

The Minor Prophets

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Minor Prophets - Introduction

God's Voice

The prophets were the voice of God.

While the priesthood was governed by genetics and genealogies, prophetism was pure grace. A man could become an officer in the temple by being a descendant of Levi or a son of Aaron, but to be a prophet required a personal call. What made a man a false prophet was simply this: they were not called. Jeremiah spoke of false prophets "The prophets prophesy lies in my name; I sent them not, neither have I commanded them" (14:14). To another false prophet Jeremiah said

"The LORD hath not sent thee but thou makest this people to trust in a lie" (28:15).

Truth is at the heart of the prophetic ministry. In the heart of every prophet was a message, a message from God. A priest could go through the motions of ministry, tending to affairs of the temple with a cold indifference, but a prophet was a man with passion that was based on a call and a personal experience with

God. Being a prophet required a passion for the truth. Jeremiah was a man with a "fire in [his] bones" (Jer. 20:9).

Priests were guided and governed by customs, rules, and ceremony. Their clothing, duties, and activities were calculated and predictable. There was no room or place for any diversion from prescribed tradition. This is not to say that the priest was any less in God's will than the prophet when each were in their ideal and most useful

state. Like a river, the priesthood stayed within its banks. The prophet had no such restraints or predictability about them. For the priest every day was the same. Each dressed, performed, and officiated with the predictability of a Catholic Mass. The prophets were as unpredictable as the weather. They might at any moment come like a storm or a flood and then just as quickly be gone. Prophets were called of God for special assignments and missions and they were selected out of any family or field of activity. They came in times of trouble. King Ahab addressed Elijah "Art thou he who troubleth

Israel?" (1Kings 18:17).

Prophet schools seemed to be an attempt to somehow channel this gift and calling, but God seemed to ignore such institutions. Prophets are not cultivated but called.

Priests operated by pattern. Prophets were one of a kind.

By the very nature of their mission to correct wrong thinking or behavior they ever seemed out of place, and out of step with the world they confronted. To go against popular sentiment often meant a prophet would suffer. To stand apart from the conventional often meant standing alone. Prophets were rare then and they are more rare today.

There is a profound misunderstanding about prophets. It is true that prophets were the vehicles of prediction, but that was not their main purpose. The "stock and trade" of the prophet was truth. They were not eschatological weather forecasters as much as reminders to stay on course. They were not the needle of the compass as much as men who stood at true moral north and vocally

called for integrity, and fidelity, and justice. They were visionaries in the sense that Paul spoke of when he said "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision" they seemed so

"other worldly."

Their authority was in the prophetic formula "thus saith the Lord."

Sometimes they would steady a trembling hand of a king (2Kings 13:16)

exercising a ministry of encouragement, and sometimes they would issue an indictment when monarches strayed or silenced all other voices. They were men of the hour and men of the moment. While they often mysteriously left traces of tomorrow like tracks on the road of today, they were always relevant. While they left a prophetic trail, sometimes

Messianic and sometimes apocalyptic, they always called for change or caution in the present.

Sometimes as small and precious things come wrapped in much paper and are protected in large boxes, the writings of the Prophets sometimes may appear to be little more than tissue paper cradling a single gem. Much of their words appear as historical packing paper carefully protecting the crystal treasures of eternity. Micah 5:2 is a diamond carefully supported by a thousand other words awaiting the query of Wise men seeking the location of the Christ child. In light of that temptation we must remember that every word is inspired. Yet some words do seem to shine more brightly than others. The single word "Bethlehem" is a jewel in the crown of prophecy. Many other verses are spiritual

landmarks beside a long path of truth that would bring men to God, or perhaps better said,

"bring God to man." While all Scripture is given by inspiration and is profitable.. some words are gold and some silver.

As when reading the parables of Jesus, we must be careful not to make bread from stones, and force a meaning from every detail, in reading the prophets we must be careful not to linger too long at wells that have no water. While all Scripture is inspired, it may be that a book has been placed in the eternal canon for a single word like "Bethlehem." It could also be that some words like wells are deeper than others.

There are hundreds of little lessons to learn from every text. We can learn about life, and about death. We are reminded about faith, hope, and love. We are called to integrity and to truth, but in all the words of the prophets there is one main purpose that must never be overlooked. Jesus spoke to the teachers of his day who thought they knew and understood the words of the prophets, but missed the most important thing. "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life; and they are they which testify of me" (Jn. 5:39).

In a sense every preacher is a prophet. While he might not have had a unique experience by some burning bush, he has been entrusted with the truth which he is called to carry in a dark world to help to light the way. He must faithfully carry that torch until God calls him to rest, and then rest assured, God will send another to lift it high again and carry it for another generation.

Prophecy is still a gift to the church in the sense that certain men are called of God to confront the world with

the truth. While every preacher must have a divine calling, and must have a "fire" in his soul so that he "cannot [help] but speak the things [he] has seen and heard" (Acts 4:20), not every preacher is a prophet (or has the gift of prophecy); but woe to the country or congregation that has no prophets among them. A land without a prophet is like a mind without a conscience. Yet wherever the

Holy Book is there is a prophet. To whoever dares to open its pages and read, the prophets speak. Twelve voices still cry out in the wilderness and still startle those they encounter. These are called The Minor

Prophets. They are called "minor," not because their message is unimportant, but simply because their words are few. Some of these men were teachers to the "so-called" Major prophets. These men spoke to their generation, but since their words were spiritual they speak to our generation as well.

Each prophet had a message to deliver to his generation. That was his first calling and holy errand, but in as much as the words were God's Word they speak to us still. There is more however. Every "would-be" preacher or teacher of God's

Word would do well to study these greats and learn what is involved in such a high calling. Like the twelve disciples, each of these ancient sages is different in tone and temperament. They have kept company through the ages and have stood side by side in the eternal canon of Scripture. They have served the Master well, and do still.

Two thousand years ago the Apostle

Paul stood before King Agrippa and pointed to the words of the prophets as the authority for his message about Christ. "King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest. Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian"

(Acts 26:27-28). When Jesus himself encountered the two disciples on the road to Emmaus he pointed to Moses and "all the prophets" (Lk.

24:27) as the standard by which to measure their experience. And in his story about Lazarus and the rich man, Jesus gave greater weight to the ministry of the prophets than to the raising of one from the dead.

"Nay, father Abraham; but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead"

(Lk. 16:30-31).

We must read and listen to the prophets still. In their words we find food for our faith. We also see the intensity with which God cares for his people and the integrity required to remain in his presence. When we open the Scriptures to study them or to proclaim them, remember the words of Jesus, "They speak of me."

Hosea - Prophet of Love

The Pharisees had only self-righteous contempt for Jesus when they observed the company he kept. Jesus was most often found in the midst of the common people. He was also a magnet to the most desperate of humanity and the most needy. "Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners," they asked his disciples. They had a distorted view of God which resulted in an aloofness, self-righteousness, and a disdain for others.

When Jesus heard their criticism he spoke of the sick needing the physician and then gave them spiritual homework. "go ye and learn what that meaneth, 'I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.'" (Matt. 9:13).

He quoted an Old Testament passage that should have sent them to the book of Hosea to find an answer. Hosea was the prophet of love.

Prophets are most often heard as they thunder with fearsome indignation; here was a prophet with little thunder, but much rain. He cried. If Psalm 22 is the Calvary of the Old Testament, Hosea is the Gethsemene. For as Jesus cried, and agonized in the garden for the life of Israel, so Hosea tells his story with a broken heart.

Hosea lived in the Northern Kingdom which misinterpreted its material success as being the pleasure of God. The rolling chariot wheels of Assyria would soon rumble across the northern plains of Armageddon as an instrument of providence to punish arrogance and infidelity. The prophets are proof that

God always warns before he punishes, and the eventual emptiness of the northern cities, as the population was lead away in chains is an historic evidence that God's word is true.

Hosea's story is a story of love. In it we see something of the love of God. To be sure there is much heart wrenching emotion involved for the prophet and broken-heartedness as a husband and father seeks to restore a prodigal wife and mother, but the love of the

Bible is deeper than emotion. Love is an act of the will.

See a man diligent in his business, says proverbs, "he will stand before kings." Hosea must have been diligent, for he stood before many Kings. They came and went, but he was the conscience of Israel crying out in the wilderness. He stood before at least eleven, Uzziah,

Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Jeroboam II, Zechariah, Shallum, Menahem, Pekahiah,

Pekah, and Hoshea who was at last carried away by the Assyrians.

"Go," said God. We have no way of knowing if the following words were written before Hosea's heart was broken or after. Perhaps he was as proud and in love with Gomer as you were the day you stood at your marriage altar. Perhaps Gomer still wore the pure white wedding gown of her innocence. Perhaps when he saw her on that wedding day, his heart leaped within him, perhaps his dreams, hopes and wishes were as wonderful and as large as yours. We don't know.

What we do know is that God had a covenant with Israel as a man has a marriage contract with the bride of his youth. What we do know is that marriage is the most

sacred of institutions, and the most fundamental of societies foundations. We are reminded in the story of Hosea and Gomer of our own vows at the marriage altar "What God hath joined together let no man put asunder."

Salvation is a sacred, holy, and eternal covenant. God has pledged himself to us with sacred promises. "I will never leave you, nor forsake you." Gomer might leave Hosea, but Hosea will never leave

Gomer. As a matter of fact, even though the marriage gave birth to disappointment (Lo-ruhamah, no pity; and Lo-ammi not my people) Hosea's love endured. Israel's infidelity has given birth to many sad children.

But the lesson is that God keeps his word and is faithful. He promised that the blood spilled by a vengeful Jehu would be revenged. Though it took a hundred years, God's word could not help but be so.

Marriage is a promise. Do you take this man to be your lawful wedded husband? Do you promise to keep yourself for him forsaking all others? Do you promise to honor and respect him, to love and to cherish and follow him till death desolve these sacred vows? One day,

Gomer said "I do." We shall never know why Gomer wandered from her vows, nor why she broke so many hearts. We shall never know what weakness of flesh, and spirit took hold of her.

What I do know is that God loved me when I was yet in trespasses and in sins. What I do know is that I never deserved to be called by him or be the object of his love. What I do know is that in me

"that is in my flesh there dwelleth no good thing." Jesus sought me when a stranger and brought me to his

banqueting table. What I do know is that I was not, and am not beautiful, yet he loved me and gave himself for me.

Nothing is more tragic than to see someone forsake their marriage vows. Let him who would crown himself the innocent party look deeper. And let him who thinks the exception clause is cause enough to sever the sacred cords read Hosea and weep. Let him hear the words of Jesus, "I would have mercy and not sacrifice." Let us all wonder how God could love us so.

"Plead" said Hosea. So I plead with you this day, "be reconciled to God."

These abandoned children become the victims of infidelity. They become, as so many are become today, little emissaries relegated to shuttle diplomacy, bringing messages in broken hearts. "Plead with your mother." Oh how God pleaded with Israel, and oh the shameful places God's Word found her with her lovers, but she would not listen.

This is not a picture of the church, for the Church is yet the Virgin.

This is an old Testament prophet speaking to Israel. However, individually the pleadings can be applied to many a prodigal who has become mad with unbridled arrogance, and backslidden through neglect, forgetting their first love.

We need to be faithful. We need not wander away from out first love, the Lord Jesus.

"Plead with you mother," wrote the prophet. And so prophets still plead with any prodigal who is breaking

God's heart. And plead with any who are in danger of going out into eternity "Pitiless" and

"Not His Children" to come in faith and be born again. Repent of your sin, and trust Jesus Christ as your only Savior and enter into an eternal covenant that God shall never break.

To understand such a love is strange to our modern mind. Likewise, hate is also an act of the will. Thus when we read the

"Jacob have I loved, and Esau have I hated" we see sovereignty and not sentimentality. When the Bible says "For God so loved the world..." it is not speaking about emotion but a sovereign choice and will.

But none the less, the love of Hosea for Gomer is heart-breaking, and the lessons are eye-opening.

To read of Gomer is to read the story of the prodigal daughter. "I will go after my lovers" (2:5) She did not realize that it was God who gave her corn, wine and oil (v.8). We are all in danger of biting the hand that feeds us. And like the prodigal son, we may indeed come to "want." Luke tells of the lad finally coming to his senses and realizing that things were much better at the father's house. "I will arise and go to my father." In Hosea we read, " I will go back to my husband again; I was better off with him than I am now" (v.2: 7).

Gomer is a figure of Israel. She forgot that every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father of light's. Israel also entered into a love affair with the world, or at least, its nations. She became unfaithful. As infidelity has cut the deepest wounds in the human heart, so God's heart bleeds from the gaping wounds inflicted by

the wantonness of his children. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem," cried Jesus as he wept over the city of David.

Like the prodigal son, Gomer had many friends while she was seemingly successful, but when her situation took a turn for the worse she found herself alone and destitute. The prodigal son "spent all" and his friends left him. God would take away everything from Israel to the extent that no one would want her. Historically this was the case, not once, but twice. The first time was when Samaria fell, the second time was when Jerusalem fell to the armies of Titus and remained a forsaken waste land for centuries until 1947. Although Israel had been the crossroads between Egypt and the Orient no one seemed interested in her parched and blowing sands until the Jews of the diaspora returned to make the desert blossom like a rose, but that is getting too far ahead of the immediate story.

"Therefore I will take back my corn at the harvest and my new wine at the vintage, and I will take away the wool and the flax which I gave her to cover her naked body, I will show her up for the lewd thing she is, and no lover will want to steal her from me." (vs 2:9-10). Beauty can be an awful curse when it attracts temptation like ointment does flies. The rich and powerful likewise have many (false) friends. The lesson of drought and famine had to be learned and relearned from generation to generation. Again and again

God's people have been heard to say "It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes." (Ps. 119:71).

"I will give her... the valley of Achor for a door of hope" (2:15)

Achor means "trouble." Many a saint can testify that the valley of trouble became a door of hope. Some sickness, some sorrow, some tragedy or defeat became the ashes from which victory would arise.

Are you in the valley of Achor? Look for the door of hope. Has God allowed some pain? There is a sacred portal hidden in that wilderness, step up to that threshold and pass through.

Hosea's story is full of grace. Even though Gomer is despicable in conduct and corrupt in character God is merciful in compassion. "I will block her road with thorn-bushes and obstruct her path with a wall" (v. 6). Some seem to be on good ground when they encourage husbands and fathers to "pray a hedge of thorns" around those exposed to danger or prone to wander. Better that a son should prick his finger while reaching for some worldly rose and recoil in pain for a moment, than to be in a coffin covered with flowers a spiritual corpse dead in trespasses and in sins. Wesley wrote a song for the church about the church, "prone to wander, Lord I feel it prone to leave the God I love." What a horrible tendency and what a legacy. There is some of Gomer in every one of us.

Pray that the needles will be sharp enough to keep us from pushing through the thicket, but realize that a seared conscience feels no pain. Grace will build a wall and a way, but grace will not keep Eve from taking the fruit if she pulls hard enough upon the branch.

Gomer was drawn into physical, emotional, and spiritual waywardness. She would be punished for her wanton pilgrimages and new moon practices and un-holy days. The timepiece of the heavens moved with flaming orbs

and awesome lights. One of the balance wheels in this heavenly clock was the moon. It was the first sun dial and traces the shadow of the earth upon its surface. It is not without significance that the woman's menstrual cycle mimics the lunar one and unholy religions employed priestesses in unseemly rituals. Whether she was so engaged when

Hosea first set eyes on her, or if she was later led astray by her unfaithful heart has been the subject of speculation for ages. Our curiosity misses the point of the story, for Hosea did what God asked and his broken heart would teach us the meaning of mercy if we are willing to learn.

If Hosea could forgive Gomer, who can we not forgive?

Hosea is the classic example of using the tragedy of domestic disappointment and the pain of personal experience as a pulpit to proclaim a redemptive message of Grace. God does not promise we will escape misery, but that He can transform it.

The fact that he married Gomer with or without knowing of her moral deficiencies is not as important as the fidelity of his love for her. Most who read the story of Hosea stumble over the strange nuptial agreement.

Did this man of God knowingly yoke himself with a soiled soul? Was Gomer deceptive? Was Hosea naive? Such curiosity is a waste for it confines us to examining the shallows when God wants us to launch out into the deep.

When life seems to have dealt us a losing hand we have several options. We can become bitter, small, and callous, or we can use each disappointment as a vehicle

to carry the message of God's grace to others. Hosea has a life's message that made beauty from ashes. The sensitive soul can find a sermon in every disappointment and discover gold in every mountain of trouble. The Apostle Paul understood this call to grace when he said "Most gladly, therefore, will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me."

Hosea had a prophetic message for Israel, but he also has a message for us today. One addresses a particular problem, the other expresses a principle. One is for time the other is for eternity. Each of us has our own disappointments. Each of us has seen some hope, dream, or expectation become sick and perhaps even die. We might have even sent word to Jesus like Mary and Martha only to find that He did not come in time.

It could be that from the depths of the sepulcher of sorrow grace calls forth glory. Then when some tragedy turns to triumph, men know and praise

God.

Message to God's People

"Plead with your mother" God wants his people back. God wants backsliders and prodigals to come home. God employs every means and endures every indignity while proving his love. Every sin has its consequence and Israel like Gomer will drink bitter waters and earn many sorrows, yet God loves us still.

Jesus would cry in his own day "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I would have gathered thee. But you would not." Later too, John would pen the sad words to a Church and a people he once pastored, "you have lost your first love." Good preaching touches the heart of the

prodigal who will respond as God would desire "Then shall she say, I will go and return to my first husband; for then was it better with me than now" (Hos. 3:7b, Lk 15:17)

The Message to Preachers

"Go, love..." The preacher or teacher of God's Word is on an errand of love. The message of the Gospel begins with a message of love. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son..." Paul said it well when he wrote "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profiteth me nothing"(Cor 13:1-3). If Hosea teaches the preacher anything, he teaches the necessity of love. No Bible teacher can accomplish anything of spiritual value without love. No Sunday School teacher can make a lasting impact, or effect a positive change in the lives of his students without love. Love never fails.

Hosea teaches us about the love of God and love for God. Love is a covenant and a choice. God does not stop payment on his checks. Israel gave God every excuse to dissolve his contract with them.

Although broken hearted, love keeps its vows. Marriage is an indissoluble life-relationship and used as an example of God's fidelity. "Husbands, love your wives even as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it."

A man is well on his way to being a great preacher and teacher if he takes his Bible in hand and the world in heart, heeding the instructions of God "Go, love....".

Joel - Prophet of Pentecost

decisions

Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision.

That is where we all live, in the valley of decision. We are living between the mountains of today and tomorrow. Where we will spend eternity is decided in this valley.

Joel spoke of the "day of the

Lord." Today is the day of man. It is the day of sin, and suffering, and sorrow. We would do well to remember that when we look around at world conditions. It is the day of man. It is the day of war and rumors of wars. It is the day of pollution, toxic waste, nuclear contamination, and the day of destruction. It is the day of immorality, of AIDS, and crime and corruption. It is the day of man.

Around us we see what are consequences of decisions man has made. God's day is coming. That will be the day of light, and truth, and peace. That will be a day of health and happiness. That will be a day of judgment and justice. It will be a day that man's fate is forever fixed. It will be for some a day of joy, for others a day of dread. For some it will be one of reward, for other restitution. It will be an awful day of great finality. someone wrote:

"I dreamed that the great judgment morning had come and the trumpet had blown. I dreamed that the nations had gathered in judgment around the great white throne."

That day is coming.

The day of the Lord will be the time when God will sort out, examine and judge. It is a day fixed in the secrets of eternity and the heart of God. This "day of the

Lord" has been the object of scorn, laughter, and ridicule by sinners, but that does not stop God's time piece from ticking ever closer to that day. God's word will come to pass. It is the great day.

It will be a time when a voice from heaven will call for all to assemble themselves (Rev. 20:11-12). There will be the final exam when the books will be opened, and all will be judged. Jesus spoke of this day. "And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate one from the other as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats" (Matt.

25:32). All the scriptures point to that coming day. "It is appointed unto men once to die and after that the judgment" Heb.

9:27. "But the heavens and the earth which are now, by the same word kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men" 2Pet. 3:7. " Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints to execute judgement upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of their ungodly deeds which they have committed, and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him" Jude 14-15. A final day is coming for man, and time shall be swallowed up in the eternity of God.

How men shall stand on that day will be determined not then but now.

Today we will make the decision that decides that day.

What will happen on that day will not be determined by God (although, for Him the future is already as passed), it will be determined by us now. We are multitudes, multitudes passing through the valley of decision.

The church is simply a valley of decision. Each Sunday morning multitudes make decisions that will determine their destiny. The school classroom is a valley of decision every morning. Countless numbers of children make the choices that will determine their eternal destiny. The marketplace is a place where a million little choices will be made, and each one will have its effect on the ages. Each dollar spent brings us closer or farther away from God. A man's life is the sum total of the choices he makes. From the type of clothes we wear, to what we eat, to where we work or worship all contribute to the person we will be when we stand before the accounting on the great day of the Lord.

Joel saw two armies come face to face in the valley of Jehosaphat. One was good, the other evil. He had a vision of the great and ultimate battle known to us from another place as the battle of Armageddon. It is the final great facing off of light and darkness. The book of the Revelation paints an awful picture of that day. The outcome of that battle will decide if evil triumphs over good.

Of course it will not. That was demonstrated at the cross. Yet men who refused to believe the cross was a conflict of truth against error shall stand helpless on their own judgment day when they stand facing the truth alone. When a sinner's sins come riding to meet them on judgment day like a blood-thirsty mongol hoard and cover the horizon like a plague of locusts, the sinner

will forget about fighting, and simply drop their sword of pretension before such an ugly army of their own deeds and thoughts.

In a vision, Joel saw that great day and sounded an alarm. There have been many others who have read Joel's words and have become alarmed enough to "blow the trumpet"

and call for a "solemn assembly" 3:15.

The coming of the Lord will be a day of great victory for the righteous, yet even they should tremble at the day reckoning, and be concerned for the lost. "Alas for the day! for the day of the Lord is at hand, and as a destruction from the Almighty shall it come. Is not the meat cut off before ours eyes, yea, joy and gladness from the house of our

God?" (1:15.) Joel was not sure what he was seeing. When a prophet gazed through an open window of eternity, time became confused.

There are many little judgment days in history. Joel saw some of those lesser as well as the greater and final day.

While we will not always understand what God shows us, we always believe it. Explaining judgment is not as important as preparing for it. "Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in my holy mountain: Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble: for the day of the LORD cometh, for it is nigh at hand."

In 1915 there was an enormous locust plague that swept across Palestine. National Geographic described it in great detail. It was like reading a chapter out of Joel. Students should not spend too much time studying the insects nor waste an inordinate amount of time trying to

determine when was Joel's birthday or what king was in office. These are but chaff that God has allowed to blow away; he has left the wheat.

History teaches us that destiny can turn on the narrow axis of a single decision. It has been said that in every life there is a turning point as with a fever when it

"breaks." A single turning point can make the difference between life and death. Napoleon said "in every battle there are ten minutes on which hangs the fate of nations." A wrong or delayed decision at Appomatox lost the American Civil War for General Lee.

The greatest battle fields are in the heart. Hundreds of these soul battles are won or lost in a moment. They turn our hearts into the valley of decision. While these battles are for the most part silent, swift, but furious, they determine your destiny.

The choice you make decides.

One army will be victorious. One will be defeated. Only one army will come out alive from the valley of decision. What comes out of those valleys of decision?

1. Character.

Character is that stamp of individuality that gives you worth, that gives you backbone. It is that thing that molds and shapes us and gives substance to our being. Every time we choose what God likes and hate what God hates we develop godly character and come closer to our destiny. Every time we agree with God we develop character. "Come now let us reason together saith the Lord..." God the Holy

Spirit "pleads" with men in this valley. (Isa. 55: 1-7;

Dan. 1:8).

2. Happiness or Misery.

Happiness is a choice. It is determined by our own decisions. Happiness is to know the Lord. "Happy is the people whose God is the

Lord" Ps. 144:15. "Whoso trusteth the Lord, happy is he" Prov. 16:20. Jesus taught the emotional consequences of our choices. "If ye know these things, happy are ye if you do them." Oceans of tears have been shed because men and women made choices that were contrary to God's will. All such choices are bad choices. The valley of tears is the valley of wrong decisions.

3. Change or Chains.

Here we decide whether we will change or not. God calls us to repent. If a man instead refuses to renounce his sin it shall be the shackle that binds him forever. John later wrote the words of an angel, "let the filthy be filthy still." It is here in the valley of decision that Grace allows us to slip the manacles of Satan's chains off our necks. Here men have shed the scales of sinful practices, and dropped their leprous robes. Here men have chosen Christ who had unloosed them from their sin.

4. Heaven or hell.

Some say that hell is right here. They speak of their troubles and speak in unbelief. Those who stubbornly refuse to believe the witness of God's word will find that it is at death that their troubles just begin. Jesus died on the cross for you. Don't reject him in the valley of decision.

"Today if you hear his voice, harden not your heart." "He came unto his own, and his own received him not."

"Neither is there salvation in any other."

Preachers and Teachers

Many think of the Holy Spirit and the anointing of Pentecost when they think of Joel. An anointing is required to minister and to be ministered to in holy things. The Holy Spirit is the author of prophecy. Unless the Holy Spirit established contact, approached, prepared, anointed and empowered the prophet there would have been no prophetic ministry.

The Third Person of the Trinity must anoint in order for a prophet to first receive and then relay the mind of God. God explained to Zechariah how his work must be done: "not by might nor by power but by my Spirit" (Zech. 4:6). Elisha understood the need of such a work of God and anointing when he asked for a "double portion" of Elijah's "spirit."

Ezekiel told of the time when "the spirit took me up" (Ezk

3:12), and John spoke of "being in the

Spirit on the Lord's day."

Peter made it clear that God communicated thorough his prophets "Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2Pet. 1:21). The word moved comes from the root phero which means to be "carried along." Zechariah spoke of this anointing "the words which the LORD of hosts hath sent in his Spirit by the former prophets"

(7:12).

The anointing of the prophets was never solicited by the prophet, but rather always initiated by God. God speaks through His word now forever settled. Today we have the completed

Word of God. The prophet today is one who is anointed by the Holy Spirit first with insight to understand truth, and second to boldly and uncompromisingly proclaim it.

The anointing of Old Testament

Prophecy or of New Testament preaching is never to be confused with superstitious spiritism. The words of Deuteronomy are clear enough. "When thou art come into the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not learn to do after the abominations of those nations. there shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or a cunsulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination unto the LORD: and because of these abominations the LORD thy God doth drive them out from before thee"

(18:9-12).

The people were to look to the prophet not to divination for guidance. The test of the prophet was simple. Is what he says true? It is the only standard by which we can measure safely, and we know that God's Word is truth. "These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so" Acts 17:11.

The anointing was not only unsolicited, it was unstimulated. By that I mean it was not something that was "worked up." It was not the result of incantations, music, prayer, or self hypnosis. Little Samuel did not seek the voice of the Lord in the Temple, nor did he lose his rational abilities when in the presence of the LORD. Spiritists and other charlatans pretend to be in some kind of hypnotic trance while supposedly communing with the

"spirits." We do not know whom they are actually communing with, but we can be sure it is not God.

Nowhere does the Scripture substantiate an anointing with losing control of either body, mind, or tongue. The anointing is an empowering by the God of order. While in times past God communicated through dreams, visions, and appearances called Theophanies, today we have the completed Bible. We may be the recipients of insights as individuals, but not of revelations. Today, the just shall live by faith.

Amos - Prophet of Justice

"Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness as a mighty stream."

Every prophet has a burden in his heart. A religion that is confined to rites and rituals and incense burns the eyes of the

Almighty if they are not offered on the altars of compassion and translated into acts of charity on those around us. Injustice had so contaminated the land that Amos (which means "burdened") could remain silent no more.

A religion that steps over the bleeding bodies of the oppressed and wounded is an abomination to the Lord. The Savior told the story of the Good Samaritan as to prick their complacent consciences that were at ease on Zion. Every saint should have a burden; yet, the

God who gives the burden will also give the grace and strength to carry it.

When God wanted a voice crying in this wilderness of indifference and idolatry he chose neither priest nor professional, he chose a shepherd and farmer named Amos. Amos grew up learning the ways of the wilderness and lived close to the simple earth.

America was once a nation of farmers. No farmer can truly be an atheist. If you should find one, you have found a fool. A farmer is often a man of faith. He understands faith, hope and love. He looks to the soil for his livelihood, but he also looks to God. He is at the mercy of the elements. The heavens have the final word

about the harvest. If it does not rain, if his crops do not grow, if the sun fails to shine, all his labor is in vain. An agricultural society is more likely to pray than an industrial one. America has prayed less and less as it turned from the fields to the foundries. Amos lived close to the earth and closer to God. Industrial affluence can also lead to social insensitivity and indifference. Prosperity becomes a sin when it is built upon the backs of oppressed classes of our fellow creatures and becomes to God an outrage. What contacts Amos had with society so grieved him that his heart was broken and he cried out for justice. "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness as a mighty stream."

Are you without a burden? Should we not have a burden for the ignorant and desire to teach them? Should we not have a burden for the hungry and wish to feed them? Should we not have a burden for the homeless and want to shelter them? He who is closest to God will have the greatest burden about the needs of others. Women are exploited, the unborn are aborted, innocent children are abused. The poor are extorted, our youth are ensnared, the land is polluted and ravaged.

Should we not have a burden for the lost? Some have wondered what constitutes a call from God. Be assured, God does not call the indifferent. God called to Samuel three times before he discovered it was God who was speaking. Perhaps the first sound of God's voice in your life will be felt more than heard; perhaps it will begin with a broken heart or a burden.

1. Prepare to meet thy God (4:12). Life is a time of getting ready. We are all on a journey as transients on the road to eternity. Yet people are oblivious to the

destination and destiny. "It is appointed unto man once to die and after that the judgment" (Heb.

9:27).

2. All must stand at God's judgment bar. Damascus, Hazeel, Edom, Gaza will all answer and give an account for their behavior. Notice they will be condemned in the memory of their deeds.

Our deeds are enough to condemn us. The sins of Tyre were many. Jesus mentioned this city as a proof of God's judgment coming on cities of

His day. The sin mentioned by Amos was in not remembering the brotherly covenant (1:9). Have we also been guilty of this sin? Have we failed treat our fellow man with kindness and charity? Have we brushed aside our obligations and ignored the needs of our neighbors? Have we failed to love our neighbor as our self? The answer must be that we have, and with that admission must come a repentance and a resolve to become an instrument of God's grace.

The sin of Edom was that he "kept his wrath forever." The children of Esau could never forget the loss to Jacob. The Edomites carried the fire of anger in their heart for centuries. They never missed an opportunity to be unkind to the sons of

Jacob. Have we kept certain resentments alive as so many Edomites in our heart? Do we hold a grudge toward anyone we feel took what was ours? If we do, we are in poor company, the company of Edom.

The sins of Ammon are also very much alive in our land today. They "ripped up the women with child.... that they

might enlarge their borders" (that is, improve their lifestyle)

(1:13). Today doctors rip up women with child for material gain, and mothers willingly allow the pagan priests of the temples of medicine to enter their most private and sacred parts, the temple of life, in order to mutilate and ravage the innocents. What an abomination of desolation is the practice of abortion. Our nation and world is being built upon the bones of a million babies a day, and what a foundation of hell that is. Such a foundation cannot support civilization much longer. It will soon collapse under the weight of its own evil.

Amos had warnings for Judah as well as the gentile.

Judah would not be spared God's judgment. They were given God's law and they failed to keep it. "Unto whom much is given much is required." Not only did they fail to keep it, they despised it.

It is one thing to fall short of it, it is quite another to trample upon it. No man ever kept the law. It is impossible, but woe to those who tread upon holy things; they should tremble.

3. Finally, Amos gets close to home. Real prophets always do. He judges his own people. It is easy to see the sins of others while we are blind to our own. We are always trying to get the speck out of the other man's eye not realizing that we have a beam in our own. The sin of Israel was that of harboring false doctrine. It seems obvious to the student of Jewish history that Israel was guilty of setting up a false religion when the altars were erected in Dan and

Bethel. This counter-worship was a grievous sin of folly. False religions and churches still abound, yet the charge brought before the bar of righteousness points to the more practical and common evidence of phony religion. They "sold the righteous for silver, and poor for a pair of shoes" (2:6). Here is exploitation and oppression.

Here is inequity and lack of charity. The sins were also a perversion of sex and profanity. The sin of the land was the addiction of drunkenness.

God sent Amos to cry out against evil and indifference, violence, and vileness.

America should see her reflection in these muddy waters, drunkenness, drug addiction, immorality, pornography, extortion, greed, and materialism. Where is Amos today? Who is burdened at the sights that parade before them? Who has a broken heart for the children, the women, the poor, and the addicted?

The church remains strangely quiet while God must weep. The church has become too accustomed to the darkness because it has not lived in the light. Pray for God to send a prophet, a preacher, a teacher, an Amos.

"You gave Nazarites wine to drink"(2:12).

God gave Israel children that they might live before God in thanksgiving and holiness. Some were to be given as a "tithe" to the service of the Lord by their parents as Hannah gave little Samuel. How many Christian parents have made promises to God as their babies were

"dedicated" and vowed to bring them up in the "fear and admonition of the Lord" only to forget those words. How many allow the babes to press cups filled with the wine of worldliness to their lips? TV with its addictive trance-

like power has intoxicated millions of children with selfishness, greed, materialism, commercialism, sexism, and hedonism to the point where they are drunk in the presence of the parents that bore them.

Worldly preachers preach worldliness (2:12) and parishioners love to have it so. Jesus called it the "blind leading the blind" and predicted that they both will "fall in the ditch." The weight of transgressions pressed down the cart drawn by Amos who, as a farmer, knew well the burden of bringing the harvest to market.

The whole family is called into account by the

Father. "Only you have I known of all the families of the earth" (3:1). The privilege of Israel was one of incalculable worth and yet they treated it with disdain.

"I will punish you for your iniquities"(3:2). God will punish all sin and sinners, but most grievous is the punishment of rebellious children. But punish

God will. Those who use Grace as a stronghold to hide from God are in for a shocking surprise. No one, not even a child, will escape the correction of the Father. And to all who refuse to accept God's counsel, pleading, and guidance is this most important question posed: "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" The answer is always

"no." The dawning of this truth upon our darkness should call everyone to repentance (which is "agreeing" with God). He who is in disagreement with God must walk alone, Godless. He who disagrees with heaven may only hope for hell, and nothing more.

Judgment is coming and the Lord has revealed it to his prophets (3:7). These prophets see the setting of the snares (3:5)

and the sound of the trumpets (3:6) though everyone else is blind and deaf. God will tear Israel to shreds. She shall be like a leg taken out of the mouth of a lion. God is serious. We should be serious too.

For Modern Preachers & Teachers

A Prophet was called a ro'eh and a hozeh.

Both come from roots which mean "to see." Prophets were seers.

They were not psychics like the false prophets of today. While many indeed had visions and "experiences," it is safe to say that they had great "insight" into the significance and meaning of events and circumstances of life. In this regard the preacher of our day must have "insight" more than foresight. He must have the gift of discernment and have a spiritual intuition in order to navigate through the shallow waters of this world.

Prophets were also called 'ish elohim a man of God. What value is the preacher who is not such a one? While we believe all believers to be priests, not all men are prophets (Deut.

33:1; 1 Sam. 9:6; II Kings 4:9).

A third word for a prophet is nabhi' which is thought to come from the verb nabha' which some say meant to "bubble up." Some say the etymology is linked to the Akkadian word nabu which means "to speak." A prophet is one who is "spoken to" and one who "speaks for God." The study of the call of a prophet helps us to understand

the significance and role of a prophet. Moses objected to this calling on the basis of his inability to speak well (Ex. 4:10-16). Moses would be given Aaron as a "mouth" and Moses would be the "mouth" for God. In

Ex. 7:1 God said "And Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet" (nabhi). In other words, a prophet is one who speaks for another. The ministry of the prophet is to speak God's word. "I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren like unto thee (Moses), and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him" Deut. 18:15-22.

Being a spokesman for God is clearly seen in the life of Amos. He was sent to Bethel to speak against the altar erected there.

The priest of Bethel challenged and attempted to silence Amos. "Oh thou seer, go, flee thee away into the land of Judah and there eat bread and prophesy there: but prophesy not again any more at Bethel; for it is the king's sanctuary and it is the king's court." Amos was not easily dissuaded and replies "I was no prophet, neither was

I a prophet's son; but I was an herdman, and a gatherer of sycamore fruit; and the LORD took me as I followed the people, and the LORD said unto me, Go, prophesy unto my people Israel" Amos 7:12-16.

Our generation is just as prone to wander as the ancient ones and Christian congregations are as likely to need correction and guidance as did Israel. Preachers are as likely to be pressured to accommodate the capricious children of today as in days of old and should be forewarned. Isaiah found his congregations often offered unsolicited advice "That this is a rebellious people, lying

children, children that will not hear the law of the LORD; which say to the seers, See not; and to the prophets, prophesy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophesy deceits"

Isa. 30:9-10.

People have not changed much. Congregations still would rather hear

"feel-good" messages rather than truth if that truth is painful and calls for a change. Real prophets must deliver God's message. It is a mistake to think that God only has "Good

News" today. Hirelings and amateurs seldom deliver heavy packages to their own door. Hirelings are naturally cautious when it comes to being too critical of their employer. While amateurs may not preach for money (as many a preacher has been so accused) they often preach and teach for fun. When it is no longer fun they look for more enjoyable things to occupy themselves with. A prophet and a preacher must sometimes speak out of a burdened heart, and Oh to God, that the people might listen.

Obadiah - Prophet of Poetic Justice

Childbirth is always a painful experience. Jacob's birth was no exception. Jacob was a twin who struggled in the womb and, but for an unfortunate placement would have been before his brother Esau. Jacob seemed to "grasp" the heel of his companion and thus began life with a tarnished testimony. Jacob and Esau were different in appearance and temperament. One seemed to be of the earth, the other of heaven. Their lives epitomize the antagonism the flesh has for the spirit. It also demonstrated the incompatibility of the spiritual soul with the carnal. Esau sold his birthright, and, even with tears, could not find repentance.

Jacob became a father of Israel, Esau of Edom. The hostility of these two peoples continued from generation to generation. They were to the Old Testament, what the Samaritans were to the New.

The Edomites settled in the naturally protected mountains south of the dead sea. They refused the Israelites passage through their territory as they tried to make their way to the promised land (Num. 20:14). This was an unkindness that Judah would never forget. Edom struggled with Israel throughout history as it fluctuated between political submission and rebellion.

After the destruction of Jerusalem by

Nebuchadrezzar, they were settled in Southern Judah in what the Greeks called Idumaea. An Idumaeen was later named by Julius Caesar Procurator of Judah in 47BC. His son would become King of Judah in 37BC. This

Edomite, a member of a hated and despised race of people, enemies of

Israel, and once a reluctant tributary under David, was named Herod, and known to us as Herod the Great.

Edom means "red" so named for the color of the earth in the region. Adam also means

"red." Just what, if any spiritual significance, is hidden in this coincidence is unclear, but there are still Adamites and Edomites that will attempt to block our passage into the promised land, offer no assistance, and is no "friend of grace."

Obadiah is the first and earliest writing Prophet who delivers a message to Edom. Dating this letter is difficult. Some of the best scholars give it an early date, others a later one. It was written sometime between 845BC (2Chron. 21:16-17) and shortly after 587BC (destruction of Jerusalem). But since prophecy is often like a "wheel within a wheel," the allusion to Jerusalem's plight may include both events. While a prophet's message may be delivered in the context of historical circumstances the implications are spiritual, timeless, and eternal.

There were three occasions that Judah was overrun by enemies. The first was during the reign of Jehoram (853-841) the despicable son of Jehoshaphat. God removed his protective hedge from the realm of this murderous king and the Philistines,

Arabians and Ethiopians sacked the city. Edom was in rebellion at this time (2Chron. 21:10) and must have rejoiced in such a spectacle.

The second occasion was during the reign of Ahaz (743-715BC) spoken of in 2Chron. 28:18. The third occasion was when Jerusalem fell in 586BC before the armies of Nebuchadnezzar.

It was not during the reign of Ahaz since the city itself was not breached on that occasion. It was not the last since that exceeded in devastation the picture drawn by Obediah.

Placing Obediah's ministry during the days of Jehoram explains the seriousness of the message. Jehoram married Athaliah the daughter of Jezebel and Ahab. He killed all his brothers when he ascended to the throne. Upon his death, and his son's deaths by the hand of Jehu, Athaliah killed her own grandchildren to insure her own place on the throne. It was in such a dark hour as this that God speaks, first by Elijah and Elisha, and now by Obediah. That this first prophetic message was directed toward Edom and not Israel is most curious. That he did not also thunder against the house of Jeroboam and later Athaliah is impossible to prove, yet the eternal record of God's

Word immediately addresses a foreign nation. Since "all Scripture is given by inspiration, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness," we can be sure there is a message to us as well as to Edom.

1. That a Prophet, sees, hears, goes, and warns is clear from the beginning (v.1). In another place we are told that "holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy

Ghost." Thus is the ministry of preacher and prophet in every age. The prophetic formula contains all the authority and the power to make the message effectual, "thus saith the LORD." The work of the shepherd is to feed the sheep, but the earnest need is still to preach to the "heathen." We are still being hindered and mocked by Edom, who glories in the Church's calamities.

2. Pride deceives its victims. "The pride of thine heart hath deceived thee" (v. 3). Edom as well as all we Adamites are proud and haughty. Edom built its city in the high, almost impregnable heights of the red stone of Petra. But those impressive fortress dwellings were not beyond the reach of a hand from heaven. The question, "Who shall bring me down to the ground?" was about to be answered by Jehovah. Ants have no idea how small they really are. They scamper around in their world, oblivious to those who tower over them. Ants fill their lives with crumbs that fall from poor men's tables, unaware that there is plan greater than themselves.

"Behold, I have made thee small..."(v.2). This would be a good lesson for each of us to learn. "I have made thee small among the heathen." Pride is the sin that so easily besets us. Pride is the virus to which man is so easily susceptible. Much of Edom is in every man. This evil spirit attempts to "exalt itself and set its nest among the stars."

This little letter is in harmony with the first beatitude: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." One of the greatest enemies to salvation and to the advancement of the spiritual life is that of pride.

It is not insignificant that the first sin condemned by the prophets is this insidious moral malady. "Humble

yourself, under the mighty hand of God, and He will lift you up" (1Pet. 5:6).

Be sure your sins will find you out.

Sin is not something soon forgotten. The sins of Esau seemed to live long after he was buried. The result of sin is felt from generation to generation. That is why it is imperative that they must be sought out, confessed and forsaken. Esau set out cursed by his own rejection of holy things. He became a hunter and a wild man. His descendants made their way to the cliffs of Petra, yet they still carried the sin of Esau.

What secret sins will be exposed in your life when God visits your comfortable fortress? What "hidden things" will God reveal? No person, or people can hide from God.

"Be sure you sins will find you out."

3. We reap what we sow. Esau not only sold himself, he missed an opportunity to assist his brother Israel as the refugees from Egyptian slavery tried to make it to the promised land. That act of unkindness would reap an awful harvest. "Many have entertained angels unawares." Perhaps someone will seek shelter in your inn, remember the inn keeper of Bethlehem before you send them away.

On another occasion they stood by and watched as Jerusalem was over run, and rejoiced. "But thou shouldest not have looked on the day of thy brother in the day that he became a stranger; neither shouldest thou have rejoiced over the children of Judah in the day of their destruction; neither shouldest thou have spoken proudly in the day of distress" (v. 12).

Beware the temptation of gloating when your enemies stumble. Even if their calamity be the hand of God falling on them in judgment, it is better to think "There go I, but for the grace of God."

Obadiah gives the formula for the worst of all judgments upon a man: "as thou hast done, it shall be done unto thee." Jesus put this law of life in a more useful form when He said "Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you." This most golden of rules is a two edged sword. It will bring either joy or sadness depending on how we use it.

There is a little phrase in verse 17 that is rich with wisdom as well as hope, "Jacob shall possess [his] possessions." God will one day heal that which he has allowed to be broken. Judah, though crushed and scattered throughout the world will one day change its tune from lamentations to joy and shall "possess its possessions." But what does it mean to possess ones possessions? Most go through life never redeeming their birthright. Like

Jacob they clasp tightly to the text and deed, but never realize their inheritance. Many a rich man has his library shelves filled with un-read books. Many a man lives in a shack thinking himself poor while he sits upon a "Mother-load" of gold. Many a man is given a brain but fails to use it, opportunity but fails to take it, time and fails to invest it. They live like paupers, when God has made them heirs and benefactors of great riches.

God wants Jacob to possess his possessions, as he does us ours.

For Modern Preachers & Teachers

Teachers usually address the mind.

Prophets speak to the will and the emotions. A church that has no prophets is in danger of being all head and no heart. There must be some prophet in every preacher. It is a cold pulpit that has only a scholar or a technician. The world does not need walking encyclopedias or linguistic experts holding lectures near the gates of hell, for man in his blindness, will stumble into eternity oblivious to their presence.

The world needs desperately to hear the truth with passion if they are to be arrested long enough to consider what we know to be the truth.

Paul was perhaps the most scholarly teacher and astute theologian the world has ever known. God used him to write the classical Christian theological textbook known to us as his

Letter to the Romans. Although Paul was a "teacher come from

God" he was also a prophet as seen on Mars Hill and in the bloody road at Lystra. Paul himself said it was by the "foolishness of preaching" that God would save the lost.

The prophet was the mouthpiece of the

Omniscient One used to move the heart of man. Any teaching or preaching ministry that fails to move the heart fails to move the man. A passionless pulpit is a powerless pulpit.

The prophet called men to be true to

God in public and in private. The prophets were often before an audience of one and sometimes that one was a king. It is dangerous work to correct a king. The

prophets were not known to enjoy the company of such powered and privileged persons to be entertained or amused. They came in moments of great crisis and did the work of a conscience pointing hearts to God.

Obadiah wrote to Edom, but he really wrote for our benefit. Edom sounds remarkably like Adam. We are all related.

Obadiah is actually writing to everyone who has ever gloated over the fall of a competitor. His warning is for all who have ever even secretly rejoiced at the misfortune of a rival (1:12). The golden rule of Jesus is a more than a suggestion of charity. It is the measure of our smallness or bigness and the judgment of ourselves by ourselves. This spirit of generosity is the air of a happy kingdom.

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is the timber of kindness that shall make a life large and substantial. On the other hand, resentment and envy, jealousy and pride is wormwood and dry rot, and unsuitable for building.

Esau and Jacob were feuding brothers.

No one is wise who holds a grudge. Even if we have been wronged and robbed of our "birthright," we poison our own well when we try to get even. Edom never lost an opportunity to try to repay Judah for cheating their father of his blessing and benefits. They rejoiced at the news of every calamity and hardship that befell Israel.

All we sons of Adam have found how easily the seeds of bitterness can sprout and take root in the soil of our human nature sending it tendrils climbing upon wounded memories until they blot out the sun. Esau became Edom and Edom became great and greatness

became pride and pride is the kiss of death. The words of God to all who lift themselves up, or climb and grapple to the top of the world, (as did Edom at Petra), are always the same "The pride of your heart has deceived you." Pride is always followed by destruction.

God does not even have to actively fall upon sinners in judgment or justice, though He shall; for the seeds of destruction are in the deeds themselves and sin bears its own fruits.

"For the day of the Lord is near upon all the nations. As you have done, it shall be done to you, your dealing will return upon you own head" (Obed. 15; Isa. 2:10-22; Zeph. 3:8-20; Zech. 12:1-14;

Rev. 19: 11-21). After reading Obadiah we should have a cup of cold water ready for any thirsty traveller who should ask for a drink, be he friend or foe.

Jonah - The Reluctant Prophet

Everyone has heard of Jonah and the whale. If Jonah were to ask the New Testament question, Who do men say that I am? He would be told he is a myth, a legend, and a fairy tale by many. His story is one of the most unusual in all the Bible. Some have found it harder to swallow than if Jonah had been asked to swallow the whale.

First of all, there was no whale. The story tells of Jonah being swallowed by a "great fish."

Second, once a person believes that God made the ocean with a single word and then filled that ocean with "whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas" he has no difficulty with any circumstance designed by the Almighty. The same faith that accepts the story of the incarnation (God reduced to the size of a single cell joined to another single cell in the womb of the Virgin Mary), has little difficulty accepting Jonah and his great fish.

While corroboration and internal evidence of some biblical characters is rare or sometimes non-existent,

Jonah has his friends. He was a respected and recognized prophet in his own day and respectfully remembered in the days of Christ.

He is referred to in 2Kings 14:25 "[Jeroboam] restored the border of Israel... according to the word of the Lord which He spoke by His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet who was from Gath-hepher." More significantly, Jesus himself spoke of Jonah and thus

validated his authenticity and rightful place in the hall of Prophets.

A man named Amittai had a son. Amattai means "truthful." He named his son Jonah which means "dove." They that worship the Father must worship in "spirit and in truth." God was grooming a man who would teach

Assyria something about worship.

His call to preach was perhaps the most difficult assignment of any preacher. He was not to stand outside the gates of Jerusalem, or Samaria and preach to the choir. He was not to chide or counsel Jewish kings. He was not even called to renounce the barbaric practices of Israel's enemies which would have been encouraged by a chorus of Hebrew "Amens." Jonah was called to go to the lion's den and look into the face of the beast. Jonah was called to preach to Nineveh in Nineveh.

Nineveh was the capital of Assyria.

Assyria was the personification of evilness and idolatry. These people were barbaric, brutal, and exceedingly wicked. They were famous by their own accounts for savagery. Assurbanipal, the grandson of Sennacherib was known to cut off the lips of captured enemies along with thousands of hands and feet. Tiglath-pileser flayed men alive and left gruesome piles of heads in the wake of his army. These Assyrians must have marched in the nightmares of Hebrew children and the thought of them must have caused mothers to tremble with fright. To the very den of this lion was

Jonah commissioned to go.

A true prophet must allow God to assign the parish. As with Lot who, when given the choice by Abraham, chose the best and most pleasant for himself, many a

"so-called" preacher selects the easy or comfortable assignment. Professional clergymen call these comfortable churches

"plums." May the Lord deliver us from such churches and church-

Every church has a few "uncalled" men who think themselves to be preachers or prophets. They are usually shade-tree mechanics who tinker with and dabble with doctrines, precepts, and parables. They are recreational and arm chair theologians who think it should be pleasant to stand in another man's pulpit. He that would be a prophet must pay the price of the prophet. Both John by the Jordon and John in Patmos knew the pain which is part of that price.

While the pain of Jonah's calling is an example of the extreme and very apparent, there is pain involved in every true call to preach. Amateur preachers never pay the price and they never go to Niniveh. When God called this writer out of seminary to go to New York City many a preacher whispered with a kind of cynical sigh of relief, "better you than me." God does not call preachers to green pastures but to barren and needy places. By the grace of God, if sown faithfully, persistently, and prayerfully the seed will result in pastures lush enough for any sheep. God does not call his prophets to dig wells next to waterfalls. Wells need digging in dry places. A man who wants to preach to the choir is rarely called to preach at all. There are more street corners

than pulpits and a man who is truly called to preach will find one before the other.

Sometimes grace offers a cup of water even knowing pride will refuse to drink it. The preacher must go where

God sends letting God worry about the results. Jonah ran from God's calling. He never told us why he ran. The final chapter gives us some clues however. Was he afraid the Assyrians would cut off his lips if they were offended by his Jewish preaching? Would they cut off his hands and send him home helpless? Would they add his skull to already high heap of unfortunates? Was he afraid? I would be surprised if he was not.

Here was David without a slingshot. A simple provincial prophet standing in the gates of the most fearsome city in the world bringing a rebuke from heaven. If he was the least bit reasonable he would at least approach this assignment with caution. But Jonah's fear was altogether different. He was afraid, it seemed, that God would spare these awful people. He was afraid God would save Ninevah.

What if God had saved Hitler in that fateful bunker? What if Hitler had taken the path of Peter rather than that of Judas? What if at the last moment, just before the allies stormed the wolf's lair, this man who was responsible for the agony, torture, suffering, and death of six million Jews repented and asked for forgiveness? Before you quickly and easily say you would embrace and welcome him to the Lord's Supper, suppose he has gassed your entire family at Aushwitz. Suppose you were asked to preach to him in a warehouse filled with a million bars of soap made from men, women, and children who had been your neighbors. Suppose you had

to read to him of God's love under the illumination pouring from a lampshade of human skin taken from the body of a helpless grandmother who pleaded for the lives of her terrorized and naked grandchildren. If you do not understand Jonah's reluctance by now, you never will, and there is little hope that you will ever truly understand the real meaning of a single word in the Bible. Jonah hated these people. He wanted to have nothing to do with them, let alone preach in their presence.

His response to the call of God was to go in the completely opposite direction. Nineveh was approximately five hundred miles northeast of Palestine; Tarshish is believed to be the ancient Tartessus of Spain which was not only two thousand miles due west, for all practical purposes it was the end of the earth. He became a fugitive from God.

This reluctant prophet has become a timeless object lesson about obedience. Every Sunday School has taken his failure as a parable of foolishness and his dirty laundry has been hanging out for everyone to see for nearly three thousand years. If my dirty laundry can be used to save a single soul, or restore a single prophet, then may God pin it to the line in spite of my shame. Millions have been ministered to by Jonah's poor example though he must still shake his head as he remembers his lack of faith while he marvels at the grace of God.

"Faithful is he that calleth you who will also do it" 1 Thes. 5:24. Jonah's problem was a lack of trust. He failed to trust God either for the means or for the result. We have all been there. We may not have purchased a

ticked to Tarshish but we have all been on board that boat. Every time we resent or resist God's call to obey some command we sail on dangerous waters. Every time we secretly wish fire would fall from heaven on some enemy or modern Assyrian we deny the name of Christ as much as Jonah failed to live up to his. Every time we think we are somehow superior to a Samaritan or an Assyrian we are seeing our reflection in the muddy waters of our imagination rather than in a true mirror of God's Word. We are all sons of Adam. We are only saved by grace.

Whether to Ninevah or New York, a call of God is a call of God and a prophet who's name means

"spirit" and who's father's name means "truth"

must go. He should fear neither failure nor success. He should simply sow the seed while trusting the results to the Lord of the Harvest. Each man must find his calling. To hear that calling, the ear is not as important as the heart. Not every man is a prophet and not every man is sent to Nineveh. How foolish it is for a bird to become a fish, a mouse think it's a lion, or a tinker a teacher. The writer of Hebrews said it well. "Today, if you hear his voice, harden not your heart." Jonah had a second chance and he took it. There is no guarantee a second call will come. There is no guarantee you will be more inclined to listen when your heart has become harder either. It is sad when we buy a ticket to Tarsish when God has a job for us in

Nineveh. The Holy record says "so he paid the fare thereof." It is very expensive indeed to try to flee "from the presence of the LORD." Satan will send you the tickets, but you will have to pay the price.

It was said of Jesus that "he must needs go through Samaria." Eternity had made an appointment. A needy woman had a date with opportunity. She found the

Savior and living water, yet only God knows the number of times he waited at some well and no one came. We are on a journey and Jesus knows the way.

Not every Jew is a Rabbi, and not every prophet a priest. Each person must answer the knock at his own door. And that knock is seldom a pounding. "Behold I stand at the door and knock" Rev. 3:20. If we expect a friend to come calling are we not more prone to be listening? When God calls, answer the door. Go to Nineveh if he asks you, or should he request to

"sup" with you and yours, make room at the head of the table.

Every believer is called to care. Every believer is called to share.

Every saint is called to serve. No, not everyone is a preacher, nor a prophet, for then we should all be yelling in the streets.

We seldom feel equipped or adequate, or ready for God's call, nor sufficient to accomplish God's calling; yet faith and obedience places itself at God's disposal. The man who jumps up to speak often has the least to say. The man who rushes to the platform and loves the lime-light and attention knows nothing of God's call. The gift of gab is not the gift of God. The prophet is always aware that "that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" John 3:6.

Jesus spoke of Jonah twice. He compared Jonah's ordeal in the sea monster's belly to his own crucifixion and resurrection and said that Jonah was a "sign."

Secondly, he referred to the ministry more than the man when he warned

Jerusalem of the coming judgment. "The men of Nineveh shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah..." Then our Lord gave what amounts to a warning for the world and every man who ever heard the name of Jonah. "A greater than Jonah is here." (Lk. 11:32.)

Micah - The Poor Man's Prophet

Micah had little love for the cities (1:5; 5:11;

6:9). He was a country boy who saw the dangers associated with big city life. He had nothing but contempt for religious professionals who earned their living telling people what they wanted to hear instead what they needed to hear. False prophets enjoyed a livelihood by selling lies (Mic.

3:5). Flattery is the stock and trade of all false teachers. Because we are all sinners, right preaching will often make the listener uncomfortable and the speaker unpopular. Edgeless preaching that never touches our conscience is also pointless.

Prosperity during the days of Jotham deadened the spiritual senses. As is often the case lives of luxury are established upon the backs of the oppressed. The wealthy are too often oblivious to the pain and the anguish of the poorer masses. The ministry of Micah lasted over forty years and witnessed the fall of Samaria, capital of the northern kingdom. He was a contemporary of Isaiah. While Isaiah spoke in the presence of kings, Micah was the poor man's prophet.

He spoke out against the grasping, greed, avaricious, and oppressive ways of the commercial, and religious aristocracy. He pointed to grave crimes of social inequity, which involved the confiscating of property of poor people, and the consumption of common people by landlords which resembled sheep cropping grass.

Political turmoil prevailed as different factions counseled for alliance with Egypt or submission to

Assyria. Leaders not only robbed the poor, Judges accepted bribes, and preachers accommodated the rich with flattering words, while priests enriched themselves, and tyrants laughed in the face of righteousness. Prosperity brought the need for more public works which required conscription of workers, taxes, and confiscation of land. The little guy was simply crushed if he got in the way of these wheels.

This simple village preacher lifted his voice to warn of judgment coming to Jerusalem. He was the first to dare such a thought. His words not only survived, but one hundred years later became the prophetic resource that saved Jeremiah's life (Jer. 26). He knew he was God's messenger "But as for me, I am full of power by the Spirit of

Jehovah, and of judgment" (3:8).

Prosperity had fooled many. They said "Is not Jehovah in the midst of us?" (Mic. 3:12). Jesus would later teach about the deceitfulness of riches. Money has a way of fooling a person into believing all is well. Prosperous people sometimes assuage their conscience by making donations and giving financial offerings. Woe said

Micah to "Those who live selfish and luxurious lives, even though they offer costly sacrifices, they are vampires in the sight of God, sucking the life-blood of the poor" (Robinson).

Micah left us three great messages. The first was "Therefore shall

Zion for your sake be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps, and the mountain of the house as the high places of the forest"

3:12. Judgment not only can begin in the house of God, it must begin there. Foolish is the man who believes he is safe because he is in the holy city. Our assurance of salvation will never lead to arrogance or presumption. God's fire may fall where he wills. It rains on the just and the unjust.

Some who sin at the foot of the cross little know the reality, the morality, or the vitality of that cross. A true conversion produces a transformed life. "Woe to them who are at ease in Zion" (Amos 6:1).

The second great message left by Micah is that of a holy geography. The

Messiah would be born, not in the sophisticated and great city, but in the provincial hamlet called Bethlehem. This is the "X" that marked the prophetic spot where wise men would find the world's greatest treasure (Matt. 2).

The third message is a gem in itself for it sums up the heart of real religion. It is the precursor to the great "spirit and in truth" sermon given to that lonely woman of Sychar by Christ himself. Micah tells what the Lord desires of us. "He hath showed thee, O man what is good; and what doth Jehovah require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God." (6:8).

This verse in on the wall in the reading room of the Congressional

Library in Washington, DC. It could stand as the life's text for any man. The Jewish religion was summed up in its 614 laws. Micah boiled it all down to three. We are to do justly. Live before the balance scale of right. May

every line be plumb, and every wall square. Truth, honesty and integrity should be our best friends. Duplicity, falsehood, and deception should be counted as plagues and avoided at all cost. Love mercy. Truth must be balanced with charity. We should treat all men as we ourselves wish we would be treated. Someone said it is not enough to do good, we must love doing good or our goodness is a sham and an imposter. The third axiom of this profoundly simple prophet is to “walk humbly with [our] God.” Here is the secret to happiness and spiritual success, humility. We are to put on no airs. We are to avoid all pretense. We are to live close to the earth (humus) which is the etymology of the word. We are to stay close to the truth and never let it out of our sight. If we do we will never think too highly or too lowly of ourselves. We will be real people who will realize the presence, power, and pleasure of God.

To Teachers and Preachers

-God put Bethlehem on the map. It is what happened in this little town that made it famous. The fact that it was the hometown of David was simply Bible trivia. It was meant for far more than that. It was where

God was born.

That last sentence sounds outrageous. It sounds almost blasphemous, except for the fact that that is exactly what happened. It was where

Jesus was born. It was where the Word would become flesh. The Word became flesh in a small, quiet, humble place. God knows where Bethlehem is. God knows where to find you and me.

Do not put on airs. Be humble. Be real. A humble person is not one who thinks poorly of himself. Thinking poorly of one's self is as sinful as thinking proudly. Self is the preoccupation in both cases. The best teachers and preachers are those who forget themselves.

When asked who he was, John the baptist said he was "just a voice." A truly humble person is simply a person who is down to earth.

Preachers are supposed to be able to help people find Christ. Micah did that. Of all the places in the world the finger of God rested on one small, almost insignificant city, "Bethlehem." Micah wrote it down. The magi came looking for "he who was born king of the Jews."

The scribes had to go to Micah for the answer. We will never be able to answer every question, and we shouldn't put off teaching until we can; yet we must search the holy record ever looking for "Him," so that should a wise man or a fool enquire of us we can point them to the

Savior.

The name Micah means "Who is like God." This could be a description as well as a question. It should be a description of every

Bible teacher and preacher. Prophets should be God-like. It is ever a shame when we do not practice what we preach. It is a scandal when the messenger marries the message with ungodly behavior.

If there is any question or confusion about what is "God-like," simply look at Jesus. The Pharisees had strange ideas of what it meant to be "God-like." They

were aloof, proud, arrogant, pompous, cynical, self-absorbed, holier-than-thou.

On the other hand, Micah is a question, "Who is like God?" The answer must be "no one." What a kind and gracious wonder God is. The teacher and preacher is thrilled to answer his own question:

"Who is a pardoning God like thee?" The God of Micah is a God of Mercy.

Men must hear of God's hatred for sin. After all, it causes such woe and sorrow in the earth. But men must also hear the words of hope. "God delights in mercy" (7:18). What will this holy God do with all our sins and iniquities because of Bethlehem and because of Calvary? He will bury them in the depths of the sea (7:19).

Good preachers offer hope and their sermons mercy.

While they give no quarter to sin in any form, and place it under the wrath of God, willing sinners are directed to a place of shelter before the coming storm.

Nahum - The Singer

The book of Nahum is one of the most beautiful examples of Hebrew poetry in all the Bible. Almost nothing is known about the prophet. Like most other prophets, he is just a

"voice." But what a beautiful voice it is. This voice is not crying in the wilderness, rather it is singing. This is his song.

Nineveh will be destroyed. The fall of

Nineveh was so complete that the site of this once most powerful city seemed to be as erased from the face of the earth as was Sodom and

Gomorrah. For centuries armies marched by or over it oblivious to the fact that they were treading on the cemetery of a civilization. So complete was Nahum's prophecy. God's judgment may be slow in coming, but when it comes it is sure.

The Assyrians were as ferocious as wolves. They had preyed upon Israel for hundreds of years. They carried away the ten Northern tribes into seeming oblivion and, in 701BC, were at the gates of Jerusalem again. They preyed while Hezekiah prayed. A cuneiform record known as the Taylor Prism told of Sennacherib's invasion. "Hezekiah, the Judean, I shut up in Jerusalem, his royal city, like a bird in a cage." He, of course, never mentioned that his army met with a terrible fate. Lord Byron, the English poet immortalized the Destruction of Sennacherib in a poem of that name around 1800.

Assyria had more than one close call with divine judgment and had brushed up against oblivion once too often.

In 1842 C. J. Rich, a British merchant, began the search for the ancient ruins of Nineveh. Three years later A. H. Layard joined in the search and excavated near Kuyunjik not far from a mound called Nebi-Yunus (translated Jonah). He discovered the palace of Sennacherib and later the Imperial library of Ashurbanipal in 1850. That library contained a collection of 10,000 different documents that provided historians with a wealth of information about the life and mind set of the Assyrian. One of the most remarkable finds were the ancient religious myths about creation and the flood. While there are some similarities, they appear primeval when compared to the Genesis account.

According to the Assyrian version of things, two gods, the male fresh water ocean (Apsu) and the female salt water ocean (Tiamat) mated and produced a number of lesser gods who fought and could not get along. Apsu became irritated with his noisy children and decided to kill them. Instead one of his offspring, the god of wisdom, killed him first. The killing of Apsu produced a violent storm god named Marduk. Tiamat became alarmed and gave birth to a host of dragons who would fight Marduk. At a banquet the other gods elected

Marduk their leader (although Ashur, the sun became the favorite of

Nineveh), he killed the dragons and split Tiamat in two (half made the sea and the other the sky). Tiamat's general was killed and his blood was mixed with the soil of the newly formed earth and man was made to serve

the gods. Such was the bible of the barbarians. Their fallen spirits had produced a legend from the broken fragments of a chaotic

Babel that was a sad reflection of their empty hearts.

The Assyrians left a legacy of blood and sorrow in the world. Huge statues of winged lions with human heads called cherubs sit in museums like silent tomb stones and witnesses to their fierceness. The Assyrians were the first true military empire and they triumphed through a combination psychology, engineering, and political genius, and military strength. Carved stone reliefs depicting warriors with long curls betray their vanity. Cuneiform steles are timeless confessions to their cruelty and unspeakable barbarity. Few would weep over the fall of Nineveh.

Nahum picked up the story of Jonah some one hundred and fifty years after a remarkable repentance brought a reprieve of judgment. Written sometime after the fall of Thebes and before the fall of Samaria the usual accepted date for Nahum is 650BC.

Various locations have been proposed as his home town yet none can be authenticated. From a city in Babylon to the New Testament Capernaum have been suggested. What is known is that Nahum's message explains what happened to an ancient civilization that disappeared. Had Jonah given the last word, history would seem to be a puzzle, but thanks to

Nahum we learn the rest of the story.

The lesson of Nahum is not that God will have vengeance, but rather that God will be vindicated. It should never

be our desire that our enemies will be destroyed, but only that

God will be glorified. These idol worshipers were an affront to all that was clean, holy, pure and just. Nahum means "comforter." His message was like that of a mother singing to a frightened child in a thunderstorm, "everything is going to be all right." Thebes of

Egypt had just fallen to the armies of Ashurbanipal II and the Assyrians seemed unstoppable. The prediction that mighty Nineveh would soon be crushed must be received by faith. All the facts were against such a thing coming to pass. Yet written as a poem, Nahum's prophecy was a song of hope.

God, good, faith and hope will be vindicated. The fall of Nineveh is a precursor to the fall of every evil kingdom that shall make way for the Kingdom of God. As awful as Assyria was, the timeless message is that we need only fear God's wrath. "Who can stand before his indignation?" (1:6). But unlike the wrath of man, Nahum qualifies the fierceness of Jehovah with comforting words "the

LORD is good." These words make all the difference. We need not fear random destruction from the heavens. Yet even if lightning does strike, we can be assured that God is good. Imagine Ashur or Marduk in control of time and eternity. Imagine evil on the throne of heaven. Such is a horrible thought. Those without faith in Jehovah were forever attempting to appease their gods sacrificing to idols while living in darkness.

Nahum is a singer with a glad song.

There is gospel in his music. "Behold upon the mountains the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace!"

Paul borrowed this expression from Nahum and Isaiah (Isa. 52:7; Rom.

10:15). "The wicked shall no more pass through thee; he shall be utterly cut off" 1:15. Sin shall no more have dominion over us.

At the cross Nineveh is fallen. A greater than Jonah is here.

The Second chapter describes the final moments of the awful city. They who had laid siege to other cities and caused them to tremble would now find "He that dashes in pieces" at their own gates. Some commentators make the "He"

(2:1) to be the king of Medo-Babylon. The "He" is in fact JEHOVAH. Woe to the city who finds God at its gates on judgment day, and woe to the sinner who has lived as arrogantly as an Assyrian when God comes calling to settle all accounts.

A prophet's voice is often loud, but never hysterical. It often brought conviction and rebuke, but the voice of the shepherd has a soothing and calming effect on the sheep. The words of Nahum were a condemnation and a comfort at the same time, as is the Gospel.

"To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things." 2Cor. 2:17.

The prophet was a constant reminder that there is a God of truth, who loves and cares for his people. The sight of a policeman elicits a different reaction from a criminal

and the law abiding citizen. Western American cowboys were known to sing to cattle in order to calm them. Naham wrote a ballad that calmed the faithful even as enemy armies could be seen marching in the distance.

Chapter three ends with applause "all that hear the news will clap their hands." Nahum's prediction was so accurate he must have been taken in the spirit to the Tigris and the heathen city as John was to heavenly one. The king of Assyria did indeed die in flames. We also applaud, not only because evil is trampled, but because God triumphs. God gives us a song.

To Modern Preachers and Teachers

Good teaching and preaching often involves a storm of emotions, yet there must be a place of calm in the midst of it all. At the eye of the storm there must be a faith in a God who is in absolute control of everything.

Paul understood his calling and he understood the ministry of the preacher. "But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort" (1Cor 14:3).

Preachers who use the Word of God properly build us up. They are not always knocking us down or about.

They call out to us as we run the race. They encourage. But good preaching and teaching will always offer hope and comfort if we are willing to conform to the Word and will of God. The word Nahum means

"comfort."

Good teaching quiets any frightened sheep. Yes, the devil is as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, but he never dares snatch the sheep nearest the shepherd. When you can no longer hear the sound of the

shepherd's song, you have wandered too far from the fold. It is only when we have gone too far that the

Shepherd may need to raise his voice. The words "Adam, where art thou" brought little comfort to man. It is sin that separates us from God. Those who stay close find only comfort in the sound of his voice. Those who are close join in his song.

Habakkuk - The Thinker

Nineveh had fallen and once again, God's people had quickly forgotten God. How dense and dull is the natural man. Habakkuk had something on his mind. It is called a "burden." He was troubled when

He compared what he knew about God with what was going on around him.

Why was God allowing evil to run rampant? Why was not God doing something about sin? Why were sinners getting away with murder? In chapter one he is wondering, in two watching, and in three we find him worshipping. Habakkuk is the thinker. He goes farther and has dared to ask what others have only thought. Why doesn't God do something about evil? Evil men, violent, sinful men seem to rule the world while the righteous suffer. Good ever goes to the gallows while evil sits on the throne. Why does God do nothing? The weak are "spoiled" by the strong.

God's laws are ignored and violators are indifferent to justice. Why doesn't God intervene?

Every lover of God has thought such questions. Why do bad things happen to good people? Lone individuals have posed the same questions to God, from the beginning. It has also been the collective cry of the Jew as a people from the days of Egyptian slavery. Habakkuk ministered during the turbulent twilight of Judea. Josiah was killed while attempting to halt the advance of Egypt at Megiddo. Pharaoh-Necho became the political power behind the Jewish throne, imprisoning one of

Josiah's sons and installing another. Jehoiakim was weak, and wicked, the world was chaotic and Judah was sinking back into darkness.

Habakkuk had a good sense of who God was in his holiness. Habakkuk had a high regard for the laws and commandments of the LORD. But why was God allowing people to trample on his law and his

Word as if God did not even exist? Here are questions that the righteous have asked for millennia. David also was well aware of the dilemma of evil parading proudly before the righteous. He wrote "Fret not thyself because of evildoers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity" (Ps. 37:1). The Psalm of Asaph spoke about the problem as well, "Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world, they increase in riches. Verily I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning. If I say, I will speak thus; behold I should offend against the generation of thy children. When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me," (Ps. 73:12-16).

The book of Habakkuk breaks into the prophet's life as he carries on a dialogue with God. If it sounds like he is complaining; it is important to realize that he is complaining to God and not about God.

There is a big difference. Real, genuine, and honest prayer often sounds like this. This is not the prayer of a self-righteous pharisee, it is more closely in tune with the breast-beating publican in the back of the temple (Lk. 18:13). Many prayers of believers begin with the question,

Why. We don't like to question God in public, but who is so perfect that they have never struggled with the weight of this question in secret prayer?

Another question God has heard many a saint pray comes next, "How long?" (1:2). Whether uttered by a Hebrew slave in Egypt, or by a sister named Mary waiting for help to come for Lazarus, this is a common prayer. "How long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear!" When we pray, God does not always come running. He hears, yet "to everything there is a season." Habakkuk's frustration will teach us more about faith than all the prophets. There is a hidden treasure in every trouble. Instead of running from trials we should search the rushing streams we must cross for golden nuggets. As Habbakkuk pans the murky bottom of a troubled faith he finds a piece of gold so large that it has enriched the saints for centuries. The precious truth he found shines throughout the church history and shines brighter still: "The just shall live by faith." This valuable truth is also a glowing truth that has shined in our doubt's darkest hours. It is like a polar star that has helped many a saint get his bearings while traveling through this world. This truth became the centerpiece for Pauline theology (Rom. 1:16-17), it was also used in

Paul's letter to the Galatians (3:11) and is found in the letter to the

Hebrews (10:38-39). The righteous shall live (exist, survive, endure) by (in, through, because-of) his faith. This was the touch-stone that ignited the light of the Reformation when it was discovered by that monk named

Luther. Habakkuk's problem is found in the first verse of the first chapter. It is solved in the fourth verse of the second. This holy man was vexed by what he "saw." What he saw weighed heavy on his heart. We must all learn to live by faith and not by sight.

Life, at times, seems so unfair. Evil people seem to thrive and prosper. Wicked people seem to get away with wrong and righteous people seem to suffer. Do "nice guys" really finish last? So it would seem, until Habakkuk got a revelation that would become the

Rosetta Stone of all moral theology.

Jesus put it another way when he said, "the kingdom of God is within you." Taking care of the evil around us is God's business. What is important for our survival is the kingdom within us.

God will take care of sorting out each of the players that have a part in and around our lives. No one will escape answering to God. We have no way of knowing how an evil person, or nation is being used by God in the greater equation of life. As a single number in a formula can transform the final solution, so too, God employs many elements and complex factors to bring about his ends. God is working. We react, God only acts. He is never taken by surprise by political cataclysms or moral catastrophe. The fall of the Assyrians or the rise of the Chaldeans do not alarm the Almighty any more than the injustice of a neighbor or the failure of a friend. We are often shaken, troubled, or confused by events. If we could climb into Habakkuk's watchtower we would see life from the lofty heights of faith. God is our watchtower, when we are in

Him we see things through the eyes of faith.

The name Habakkuk means "embrace." Some see a saint struggling with difficult moral questions and the "embrace" like that of one wrestling with an opponent. Better is the embrace of a parent holding a troubled child. Or even better still, is the believer who embraces God's truth: "the just shall live by faith."

Habakkuk did not like the answer God gave him. God said that he was about to do something beyond the wildest imagination of the Seer. God's answer offered no relief. God was about to raise up the

Chaldeans (1:6) and use that bitter and hasty nation to bring a terrible and dreadful judgment. How could a righteous God use unrighteous men to accomplish his ends, and more importantly, punish the righteous? How could a God who is "of purer eyes than to behold evil" use evil to such an end? Habakkuk is the doubting Thomas among the twelve ancient seers.

He retreated to his Old Testament equivalent of the upper-room and like the Apostles of Christ waited for the filling of the Holy Spirit, so to speak. He "will watch to see what [God] will say" (2:1). As Christ instructed his followers to "tarry" at Jerusalem so Jehovah told this troubled seer to wait for his answer for "though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry" (2:3). The answer that came was simple and yet brilliant: faith. Pride will never triumph, faith never fails. "The just shall live by faith."

Descendants of the Babylonian captivity and Disporia were visited in their synagogues nearly five hundred years later by an

Apostle once named Saul who would preach another message that must be accepted by faith. Paul on his first

missionary journey quoted the words of Habakkuk while preaching to the Jews of Antioch in Pisidia. Far from Jewish soil, the great-great grandchildren of deported Jews listened "Be it known unto you, therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins; And by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses; Beware, therefore, lest that come upon you, which is spoken of in the prophets; Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish; for I work a work in your days, a work which ye shall in no way believe, though a man declare it unto you." (Acts 13:38-41).

It was beyond the scope of Habakkuk's wildest imagination that Jewish Apostles would carry a light to the Gentiles (Acts

13:47) and the descendents of Babylon would bow before the Lord Jesus

Christ.

By faith Habakkuk is assured that crime does not pay.

Every sin will have its judgment. Every evil will have its end. The woes of the second chapter are severe and awful and the tears of a sinner's sorrows will know no comfort. The cries of the righteous will be quieted with God's embrace not unlike a mother who picks up her troubled babe, holds it close, and softly whispers "hush" 2:20.

The final chapter of this little book is a song. One would have to read in Hebrew to appreciate the beautiful alliterations and the poetic form it takes. It is a song of

faith. It is the equivalent of Luther's "A Mighty Fortress is our God." It speaks of

God's love, and mercy. It sings of his glory(3:3-4), and tells of his might (3:5). Faith is able to sing as God "measures" and judges the earth (3:6). Faith stands trusting though the world tremble. Faith, like

Paul and Silas in a Philipian jail, sings in the night.

One of the most beautiful expressions of faith is found in this ode.

Faith needs nothing but God to survive. Many times in history the Jewish people were stripped of everything yet so many fail to find this truth.

"Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls; Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation."

Habakkuk's faith survived his doubts. He climbed into his watch tower and waited for insight and assurance. His faith endured as seeing him who is invisible. His faith discarded the human scales of what men think is

"fairness" and trusted God's goodness, wisdom, and integrity. His faith finally learned to lean on God alone and learned to trust in the giver more than the gift. Like every other giant of faith he discovered the peace that comes with trust. Elijah learned it when Cherith dried up,

Moses learned it in the wilderness, Job on the ash heap, God is working on the problem of good versus evil and when he is finished we shall all bow in astonishment, ashamed that we could ever have doubted at all.

To Modern Preachers and Teachers

The best teachers think. Some are afraid to look too closely at what they believe for fear that it will not survive such close scrutiny. They are afraid to think. Habakuk was a thinker. The best students, ask hard questions. There was a day when anyone who dared to ask a question was quickly crushed. Those were dark ages indeed.

Truth fears no inquiry. Real faith needs no inquisitions.

The best teachers embrace God's words and cling to them as a vine climbing the lattice. The best teachers hold on to God's promises and never let them go. But the best teachers also embrace in love all whom they teach. The best teachers do not teach lessons, they teach people. It is not until a man has doubted and dared to ask the hard questions, that his faith has come of age. There was a time when a man was not considered a real sailor until he had "rounded the horn" and experienced the fury, wind and waves in the straits of South America.

Once he had endured the treacherous currents, icy gale force winds, frozen canvas, and colliding oceans, then and only then could he be said to truly be a sailor.

Faith that never had a doubt is feeble. It is untried and untested.

Habakkuk faces our doubts and helps us destroy each with an honest answer. Thank God for the thinker.

Zephaniah - Seer of the Apocalypse

Nahum's prophecy had not yet been fulfilled when Zephaniah was awakened by God's call. Nineveh had not yet fallen. As God had used Hosea and Amos in the last days of Israel, now God would use

Zephaniah to give the final words of warning before destruction would come to Judah. Zephaniah is the author of an Old Testament Apocalypse.

He wrote of the culmination of history and the fall of all nations.

George Adam Smith wrote, "No hotter book lies in all the Old Testament.

Neither dew nor grass nor tree nor any blossom lives in it, but it is everywhere fire, smoke and darkness, drifting chaff, ruins, nettles, salt pits, and owls and ravens looking from windows of desolate places"

(The Book of the Twelve Prophets).

Zephaniah ministered during the reign of Josiah. He was a distant relative and could trace his heritage back to King

Hezekiah himself. It was Hezekiah who had a face-off with the mighty

Sennacherib. It was Hezekiah who led Judea into a time of spiritual revival. However, it has been aptly said that "God has no grandchildren." Hezekiah's children did not share his faith nor enthusiasm for the things of God. Each generation must discover the living God for itself. Every generation must rediscover the faith and be

"born again."

Hezekiah's son was the most wicked of all the kings of Judea. Manasseh's reign of half a century proves longevity is no measure of spiritual things. Under this longest reign all the economic indicators pointed to prosperity, while the things of the spirit suffered. Manasseh had a change of heart later in life but his son Amon was unimpressed and copied his fathers corruptness rather than his conversion. After two years of darkness he was killed by his own servants (2Chron. 33:24). After the assassins were themselves executed, Amon's son Josiah was installed as king at the age of eight. It is at this time that Zephaniah begins his ministry.

The fact that the prophet records his pedigree back to Hezekiah suggests that his message must have had an influence on the eight year old. By the twelfth year of his administration he began to purge the land of the dark debris inherited from Manasseh and Amon.

Exactly how much influence this cousin to the king had on Josiah is not as important as how much influence he has on me. Though long dead, the words of Zephaniah are still, "quick and powerful and sharper than a two edged sword." If God must use them to cut our own hearts, may we not attempt to stay his hand, or try to dull the edge of his word by calling it ancient history.

"I will utterly consume things from off the land"

(1:2). An impending doom is the topic once again. Man has a way of quickly forgetting in prosperity lessons learned hard in poverty. The lesson of a destroyed Israel seems to be lost on the dull hearts of

Judah. No sooner does the invading army of adversity disappear than foolish men return to their old ways.

The focus of Zephaniah is on the heart rather than the heathen. God will use the heathen, and he will judge the heathen, but the central figure on the world's stage is always God's wayward nation Israel.

And at this point it is good to remember as Paul so carefully did in his epistle to the Romans, " they are not all Israel, which are of Israel"

Rom. 9:6. Zephaniah's voice is a shepherd's voice which only God's sheep will recognize. The continual and constant mistake of the Hebrew was in mistaking political boundaries for belief. The fact that a person found himself within the walls of Jerusalem or the borders of Judea was no guarantee that he was one of God's own.

Zephaniah tells of the coming judgment of God upon Judea and all nations. This is not a history lesson, it is a call to examine the heart. The sins condemned by this prophet are still found in our own land and the chariots of God's judgment can be heard by all who have "ears to hear."

"I will overthrow the stumbling blocks" 1:3. Idolatry is ever producing its idols and each is a stumbling block to the idolater.

An idol can be anything that has taken the place of God in our society.

Our country is filled with them and they are all hindrances to any who would attempt to walk godly in Christ Jesus. From sports, to entertainment, to pleasure palaces, and marketplaces there are enough obstacles

for any pilgrim to beware. Our churches are empty, our shopping malls (fish gates) are full. Our chapels are forsaken, our sports arenas are over flowing with fans. Tabernacles are silent, televisions have become electronic altars and high places.

"I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth"

(1:3 Amplified). Zephaniah is seeing far beyond Assyria, Babylon, and

Rome, he is seeing clear to Armageddon and the final triumph of good over evil, and yet "now" is in the picture as much as some world tomorrow.

God promises to cut off those who "worship the starry host." Even in our "so-called" sophisticated day there is a revival of astrology which places a man's destiny in the stars, as well as a resurgence of interest in "Physic" phenomenon. People are consulting mediums to reach the dead (supposedly), studying horoscopes, and calling upon spirits (angels) for help and success. To think God is any less likely to judge our land than he did Israel, Judah, and Assyria is the height of presumption. The implication of the prophet is that these star worshipers do so while "pretending" to worship the LORD. These people had an amalgamated religion that was a strange mixture of pretence and profanity that grieved God. Many "so-called" Christians also have created a theological stew in a caldron of religious chaos.

Many who claim to worship and know God also burn incense at the altars of humanism, psychology, mysticism, and pray to the god of luck while hoping for a financial windfall. Zephaniah's words are also directed to those who have "drawn back" from following the LORD.

While our nation is filled with idolators, it is also filled with

"backsliders." The only message to a "backslider" is to repent.

Included in the condemnation are the princes or

"officials" who have adopted the dress (standards and attire) of the world. It may seem strange that apparel should even be considered in this judgment of God, and seem to be inapplicable to those who live in the age of Grace, yet there is a lesson even here. The leaders set aside their old-fashioned Jewish identity in order to wear the popular Babylonian, and

Egyptian styles. While the uniform does not make the soldier, there is definitely something wrong with the soldier who discards his uniform. The

Torah specifically described a certain dress that would act as a reminder of Jewish identity and obligations (Num. 15:38). It speaks volumes when the church dresses itself in the garments of paganism and imitates the fashion of those who worship the sensual and ridicule the spiritual. Body piercing has become fashionable, as well as dying hair purple, and immorality and abortion are eyed with indifference and souls are sold for silver. I compare our own day with the dying days of Judea only because it would border on malpractice for any preacher worth his salt not to do so.

While the storm clouds of God's judgment were rolling in on Zephaniah's world men who should have known better were "settling on their lees." That is to say they were unmoved. Zephaniah came to stir them up. "Their wealth shall become plunder" 1:13. While our modern

Assyrians and Babylon seem to have fallen and are no longer a threat, we are on the brink of our own annihilation unless we have a spiritual awakening and revival. The world's populations have become restless and large numbers of peoples are desperate. Our own "underclass" is only being held in check by the unseen Spirit of God. The enemy is already within our gates. The moment the Almighty removes his hand an angry sea of godless classes will erupt into a social upheaval and violent inferno that may very well burn our civilization to the ground. In that day "neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them" 1:18.

The second chapter addresses the world. The last chapter gives the final word to Jerusalem (the city of God) and calls her the "polluted" city. Her prophets spoke filling their cannons with tissue paper instead of cannon balls. They were called "light and treacherous persons." The clergy had profaned the sanctuary and holy place. It is for the same reason Jesus overturned the money changers tables and drove out the cattle in the famous "cleansing of the temple." God would judge Judah, but one day he will restore her. The "poor in spirit" will survive as they wait for the coming of the Lord. "I will also leave in the midst of thee the afflicted and poor people; and they shall trust in the name of the LORD" 3:12. Every generation has this "remnant" (v.13). Every generation has those listening for the Master's voice which says "blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Zephaniah's ministry reached its apex sometime before Josiah reached his. In 621 Hilkiah discovered the Book of the Law in the temple and read it before the pious

king. As it was in the day of Jonah, revival held back the hour judgment and reform stayed flood of ruin.

Because Zephaniah is lacking in what preachers call "pulpit texts" many congregations are unfamiliar with this sage and have never heard of sermon out of his book. Yet, God is at this very moment gathering from among the peoples of the earth souls of the "afflicted" into a kingdom of which he himself will be king (3:19, 20, 15) and all who come will "rest in his love." Jesus said, "come unto me all ye who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest."

To Modern Preachers and Teachers

Even though there seems to be only scorched earth and judgment remaining after Zephaniah is finished with his prophecy there is still hope for God's people. It is almost as if we come to an ash covered and charred remains of a wood after a forest fire. Everywhere there is blackness and bleakness and grotesque charcoaled monuments pointing upward like twisted and broken fingers to heaven. Then there in the center of a large burned out spot a shoot of green has broken through the now cold cinders, as a witness and a promise that God is not finished with Israel.

The New American Standard translation says "Shout for Joy....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." 3:14-15.

Then in what has to be a reference to the Messianic kingdom, he goes on with these words of hope "I will save the lame, and gather the outcast, and I will turn

their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you in, even at the time when I gather you together... I will restore your fortunes before your eyes."

3:19-20.

No prophet should forget to hold out hope. No matter how dark the sin, no matter how grievous the judgment. As long as there is life, there is hope. There is salvation and security in Christ. However, all that those outside of Christ can hope to find is judgment. Not a single soul that rejects God will survive the wrath that must fall on evil, and though they may be long in coming, not one of God's promises will fail. "Wait for me,"

says the LORD (3:8).

Haggai - Prophet on Duty

We all need a Haggai in our Christian lives. The spirit of his message was simple: "continue." It is the secret of success. Many start, but are like the seeds in the parable of the sower which for one reason or another came to nothing. Many start, few finish.

Paul admonished Timothy to "continue in the things [he] had learned."

The early Christian believers had this testimony: "They continued steadfastly in the Apostle's doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread, and in prayers." Starting is the first step, but one stone does not a temple make.

Paul understood the danger of distraction. He wrote, "Let us not be weary in well doing for in due season we shall reap if we faint not." The remnant that returned from Babylon first fainted and then found less strenuous work to do. For twelve years the remnant neglected the main thing and filled their lives with a vain thing. They turned their attention from the eternal to the temporal. They built their own houses while the house of God lie in ruins. This was a mistake. Someone said it well when they said, "Only one life, will soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last."

In the year 536BC the Meds & Persians under the reign of Cyrus overwhelmed the city and state of Babylon. Daniel, who predicted the fall of Belshazzar was highly esteemed by the new conquerors. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that he had an influence on the decision to allow a remnant to return to Jerusalem with permission to rebuild the temple. Some 42,000 persons

returned to the holy city, and under the command of Zerubbabel, began work on the foundations of the house of God. Shortly after the work began, it stopped while political adversaries initiated what amounted to a search for proper documents and authorization. This bureaucratic inconvenience was too easily accepted by the Jews who forgot the sacred work for fourteen years. It is into this period of spiritual indolence that

Haggai steps.

Why have you stopped doing such an important work?

Why are you more concerned about your business than God's business?

These are the questions the prophet asked. His book and ministry are to the point. His sermon against spiritual indifference and indolence, unfortunately, would be timely in many circles today. Have you stopped doing an important work? What opposition, what discouragement, what distraction has become larger than God, or more powerful than his call?

In the second year of Darius God spoke to and through Haggai. The question he asked the people was "sharper than a two-edged sword." "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house of the Lord lies in ruins?" The people had become disheartened by opposition and then distracted with their own affairs. They too soon forgot why they were allowed to leave Babylon in the first place. They were to rebuild the broken places. They were to once again take their place among the world's population as God's special people. One might be quick to remember he is among the chosen while forgetting what he is chosen for. We are chosen to show forth God's glory.

The church as well as individuals would do well to listen to Haggai. We need to keep our priorities right. Jesus said,

"Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33). The remnant of Jews put their own homes before the house of God. Many a local church is a sad witness to the greatness and glory of God. To such indifference God says, "Consider your ways."

Removing God from his rightful place of priority one is not only spiritually destructive, but is likely to bring with it a curse. The prophet continued, "you have sown much, but you have reaped little, you eat, but you do not have enough; you drink, but you do not have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and he who earns wages has earned them to put them in a bag with holes in it"

(1:6) There are many ways the displeasure of God can touch a nation or family. The harder we work the more futile our endeavor, the more we sow, the less we reap or the less we keep. The more clothing we put on the colder it gets.

While prosperity may not be a proof of God's good pleasure, blight and poverty should make us pause and, as Haggai said

"Consider." Perhaps there is a lesson to be learned in failure.

Adversity is not a signal to quit, but is a call to consider. It is a summons to search our hearts to see if God and his interests are first and foremost in our lives.

We are all laying brick and building a legacy. Paul warned the Corinthians not to build with inferior materials like wood, hay, and stubble. Instead he encouraged the believers to build with precious stones. The preacher must sometimes remind the church to be a "doer" and not a hearer only.

Finish the job! Here is the lesson of Haggai. Life is something we do. We are all stewards who will one day have to give an account of our stewardship. Noah had his boat, David his city, and

Solomon his temple to build. We are "workers together with God." Haggai is an enemy of the spiritually indolent. There is a temple that must be built, and yet the workers are idle. This prophet awakens the dozing disciples who are asleep to God and God's things.

The second sermon of Haggai had to do with comparisons. Compared to the glory and splendor of the temple built by

Solomon, this new undertaking was pale. This caused some to lose heart.

Some wept. To this Haggai spoke of a greater glory that shall come. They had to look beyond the building and see the greatness of the God to which it pointed. Every truly great work is a spire that points to God.

A building that only calls attention to itself will never be more than a building. The seer looked for God's glory and saw it in a coming millennial kingdom. A temple without God is a temple without glory.

Jesus is the glory.

Beware of the "snare of comparisons" in Christian work. Man has a natural tendency to compare and compete. Churches, and ministries are often taking up the argument of the distracted disciples, who in the upper room, argue about "who is the greatest." Such considerations are a waste of time. The snare of comparisons can lead to pride or discouragement; it never leads to good. It is a foolish enterprise and a snare of evil.

Sometimes we compare this year's attendance to last year's, or to the

"glory years" and become discouraged when it seems less, or we gloat when it seems greater. Sometimes we count the offering and swell with pride, or lament when they are leaner. We sometimes compare our temple with the temple being built down the street, and enter into a un-holy race for glory. Be assured that any such rivalry is about man's glory, not God's.

Haggai spoke also spoke of a great "shaking" to come.

As to what this "shaking" is we are not sure. Some say it is the fall of

Persia and Greece. We are more inclined to take the larger view as seen in the Book of Hebrews "Whose voice then shook the earth; but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven. And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve

God acceptably with reverence and godly fear; For our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:26-29).

When Haggai said that "the glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former" (2:9). He had to be speaking of another age and time. He was speaking of the coming of the

"Desire of the Nations," Jesus. Grammarians argue about what they call a

"unfortunate mis-translation." Just what the "desires" of the nations are is not clear, but we know what mankind is looking for, although they themselves have no idea. What they desire and what they are looking for can only be found in Christ.

Solomon had more silver and gold in his temple, this second temple had little of that glory. Haggai reminded the workers that

God had plenty of the precious metal, but that there is a greater glory than that. Peter and John knew of that glory when Peter said, "silver and gold have I none, but such as I have give I to thee. In the name of

Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk" (Acts 3:6).

The third message of this little book is profoundly important. Handling holy things will not make us pure, but handling unholy things will pollute us. Just because we are doing a holy work, like building the temple is no guarantee that we are right with God, or sons in whom he is well pleased. We must serve with clean hearts or all our labor is in vain. Sad indeed would be a life of toil and building temples, should all that work be rejected by a God.

To Modern Preachers and Teachers

The name Haggai means "Festive." He who is engaged in such a great and glorious work as God's, and does so in the right spirit, could be nothing but. Is there any unfinished business? Has some work fallen idle? Have we started only to stop and forget some high and holy calling? If so, let us "consider our ways" for life is a "time to build." Let us begin to build again the broken things, and let us give

God all the glory.

Zechariah - Who God Remembers

The Prophecy of Zechariah is the longest and most complex among the minor prophets. His name means "God remembers." Just as our dreams are sometimes a swirling of images, without regard for time and sequence, this work is a kaleidoscope of visions. Among the predictions about Jerusalem are precious messianic promises that find their fulfillment in Christ.

Two months after Haggai preached his first sermon and the work began on the Temple God spoke to Zechariah. God is not limited in the number of vessels he can fill nor of those he can pour out. The rebuilding of the Temple was accompanied with a great outpouring of God's

Spirit and where there is faith there is also the Word.

The calamities that fell on Israel and Judea were a display of God's anger. It is as if Zechariah is saying, "learn from the mistakes of others, and don't repeat their folly." We too were told that the scriptures were given to us as examples. "Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples; and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come. Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." (Heb. 10:11-12). "Be not like your fathers," said the sage. (Zec.1:4).

His visions include colored horses like the Apocalypse of John. There are angels and myrtle trees and even a glimpse of the Devil himself. There are flying scrolls and stones with eyes, there is judgment and justice. These visions are smoke and fire and fury. The fourteen

chapters are full of symbols, and signs, lightning and thunder. No one fell asleep during Zechariah's sermons. His oracles still shake heaven and earth.

Nations are seen swallowing up nations and then being crushed by another. When Zechariah spoke of Egypt, Assyria (already reduced to subservience), Philistia, Syria, Tyre and Sidon he was speaking of all that dared to touch the "apple of [God's] eye." 2:8. Woe to all who had a part in ill-treating God's chosen. The LORD will shake his hand upon all who were unkind to Israel.

The work of Zechariah and Zerubbabel was only a shadow of another day when God will say "I am returned to Jerusalem with mercies; my house shall be built in it, saith the LORD of hosts, and a line shall be stretched forth upon Jerusalem" 1:16. In that day a servant shall appear who is called the BRANCH. Then God says through his prophet, "I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day."

While this speaks of a day yet to come, one can only shudder to think of what that might mean in light of the crucifixion of the BRANCH.

Zechariah speaks of the restoration one moment and then he is predicting destruction the next. He is rejoicing and then he seems to be lamenting. He speaks of God's forgiveness and pity and then next moment is telling again of God's wrath. The reason for this is that this restoration of the temple was to be temporary. Once again it shall be in ruin and God shall abandon her. Zechariah himself had no idea Rome would one day rule the world and destroy the city yet again. He had no idea when he spoke of the gathering of Jews from the far corners of the earth that he was speaking of Ben Gurion

and the founding of a modern Jewish state (8:7), but these things have come to pass as he predicted.

The fulfillment of prophecy is not proof of the veracity of God's word. The believer needs no proof. However, when incredible events come to pass Christians cannot help but find comfort in the accuracy of the Bible. The fall and utter destruction of Tyre was foretold (9:4). For centuries this promise laid dormant, then in 332BC

Alexander the Great accomplished what the Assyrians and Babylon found impossible (Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to it for more than a year, but in vain). The Macedonian tore down the city and overpowered the sea fortress killing all the inhabitants and selling 20,000 into slavery.

The prophet spoke of things he could not have understood. Little did he know who would be riding on the colt, the foal of an ass (9:9) nor who would be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver (11:12). Neither did he realize the depth of the mourning that shall come when Israel looks upon that awesome "me whom they have pierced"

(12:10).

Zechariah's vision included a rending of the earth when the Mount of Olives shall break in two. "And his feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives which is before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, and there shall be a very great valley; and half of the mountain shall remove toward the north, and half of it to the south"

(13:4). It was upon this mountain that the Lord Jesus ascended and mesmerized his disciples until the angels once again animated the startled followers of Christ saying, "Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11).

This difficult book is a labyrinth for the even the most learned and astute among scholars. It is filled with much mystery yet its fear and fury ends with a triumphal note of hope and joy. It looks forward to that coming day when "the LORD shall be king over all the earth" (14:9a). And in that day the bells on the horse's bridle shall ring calling attention to the "HOLINESS UNTO THE LORD" (14:20).

Malachi - The Last Prophet

Malachi has the last word. Malachi is the final prophet that shall introduce a prolonged silence of over four hundred years. His name means "Messenger" or "One who has a message." The description of conditions in his world seem to date his ministry to a period shortly after Nehemiah, although this is in no wise certain.

Little did his contemporaries realize that they were about to witness the conclusion of an era. Little did they appreciate the importance of this final messenger or his message. All too often we assume that there will be another sermon next week, or another opportunity will knock at our door tomorrow. Often God's servants are not appreciated until they are gone. There is no guarantee that the God who pleads with us today will even speak to us tomorrow. There is no guarantee that we will not run out of chances, and that our children will be able to rekindle fires we have allowed to die out.

Time and time again God restored the unfaithful children of Israel. Time and time again they took God for granted, forsook and forgot him. There always seemed to be a voice crying in the streets, warning God's people to "repent" and return to him. This last word was not an impassioned appeal or religious hysteria, it was instead a sincere and reasoned argument of a teacher. Different from all the other writings of the prophets in style and approach, Malachi taught by asking simple questions to provoke interest and then set out to prove his thesis. He made a statement and a charge against his fellow Jews. Then, seemingly as if to answer objections, he poses a hypothetical response in the form of a question. "You

have robbed God." "But ye say, 'How have we robbed God?'"

Lastly he proceeds to answer this question. This is called the didactic-dialectic method of reasoning. God is always reasonable. Sin is always insanity.

Divorce among God's people was becoming common place and comfortably accepted. A feeling of estrangement and alienation to God was growing, as their love for God was dying. Offerings to God were inferior and offensive as priests were sacrificing the sick, and the lame animals instead of the best. The people called devotions a "drudgery" and expressed a "weariness" in worship. The priests compromised their integrity by calling evil good (2:17) and were secretly despised by the very people they served. God's chosen people were coming to believe that it did not pay to serve God. They began to feel that evil-doers were just as prosperous or even more successful than the righteous (3:15).

Spiritually speaking, Israel was never in a weaker state. More frightening however, is how this awful description resembles conditions and attitudes in many churches today.

Christians are breaking sacred marriage vows at an alarming rate and thereby defrauding their marriage partners. God could not make it any clearer than he has through his servant Malachi, he hates divorce (2:16).

It is amazing how man is trying to defend what God hates.

The second indictment had to do with theft. God was robbed. God is being robbed every day still. To all who

respond with the teachers dialectic response, "How have we robbed God ?" the answer is still "in tithes and offerings." To those who still wish to argue with

God, and insist that "tithes" are ancient tokens, Old Testament and

"legalistic," we simply continue to point to God's charge found in the larger word that defies measurement "offerings." We all know how big or small a tithe is, but who can ever give an "offering"

large enough. And how can an offering be legalistic?

God keeps the books of the heart and he who embezzles the blessings of the

Almighty shall one day give an account when the "books are opened" (Mal.

3:16; Rev. 20:12)..

Offering God less than our best is not proof of our devotion, rather it is evidence spiritual decadence. God knows a diseased sacrifice when he sees one. Going through the motions of worship while resenting faith's requirements, is like Judas planting a kiss on the cheek of the Lord Jesus. God receives no enjoyment from hypocrisy.

Does it pay to serve and obey God? Many were expressing their doubts about just that. "And now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered" (3:15). Faith does not wear a long face. Faith does not count carnal things and compare itself with unbelievers. Faith does not weigh itself on worldly scales nor attempt to balance the eternal with the temporal. True piety does not walk through this world as

if in mourning (3:14), and carry faith as if it is a heavy load and burden.

Malachi, like a final voice of reason, appeals to the Jews to return to their first love, but seemingly in vain. At last he foretells the coming of another Malachi "messenger" who he calls Elijah the prophet that will be the precursor to the coming and final judgment.

Sad to say the final word of the Old Testament speaks of a curse. "I will come and smite the land with a curse" 4:6. And what a curse it was. It began with four hundred years of silence, and then after the rejection and crucifixion of Israel's only hope, the Messiah, the Jews would wander the world for nearly two thousand years, wondering at the words of this book and longing for an unobtainable peace.

No unfilled prophecy stands in the way of the second coming. We may very well be hearing the final voices of the church age. It could be a minute before midnight or a day before a dawn that is described as the rising Sun of righteousness with healing on his wings (4:2).

Prophets spoke for God and of God. "And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me" (Lk. 24:44).

To Modern Preachers and Teachers

Your voice may be the final voice some sinner may hear before they step out into eternity. Your sermon or your lesson may be their last. Great care should be given so we may be able to say with the

Apostle Paul, "I kept back nothing."

Minor Prophets - Conclusion

These twelve men were as different as snowflakes, yet they were one in spirit. They were God's special messengers and their work is timeless. They were the preachers of God. Although they were of the Old

Testament, their sermons still echo and bounce off the steep canyon walls of the human conscience.

Their lessons are for all who will listen, Jew or

Gentile alike. They warned of the folly of sin and the foolishness of forgetting God. They offered hope as they spoke of the coming day of the

Lord and they spoke of Jesus.

Every teacher and preacher must have some of the gift of prophecy if they are to be effective. The twelve minor prophets stand side by side in the eternal canon, and each make a contribution of character. Each life left a legacy of faith from which the modern teacher and preacher can learn. Twelve lessons comprise a simple curriculum that every modern minister should study.

Hosea teaches us to "Go love." No preacher dare enter the ministry without it, for love is the law of God. In Joel we learn about the Spirit, without whom nothing lasting can be accomplished. Amos is the farmer with a burden. No man belongs behind the sacred desk who is without one. Such a man will himself be a burden to those who must listen to this head without a heart. Obediah teaches about the end of pride,

Micah about humility. Jonah is a warning to every preacher who thinks he can choose his own parish apart

from God. From Nahum a shepherd can learn how to sing to and comfort the sheep. Habakkuk is the thinker and

Zephaniah is the Seer. Haggai is festive, and Zechariah reminds us to remember.

Malachi is the last voice the Jewish nation heard until John cried out in the wilderness. Every teacher should be aware that their words about God might be the last words someone might hear before they step out into eternity. It is an awesome responsibility to stand in God's stead and be a voice for him. Let each who opens the Blessed Book and dares to say "thus saith the Lord" be faithful to the sacred text and the sacred task.