotional life, or who have "misplaced their harps" will eventually lose everything, according to Malachi.

How do the people of God become like a spiritual corpse? According to Malachi, this deadly process begins when the spiritual leader doubts the love of God for him personally, and neglects the regular, devotional expression of his love for God. This truth obviously applies to every believer and not only their spiritual leaders.

Whisper Number Two: To Despise the Name of God (1:6-2:4)

The next charge of God through Malachi profiles the second whisper of a heart growing cold toward God. Essentially, the second whisper is when the spiritual leader or the believer despises the name of God. The backtalk continues with the denial, "When did we ever despise the name of God?" The reply comes, "Every time you say, 'Do not bother giving anything very valuable to the Lord.'

Malachi is telling these priests: "When you accept and then offer sick, blind and lame animals as acceptable sacrifices to God you are despising the name of God." In one of Malachi's strongest messages, speaking for God to these priests, Malachi will proclaim: "God would like to spread on your faces the manure of those animals you offer to Me, and throw you out like droppings" (2:3). Malachi exclaims: "Oh, to find one priest among you who would shut the doors and refuse this kind of sacrifice!" (1:10)

The name of God represents the essence of Who and what God is. A careful study of the names of God in the Bible is actually a study of the nature and essence of God. The third of the Ten Commandments warned us that we should never take the name of the Lord in vain (Exodus 20:7). This commandment is not prohibiting profanity, but mandating that we should never speak the name of God in worship without being in awe of who and what God is, and called according to His purposes. When Jesus taught the apostles how to pray, after telling them to address God as their heavenly Father, He taught that their first petition should be: "Hallowed be Your name." (Matthew 6:9)

When the people of Judah were offering God these inferior sacrifices, the priests who accepted those sacrifices, and the people of God who offered them, were despising the name of God. They were making the statement that God did not deserve anything valuable. Our stewardship also reveals what we think of who and what God is - and deserves from us. According to Malachi, the second whisper of a heart growing cold toward God is to despise the name of God.

Are you seeing yourself in these heart whispers? Do you have a personal, private, intimate, worship, love relationship with God? Do you show by your worship that you love God and appreciate who He is, and what He deserves?

Whisper Number Three: A Broken Commitment to God (1:13)

When a spiritual leader, or a devout believer no longer expresses a personal love relationship with God in private worship, and they show by their actions that they despise the essence of who and what God is, the next whisper of their heart is that they find the work of God to be too difficult. Malachi is subtly implying another question for priests at this point in his prophecy. That question is: "Are you overworked, or are you under motivated?" He is now challenging priests, who murmur and complain that the work of God is too difficult, with this issue: "Is the work of God really too difficult, or have you left your first love and no longer love God with all your being?"

I now remind you of those two words that were focused for us in the prophecy of Haggai, and are found throughout the Bible: "God First!" From Genesis to Revelation we are challenged to put God first and worship Him only. When a spiritual leader serves God with a divided heart, it will not be long before they find the work of God to be too difficult. The most miserable people on earth are spiritual leaders, or devout people, who are serving God with less than a total commitment to the God they are serving.

Look for the essence of this truth throughout the Bible: "If God is anything to you, then God is everything to you. Because, until God is everything to you, God is not really anything to you." Observe Elijah as he challenges the people of God on Mount Carmel with this question: "How long will you be torn between two opinions? If the Lord is God, then follow Him and if Baal is God, follow him. Also hear the risen, living Christ as He writes to the church in Laodicea: "I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither

cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of my mouth." (Revelation 3:15,16)

James tells us that the double minded man is unstable in all his ways. As I have already observed, Jesus taught that the single mind, or outlook, leads to a life that is filled with happiness, while "spiritual double vision" leads to great darkness, or unhappiness (Matthew 6:22,23). The Word of God is filled with Scriptures that charge us to serve God with undivided hearts.

Profile of a Priest (2:5-9)

As he creates the context in which he is going to present his fourth charge in chapter two, Malachi gives us an eloquent profile of what a true priest of God was meant to be. He is actually quoting words that were spoken by Moses about Levi, the father of the priests: "He passed on to the people all the truth he got from Me. He did not lie or cheat; he walked with Me, living a good and righteous life, and turned many from their lives of sin." (Malachi 2:6; Deuteronomy 33:10)

As a tribute to extraordinary, dedicated pastors, who have served them for many years, some congregations have inscribed these words of Moses and Malachi on a plaque that is conspicuously placed in the church for future generations to read.

Malachi's profile of a priest continues by telling us that: "Priests' lips should flow with the knowledge of God so the people will learn God's laws. The priests are the messengers of the Lord of Hosts, and men should come to them for guidance." (7) Malachi then contrasts this model of what a priest should be with the cold-hearted, apostate and corrupted priests to whom he will address his fourth charge, and most of this prophecy.

Whisper Number Four: Broken Marriage Commitments (2:10-16)

Once the priests and the men of Judah had compromised their vertical commitment to an absolute and Holy God, as we might expect, it was only a matter of time until they compromised their horizontal commitments to their marriage partners. Try to follow the logical sequence of these heart-whispers. When the vertical commitment to God is flawed, then the horizontal commitments to people become like bread crusts - made to be broken.

Malachi now addresses the problem of divorce. He joins Nehemiah in his concern for the children of marriages that end in divorce courts (Nehemiah 13:23-25). He reminds the priests and the men of Judah, that marriage is God's plan for giving children twenty years of nurture before they must go out into the world and live out their own lives. That is why God hates divorce (15).

Solomon told us that parents are like a bow and children are like arrows. The way children enter into life depends on the thrust and direction they receive from their parents. If you were the evil one, and you knew that Solomon's metaphor represents the truth about how children are nurtured and prepared to live their lives, what would you do? You would probably try to cut the string on that bow. That is what the evil one was doing when this last prophet was living and preaching. It seems obvious that he is doing the same thing in our cultures today.

Remember that Malachi is charting the whispers of a heart growing cold toward God. He is warning the people of Judah that when their commitment to God is fractured, their commitments to people will also soon be broken.

He is primarily addressing the degrees by which the hearts of the priests have become cold toward God, and led them to the

place where they are treating divorce as normative behavior by accepting the offerings of divorced people. Malachi eloquently charges that these divorced people cover the altar with tears, while complaining that God has withdrawn His blessing from their lives. He then explains that God has withdrawn His blessing from the men of Judah because they have dealt treacherously with their wives by divorcing them. Their wives had been faithful to them since they were both very young. They had made a solemn covenant with God and their wives to live with them, for better or worse, until they were parted by death. To break that covenant was treachery, according to Malachi.

Whisper Number Five: Relative Morality (2:17-3:7)

To medicate the pain of their guilt, the only way they could live with their loss of integrity was to devise a relative morality. Their "new morality" or "moral relativity" relieved the spiritual schizophrenia of their guilt, and gave these double-minded Jews a new comfort index that made it possible for them to live with their sinful values and lifestyle.

When you think about the moral absolutism of the Law of God that was given to Moses, the very thought of a "new morality" or a "relative morality" is a theological monstrosity. We think the idea of moral relativity, or the amoral ethics of the twenty-first century, is a recent ethical development. If you read and believe the prophets, you know that they nearly all joined Malachi in addressing the problem of moral relativity.

Malachi charged that the priests and the people of Judah were saying that evil is good, that evil men please the Lord, and that God is indifferent to morality - that He does not even care about morals (2:17). If you ignore the chapter divisions, you can see that Malachi used a two-fold argument in refuting

the moral relativity of those who were medicating their guilt in this way.

First, Malachi made reference to the coming of the Messiah in His first Advent (3:1-6). Malachi's question was, "But who can stand when He appears? Who can endure His coming?" When He comes, the Messiah will be like a blazing fire refining precious metal; He will bleach the dirtiest garments, will purify the ministers of God, and will put things right in the Holy City (3:4, 5). When He comes, the Messiah will preach that God never changes and that God always feels the same way about moral issues (3:6).

The second part of Malachi's argument moves into chapter 4 and focuses the coming of the Messiah in His second advent (Malachi 4:1, 2; 3:18). Malachi was preaching one of the basic immutable laws of God that is emphasized in the Bible – that God is not indifferent to morality and that we therefore reap what we sow.

Whisper Number Six: Robbing God (3:8-12)

The next whisper of a heart that is growing cold toward God is the charge of Malachi that the priests and the people of Judah are robbing God. The talking back continues as the people respond, "When did we ever rob God?" The answer comes as they are told that they robbed God every time they withheld their tithes from God.

The Hebrew word "tithe" means "tenth." The significance of the tithe is that it was the first tenth of everything the devout believer received in life. The tithe was an opportunity for the believer to learn and then measure the degree to which they were practicing that "God-First" principle that is taught throughout the Bible. When they invaded the Promised Land, all the spoils of the first city they conquered belonged to God.

They even gave their firstborn son to God.

Beyond the tithe, the Law of God instructed the believer to make offerings and sacrifices. David defined a sacrifice when he wrote: "I will not offer to God as a sacrifice that which costs me nothing." (II Samuel 24:24) The significance of Malachi's perspective on the tithe is that the first tenth of all they had and received was so clearly the Lord's, that to withhold their tithe meant that they were robbing God of what belonged to Him.

Consider the context of this sixth whisper of a heart that is growing cold toward God. You will then appreciate the subtlety of the gradual progression into apostasy profiled by this prophet: There is no longer a devotional expression of love for God; their actions do not demonstrate an appreciation of who and what God is and deserves; there is a broken commitment to God; defective vertical commitments to God are followed by broken commitments to people; moral relativity follows to medicate the loss of integrity.

When we have listened to these first five whispers, we might then expect there to be a withholding of tithes and offerings. Since this sixth whisper comes rather late in this sequence, and the prophet is primarily addressing his message to corrupt priests, we might suspect that he is implying that the priests are misappropriating these tithes and offerings.

Whisper Number Seven: Unbelief! (3:13-15)

The seventh whisper of a heart that has now grown completely cold toward God is unbelief. That unbelief is eloquently expressed when Malachi, speaking for God, states his seventh accusation against the priests and the people of Judah - and they talk back to him: "Your attitude toward me has been proud and arrogant," says the Lord.' But you say, 'what do you

mean? What have we said that we should not have said?' Listen, you have said, 'It is foolish to worship God and obey Him. What good does it do to obey His laws, and to sorrow and mourn for our sins? From now on, as far as we are concerned, 'Blessed are the arrogant!' For those who do evil shall prosper, and those who dare God to punish them shall get off free.'"

Even though these priests no longer believed, since they were born priests, they could not leave the priesthood. So they continued to function as priests. Since one of the functions of these priests was to teach the Scriptures to the people of Judah, what were they going to teach if they no longer believed the Scriptures? According to Malachi, they taught, "Blessed are the arrogant!"

If you are familiar with the Bible, you know how much God hates pride and arrogance. Pride is the mother of all sins. Why would priests then preach, "Blessed are the arrogant?" Malachi is telling us that these priests have now completely departed from the faith.

When we hear preaching that clearly contradicts the Bible, we cannot help but wonder how we ever reached this point of apostasy and unbelief. The profound answer of Malachi is that it all started when we started listening to these whispers of our hearts. It may take many years for these seven whispers to be heard in the heart of a believer or a spiritual leader.

If you place a frog in a pan of boiling water, the frog will jump out of the water. But, if you place the frog in cold water and gradually increase the temperature, the frog will soon be completely boiled. The subtle process profiled by Malachi works that way - very slowly - but the final result is corrupt spiritual leaders, epidemic divorce, moral relativity and unbelief.

Chapter Fourteen

Epilogue (Malachi 3:16-4:4)

A careful study of the Scripture referenced above will show that the sermon of Malachi ended at verse fifteen of chapter three. The rest of the prophecy of Malachi was an epilogue, which described the response to this great preaching of Malachi, of cold-hearted believers who had abandoned their relationship with God, or even their faith, and God-fearing people who had done neither.

All through the prophecy of Malachi we have heard the responses of God to the imaginary backtalk of the priests and people of Judah with cold and hard hearts toward God. In this beautiful epilogue we hear the loving response of God to the true people of God. Those who feared and loved the Lord affirmed Malachi's great preachment. They were the people of God who had not left their first love, or had repented and returned to their love of the Lord through the preaching of Malachi.

We read: "Then those who feared and loved the Lord spoke often of Him to each other. And He had a Book of Remembrance drawn up in which He recorded the names of those who feared Him and loved to think about Him."

The mission objective of Malachi was to restore through a spiritual revival the love relationship God wanted to have with His people. The Book of Malachi concludes by telling us that Malachi achieved his objective because these words are the description of a revival.

The epilogue also records a beautiful response from God to this response of the true priests and people of God. Malachi presents the Second Coming of Christ when the Sun will rise with healing in His wings for the faithful, but severe judgment for the cold-hearted - who are the focus of so much of his prophecy. He tells them that they will then see how God feels about moral relativity.

A Closing Prophecy (4:5,6)

Malachi concludes his dynamic preaching by also telling of the coming of an Elijah-like prophet who will precede and introduce Jesus Christ. Jesus will state very clearly that John the Baptist was that prophet (Matthew 11:7-14). Lest anyone might believe that John the Baptist was a reincarnation of Elijah, John emphatically denies that possibility (John 1:21).

Malachi might have ended his prophecy with the words, "To be continued - in about four hundred years!" After four hundred silent years, when these Jews had no prophet or Word from God, John the Baptist came preaching in the spirit and power of Elijah. Priests, spiritual leaders, and the people of Judah spent many hours listening to this greatest of all the prophets.

When Jesus Himself preached, these same religious leaders spent many hours listening to their Messiah. Some of them tried to stone Him, but some exclaimed, "We have found the Messiah!" They believed in Him, followed Him, and became His apostles.

It has been a joy to survey the Old Testament with you, and I conclude with two challenges for you: 1) What are you going to do with what you have learned? Will you stone the Messiah out of your life, or will you follow Him? And 2) Will you continue studying this Holy Book with us as we begin our survey of the New Testament?