

*Aren't the days of the
eccentric prophet over?*

revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel (Lk 2:32).

Stripped and Barefoot for Three Years

The Lord spoke through Isaiah son of Amoz. He said to him, "Take off the sackcloth from your body and the sandals from your feet." And he did so, going around stripped and barefoot. Then the Lord said, "Just as my servant Isaiah has gone stripped and barefoot for three years..." -Isaiah 20:2-3

Oh, to be a prophet of God...It's a calling that has its drawbacks, one of which would be that you could be called to do something that would make most people think you lost your nut. But if the Lord wants to make a point and use you to do it, I guess that's his business.

So, the Lord wants to send a prophetic message concerning Egypt and Cush (likely part of the upper Nile region or Ethiopia). To do so he tells Isaiah to take off his clothes and shoes and walk around stripped and barefoot for three years as a sign that the Egyptians and the Cushites would be led away stripped and barefoot by the Assyrians. It's

bad enough that the prophet has to wear a sack for clothes. The sackcloth that Isaiah was wearing could have been a sign of mourning or it may have been standard issue for a prophet (Prophet's not Class - which, by the way, is always drafted and never enlisted). But the word of the Lord comes and Isaiah has to shed the sackcloth and his shoes and walk around either naked or in his skivvies for three years. When the Lord wants to make a point, he wants to make a point, and the prophet's job is to be used for just that purpose.

Ezekiel didn't have it any better. He was told by the Lord to cook bread over a fire fueled by human excrement and lie on his side for 390 days for the sin of Israel plus 40 days for the sin of Judah (see Ezekiel 4). He was able to get a reprieve from the Lord to use cow manure instead, but again, we get some insight into the glories of being a prophet of Yahweh.

How about today? Would the Lord lead someone to do a "weird" prophetic act to make a point? Aren't the days of the eccentric prophet over? Well, not necessarily. First of all, there are prophets in the New Testament who performed prophetic theater to make a dramatic point (i.e., Agabus, Acts 21:10-11). Second, some of Jesus' methods of ministry might seem a bit eccentric if we were to imitate them today. Third, I believe the Lord delights in using persons that the world thinks are peculiar, to do his bidding.

It's not that every strange duck who claims to speak for God is a prophet. But we need to be careful to not judge too quickly those who seem a little off the wall because hey would actually be in good company,

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Your Name and Renown Are the Desire of Our Hearts

Yes, Lord, walking in the way of your laws, we wait for you; your name and renown are the desire of our hearts. My soul yearns for you in the night; in the morning my spirit longs for you. -Isaiah 26:8-9

There is something within us that delights when the name of the Lord is honored. We long to see him glorified. We want the fame of the Lord to spread. This is one of the reasons we like to hear the testimonies of what God has done in a person's life. The *name and renown* of the Lord *are the desire of our hearts*.

There are reasons that we desire to see the name of the Lord glorified. One is because we bear his name. Our identity is wrapped up in him so when he receives glory, we share in it. Another reason is that we instinctively know that he is worthy to receive the praise. When God gets his due, we have a sense that things are as they should be. A third reason is that we know that the knowledge of the Lord is what people need in order to be saved. When his name and renown are spread abroad, we get excited because we know that people's lives are going to be touched and changed. Conversely, it breaks our hearts when the name of the Lord is dishonored or ignored.

Psalm 115:1 says, *Not to us, O Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory*. Our desire is not for our own names to be glorified but for his name to receive the praise. How appropriate would it be for us to take any of the glory that belongs to the Lord? Not at all. *You have exalted above all things your name and your word*, the Psalmist says (Ps 138:2). His name is exalted above all things and we love to see that name glorified. When Jesus was on the earth he prayed, "Father, glorify your name!" A voice came from heaven and said, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again" (Jn 12:28). The name and renown of the Father were certainly the desire of the heart of Jesus.

No doubt, you can relate to the Doug Horley song which says, "We want to see Jesus lifted high—A banner that flies across this land—That all men might see the truth and know—He is the way to heaven." Yes, that is the desire of our hearts. When his name is glorified, we rejoice. We want *the earth [to] be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea* (Is 11:9).

Whether it is through our lives or any other possible way, we want to see the Lord honored because the name and renown of the Lord are the desire of our hearts.

See, I Lay a Stone in Zion

So this is what the Sovereign Lord says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed. -Isaiah 28:16

Isaiah received more revelation concerning the coming Messiah than any other Old Testament prophet. Both Paul (Romans 9:33) and Peter (1 Peter 2:6) contend that Jesus of Nazareth is the messianic fulfillment of Isaiah 28:16. Let's take a look how.

See, I lay a stone in Zion. The *Sovereign Lord* has spoken and he says, "Look. I want you to see something. It is not a hidden thing. You who have eyes to see, take a look and you will see." See what? That "I lay a stone in Zion." Notice that it is God himself who lays the stone. It is placed there by him. And where is it placed? In Zion, the place of God's dwelling among his people (see page 204).

A tested stone. So what kind of stone is it? It is a *tested stone*. It is one tested for its strength, for its ability to withstand the weight of all that is to be built upon it. Jesus was tried and found to be true. Through his faithfulness, his suffering and his obedience to death on the cross, he was proven worthy.

A precious cornerstone. Jesus is the cornerstone that has become the measuring and plumb line for the entire house of God. When they laid the foundation for Solomon's temple, they didn't use ordinary stone, they used "precious" or valuable stone (see 1 Kings 5:17). Peter describes Jesus as, *The Living Stone--rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him* (1 Pt 2:4).

A sure foundation. Paul says that we are *members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone* (Ep 2:19-20). And this building ain't about to fall down.

The one who trusts will never be dismayed. It is not so much the power of our faith and trust that will keep us from becoming dismayed, it is the strength of what we are trusting that will provide the stability that will cause us to never be shaken.

Isaiah chapter eight speaks of the Lord being a *stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall* (v14). But the stone spoken of here is the foundation stone of the kingdom of God, Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

How rampant is insincere and formal worship in the body of Christ? when his name is glorified, we rejoice

The strength of our character comes from the things that we have put our hand to and actually done kingdom of God

Their Worship Is Made up Only of Rules Taught by Men

The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men." -Isaiah 29:13

God is attentive to the heart of the worshiper first, and then the form of worship. We, on the other hand, seem to concentrate more on the form than what is in the heart. Part of the reason for this is that it is much more difficult for us than for God to measure what is in the heart of the worshiper. But both the heart and the form are important—but especially the heart.

The word of the Lord came to Isaiah concerning the worship of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the one place on earth place where Yahweh had chosen to put his name and his presence. There was a lot of “form” in temple worship but the Lord wanted more than that. He said, *These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.* to the Pharisees and said that Isaiah's worship has become synonymous with form. We were big on form and decrepit in heart.

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We might presume that the cosmos would always be here

For the people of Jerusalem (and the Pharisees) worship had somehow devolved to being *made up only of rules taught by men*. Whatever the Lord had prescribed had been replaced by man-made tradition. They had lost touch with the right heart and the correct form. You may say, “Well the Lord isn’t concerned about form anymore,” but that is not altogether true. Temple worship is no more, but there are some healthy examples of appropriate expressions of worship in both the Old and New Testaments. The fact is, we get more of our form from ancient synagogue worship than anywhere. You might think that the New Testament model would closely mirror the synagogue model—but it doesn’t. We are called to worship in *spirit and in truth* (Jn 4:24) and Spirit-inspired worship will of necessity take some form. But we need to be sure that our form of worship is not dictated by the *traditions of men* (Mark 7:8).

Do you think that the Lord is pleased for the most part with our corporate worship? I don’t. How rampant is the problem of insincere and formal worship in the body of Christ? And what about the “rules” we observe during worship that are of human origin? We must guard, as first importance, the heart of worship. For, when we lose the heart of worship we will begin to rely on the form. From there, it is inevitable that the form will degrade into *worship that is made up only of rules taught by men*.

And by Noble Deeds He Stands

The noble man makes noble plans, and by noble deeds he stands. - Isaiah 32:8

My Father-in-law had a saying that was both catchy and useful. It was, “Plan your work and work your plan.” Isaiah also had a catchy and useful saying: *The noble man makes noble plans, and by noble deeds he stands.* “Noble” people make noble plans—and follow through with them.

It is not good enough just to make plans. We all know that. On the way home from a church family meeting where we as pastors laid out some “noble plans” for the future, I drove by a billboard for a phone card company that said, “Talk is cheap” (the Lord speaks in unique ways). Talk is cheap, indeed. My seminary professor, Doug Welch, had a poster in his office of a wide-mouthed hippo with this caption: “After all is said and done, there is usually more said than done.”

This does not discount the importance of making plans, however. We see that what a noble man does is make noble plans. The Hebrew is interesting here. Transliterated it goes something like this: “Noble makes plans noble, and by noble he stands.” A noble person not only makes plans, he or she makes noble plans—plans that have a higher purpose than serving self.

So, what we need to do is make plans and then carry them out. We need a noble plan, but the plan itself will not make us stand. This idea is very consistent with what Jesus taught. He said to the twelve, “*Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them*” (Jn 13:17). In Jesus’ parable in Matthew 7, the only difference between the man who built his house on the rock and the one who built on the sand was that the first heard Jesus’ teachings and put them into practice. The second man heard the words alright, he just did not put them into practice. The strength of our character comes from the things that we have put our hand to and actually done, not by what we merely know to do or wish we would have done.

In Psalm 51:12, David prays, *Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me*. The word “willing” is the same root word as the word “noble.” A noble heart is a willing heart. It is the heart that will “sustain” you. It is a heart that will make noble plans and then nobly work to fulfill those plans.

Do you want to be a noble man or woman of God of strong standing in the kingdom? Then plan a noble work and nobly work that plan.

The strength of our character comes from the things that we do. So how does antiquity deal with this small detail of 185,000 men being killed?

All the Stars of the Heavens Will Be Dissolved

All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shriveled figs from the fig tree. -Isaiah 34:4

Both the Old and New Testament prophets foretell the “day of the Lord”—a day of judgment when, quite literally, the heavens and the earth will be destroyed by God. Almost all of the twenty-two times that the phrase “day of the Lord” is used in Scripture, it has to do with a dreadful day of destruction. Isaiah 34:4 is one example.

If it wasn't for the attestation of the biblical prophets concerning the destruction of the heavens and the earth, we might presume that the cosmos would always be here. Even with the biblical witness, many, if not most, of us who hold to the testimony of Jesus don't really expect it all to burn—at least not before our lives run their courses. *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar, the earth will be laid bare, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare* (2 Pe 3:10).

Isaiah's depiction of this destruction of the heavens is sensational. *All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll.* Earlier he says, *See, the Lord is going to lay waste the earth...The earth will be completely laid waste* (24:1,3). It is good to always ask the question concerning an oracle of a prophet, “Is he speaking figuratively or literally?” There are just too many other prophetic witnesses (i.e., Ezekiel 30, Amos 5, Zephaniah 1, 2 Thessalonians 1) that predict a similar cataclysm to reject the idea that the day of the Lord *will come like destruction from the Almighty* (Jl 1:15). Jesus himself tells us that a day will come when, *“The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken”* (Mt 24:29).

Exactly when is all this to take place and what is the progression of events that will lead to this cataclysm? These are two good questions. The first is unanswerable and most North American Christians are wrong about the second. But suffice it to say, for now, that a day will come, called the day of the Lord, when *all the stars of the heavens will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll.* And no advice concerning the coming of this day could be more appropriate than Peter's when he said, *Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming* (2Pe 3:11-12).

A Hundred and Eighty-five Thousand Men

Then the angel of the Lord went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning--there were all the dead bodies! So Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew. -Isaiah 37:36-37

Sometimes the nations and the kings spoken of in the Old Testament are obscure. The Hivites, Perizzites, Gargashites, Amorites and Jebusites are a little tough to track down in the annals of antiquity. They were very ancient peoples and they didn't exactly become glorious empires in their day. Not so with Assyria. When king Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem faced off with Sennacherib and the Assyrians, they were dealing with the greatest empire the Middle East had seen until that time. Historical references to Sennacherib and the Assyrian Empire abound. The Assyrians were anything but obscure.

Hezekiah and the residents of Jerusalem had reason to fear the impending siege of this great empire and its army. The cockiness of the Assyrian commanders was reasonable. The a toppling every nation and mocking their gods as they advanced. They had conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in the process and had taken over most of Judah before Hezekiah found them at his doorstep. In the natural, he's toast. So Hezekiah lays it out before the Lord and God answers dramatically. The angel of the Lord goes out to the Assyrian camp and in one night 185,000 men are put to death. The great Assyrian army breaks camp and withdraws.

So how does antiquity deal with this small detail of 185,000 men being killed and the great Assyrian army retreating? Did the people of the world hear about it? Is there an extra-biblical record of it? According to the Greek historian Herodotus, the Assyrians were wiped out by the bubonic plague. Yes the world heard—and they found out that Yahweh is God.

More than the corroboration of a biblical story by an ancient historian, I am encouraged by the unmitigated deliverance of the people of God from the hand of a dominant world power of its time. Hezekiah's prayer, *O Lord our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O Lord, are God* (37:20), was answered. We tend to view the biblical narrative outside the context of the real world. To do so misses the eminent point that the God who took out 185,000 Assyrians in the year 701 B.C. is the same God who acts on our behalf in the very certain reality that we call our own.

So how does antiquity deal with

If a reed became “bruised,” or damaged it would be broken and then discarded as useless

Her Hard Service Has Been Completed

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. -Isaiah 40:1-2

When Isaiah says these words, he is speaking of future things. During the time of Isaiah, in 701 B.C., Jerusalem had been delivered from the Assyrians. But one-hundred-seventeen years later, the holy city would fall to the Babylonians. Most commentators assume that the "hard service" of which Isaiah speaks is what the people of God endured during the seventy years of Babylonian captivity. Although many commentators believe that Isaiah 40:1-2 was written by a "second" Isaiah who would have come after the return from captivity, I believe the "first" Isaiah came—and not only about what would happen centuries beyond.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has

been completed, that her sin has been paid for. The Father would look on the suffering of his people and would say, "Enough." A time of captivity would come, but then would come the time when the *hard service* would be over. So, speak prophetically to Jerusalem. Speak tenderly to her. Let her know that *her sin has been paid for.*

For any people under the shadow of oppression, these are welcome and soothing words. They certainly would have been for the captive Jews who were paying the price of their forefathers' sin. But think about how appropriate these words are to all who face the oppression and captivity of sin, doing "hard service" in a vain attempt to atone for their iniquity. Comfort, comfort the people with the good news. Your day of striving is over. No need to work so hard. In fact, no need to work at all to make up for the past. Your sin is paid for. It is finished.

Did you notice that the Lord is not speaking directly to the people here? He is giving Isaiah, and, more importantly, the evangelists of the Babylonian captivity, the task of comforting and speaking tenderly to the people. And now, the task of telling the good news has been given to all the people of God. Tell the news to all who are weary and heavy laden that their sin has been paid for. Jesus has received from the Lord's hand double for all your sins and your days of hard service under the oppressive yoke are over.

It is his pattern to provide a three-fold witness to testify: Before, during and after the fact

under the oppressive yoke are over

A Bruised Reed He Will Not Break

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice. -Isaiah 42:1-3

Another messianic harbinger from Isaiah. This one is quoted in Matthew 12:18-20 describing the life and ministry of Jesus. He is the servant of the Most High, upheld by his mighty hand. He is the chosen one in whom the Father delights. The Spirit of God is on him and he has the power to bring justice to the nations. He is not boisterous nor will he incite. These are all apt descriptions of the Christ of the Gospels. But the most important part shows the tender disposition of the Christ. *he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.*

A reed is the thick stalk of a tall marshy grass. Bible times it was used as a measuring stick as well as a writing tool. Today, it is used in various musical instruments. If a reed became "bruised" or damaged it would be broken and then discarded as useless.

The analogy that Isaiah uses is absolutely relevant to the human condition. How easy it is to become wounded, even disabled, in circumstances of life. But the Lord knows our frame, our weaknesses and our hurts. As with the woman caught in adultery (John 8), the world would write us off, religion would punish us and the devil would kick us while we are down, but Jesus will do none of these. He will nurture us and move us toward healing and usefulness.

Jesus also will not snuff out a *smoldering wick*. Such a wick still has a glow to it but it is not producing a flame. It is not really doing any good and may even be causing discomfort by the smoke it is producing, but the ember of a fire is still there. Some of us are like that. We can't say that our candle is burning brightly for the Lord. In fact, some of us are really struggling to keep the flame going at all. We have let it burn down to a smolder. But Jesus will never have a heart to snuff out your smoldering wick. It still has the ember. It still has the immediate potential to burn and needs the trimming of repentance and the of wind of the Spirit. Jesus will do all he can to see you burn brightly again.

If you are a bruised reed or a smoldering wick, take heart. Jesus is for you and not against you. He loves you more than you could possibly know.

Because a government leader doesn't know the Lord doesn't mean that he or she can't be anointed by God to accomplish his will

damaged it would be broken and then discarded as useless

I Have Revealed and Saved and Proclaimed

Which of them foretold this and proclaimed to us the former things?...I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from me there is no savior. I have revealed and saved and proclaimed--I, and not some foreign god among you. You are my witnesses, declares the Lord, that I am God. Isaiah 43:9, 11-12

God does not do things *in a corner* (Ac 26:26). Although it is sometimes to his glory to hide a matter from the “wise and learned” (see p. 253) when God does something, he never leaves himself without a witness. In fact, it is his pattern to provide a three-fold witness to testify: Before, during and after the fact.

The Lord is comparing himself to the other so-called gods of the nations: “Which of them foretold this and proclaimed to us the former things? Let them bring in their witnesses to prove they were right, so that others may hear and say, “*It is true*” (v9). The Lord goes on to say, *Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me. I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from me there is no savior.* (vs 10-11). And then he says something that I find very significant: *I have revealed and saved and proclaimed--I, and not some foreign god among you. You are my witnesses.*

“*I have revealed and saved and proclaimed.*” This is the normal pattern when God chooses to do something in the earth—or in your life. First is the foretelling of the action, second is the act itself and third is the proclamation of the act. This is what separates God (and the gospel) from the foreign gods and their claims. Since God knows the end from the beginning and does all things well, he is able to foretell something exactly as it will happen, bring it to pass, and establish an irrefutable witness to that which he has accomplished.

Amos 3:7 says, *Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets.* That is the revealing or the foretelling. Then sometime later comes the glorious witness of the act itself and then after that, those who have seen it are called to proclaim what he has done. As is perhaps obvious to you, this is exactly the pattern regarding the gospel of Jesus Christ. God foretold it through the prophets, his arm then worked salvation and now it is being proclaimed all over the earth by his witnesses.

What God had done has been done for all to see and cannot be denied. Unlike some foreign god, he revealed and saved and proclaimed, and continues to foretell, act and call us to witness to his marvelous works.

It is his pattern to provide a
There is nothing innocent about considering your horoscope. It is a form of divination.

Cyrus, He Is My Shepherd

I am the Lord...who says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, “Let it be rebuilt,” and of the temple, “Let its foundations be laid.”’ -Isaiah 44:24, 28

Two major questions arise from the references to Cyrus in the book of Isaiah. One has to do with how Isaiah could have described and named the man who would free the Jews from Babylonian captivity when the Babylonian captivity had not yet taken place and the deliverer had not yet been born. The other question has to do with how the Lord could call Cyrus, a pagan king who did not know or acknowledge Yahweh, “*My shepherd*” and, “*My anointed.*”

The former question has basically one of two possible answers. First: This section of Isaiah could not have been written by the Isaiah of Jerusalem who prophesied during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah (740-686 B.C.) because Cyrus, who is specifically named in Isaiah, reigned from 559-530 B.C.. Another person must have written about Cyrus after the fact (even though the passages are predictive) and his writings were added to the Isaiah corpus. Second: Isaiah of Jerusalem prophetically foresaw the Babylonian captivity and was given the name of the one who would return the Jews to their homeland to rebuild it.

Now, concerning Cyrus being the shepherd and anointed of the Lord, it seems like Cyrus was not that bad of a guy—but that really has nothing to do with his role for being anointed by God for his purposes. In Isaiah 45:5, the Lord says concerning Cyrus, *I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me.* Just because a government leader doesn’t know the Lord doesn’t mean that he or she can’t be anointed by God to accomplish his will. *The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord,* it says in Proverbs 21:1. Cyrus was the one whom Isaiah predicted to be the man God would use to restore Jerusalem and its people. In that sense he is the shepherd of the Lord. He “*will accomplish all that I please.*”

Most political leaders have some sense of the burden of their calling and are receptive and even solicitous of prayer. They may not know the Lord, but that does not preclude God from working through them or instructing us to pray for them (see 1 Timothy 2:1-2). Though it would be advantageous to have more believers in public office, there is no guarantee that these would always hear and do the will of God. And, it is altogether possible that the public official who does not know the Lord could become his anointed shepherd.

The Lord has not called you to be successful. He has called you to be faithful.

Let Your Astrologers Come Forward

All the counsel you have received has only worn you out! Let your astrologers come forward, those stargazers who make predictions month by month, let them save you from what is coming upon you. -Isaiah 47:13

Astrology is on the way out...it appears...for now. It seems that the whole horoscope thing is not as popular as it was thirty years ago. Other occult and New Age practices are presently in ascendancy among those who seek an esoteric spiritual experience. But don't count astrology out just yet. It has been around a long time and continues draw people into demonic influence through the pervasive acceptance of daily horoscopes. Much occult practice has its roots in astrology and its' practice has always been abhorrent to the Lord.

As the Random House Dictionary defines it, astrology is "The study that assumes, and professes to interpret, the influence of the heavenly bodies on human affairs." Ancient Babylon was big into astrology (sorcery, with its incantations, was a part of Babylonian religion). Babylon was the Mecca of astrology. You didn't arrive as an astrologer until you studied in the courts of Babylon.

The Lord spoke to Babylon about impending judgment. He addressed those who trusted in the *stargazers who make predictions month by month*. He said about the astrologers, "Let them save you from what is coming upon you." They had given counsel but, "All the counsel you have received has only worn you out!" The astrologers of yesteryear and of today could never give counsel that would bring life and healing and truth. Eventually the counsel that they give is wearisome to the soul. Their predictions are banal fodder for the superstitious. Maybe that's why my generation is no longer enamored with it.

What about the Magi, weren't they astrologers? We cannot say for certain, but they were probably more like astronomers because there is clearly a difference between those who believe that the movements of the stars have transcendent influence on our lives and those who recognize that an unusual occurrence in the sky could be a sign from God.

Astrology is an abomination to the Lord. There is nothing innocent about considering your horoscope. It is a form of divination. It is attempting to foretell events or acquire knowledge by ungodly supernatural means. It is ascribing divine sovereignty to the created order—namely the stars. According to the astrologer, your destiny is under the control of the stars, not the Living God. Such a concept is not just ludicrous—it is demonic.

What Is Due Me Is in the Lord's Hand

But I said, "I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing. Yet what is due me is in the Lord's hand, and my reward is with my God." -Isaiah 49:4

It is not an easy time when you assess your work—maybe even your life's work—and you say, "I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing." Have you ever felt this way? I know that I have. It can happen in your business, your career, raising a family or in your ministry. You take a look at your dreams and goals and compare them to what you have accomplished, and you ask, "Have I labored to no purpose? Have I given the best years of my life for nothing?"

In Isaiah 49:3, God said, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor." But God's suffering servant says, "I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing." The promise is that Israel can they do that as captives in Babylon? The results of his life's work. Sure, he did a lot of miracles, but what did he have to show in the end? Dying on the cross as a Roman criminal, despised and rejected by the people and their leaders, deserted by all but one of his disciples, forsaken by the Father, he could have easily said, "I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing."

Jesus knew better, of course, but we often don't. We can say those disheartened words and really mean them. George Bailey had Clarence the angel to show him that, despite what he was feeling, he really did have "A Wonderful Life." But we may not have that luxury. The luxury that we do have, however, is found in what the servant of the Lord says next: *Yet what is due me is in the Lord's hand, and my reward is with my God.*

There could be no more righteous perspective than this. The fact is, the Lord has not called you to be successful. He has called you to be faithful. Yes, your faithfulness will, more than likely, be rewarded in this life, but what if it isn't? God's economy is his economy. He decides who gets rewarded, and when. What is due you is in the Lord's hand. Your reward is with your God and you need not, and should not, look any further. Not everyone has labored faithfully and many indeed have worked for nothing. But if you are faithful, you will not have spent your strength for nothing. What is due you is in the Lord's hand.

There is nothing innocent about considering your horoscope. It is

The messengers may have arrived with their feet scuffed and bleeding. That would have made those feet all the more beautiful.

The Lord has not called you to be successful. He has called you to be faithful.

Consider the wonder of this messianic prophecy which remarkably foretells the life of Jesus

The Feet of Those Who Bring Good News

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!" -Isaiah 52:7

We have been privileged on two separate occasions to have Bob Brassett, an evangelist from Victoria, B.C., in our home. As Canadians, our custom is to take off our shoes at the door as we enter our homes. When Bob was here the first time, our cat did something that she had never done before with anyone's shoes. She went over to Bob's and laid on them. I remarked about her unusual behavior, half-jokingly commenting that, after all, they were the shoes of an evangelist. We laughed about it together but then Bob proceeded to inform us that every time he leaves on an evangelistic trip, his wife prays over his shoes, claiming Isaiah 52:7. Our cat never did it again—that is, until Bob came back a year later.

How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news. In ancient times, messengers would be sent from the scene of a battle to run with news concerning the conflict to those who were anxious to hear—especially those in authority. Sometimes the news would be good and sometimes it would be bad. But for those who were to come running proclaiming the good news of the salvation of God's sovereign deliverance for the Jews in captivity, how beautiful would those feet be?

The bread of life and the wine of the Spirit cannot be bought with money

This is the context for Isaiah's commentary on those who traverse the mountains with the good news that the God of Zion reigns. But because we know that we have the gospel, what Isaiah has to say has crisp meaning for us today. I love what the angel had to say to the shepherds on the night that Jesus was born: "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people" (Lk 2:10). Oh those beautiful angels. But where the angels have "wings," we have feet. Feet that are to be *shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace* (Eph 6:15 KJV). Feet that are to run with the news of salvation. Feet that carry the good tidings of the triumphant reign of our God. Beautiful feet.

Most people don't have beautiful feet. I doubt whether you would consider it a sublime specter to gaze at Bob Brassett's. The messengers who ran through mountainous terrain to bring good news may have arrived with their feet scuffed and bleeding and filthy for the very fact that they were so anxious to bring the news to those who needed to hear it. But don't you see? That would have made those feet all the more beautiful.

Isaiah 53

Consider the wonder of this messianic prophecy which remarkably foretells the life of Jesus:

See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Just as there were many who were appalled at him--his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness--so will he sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand. Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of suffering, and acquainted with pain. Like one from whom men have hid their faces, he was despised, and he was esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was

We think that we will be heard for our great sacrifices while the Lord is looking to see if we have remembered things close to his heart

Jesus

crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. -Isaiah 52:13-53:12 NIV

You Who Have No Money, Come, Buy and Eat

Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. -Isaiah 55:1-2

Go into virtually any restaurant and order something off the menu and then tell them that you have no money and see if they bring you your food. But if the owner of the restaurant tells the maitre-d' that it's on him, you can order and enjoy anything you want.

How many times have you (sometimes wisely) turned down an invitation to go out with friends because the Lord invites us to come drink and dine, but at the Lord's table, we reason. And we can't. But he issues an invitation unlike any we have received before. Our experience has been that we have to pay for what we order. Wine and milk does not come free. Bread is sold for a price and the fare of the wealthy is beyond us. But the Lord says, "You don't have any money? Come, buy and eat anyway." "But how can I buy when I have no money?," you say. And the Lord says, "This is a different kind of food. It is the bread of life. It is the milk of the word. It is the meat of the will of God. It is the wine of the Spirit. It didn't come cheap, in fact, it is priceless, but I offer it to you freely."

To those who came looking for him because he had fed them the day before, Jesus said, "Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you" (Jn 6:27). Then he told them, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty" (v35). Jesus invites us to come and eat that which is truly good and will always satisfy. What the world has to offer will only leave you wanting. Why spend your strength and your money on what will leave you unsatisfied when God's offer is, *Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life* (Rv 22:17).

They say that the best things in life are free, so don't worry if you don't have much cash. The bread of life and the wine of the Spirit cannot be bought with money anyway. Jesus picked up the tab—and invites you to come and delight in the richest of fare.

Why Have We Fasted and You Have Not Seen It?

They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. 'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?' "Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please..." -Isaiah 58:2-3

Fasting should not be seen as a hunger strike to force God to give you what you want, but let's face it, we fast because we want to get God's attention. That may sound unspiritual, but it's true. Fasting proves our seriousness about receiving from God what only he can give. If we want to get closer to God, discern his will or seek his provision, it is entirely appropriate to go into times of fasting with prayer. Jesus said that when we fast, we should expect God to see it and reward us (see Matthew 6:18).

So, it is understandable that when someone seeks the Lord by fasting, and he does not respond, they would ask the question, "Why have we fasted and you have not seen it?" This question can be asked with humility—sincerely wanting to know what might be hindering the prayers, or it can be said with a touch of self-righteous indignation at the discourtesy of the Lord to not notice our religious sacrifice.

In Isaiah 58, the Lord gives reasons why he did not respond to the fasting of his people. They had divorced what God really cared about from their practice of fasting. They had replaced the essential with the religious. They seemed eager to know the ways of God (v2) but they had forsaken his clear commands. During the time of fasting they did as they pleased and were involved in exploitation, quarreling, strife, and fisticuffs (v4). Not good. The Lord says to them, "You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high" (v4).

Jesus said that the Pharisees were guilty of neglecting the weightier matters of the Law for the sake of their religious traditions. This is something the people of God will always have to guard against. We think that we will be heard for our great religious sacrifices while the Lord is looking to see if we have remembered the things close to his heart. And what are those things? *To loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke...To share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter-when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood* (vs 6,7). This is the kind of "fasting" that will get the attention of the Lord.

One of the reasons that we are impotent and barren is that we are not sowing seed

The bread of life and the wine of the Spirit cannot be bought with money

We think that we will be heard

Jesus did more that heal them. He made them "clean."

The Lord Has Anointed Me to Preach Good News

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news... -Isaiah 61:1

Last week, a pastor friend of mine told me that he has recently given a challenge to the people he oversees in the Lord. It doesn't seem to be a heavy challenge, yet if it were met, I'm sure it would transform his church and cause the church growth industry to take notice. He is inviting everyone his church to ask the Lord to give them each one person to lead to Christ and mentor into Christian adolescence over the next two years. Does this seem out of the question? No, but the sad fact is that most of us do not come close to that kind of reproduction of disciples.

Impotency and barrenness mark our Christian existence.

One of the reasons that we are impotent and barren is that we

Jesus is appearing to them in dreams, in visions and in person, resulting in the conversion of thousands

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news.

of Jesus, is meant to apply to us in Jerusalem because, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses" (Ac 1:8). The same anointing that marked Jesus' ministry was to mark the ministry of his followers. The same *Spirit of the Sovereign Lord* who enabled Jesus to preach the good news is upon us as well. He has anointed us with the good news of the *year of the Lord's favor* (v2)—a perpetual Jubilee for all held captive to sin and the devil.

A prophet I met, whose testimony I believe, shared about a time he was taken to heaven. While there he was approached by Paul who asked him, "What are you doing with the gospel I gave my life for?"

Of course, Jesus could ask us the same question. What are we doing with the gospel? Are we proclaiming it? One of the reasons that we are impotent and barren is that we are not sowing seed. For the most part, we have not been good stewards of the message. We hear a lot of talk about "the anointing," but if the anointing is not being used to preach good news, what good is it? Why would the Lord anoint you if you are not willing to bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim freedom to the captives, release the prisoners from their spiritual darkness, and declare the coming day of vengeance of our God?

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news. Is this your testimony? It really needs to be. Maybe you can start by asking God to give you just one person who you can lead to Christ in the next six months and let them know that the Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on them to preach good news as well.

All of Us Have Become like One Who Is Unclean

You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved? All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags... -Isaiah 64:5-6

Under the Mosaic code certain things were considered "unclean." Particular animals, birds, sea creatures and insects were neither to be eaten nor sacrificed to the Lord because they were unclean. Any creature that had died on its own or had been strangled was unclean. Anyone who had touched a dead person was said to be unclean. And anyone who had an infectious skin disease or who had a discharge of any kind was unclean before the Lord for a length of time.

One can certainly understand that hygienic and health considerations were at the forefront of many of the laws concerning "unclean" things. But aside from that, if you were unclean you would be unfit for both social interchange and worship. Rejection by both God and man awaited those who were "unclean."

He was a passionate, genuine, persistent, bold, and self-revealing man with a remarkable call on his life

"clean."

Isaiah laments the collective state of the people who had continued to sin, provoking the Lord's anger. This being the case, Isaiah rhetorically asks, "How then can we be saved? All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags." It is probable that the term "filthy rags" is referring to menstrual cloths. In Ezekiel 36:17, the Lord says that the conduct of his people had defiled the land and was *like a woman's monthly uncleanness in my sight*. This was the collective state of God's people. They all had become as one who is unclean. What a mess. They simply could not be acceptable to the all pure God in that state.

Jesus came to make those who are "unclean," perfectly clean. Imagine the leper, in a perpetual state of uncleanness, being touched by Jesus and being made clean (see Matthew 8:2-4). Imagine the woman with the issue of blood in that same perpetual state, doing the unthinkable, going out in public and reaching out to touch the hem of Jesus' garment (see Luke 8:42-48). Jesus did more than heal them. He made them "clean."

Only one thing can make us truly clean. Ironically, it too is an "issue of blood"—the one that flowed from Jesus' side.

I Revealed Myself to Those Who Did Not Ask for Me

I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, 'Here am I, here am I.' All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people... - Isaiah 65:1-2

Many have a testimony that is a fulfillment of Jeremiah 29:13: *You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.* We went on a search for the Living God and he honored his word and revealed himself in our seeking. Others of us have a testimony that is a fulfillment of Isaiah 65:1: *I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me.* The sovereign hand of the Lord reached down, grabbed us by the scruff of the neck, turned us around and we saw the Living God face to face.

The Lord was weary of the lack of devotion of his people and the paucity of their responses to his entreaties. *"I called but you did not answer, I spoke but you did not listen"* (v12). As a result, he decided to reveal himself to a people who were not his people in order to make his own people jealous and open the door for fellowship with the Gentiles. Paul speaks of this in Romans 10:16-11:32.

I have heard a number of reports in the last few years of the Lord revealing himself to Muslim and Buddhist clerics. Jesus is appearing to them in dreams, in visions and in person, subsequently resulting in the conversion of thousands. These clerics did not specifically ask to see Jesus nor were they seeking him, but have now found him nonetheless. I wonder how the state of their hearts, their strategic positioning for the spread of the gospel and the prayers of the saints have factored into these revelations, but only the Lord knows the reasons why they were chosen. Like he did Saul of Tarsus, God has chosen to reveal himself to them for his purposes.

Jesus told two related parables, one about a man who accidentally found a buried treasure in a field and one about a man in search of fine pearls who found one of great worth (Mat 13:44-46). One man was actively looking and the other was not. But their response was the same, nonetheless. They both were ready to give all they had for what they had found. It is not likely that when we found the Lord, any one of us was entirely absorbed by an intense pursuit of God or entirely void of spiritual cognizance. But the revelation of Jesus still came by grace, as did our ability to respond—a grace given because God is willing to reveal himself even to those who aren't looking for him.

If the ark of Moses's covenant showed up today, how many Christians would flock to it in order to be close to God?

I Appointed You as a Prophet to the Nations

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations. -Jeremiah 1:5

There are some Old Testament men of God whom I wouldn't necessarily have an overwhelming desire to meet (no offense, Ezra). But Jeremiah—well, I think I would like to hang out with him. He was a passionate, genuine, persistent, bold, and self-revealing man with a remarkable call on his life. He was sometimes lonely and, yes, he felt rejected by God more than once. He is known to many as the “weeping prophet,” but it was a heart of godly intercession that induced his lamentations.

The book of Jeremiah is more autobiographical than any other of the Old Testament prophetic writings. He begins with his call to the office of a prophet. The story of his call is a portend for many who are called to carry the prophetic mantle. The first recorded words of the Lord to Jeremiah are, *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."* Jeremiah is not being nabbed randomly off the street to do some temp work for God. The Lord formed Jeremiah in the womb, and, even prior, he knew him and set him apart. Think about it. To hear God say that he knew you and set the course for your life before you were born has got to do something for your sense of call. And the call for Jeremiah was to be a *prophet to the nations*.

That's a sizable calling. Quite often, the weightier the call, the more intentional the Lord is about making it known up front. As it was with Moses and Paul, so it was with Jeremiah. The initial calling was so profound that it became inalienable.

At first, Jeremiah balks (as did Moses): *"Ah, Sovereign Lord, I do not know how to speak; I am only a child"* (v6). What is a young man to do with a call to be a prophet to the nations? But the Lord's choice stands and Jeremiah is immediately told what he must do. Without exception, he is to go to everyone to whom he is sent and declare whatever the Lord commands. This, in essence, is the call of the prophet. And the enabling is there, for the Lord (somehow) reaches out his hand and touches the mouth of Jeremiah and says, *"Now I have put my words in your mouth"* (v9).

Jeremiah was “only a child,” but he would grow up very fast. He went through many trials and tribulations—at times even despairing of life. But one thing that he never lost was his sense of calling—as a prophet to the nations.

He was a passionate, genuine, persistent, bold, and self-
There is a very popular lie going around

It Will Not Be Missed, Nor Will Another One Be Made

In those days...men will no longer say, 'The ark of the covenant of the Lord.' It will never enter their minds or be remembered; it will not be missed, nor will another one be made. -Jeremiah 3:16

Recently, at one of the weekly gatherings of our church, we were teaching on the difference between the “old wineskin” and the “new wineskin.” We were having an open discussion and were zeroing in on the differences between the Old Covenant and the New. Prior to this time of looking into the word of God, I noticed two newcomers arrive during worship. As we were into our discussion, a brother in our fellowship made the observation that the Old Covenant could not bring life and that it only resulted in death. At this, one of the newcomers angrily rose from his seat and approached me yelling, “Are you saying that the covenant God made with Moses is no longer in effect?” After assessing whether this man intended to cause me bodily harm, I said, “Yes, that is exactly what we are saying,” referring to Hebrews 8:13. We bantered for a few minutes before he took his friend, leader of a small group of “Christians” who wanted to return to the Jewish roots, putting a heavy emphasis on observing the Sabbath and the Old Testament feasts.

If the ark of Moses's covenant showed up today, how many Christians would flock to it in

It is one thing to have the Bible. It is another thing to rightly interpret it.

One of the questions I would like to ask this man, as well as the surprising numbers of Christians whom I am aware are drawn to emulate various forms of Jewish custom, is, “How do you determine which Jewish customs and Old Testament practices are still relevant and which are obsolete? Perhaps there is a good answer, but to me, such practices are turning to what Paul calls *weak and beggarly elements* (Ga 4:9 KJV) that lead to bondage.

Perhaps the greatest of all the tangible “elements” of Old Covenant worship was the ark of the covenant. If there was ever an artifact that would be an aid to worship, the ark of the presence of God would be it. And yet Jeremiah prophesied that a glorious day was coming when the people of God would not think about, talk about, miss nor even remember the ark of the covenant. Even if it were feasible to build another one, there would be no need for it. Basically, the attitude of the people would be, “Who cares. The presence of the Living God is now with us and in us.” Yet, if the ark of Moses’s covenant showed up today, how many Christians do you think would flock to it in order to be close to God?

They Have Lied about the Lord

“The house of Israel and the house of Judah have been utterly unfaithful to me,” declares the Lord. “They have lied about the Lord; they said, ‘He will do nothing! No harm will come to us; we will never see sword or famine.’” -Jeremiah 5:11-12

There is a very popular lie going around. The masses have accepted it and many of those who haven’t would probably like to. The lie is that there is no judgment day. There are those who are saying about the Lord, “*He will do nothing. No harm will come to us.*” But they have lied about the Lord.

Jeremiah’s main call was to prophesy the Lord’s judgment—to Israel in general and to Judah in particular. It is a foolish sense that, contrary, no harm would befall them. They said, “*The prophets are but wind and the word is not in them; so let what they say be done to them*” (v13). I guess people believe what they want to believe. And nobody wants to believe that the wrath of God is going to come—at least not upon them.

If you want to boast in the God who gave you the ability to achieve, go ahead, but there is even a greater boasting

My observation has been that people may give assent to the idea that God must mete out a righteous judgment in the end but they think in terms of that judgment being for someone else. It is like the person who listens to a sermon and says, “Yep. That was a great sermon ‘cause there are a lot of people in this church who need straightening out.” Or it is like when you see the flashing lights of a patrol car in your rearview mirror without realizing that it is you that they are after. Judgment is somehow for some other guy, never for me and my house. It’s for the bad guys—the despicable ones who need to get what is coming to them. But if we were to really get what was coming to us, what would that be?

Where do people get the idea that God will do nothing—that no harm will come to them? Aside from people believing what they want to believe about themselves, it may have to do with what they have been led to believe about God. To believe in a God of retribution is...well, archaic, unenlightened. “A god of love would never send anyone to hell.” Pleasant thought, but it doesn’t line up with what anyone in the Bible, including Jesus, taught about the nature of God.

It is a good thing to fear judgment. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom—and repentance, which leads to salvation. God is bringing judgment to the earth. If someone tries to convince you otherwise, no matter what their motive, they have lied about the Lord.

The Lying Pen of the Scribes Has Handled it Falsely

How can you say, "We are wise, for we have the law of the Lord," when actually the lying pen of the scribes has handled it falsely? -Jeremiah 8:8

It is one thing to have the Bible. It is another thing to rightly interpret it.

There came a point during the era of Jeremiah when the Lord lamented, "My people do not know the requirements of the Lord" (Jer 8:7). They were under the false impression that just because they had the law of Lord as well as teachers who claimed to be able to interpret it correctly that they had become wise in the things of God. But the Lord confronted their error, saying, "How can you say, 'We are wise, for we have the law of the Lord,' when actually the lying pen of the scribes has handled it falsely?"

By Jeremiah's day, a new t Known as the scribes, they were themselves to preserving, dissemin the time of Christ, the scribes had teachers of Israel. But as in Jeremiah's day, they could not always be trusted to handle the word of God correctly.

The Lord is telling Jeremiah that he had better learn to deal with these things because it is not going to get any easier

It is one thing to have the Bible. It is another thing to rightly interpret it.

"Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly," James said (3:1). We who instruct will be judged more strictly. People put stock in what we say because we are 'teachers.' If we are in error, we affect more than ourselves. It is bad enough if our inability to see causes us to fall into a pit, but it is a far worse thing to be a "blind guide" and lead others to their demise as well (see Matthew 15:14).

Do you know how many people there are who say, "We are wise, for we have the law of the Lord," but they have been misled by their teachers? Pride, itching ears (2 Ti 4:3), prejudices, human traditions, certain "winds of doctrine" (Ep 4:14, KJV) demonic influence (1Ti 4:1) and self-justification are all things that will cause us to mishandle the Scriptures.

Paul exhorted Timothy to be a *workman...who correctly handles the word of truth* (2 Ti 2:15). Amen. But how do we know that we are doing that? Well, no one I know has complete light on all points of doctrine, but if we are: 1) Born again, 2) Diligent to compare scripture with scripture, 3) Dependent on the Holy Spirit, 4) Aware of the aforementioned pitfalls and 5) Testing the fruit of our doctrine by putting it into practice, then we will be able to correctly handle God's word.

Let Him Who Boasts Boast about This

Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight... -Jeremiah 9:23-24

Just as there is good pride and bad pride, there is good boasting and bad boasting. There are certain things worth boasting over and others that you would be better off keeping silent about. It's not wrong to boast—it just depends what you are boasting about.

The Lord speaks through Jeremiah and says, "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this

If you want to boast in the God who gave you the ability to achieve, go ahead, but there is

If there was ever a categorization of false prophecy, this would be it.

seems a natural thing for a wise man to boast in his wisdom. After all, he is wise. Same for the strong man and the rich man. If the strong man is going to have something to boast about, it is going to be his strength. If the rich man boasts in his riches, it is not like it would be false boasting. Some people try to build themselves up by boasting about things that are simply not true, which, I guess is more pitiful than the person who has a legitimate reason to boast.

But maybe the point is that no one really has a legitimate reason to boast. "What do you have that you did not receive," Paul says, "And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?" (1 Co 4:7). If we have acquired wisdom, strength, riches or anything else in this life, ultimately, it is from the hand of the Lord. If you want to boast in the God who gave you the ability to achieve the things you have, go ahead, but there is even a greater boasting than this. No achievement in this life, no matter how great or noble or spiritual, can compare with the all-surpassing greatness of knowing the Lord—who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on the earth.

If people boast about who they know (and they do) how great is it to be able to say that you know the King of the Universe? What would the point be in boasting about yourself when you are a friend of God? What need would you have to build yourself up in the sight of others when at any time and any place you can have an immediate audience with the eternal, omniscient, omnipotent creator and sustainer of all things? What is more important or affirming than knowing God and understanding his ways? Let him who boasts boast about this.

How Can You Compete with Horses?

If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses? If you stumble in safe country, how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan? -Jeremiah 12:5 (Thanks to Gord Hancock for his inspiration regarding this passage)

Certain men from Jeremiah's hometown were conspiring to murder him but the Lord revealed the plot to Jeremiah. After Jeremiah found out, these men said to him, "Do not prophesy in the name of the Lord or you will die by our hands" (11:21). They obviously didn't appreciate the fruit of his prophetic ministry. Perhaps the home boys didn't like a curious and bad-news prophet giving their town a shoddy name. In any case, Jeremiah is somewhat shaken by this opposition and he prays to the Lord to take care of it, which the Lord assures him he will.

As Jeremiah reflects on all this he says to God, "I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?" (12:1) and he goes on to talk of the hypocrisy among his own people. In response, the Lord says to Jeremiah, *If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses? If you stumble in safe country, how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan?*

In essence, the Lord is telling Jeremiah that he had better learn to deal with these things because it is not going to get any easier. "If you can't handle this trouble, then how are you going to be able face what lies ahead?" It's not that a conspiracy to be murdered is a negligible affair, but in comparison to what would ultimately challenge Jeremiah and his high calling, it was merely preparation.

So what about us? Is it possible that we complain about what we are going through not knowing that what we are currently facing is only a preliminary test of our mettle? The writer of Hebrews says, "In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood" (12:4). If it is tough now, how would we fare if the battle really got hot? On the road to his crucifixion Jesus compared his own suffering to a future tribulation—perhaps in Jerusalem, perhaps in the earth—when he said, "If men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?" (Lk 23:31). You may not know whether your current trial is the ultimate test or just a training course for greater glory, but if you persevere, one day you may be able to run with horses.

False Visions, Divinations, Idolatries and Delusions

Then the Lord said to me, "The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I have not sent them or appointed them or spoken to them. They are prophesying to you false visions, divinations, idolatries and the delusions of their own minds..." -Jeremiah 14:14

I believe in the prophetic. I believe that God gave some to be prophets to *prepare God's people for works of service* (Eph 4:12). I believe that we should eagerly desire the ability to prophesy (see 1 Co 14:1). I believe that the Bible and the gospel came by prophetic revelation and that the Spirit of prophecy that engendered both is still active today. That being said, we must deal with the possibility of false prophecy, for Satan will purpose and act to discredit and counterfeit *every word that comes from the mouth of God* (Mt 4:4).

It had been confirmed to Jeremiah that judgment against Jerusalem and Judah was immanent and inevitable. The Lord instructed him to not pray for the well-being of the people (14:11). Their fastings and sacrifices would be to no avail (v12). Even if Moses and Samuel were to intercede, the Lord's heart would not be moved (15:1). But there were certain prophets in the land who were telling the people that they would not suffer judgment, and that the Lord was saying, "I will give you lasting peace in this place" (14:13).

The Lord tells Jeremiah, "The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I have not sent them or appointed them or spoken to them. They are prophesying to you false visions, divinations, idolatries and the delusions of their own minds." If there was ever a categorization of false prophecy, this would probably be it:

False Visions: These are actual visions, but they are not from the Lord. They are spiritual in nature and come from the one who *masquerades as an angel of light* (2 Co 11:14). Joseph Smith and Mohammed had false visions.

Divinations: Prophets who attempt to speak for God through divination (forbidden/occultic means) are necessarily false and an abomination. Modern divination include tarot cards, palm reading and psychic energy.

Idolatries: Prophesying "idolatries" could mean speaking "worthless things," but more specifically I see this as the false prophet prophesying according to the idolatries he or she sees within the hearts of their audience (see Ezekiel 14:1-4).

Delusions of their Own Minds: This would be the most common. People often mistake their own understanding for the voice of God, but to speak it as such puts it into the category of false prophecy.

The Heart Is Deceitful above All Things

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? "I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct." -Jeremiah 17:9-10

Who can understand the ways of the heart? Can we trust our hearts to lead us where we need to go?

The word “heart” is used over nine-hundred times in the Bible. We have a pretty good frame of reference in our culture for the biblical concept of “the heart.” It is not very different from either the Old Testament or New Testament idea. Matters of “the heart” dominate our books, our movies and our songs. The heart is the “seat of our emotions,” the “garden of our affections,” the “wellspring of life.” You could say that the heart is that place deep inside the recesses of our soul which is the essence of who we really are.

Jeremiah said, *The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.* If this is true, then we are in trouble since the heart really does reveal the essence of who we are. We are then apt to deceive ourselves and we will continue to do it time and again. If the heart is deceitful, then we are deceitful. And if there is no cure for this deceitfulness, how can we trust our hearts?

Do those who have no concern for the poor and needy know the Lord? How can they?

The heart is deceitful in the sense that it has been tainted by the Eden fall. But this problematic because God wired us to follow our hearts. In order to be true, we must follow our hearts, and yet every one of us has been bent in some fashion toward the ogre of self. The question is whether our hearts are totally depraved. Jeremiah’s statement would seem to support that notion.

Jesus said, *“The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart”* (Lk 6:45). Except for Jesus, everyone who has ever lived has had a mix of both good and evil stored up in his or her heart. We are not totally depraved. Yes, only the Lord truly knows what is in the heart and you have to ask him to search it (see Psalm 139:23-24). And yes, your conscience may be clear, but that doesn’t make you innocent (see 1Corinthians 4:4). But, there is a cure for the deceitfulness of the human heart. Through Christ, and by the Holy Spirit, God has poured his love into your heart (Ro 5:5), purified it by faith (Ac 15:9) and brought his peace to rule there (Co 3:15).

You may never fully understand what is in your heart, but you need to listen to it and follow to the extent that you are confident that what is growing there has been planted by God. And to that extent, you can trust your heart.

His Word Is a Fire Shut up in My Bones

So the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long. But if I say, "I will not mention him or speak any more in his name," his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot. -Jeremiah 20:8-9

What was Jeremiah to do? He has the word of the Lord but when he speaks it he gets beaten and put in stocks (20:2-3). That doesn’t stop him from continuing to exhort and correct and rebuke, but still, he has resentment about it. He says, in his inimitable way, *“O Lord, you deceived me, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long”* (20:7-8).

Jeremiah says he was deceived or, perhaps even, seduced by the Lord. “I didn’t know that this was part of the agreement. You didn’t tell me this when you called me to speak by the Lord. Some commentators believe that a woman would feel after being lured into a situation on false pretenses and then raped. Whether this is what he means or not, the word of the Lord does bring him reproach and insult.

You don’t see it as a duty. You don’t even see it as a

You can find these shepherds in countless places all over the world tending the flock of God

The word of the Lord has indeed brought him reproach and insult—even worse. So what are his options? He could say, “That’s it. No more. This is way too much trouble. I will not speak his word or mention his name again” (v9). But that won’t work. And why not? Is it because he is worried that he’ll be in trouble with the Lord if he doesn’t speak his word? Is it because he is concerned about the welfare of those who need to hear the word? No, it is because *“His word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones.”* Jeremiah can’t help it. *“I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.”*

Can you imagine being like this when it comes to giving voice to the word of the Lord? You don’t see it as a duty. You don’t even see it as a privilege. It is a compulsion. “I can’t help it,” you say. His word is in your heart like a fire, a fire shut up in your bones. *“Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel,”* Paul says, and he is not talking about punishment from the Lord. There is an inward compulsion to discharge the trust committed to him (see 1 Corinthians 9:16-17).

Oh God, let your word be in our hearts like a fire, a fire shut up in our bones so that we can’t help but speak.