



WHAT IS WORSHIP?

SERIES: STUDIES IN THE MINOR PROPHETS

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Micah 6:1-8

First Message

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Almost exactly thirty years ago, in fact, the date was June 12th, 1966, Ray Stedman taught on the book of Micah. He was doing a series in which he covered an entire book of the Bible each week. I have always had a lot of respect for Ray, but after facing this same task, I am amazed that he could teach on whole books of the Bible week after week after week. One hope that I have this morning, and I know that Ray would have shared this, is that you will be encouraged to read the Minor Prophets as we learn about them in this series.

Background: A World and Man of Contrasts

Most of us already know some of the familiar verses of the book of Micah. Every Christmas we hear his beautifully worded prophecy about Messiah coming from Bethlehem:

**But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
Too little to be among the clans of Judah,
From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel.
His goings forth are from long ago,
From the days of eternity (5:2, NASB).**

It was Micah who also uttered the well known verses from the end of our text this morning—words which are among the most famous in the Old Testament:

**He has told you, O 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? (6:8)**

I will take a moment to cover some background for this wonderful little seven-chapter book.

Micah's world and his prophecies are filled with sharp contrasts. He prophesied during the reigns of several kings, two of whom were Ahaz and Hezekiah. It was Ahaz, one of the most wicked of the kings of Judah, who threw his own child into the flaming hands of the idol Molech, there to die a horrific death. Hezekiah, in contrast, is the king who prayed for God's mercy when he was ill, and he was granted an additional fifteen years of life. Although Hezekiah was not perfect, he knew something about Yahweh's loyal love and attempted to respond to it in faith and holiness.

Micah also knew grave contrasts when it came to national history. During his life, the kingdom of Israel came to a bitter end. The cruel armies of Assyria, the Nazis of the ancient world, destroyed Samaria in 722-721 BC, and deported the Israelites. In amazing contrast, God miraculously saved Judah from destruction by the Assyrians. This story is related in one of the most dramatic accounts in all of Scripture, 2 Kings 18-19.

So this is a book of stunning contrasts and breathtaking leaps. In Micah's prophecy, hope and doom are woven together and examined separately. At times it is difficult to know when the prophet has switched from one mode to the other. One moment he casts his eye around his world and cries doom. Unequivocally he states that God will judge the terrible wickedness and sin found especially in the spiritual, social, and governmental leaders of Jerusalem. Moments later he is painting a picture of all of God's people gathered together as a remnant, being led by God as by a shepherd, to live gloriously and forever in peace and plenty. Then, weapons of death and destruction will be transformed into tools for farming.

Micah contrasts the professional prophets of his day, who prophesy pleasing things only for the patrons who feed and pay

them, with himself:

**On the other hand I am filled with power -
With the Spirit of the Lord -
And with justice and courage
To make known to Jacob his rebellious act,
Even to Israel his sin (3:8).**

Many OT scholars think that Micah was a suburban shepherd. Not being integrated into the ways of the highbrow city of Jerusalem, the prophet could see with a clear eye the evil of the people who lived there, and he was not intimidated by the positions of power they held. As a shepherd, Micah was deeply sympathetic for the ordinary citizens in God's nation. Consider the gruesome picture he paints, in 3:1-3:

**Hear now, heads of Jacob
And rulers of the house of Israel.
Is it not for you to know justice?
You who hate good and love evil,
Who tear off their skin from them
And their flesh from their bones,
And who eat the flesh of my people,
Strip off their skin from them,
Break their bones,
And chop them up as for the pot
And as meat in a kettle. (3:1-3)**

The Question of Worship

So, out of all of this rich content, where should we focus? As I studied through each chapter, with my family and on my own, I thought with each passing text that I had found the place from which to teach. But, in the end, I came to the conclusion that by covering 6:1-8, I could accomplish two things at once: 1) introduce us to the context of Micah 6:8 and so provide insight into one important section of the minor prophets; and 2) address a question which has been in my heart for a long time, and for which I still have no completely satisfactory answer. That question is: What is worship?

How is it that I can use this passage to speak about worship? you ask. Even though the word itself is not included, the OT idea of worship is. Look at verse 6:

**With what shall I come to the Lord
And bow myself before the God on high? (6:6a)**

If we look at worship in the broadest biblical perspective, the OT is clear about what it involves. Two fundamental notions, taken together, make up the OT notion of worship: the idea of prostrating, or bowing down, and the idea of obedience and service. I think we intuitively understand worship in the first sense: the sense of bowing before the Lord, of being prostrate before him. But I believe that we have by and large lost the second part of the OT understanding of worship, and that is the idea of service. The Hebrew word *abad* is used hundreds of times in the OT. Most often it simply means "serve." But it is also frequently translated as "worship."

I have been troubled by this notion of worship for at least fifteen years. At church, I would hear people talk about the Sunday morning gathering as a time for "worship," and I was puzzled by this. Over the years, though, this problem has become more focused for me. I began to pay attention to how people used the word "worship," and I sensed that we have a peculiar, isolated, narrow understanding of this word, one that is not shared with

the history of the Church, nor with the whole counsel of Scripture.

I think most people take the word “worship” to mean an emotional state that is brought about by focusing on God and his wonderful character. In this sense, many regard music as being especially helpful in allowing them to “worship.” We call the time that we are together right now a “worship” service. If we were honest about it, we would judge how “good” the service is this morning by how much and for how prolonged a time we were in the emotional state that we identify as “worship.”

But I could never achieve the kind of feeling I heard others talking about. For me, the times when I felt, on a purely emotional level, close to God were occasions when I was alone, particularly times spent in the mountains or forests. For me, achieving this state meant getting away from people. There was no way I could “worship” in a room filled with four hundred distractions—I mean, people!

In addition, from my knowledge of church history I knew that there was no evidence for a time set aside for “worship” in the NT church; and there is no evidence that instrumental music played any role in gatherings of the earliest Christians. The reference in Ephesians 5:19, of addressing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, is often taken in support of “music in church,” but the passage has to be distorted to make it appear that way. At most, that text reveals that music played an audible role in how the earliest Christians communicated with one another in all contexts, not just the times when the local body gathered together.

The early church did not use instrumental music in its gatherings and ceremonies, because there were all kinds of connections in Greek and Roman society between music and driving away demons. Most pagan ceremonies used music, especially music played by the flute, to drive away evil spirits. The early church wanted to avoid the connection between pagan worship and music, and so avoided the use of instruments altogether in its ceremonies and gatherings. There is some evidence that congregational singing, always *a cappella*, was practiced in second century church gatherings, and perhaps even a little earlier. I am convinced that were it not for the abundant example of singing and the use of musical instruments in the OT, the early church would have eliminated entirely the use of musical instruments in Christian music, and we would have no use for instruments today.

For many years my reaction therefore, after studying the NT especially, was to simply look down my nose at people who defined worship as an emotionally-based thing. After all, look at Romans 12:2, where worship is defined primarily in intellectual and moral terms, as a transforming of the mind. But I have grown up a little in the last year or so, thanks in large part to the discussions among the elders as we have sought God’s leading in our search for a worship pastor. This has been hard for me. But I have been sharpened, as iron sharpens iron, by the wisdom of my brothers.

What I now see is that we need today a complementing of our primarily emotionally-based understanding of worship. Thankfully, Micah 6:1-8 provides this complement. This morning we will find that worship consists as much in acts of service as it does in praise and emotional focus on God. From the perspective of the book of Micah, we will find that the prophet’s words are God’s answer to the question: What is worship?

The Courtroom of God: Announcing the Case

Before we answer this question we need to understand the context of Micah 6:1-8. In 6:1-2, Micah, as God’s spokesman, opens with a call to a dramatic courtroom scene in which God will contend with his people, Israel:

**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)

Here is a startling picture of God as Judge and Plaintiff, Micah as Prosecutor, Mountains as Witnesses, and Israel as the Accused, the Defendant. How compelling this is, especially Micah’s calling upon the mountains and the foundations of the earth as witnesses to God’s complaint and judgment against his people. For it is the mountains that God created as the original witnesses when Israel stood divided on Mounts Gerizim and Ebal and God spoke, for the first time in the Promised Land, the covenant words of curse and blessing. From the beginning, then, the mountains had been witnesses to God’s covenant with Israel. That is why God has Micah call upon the mountains as the sure witnesses that any violation of the covenant would not be excused because of a plea of ignorance.

Does anything about this strike you as odd? Here we have a suburban shepherd, using legal metaphors to express the word of the Lord that had come to him. Why the legal metaphor? I can think of others. A friend of mine who is a farmer told me once that on occasion, one has to use violent means to change a donkey’s behavior. Donkeys, of course, are stubborn beasts. My friend told me of a farmer who hit a donkey over the head with a piece of two by four—and that was just to get its attention!

The comparison to how God has to get our attention is obvious. Sometimes a personal catastrophe must intervene before God gets us to pay heed. We are just like that stubborn donkey. No wonder then, that one of the most spiritually sensitive men in history, Francis of Assisi, referred to his physical body as “Brother Ass.” So, Micah could have used an approach like that: “Look out, God is coming, and he’s mad. All leaders in Jerusalem are going to get spanked.”

The legal metaphor, however, gives Micah a couple of things. First, it allows him to communicate to Israel their sin in an area in which they are sinning. The legal system of Judah had become corrupt, favoring the rich against the poor. By using a legal metaphor, Micah challenges sinners on their own ground. In addition, a legal metaphor is appropriate to the covenantal nature of God’s relationship with his people.

The Courtroom of God: The Charge

Let us then answer the summons and enter into the courtroom with guilty Israel. We can almost hear the hush, for we know that the Divine Judge and Plaintiff is about to speak. But when God speaks, we don’t get an angry scolding. Instead we hear, in verses 3-5, the words of a Grieved Lover:

**“My people, what have I done to you,
And how have I wearied you? Answer me.
Indeed, I brought you up from the land of Egypt
And ransomed you from the house of slavery,
And I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.
My people, remember now
What Balak king of Moab counseled
And what Balaam son of Beor answered him,
And from Shittim to Gilgal,
In order that you might know the righteous acts of the Lord.**

The Judge does not call a witness. Instead, he turns to Israel and twice addresses him as “My people”—a term of endearment. What a loving God! Even as he enters the court to preside over the losing case of the defendant, he is seeking him out in love, reminding Israel of how much he cares for him.

But we get more than an emotional response here. Yahweh asks questions, forcing Israel to look back over the past and understand how faithfully they had been treated for hundreds of years: miracles in Egypt; freedom from slavery; strong and righteous leadership; conquests over enemies in the physical and spiritual realm from one end of the wilderness to the other—all because of God’s loyal love and righteous character. In what way, Yahweh pleads, has this been a trouble or a burden to Israel?

I won’t stop here to describe each of the references that Micah makes in this passage. To read Exodus and Deuteronomy is to know them. Besides, the history lesson we need this morning is not an outward, but an inward one. And the lesson is about to

become intensely personal.

The Courtroom of God: The Defense

Finally, the defendant speaks, in verses 6-7:

**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 first-born for my rebellious acts,
The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? (6:6-7)**

Here, Micah gives a clear picture of the utter inadequacy of any human response to God. The prophet reveals that we cannot compensate God for our spiritual rebellion by any physical act, because the issue cannot be resolved on the physical level.

Bruce Waltke has an extremely insightful comment on this passage. He writes:

Instead of responding to such a wonderful Lord with loving and obedient hearts, Micah's generation transformed the covenant into a contract... [Israel] seeks to establish the price that will win God's favour by raising the bid even higher. Holocausts? One-year-old calves (already more costly)? Thousands of rams? Myriads of torrents of oil? Or, the highest price of all, the cruel sacrifice of a child? He can bid no higher. Outwardly he appears spiritual as he bows before the Most High with gift in hand. But his insulting questions betray a desperately wicked heart. Blinded to God's goodness and character, he reasons within his own depraved frame of reference. He need not change; God must change. He compounds his sin of refusing to repent by suggesting that God, like man, can be bought.

The Courtroom of God: The Decision

So the stage is now set for the famous words of Micah 6:8. In the hush of the courtroom, God has appealed to history and recounted his hundreds of years of loyal love and righteous acts. Israel has been led to see that no physical act of sacrifice can respond adequately to this love. The Prosecutor, Micah, steps forward, and asks the rhetorical question which closes the case, the question which summarizes the covenantal relationship between God and man:

**He has told you, O 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? (6:8)**

And as I studied this passage I remember feeling that finally I had come to the bottom line. Here, at last, is a clear statement of what God expects of me. Here, in my pointed little head, I thought I would find the contract with God that I could slip comfortably into. But a study of what the Hebrew word for "require" means stopped me dead in my tracks. The idea behind the word means "to seek something out in someone." So the opening line to this famous passage does not mean, "What, ultimately, is the end of the bargain I must keep with God? What do I have to do to enter God's presence and worship Him?" What it means is, "What is it that the Lord longs to find in me when I want to worship and bow down before him?" God supplies the initiative and passion, and I am left with needing to respond, appreciate, and express gratitude for the wonderful thing he has done in graciously letting me enter into a relationship with him.

Now that I know I have not entered into a contract, but into a relationship, and that in that relationship God seeks out certain qualities in me, it is appropriate to ask: What are those qualities? What is it that God wants to see when I come to bow down before him? Now the famous words take on a freshness I had missed when I wanted to view these verses as "my end of the bargain": do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

Let's briefly look at these three phrases in turn.

Do Justice

The word Micah uses for "justice" here is a common Hebrew term. It means what it means in English, although I am afraid

that today we have perverted the idea of justice to mean that everyone has an equal right to have everything all the time. God's justice, though, is based on love for individuals and their unique needs. Micah usually reserves the word for contrasting how the leaders of Jerusalem treated people versus how a godly man would treat them: the leaders of the Hebrews do not "know" justice: they are exploitative and evil. Micah, on the other hand, a man who experiences God's indwelling and power, says he will act justly and so announce Israel's sin to his face. Ultimately, justice is seen as coming from the hand of God. For those who sorrow over their sin, it is deliverance. For those who do not repent and see their own evil, it is the crushing weight of Yahweh's vengeance

To "do justice" is something that Micah was very concerned about, and something that was not happening in his world. Twists, perversions, secrets, indirectness—these are all anathema to Micah's sense of justice. For him, the man who does justice does not hide things; he keeps short accounts; he sees all men and women, no matter their wealth, health, giftedness or social position, as children of God. People who "do justice" are guileless, honest, aware of their own brokenness.

Love Kindness

To fully explore the notion of "loving kindness," as the NASB translators have it, would take all morning. That is a weak translation. In his series in 2 Samuel, Brian Morgan said that the word used here, *chesed*, is the theological word of the OT. It means loyal love, and is the entire basis for how God views us. God has made promises to us, and he is bound by his holy character to keep those promises forever. Therefore, God wants us to love loyal love. He wants us to be excited and passionate about keeping our promises and honoring our commitments.

I found it intimidating to look at this example of God's loyal love for standards that I would be encouraged to follow. So I took my view down a notch and looked at models in the OT where loyal love is said to have been practiced between human beings. Two occasions that are helpful are the times when:

Joseph asked Pharaoh's cup bearer to show him loyal love and remember him after he had gotten out of prison;

David is grateful to the men of Jabesh-Gilead for the loyal love they showed to Saul and Jonathan when, in a daring midnight raid, they rescued the corpses of their one-time king and his son from disgrace and gave them a proper burial.

Loyal love practiced between human beings reveals a sense of loyalty, devotion, and fair play. Seen in ourselves, then, loyal love is, first of all, a complete devotion to God, based on having entered into an exclusive, promise-based relationship with him. God has been faithful, and more than faithful, to me, so I can do nothing other than be faithful to him. And then, because God seeks this quality in all men, I am commanded to turn and love others. The loyal love I can show them is to approach them with decency and fairness: it is living out the Golden Rule; it is treating my spoken word to someone as a public and sacred commitment; it is remembering the acts of kindness shown to me, and longing to return these in kind. People who love loyal love are thoughtful, kind, fair, and faithful.

Walk Humbly with God

Finally, Micah reveals that God longs for us to walk *humbly* with him. This is an interesting combination of words. There is a strong verbal echo between Micah 6:8 and Deuteronomy 10:12: "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require from you, but to hear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul."

Micah introduces a subtle difference here. We are to walk humbly with God. There is debate among Hebrew scholars about just exactly what this word "humbly" means. Some see it as merely echoing Deuteronomy and emphasizing how we must live in conformity to God's law. Others see it as connected to a sense of lowliness of spirit as we approach God. To me, the balance is tipped in favor of the latter interpretation when we re-

member the larger context of this portion of Micah. Micah is talking about how we worship God, how we can come before him. Of course, we will want to conform our will to his, but I think even more we will be overwhelmed by his love and goodness and will understand ourselves to be unimaginably beneath him.

Back to the Question of Worship

Micah's dramatic poetry has a powerful logic to it: God's faithfulness to Israel has been publicly and undeniably obvious over hundreds of years; and no physical response is adequate to repair a breach on Israel's part in this covenantal relationship. So if Israel wants to be restored to God, let him remember God's loyal love, and from this remembrance, treat men with justice and faithfulness, never forgetting the humble position he has with God his Father.

With this logic in mind, we are ready to come back to the question of worship. Micah 6:1-2, the verses in which God uses Micah to summon Israel into court, remind us that when it comes to our relationship with God, he is the initiator. Because God is faithful to his promise, because he practices *chesed*, he will relentlessly pursue us, even when we have gone astray. His pursuit of us, though, may not be pleasant. God's calling us into "court" may mean that terrible things will happen until he gets our full attention. God loves us enough to discipline us.

Micah 6:3-5 teaches us that our ability to come before God and bow down, to worship the Most High, comes from a sense of history. The parallel to my own heart is obvious. As I look back over my life, I also see the loyal love and righteous acts of God: loving parents; comfort in times of danger; withdrawal of things I have loved too much; a tender drawing together of circumstances to keep me from disaster; easy access to fabulous teaching and faithful friends; every physical need met and more than met; a wife of goodness and mercy who loves and forgives, who knows and cares; the blessing of an increasingly full quiver: wonderful and challenging children who keep me on my knees. And yet I am just like Israel: I grow weary of God; I forget, and I imagine that I have done good things on my own; I respond more favorably to those who speak well of me; I hedge on my commitments; I grow blind and stupid. And yet, wonderfully, God keeps calling me, even bringing me into court to get my attention.

I believe that this is where worship starts. And, in some ways, it is here that it ends. Worship is, in part, the simple remembrance of the truth that all has come from God and nothing from me; that without him I can do nothing; that I am a stinking corpse apart from him. And then, when I realize what he has done for me, I am overcome with emotion because my mind has finally seen things as they really are—from his perspective. If only we could hold onto those moments forever. Can you imagine it? To constantly keep in mind God's perspective of oneself. Such would be the beginning of true worship.

But don't let me beg the question. What, after all, is worship? Micah asks this very question in 6:6. How is it that we can come to the Lord and bow down before God on high? As I said earlier, the OT notion is clear: a combination of the ideas of being prostrate and of serving.

The problem lies in our deeply human tendency to try to do things for God, to pay him back for what he has done for us. That is what Micah 6:7 is saying. But there is nothing we can do to pay God back for his mercy. That mercy is infinite, divine, unreachable by mere human effort.

So the only thing left is Micah 6:8. Out of a heart of gratitude, we will do justice, be passionate about loyal love, and we will walk humbly with God. Micah's poetic logic is wonderfully clear: worship begins with gratitude. Worship avoids the perverse notion that we can bring anything to the table when entering into relationship with God. Worship springs into action from a heart of continuing gratitude. It causes us to be fair and honest with our fellow man, to keep our promises, and live out the Golden

Rule. And finally, true worship is an endless passionate circle. It is the constant reminder of who we are, who God is, the distance between us, and the humbling fact that only God can bridge the gap we are disgraced to know is there. In the end, worship is gratitude in action.

I believe that the American church has slipped into accepting the first half of the definition while ignoring the second: gratitude *in action*. We can't just sing songs of praise and express gratitude in church. We can't just feel good about being close to a God who loves us infinitely. We need to move out in humble obedience to a world that does not yet know the Relentless Pursuer of Heaven. The message of Micah is that if we are going to err on one side or the other on the question of worship, we ought to err on the side of understanding worship as acts of service and obedience rather than as expressions of praise and adoration. Wouldn't you rather have obedience and acts of loyal love and justice from your own children than mere expressions of these things? Of course, the best thing is to have both. But if we can have only one, we know in our hearts which is more important.

So you might ask yourself some questions this morning:

Do you "do justice"? At work, are your practices straightforward and honest? Do you speak the truth clearly and directly? Do you confront the people around you with passion, love, and integrity?

Do you love "loyal love"? What is your attitude toward the vows you spoke to your spouse on your wedding day? Have you promised to do something with your children and not carried through? Have you put stakes in the ground that publicly announce your deepest commitments, obligations, and promises?

Do you walk humbly with God? Are your day to day words and actions representative of a heart, mind, and soul that realizes how God in compassion and mercy has bridged the gap between himself and you?

To do all of these is to worship God. These are the things that God wants as we bow before him on Sunday morning, Tuesday afternoon, and Friday in the evening. And I cannot stress enough that this is not the law. It is gratitude in action. We do these things because we are compelled to by gratitude to a God who has saved us in his mercy.

As we contemplate the words of Micah we know that we fail miserably. We don't comprehend how we can be given God's loyal love when we do not deserve it. We fear making a public commitment to a God who acts faithfully in history. We engage in religious activity as a cover for hearts barren of gratitude, much less gratitude in action. Knowing our frailty, let us not forget the words that close the book of Micah:

**Who is a God like Thee, who pardons iniquity
And passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession?**

**He does not retain His anger forever,
Because he delights in loyal love.**

**He will again have compassion on us;
He will tread our iniquities underfoot.**

**Yes, Thou wilt cast all their sins
Into the depth of the sea.**

**Thou wilt give truth to Jacob
And loyal love to Abraham,
Which Thou didst swear to our forefathers
From the days of old. (7:18-20)**

Dedication

When I was in high school, a very small group of Christian friends gathered together at my parents' house and we studied the Book of Micah together. To these friends: Paul Van Maanen, Ed Chan, and Christy Hale (now Christy Apostolou), I dedicate this morning's teaching.

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"THE LION HAS ROARED... THE SOVEREIGN LORD HAS SPOKEN..."

SERIES: STUDIES IN THE MINOR PROPHETS

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Second Message
Wm. D. Hyatt
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Try to imagine a nation with the following characteristics. A nation that is...

- over 200 years old
- at the very height of its economic success and political influence
- militarily powerful, and yet has enjoyed many years of peace with its neighbors
- a powerful factor in international trade, which has made many of its citizens wealthy, as seen by their grand estates near the cities and their second homes in the mountains.

A nation where...

- the rich and the politically powerful dominate everything and everyone, from judges to religious leaders
- the political leaders have learned how to use religion as a tool to influence the people
- this use of religion is effective because religion appears to be very important; why, any poll would show that more than 80% of the people believe in God, and religious buildings are always packed during major religious celebrations.

And, I should add, there is just a hint that much of the religious activity of this nation is based on tradition or on self-interest (especially on the part of the political leaders).

Can you imagine a nation like that? You probably can. You may even be tempted to think that I am talking about the United States. Perhaps that is why our study today of the Book of Amos is so interesting.

Israel

The nation I have described is Israel (specifically, the northern ten tribes), in the eighth century before the birth of Christ. While the term "Israel" is often used for the whole nation of the twelve tribes, at the time of Amos, the kingdom was divided. The Southern Kingdom (which was often called Judah) consisted of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, and the Northern Kingdom (referred to as Israel) consisted of the other ten tribes.

What did God have to say to a nation like the one that I have described, and to a nation like ours? Today, we will "listen in" as Amos speaks God's words to Israel.

Apparently, Amos was the first of the "writing prophets," the first to leave a written legacy. He is called a Minor Prophet, because his book was brief, not because it was unimportant. The prophets before his time spoke God's word to individuals, to kings and the like (e.g., Nathan's words to David), and they spoke regarding specific situations or events (like Elijah on Mt. Carmel). Amos, and the great prophets who came later, spoke God's word to the very soul of the nation. In the eighth century BC, Amos was closely followed by Hosea, who also spoke to Israel, and by Micah and Isaiah, who spoke principally to Judah, the Southern Kingdom.

But I am getting ahead of the story. We need to go back nearly two hundred years before Amos.

Solomon, David's son, became a great king who expanded the unified kingdom and brought it to a position of prominence and glory. But when Solomon died in 931 BC, the ten northern tribes rebelled. They were fed up with paying heavy taxes and providing the labor force for his grand building projects. Israel, the ten

northern tribes, appointed Jeroboam king. Solomon's son, Rehoboam, was unable to prevent this split, so he ended up as king over only Judah and Benjamin (you can read this story in 1 Kings 12).

"Jerry," the King of Israel, had won the power struggle. But now he had a religious problem that he feared would cause a political problem and undermine his new kingdom. All the Jewish men, including those of the Northern Kingdom, were supposed to go to Jerusalem each year to offer sacrifices. Jerry was afraid if they went to the capital city they would again give their allegiance to "Rey" and then return and kill him. Ingeniously, Jerry found a "religious" solution to his religious problem. 1 Kings 12:28-29 tells the story:

After seeking advice, the king made two golden calves. He said to the people, "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." One he set up in Bethel, and the other in Dan. (1 Kgs 12:28-29, NIV)

Jerry was saying, in effect, "Going all the way to Jerusalem is such a hassle." So he made things more convenient with a kind of "Quik Stop" religion. He had one shrine set up in Bethel, near the southern border of Israel, on the road to Jerusalem, and another set up at Dan, in the far northern part of Israel. But, the question was, what to worship at these phony shrines? Jerry came up with the idea of golden calves, reminiscent of the Exodus from Egypt. While golden calf worship did take place during the Exodus, it represented the worst kind of idolatry and apostasy. Jerry then sold the office of priest to non-Levites, and made up his own festivals.

At the time of Amos, about 760 BC, nearly 200 years later, Jeroboam II was king. Under him, Israel reached its greatest economic and military success. That success convinced them that God favored Israel, and even that their idolatrous worship (which now included Baal worship, thanks to Ahab and Jezebel) was accepted and approved by God. International trade had made the merchant class rich, but wealth brought greed and injustice: The poor were exploited; religion was formalistic; the rulers and the rich dominated everything, including religion. It was to this self-centered, self-pleasing, self-sufficient nation that God sent Amos to speak his words of truth and judgment.

Amos and his message

Who was this man Amos? We know that he came from Judah, the Southern Kingdom, specifically a region south of Bethlehem, called Tekoa. Amos describes himself as a "herdsman," but the Hebrew word used here, *boqer*, suggests that he was more than a simple shepherd. He may well have owned cattle and sheep. Amos was a rancher. Thus he was somewhat wealthy for his time. He was also quite industrious and willing to supplement his income by growing and "piercing" sycamore figs (a practice that ensured that the fruit would ripen properly). This combination of cattle (hardware, if you will) and fig processing (software?) suggests to me that if Amos were around today, he probably would be an engineering manager working at Hewlett Packard.

In any case, Amos was a person of unique capability. He was well traveled and very literate, as we can see in the use of language and word pictures of this book. Although God called him

to prophesy, he was quick to point out that he was not a professional, “for hire” prophet. He had not even attended an “intern” program for prophets. (The term, “son of a prophet,” refers to a prophet school or guild.)

So Amos was called by God from humble circumstances, and God used his unique background and capabilities to minister in a very powerful way.

God is still in the business of picking unlikely people for his work, utilizing their unique background and gifts. I think of Dwight L. Moody, the shoe salesman from Chicago who became the leading evangelist in the English-speaking world of the last century. Although Moody lived before the advent of radio and television, he proclaimed the word of God to over one hundred million people. In our own time, I am reminded of Ray Stedman, and how God called him from a very humble background.

As Amos walked around Bethel and other parts of Israel, he made two principal observations. One was what people *did*; the other was what they *did not do*. Both of these have application to us today.

First, what people did: They “presumed” on God’s mercy. They interpreted two hundred years of God’s mercy to them as his approval of their religious and social behavior. Even worse, they concluded that they were blessed as a result of their ritualistic religious activity.

That is a very human characteristic: We live with the benefit of God’s blessings, and presume on his mercy and patience. We even assume that there is a cause-and-effect relationship between something that we have done, or some religious ritual, and God’s mercy to us.

I want to insert a parenthesis here to make two points that relate to the character and nature of the God of the Bible. These points are: the *patience of God*, and the *nearness of God*.

I have just noted how presumptuous we can be. As *presumption* is characteristic of us, *patience* with people is characteristic of God. It is part of his very nature. God waits with great patience for us to return to him. These New Testament texts prove his patience:

Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness leads you toward repentance? (Romans 2:4).

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation (2 Peter 3:9, 15a).

In the Old Testament, God himself says:

All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations (Isaiah 65:2).

Can you imagine that? God, the Creator of the universe, waits patiently while we delay taking him seriously.

We often hear people ask, “Where is God?” But that is man’s question. In the Bible, the question is not, “Where is God?” but rather, “Where are you?” The first statement by God to mankind after sin had entered the world was not one of judgment or condemnation, it was the question, “Where are you?” God is always near! Many passages in the Bible confirm that:

The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth (Psalm 145:18).

God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us (Acts 17:27).

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me (Rev 3:20).

God is patient, and he is near. Count on it!

If God is being patient with you, and blessing you with his mercy, do not be like these people in Israel, or like the man in the fifth chapter of Ecclesiastes, who never considered the character and heart of God, who demonstrated such mercy and patience toward them.

In a recent interview in *Fortune* magazine, Lee Iacocca said, “What do guys like me do who’ve had the world by the string? I got some notoriety...and made some money in the car business. You can plan everything in life and then the roof caves in on you because you haven’t done enough thinking about who you are and what you should do with the rest of your life.”

Those are good questions, Lee! The answer is obvious: Have you looked in the Owner’s Manual?

What Amos did not find in Israel was care for the poor and powerless of that society. In fact, he saw that they were exploited. The Book of Amos is justly celebrated, even in our day, for its condemnation of a society that exploited the poor and the defenseless. However, Amos knew that this behavior was primarily a reflection of the people’s relationship with God.

We will look at God’s perspective on these issues in a moment. First, we will learn *what* would happen to this nation, then we will learn *why*.

The Lordspeaks...

The Lord, speaking through Amos, left little doubt about their future defeat and exile:

Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: “An enemy will overrun the land; he will pull down your strongholds and plunder your fortresses” (3:11).

“On the day I punish Israel for her sins, I will destroy the altars of Bethel...I will tear down the winter house along with the summer house; the houses adorned with ivory will be destroyed and the mansions will be demolished” (3:14a-15).

My wife Yvonne and I have been in Samaria, at the site of the winter palace, and we found that archaeologists are still digging up the pieces of ivory used to decorate it.

“Therefore this is what the Lord says: ‘And Israel will certainly go into exile, away from their native land’” (7:17b).

In the face of this prophecy, Amos utters this touching lament:

“Fallen is Virgin Israel, never to rise again, deserted in her own land, with no one to lift her up” (5:2).

That did happen in, 722 BC, about thirty-five years after Amos said this. The ten tribes went into captivity and never returned to their land. The Southern Kingdom, Judah and Benjamin, who witnessed this tragedy, did not learn from it; they also went into captivity, about 120 years later.

So the message of the Book of Amos is one of judgment and restoration. However, God’s love for the people and his willingness to be merciful can be observed throughout. God wanted them to see their situation from his perspective, then perhaps they would repent. There was still time enough to do so.

While Amos could only see events from the “outside,” what was happening in the people’s lives, God could also see the “inside”—what was going on in their hearts. And God did not like what he saw. Biblical religion is expressed in both its vertical and horizontal components; that is, a person’s relationship with both God and other people. This is clearly seen in these words of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew, where he defines the essence of Old Testament teaching in these words:

Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matt 22:37-40).

In chapter 4 of Amos, we get a view of the people's relationship with God. In 4:4-5, God himself says:

**"Go to Bethel and sin;
go to Gilgal and sin yet more.
Bring your sacrifices every morning,
your tithes every three years.
Burn leavened bread as a thank offering
and brag about your freewill offerings—
boast about them, you Israelites,
for this is what you love to do,"** (4:4-5)

Bethel and Gilgal are the site of major religious festivals, and yet God labels all their activities there as sin! All of their religious activity was self-invented, self-pleasing and thus, pointless!

- They go to Bethel and Gilgal when they were supposed to be in Jerusalem
- They worship a golden calf idol instead of the living LORD
- They are ritualistically precise with their phony sacrifices and tithes
- They burn leavened bread, the very thing the Law forbade
- They brag and boast about their freewill offering, which was to be a private matter between an individual and God.

Why did they behave this way? God says: "For this is what you love to do." This is all done to publicly honor self, not the Lord.

God's comment on Israel's hypocritical religious ritual is heard, in Amos 5:21-22:

**"I hate, I despise your religious feasts;
I cannot stand your assemblies.
Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them.
Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
I will have no regard for them."** (5:21-22)

The people of Israel were convinced that their history and their religious ritual obligated God to bless them. Do not believe for a minute that anything you do will obligate God to provide you with health and wealth! This is not a "do" issue, it is a "heart" issue. The Lord is not impressed with religious activity. He wants a "heart" relationship with us. And so he waits patiently nearby for us to end our rebellion and return to him in repentance.

This can be seen further on in chapter 4. In verses 6-11, the Lord lists the difficulties of life confronting the people of Israel. In the face of famine, drought, war and tragedy, God says: "Yet you have not returned to me!" This is so significant that it is repeated five times! Even we cannot miss this point. Then we have the Lord's conclusion to this situation: "Prepare to meet your God." God is saying: "You would not return to me, so I will come to you at last. Get ready!"

Amos then adds verse 13. He wants to be sure that they know "who" this God is who is talking to them:

**He who forms the mountains,
creates the wind,
and reveals his thoughts to man,
he who turns down to darkness,
and treads the high places of the earth—
the Lord God Almighty is his name** (4:13).

Literally, the "God of Hosts," "the God of Armies" (the Hebrew word *sabaot*). This title is used nine times in Amos. The prophet saw that these people believed in "god" all right (every poll showed that), but, which god? They were willing to worship Moloch, the star-gods, Kiyyun (the planet Saturn), Sikkuth (the Assyrian war god), the idol of Samaria, the god of Dan and the god of Beersheba! Sure, they worshipped "god"—right after they checked their horoscopes in the morning newspaper, knocked on wood and thanked their lucky stars that business was so good. Of course, they worshipped "god." If one god is good, more gods

would be better.

We have seen the relationship that God wanted with the people of Israel. Now we must ask, What is the relationship that the God of the Bible desires with us? We have looked at Jesus' summary of the Old Testament: "Love God...Love your neighbor." The first part is a quote from Deut 6:5: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."

This command to love God is very unusual among the world's religions. The idea that God loves you is even more unusual. The Bible proposes a relationship between God and man based on love. Philip Yancy points out how surprising this idea is in a recent article in *Christianity Today* (June 17, 1996, p. 34):

On our own, would any of us come up with the notion of a God who loves and yearns to be loved? Those raised in a Christian tradition may miss the shock of Jesus' message, but in truth, love has never been a normal way of describing what happens between human beings and their God. Not once does the Qur'an apply the word *love* to God. Aristotle stated bluntly, "It would be eccentric for anyone to claim that he loved Zeus"—or that Zeus loved a human being, for that matter. In dazzling contrast, the Christian Bible affirms, "God is love" and cites love as the main reason Jesus came to earth: "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him."

What is the relationship with you that the God of the Bible desires? God wants all of you, starting with your heart. Where your heart leads, your life will follow. This is why a right relationship with God begins by loving him with all your heart. It is a personal, one-to-one relationship. The people of Amos' time relied on impersonal ritual and tradition. Do you do that today?

When I first arrived at Peninsula Bible Church, Palo Alto, I thought highly of religion. I even approved of God. But, I was somewhat irritated by the emphasis that was placed on the reality and health of my personal relationship with God. That was what was stressed at PBC. I expected that if I attended church regularly, and made sufficient contributions, the details of my salvation would be taken care of by the religious professionals (the ministers), sort of like a spiritual root canal!

At last, I began to realize that PBC was there to equip and encourage me: First, to make me see that I needed a personal relationship, a heart relationship, with the Lord; and then, to strengthen that relationship. That takes place through studying the word of God, and prayer and fellowship with one another. I learned that I could not come into a right relationship with God merely by joining a religious organization (even one with correct doctrine), or by participating in religious activities. This is what the people of Israel were counting on—a ritual religion with years of tradition. But we have seen God's view of that.

Jesus said that we must love God and love your neighbor as yourself. We have seen that the Jews did not love God, so it is no surprise that with regard to the poor in that society, Amos says:

**They sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals.
They trample on the heads of the poor
as upon the dust of the ground
and deny justice to the oppressed** (2:6b-7a).

**You trample on the poor
and force him to give you grain** (5:11a).

**You oppress the righteous and take bribes
and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts** (5:12b).

They systematically exploited the poor and powerless. Yet, human responsibility for one's neighbor is a part of Biblical religion, from the story of Cain and Abel to the end of the book of Revelation. This is especially true with respect to the most vulnerable and defenseless in society. In Biblical times, these were epitomized by "widows and orphans." The Lord himself said, in Exo-

dus 22:22: "Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan." And Moses, repeating a command from God, said: "Cursed is the man who withholds justice from the alien, the fatherless or the widow" (Deut 27:19).

The Psalmists also stressed God's care for widows and orphans. Psalm 68:5: "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling." In the New Testament, James says: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (1:27). James also calls the command to "Love your neighbor" the "Royal Law of Scripture."

The people of Israel ignored and exploited the poor around them. And yet they were confident that their religious festivals and traditions were adequate proof of their secure position with God. But God himself removes that false hope, in chapter 5:

This is what the Lord says to the house of Israel: "Seek me and live; do not seek Bethel, do not go to Gilgal, do not journey to Beersheba. For Gilgal will surely go into exile, and Bethel will be reduced to nothing" (5:4-5).

What is the significance of these places? Why does the Lord single them out for condemnation? And why did the people of Israel rely on them? Bethel was closely associated with the patriarch Jacob. Jacob named Bethel, and it was there that God gave him the name "Israel," which the Jews had taken as their national name. Jacob had two encounters with God there, leading him to say: "God is in this place." So he named it Beth-El (the House of God). The people of Amos' time thought this was the "place" of God. The theme for Bethel was: "God is here!" Imagine how surprised they were to hear Amos say: "Do not seek Bethel. Bethel will be reduced to nothing. Seek the Lord and live." They thought: "God is here at Bethel." But God responded (verses 6-13): "You have trampled the poor and you withhold justice. There is no evidence that you have encountered God here!"

Beersheba was not in Israel; it was located fifty miles south, in Judah. In Genesis, we learn that this place was visited by Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Here all three patriarchs received assurance of the companionship of God. The people of Amos' day thought that by making the pilgrimage to Beersheba they could claim the companionship of God—his presence in their lives. They probably had their Pilgrim Passports stamped to prove they had been there.

How shocked they must have been to hear Amos quote the Lord as saying: "Do not journey to Beersheba." If they wanted the Lord to be with them, what they had to do was, "Seek good...then the Lord will be with you" (5:14). They thought: "Beersheba proves that God is present with us"; we have peace with God." But God responded: "I am coming to be with you, but you won't like it."

Here is how Amos actually put it, in 5:16-17:

Therefore this is what the Lord, the Lord God Almighty, says: "There will be wailing in all the streets and cries of anguish in every public square. The farmers will be summoned to weep and the mourners to wail. There will be wailing in all the vineyards, for I will pass through your midst," (5:16-17)

Gilgal, which is near Jericho, was a very historic site for Israel. It was here they made their first encampment after crossing the Jordan. At Gilgal they were reconstituted as a nation. They celebrated Passover, and circumcised all the males who were born during the forty years in the wilderness. Here they stopped eating manna and began partaking of the first "fruit" of the land of Canaan. At Gilgal, Joshua set up headquarters. Saul, their first king, was confirmed there. This especially appealed to the ten

Northern Tribes in their rebellion against the house of David.

Gilgal, which sounds like the Hebrew word for "roll," was so named because it was here the Lord said: "Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you" (Josh 5:9). The people of Amos' time were convinced that Gilgal proved God had given them the undeniable inheritance of the Promised Land, and the security which that implied. Gilgal, the site of a great religious festival, was a shrine they had venerated for hundreds of years. So imagine their outrage at hearing Amos' words: "Do not go to Gilgal...for Gilgal will surely go into exile" They thought: "Gilgal proves that our inheritance from God is secure." God responded: "I will not breathe in the odor of your festivals" (v 21). In other words, "Your religion stinks." It is an idolatrous mixture that I despise."

"Therefore I will send you into exile beyond Damascus," says the Lord, whose name is God Almighty" (5:27).

God is saying to them: "You roll into Gilgal for you religious rituals, and then you roll home and forget to bring my character into your daily life and relationships."

God continues:

"But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream" (5:24).

Righteousness and justice are linked together over sixty times in the Old Testament. These are fundamental concepts. The Psalms declare them to be the foundation of the throne of God. Abraham was told to command his children and household to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice (Gen 18:19).

Righteousness refers to "conforming to a moral and ethical standard." The original meaning of the Hebrew word is, "to be straight." The Hebrew word for "justice" has the sense of "to rule or govern"—the overall function of government. It is broader than our idea of the judicial function of government. In contemporary business jargon, we would say that righteousness is "doing the right things," and justice is "doing things right." That is what God wanted to "roll on" and to flow through that society's relationships—and that is what he wants from ours as well.

Clearly, this fifth chapter of Amos sets a very high standard for anyone who aspires to "Love your neighbor as yourself." That is because it is the visible result of a heart living in the right relationship to God. Actually, you cannot do this on your own. Only a life changed and transformed by God, and guided by the Holy Spirit, can truly respond in this way.

Conclusion

How did the people of Israel, especially the priest at Bethel, respond to the message of Amos? You can read about that in chapter 7. At the end of the book there is the great reminder that a remnant, including Gentile believers, will be preserved and that a restoration will eventually take place. I also leave that to your reading.

Perhaps the simplest summary of the message of Amos is as follows: "Go to Bethel! Do not go to Bethel!"

Chapter 4 of Amos says: "Go to Bethel." If you want "Religion," especially, self-pleasing religion, almost any religion will do.

But if you want "Life," if you want to have a right relationship with God and with the people in your life, then there is only one answer. That comes in chapter 5 of Amos: "Do not go to Bethel. Seek the Lord and live." This is the choice that we all face in life: to seek what pleases self, or to seek the Lord and life in him. It is a daily choice, a moment by moment choice.

May God give each one of us the grace to choose life in him!



IMAGES OF LOVE: THE BOOK OF HOSEA

SERIES: STUDIES IN THE MINOR PROPHETS

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The Book of Hosea
Third Message
John Hanneman
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Nothing shocks us anymore in today's world. When we watch the news at night, so inundated are we with crime, drugs, sex and violence, our emotions are numbed to the shock value of the stories reported. Our society is in decline. As a nation, we are morally and spiritually bankrupt. Conscience of guilt and accountability are eroding. We have to ask ourselves, Will anything shock us enough to put us on the right road? Is there anything that can draw people's hearts back to God?

In our studies in the Minor Prophets, this morning we come to the book of Hosea. When the prophets wrote these words, the nation of Israel was living in a time like our own, a period of moral and spiritual corruption. How did God speak to his people then? What did he do to shock them so that they would change the way they were living?

The prophets, of course, were God's agents to shake up and change the world—and Hosea was no different. But the book of Hosea has more than searing words of impending judgment. This prophet also presents two powerful images of love, as we will see.

The book opens with these words:

The word of the Lord which came to Hosea the son of Beeri, during the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and during the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel. (Hos 1:1, NASB)

Hosea shares the same historical context as the book of Amos, which we looked at last week. Following forty years of wandering in the wilderness, at last Joshua took the people of Israel into the land of Canaan. But, as Judges records, Israel failed to destroy all the Canaanite people as the Lord had commanded. Baal was the chief god of the Canaanites. He was the deity who supposedly made the land fertile, the one whom the Canaanites thought was stimulated to blessing them by their engaging in sexual activity with temple prostitutes. Over the years, the religion of the Canaanites wove itself into the fabric of Israel's worship. This practice greatly angered the God of Israel. That is why the prophets spoke to the nation—so that their hearts might be drawn back to the God who had delivered them out of Egypt.

The prophecy of Hosea was given at a time when Israel was divided into two kingdoms, north and south, Israel and Judah. Following the rule of the kings Saul, David and Solomon, the nation divided. A rival place of worship was established in Samaria, and each kingdom had its own king. The prophecy was written in the eighth century BC, and the kings who reigned in both the northern and southern kingdoms are listed in the first verse. Notice that Jeroboam is the only king listed as having reigned in Israel. There were other kings, of course, but they are not deemed worthy to mention.

Hosea's ministry covered the last thirty years of the northern kingdom. At the beginning of the eighth century, Israel's enemies were not as dominant as they were at other times. Assyria and Babylon were engaged elsewhere, while Egypt was comparatively weak. Israel therefore enjoyed a period of

affluence at this time. The economy was booming, although the rich were getting richer at the expense of the poor, as we saw in our study in Amos. The people felt they were prospering as a result of their worshipping the Canaanite gods, so their idolatry increased. (Does this sound like our own society today?)

As Hosea began his prophetic ministry, he declared the impending judgment at the hands of Assyria. Israel imagined this could never happen, but as the years passed, Hosea's prophecy proved true. The armies of Assyria grew stronger and marched nearer and nearer to Israel. When Pekah was king of the land, Israel combined with Syria and attempted a revolt against Assyria, but they were defeated. Damascus fell, in 732 BC, and the Assyrian stranglehold drew tighter. Then Israel made an appeal to Egypt to come to their aid. But this too failed. Finally, Samaria fell in 722, following a three-year siege. The lesson is clear: When you are not following God, friendship with the world cannot save you from God's judgment. Eventually, judgment will come.

So God spoke through the prophet Hosea in an attempt to call his people back to himself, declaring the judgment that would come upon the nation if they did not return to him. And, as he did with all the prophets, God spoke through Hosea to offer the hope of restoration and a time of future blessing. But what really stands out in this book, and what I want to focus on this morning, are two metaphors, two images of love, two very powerful statements that can change people's lives.

The first image centers around Hosea himself and what God asks him to do. Incredibly, God instructs the prophet to become a husband to an adulteress named Gomer:

When the Lord first spoke through Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, "Go, take to yourself a wife of harlotry, and have children of harlotry; for the land commits flagrant harlotry, forsaking the Lord." (1:2)

What an assignment for a spokesman of God! Yet, this is what God asked of Hosea.

So he went and took Gomer the daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son. And the Lord said to him, "Name him Jezreel; for yet a little while, and I will punish the house of Jehu for the bloodshed of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel. And it will come about on that day, that I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel." Then she conceived again and gave birth to a daughter. And the Lord said to him, "Name her Lo-ruhamah, for I will no longer have compassion on the house of Israel, that I should ever forgive them. But I will have compassion on the house of Judah and deliver them by the Lord their God, and will not deliver them by bow, sword, battle, horses, or horsemen. When she had weaned Lo-ruhamah, she conceived and gave birth to a son. And the Lord said, "Name him Lo-ammi, for you are not my people and I am not your God." (1:3-9)

By means of these names, God is trying to shock the nation of Israel and awaken them to their perilous state.

God repeats these instructions again, in 3:1,

Then the Lord said to me, "Go again, love a woman who is loved by her husband, yet an adulteress, even as the Lord loves the sons of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love raisin cakes." (3:1)

In this metaphor, Gomer represents Israel, and Hosea the image of God as a husband to his people. Israel, therefore, is the bride of God. But, like Gomer, she is playing the harlot, committing adultery with the gods of the Canaanites. She is being unfaithful to this most intimate of relationships.

That is the picture that is drawn in 4:11-12,

**Harlotry, wine, and new wine take away the understanding,
My people consult their wooden idol, 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. (4:11-12)**

Our tendency is to do the same thing. We come to church and proclaim: "As the Lord lives, God bless you. Jesus is Lord." We are the bride of Christ, but we are in a love affair with the world. Whether secretly or out in the open, we serve idols: power, popularity, prestige, possessions, people. We court these multiple lovers. Like Israel, we commit spiritual adultery.

In contrast, Hosea presents a marvelous picture of love. God is a faithful, loyal husband who will never forsake his wife, his bride, no matter what she does. No matter how often she strays he is there to restore her. Today, we would call Hosea a fool. We would advise him to get rid of Gomer. But in this account, God is attempting to shock his people by giving them a picture of his faithful, committed love, hoping that they will forsake their lovers and cling to him.

Furthermore, in this picture God assures his people that he is committed to their future restoration.

**"Therefore, behold, I will allure her,
Bring her into the wilderness,
And speak kindly to her.
Then I will give her her vineyards from there,
And the valley of Achor as a door of hope.
And she will sing there as in the days of her youth,
As in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt." (2:14-15)**

We find the same picture again, in verse 19:

**"And I will betroth you to Me forever;
Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice,
In lovingkindness and in compassion,
And I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness.
Then you will know the Lord." (2:19-20)**

God's love for us is like the love of a faithful husband. He will never leave us or forsake us; he will never deny us or divorce us.

Clearly, this feminine image speaks to the heart of women. The greatest hunger of a woman's heart is for one who will be her advocate, her champion, someone who will lift the weight of the world off her shoulders and provide security for her. When she makes a mistake, she longs to feel her husband's arms embrace her and hear that she is loved. When she gets

all dressed up, she longs to hear her husband tell her she is beautiful. When she works hard to be creative, she longs to hear that she has done well. When she is weary, she longs for a strong support to find rest for her soul. God is the kind of husband who does all these things for us—and more. He is committed to us, even when we stray and fall into sin.

Marriage, then, becomes the vehicle through which God demonstrates the kind of love that he has for us. He wants to use faithful husbands to teach the world about his love. The reason we do not understand the depth of God's love for us is that we do not experience this kind of love in our marriages, the kind of commitment, loyalty and faithfulness that will demonstrate an image of God's love that will shock the world. More often than not our marriages reflect our spiritual harlotry. Spouses say things like: "You don't fulfill me." "I'm disappointed in you." "You always mess up." "You should have done it better." "You don't give me what I need." But God's love never accuses us in these ways.

I have begun to learn some things at last after twenty-one years of marriage. Recently, our staff attended a pastors conference, at Regent College, where we heard from Dr. Larry Crabb. He impressed upon us the importance of entering into someone's life so that we might bless them, based on a vision we have for their lives. Dr. Crabb and his wife shared the visions that they had recently written for one another.

I have reflected on this idea in light of the message of Hosea. Remembering when my wife and I were first married, I thought I probably would have written a flowery vision statement if I were asked. But the following words would have more accurately reflected my self-centered love then:

I want to move into your life with a desire to have you bless me. My vision for you is that you can fill all the emptiness and loneliness in my soul. My desire is that you can heal all the wounds and pains I don't even know I have. I want you to be all that God has created you to be so that you can bless me. I don't want you to grow and blossom in areas outside my sphere, because that will leave less of you to give to me. I have a vision that you will satisfy all my emotional and physical desires. I want to enter into your life so that you can bless me.

Now, after all those years of marriage, and whole lot of work by God, I can begin to express different thoughts towards my wife. Today I write this as my statement of vision:

I want to enter into your life so that I can bless you. You have a wonderful passion for people and I want to free you more and more to invest in others. I see you as having a very positive influence on others. You have a wonderful gift to create works of design and art. I want to create a place for you to express these gifts. I love to hear how you have blessed others with your talents. You have a wonderful, crazy, frustrating spontaneity. My vision is to set you free to be wild and passionate. For so long so many people have depended on you. My vision is that you might depend on me. I delight when you share with me your pain. It means that you trust me. It allows me entrance into the deepest part of your soul. I have a vision for you to find protection and comfort in my arms. My greatest desire is for you to know the undemanding and unselfish love of a faithful husband and to know God in the same way. I want to enter into your life so that I can bless you.

Hosea gives us a powerful image of God as a faithful, committed, loyal husband who loves us as his bride, in a love that is quite beyond our human experience. If our marriages begin to reflect this kind of love, we can shock the world and people will be drawn to God.

Hosea's second image is just as powerful. It is the image of a faithful, forgiving, loyal father who will never give up on his son, 11:1-2,

**When Israel was a youth I loved him,
And out of Egypt I called My son.
The more they [the prophets] called them,
The more they went from them;
They kept sacrificing to the Baals
And burning incense to idols. (11:1-2)**

Here we see a reference to God's choice of Israel and of the Exodus out of Egypt. In the New Testament, we see that Jesus repeated this same journey.

**Yet it is I who taught Ephraim to walk,
I took them in My arms;
But they did not know that I healed them.
I led them with cords of a man, with bonds of love,
And I became to them as one who lifts the yoke from
their jaws;
And I bent down and fed them. (11:3-4)**

Verse 4 could perhaps be translated: "And I became to them as one who lifts a child to his cheek, and I bent down and I fed them." What a beautiful image of a father's care and protection for his son! God remembers the time when his son was young and helpless. As I get older and my children grow up and contend and fight for their independence, the images of them that fill my mind are their first steps, teaching them to ride a bike, how to swim, how to hit a baseball. I remember the times when I took them in my arms and they would bury their head on my shoulder.

But, there will be judgment, there will be consequences, because Israel did not repent, 11:5-7,

**They will not return to the land of Egypt;
But Assyria—he will be their king,
Because they refused to return to Me.
And the sword will whirl against their cities,
And will demolish their gate bars
And consume them because of their counsels.
So My people are bent on turning from Me.
Though they call them to the One on high,
None at all exalts Him. (11:5-7)**

But everything turns in verse 8:

**How can I give you up, O Ephraim?
How can I surrender you, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah?
How can I treat you like Zebaiim?
My heart is turned over within Me.
All my compassions are kindled.
I will not execute My fierce anger;
I will not destroy Ephraim again.
For I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst,
And I will not come in wrath. (11:8-9)**

The words, "give up, surrender," are used with reference to delivering up someone to his enemies. Admah and Zebaiim were cities that were completely destroyed along with Sodom and Gomorrah. God's judgment must be exercised upon his people. But God cannot do that, because, he cries: "My heart is turned over within me." In a marvelous reversal, God's anger with Israel is overturned and replaced with yearnings and compassion that rise from deep within him. He cannot execute his fierce wrath. God has every reason to destroy Israel, but his father's heart will not allow for that. If he were a man, he would take out his anger and destroy Ephraim. But he is not a man, he is God. The heart of God is not like the heart of man. God's uniqueness is not defined in

terms of power, wisdom, or sovereignty, but in terms of love.

**They will walk after the Lord,
He will roar like a lion;
Indeed He will roar,
And His sons will come trembling from the west.
They will come trembling like birds from Egypt,
And like doves from the land of Assyria;
And I will settle them in their houses, declares the Lord.
(11:10-11)**

God will roar like a lion, and his sons, Jews and Gentiles alike, will gather from all the nations. They will come home, like the prodigal, and like Jesus, and God will settle them in their houses. The word "settle" is the word from which we get Sabbath. The sons of God will come home and find rest.

God is a faithful, forgiving father who will never give up on his sons, no matter how far or how long they have strayed. If the first image of a husband is more feminine, perhaps this image is more masculine. Of course, any woman can replace the word "son" with "daughter." The significance is just as deep.

Can there be any doubt that a father is a very powerful force in a man's life? Men long for fathers who will embrace them and accept them. When these yearnings are not met, they turn elsewhere. They seek the love of a father in the arms of a woman. They seek the approval of a father by striving for success in their work. Much of the emptiness and loneliness in men's lives can be linked to a lack of intimacy with their fathers. So men become fearful—fearful of rejection, fearful of being inadequate, fearful of intimacy and closeness. Their hearts turn away from God. They can't connect their deep yearnings with the God who loves them.

The joy of being a Christian is being accepted by God, through Christ, as a son or daughter. The New Testament says that because we are in Christ, we are all sons of God. As Paul says, "We have not been adopted into slavery, but into freedom." As believers, we address our Father tenderly, calling him, "Abba, Father," even like God's own son Jesus. The joy of being a son is hearing the Father say to us, as he said to Jesus, "You are my beloved son; in you I am well pleased."

God is a faithful and forgiving Father. His judgment needs a reason, but his compassion never does. He has poured out all his anger and judgment on his own Son so that we might experience his compassion, his fatherhood. It is when we experience these things, over and above our sin and iniquity and rebellion, that we can return home and fall into the arms of our heavenly Father.

But it is not like that in our homes, is it? There, relationships depend more on performance than acceptance, more on control than freedom, more on anger than love. Our family relationships are filled with turmoil and conflict. Now I am not saying that fathers should forego discipline when their children rebel. The problem arises when anger and judgment rule over compassion. Children are crushed when they hear their fathers say: "You're no good." "You should have done better." "Why do you always make a mess of everything." "Why can't you be more like your brother." "If you would work harder, you would make the team." Sometimes we don't even have to say a word. Disapproval is written all over our faces.

But Hosea's image of God as Father shocks us, stopping us dead in our tracks. If we become fathers and mothers who reflect the fatherhood of God, then we too will give the world an image that will shock people and draw them to the heart of God. I have learned as a father that the thing that will have the most lasting effect on my children, even when they rebel, is to reaffirm my love for them and tell them that I will never

give up on them. As a father, I have discovered that I have unlimited compassion for my children, a compassion that far outweighs my anger and frustrations.

Dr. Crabb shared with us a story about a pastor's rebellious son. One night, the police called the pastor to say that they were holding his son. When the father arrived at the police station and inquired about him, the desk sergeant told him there was no one there with that name. The father pressed on and asked the sergeant to check other police stations. But the result was the same: they were holding no one with that name. The worried father drove to the commune where his son had been living. He entered the front door and saw him lying on a couch. Kneeling down, he kissed the boy on the forehead. Seven months later, his son called him and asked to meet with him. When they met, the father was surprised to see his son clean shaven and well dressed. He asked him how long he had been that way, and the son replied that he had been clean for a while. When the father asked him why he hadn't called sooner, the son said he wanted to let enough time elapse so that his father would know that he had indeed changed. Then the father asked what had caused the change. The young man said, "When you came to my house that night seven months ago and knelt down and kissed me, I wasn't asleep."

The love of a father, the love of a husband, are very powerful forces that shape our lives. These are the forces that can change people's hearts and turn them towards God. If we can see our personal relationship with God as one with a faithful husband and loving father, then we will stop committing spiritual adultery with false idols. We will find compassion, grace, and freedom. We will experience what life can be like as a loved bride, a valuable son. Then we in turn can be loving fathers and mothers, husbands and wives. These are images of love that will shock the world around us. We will be modern-day prophets, demonstrating the character of God. We won't change people's hearts through right-wing politics. We will change the world by being loving, caring husbands and fathers. Men, it is time to step up to the plate.

My wife has three sisters, one of whom is presently in a very dark, lonely place as a result of bad choices she has

made. She is lashing out at her family, at my wife in particular, with blame and anger. This has caused an emotional crisis for her. It has revealed the depth of emotional pain in the family, the deep hurt, resentment, and unrealistic expectations which the sisters are placing on one another. At the heart of these issues is the love and approval of a father that was never experienced. Regrettably, most of us never get that from our earthly parents. But my wife's identity and loyalty is not wrapped up with the family. Despite some deep pain, her emotional well-being is not dependent on that; she has a life outside her family. But this only spurs deeper resentment and anger from the others.

As my wife was reflecting on these family issues a few weeks ago, she told me that the one of the reasons she was not suffering the same resentments as her sisters is because she has come to trust God and know him as a Father. But she said that another reason she has her own life and identity is because I have loved her and encouraged her, despite her shortcomings. She told me she had heard a song, by Celine Deon, that said it perfectly: "I'm everything I am, because you loved me." Of course, I went right out and bought the CD!

I do not have the words to describe what it did for me to hear my wife tell me that she is what she is because I have loved her. But what I can say is that nothing that was ever said to me has made me feel more like a man than hearing my wife say that. As I reflect on the book Hosea, I sense there is nothing that makes God feel more like God than when we as his children tell him that we are everything we are because he loves us, as a husband, as a Father. At that point, God knows that all his hurt, all the agony and the sacrifice have been worth it. His joy is complete when we return his great love.

Despite our sin and failure, our rebellion and adultery, God still loves us and accepts us. He will never give up on us because he is God and not a man.

The love of God is what shocks us and changes us. His love soars above the words of judgment, calling us home to the embrace of a husband, to the arms of a father. May God give us the grace to know such love.

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RETURNING TO GOD

SERIES: STUDIES IN THE MINOR PROPHETS

Catalog No. 1074
Zechariah 1:1-6
Fourth Message
Pat Harrison
July 14th, 1996

As we come to the book of Zechariah this morning in our studies in the Minor Prophets, I want to begin by reading parts of a remarkable essay, written by a high school senior as part of his application to enter Stanford University. This young man demonstrates amazing clarity of thought and purpose for a teenager, and unusual boldness in trying to impress a secular institution with one's faith. He influenced my life spiritually when I was a junior in high school, pointing me toward God as much as anyone I knew. The essay was a response to the question: "If you were to write a book, what would it be and why."

If I were to write a book, it would most likely be on the value of becoming a Christian. Becoming a Christian is not simply a pledge to read the Bible or to go to church, but it is a change. This change is present spiritually, mentally, and physically. Becoming a Christian means asking Jesus Christ into your life as your personal Savior. This is done not only because you need Him and His forgiveness, but because you wish to fellowship with Him in order to truly live the abundant life that God has given us all.

The acquisition of a strong faith in God, which results from asking Christ to take hold of one's life, will clear away all the unnecessary parts that have been storing themselves deep inside one's inner self. Committing yourself to the Lord is similar to having a million tons of worry, doubt, and guilt lifted from your shoulders. It can only be described as the most beautiful feeling of total freedom ever felt.

My friend wrote this twenty years ago. In the last eighteen years, drugs have gripped his life and ravaged his self-image. Isolated from people, and seemingly unteachable, he survives. Obsessions, compulsions and fear lay fierce claim on him. What would I say to him if he were to ask me for help? Is there hope?

More recently, is there hope for a neighbor of mine to turn from the isolation and hopelessness of alcoholism? This man has lived his life alienating himself from anyone who tried to get close to him. He never had children. Now his wife has had a stroke and is gone. He is entirely alone. Recently he confided that he once called himself a Christian, but now he wonders what God thinks of the way he lived his rough-edged life. As he drove away from my house, with tears in his eyes, he said he would like to talk more about it sometime. Can a man turn to God when he is eighty?

Perhaps we all know stories like these. Perhaps the

stories are our own. We have seasons of humiliation and defeat. We are ravaged by the effects of sin. We know deep discouragement resulting from sin patterns that are habitual, generational, and escalating, debilitating and deceiving patterns that we have allowed to take up residence for a long time. Does God ever decide to not pursue us anymore? Does he stop crying to us to return to him? Where is a word of encouragement from God for us?

Fortunately, we know a God who takes the first step into situations like these. He breaks into space and time and brings his Word. God *always* initiates and awaits our response. The first creative act of his Word brought forth the heavens and the earth and every living thing. He came to Abraham to call out a people for himself. The Word became flesh, and dwelt as one of us.

This truth about God is what Zechariah's message reminds us about first. Chapter 1, verses 1,2:

In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to Zechariah the prophet, the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo, saying, "The Lord was very angry with your fathers." (Zech 1:1-2, NASB)

The name Zechariah means "God remembers." In fact, the text gives the names of his father and grandfather in the priestly line: "son of Berechiah", "son of Iddo." These names, strung together, mean: "God remembers, God blesses, at the appointed time." Already we see a hint of encouragement to a discouraged people who probably felt forgotten. Had God had turned his back? No. God raised up a messenger, Zechariah—"God remembers."

The Darius mentioned was the current ruler, a Persian. He was the second Persian king after Cyrus, the one who overtook the Babylonian empire and allowed Israel to return to Jerusalem, in 537 B.C., and rebuild its temple. The mention of a Persian ruler reminds us of what has taken place. Israel was not under self-rule. What had happened?

God's people continued to delight in the world's idols and false gods and did not return to relationship with him. The steps they took were further and further away from him. God repeatedly reminded, warned, cried, and sent messengers (prophets). Hosea, Amos, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah and others repeated the refrain to turn from worthless idols and worship the true God.

But they refused to listen. Consequences from life became their teacher. Captivity resulted, courtesy of godless people. Limitation, defeat, disillusionment, discouragement and dislocation defined their lives for a generation. In short, exile was utter humiliation for a people who thought it could never happen to them.

God was angered by idolatry and stubborn hearts. God was angry with the exiles' fathers, and their fathers, and generations before that. In fact, every generation since the Exodus had fallen out of covenant.

Idolatry is what draws us away from God and seduces us. It can be career, fantasy, ministry, self-protection, preoccupation with money. Idolatry isn't merely blatant hero worship or having a personal psychic. It is the seeking of something other than God to satisfy one's desires.

John Calvin said: "our hearts are idol factories." The apostle John, who tenderly calls the recipients of his first letter "little children," finishes the letter with the warning: "little children, guard yourself from idols."

What are your values that are idols displacing God from the heart of your life?

The Old Testament has no problem attributing anger to God. God is angry, and also jealous, for his creation, his laws and his covenant people (see verse 14). The expression of this anger is the discipline of a loving parent who cannot rescue his child from the natural consequences of his choices. Limitation, destruction, alienation: all these were part of exile—and they are part of the outworking of God's anger in our lives due to our refusal to turn from worthless pursuits.

It is interesting that the name given for God here is the covenant name Yahweh, or, the Lord. The anger of God, expressed in destructive consequences, still does not invalidate God's loyal love or his determination to woo us into relationship.

Only 42,000 returned to Jerusalem, in 536 BC, with the prophets Zechariah and Haggai. They were greeted by the sight of desolation: a burned-out heap of a temple, ruins and rubble everywhere. Imagine the sight. Could images of the war in Sarajevo be similar to a returning Sarajevan resident?

Sixteen years later (in our passage) the temple is being rebuilt. But the work is slow. A spirit of pessimism and discouragement was beginning to set in. Remodeling and reconstruction projects are always like that. They are never on schedule. After all, Israel was still the pawn of Persia, and subject to all the godless nations around them. There was no sign of Messiah. There was little hope for future. Even when the temple was finished, five years later, in 515 BC, the disappointment was greater than the joy, because the temple did not measure up to the old one. The book of Ezra tells us:

Yet many of the priests and the Levites and heads of fathers' households, the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the founda-

tion of this house was laid before their eyes, while many shouted aloud for joy; so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the shout for joy from the sound of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard far away (Ezra 3:12-13).

Certainly, some of our lives are involved in reconstruction. We see the ruins of once beautiful lives, and we are picking up the pieces. But this season can end. There can always be a fresh start. Like children, we need reassurance after discipline. Who will reassure us that the covenant love of God is still in force? God will. He initiates the contact. He always does. We are responders.

God's word breaks in here with the central message of Zechariah. Verse 3:

"Therefore say to them, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'Return to Me,' declares the Lord of hosts, 'that I may return to you,' says the Lord of hosts. (1:3)

The key word in this passage is "return." It frames the passage, since it is repeated in verse 6b, where it is translated "repent." It is a call to return to God from humiliating exile and worthless idols, to return to the covenant relationship with God in the center. "Return, return, return!" was the refrain of the prophets in the north and south. Jeremiah uses "return" one hundred and eleven times; the word is used more than a thousand times in the Old Testament. Even eighty-seven years later, in Malachi 3:7, God is still pleading to Israel to "return to Me"—although the temple has already been built. If God had temple-building work in mind only, he would be satisfied already and not pleading for a return of their hearts.

God is inviting his beloved to return to relationship with him. God remembers his promises, his covenant. But turning one hundred and eighty degrees to face God honestly is both the simplest and most difficult thing for our stubborn wills, intelligent minds, and busy bodies to do.

A man who came to Dr. Larry Crabb for help answered Dr. Crabb's question, "How can I help you?" with, "I want to feel better, quick." Blunt, honest, and superficial. Yet, isn't that what we really want so we can circumvent God? "Feeling better has become more important to us than finding God," Crabb says. We want our problems to be fixed more than we want God. But God does not exist to improve our lives. We exist to enter into his life.

We sometimes equate returning to God with:

- * expensive counseling from professionals
- * the latest popular Christian book
- * an extremely disciplined quiet time regimen
- * doing some good, hard work for God
- * counting on time to heal all wounds
- * sitting under an evangelical "expert" celebrity

- * the excitement and inspiration of a stadium rally or seminar movement
- * the cause of the political right
- * serving the Lord earnestly in ministry opportunities.

All of these things can be good individually, but all too often we are doing them *before turning* to God or *instead of turning* to God. They may be done without the brokenness and humility required to turn and face God and say, "Here I am, Lord." And this begins by intentionally turning toward him and turning away from the religious and idolatrous things that keep us from him.

The second half of this key verse says: "*and I will return to you.*" It seems, then, that God says we must make the first move, then he will respond. But it is not saying that. Remember, God's Word begins the process, initiating dialogue with us after we have wandered away from him. We respond by returning, then he meets us and draws near. God chooses not to barge in. He says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." He does not crash in forcibly.

And when you turn, you will find that God is close—closer than you think. God is always near, no matter how far we feel we have strayed from him. We naturally assume the distance back to God is equally as long as our drift away from him. But that is wrong. The moment we turn, God meets us there. That is what he is waiting for.

This is illustrated in the story of the prodigal son. The son's words to his father, "Give me what is coming to me, now," while the father was yet living, were tantamount to saying he would rather he was dead. He rudely asks for his portion of the inheritance, and leaves. After some time, the son gets to the point where he is humiliated, hungry, and repentant. He returns and wants to work for his father. But he finds a celebration in his honor, treating him as a noble, full son of privilege. Extravagant, surprising love awaited him. He finds a father who longingly looked for him every day, and runs recklessly to kiss him and draw him near. God draws near to us with an unexpected freeing, healing love the moment we turn toward home, honestly in need.

We see from this word that God also desires supremely relationship, not ritual. He says: "Return to Me." Not to religious activity, good behavior or works, his law or a new way of life. God desires to establish personal relationship. It is not enough for God to have you return to live under his roof. His desire is to have a close, personal relationship.

Although we accept God's invitation to return and find him near, we are still prone to wander away. As the hymn puts it: "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, / Prone to leave the God I love." Zechariah now reveals four instructions, four warnings for wandering hearts, to keep us from being lured away from God again. Verses 4-6:

"Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets proclaimed, saying, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'Return now from your evil ways and from your evil deeds.' But they did not listen or give heed to Me,' declares the Lord. 'Your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever? But did not My words and My statutes, which I commanded My servants the prophets, overtake your fathers? Then they repented and said, 'As the Lord of hosts purposed to do to us in accordance with our ways and our deeds, so He has dealt with us.''" (1:4-6)

The first warning is this: *Break from the unhealthy influences of past generations before they break you.*

This is *not* saying to deny or dishonor your parents. It is saying you do not have to repeat their dysfunction. At some point we must choose to stand apart from our parents in areas where they may have been blinded to God's way.

The second warning is: *Listen to God's Word before you lose the capacity to hear.*

The fathers had a hearing problem. The text says: "They did not listen or give heed to." We could easily miss this. But this is an important concept. It means more than they "tuned out." Actually, they chose to hear *only*. They were merely going through the motions. But listening requires both hearing and responding to what you have heard. If you do not obey, you have not heard.

More than that, hearing is being attentive, inclining the ear. In the old E. F. Hutton commercials, everyone leaned forward to catch even a whisper or movement or word of wisdom. We need to be like this with God, straining to discern his voice from scripture or the nudge of his Spirit inside us.

Our listening skills are terrible today because we fight against a visually-oriented culture, not an oral one, which would force us to hear and memorize. We access information on the Internet so we don't have to listen well or be truly "present" when we are with someone. This tendency carries over to our relationship with God.

Hearing a sermon on Sunday morning isn't enough to withstand the culture we live in or resist our own misguided thoughts. We need to create space to pray and read God's words. Prayer is listening to God. If Jesus listened to the Father, how much more do we need to?

Sadie and Bessie Delany, the "one hundred something" sisters who have lived together their entire lives, share about their mother's "sweet hour of prayer," in their most recent book:

We set aside time every day to talk to the Lord. We got that habit from Mama. She had a full-time job running the school, plus ten children to raise, but there was never a day in her life that she didn't reserve one full hour to pray. She had a beautiful writ-

ing desk where she kept her special things, like her own Bible and prayer book. Above it were two pictures of her heroes—Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass—and when she sat down between them, we knew we had to leave her alone. That was her hour with the Lord.

Do our children see us spending time listening to God?

Here is the third warning: *Seek the truth of God's Word or it will seek you out.*

A double rhetorical question from God stresses what should be our foundation: God's Word. It is not fathers; they are dead in Babylon. The Word outlasts and supercedes God's messengers. They (righteous men) pass away. Do not revere them. Revere the Word of God. In fact, it always catches up to us. We can't outrun it. We can run but we can't hide. The word "overtake" is a hunting term. The Word *will* hunt you down. Truth always pursues until it overtakes.

And the fourth warning: *Be teachable before consequences teach you.*

The text says, "then they repented"—and agreed that God was right and just in his commands and discipline. The exiled people had no choice but to recognize they were deluded, and admit failure. They had to confess.

The text teaches us two things about the nature of repentance. First, we must get to the point where we cease making excuses, maneuvering, and negotiating.

Young children are gifted negotiators of consequences to bad behavior. Sometimes I think my four-year-old has been listening to the "art of negotiating" tapes at night. He is constantly deflecting attention from the real behavioral issue of defiance. He is constantly in motion, a moving target. Anne and I long for him to stop, face us, and say: "I'm sorry. I was wrong." God longs for the same thing from us, but all too often we are in motion, maneuvering.

The second thing is: Do not wait for consequences to be your teacher. Confess, repent, become teachable, pliable. Confession releases power to make a fresh start. Preventative maintenance is always better than corrective.

The idols today are strong. Returning to God is not just for addicts and alcoholics. And it is not something that has to be done just once. We must return to God and keep returning.

God knows it is the only place where we will find the resources to handle life and quench our thirst with Living Water. Jeremiah 2:13 says: "What injustice did your fathers find in Me that they went far from Me?...My people have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to dig for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water." The idols of the world and other sources of refreshment will not satisfy. Are you thirsty? Have you forsaken your God?

It is time to return to the Father, or as James put it: "draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (4:8).

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RISKING TO BE REAL

SERIES: STUDIES IN THE MINOR PROPHETS

Catalog No. 1075
Zechariah 7
Fifth Message
Pat Harrison
July 21, 1996

Philip Yancey, in a recent article entitled, "Why I don't go to a Megachurch," describes a tendency toward superficiality in many churches, especially as they get large. The tendency is to emulate a "club," not a "community." A club is a gathering of people we like or with whom we share common interests; we choose them.

A community, however, is like a family; it is chosen for us. And that can get messy. Henri Nouwen defines "community" as the place where the person you least want to live with always lives. Yancey agrees with that, saying: "Thinking back to family reunions, I must quickly agree that the institution of the family forces me into close contact with characters I would otherwise avoid. I have no choice about such encounters; we share a gene pool. Several of my family members have served stints in prison. Some carry on feuds that go back generations. A few spin elaborate tales to cover up unwed pregnancies. Geographically, my family extends from Philadelphia to Australia. It includes a professional football player and a Ph.D. in philosophy, as well as some who never graduated from high school. Methodists, Unitarian Universalists, Independent Baptists, atheists—they all come together at our reunions."

In the church, Christians are called to live in community with each other. The church is God's provision for healing and authentic connection. Yancey says: "Anyone can form a club; it takes grace, shared vision and hard work to form a community. The Christian church was the first institution in history to bring together on equal footing Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slaves and free. By forming a community out of diverse members, we have the opportunity to capture the attention of the world."

Or do we? The church can often be people who shallowly embrace the connected, the beautiful and the humorous, but overlook the disconnected, the awkward and the needy. A friend shared with me recently that his sister, who lives abroad, remarked that it must be easy to be a Christian in California, because everyone who visits from there looks so healthy, wealthy, clean and happy. But, she wondered, what would they choose in the less affluent, difficult world she lives in?

That is an indictment of a brand of cultural Christianity that has grown up in America. Too often Christians are preoccupied with celebrity, with outward appearance. We have taken a page from the world. We choose

to see as our reality the sparkling lights of the Olympic opening ceremony, but neglect to see backstage and outside the stadium the contradictions and profound problems of humanity in the city of Atlanta.

Are we content to only show the clean side, content to be superficial and ignore true community because it is too messy? In an age where the buzz word "lite" on products proliferates so much that it becomes meaningless, are we content to have "Christianity lite"?

The prophet Zechariah's message in the opening chapter of his book is to call God's people to return to a right relationship with the Lord, rather than wandering after spiritual and material counterfeits. Now, having returned to God, how do we have a faith that risks to be real, one that both holds our interest and attracts the world? Studies show that the number one thing that attracts people to a church and convinces them to remain is authenticity. But, what does that look like?

The Ritual

Through Zechariah, God unmasks superficiality and reveals authenticity. First, he unmasks phony *ritual*; next, he exhorts us to *risk*; then he reveals the wonderful *result*. Zechariah 7:1-3:

Then it came about in the fourth year of King Darius, that the word of the Lord came to Zechariah on the fourth day of the ninth month, which is Chislev. Now the town of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regemmeleh and their men to seek the favor of the Lord, speaking to the priests who belong to the house of the Lord of hosts, and to the prophets saying, "Shall I weep in the fifth month and abstain, as I have done these many years?" (Zech 7:1-3, NASB)

Two years have passed since the last word from Zechariah. The people have continued to build the temple in Jerusalem upon returning from captive exile. After his initial call to return, in chapters 2-6, Zechariah relates eight colorful oracles or visions from God which he received all in one night. It must have been a busy night! The oracles all share themes of God's sovereignty, grace, and power.

Chapters 9-14 give pictures of Messiah, one who is a humble King, riding on a young donkey (9:9), and a Shepherd who is struck down (13:7). There is language similar to the book of Revelation in the New Testament about the certain hope of God's ultimate rule and pur-

poses: "And the Lord will be king of all the earth; in that day the Lord will be the only one, and His name the only one" (Zech 9:14).

Chapters 7-8 are a message which God gives to Zechariah's contemporaries in response to the inquiry of a delegation of Jews that comes to Jerusalem from Babylon. It seems the Jews want to coordinate their liturgical calendars with the priests in Jerusalem. (Today, we would use E-mail!) They had been dedicating themselves to abstaining from food (fasting) for seventy years, the period of time since captivity, and now wonder if they may stop. There is something more behind their question. At face value, this is a sincere, practical question, but there is also a little pride in their religious achievement.

It is dangerous to ask God a question unless you are ready for an unsettling answer to probe your heart. Verses 4-7:

Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me saying, "Say, to all the people of the land and to priests, 'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months these seventy years, was it actually for Me that you fasted? And when you eat and drink, do you not eat for yourselves and do you not drink for yourselves? Are not these the words which the Lord proclaimed to the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and prosperous with its cities around it, and the Negev and the foothills were inhabited?'" (7:4-7)

God answers their question with a question—in fact, three questions. There is a problem here. Seeing their heart, God desires to strip away pretense. It is the problem of the great human capacity to be religious. By "religious," I mean a relationship with God that is preoccupied and self-satisfied by external activity and outward appearance. Our superficiality with God is like when we are speeding and we see a police officer. We automatically take our foot off the accelerator. Then, when we are out of range, we are right back to our old habits.

When we relate to God, when we worship, pray, serve and teach, are we doing these things for God or for ourselves, to feel better about ourselves and how God views us? Do we do them with a self-serving and self-promoting motive? Religious activity or ritual to feel better about ourselves before God is nothing more than self-pity or grandstanding. In Matthew 6:16-18, Jesus speaks of fasting only so the Father in heaven will see. It is not to be done in front of people for their commendation. Verse 7 even states that their motives are no more pure than the people who heard the former prophets back in the good peacetime days. They have been over this ground before, and they know what happened: exile.

Actually, God had not asked them to fast for the destruction of the temple these seventy years at all. If any-

thing, he asked them to know and reflect his character through the former prophets, which he repeats now in his next word.

The Risk

To be different, to go below surface level with God is *risky*. But that is where the action is. So how do we become attractive and authentic? Verses 8-10:

Then the word of the Lord came to Zechariah saying, "Thus has the Lord of hosts said, 'Dispense true justice, and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother; and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.'" (7:8-10)

1. Risk to be real in our love for each other

Here are some definitions of the ways to be authentic that are mentioned here. *True justice* is restoring harmony and peace where there was conflict. It is part of our responsibility in the community. *Loyal love* is a tenacious, kind, condition-free love toward each other. *Compassion* is feeling deeply for each other; it is tender emotion that wells up from within.

This is where community comes in. The "each other" part presumes we are in a community of believers. Community is not an organization. It isn't formal. It's not something you join. It is friends, prayer groups, families and home fellowships.

And community will get messy. Marriage is a community. Ask my wife how perfectly delightful I am to live with all of the time! In the community of twelve disciples of Jesus, James and John fought amongst themselves as to who was the greatest. "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ," wrote Paul, in Galatians 6:2. I have yet to truly bear the weight of someone's suffering without it being tough.

The second place where authentic love is risked is given in verse 10: "*do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the resident alien, or the poor.*"

2. Risk to be real in our concern for the unlovely

Isaiah said the fast that God desires is: "to let the oppressed go free ... to divide your bread with the hungry... bring the homeless poor into the house ... when you see those in need of clothes, to cover them."

Jesus gave his precious time for three years not to the movers and shakers, but to the "moved and shaken," those who knew their need for God.

James 1:27 says: "This is pure and undefiled religion is the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." Note that he says, "visit...in their distress," not "send money to an organization that does

that." We have to be in the world, in the places where the pain is, feeling the lostness, the loneliness of that place. We have to have the courage to just *be* with people.

For example, who is the resident alien or stranger? This does not mean to watch out for "close encounters" activity in your neighborhood, but rather to open your home and schedule encounters with people you aren't naturally inclined to be with. This is not talking about dinner parties with people you know well. In fact, the word "hospitality" among the early church meant love of strangers.

It is important that we don't automatically think *only* in the categories mentioned in the text, and that we do not allow motivation by guilt to drive us.

How do we oppress people? By overlooking them—by omission. We devalue the person who can give us nothing.

Who are these people in our lives? Perhaps it is a secretary at work; the checkout clerk; the dying man down the street. They are in our church, but we are all too occupied appearing together and busy for God. Dive in. Begin by praying that God would open your eyes to those in need of a touch who are already in your life. We need eyes to see and care for the people on our doorstep that we've passed over. Practicing loyal love and compassion to the unlovely begins in our neighborhoods, not overseas.

The mark of greatness, I believe, is evident in how someone treats the weak, the defenseless, and the "little people" they encounter in their life.

Richard Halverson, the former chaplain of the United States Senate, modeled for me as a young man uncommon genuine concern for the overlooked, the lowly-esteemed. Ray Stedman took me along with him to a conference outside Washington D.C., and on a day off we visited Dr. Halverson's office and the Senate. I will never forget Ray introducing me as if I was a "somebody," and Dr. Halverson's gracious response.

But what stood out even more about this man's character was, although he knew every high ranking official from the President on down, he spoke genuinely and personally to every page, elevator operator, secretary and person of no rank. He knew them by name and inquired about something personal in their lives. Richard Halverson served for decades in that place of pomp, prestige and power, yet who can measure the remarkable effectiveness of his ministry due to his honor and care of the lowly? He risked to be real in a place of great posturing. He was known for credibility and integrity, and people wanted to know his God.

It is the quiet acts of mercy and compassion which no one sees that are the strange megaphone God wants to use. St. Francis of Assisi is attributed with the quote:

"Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words."

But, we can refuse to yield ourselves to this kind of deeper, risky faith which reflects a soft heart for the things of God. If we do, what we will find is a progressively hard heart ending up isolated and dry. Verses 11-14:

"But they refused to pay attention, and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears from hearing. And they made their hearts like flint so that they could not hear the law and the words which the Lord of hosts had sent through His Spirit through the former prophets; therefore great wrath came down from the Lord of hosts. And it came about that just as He called and they would not listen, so they called and I would not listen," says the Lord of hosts; but I scattered them with a storm wind among all the nations whom they have not known. Thus the land is desolated behind them, so that no one went back and forth, for they made the pleasant land desolate." (7:11-14)

To be real means to respond promptly when truth is revealed to you.

The hardening process is incremental. It begins by simply not paying attention. Then it proceeds to "turning a stubborn shoulder," like an animal stiffening every muscle to refuse the yoke. Then the ears are made heavy or closed up. At last the hardening hits the heart, like a diamond surface, the hardest natural surface there is.

Notice the Word of God, his revealed truth, came to them through different sources over time: through the law, and through the prophets who were spoken to by the Holy Spirit. Who are the "former prophets" in your life, the times when you clearly had God's truth opened up to you? What are we doing with the revelation we have already received from God? We are responsible to what we have heard. When we select to disregard the Word when it penetrates us, we harden. Obey what you know. Hebrews says: "Today when you hear His voice..." Refusal ends up in isolation and fruitlessness.

But, we have seen that God desires us to have much more fruitful and attractive lives. He promises a different result. We must turn to chapter 8:18-19, where we are given the actual answer to the delegation's original question:

Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me saying, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'The fast of the fourth, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh and the fast of the tenth months will become joy, gladness, and cheerful feasts for the house of Judah; so love truth and peace' (8:18-19).

God's plan is much better than they were asking for. Now the vision has been expanded to be God's vision,

which is more than a program of outward observances and depriving yourself, but inward joy, loving truth and peace. God is much more than a God who is interested in how much we have performed religiously. God has already blessed. He is at work. So instead of depriving yourself in a fast, celebrate with a feast, Zechariah says.

Now Zechariah reveals the wonderful *result* when we turn to God, cease superficial ritual, and are responsive to his Word to live in community and care for the weak in our midst.

The Result

People will want to know the secret of this joy and authentic love. Verses 20-23:

“Thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘It will yet be that peoples will come, even the inhabitants of many cities; and the inhabitants of one will go to another saying, ‘Let us go at once to entreat the favor of the Lord, and to seek the Lord of hosts; I will also go.’ ‘So many peoples and mighty nations will come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favor of the Lord.’ Thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘In those days ten men from the nations of every language will grasp the garment of a Jew saying, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you’” (8:20-23)

This is the wonderful result of being real: people will long for what truly matters in life—God himself. This was the original call of Abraham, in Genesis 12:3, to be a blessing to all nations. And they will come with a genuine interest in God: “We want to seek God with you. We see how different you are, that God is with you.”

People will have a yearning *for* God, not just *about* God.

Dr. Larry Crabb has said: “Don’t answer any questions that the quality of your life doesn’t provoke people to ask.” Are people provoked by the quality of our lives at work? at play? in our homes? how we treat our wives and our children? Or, are they just provoked by us?

We live in a day and age filled with meaningless talk—talk shows, talk radio, etc. Everyone is talking and no one is listening. Few are speaking meaningfully. And fewer still are quietly living in the mess of community and entering into the advocacy of those hurting around us. But if we are being authentic in this way, people will be drawn to God.

Being involved in imperfect community and with unlovely people is compelling. Superficial ritual is not. The result of risking to be real will be that our lives will be marked by God. They will be winsome, not abrasive, truth saying, not hypocritical.

The strategic crack in the armor to penetrate the world for Christ may not be found through a large, organized movement, but through a small decentralized movement of the heart to love the one in the pew next to you or the one serving you at lunch today.

Successful evangelism does not result in religious activity or church membership, but a hungry appetite for knowing God, which desires to dialogue about questions of the heart.

May God give us the grace to open our eyes to what is around us. May God also give us the grace to not try to do it ourselves.

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WHEN YOUR WORLD FALLS APART

SERIES: STUDIES IN THE MINOR PROPHETS

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Zephaniah

Sixth Message

Andy Drake

July 28th, 1996

In July, I always become much more patriotic than usual. Celebrating the Fourth of July reminds me of how grateful I am for the freedoms I enjoy in my country and the principles upon which it was founded. Of course, in late July every four years the Olympic Games are held. Over the past week, from the opening ceremonies to the women's gymnastics team finals, at times my eyes have welled up with tears of joy and pride in my country and in our athletes who have trained so hard and done so well. I love the carefree attitude, independent spirit and unconventional style of Americans—especially us crazy Californians.

Our greatest strengths as a nation, however, may be our greatest weaknesses, too. Filled with pride, we think we are the greatest nation and people the world has ever known. We are rich and smart. We feel we can overcome any obstacle. As Americans, we love to think we are invincible.

But are we? As a nation we can be lulled into complacency before God. A casual look would suggest that God is pleased with us, because he has blessed us with such an abundance of riches. We rest comfortably in the notion that we are a "godly" nation. Our Constitution presupposes a Supreme Being; our Pledge of Allegiance declares that we are "one nation under God"; and our money states that it is "in God we trust." We assume therefore that our nation is free from God's hand of judgment. But nothing could be further from the truth.

Our carefree attitude, unconventional style, independent spirit and the expression of our freedoms without limit have produced in us an arrogance of gargantuan proportions. These things have opened the doors wide open for the acceptance and practice of every kind of sin and evil. Our spiritual and moral decline, however, have not gone unnoticed.

The July 1996, edition of the Focus on the Family Magazine published an article in the form of a letter written by Bob Welch to his late father-in-law, a man of great Christian character, who has been dead for ten years. Welch's letter expresses with deep regret how much the U.S. has changed for the worse even in just the last ten years. He writes:

America isn't the same country it was even ten years ago. Much has changed, Pop. Too much. You're not going to understand this, but you'd be considered, well, "politically incorrect" these days. I remember a man who remained faithful to his wife, taught his children right from wrong and kept his family together despite drought and Depression. I remember a man who got tears in his eyes when singing "Amazing Grace."

But today, Pop, you'd be considered a fool for worshipping some obsolete God when you should be searching for your inner child, winning by intimidation, or awakening the warrior spirit within.

As I said, the country has changed in the ten years since you died. Oh, some of it's been for the better. If not overcoming our prejudices, we're at least confronting some of them, especially against women and minorities. Recycling has caught on. And the Big Hunk folks finally made a wrapper that doesn't stick to the candy bar.

But evil, if possible, has gotten more evil. Last year, a bomb blew up a federal building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people. A mother in South Carolina drowned her two sons so they wouldn't interfere with her relationship with her boyfriend.

And this morning's newspaper told of a St. Louis teacher who died after being punched by a fourth-grader who didn't like his homework assignment.

What's going on, Pop?

Crack cocaine. Drive-by shootings. Assisted suicide. Partial-birth abortions. Video poker. Trashy talk shows. Greedy athletes. Computer pornography. Runaway lawsuits. Shock radio. Sexual abuse. All have mushroomed in the last decade.

The abnormal has become normal. Right and wrong have traded places. Your great-granddaughters need notes from their parents to get their ears pierced. But in Oregon, they could legally have an abortion without parental permission. Schools pass out condoms but ban children from handing out Christmas cards. Crazy isn't it?

What does it take to break through the idolatry, arrogance, and complacency of a nation before God? What does it take to break through the callous hearts of individuals? In our study today in the book of Zephaniah, we will discover how God moves to bring his rebellious people back to himself. Chapter 1 verse 1:

The word of the Lord which came to Zephaniah son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah son of Amon, king of Judah, (Zeph 1:1, NASB)

Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of Josiah, king of Judah, 640-609 BC. The intended audience of his prophecy was the nation of Judah, and in particular the city of Jerusalem, where the religious and political leaders were living. Zephaniah was one of the last minor prophets to perform his duties before the Babylonian captivity. He exercised his office at about the same time as Jeremiah, a mere thirty years before Jerusalem was destroyed.

Almost nothing is known about the prophet except for what is given here in this verse. Notice that his genealogy is carried back to four generations. No other prophet has his pedigree traced back that far. I believe Zephaniah did this to show that he was the great-great-grandson of the godly King Hezekiah. He was of royal lineage, and he would know intimately the activities and moral character of Israel's leaders.

2 Kings 22-23 give the account of Josiah's reign. While rebuilding the temple, this righteous king uncovered the book of the Law of the Lord given to Moses. Based on that book, Josiah initiated nationwide reforms in accordance with the covenant. It is not clear whether the prophecy of Zephaniah was given to Judah before or after Josiah's reforms. But if Zephaniah preached after the reforms of Josiah, it is clear that these did not completely change the nation, because there was still obvious rebellion against the Lord. This once very privileged and obedient people had now turned their back on the Lord and from following his ways.

The focal point of Zephaniah's message is the "day of the Lord." Zephaniah uses this expression more often than any other prophet. Throughout the scriptures the phrase is used to describe a time of God's intervention in history to bring his people back to himself. Early on in Israel's history this meant that the "day of the Lord" was a day of hope for Israel, because God would bring them to himself by rescuing them from their oppressors. But as we shall see, Zephaniah redefines the "day of the Lord."

1:2-3 gives a glimpse of what this “day of the LORD” is like:

I. The Day of the Lord is a Day of Judgment (1:2-18)

**“I will completely remove all things
From the face of the earth,” declares the Lord.
“I will remove man and beast;
I will remove the birds of the sky
And the fish of the sea,
And the ruins along with the wicked;
And I will cut off man from the face of the earth,” declares
the Lord. (1:2-3)**

The first thing we learn about the “day of the Lord” is that it is a day of judgment. And, as these verses show, the extent of that judgment is total and complete. The images that are used are reminiscent of the Noahic flood, expressing how mad and serious God is and how complete his judgment will be. This judgment upon the wicked carries great weight and force, because it will be done by the Creator of the cosmos.

Verses 4-6 continue with the extent of God’s judgment:

**“So I will stretch out My hand against Judah
And against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem.
And I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this place,
And the names of the idolatrous priests along with the
priests.
And those who bow down and swear to the Lord and yet
swear by Milcom,
And those who have turned back from following the Lord,
And those who have not sought the Lord or inquired of
Him.” (1:4-6)**

And in verse 12:

**“And it will come about at that time
That I will search Jerusalem with lamps,
And I will punish the men
Who are stagnant in spirit,
Who say in their hearts,
“The Lord will not do good or evil.”” (1:12)**

God’s judgment is not only total and complete, it is also thorough and personal. The image of God, lamp in hand, searching through Jerusalem for all who have rebelled against him is like the probing of a doctor looking for cancer. God is very thorough. He leaves no stone unturned. Every nook and cranny of darkness is exposed by his light.

Not only is God’s judgment thorough, it is personal, too. Notice the use of the personal pronoun all through this passage: “I will stretch out my hand against Judah”, “I will cut off the remnant of Baal”, “I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the men who are stagnant in spirit.” God may use other nations and armies to accomplish his will, but make no mistake, it is his hand working through events in history.

This “day of the Lord” is also personal, because it is more than judgment against nations in general, it is judgment upon the sins of individuals in particular. This prophecy began with a broad and sweeping judgment against all the wicked of the earth, but now the focus narrows down from the whole earth to the nation of Judah, to the city of Jerusalem, and finally to individuals. The sword of God’s judgment penetrates to the very hearts and souls of his people.

Your response to the letter I read earlier about the litany of evil we are guilty of as a nation may have been similar to mine. We say, “That’s right. America is going to hell in a hand basket. We need God’s judgment to be swift and severe to rout out all these wicked and perverse people.” We think, “I hope God takes his lamp and searches deep and wide to find and punish every crack dealer, murderer, and pornographer in the country.” Or, in light of recent events you might be thinking, “I hope God’s lamp is burning bright so that he can find the terrorist who brought down TWA flight 800, and the person who bombed Centennial

Olympic Park.”

But as I reflect on these verses, it is obvious that the judgment of God comes not only on the sin around me, but the sin within me. I am forced to admit that even though I may not be a terrorist, or smoke crack cocaine, or participate in drive-by shootings, my arrogance and flippancy with the freedoms that God has blessed me with are just as damaging. I am no less guilty of idolatry, duplicity, and complacency.

I struggle with pursuing the false and empty idols of wealth, prestige and leisure. I struggle with the desire to spend more money fixing up my house than supporting our church and our missionaries. I know I spend more time watching television than I do in reaching out to my unbelieving neighbors and building up my fellow Christians.

I find it easy to jump up and down and raise my hands in exuberant joy at sporting events, but I often remain listless and lifeless when it comes to worship and praise of my Heavenly Father. I am definitely guilty of spending more time on my knees pulling weeds than I do on my knees in prayer before the Almighty. I do not want to live under the letter of the law, but I know that my spirit, as this passage warns, is often stagnant. So it is not just America that is rebellious against God, I am rebellious, too. If we are honest, we will admit that we are all guilty of rebellion and complacency before God. And we are all therefore deserving of God’s judgment. God’s righteous and purifying judgment comes not just to nations, but to individuals like you and me.

Verses 4-6 and 12 of the first chapter describe the extent of God’s judgment: it is total and complete, thorough and personal.

Let’s move on to verses 14-18 now, which describe in more detail what the three most predominant characteristics of that judgment will be. The first characteristic of God’s judgment is found in the first part of verse 14:

**Near is the great day of the Lord,
Near and coming very quickly; (1:14a)**

God’s judgment is imminent. It is just around the corner. There is no time for the rebellious to delay, for the great day of the Lord is coming quickly.

The second characteristic is found in verses 14b-17:

**Listen, the day of the Lord!
In it the warrior cries out bitterly.
A day of wrath is that day,
A day of trouble and distress,
A day of destruction and desolation,
A day of darkness and gloom,
A day of clouds and thick darkness,
A day of trumpet and battle cry,
Against the fortified cities
And the high corner towers.
And I will bring distress on men,
So that they will walk like the blind,
Because they have sinned against the Lord;
And their blood will be poured out like dust,
And their flesh like dung. (1:14b-17)**

Not only is God judgment imminent, it is also intense. It is a time of extreme distress.

The third characteristic is in verse 18:

**Neither their silver nor their gold
Will be able to deliver them
On the day of the Lord’s wrath;
And all the earth will be devoured
In the fire of His jealousy,
For He will make a complete end,
Indeed a terrifying one,
Of all the inhabitants of the earth. (1:18)**

God’s judgment is not only imminent and intense, it is also inevitable. We cannot thwart it. Though we may have all the riches

in the world, we cannot buy our way out.

So the “day of the Lord,” which at one time stood for God’s intervention in history to rescue his people from their oppressors, has now come to mean a time of judgment. What had once been a word of hope is now a word of dread. The Lord’s wrath against his own people is near, terrible, and certain. This pronouncement of judgment is intended to leave the listener with a sense of both terror and trepidation.

It is a prophecy intended to shock and awaken a people indifferent to their God. It is like the terror you might feel if, after years of being in the sun, and after repeatedly ignoring the advice of your family to put sunscreen on, one day a friend points out that a mole on your skin has changed size and color. You go to the doctor to have tests performed, and he reports back to you that you have melanoma. With that one word, “cancer,” your world falls apart. You wonder when all the treatments are done, and all the cancer is gone, will you survive? After all the darkness and distress, is there any ray of hope?

Just like the pronouncement of a doctor on the seriousness of one’s physical condition, the pronouncement of judgment by Zephaniah on the spiritual condition of God’s people leads his listeners to ask, “How are we to respond?” How am I to respond when I see my world falling apart as a consequence of my rebellion?

In the next few verses we will see that our appropriate response is not complicated, but it is difficult, because it goes against our natural tendencies.

II. The Response to Judgment (1:7; 2:1-3)

The first response to judgment is found in 1:7a,

Be silent before the Lord God! (1:7a)

Our first response to God’s judgment is to be quiet. We are to shut up. The Hebrew word for “be silent” literally means “hush.” Our natural tendency is to try and make excuses for our sin. I know this first-hand, because I recently completed two nights of traffic school. Are you shocked? It was a shock to me, too! It was a shock to all thirty of us in the class. We were eager to tell one another and the teacher that we didn’t belong there. We all had really good reasons for why we got a ticket.

But under the judgment of God, we are to do none of that. As this passage suggests, we are to remain speechless, because we really have no defense. We are guilty as charged, and our silence before the righteous Judge is a recognition of our guilt and acceptance of the consequences.

Our silence before God also allows us to hear him speak to us. If we are always moving and talking we are never attentive to the voice of God. Brennan Manning, in his book “Abba’s Child,” tells the story of a busy executive who went to a wise old hermit in the desert,

and complained about his frustration in prayer, his flawed virtue, and his failed relationships. The hermit listened closely to his visitor’s rehearsal of the struggle and disappointments in trying to lead a Christian life. He then went into the dark recesses of his cave and came out with a basin and a pitcher of water. ‘Now watch the water as I pour it into the basin,’ he said. The water splashed on the bottom and against the sides of the container. It was agitated and turbulent. At first the stirred-up water swirled around the inside of the basin; then it gradually began to settle, until finally the small fast ripples evolved into larger swells that oscillated back and forth. Eventually, the surface became so smooth that the visitor could see his face reflected in the placid water. ‘That is the way it is when you live constantly in the midst of others,’ said the hermit. ‘You do not see yourself as you really are because of all the confusion.’

Our solitary silence before God not only enables him to convict us of our sin but, as Manning also notes, allows us to “listen

with great attentiveness to the voice that calls us the beloved. God speaks to the deepest strata of our souls, into our self-hatred and shame, our narcissism, and takes us through the night into the daylight of His truth.”

So our first response to God’s judgment is to be silent, to shut up and be still in the presence of our Lord.

The second response is found in 2:1-2,

**Gather yourselves together, yes, gather,
O nation without shame,
Before the decree takes effect—
The day passes like the chaff—
Before the burning anger of the Lord comes upon you,
Before the day of the Lord’s anger comes upon you. (2:1-2)**

In response to God’s judgment we are not only to shut up, we are also to show up. Our natural tendency is to try and hide and solve our problems on our own. But in addition to spending time in solitary silence before God, we are called to gather together with other members of God’s family. We cannot be healed in isolation.

The third response to God’s judgment is found in 2:3,

**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. (2:3)**

We are not only to shut up, and show up, we are to repent, too. We are to gather together with the purpose of identifying ourselves as sinners, praying for deliverance, and falling before the Lord in humble worship and service. We repent by turning our back on the ways of this world and seeking after the Lord.

How do we seek God? This passage says that we are to seek the very character of God. We are to seek righteousness and humility, to seek to do the right thing, in the right spirit.

The parable told by Jesus of the Pharisee and the tax collector illustrates what this spirit of humility is like:

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men — robbers, evildoers, adulterers — or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:9-14, NIV)

But before we think we have a secret recipe for earning God’s grace, notice that at the end of this verse it says, “perhaps you will be hidden.” This “perhaps” reminds us that there is no magic formula. There is no way to earn salvation. We cannot presume upon God. We must lay ourselves completely on his mercy. Our deliverance and protection come only by God’s extraordinary grace.

So, what is our response to the judgment of God? What is our response when our world falls apart because of our rebellion? When our sins are exposed, when our false securities are demolished, when we finally realize that we are nothing and have nothing without God, what are we to do? We are to throw ourselves on the mercy of God; we are to be silent; we are to gather together, and we are to seek the Lord. We are to shut up, show up, and repent.

Fortunately, that is not all there is to the “day of the Lord.” That is not the last word. There is something more, something

new. As God intervenes in judgment against sin in our lives, there is also hope that by his grace he will not totally destroy us. As we shall see in the second half of chapter 3, the purpose of God's judgment, as it was in the days of Noah, is not primarily to punish the wicked, but to purify, protect, and restore his people. Judgment is transformed into joy. What begins in darkness and distress ends in gladness and singing.

III. The Transformation of Judgment (3:9-20)

After God's judgment, he says, beginning in verse 9:

**I will give to the peoples purified lips,
That all of them may call on the name of the Lord,
To serve Him shoulder to shoulder.
From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia
My worshippers, my dispersed ones,
Will bring my offerings. (3:9-10)**

The restoration process begins with the cleansing from sin. Just as the sins of Isaiah were forgiven by the symbolic cleansing of his lips, so too the people of God will have clean hearts and pure lips. No longer will their worship be idolatrous and deceitful. It will be transformed into something pure and holy. Every believer will be like a prophet, a holy spokesperson, able to call on the name of the Lord for the purpose of serving him "shoulder to shoulder."

"Shoulder to shoulder" is a beautiful picture of unity and common purpose. No longer would their service before God be complacent and stagnant, it is transformed into being diligent and united. It says here that even those "from beyond Ethiopia" will worship God as one. This occurred on the day of Pentecost, when the Lord brought together a diverse multitude in worship by pouring out his Spirit upon men of many nations.

This restoration process continues. Verses 11-13:

**In that day you will feel no shame
Because of all your deeds
By which you rebelled against Me;
For then I will remove from your midst
Your proud, exulting ones,
And you will never again be haughty
On my holy mountain.
But I will leave among you
A humble and lowly people,
And they will take refuge in the name of the Lord.
The remnant of Israel will do no wrong
And tell no lies,
Nor will a deceitful tongue
Be found in their mouths;
For they shall feed and lie down
With no one to make them tremble. (3:11-13)**

After God's purifying judgment only a righteous remnant remains. No longer will his people live in fear and shame because of their rebellious pride and deceitful speech. There will only be words of truth and a spirit of humility.

Verses 14-17 give a most glorious look at this restoration:

**Shout for joy, O daughter of Zion!
Shout in triumph, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter of Jerusalem!
The Lord has taken away His judgments against you,
He has cleared away your enemies.
The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;
You will fear disaster no more.
In that day it will be said to Jerusalem:
"Do not be afraid, O Zion;
Do not let your hands fall limp.**

**The Lord your God is in your midst,
A victorious warrior.
He will exult over you with joy,
He will be quiet in His love,
He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy. (3:14-17)**

What an amazing transformation! What once were cries of wailing at the terror of God's judgment become shouts of joy that the Lord has taken away his judgments. What was once a time of darkness and distress is transformed into a time for rejoicing and exultation. The Lord is no longer in the midst of his people to pour out his angry wrath, but to rejoice over us and calm us with his love.

The word of God as prophesied by Zephaniah is a word concerning the coming "day of the Lord." It is a prophecy intended to awaken God's people to their own rebellion and arrogance, and to turn them to him in righteous obedience and humble adoration.

The "day of the Lord" is not just a one-time event, when Christ comes again in glory and judgment to reclaim his people once and for all. We have seen from history that the "day of the Lord" continually repeats itself. Zephaniah's prophecy came true. The "day of the Lord" came for the city of Jerusalem, in 587 BC, when the city fell at the hand of the Babylonians, leaving behind only a remnant of the Jews.

In the first century, Jesus himself warned Jerusalem of coming judgment. The "day of the Lord" came for them in AD 70, this time at the hands of the Romans, leaving behind only the remnant of Christ's Church.

So, what is the "day of the Lord" for you and me? The "day of the Lord" can be seen each and every day and in many different ways when we are forced to rely on the mercies of God. Those are the times when the God's thorough and intense judgment strips us of our self-righteousness and brings us face to face with our own inadequacy and dependence upon God. It is those painful times when his righteous judgment burns away the sinful chaff in our lives, and what remains is a heart that is being made pure in loving devotion.

I admit that it takes the "day of the Lord" to break me and bring me to my knees in quiet repentance and humble obedience. It takes "the day of the Lord" to remind me that my true and primary citizenship is not in the USA, but in the Kingdom of God; and that my primary identity and source of pride is not as an American, but as a beloved child of God.

Zephaniah reminds us that our God is a righteous God. In his jealous love he will go to great lengths to purify and protect his people. He is ruthless and relentless in carving out and destroying anything that threatens our ultimate well-being. The "day of the Lord" is a time of pain and distress, but it ends with shouts of joy.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the message you have given to us through your servant Zephaniah. Thank you for being here in our midst. We give praise that in this present age there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. How gracious of you to send us your Son that our "perhaps" might be transformed into the blessed assurance that we are sealed with your Holy Spirit. Help us to come to you with humble and repentant hearts and to seek after you in solitude and in community. Purify our lips, Lord, and help us to love you with all our heart, mind, and strength. May we rejoice in knowing that through times of darkness and distress you are here in our midst, conforming us into your image and rejoicing over us with shouts of joy. Amen.

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IT'S TIME TO GET YOUR PRIORITIES IN ORDER!

SERIES: STUDIES IN THE MINOR PROPHETS

Catalog No. 1077
Book of Haggai
Seventh Message
David Horn
August 4th, 1996

I worked for a difficult boss for a number of years. No matter how hard I tried, every day I faced tremendous stress and failure. But this failure drew me closer to God. Through obedience to God and his will for me I learned that:

-My significance did not depend on my boss's approval and what mood he was in. My significance comes from God.

- Praying with my wife each morning, before work, allowed us to communicate our weakness and needs to God and each other. Prayer had the effect of placing upon God the weight I was feeling, taking it off my wife's shoulders.

- Prayer for my boss and co-workers in the midst of the day and during meetings helped me remember that I could not fix every problem. I can only try and be wise to be choose those things I could take on, and give the rest to God.

I wish I could say that during the past five years I have made these lessons a consistent part of my life, but I haven't. Why? I am sad to say this, but life has gotten easier. Don't get me wrong, I still work hard, and probably have more demands on my time today. But my work has produced results, and my goals are within the reach of my capabilities. At times I feel like asking, Where did God go? Or rather, as I make up my "to do" list, how high a priority do I place on my relationship with God?

Hardships often give birth to lessons learned, but with time, these lessons, which seem like common sense, are easily set aside. A recent magazine article on Stephen Covey, the author of the book, "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People," said Covey is packaging common sense as if it were original—and making a fortune doing it. But Covey would say, what seems to be common sense just isn't common practice.

This morning we come to the book of Haggai in our series in the Minor Prophets. Through Haggai the prophet, God calls us back to a relationship with him and the work he intends for each of us. If you feel it's time to evaluate what you are working so hard for in life, the message of this book is, get your priorities in order—just do it!

The history of the nation of Israel is not a record of their faithful progression from a chosen people to the revealing of Christ, their long awaited Messiah. Israel, once chosen and privileged by God, became proud, and turned away from God in rebellion and idolatry. The result was that the nation was divided, and delivered into the hands of its enemies. Jerusalem was captured and its main buildings destroyed. The magnificent temple, built by Solomon, and the city's walls and fortifications were demolished. Israel was placed in captivity and deported to Babylon. In their suffering, the people turned to God to seek his blessing

and their hoped-for return to their homeland to rebuild the temple.

In 538 BC, nearly seventy years after the captivity and destruction of Jerusalem, as recorded in the book of Ezra, King Cyrus allowed a number of Jews, less than fifty thousand strong, to return to Judah with their possessions. This group, made up of farmers and their servants, planned to rebuild the temple and reinstitute worship of God. Humility and hardship had drawn the remnant closer to God, and they made it their first priority to rebuild the temple and institute formal worship. They quickly set about laying the stone foundation of the temple and rebuilding the walls. When the altar was built, sacrifices in the form that God had instructed Moses to follow were once again offered. The remnant, having learned bitter lessons through captivity and exile, wept with joy over their deliverance.

Now we come to the book of Haggai, which was written after the remnant had been back in Jerusalem for eighteen years. Haggai 1:1-4:

In the second year of Darius the king, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest saying, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, "This people says, "The time has not come, even the time for the house of the Lord to be rebuilt." "Then the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet saying, "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house lies desolate?" (Hag 1:1-4, NASB)

This message from the Lord, delivered by Haggai, recorded in the month of August of 520 BC, is addressed to Zerubbabel, a descendant of David and heir to the Davidic throne (as governor of Judah, Zerubbabel held the highest office of civil authority); and to Joshua, a direct descendant of Aaron the Levite, who held the highest office of religious authority.

Right away we see two clues in Haggai's message that there is a problem in the relationship between God and the returned remnant. First, God refers to them as "this people," rather than the more common form of address, "my people." This indicates that the relationship between God and his people had become strained, to say the least. It probably caused them to wonder about their reputation as the "chosen people." Second, notice that their own words are thrown back in their faces: "This people says, "The time has not come, even the time for the house of the Lord to be rebuilt." Although they had been back in Jerusalem for eighteen years, they did not think the time had arrived to finish the temple. Yet the book of Ezra seems to indicate that the remnant had gotten off to a great start, rebuilding the temple and working on their relationship with God.

What had they been doing all this time?

Verse 4 answers that question. God asks: "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house lies desolate?" They had been working on their own homes. That took priority over completion of the temple. They were living in finished houses, while the temple still lay desolate and ruined. For eighteen years, they had failed to get around to completing the half-built temple. They were focused on pursuing their own priorities rather than God's. They felt it was "not time" because they were distracted. Life was busy. Furthermore, as we know from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, they faced many hardships and difficulties, especially from their surrounding neighbors, the Samaritans. These people were concerned about the Jews establishing themselves, so they harassed them physically and politically.

Verses 5-7 go on to detail the priorities of the remnant during the eighteen years they had been in Jerusalem.

Now therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, "Consider your ways! "You have sown much, but harvest little; you eat, but there is not enough to be satisfied; you drink, but there is not enough to become drunk; you put on clothing, but no one is warm enough; and he who earns, earns wages to put into a purse with holes." Thus says the Lord of hosts, Consider your ways!" (1:5-7)

"Consider your ways!" (NASB). "Give careful thought to your ways" (NIV)—the course of life you are on. This is a gentle but firm warning and rebuke. Verse 6 sets out the five pursuits of the remnant. Perhaps we ourselves should give careful thought to how these may apply to us.

First, God says: "You have sown much, but harvest little." Their work was not producing enough. They were not meeting their objectives. Second: "You eat, but there is not enough to be satisfied." Their food did not satisfy them. Third: "You drink, but there is not enough to become drunk." Wine failed to provide them with an escape from life's challenges. Fourth: "You put on clothing, but no one is warm enough." Their clothes did not meet their need for warmth and comfort. Fifth: "And he who earns, earns wages to put into a purse with holes." No matter how much money they made, they never had enough.

The remnant were facing great hardship, and working hard, but not getting anywhere. All their efforts were in vain. They probably reasoned, "Surely God will understand that once the chaos of life's daily grind smooths out, we will again make a high priority of rebuilding the temple."

Here we could ask ourselves a question: What are the things that get in the way of our relationship with God and pursuing his priorities? God's desire is for his people to think carefully, to exercise free will, and choose to obey him. We should think carefully about what we ought to do. C. S. Lewis observes in *The Problem of Pain* that in all moral law, the question that man has to face is, What ought he to do? This is quite different from what we want to do or what we are being forced to do.

The next moral problem man faces is dealing with his inability to do what he feels he ought to do. By their own standards, all men stand condemned. But humble reflection and admission of guilt are a far cry from the "radar

detector" lifestyle of the '90's. We only slow down if we think we are going to be caught; then we search for loopholes to beat the charges. The convicted murderer Richard Alan Davis seems to symbolize our society's indifference and lack of shame. Do we consider our ways? No. We live by our desires; we justify ourselves by appealing to our emotions. We measure success by our titles, our checkbooks, our cars, our appearance.

I think the wisdom of our times was captured in a recent Kudzu cartoon. Character 1 says to Character 2: "If you believe the infomercials, there are lots of people who think their lives will improve if only their buttocks were firmer!" Both characters reflect on this, and then Character 2 says: "Buns of steel, brains of silly putty!"

What are you pursuing in life? For most of us, success in our jobs provides us with significance and determines more of our self worth than we are willing to admit. Weight Watchers, Alcoholic Anonymous and other organizations help people who are seeking satisfaction through food or dulling the pain of life through drugs. Our incomes are always just short of meeting our perceived needs. Things aren't working out. Life is not bringing satisfaction. We work hard, but we seem to be going nowhere. So we work harder. Is this all there is to life? What are you going to do about it? Stop merely responding to life. Be still, and listen!

God is informing the remnant that the connection between the fruits of their work and the satisfaction derived from it should always be viewed in the context of their relationship with and obedience to him. God is both the source of the blessing and the source of withholding of the blessing. This is what Haggai points out in the next verses. Chapter 1, verses 7-11:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, "Consider your ways!" Go up to the mountains, bring wood and rebuild the temple, that I may be pleased with it and be glorified," says the Lord. 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. Therefore, because of you the sky has withheld its dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I called for a drought on the land, on the mountains, on the grain, on the new wine, on the oil, on what the ground produces, on men, on cattle, and on all the labor of your hands." (1:7-11)

Here God is saying that he is the source of their difficulties! He blows away the wheat with the chaff. And it was he who brought a drought on all the land, withering their crops, bringing tension to their relationships with their neighbors, and hardship on their cattle. All their efforts had been in vain! But, as life became harder, the people did what seemed right to them. They looked to their own abilities to solve their problems. They buckled down and worked harder for their goals, which were always just out of reach. God did not bring these things upon the people to punish them, but to draw them to himself. Yet they did not turn to him.

Today, just as in the time of Haggai, man feels he does not need to turn to anyone but himself to work out his problems. The self-help sections of bookstores grow bigger every year. Today, you can even find books for children

who are dealing with the difficulties of life. From the time of Adam, the blessing of both the land and animal life had been directly related to man's relationship with God. God withheld the blessing because the sacrifices of the people were not offered from the heart. What seems odd is that in the book of Ezra, the remnant's first sacrifice upon completion of the altar was born out of their gratefulness to God and their recognition of their need for protection.

Here is how Ezra put it:

Then Joshua the son of Jehozadak and his brothers the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brothers arose and built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God. So they set up the altar on its foundation, for they were terrified because of the peoples of the lands; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the Lord, burnt offerings morning and evening (Ezra 3:2-3).

I believe that the returning remnant, as new arrivals in the destroyed city of Jerusalem, a place inhabited by hostile Samaritans, and facing the hardship of plowing and planting new land, truly felt weak and inadequate. But it was this feeling of inadequacy that made them aware of just how needy they were. This humbling experience forced them to turn to their God to communicate in worship and express their needs. They realized that the work on the temple was started before the work on the city walls and fortifications. They knew that their protection came from God. Over the next eighteen years, however, each man established his home and lands, harvested his crops and tended his cattle. As each family established themselves, and their needs were met, their first priority shifted from their relationship with God to tending their own affairs and running their households.

Our own hearts are easily drawn away from a relationship with God. How can we worship him when our attention is drawn to our jobs and possessions, to sports, television and hobbies for our significance and satisfaction, rather than looking to God, the Creator and Father? What is distracting you in your relationship with God? What would you find it hard to live without? What takes first place in your life? Where are you looking to for satisfaction? A heartfelt attitude of obedience worships God, and God promises his blessing through a relationship with him. Does God have your attention?

In verse 8, God directs his people to turn their hearts from satisfying their own needs and desires toward a relationship with him, and toward obedience, by finishing the heart of the temple—the very means of worshipping and communicating with him. God directs them to get wood; since the external foundation of stone had been completed, the internal wooden structure and adornment was left undone.

I think this is another picture of how we relate to God at times. We go through the motions, but fail to spend the time to adorn our love relationship with him. We avoid intimacy, even when we talk to our Maker. The Jews had been routinely worshipping God, going through the motions, with no heart, no passion. The temple was not a special place to them. In fact, as it says in verse 4, "this house lies desolate." It was hardly a place that exemplified God's thriving house of worship.

Why was the temple so special that God desired to be pleased with it and glorified through it? To answer this question we need to look at the structure and symbology of the temple. The elements of the temple provided God's people with the necessary aspects of worship that demonstrated their humility and obedience. The elements were physical reminders of the Messiah to come. They were the Christ-centered symbols that God had required as part of worship.

Let's briefly look at these elements. Lavers were used for cleansing before people entered into worship. Christians today confess their sins to cleanse their hearts, knowing that Christ paid for our sins with his blood. The temple altar was the place where blood was shed for the forgiveness of sins. Christians have no need for an altar. In the cross of Christ, the sacrifice has been paid. The altar of incense is a picture of prayer, as the aroma moves from the area of worship past the great veil into the Holy of Holies. The veil, which came between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies, was torn in two at the death of Christ. His death forms the basis on which we can approach God and enter his presence. The Holy of Holies, where the Ark of the Covenant was seated, symbolized the presence of God. This was where the blood of the lamb was placed on the Day of Atonement.

Today, however, the temple is the Body of Christ, built of human hearts that have been moved by the Spirit. Listen to these words of Paul, from Ephesians chapter 2:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. ...For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit (Eph 2:13, 18-22).

And these words from 1 Peter 2:4-6:

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." (1 Pet 2:4-6)

There are people around you today whom the Holy Spirit intends to add to the Body of Christ. At home, at work and at play, are you strengthening the body of Christ or are you a stumbling block? What is stopping you from adding living stones to the body of Christ? You may be thinking, "I don't know anybody." If you attend church but are not in Christian fellowship, you are not functioning in the body. Listening to teaching from the pulpit but not seeking Christian relationships is like listening to lectures on how to play the piano but never playing a note. There are many midweek opportunities to meet other Christians: in home fellowships, men's and women's Bible studies, singles, college fellowships, etc. There are even

more opportunities beyond PBC. And if you don't like any of those, start your own group!

Perhaps you are thinking, "I don't think I can get involved in ministry." But if you are in Christian fellowship, you are in ministry. Ministry isn't all teaching and evangelism. Only a small part of ministry is done by full time pastors and paid staff. Serve with the gifts and talents that God has given you, right where you are. Be obedient to God where you are planted, at home and at work. He will use you to accomplish something that will have eternal effects.

Some of you may be thinking, "I'm not ready to teach others. I need more teaching and discipling." Has someone poured their life into you? If so, it may be your time to nurture others. Our children would love to hear simple stories of what you have learned about God or what he has done in your life. How long will you soak up good teaching and yet not share what God has taught you? Junior High, High School, College, Singles, and the Juvenile Hall Ministry all provide opportunities for us to share life, to serve and build the body of Christ. If you need information, the church office, the information kiosk and upcoming ministry fair can get you connected. Again, if you don't feel drawn to any of these, start your own!

Are you saying, "I'm too busy"? I don't know anyone who isn't. Maybe you are going through a busy season. Ask yourself, is this a season or a lifestyle? Is this an excuse to have relationships on your own terms, not God's? You should evaluate your priorities in light of your relationship with God. Do your priorities, your work and sacrifices, have eternal value? When we began our home fellowship, I thought about how hard it would be to give up our Wednesday evenings. But, after five years of meeting together, I would not trade that evening for anything.

Are you thinking, "I'm waiting until the right ministry opportunity comes along"? Are you a perfectionist, worried about the quality of your work? My advice is, just do it! Remember that the temple that Haggai encouraged the

remnant to build was probably a crude structure, having been built by farmers. In fact, some of the older members of the remnant remembered the glory and splendor of Solomon's temple and they were highly critical of the work in progress.

In the verses that follow, God encourages his people to obedience by saying:

'But now take courage, Zerubbabel,' declares the Lord, 'take courage also, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and all you people of the land take courage,' declares the Lord, 'and work; for I am with you,' says the Lord of hosts (2:4).

Is the work hard? Be strong! God is with you!

God also promises, in 2:9:

'The latter glory of this house will be greater than the former' (2:9a)

If you are frustrated and ready to quit because the work doesn't seem to measure up to some previous standard, be careful. God is in control—and he loves a new creation. This very temple constructed in Haggai's day was the very house of worship that Jesus, the long awaited

Messiah, would enter to worship and fill with his glory five hundred years later.

Will you choose to put aside your excuses? What will be your first priority . . .

- Material gain or eternal treasure?
- Sports channel or relationships?
- Prime time wisdom or knowledge of God?
- Self help or submission and obedience to God?

Do you allow yourself to be bounced around on a sea of emotion, chasing the winds of convenience and comfort? In the book of Haggai, God calls us back to a heart to heart relationship with him, one that is demonstrated through obedience, which glorifies him and brings him pleasure.

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WHO IS GOD, ANYWAY?

SERIES: STUDIES IN THE MINOR PROPHETS

Catalog No. 1078
Book of Jonah
Eighth Message
Ben Woodward
August 11th, 1996

The story of Jonah is a whimsical, somewhat fantastic tale, one that has worked its way into the cultural fabric even of modern times. Jonah is a favorite of Sunday School classes because of the vivid images of the action. There are several clear lessons to be learned from this book—lessons about the importance of obeying God and of his wonderful grace and mercy, not to mention the swallowing of a man whole and alive!

But Jonah is not at all like the other Minor Prophets we have been studying this summer. The book doesn't appear to be either an oracle from God, or prophecy, but simply the story of a rebellious man who seems always to be on the wrong side of God. And it doesn't seem to be very inspiring, leading some to wonder why it is even in the Bible. I believe, however, that the entire book of Jonah is read in Jewish synagogues on Yom Kippur, their most holy day. Surely there must be something deeply significant in this book. Let's see if we can discover what that is.

I want to look not so much at Jonah's actions, but his words. Rather than focusing on the motivation and negative example of the reluctant prophet, I want to look at the positive elements, the three times when Jonah speaks—Jonah's three Testimonies. I will refer to the story as background, so I'll briefly go over the highlights of the narrative.

Jonah was called by God to go to Nineveh, the capital of the nation of Assyria, and preach a message of coming destruction. The prophet, however, headed in the opposite direction by signing on for an extended cruise to the West, from the city of Joppa. Soon the ship was overtaken by a fierce storm, and it became evident that Jonah was the immediate cause of the storm. After his testimony, and further futile attempts to save the ship, the ship's sailors threw him into the sea. Miraculously, the storm immediately abated; the wind stopped blowing and the sea became calm. At that point Jonah was saved by being swallowed by a big sea creature (variously referred to in the Bible as fish, whale, or sea monster). Jonah prayed to God from the belly of the fish (his second testimony) and was subsequently vomited out on the shore.

God again called Jonah to Nineveh, and this time he went. He preached a short message of calamity against Nineveh, and miraculously, all of Nineveh repented of their evil ways. God was favorably moved by their repentance and decided not to destroy the city. Jonah, however, was incensed by God's mercy, and prayed to die on the spot. Jonah's third testimony is part of his accusation against God. God used the example of a shade plant to try to teach Jonah a lesson in compassion, but by the end of the book, Jonah was still unconvinced and angry. We never learn whether he learned the lesson.

Jonah lived in the north of the nation of Israel at the time of the king Jeroboam II (about 800 BC, shortly after the time of Elisha the prophet). He had had quite a good run of successful prophecy regarding the political and military expansion of Israel under King Jeroboam. Given the proximity of the nation and the prophet to the Assyrian Empire, whose capital was Nineveh, we can surmise that Jonah was quite familiar

with the Assyrians, an extremely wicked people who tortured their captives and practiced genocide. The Assyrians at times have been referred to as the Nazis of the Ancient Near East.

Jonah's words in this little book are literally and theologically true, even though his actions and attitudes are mostly rebellious and ungodly. It would appear that a true prophet is unable to speak falsehood. Balaam, for example, was willing to take money to curse the Israelites of Moses' day, but could not do so; blessings came out of his mouth instead. Jonah's words are not merely true, however; these three testimonies form a core of truth which pervades all of scripture. Moreover, the message both spoken by Jonah and lived by him in spite of himself, points directly at our Lord Jesus.

Let's look now at Jonah's first testimony, his witness of Jehovah God. To get the immediate context, we will look at the scene on the ship in the midst of a "great storm." Chapter 1, beginning with verse 4:

And the Lord hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up. Then the sailors became afraid and every man cried to his god, and they threw the cargo which was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone below into the hold of the ship, lain down and fallen sound asleep. So the captain approached him and said, "How is that you are sleeping? Get up, call on your god. Perhaps your god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish." And each man said to his mate, "Come, let us cast lots so we may learn on whose account this calamity has struck us." So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, "Tell us, now! On whose account has this calamity struck us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?" [In short, they asked, "Who are you, anyway?" Now listen to Jonah, verse 9:] **And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land." (Jonah 1:4-9, NASB)**

Jonah didn't answer all of their questions; or at least his responses are not recorded. I like the answer that he gave, though. In reply to the question, "From what people are you?" Jonah identifies himself with Jehovah God, and identifies his God as the one God who made everything.

The intensity of the response to Jonah's witness has fascinated me for some time. Verse 10:

Then the men became extremely frightened and they said to him, "How could you do this?" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them. (1:10)

What I find remarkable is that although these men were pagans, having their own pagan gods, after Jonah's very brief testimony of a Creator God, Jehovah, they instantly recognize God (as Creator, at least) and fear him. They are genuinely shocked that a man would do what Jonah had done. Of course, mentioning that his God had made the very sea that

was now threatening to kill them had a very immediate and profound impact on them. These men were changed by Jonah's message. Their intentions were changed, and although they eventually threw Jonah into the sea, with reluctance and fear, they ended by worshipping Jonah's God, Jehovah. Jonah made a brief yet wonderfully true statement that changed these men's lives: that Jehovah God was the Creator of all things.

This scene teaches us the importance of identifying God with his creative acts. In the Bible, God identifies himself in this way, most spectacularly at the end of the book of Job. Job 37-41 gives God's perspective on his creativity and connection with the natural world. Listen to a few phrases that he addresses to Job:

**"Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades,
Or loose the cords of Orion?
Can you lead forth a constellation in its season,
And guide the Bear with her satellites?
Do you know the ordinances of the heavens,
Or fix their rule over the earth?
Can you lift up your voice to the clouds,
So that an abundance of water may cover you?
Can you send forth lightnings that they may go
And say to you "Here we are'?" (Job 38:31-35)**

Here is how Isaiah describes who God is:

**"Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand,
And marked off the heavens by the span of a hand,
And calculated the dust of the earth by the measure,
And weighed the mountains in a balance,
And the hills in a pair of scales?" (Isa 40:12)**

Less than a month ago, my wife Nancy and I spent two and a half weeks in the Rocky Mountains, including Teton and Glacier National Parks. Those mountains are magnificent and awe-inspiring, but when Isaiah speaks of God's majesty, God is seen to be far greater—and able to handle those huge mountains as if they were so much dirt.

The Bible begins and ends with creation. So I think of creation as the *book covers* of the Bible. But creation fills the pages between as well, as we see in the verses I just read. Furthermore, God is still in the business of creation. Dave Roper says, "It took God to make a man, and it still does." Of course, Dave isn't referring only to making a man from the dust of the earth or knitting him together in his mother's womb. He is referring to the making of a mature man, as the New English Bible translates Ephesians 4:13: "So shall we all at last attain to the unity inherent in our faith and our knowledge of the Son of God—to mature manhood, measured by nothing less than the full stature of Christ." God's creativity is never ending, as you can probably attest from your own life. And of all the ways that we are made in the image of God, I think we value creativity the most.

Before we leave this first testimony, I'd like to point out a parallel between the account of Jonah in the storm and that of Jesus with the disciples in a storm on the Sea of Galilee, described in Mark 4:34-39. Jesus was also asleep, even as the storm was raging. He was also awakened by the others, and challenged or even rebuked for sleeping when all were in peril. Jesus too spoke just a few words. And in both cases the results were the same—a perfectly calm sea. I certainly don't mean to imply that Jonah calmed the sea in the way that Jesus did; only that as a result of Jonah's words and actions, he was thrown into the sea, at which point God brought about a complete calm. So we might say, in a figurative sense, that Jonah

calmed the sea. He did, after all, tell the sailors that the sea would become calm if they threw him in. And the responses of the others on board the vessels were the same in both cases: fear of the power and presence of God. Clearly, all present recognized that only God can control the storm. Jonah's shipmates were moved to worship this God who saved their lives; and Jesus' disciples were moved to awesome wonder at who he is.

What is the meaning of these words and events to us living at the end of the 20th century? Those sailors discovered that God is both powerful and present. I wonder whether we truly believe that. It seems to me that many of us act as if God is either impotent, uncaring, far away, or all three. However, scripture teaches the opposite. Occasionally God breaks through our unbelief to show us the truth—as in a storm. Although those moments can be terrifying, they are also rich, because they bring us face to face with God. I would challenge us all to remember what scripture says here: that God is present, and that he is perfectly able to deal with every circumstance over which we needlessly worry. We too find ourselves in the storms of life, fearful that our boats will capsize. The storms serve to remind us that our own efforts are totally inadequate, and that we need God to calm the waves. As we mature in faith, we learn that God is not a cosmic genie, ready to do our will at any moment. As Jonah and others have discovered, God is sovereign.

And sometimes the trial seems endless. I'm reminded of a couple who have shared their story with the elders. They are embroiled in a lawsuit that came about from their efforts to do good. Now they are facing a financial and emotional storm that threatens to break up their boat. It's not easy for them to trust God in the midst of the storm, and they have yet to find their way to the safety of the shore. Yet God is worthy of their trust—and ours, too.

When Jonah was thrown into the sea by the fearful sailors, he faced near certain death, sinking he says, "to the roots of the mountains." But no, he was swallowed whole by what the Bible calls a "great fish." Without trying to analyze what sort of creature that might have been, let us admit that Jonah's salvation was completely miraculous. This event is the one fact that nearly everyone knows about Jonah, whether they believe it or not. This is what galvanizes our imagination and fascinates children. And this is the sign to which Jesus refers when he says that no sign will be given other than the sign of Jonah; part of the sign and the miracle is that Jonah survives for three days inside the fish.

Now let's look at Jonah's prayer, in chapter 2. His prayer is a psalm. Its language and content are familiar from several of the psalms, and the language itself is taken from the Psalms. And why should it not be so? Certainly, Jonah, as God's prophet, would have been familiar with the Psalms. Jonah's prayer is a song of thanksgiving for deliverance, even though that deliverance is incomplete and even questionable when he prays. He was still inside the fish, after all. This prayer is a concrete example of giving thanks in all things. Verse 7 says that Jonah remembered the Lord. It appears he did that, just at the last moment, when his situation was hopeless from a worldly perspective. Jonah says that God heard, that he answered, and then in verse 9, Jonah declares: "*Salvation is from the Lord*"—that is, from Jehovah God. The essence of this prayer is that Jonah is thankful, even though he's still in big trouble. Sitting, standing, lying, whatever, in the belly of a sea creature is not exactly salvation. But Jonah gives thanks to God for saving his life, and, because he knows God's character, he is willing to trust in God's deliverance in spite of the

circumstances of the moment.

The word I want to focus on in this message is *salvation*. This is the Hebrew Y'SHUW'AH. This word, meaning "deliverance," "saving," perhaps "victory" (especially in impossible situations), is used seventy-seven times in the Old Testament. For example, after the Red Sea crossing, Moses sang, "The Lord is my strength and my song, and He has become my salvation" (Exod 15:2). Hannah was barren, but God gave her a baby in response to her fervent prayer. Listen to her song of praise: "My heart exults in the Lord; My horn is exalted in the Lord, My mouth speaks boldly against my enemies, Because I rejoice in Thy salvation" (1 Sam 2:1). And in 1 Samuel 19:5, the writer says of David, "For he took his life in his hand and struck the Philistine, and the Lord brought about a great deliverance for all Israel." (Here the word "deliverance" is the same y'shuw'ah as that usually translated as salvation.)

Salvation from God is the theme of the Bible. We can see that in the above passages. Salvation from God through Jesus' life, death and resurrection is the central message of the New Testament. Indeed, Jesus' very name is essentially Jonah's testimony, "Salvation is from Jehovah."

The story of Jonah turns on this word, for the prophet became God's instrument for the salvation of Nineveh. His figurative death and resurrection for the sake of Gentile Nineveh prefigure Jesus' literal death and resurrection for all Gentiles, indeed for everyone. Jesus testified to this truth (in Matthew 12:39-41): "for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment, and shall condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here." So Jonah's story became Jesus' story, changed and magnified and glorified.

Both Jesus and Jonah were given up to death to accomplish God's work. But Jonah "died" (so to speak) on account of his own sin, whereas Jesus died for the sin of all men. Jonah deserved his sentence, but Jesus was innocent of all wrongdoing. So in fact, Jonah is not a type of Christ, but an anti-type. Jonah "died," not for Nineveh, but to escape from participating in God's plan of salvation. By contrast, Jesus our Savior died of his own free will, intending to save us. Nevertheless, Jonah's story is a sign of Jesus' coming death and resurrection, and of his work of salvation for all.

How do you suppose the twelve disciples felt as Jesus spoke those words of the sign of Jonah? Don't you think that they then (at least then) recalled the story of Jonah sleeping in the ship, and remembered when Jesus slept in the back of their little boat on the Sea of Galilee and then calmed the storm? I think that the parallels of those incidents served to authenticate Jesus as the one who would, like Jonah, not only die and rise again, but also bring salvation. In other words, since he had already replayed the role of Jonah sleeping and calming the storm (again, figuratively speaking), his word of fulfillment of the very next act in Jonah's life could be trusted all the more.

Very few of us have had the experience of coming close to death by drowning. And none of us have found ourselves in the dark, wet, slimy, smelly, and probably dangerous, belly of a large sea creature. But many of us have faced situations in which we felt as though we were drowning, and many will face such circumstances in the future. Where do we turn at those times? Oh, we say that we trust in God in all circumstances. But do we? Do we have the confidence that Jonah had when he remembered God, or when he thanked God

from the belly of the fish? Are we ready to praise God when we're still in the middle of the mess? How can we ever learn how trustworthy God is unless we have to trust him in an impossible situation? We are called to step out in faith, regardless of the circumstances. Sometimes we need to take a step without seeing any sign of support. In the Indiana Jones movie, the hero has to take a step out over a terrifying chasm. Only when he takes the step does a platform extend out to support him and prevent his certain death. Sometimes we're called upon to show up without being able to see the end result, like Jonah or Jesus' disciples.

Nancy and I learned to trust God in our storm many years ago, when we faced a child custody lawsuit from my ex-wife. It seemed so clear to us that my two children should be with us, in a stable home and learning to know the Lord Jesus; but there was a very real chance that a judge in another state, with no knowledge of us, would listen to the appeal of their mother for permanent custody. The state supreme court there had already overruled another judge's order to return our children to us until the custody case was heard. Everything was going wrong. The legal costs were horrendous. Our hearts were breaking. At times I felt as though I was drowning. But we went to our knees in prayer. We learned there not only to trust God, but to know him. We discovered in the weeks and months of praying and anguished waiting that God was there, that his people were there for us, and that he would be there for us and for our children, regardless of the outcome of the custody hearing. What lessons! There is no other way to learn.

I think we often have the incorrect view of God that when times are good, he is blessing us, and when times are bad, he is punishing us. That's the view articulated thoroughly by Job's friends. But at the end of that book, God declares that he is sovereign and has the right to do whatever he wishes, because he is the Creator. In the New Testament, we are given additional insight into God's purposes in our lives. Peter says in his first letter that "even gold passes through the assayer's fire, and more precious than perishable gold is faith which has stood the test. These trials come so that your faith may prove itself worthy of all praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Peter 1:7, NEB). So we see that these trials are part of God's eternal purpose for our lives. But, in order to trust God, we must believe that he is good. This is what Jonah testifies in chapter 4, verse 2.

In the intervening time, Jonah was saved; then he brought a message, not of salvation, but of destruction to the Ninevites. Their response was overwhelming. Every person believed the word of the Lord as proclaimed by Jonah, and everyone repented. I'm struck by the results. Jonah had a 100% conversion record, including the sailors he witnessed to. He did have a pretty impressive story to tell the Ninevites, and his appearance probably backed up his story. But 100%—that's quite a success. God was moved by their repentance, and in his goodness, decided not to bring destruction on the city.

But that mercy he showed to Nineveh was not what Jonah wanted. In fact, it made him angry. He complained to God:

"Please O Lord, was this not what I said when I was still in my own country? Therefore, in order to forestall it I fled to Tarshish; for I knew that Thou art a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity."
(4:2)

This testimony is taken directly from Exodus 34:6-8; however, there is more in Exodus. There is a "but" in Exodus 34:7:

“but one who punishes sons and grandsons to the third and fourth generation for the iniquity of their fathers!” Now if any fathers did iniquity, it was the Assyrians, whose capital was Nineveh. Of all people, they were the most wicked, and the most likely to deserve God’s curses instead of his blessings. Jehovah God is a God of justice, but the Bible teaches that his mercy is an even stronger quality. For example, Psalm 86:5 assures us, saying to God, “For Thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive, And abundant in lovingkindness to *all* who call upon Thee.”

‘Lovingkindness’ is that little word *hesed* (loyal love) which we hear so much in the Old Testament. We see now, though, that *hesed* means more than that. God had made no covenant with the Assyrians, no commitment to them to be loyal or loving. But out of his goodness comes his *hesed*, his lovingkindness, his wonderful love and compassion.

Jonah’s view of God, then, is scriptural and accurate. But he didn’t want God to be gracious and compassionate to Nineveh! He wanted God to destroy the place—and, from a worldly perspective, with good reason. In less than a hundred years, the Assyrians would defeat Israel, and carry most of them off to captivity. Did Jonah know that? As a prophet to Israel, he might have. Certainly, he would have known that Nineveh and the Assyrians represented a threat to Israel; and as a good, loyal citizen he wanted nothing to do with saving Nineveh. Twenty-eight centuries later, it has been easy to criticize Jonah for his lack of compassion, but consider the following scenario. Supposing you were a Jew living in Poland about the year 1900. God gave you a message of destruction to give to Berlin, Germany. But you, as a godly Jew, knew of God’s mercy and lovingkindness. And as a prophet, you knew what was coming—or at least had a fuzzy vision of the next forty years of some of the horrors of Nazi Germany. What would your response be? In that modern context, we might be more sympathetic to the dilemma facing Jonah. At the same time we see a little clearer the enormity of God’s mercy.

God has a further course of instruction for Jonah. However, we will continue to look at Jonah’s testimony of God’s goodness: of his grace and love, of his loyal love. The Old Testament teaches God’s goodness not only in words, but by his merciful and gracious actions. In spite of the rebellious and unloving response of his people Israel, he time and again responded to their cries for help with deliverance, a miracle, or a savior. His forbearance and gracious provision for them in the desert for forty years; his raising up of judges in the time after they came into the land of Canaan; his giving them his anointed king, David, all show God’s tender father’s heart and his loyal love.

God’s goodness is fully revealed in the person and work of his Son, Jesus. When Jesus announced his ministry, he said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, Because He anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor, He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the captives, And recovery of sight for the blind, to set free the oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18-19). What can be better for us who were entangled in sin—like the woman caught in adultery—than to be set free? Then, blinded to truth and living in darkness, now Jesus brings us light and sight, every bit as much as he did literally to the blind men he healed. He has promised us release from oppression and to give us a spiritual life of abundance. No one is or was better than our Lord Jesus, who showed us in his person what it means to be good, and in the

process, what it means that God is good.

God’s goodness wasn’t limited to showing us a bit of himself, and it isn’t limited to loyal love and deliverance to us today. He sent Jesus to the cross, showing in the most dramatic and loving act of all, his loyal love for us, who, like the Ninevites, do not deserve it. Because of that act, we will have an eternity to thank him, to be with him, and to live in incomprehensible joy. Jonah testifies to God’s character, and ultimately to the character of our Lord Jesus.

Jonah preached a message of doom—the destruction of Nineveh—but the Ninevites turned from evil and believed in Jehovah God. Jesus preached a message of reconciliation and life, but many find it difficult to believe him and accept God’s love. Remember that he spoke of the rejection that he faced, and that the men of Nineveh would call to account those who rejected him. Will you be one of those judged by the Ninevites on the last day? Are you more proud of your abilities than they? Or do you think you are too wicked to be saved by God’s mercy and grace? I assure you, you are not more so than were those ancient Assyrians, nor probably more so than the man or woman sitting next to you.

Jonah’s testimonies reveal the essence of God’s word to us: the book covers of creation, the theme of salvation, and his character of goodness and loyal love.

Consider again God’s creation. John 1:4 says, “All that came to be was alive with His life, and that life was the light of men.” God made us to be his children, living a life of joy because of his presence. Consider the salvation that is there for you. “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whoever believes in Him might not perish, but have eternal life. It was not to judge the world that God sent His son into the world, but that through Him, the world might be saved” (John 3:16-17). The salvation that he offers is not just deliverance in the present crisis, but forever. And he does love you. In Revelation 3:20, Jesus says: “I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and sit down to eat with him and he with me.” His invitation is gracious and loving. He is not offering an impersonal religion, but an ongoing, eternal relationship. The Creator, saving, loving God wants you to accept him today. Turn to him in response to his love and sacrifice for you. He loves you more than any earthly father. He asks only that you believe with a faith the size of a mustard seed. He promises to do the rest.

If you have not yet asked Jesus into your life and soul, I ask that you would pray now with me.

Dear Lord God, I confess that I am a sinner, that I am wicked, and undeserving of your mercy. I believe that Jesus your Son died on the cross for my sins, and I pray that you would accept that sacrifice for me as you have promised. I promise to follow Jesus where he leads me, trusting in you to provide the resources I desperately need to do so. Thank you, Father, for your acceptance of these new believers, for your gracious words to us, and for your answers to our prayers. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

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