

I Will Bring Them Back to this Land

I will bring them back to this land... I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart. -Jeremiah 24:6-7

Have you ever wondered about what happened in that era we call the “inter-testamental period”—that span of about four-hundred years between the last veritable Old Testament prophet (Malachi) and the birth of Christ? My tendency has been to view this as a sort of “dark ages” where God was nowhere to be found. These are the “silent years,” where Protestants have no canonical record of the activity or word of God—an interval where the Lord took a break from intervening in the affairs of men.

Not so. There was life for Israel in this time between the Testaments. This was predicted in Jeremiah’s vision of the figs at the temple (chapter 24).

The figs represented people God regarded as “good”—the exiles from Judah in Babylon that he would bring back home. And when they returned, God said he would “*give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart.*” We see the first fruits of the fulfillment of this prophecy recorded in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Jerusalem and the temple were rebuilt and, indeed, the people whom the Lord brought back from captivity were devoted to him.

So how much of that changed between 432 B.C. when Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and 5 B.C. when the angel, Gabriel, appeared to Zechariah in the temple? Well, we don’t necessarily need to refer to the historical and religious writings of that era to know (although they do shed light). As the biblical curtain rises again for Part II, we see signs of spiritual vitality in the land. They have gone the four-hundred years free from hair-raising judgment (a comparatively good run for Israel). Temple worship was in place with prophets like Anna and Simeon receiving the word of the Lord there. The festivals and the Sabbath were being observed. Idol worship was not a problem. Parochial worship was being expressed through the rise of synagogues. And despite the emergence of the legalistic Pharisees and the unbelieving Sadducees, there were many godly people the Lord could use to give birth (literally) and rise to the coming of the Messiah and, subsequently, his church. Note that at no time during these four-hundred years was imperial rule restored to Israel. They spent the entire time under foreign occupation. I believe this actually kept them truer to the Lord to fulfill the prophecy that they would have a heart to know God and once again be his people.

What happened in the “inter-testamental period?”

If Any Nation Will Not Serve Nebuchadnezzar

If...any nation or kingdom will not serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon or bow its neck under his yoke, I will punish that nation with the sword, famine and plague...So do not listen to your prophets, your diviners, your interpreters of dreams, your mediums or your sorcerers -Jeremiah 27:8-9

Sometimes a message from God goes against the grain. We may reject a prophetic word out of hand because, from our point of view, it couldn’t be of God. Like the Pharisees who knew that Jesus couldn’t be of God because he violated the Sabbath, our theological constructs can cause us to dismiss a genuine revelation of God,

I can understand why the people of Jeremiah’s time didn’t believe the message he was bringing: “*I will hand all your countries over to my servant*

Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; I will make even the wild animals subject to him” (27:6).

Nebuchadnezzar the servant of the Lord? The wild animals subject to him? “Yes,” says Jeremiah. “*If, however, any*

nation or kingdom will not serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon or bow its neck under his yoke, I will punish that nation with the sword, famine and plague, declares the Lord, until I destroy it by his hand” (v8). “Now, that’s going way too far. The God of Israel is calling his people to serve the King of Babylon? We are supposed to willfully bow our necks under his yoke so that he can do anything he wants to us? And you’re saying that God will punish us if we don’t offer ourselves as slaves to this pagan king? You’re nuts.”

I don’t know how many times I have heard someone say, “But God wouldn’t do that.” Yes, there are many things that you can be sure that God wouldn’t do, but you can also be sure that there are many items in his repertoire to offend our sensibilities and our understandings. “God wouldn’t leave his people to wander in the desert after delivering them from their enemies.” “God wouldn’t choose a shepherd boy to be king.” “God wouldn’t mark the Gentiles for salvation.” “Oh, yes he would,” you say. That’s because you already know the Scriptures. But would he send revival among the Catholics? Would he slay someone in the Spirit? Would he bless a heavy-metal band. Would he use someone who believes that only the King James Bible is the word of God?

We tend to project God’s will in line with our limited thoughts of what he must be like, as well as what we want and need him to be for the sake of our personal agendas. Jeremiah’s message didn’t fit either bill. But it was the word of the Lord. And it was fulfilled.

I don’t know how many times I have heard someone say, “But God wouldn’t do that.”

Restrain Your Voice from Weeping

This is what the Lord says: "Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded," declares the Lord. "They will return from the land of the enemy. So there is hope for your future..." -Jeremiah 31:16-17

"Don't cry" is usually bad advice, most often given by someone who is uncomfortable with the expression of grief or emotion. A person in grief needs to be allowed to express their pain through the God-given agency of tears. Hannah poured out her soul to God with tears in desperate plea for a son. King David often expressed emotion when beset with the heartaches of life. Jeremiah lamented over his exiled countrymen. Jesus cried over Jerusalem. And Peter wept bitterly at the realization of his denial of the Lord. In each of these cases, the restraint of tears would have been a betrayal of both honest expression and the natural prescription for the healing of a broken heart.

But there comes a time when God says "*Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears.*" There comes a time when the Holy Spirit seems to say, "Your season of grief is over. Now look to me for my plan for your situation. You will see me bring my good purposes to pass from your hurtful situation." Grief is productive for only so long.

Grief is productive for only so long

In Jeremiah 31, the Lord was forecasting a day when the people of Judah would be returned to the land of their ancestors. They would be exiled but, soon enough, they would return. Their work would be rewarded. Weeping and tears would no longer be appropriate. A time would come to forget the past and look to the future.

When do we reach that point when God says it's time to move on? Certainly not until we've grieved sufficiently. In days gone by, widows wore black, and as long as they did they were recognized as still grieving. But the time would come for them to put away the dark clothes. It would be time to move on in life.

Sheldon Vanauken, recounts his amazing love story in his book, "A Severe Mercy." After valiantly grieving the loss of his young wife, he describes the end of his grieving period as a "second death," when the presence of grief died and he was free to reclaim the call of God to move on.

Grief is a necessary and sometimes remarkable exercise. But there comes a time when the night of grief must give way to the dawn of God's work so that there will be direction and hope for the future.

A New Covenant

"I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel... I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people... they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." -Jeremiah 31:31,33-34

Of all of Jeremiah's prophecies, this is the most significant. He spelled out a brand new and different covenant for God's people—and all mankind. It would be a covenant unlike any previous. It would be one they could keep—one with better promises than the one that Moses received.

What would be the nature of this new agreement between God and his people? God would make it so that it would become second nature—actually, first nature—to love, know, and obey the Lord. Under the "old" covenant the people of God were instructed to take the commandments of the Lord and, "*Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates*" (Dt 6:8-9). With the new covenant they would have something better than these external reminders. They would have the inner witness of the very Spirit who was the author of the commandments. Under this covenant God says, "*I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.*"

It would be a covenant unlike any previous

God has always wanted a faithful people to call his own. The new covenant provided the means for that faithfulness through the knowledge of the Lord: "*This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God,*" Jesus said (Jn 17:3). Under the new covenant you wouldn't have to be commanded to "know the Lord." Knowing the Lord on a personal level would be part and parcel of this new design. From the least to the greatest, all those in Christ would come to know God.

Under the Mosaic covenant, sacrifices for the sins of the people would have to be offered up on a continual basis. But the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world would be *offered up* once for all (see Hebrews 7:27) to take away sin forever, fulfilling God's promise to *forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more*. The writer of Hebrews quotes all of Jeremiah's new covenant prophecy (vs 31-34) and then comments: *By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear* (He 8:13).

What a tremendous new covenant we live under. It's where we know the word, know the Lord and where our sin would be known no more.

I Will Tell You Great and Unsearchable Things

Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know. -Jeremiah 33:3

Through the ages people have pondered the “great mysteries” of life. They have longed to search the “unsearchable.” They have been intrigued with the esoteric. “Mirror, mirror on the wall, tell me, tell me...” Forays into the occult are inspired by a desire to know the answers that cannot come by scientific means. Scientists themselves have crossed the boundaries of their disciplines, relying on assumption to explain the great and unsearchable things they do not know. But the answers are not found in science, the occult, or even religion. The great and unsearchable things belong to Yahweh and his son Jesus. “*In Christ*,” the Bible says, “*are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*” (Co 2:3) –those great and unsearchable things that elude our understanding.

***“Mirror, mirror on the wall,
tell me, tell me...”***

What an invitation God gave to Jeremiah: “*Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.*” And yet I know that you have a lingering suspicion that the invitation is not just for him. What do you do with an invitation like that?

The invitation is, “*Call to me...*” We give that kind of invitation all the time. “Hey, give me a call,” we say, making ourselves available. Throughout the Scriptures the invitation to call upon the Lord can be found, yet this one is more than a little different from most. If we call to the Lord, he will show us *great and unsearchable things* we could never know.

As you may have noticed, I like to talk about the prophetic. That’s because we must live by every word that proceeds from the heart, mind and mouth of God. And because the great and unsearchable things belong to God, they must come by revelation. This is the prophetic. And this is the essence of what God promised us through Jeremiah.

Consider the significance of this invitation. If we call, he will answer and tell us great and unsearchable things: Things that we can’t imagine. Things that remain hidden to the carnal. Things that will inspire and give direction. Things that will allow us to see his glory. Things that will reveal his character—and ours. Things that will blow our minds.

So, what will you do? Are you interested in knowing the great and unsearchable things that can only be revealed by God? The invitation is yours.

King Zedekiah Asked Him Privately

Jeremiah was put into a vaulted cell in a dungeon, where he remained a long time. Then King Zedekiah had him brought to the palace, where he asked him privately, "Is there any word from the Lord?" - Jeremiah 37:16-17

The relationship between Zedekiah and Jeremiah is intriguing. The king and the prophet. They could’ve made a movie out of this one.

By the time of Zedekiah’s ascendancy to the throne, Jeremiah is a seasoned prophet. He has been prophesying in Jerusalem for twenty-nine years and his message hasn’t changed a whole lot. It used to be, “Repent or the Lord will hand you over to the Babylonians.” By the time Zed is king the repentance option has been rescinded. The message now is simply, “You will be handed over. Cooperate and things won’t be as bad as they could be.”

Early in the reign of Zedekiah, the Lord sends Jeremiah to the king’s court with an object lesson (27:1ff). He walks in with a wooden yoke over his neck as a

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sign to Zedekiah that he must bow his neck to the king of Babylon. Nobody wants to believe it so Zed sides with the false prophets and the crowd, rejecting the word of the Lord. But he wants to hedge his bet so he sends a messenger to Jeremiah to ask him to pray, just in case (37:3). Later, the Babylonian siege begins, showing Jeremiah’s words to be true but when the siege is temporarily lifted, Jeremiah is accused of treason, arrested, beaten and imprisoned. Zedekiah knows that Jeremiah is a political liability but where else is he going to get a word from God? He consults him privately and at Jeremiah’s request, does not send him back to the dungeon but puts him under his own guards. As the siege recommences, some officials come to Zedekiah wanting to kill Jeremiah because he is still preaching the same message and discouraging the soldiers who are fighting. Zed refuses to protect Jeremiah and he is thrown into a cistern to die, but others come to the King on behalf of the prophet and Zedekiah orders that he be rescued. Under the pressure of the siege, Zedekiah seeks the counsel of the man of God who has been preaching the word now for forty years, but he still keeps his conversations and relationship with Jeremiah under wraps because Jeremiah is still a political liability. In the end, Zedekiah rejects the word of the prophet but tragically experiences the truth of that word as he witnesses the execution of his children just before his eyes are torn out.

The moral? Political leaders may want the word of the Lord but in most cases their ears are tuned far too politically to hear it. And in many cases, as it was with Zedekiah, it is their very downfall.

When Zedekiah Saw Them, He Flew

When Zedekiah king of Judah and all the soldiers saw them, they fled; But the Babylonian army pursued them and overtook Zedekiah in the plains of Jericho. They captured him and took him to Nebuchadnezzar... where he pronounced sentence on him. -Jeremiah 39:4-5

The story of Zedekiah makes no sense apart from one major lesson that he failed to learn: We must submit to the Lord's discipline.

No one likes to be disciplined for their sin. No one wants to hear that they must suffer the consequences of their disobedience. The message that Jeremiah brought to Zedekiah and the people of Jerusalem was as hard to stomach as any message from the Lord could be. It was so hard that they could not accept it. "No, no, no," I can hear them say. "No, no, no," their prophets would echo. "The Lord says that I must bow my neck to the yoke of Babylonian captivity? No, no, no, I will never accept such a thing." But the Lord says, "If you resist, you will suffer even more, but if you submit to the discipline that I have decided on, it will go well with you and your suffering will be lessened."

We resist the discipline because we don't want the pain, but if we don't submit to the pain of it we will experience even more pain.

Zedekiah wanted the word of the Lord—it seemed. On more than one occasion he called for Jeremiah to ask what the Lord was saying but his double-mindedness prevented him from attending to the truth that he so desperately did not want to hear. *No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful* (He 12:11). We resist the discipline because we don't want the pain, but if we don't submit to the pain of it we will experience even more pain. That is what Zedekiah discovered. He was promised by the Lord that if he submitted to the Babylonians (read "the Lord's discipline") then his life would be spared, the city would not be burned and his family would live (38:17). As it was, he resisted to the end, the city was destroyed, his family was executed and his eyes were torn out.

I am not ashamed to say that from time to time my dad gave me "the belt." I would cry, "No, no, no" as he took off his belt to give correction to my blatant rebellion. He would say that it was going to hurt him more than it was going to hurt me, and I believed him. I did not rebel against his discipline and it produced a *harvest of righteousness and peace* (He 12:11) in my life.

We must submit to the Lord's discipline. We must learn to trust in it even if it brings consequences we fear. Otherwise, we will face far more tragic consequences and unnecessary regret.

We Will Burn Incense to the Queen of Heaven

"We will burn incense to the Queen of Heaven...ever since we stopped burning incense to the Queen of Heaven...we have had nothing and have been perishing by sword and famine." -Jeremiah 44:17-18

A remnant from Judah had filtered back into the land after the fall of Jerusalem. Against the word of the Lord, they retreated to Egypt for fear of the Babylonians and they forced Jeremiah to go with them. While there, they renewed the practice of burning incense to foreign gods. One of these deities was the "Queen of Heaven." The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah that if they continued this practice they would be cut off and there would never be any descendants to return to Judah (44:7).

Did they heed the word of the Lord? Disappointingly, no. In fact, they were downright belligerent with Jeremiah. *"We will not listen to the message you have spoken to us in the name of the Lord! We will certainly do everything we said we would: We will burn incense to the Queen of Heaven"* (vs 16-17). Call it stiff-necked rebellion.

Who is this "Queen of Heaven? According to the NIV Bible Dictionary, the Queen of Heaven is most likely the goddess of fertility known as Ashtoreth, Ishtar/Venus. Burning incense represents the prayers that rise as a fragrance to God (see Revelation 5:8; 8:3-4) or a god. In this case, since women were mostly involved, the prayers would have included requests for fertility. I don't know about you, but the concept of worshiping or praying to "The Queen of Heaven" gives me the willies. Unfortunately, some branches of Catholicism pray to Mary and call her "The Queen of Heaven"—a designation I'm sure she would abhor.

Who is this "Queen of Heaven?"

So, the remnant from Judah chose to continue to burn idolatrous incense. In fact, they contended that back in Judah things were fine as long as they were burning their incense but as soon as they had stopped things went down the tubes. A demonic stronghold was convincing them that they were worse off if they obeyed the word of the Lord. I have known people who made decisions to honor the Lord through such things as first-fruits tithing, seeking reconciliation and practicing regular prayer but gave up because of the swift oppression they experienced in doing so. They said, "Things are worse now than they were before, so forget it," and went back to their old ways. Maybe it wasn't as serious as burning incense to the Queen of Heaven, but the King of Heaven had been disclaimed, the enemy's stronghold reestablished and like the disobedient remnant from Judah, the promised blessing of the Lord had been removed.

This Is What the Lord Says to You, Baruch

“This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to you, Baruch: You said, ‘Woe to me! The Lord has added sorrow to my pain; I am worn out with groaning and find no rest.’ ”... -Jeremiah 45:2-3

Jeremiah 45 recounts a word of personal prophecy given by Jeremiah to his secretary, Baruch. Jeremiah had just finished dictating a word of the Lord for the king of Judah (Ch 36) when this word came for Baruch. I can picture Jeremiah completing the word for the king and with the spirit of prophecy still on him saying, “Ok, now it’s your turn, Baruch, *This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to you...*” (v2).

Jeremiah’s personal prophetic word had three distinct components: The revealing of Baruch’s heart, the revealing of the word of the Lord and the revealing of what to expect for the future. Many if not most legitimate personal prophecies will have these components.

***Jeremiah’s personal
prophetic word had three
distinct components***

The first component gets the attention of the person to whom God wants to speak. It’s called, “reading someone’s mail.” Jesus did this often. An accurate word of understanding that touches you at the point of your pain or your desire can prepare you to receive a message from the Lord. When the Lord wants to encourage, or even rebuke, such revelation can immediately soften the soil of the heart making it ready for the seed of the word. Jeremiah spoke to Baruch’s pain *“Baruch, you said ‘Woe is me! The Lord has added sorrow to my pain; I am worn out with groaning and find no rest’ ”* (v2). This first component of revealing the heart shows that “God knows,” which can bring comfort or discomfort.

The second component is what God wants to say to you in the context of your desire or pain. In Baruch’s case, the Lord wanted him to know that even though the word of judgment that Baruch had just recorded was part of his sorrow, the Lord was constrained to follow through on the judgment declared for Judah.

The third component is application for the future. Everything would be uprooted with the destruction of Jerusalem. But the promise to Baruch was that when disaster came, he would never have to fear for his life.

A significant word that I once received went like this, “You have said that you might as well quit while you’re behind, but the Lord approves of what you are doing and he says ‘don’t quit.’” All three personal prophecy components were in this word and it encouraged me to keep going.

This Is the Word of the Lord

This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says... This is what the Lord says... This is what the Lord Almighty says... I have heard a message from the Lord... This is the word of the Lord... -Jeremiah 48:1; 49:1,7,14,34

How does a book make into the canon of Scripture? Apart from Providence, of course, there must be an acknowledgment by posterity that what has been written is authentically the word of God. In the case of the book of Jeremiah, there had to be a recognition that Jeremiah was indeed a prophet of God, and that what had come down through time with his name on it was indeed the word of Jeremiah and the word of God.

Jeremiah claimed to speak the word of the Lord. He testified that he was appointed as a *prophet to the nations* (Jer 1:5). What we know as chapters 46-51 are specific messages for nine different nations.

***Time has a way of revealing
the truth of a thing***

Now, since no writing is established as worthy of being called "Scripture" until generations after being written, the book of Jeremiah, including these messages about the future of the nine nations, had a chance to be evaluated.

Time has a way of revealing the truth of a thing. For a good twenty years, virtually no one in Judah accepted the word of Jeremiah as the word of the Lord, but that all changed when what he predicted finally came true. His reputation as a prophet was established. But there were other things recorded in this prophetic narrative—things concerning the nations—that were still to be confirmed after Jeremiah was gone. There were many predictions of judgment that, if they did not come true, would dis-authenticate the book of Jeremiah as the word of God, doing damage to its prospect to be recognized as Scripture.

What I am saying is that the fact that the book of Jeremiah made it into our Bible is a testimony that the book of Jeremiah is true, lending credibility to the idea that the Bible is true. This may sound like circular reasoning but if the word of Jeremiah could be tested historically as true or untrue—and it could—then a gauntlet had been laid down to anyone who wanted to challenge the veracity, not only of the book of Jeremiah, but the Bible. Jeremiah claimed to have the word of God. The Bible claims to be the word of God. If Jeremiah’s prophecies to the nations were discovered to be spurious, they would have been set aside long before the final Old Testament canon was established. So, its very inclusion in the canon is a testimony to its veracity. Jeremiah is not true because it is the Bible, it is in the Bible because it was, and is, recognized as true. And it is true because it is the word of the Lord.

Search Will Be Made for Israel's Guilt

"In those days, at that time," declares the Lord, "search will be made for Israel's guilt, but there will be none, and for the sins of Judah, but none will be found for I will forgive..." -Jeremiah 50:20

Israel and Judah were plenty guilty. Nothing else could explain the severity of the Lord's judgment against them. Ample time and opportunity had been given them to repent but they had not. They considered good, evil and evil, good. The entire land reeked with the guilt of their sin. Consequently, the people of Israel and the people of Judah were brutally wrested from their homes by foreign captors.

But when God forgives, he forgives. A day was coming when the Lord *would bring Israel back to his own pasture* (50:19). *In those days, at that time...search will be made for Israel's guilt, but there will be none.* What would happen to the guilt of the people of Israel? Would you be able to search for it and find it? "No," says the Lord, *"I will forgive"* (v20), and when the Lord forgives, the guilt of sin can no longer be found.

Does this mean that when Israel would return to the land that they should not remember what led to their exile in the first place? No. Paul never forgot Saul. The fact that at the end of his life he considered himself the chief of sinners (see 1 Timothy 1:15) is a testimony not to the guilt, but the grace, that he carried.

Forgiveness and the removal of the guilt of sin is, of course, a cardinal doctrine of the gospel of Jesus Christ. When the Lord says that a search will be made for your guilt and none will be found, he is not talking about the remembrance of your sin, but the record of it. There is a difference. The remembrance of where you have come from can be a positive thing, even if there are regrets concerning things you wish you could change about the past. But when you, the Devil or someone else goes on a search for the record of your sin, in Christ, it cannot be found. It is not on file. It has been taken away and can never again be found—ever.

The Devil hates that. Boy, does he hate that. The fact that *there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus* (Rom 8:1) makes impotent the *accuser of our brethren* (Rev 12:10). He says to God, "These people don't deserve to be forgiven," and the Lord says, "It is not about what they deserve, it is about my heart for them."

How else do you explain the return of the people of Israel from exile? And how else do you explain the cross?

The Slain in All the Earth Have Fallen Because of Babylon

Babylon must fall because of Israel's slain, just as the slain in all the earth have fallen because of Babylon. -Jeremiah 51:49

Jeremiah's last and most extensive prophecy to the nations is to Babylon. Because of Babylon's ignominious reputation as a seed bed of false worship, occult practice, materialism and hedonistic pleasure, "Babylon" came to mean much more than merely an ancient city and nation in central Mesopotamia. Babylon became synonymous with ungodly influence itself.

In Jeremiah's prophecy against Babylon, he is predicting its demise through the Medes and the Persians. Even though the fall of Judah was prophesied to be at the hands of the Babylonians, Babylon would still be repaid for her deeds and would be treated as she treated the people of God (see Jeremiah 50:29). In his prophetic utterance against Babylon Jeremiah says, *"Babylon must fall because of Israel's slain..."* but then he says *"the slain in all the earth have fallen because of Babylon."* In what sense is Babylon responsible for the slain in all the earth?

Over three-hundred times "Babylon," or "Babylonia" are referred to in the Scripture. Most of these are in the Old Testament, as you might presume. But in both the Old and New Testament, "Babylon" is used as a symbolic reference to the source of that which exerts an ungodly, or anti-Christ influence in the world. Isaiah's description of the king of Babylon turns out to be a description of Satan himself (Isaiah 14). The book of Revelation describes "Babylon" as: [the one who] *made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries* (14:8); *the mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth* (17:5); *a home for demons and a haunt for every evil spirit* (18:2); *the city of power [with] excessive luxuries* (18:10,3). So, biblically, the term Babylon became synonymous with the wicked anti-God system of the world. Consequently, you can see how *the slain in all the earth have fallen because of Babylon.*

Throughout the history of the church, "Babylon" has been equated with ancient Rome, The Roman Catholic Church, denominationalism, formal religion, the political systems of the world, materialism, the spirit of the world, and even recently, the regime of Saddam Hussein—to name just a few. God knows to what extent these equations are valid. Suffice it to say that "Babylon" is still with us, but be assured that its destiny will be the same as its ancient namesake.

Your Wound Is as Deep as the Sea. Who Can Heal You?

What can I say for you? With what can I compare you, O Daughter of Jerusalem? To what can I liken you, that I may comfort you, O Virgin Daughter of Zion? Your wound is as deep as the sea. Who can heal you? -Lamentations 2:13

Even though you wouldn't normally equate lamenting with poetry, the book of Lamentations is, for my tastes, the most beautiful piece of poetic literature in the Bible. I am captured by the way the author (tradition says Jeremiah, but the book itself does not say) gives expression to his deep feeling through the use of metaphor: In 1:4 he says, *The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to her appointed feasts;* 3:44 says, *You have covered yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can get through;* and here in Lamentations 2:13 he says, *Your wound is as deep as the sea. Who can heal you?*

This last metaphor speaks of the crushing "wound" that Jerusalem and her offspring experienced at the hands of the Babylonians when they came and destroyed the city known to its inhabitants as *the joy of the whole earth* (v15). Laid waste and made desolate, the wound she received was *as deep as the sea*. Could it ever be healed? Could she ever be restored?

The poet's metaphor is not just for ancient Jerusalem. It is for us today. There are many persons who carry a wound "as deep as the sea." There has been devastation of trust, desolation of hope, and you ask yourself, "Will I ever be healed?"

The identification of the depth of the wound is actually the beginning of the healing

The identification of the depth of the wound is actually the beginning of the healing. Jeremiah says, *"What can I say for you? With what can I compare you, O Daughter of Jerusalem? To what can I liken you, that I may comfort you."* The book of Lamentations plays an important role in the healing of the nation. It gives expression to the depth of the wound that has been experienced. When there is recognition that the wound you bear is as deep as the sea, that is where the healing can start.

Ultimately, it is the Lord who understands and heals. No matter what, and even in his discipline, God always has our final healing in view. Only the Lord could heal the deep wound of Jerusalem and only he can fully know and ultimately heal the depth of your wound.

While in the dreadful bowels of a Nazi concentration camp Betsy ten Boom said, "There is no pit so deep, that God is not deeper still." Your wound may be as deep as the sea, but there is one who is deeper still.

Yet this I Call to Mind and Therefore I Have Hope

I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. -Lamentations 3:19-23

Positive thinking is good, but it must have its basis in reality if it is to be truly effective. You could say that Lamentations 3:21-26 is the ultimate in positive thinking—the silver lining behind a very dark cloud.

The poet of Lamentations, likely Jeremiah, is dealing with two realities. The first is the destruction and desolation of Jerusalem, or more precisely, how the destruction has affected him. *"I have been deprived of peace,"* he says, *"I have forgotten what prosperity is...I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me"* (vs17, 19-20). There can be no doubt that he is in touch with the anguish of his heart and mind. He can't help but remember, and remember well, the affliction, bitterness and gall that have attended his soul because of what has happened to Jerusalem. This is the first and most conspicuous reality.

While his soul is downcast within, he decides to do some positive thinking

The second reality is less salient but nonetheless real. It is the reality of love of God. While his soul is downcast within, he decides to do some positive thinking. It is, in fact, reality thinking, and it will counter the depression of his soul. He decides to call to mind the truth that, *"Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.* Whether it's positive thinking, positive confession or something else, it is positively the truth—and it is the only thing that will bring hope to Jeremiah's desperate situation.

Notice that Jeremiah *calls to mind* the love, compassion and faithfulness of the Lord. It is something that he consciously chooses to do. We so often fail to do this when we are overwhelmed with our sorrow. I am not talking about denying the reality of what has gone wrong. Jeremiah was certainly not in denial about the tragic circumstances that had either ended or changed the life of every man, woman and child that he knew. What he did, and what we need to do when facing heartache and loss, was remember that the mercy of the Lord is always a present reality and his compassions are *new every morning*. Of course, to remember that, we have to know it in the first place. And I guess that is where positive thinking really starts.

Four Living Creatures

In the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was that of a man, but each of them had four faces and four wings. -Ezekiel 1:5-6

Ezekiel was a priest of God who had been taken into exile to Babylon before the final fall of Judah in 586 B.C.. It was there in exile in the year 593 that, “*The heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.*” Visions indeed.

The description of these visions in chapter one of Ezekiel vividly portrays a strange yet wonderful scene—probably more strange than wonderful to us as we attempt to make sense of what it was that Ezekiel was seeing: An immense storm cloud flashing with lightning yet surrounded by brilliant light.

A fire in the cloud from which emerged four fantastic science-fiction-type creatures who moved with the speed of light and whose wings thundered when manoeuvred.

Barnum would have loved to get his hands on one of these

Wheels within wheels that had eyeballs covering their rims and that moved in synchronization with the strange creatures. A great expanse above the creatures that sparkled like ice and, higher still, a glorious throne occupied by a glorious king. Strange and wonderful, to be sure.

Ezekiel doesn’t attempt to interpret the scene. He merely describes it, leaving us to wonder at it for ourselves. The most puzzling description, to me, is of what he calls the *four living creatures*. Their general form was as a man but they each had four wings and a head with four faces. Underneath each wing were hands. The four faces on each creature were a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle. Barnum would have loved to get his hands on one of these.

What can we determine about who or what these creatures might be? Well, it is later revealed to Ezekiel that these creatures really are “living,” and not just illusion (Ezk 10:15). They are a class of angelic beings called “cherubim” (or “seraphim”) which figure prominently in both the earthly and heavenly holy of holies (see Numbers 7:89, 1 Kings 6:23, Isaiah 6:2 and Revelation 4:8). These creatures are expressly numbered and named and similarly described in Revelation 4 as beings who worship before the throne of God night and day. Matthew Henry and other commentators believe that the four different faces represent the highest of God’s earthly creation, with humans at the forefront.

The fact that Ezekiel saw these creatures in a vision was mainly an indication that, as he had done with Isaiah, God was revealing his glory to the exiled prophet. Strange, yes—but wonderful as well.

Those Who Escape Will Remember Me

In the nations where they have been carried captive, those who escape will remember me--how I have been grieved by their adulterous hearts...They will loathe themselves for the evil they have done...And they will know that I am the Lord; I did not threaten in vain to bring this calamity on them. -Ezekiel 6:9-10

John Eldredge in his book, *Journey of Desire*, writes, “G.K. Chesterton thought that everybody ought to get drunk once a year because if that didn’t do you good, the repentance in the morning would. There is nothing like waking up to what you’ve done....” There would come a time when the people of Jerusalem, at least what was left of them, would wake up to what they had done.

Ezekiel was given one of those eccentric prophetic acts to perform. He was to take a sharp sword and shave his head and his beard (wonder no longer where

There is nothing like waking up to what you’ve done

the Wilkinson razor company got their inspiration). A third of the hair he was to burn with fire in a model of Jerusalem he had made. A third he was to strike with the sword all around the model and a third he was to scatter to the wind (5:1-4). In the process he was to take a few strands of hair and tuck them away in the fold of his garment. All this signified that a third of the people of Jerusalem would die within the walls of the city during the siege by the Babylonians, a third would die by the sword outside of the city as they would try to escape, a third would be pursued by the sword and scattered to the nations and a small remnant would be kept safe.

For those who escaped, it would be wake-up time. They would realize that the Lord *did not threaten in vain to bring this calamity on them*. They would remember the Lord and there would be repentance. They would remember how they grieved the Lord and they would *loathe themselves for the evil they have done*. Unfortunately, it took the severest of measures to bring them to this place of remembrance and repentance.

Not everyone escapes the judgment of God to one day repent. In Jerusalem’s case, only a remnant did. The fact that it was only a remnant compelled a deeper contrition. To remember the Lord and to know he is grieved by our sin is good. To “loathe” that sin is better still. It is the grace of God that we would have opportunity to remember him and despise the sin that has brought trouble to our lives. It is also his grace that leads us to remember him and loathe sin long before we find ourselves waking up to what we’ve done.

A Mark on the Foreheads of Those Who Grieve and Lament

Then the Lord called to the man clothed in linen who had the writing kit at his side and said to him, "Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it." -Ezekiel 9:3-4

Ezekiel had a very unique spiritual vision. While exiled in Babylon, he saw a fiery figure come, take him by the hair and lift him up *between earth and heaven* (8:3) and bring him to Jerusalem. It was here that he had *visions of God* concerning activity in the city and the temple. He wasn't anywhere near Jerusalem, but in the Spirit, he was *lifted up*, and taken there. He was in the spiritual realm—that place unseen with the natural eye, *between heaven and earth*, where the true spiritual nature of things, including angelic and demonic forces, is revealed. This is a place that I call "the second heaven."

So, Ezekiel is taken to Jerusalem to see the true spiritual state of the city and its residents. He sees as the Lord sees, and what he sees is *detestable*. In the

Ezekiel was seeing beyond the physical realm to the spiritual

temple of the Lord he sees idol and animal worship (8:6, 9, 12). He sees pagan ritual (8:14,17). He sees people bowing down to the sun (8:16). The things he observes are certainly literal—in part, but he is also shown intrinsic meaning, motive and consequence. Continuing in the Spirit, he sees six guards of the city—angelic beings represented as men—with deadly weapons (9:2) ready to mete out the judgment of God. He then sees a seventh man, clothed in linen, with a writing kit, who is given instructions to *go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it*. The six go out and kill, without mercy, everyone—except those marked as people after God's own heart.

We know that the fall of Jerusalem did not happen this way. But Ezekiel was seeing beyond the physical realm to what was true in the spiritual realm—which, in fact, is the realm of greater truth. God knew those who were grieved by the idolatry in the land and he marked them. These were the ones who would have had spiritual insight themselves—eyes to see and hearts to lament the awful things around them. Ezekiel saw the true spiritual state of the city. Most people were desensitized or even blinded to the wickedness in and around them. In the spirit, they were not marked for safety and were destroyed.

Who among us sees the true spiritual state of our own environment? Does what we see grieve us? If the Lord were to judge us in such a way today, would the man in linen mark us for safety?

Where Is the Whitewash?

When a flimsy wall is built, they cover it with whitewash, therefore tell those who cover it with whitewash that it is going to fall...When the wall collapses, will people not ask you, "Where is the whitewash you covered it with?" -Ezekiel 13:10-12

Often, what is seen is more appearance than substance, more smoke than fire, more show than go. In time, people won't care about presentation. They want to know if we've got the goods. Will what we build stand or will it fall when tested? Is there a structure behind the facade?

Early in the sixth century B.C., Israel had false prophets—lots of them. They prophesied out of their own imaginations because the Holy Spirit had not inspired them (vs 2-3). They had nothing of substance that would help repair the breach in the spiritual walls of Zion (v5). They expected their unanointed words to be fulfilled (v6). Their prophesies were flimsy walls covered with whitewash (v10)—mere stage props that were mistaken for the real thing. Their prophesies couldn't stand any more than a cardboard

The facade will not impress indefinitely

box could defeat the elements. The paint job that made what the prophets had built look substantial would be of no practical help when the torrents of hail and wind *burst forth* (v11). At that point, the ministry of the prophets would be exposed to all as immaterial and the people would sarcastically ask concerning their flimsy walls, "*Where is the whitewash you covered it with?*"

The prophets weren't just fooling the people with their whitewashed walls. They duped themselves. As long as it looked good they were okay. If it looked like God then, by God, he must be in it. Just because it looked and sounded good, they actually expected their words to be fulfilled, when all along they were building a house of cards. This is the modus operandi of a false prophet or anyone else who believes that appearance will beget substance and that the facade will impress indefinitely.

But the facade will not impress indefinitely. It takes only so long for the lie to be exposed. It is only a matter of time before the wall comes crashing down, especially if the Lord is not in what you are saying. "*Where is the whitewash you covered it with?*" people will eventually ask.

Don't worry about the icing before the cake is baked. And don't be afraid to take a look at what's really in the oven. The Pharisees were more concerned about appearances than substance. That is why Jesus called them *whitewashed tombs* (Mt 23:27). Paint is good for appearance, but make sure you've got something worthy of the whitewash.

You Did Not Remember the Days of Your Youth

In all your detestable practices and your prostitution you did not remember the days of your youth, when you were naked and bare, kicking about in your blood. - Ezekiel 16:22

When you want to convey an important thought or feeling, perhaps the best way to do it is paint a word picture. We, along with the residents of Jerusalem, may wonder at the severity of the punishment that came upon the ancient city at the hands of the Babylonians but the Lord paints a compelling word picture to help us understand his heart in the matter.

Jerusalem was born in neglected obscurity of Canaanite parentage. “*Your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite,*” (v3) the Lord begins. “No one bothered caring for you from the moment of your birth. You were thrown into a field, you were naked, your umbilical cord was still attached, you were still covered in the blood from your birth. That’s where I found you. So what did I do? I took you as my own. I washed you, nurtured and nourished you with all that you needed. You grew and became beautiful. When you had matured and were old enough for love, I made a covenant with you and took you as my own. I lavished every good and perfect gift upon you—the finest of ointments, dresses, jewelry and foods. *You became very beautiful and rose to be a queen. And your fame spread among the nations on account of your beauty, because the splendor I had given you made your beauty perfect*” (vs 13-14).

And then the story takes a turn: “You became proud in your beauty and became unfaithful to me with any and every man that came by. You took my gifts and offered them up to other lovers. Worse yet, you took the children that you bore me and sacrificed them in idolatrous worship. In all of this you forgot where you came from and who gave you your beauty.” Quite a word picture. And this is why punishment came upon Jerusalem.

Part of the problem for Jerusalem was that they did not consider the days of their infancy when they were naked and bare and kicking about in their own blood. They forgot where they came from. They forgot the One who had made their beauty famous. Peter talks about the person who has become *nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins* (2 Pe 1:9). You may know people who have forgotten the grace that saved them and turned aside to other lovers. Like the people of Jerusalem, they became nearsighted and blind, forgetting the Lord. And like the people of Jerusalem, what can they expect other than to be overtaken by the enemy?

Do I Take Any Pleasure in the Death of the Wicked?

Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked?...Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live? -Ezekiel 18:23

The subject of hell is a difficult one for most of us. Would you believe that it might also be a difficult one for God?

When the subject of hell comes up, the question usually centers around whether God would send anyone to a place of eternal punishment. There are many theological nuances that relate to the existence of such a place. Most of them find their locus in our understanding of the heart of God toward his creation. Though it doesn’t expressly speak about the existence of hell (there is not much in the Old Testament that does), there is a verse in Ezekiel that can be used to argue both for and against the existence of that place of eternal damnation. In speaking about the need for persons to turn to righteousness in order to preserve their lives, the Lord says, “*Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked?*”

First of all, rule it out of your thinking that God would take any delight in anyone dying in sin, much less sending such a person to eternal punishment. Forever banish the thought that the Lord relishes the death or punishment of the wicked. That is not his heart and is the express reason why the day of the Lord’s return has not yet taken place. As Peter explains, “*He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance*” (2 Pe 3:9). That’s why Yahweh says to Ezekiel, “*Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked?... Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?*”

Those who cannot or will not conceive of the possibility of hell, or a place of final torment called the Lake of Fire, may point to the Lord’s attitude revealed to Ezekiel in support of their position. Others, like myself, would liken what the Lord is saying here to a just and merciful judge who has no choice in his justice but to sentence the guilty, but because of his mercy, takes no delight in doing so.

God is both just and merciful and, in Christ, mercy triumphs over justice. The Lord takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He would rather that all be *saved and come to the knowledge of the truth* (1 Ti 2:4). To affirm the existence of hell does not discount the mercy of God. It, in fact, accentuates it. God’s mercy is why he does not take delight in the death of the wicked. The tragedy of a life wasted for good not only in this age but also in the one to come is a hard thing for anyone to contemplate—even God.

They forgot where they came from. They forgot the One who had made their beauty famous.

Forever banish the thought that the Lord relishes the death or punishment of the wicked

When I Deal with You for My Name's Sake

You will know that I am the Lord, when I deal with you for my name's sake and not according to your evil ways and your corrupt practices, O house of Israel, declares the Sovereign Lord. -Ezekiel 20:44

You might not think that the Lord cares about his reputation among the sons of men, but he does.

The Lord had promised to give the land of Israel to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Because he had sworn with uplifted hand (Ezk 20:42) to do this, his reputation was on the line in regard to how he dealt with his people. It was always in the heart of God to bless the people called by his name but when they had become flagrantly disobedient to him, he, of course, had to deal with them. And he dealt with them according to his name's sake.

When the Lord dealt with his people for the sake of his name and reputation, it often meant that he dealt with them less severely than they deserved. When the children of Israel tested the Lord

There are times the Lord does not deal with us according to our sin because of his great name

with their grumbling, disobedience and idolatry in the wilderness, the Lord had in mind to wipe them all out and start over with Moses. But Moses reasoned with the Lord and said, "Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them...' Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self:...' I will give your descendants all this land I promised them...' " (Ex 32:12-13). So the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster intended (Ex 32:14). That is why it says in Ezekiel 20:13-14, *I said I would pour out my wrath on them and destroy them in the desert. But for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations.*

There are times that the Lord does not deal with us according to what our sin deserves, not only because of his great mercy but, because of his great name. The fact that we carry his name affects the kind of discipline that he chooses to apply to our lives when we are missing the mark. And it works both ways. Because we carry his name, we are more accountable for preserving the reputation of that name. But in that place of accountability, there could very well be times when, for his name's sake, the Lord will protect us from public disgrace. Many chances for repentance are likely to come before the Lord allows hidden sin to be exposed. And if it comes to a point in which he has no choice but to go public with our discipline, for his name's sake, as well as for ours, he will work to restore our reputation—and his.

Her Priests Do Violence to My Law

Her priests do violence to my law and profane my holy things; they do not distinguish between the holy and the common; they teach that there is no difference between the unclean and the clean and they shut their eyes to the keeping of my Sabbaths so that I am profaned among them. -Ezekiel 22:26

Jerusalem was guilty of many, many sins. The Lord specifically names nineteen of them in Ezekiel 22:1-12—nineteen detestable and flagrant violations of the Law of Moses and the conscience of the virtuous. Everything from the shedding of innocent blood to idolatry to oppressing the weak to sexual sin to extortion. How a group of people get to the point of such unrestrained sinfulness is a curious and unhappy spectacle.

Part of the answer of how this can happen may be found in the fact that after the Lord speaks about the specifics of the sin that was found in Jerusalem, he addresses the culpability of the religious and political leaders within its walls. About the priests in particular he says, "Her priests do violence to my law and profane my holy things; they do not distinguish

There are many persons today in seats of ecclesiastical authority who are doing violence to the word of God

between the holy and the common; they teach that there is no difference between the unclean and the clean and they shut their eyes to the keeping of my Sabbaths so that I am profaned among them." The ones who were given charge of defending the credibility of the law of the Lord in order to protect the virtue of the people had done just the opposite. They did "violence" to the Law, breaking down its constraints, allowing brazen sin to rise unchecked among the people of God. For these priests, the holy things were no longer considered holy, the "unclean" became no different from the clean and the Sabbaths were ignored, becoming equal to any other day. Thus, as the supposed keepers of the law, the priests weren't just breaking the law, they were assaulting it by teaching the very opposite of what it actually said.

I can't help but observe that there are many persons today in seats of ecclesiastical authority who are doing violence to the word of God. They are making the holy things unholy and teaching that the unclean things are clean. No, I am not talking about certain types of food and the observance of particular days, I am talking about New Testament standards of righteousness that these keepers of the covenant are assaulting left and right. They have opened the doors to everything from radical feminism to racial discrimination to gay sex to abortion rights to universalism to legalism.

And the Lord has become profaned among the people because of it.

I Am about to Take Away from You the Delight of Your Eyes

The word of the Lord came to me: “Son of man, with one blow I am about to take away from you the delight of your eyes. Yet do not lament or weep or shed any tears...” -Ezekiel 24:15-16

Seems a bit unfair, don't you think? In order to paint a prophetic picture, the Lord is going to take away from Ezekiel the delight of his eyes—his wife. Just like that, she is going to die, and Ezekiel is told that he is not to mourn her death. Whoa. You gotta figure that the point God wants to make could have been expressed in some other way.

Obviously, God knows that it is no small thing that he takes the life of Ezekiel's wife. Yes, life was more tenuous and death witnessed more readily in that time and place, but that doesn't mean that the loss of human life was any less heart-wrenching than it would be for us first-world moderns. The Lord knew that Ezekiel's wife was “the delight of his eyes,” and yet he had it in mind to take her away *with one blow*.

Some might think that even though the Lord knew that it was no small thing to Ezekiel, perhaps it was of little significance to the Almighty that he took her life. You know, “What's it to the God of the Universe that there is one less human being on the face of the earth?” But the fact that God would take the life of his own prophet's wife is an indication of just how significant this act must be to him. That he would actually go to this length to speak to his people must mean that it was a very important message indeed.

One morning, Ezekiel spoke to the exiles regarding the impending death of his wife, and in the evening she died (v18). But as instructed, he did not publically mourn for her, he was allowed only to “groan quietly” (v17). Wow. *What does this mean* the people wondered? It meant that just as the delight of Ezekiel's eyes was taken away from him, the delight of Israel, the temple, would be taken away with one blow, and instead of mourning, all they would be able to do would be to *groan among themselves* (v23).

So, the message got through. But what about the price Ezekiel paid as a prophet called by God? Those called into the service of God (i.e., you) have to receive from the Lord's hand what he deems best. If he calls us to pay a certain price, he has his reasons. Paul called it *our present sufferings* (Ro 8:18) that aren't comparable to future glory. This future glory is dependant on our willingness to submit to the will of God—even if it means that he takes from us the delight of our eyes in one blow.

***But what about the price
Ezekiel paid as a prophet
called by God?***

Because of Your Wealth Your Heart Has Grown Proud

By your wisdom and understanding you have gained wealth for yourself and amassed gold and silver in your treasuries. By your great skill in trading you have increased your wealth, and because of your wealth your heart has grown proud. -Ezekiel 28:4-5

Ezekiel prophesies about the King of Tyre. This king (the NIV Study Bible identifies him as Ittobaal) has made quite a name for himself because of his ability to create wealth. The Scriptures say that by his *wisdom and understanding* he gained wealth for himself and amassed gold and silver in his treasuries. Tyre was a port city famous for its trading ships. Because the king had *great skill in trading* he became a very rich man. In many ways, he was a prototype of the modern business tycoon.

Those who have money, and especially those who have amassed their own fortunes, have notoriety. This is natural in a world where money has become chief in the pantheon of modern gods. Why is Bill Gates famous? Because he is a smart computer guy? No, being a smart computer guy, among other things, has made him wealthy, and it is his incredible wealth that has made him famous. Fame often begets fortune, but fortune always begets fame.

***Fame often begets fortune, but
fortune always begets fame***

So, in the case of the king of Tyre he became famous for his wealth. Too famous. The Lord said to him, “*Because of your wealth your heart has grown proud.*” So proud, in fact, that he began to view himself as more than human. He said, “*I am a god; I sit on the throne of a god*” (v2) (this prophecy against the King of Tyre can also be seen, in part, as a description of Satan).

Now, I haven't heard of too many rich people who see themselves as gods as a result of the great wealth they have accumulated (though the regard they receive from certain admirers might border on worship). But those whose hearts have become proud because of their wealth are legion. Jesus talked about how hard it was for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven (see Matthew 19:23). The difficulty has a lot to do with the pride that can dominate a person's heart because of their riches. That's why it is so refreshing to meet someone with both money and humility. The two don't often go together.

God will judge both the rich and the poor alike. He *opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble* (Ja 4:6). Wealth can make the heart grow proud, and that pride often grows in proportion to any increase in wealth. It certainly did for the King of Tyre, and if you are not intentional about cultivating humility, it will for you as well.

And They Will Know That I Am the Lord

So I will inflict punishment on Egypt, and they will know that I am the Lord. -Ezekiel 30:19

Twenty-seven times in the book of Ezekiel we read the phrase, *and they will know that I am the Lord*. In most cases (twenty-two), this knowledge of Yahweh is predicated on some inflicted punishment from above. Why does it seem that people don't, can't or won't have a revelation of the Lord apart from some affliction that comes from his hand? Is this the only way that some people can come to know who God is?

In the case of Egypt, as it was **God will not be ignored** in the case of Jerusalem (ch 6), Moab (ch 25), Philistia (ch 25), Tyre (chs 26, 28), Edom (ch 35) and Gog (ch 38) the acute realization of who God is would come through calamity. In these instances, the strength of the arm of the Lord would be displayed against a people who either opposed or would not acknowledge Yahweh. Because of her pride (v18) and false worship (v13), the Lord says about Egypt, *I will inflict punishment on Egypt, and they will know that I am the Lord*.

I think we understand how this works. In Israel's case, it would be like a father who longs for his child to know his authority in love but will make that authority known through discipline if need be. In the case of the nations, it would be like a school principal who has to deal with a gang that has formed within the school and is assaulting students and trafficking drugs. The gang blatantly opposes the principal's authority and they establish their own. The principal must "inflict punishment" on the gang to administer justice and preserve order.

So, God inflicts punishment saying, *"And they will know that I am the Lord."* The point is that God will not be ignored. God will be acknowledged as God—by those who choose to and by those who refuse to. That is why it says in Philippians, *...at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (2:10-11)*. God has this thing about perpetuating his name and his glory. If the love of God does not inspire you to acknowledge his sovereignty now, his righteous judgment will elicit your response later.

The bright side of these pronouncements in Ezekiel is that there are times when the revelation of God comes not by inflicted punishment but by abundant blessing (see Ezekiel 34:25ff). God would rather be known in his love, I am sure. That's why he sent his Son to die on the cross. That's why the day of grace has been prolonged. And that's why choosing to know the Lord now is a whole lot better than being required to know him later.

Nothing More than One Who Sings with a Beautiful Voice

Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice. -Ezekiel 33:32

It is one thing to want to hear from God. It is another thing to actually put what he says into practice.

The people were talking about Ezekiel. Whether it was by the walls of the city or at the front doors of their houses, the prophet was the hot topic of conversation (see 33:30). The people were saying, "Ezekiel's got an incredible prophetic anointing. He's got the word of the Lord and he keeps getting these visions." "Yea, did you hear about the time when the elders were over at his house and they were just sitting around and Ezekiel goes into this trance and when he comes out of it he says that he was taken by the angel of the Lord to Jerusalem." "Incredible" someone says, "What are you guys doing tonight? I hear that Ezekiel has a new message from the Lord. We should shoot down to his house and hear the latest. You never know, he could get whisked away in the Spirit."

For them, hearing the word of the Lord was no more than a form of entertainment

So when it came time for Ezekiel to deliver the word of the Lord, he gathered a crowd. The people came to sit before him to hear what he had to say. They seemed attentive to the word of God, but the Lord told Ezekiel, *"With their mouths they express devotion but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain"* (v31). For them, hearing the word of the Lord was no more than a form of entertainment. *"Indeed,"* the Lord says to Ezekiel, *"to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well."* The people didn't really come to hear from God because if they had they would have put into practice what they heard. No, they came to see a show, and nothing more.

How many people want no more than to be entertained with the word of the Lord? How many in our pews are hearers of the word but don't seriously consider really doing it. They are like Ezekiel's crowd. They come as observers. They come for the music, the preaching, the anointing—the show. They leave with no intention to put into practice anything that they heard. They are satisfied with knowing that "we had a great service this morning."

The word of the Lord was never meant to entertain us. It is meant to engage us and change us. When it comes down to it, we need to do more than merely attend an enjoyable (or miserable) weekly diversion called "church." We need to hear the word of the Lord and do it.

I Will Place over Them One Shepherd

I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the Lord have spoken. -Ezekiel 34:23-24

The shepherds of Israel had failed in taking care of the Lord's sheep. They did not strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, bring back the strays or search for the lost (see 34:4). "*Should not the shepherds take care of the flock?*" the Lord asks (v2). But the appointed shepherds were concerned only about themselves, so the sheep of Israel were left to become *food for wild animals* (v5).

The Lord determined to remove these shepherds from tending the flock, holding them accountable for their neglect. But who would be left to tend the sheep? The Lord says, "*I myself will search for my sheep and look after them*" (v11). "*I will rescue them...I will bring them out...I will pasture them...I will tend them...I will search for the lost...I will bind up the injured*" (vs12-16). The Lord would be the one to tend the sheep of Israel. I find that both interesting and comforting. God, somehow, would come among his people to do for the sheep what his shepherds would not do.

To cap off this promise, God says, *I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them* (v23). Now let's just imagine that we are the sheep of Israel and we hear this prophecy from Ezekiel. Are we not intrigued? David is coming to shepherd us, the one about whom it is said, "*He brought him to be the shepherd of his people Jacob, of Israel his inheritance. And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them* (Ps 78:71-72). But David has been dead for five hundred years. Of whom is the prophet speaking? Who is this "David?"

The entire Old Testament speaks of the coming of the Messiah. But it is with the prophets that the revelation concerning his coming is amplified. Prophecies like this would have piqued the curiosity and desire of Israel concerning the coming of the one shepherd to be placed over them. For those who will honestly search the Scriptures, they will come to see that Yeshua, the carpenter from Nazareth, is the one Ezekiel speaks of. He is the Son of David (see Matthew 1). He is the one who said, "*I was sent...to the lost sheep of Israel*" (Mt 15:24). He called himself the *Good Shepherd* (Jn 10:11), and is known as the *Great Shepherd* and the *Chief Shepherd* (He 13:20; 1Pe 5:4). And he has come to tend the flock of God.

Yeshua, the carpenter from Nazareth, is the one Ezekiel speaks of

When My Sanctuary Is among Them Forever

My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. Then the nations will know that I the Lord make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever. -Ezekiel 37:27-28

The challenge with receiving a prophetic word regarding the future (besides having to wait for its fulfillment) is that the interpretation of the word depends largely on your assumptions regarding that future. A true word from the Lord can change those assumptions by painting a new picture of what lies ahead. The fulfillment of the word of the Lord makes life look different from what might have been envisioned at first. This is true especially if the word concerns the distant future.

Ezekiel is prophesying a future day. We who live today have twenty-five hundred years of history to look back on to see if and how Ezekiel's prophecy has been fulfilled. That is quite an advantage, but it doesn't guarantee that we will be able to correctly understand the prophet's words. As it stands, and as it is with much of the Word of God, there are still many and varied interpretations of Ezekiel's look into the future. All of which need to be spiritually discerned.

Ezekiel reiterates the idea that the future will bring "David" to shepherd God's people (see Ezekiel 34:23-24). Here in chapter 37 this shepherd is also identified as "king." Governed by this king, the Lord's people will flourish forever under an everlasting *covenant of peace* in the land that God gave to Jacob (37:26). Finally, the Lord says, "*And I will put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them*" (vs 26-27). Some people believe that this prophecy has already been fulfilled, some that it is currently being fulfilled, some that it is yet to fulfilled and some that it will never be fulfilled. Was it fulfilled in the post-exilic repatriation of Israel? Is it being fulfilled in those who are shepherded by King Jesus who has made them temples of the Holy Spirit? Will it yet be fulfilled by a resurgence of temple worship in the land of Israel—particularly in a millennial reign of Christ?

The new covenant is about God dwelling among his people, not about a temple *on this mountain nor in Jerusalem* (Jn 4:21). The sanctuary of which Ezekiel prophesies is not one *built by hands* (Ac 17:24). We are his dwelling place. We are his sanctuary. We are the fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy.

Some people believe that this prophecy has already been fulfilled, some that it is currently being fulfilled, some that it is yet to fulfilled

Gog and Magog

“Son of man, set your face against Gog, of the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal...” -Ezekiel 38:2

It is sometimes easier to say what a difficult passage of Scripture doesn't mean than what it does mean. When a portion of Scripture does not lend itself to obvious interpretation, it becomes more likely that well or ill-meaning teachers will lay spurious claims to categorical expositions. This is certainly the case with Ezekiel 38 and 39 which speaks of *Gog and Magog*. Despite the ironclad renderings of some dispensational theologians, the definitive understanding of the historical and prophetic identity of Gog and Magog remains elusive. Let me share with you, however, some observations that should prove helpful.

You are probably familiar with the intriguing interpretation which says that Magog represents

Gog and Magog. Who are they and who do they represent?

modern Russia who, along with Ethiopia, Iran, Lybia and a host of other nations, will come on horseback and invade an unprotected Israel to fight with swords, shields and bows in order to plunder their goods. As the story goes, these hordes will be defeated when the Lord sends an unprecedented earthquake, a great plague, hailstones and burning sulphur from heaven. Some see a nuclear holocaust here as well. Could this be true? Key is the identity of Gog and Magog. Who are they and who do they represent?

As I said, it is easier to say what something doesn't mean and there are compelling reasons to reject the Russia thing. Space does not allow me to elaborate, but, if you are interested, check out three or four reputable commentaries on the subject. As far as identifying Gog and Magog, the best way to interpret any scripture is with other scriptures on the same subject. In another apocalyptic vision, John specifically identifies Gog and Magog as, *The nations in the four corners of the earth* (Rev 20:8). In both Ezekiel and John's visions, Gog and Magog clearly represent the collective assembly of the enemies of God and his people. More than specific geographical assignment (this is where we get hung up), Gog and Magog represent the nature of those who come against the people of God. Josephus, the extremely reliable Jewish historian of the New Testament period, positively identifies Gog and Magog as the Scythians who were (and who represent) the most barbarous hordes from the uttermost part of the known world. Thus, Gog and Magog are representative of *the nations from the four corners of the earth, the enemies of God, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming* (2 Th 2:8).

In Visions of God He Took Me to the Land of Israel

On that very day the hand of the Lord was upon me and he took me there. In visions of God he took me to the land of Israel and set me on a very high mountain... Ezekiel 40:1-2

Ezekiel was a man given to detail. Six times in the book that bears his name he gives the exact date when he received the particular word or vision that is recorded there. This is very helpful for students of the Bible because we can know, down to the day, when a particular word from the Lord had come and relate the message from the Lord to its historical context. In the case of this, the last of Ezekiel's visions (chapters 40-48) which was given in the twenty-fifth year he was in exile, the historical context may not help us a whole lot. For what Ezekiel saw in the Spirit, may not have had much to do with anything in history at all.

Most times, biblical visions do not depict literal, but figurative, truth

This vision was similar to the one that Ezekiel had as recorded in chapters 8-11 where he was taken up *between earth and heaven* and transported to Jerusalem to see things that pertained to the city—namely the impending judgment of 586 B.C.. This last vision is different however in that the spiritual realities that Ezekiel sees cannot definitively be tied to a historical context like the fall of Jerusalem. That they are spiritual realities is for certain, but are they figurative or literal?

Another certainty is that the details of this vision are very important. Much like the admonition of the Lord to Moses to record in detail the pattern for the tabernacle of God (see Exodus 25:9), Ezekiel is told, “*Look with your eyes and hear with your ears and pay attention to everything I am going to show you, for that is why you have been brought here...*” (v4). Ezekiel is shown another pattern concerning the temple of the Lord. Ezekiel's vision of this temple is especially detailed. But it is not the same as any of the historical temples that have stood in Jerusalem. It is different from Solomon's temple, from Zerubbabel's temple and from Herod's temple.

That Ezekiel's temple is a description of a literal temple yet to be built is possible—but not likely. It is not taking away from the word of God to suggest that what Ezekiel sees has more spiritual than literal significance. Ezekiel's apocalyptic vision, like John's Revelation, must be interpreted— as must any dream or vision. The fact is, most times, biblical visions do not depict literal, but figurative, truth (i.e., Jesus returning on a white horse (Rev 19:11-16)). Ezekiel's visions are profound. We will benefit from them much more if we will apply these visions to our own spiritual realities rather than being caught up in anti-biblical conjectures about their literal fulfillment.