

Describe the Temple That They May Be Ashamed

"Son of man, describe the temple to the people of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their sins. Let them consider the plan, and if they are ashamed of all they have done, make known to them the design of the temple—..." -Ezekiel 43:10-11

The Lord is speaking to Ezekiel in the prophet's last great recorded vision. He has been shown the temple of the Lord—the one thing for God's ancient people that represented his abiding presence. In an earlier vision, Ezekiel had seen the presence of the Lord depart from the Jerusalem temple (see 10:18). Soon after, this historic temple was destroyed by the Babylonian hordes. But now, Ezekiel is seeing a different temple. Similar in many ways to the recently destroyed temple of Solomon, yet not the same. In this vision, Ezekiel witnesses the glory of the presence of the Lord return to the temple. This beautiful and inspiring picture indicates that the Lord intends one day for his glory to return to fill his "temple" again.

Much of what we find in these last eight chapters of Ezekiel reflects the original purity of the covenant of Moses. By the time of the destruction of the temple, God's people had strayed so far from the original intent of the Mosaic covenant, in both spirit and practice, that very little in Israel looked like what God had established at the start when he "tabernacled" with his people in the wilderness. So God showed Ezekiel a vision of a temple and said to him, *"Describe the temple to the people of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their sins."*

Many people believe that God gave this vision to Ezekiel in order to give a future generation, perhaps even ours, a detailed blueprint to build a millennial temple where there will be a re-institution of the Mosaic customs of priestly service and animal sacrifices. But the express reason why the Lord wanted Ezekiel to see the vision of this Mosaic type temple was so that when he described what he saw, the people would be ashamed of the sin that had led to the departure of the glory of God and the destruction of his dwelling place. Now a new and different temple filled with the glory of God was being revealed and this revelation would bring the exiles past the place of despair to the place of repentance—and hope. The description of the temple and its glory would make them ashamed of their sins, determined to experience the reality of the return of the glory of God, and give them faith that if they regained fidelity to the Lord, somehow, someday and someday God would return to his "holy mountain."

Is this a millennial temple where there will be a re-institution of the Mosaic customs of priestly service and animal sacrifices?

To Make Atonement for the People

One sheep is to be taken from every flock of two hundred from the well-watered pastures of Israel. These will be used for the grain offerings, burnt offerings and fellowship offerings to make atonement for the people. Ezekiel 45:15

Matthew Henry says of Ezekiel 40-48 that it, "is justly looked upon to be one of the most difficult portions of Scripture in all the book of God. The Jews do not allow any to read it until they are thirty years old and tell those who read it that, though they cannot understand everything in it, 'when Elijah comes, he will explain it.'"

Many modern evangelical commentators don't find these chapters hard to understand at all. They believe that Ezekiel is looking directly into a future time when Jesus will return to establish a thousand-year reign as king of the earth. By now, you may have picked up that I find this doctrine of a literal earthly millennium to be unsatisfactory, and so I wish to address a couple problems of the theory, as I understand it.

These last eight chapters of Ezekiel are one of the major pillars on which the doctrine of the millennium rests. A doctrine is not spurious just because it is based on a passage of scripture which doesn't lend itself to a clear-cut interpretation. But when all the other supports for the doctrine are attempts to make literal, passages that can just as readily (or more so) be interpreted as figurative, it gets too shaky up there for my comfort. A solid eschatological hermeneutic would suggest that we start with those passages of Scripture that we are certain deal with the return of Christ and can be taken literally. These are Matthew 24, Luke 21:5-36, John 5:24-29, 1 Corinthians 15:50-53, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, and 2 Peter 3:3-14. I contend that if we start with these, by the time we get to Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah and Revelation, there will be no room to accept the millennium doctrine as commonly promoted today.

Another problem that all new covenant believers should have with the millennial doctrine comes out of these chapters. If Ezekiel's vision is of a literal millennial reign of Christ then we are talking about saints who have been clothed with immortal heavenly glories coming back to live in a flesh and blood earth and reverting to worship in a temple that is a mere shadow of the heavenly tabernacle. Here they will observe the festivals, new moons and Sabbaths and offer up again the blood of animals *to make atonement for the people* who live in the land. To me, this idea is ludicrous and an affront to the gospel.

We should start with those passages of Scripture that we are certain deal with the return of Christ and can be taken literally

Every Month They Will Bear

Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing. -Ezekiel 47:12

God expects his people be fruitful. As it is intended in nature, so it should be with us—and more so.

In Isaiah, the Lord likens Israel to a vineyard of choice vines with the best care—but they failed to bear good fruit (5:1-7). The Gospels use the figure of a fruitless fig tree to represent persons who will be cursed or are in danger of being cut off (see Matthew 21:18-19; Luke 13:6-9). But this is not what God intends. To his disciples, Jesus said, “*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit--fruit that will last*” (Jn 15:16). And Paul said that we belong to Jesus *in order that we might bear fruit to God* (Ro 7:4).

It is the river that brings supernatural life

Ezekiel sees a vision from the Lord that represents what happens when the life of the Spirit of God flows to the people of God. He sees a river flowing out from under the Jerusalem temple that becomes deeper and more powerful as it flows along. This is no ordinary river. Revelation 22:1 calls it *the river of the water of life and where the river flows everything will live* (v9). The redemptive power of the river is such that when it empties into the sea, the salt water is turned fresh (see v8). The fruitfulness of the great varieties of trees that line the banks of this river is astounding. The leaves never wither and are used to bring healing. Whoever heard of a tree bearing fruit every month? But this is what we are told about these trees. I can guarantee you that Jesus would not have cursed one of these.

We discover in Ezekiel’s prophecy that the reason the trees are able to bear fruit every month is *because the water from the sanctuary flows to them*. It is the river that brings supernatural life. This is the real “holy water”—*water from the sanctuary* that will produce the fruit of righteousness. This water is the flowing presence of the supernatural working of the Spirit of God inspiring every good work and producing exquisite fruit in our lives.

Your destiny is to be a fruit-bearing tree for the glory of God and the healing of the nations (see Revelation 22:2). If you are planted by streams of living water (Psalm 1:3) you will bear supernatural fruit—the kind of fruit that Jesus said *will last* (Jn 15:16). As the water that flows from the throne of God touches your life, you will produce fruit—abundant and astounding fruit that will be borne in season and out.

He Found Them Ten Times Better

The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service. In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom. -Daniel 1:19-20

During a Canadian federal election one year, I attended a debate between the incumbent in my district, who was a ranking cabinet minister in the government, and the challengers, one of whom was a young man of only twenty-three years. The best way that I can describe the effectiveness of this new candidate in the debate against the representatives from the rival political parties was that “he cleaned their clocks.” I was amazed at his grasp of the issues, his articulation and his ability to think on his feet. He lost the election to the incumbent by less than half a percent. About a year later, I saw him at a city-wide prayer meeting and asked him how things were going. He said that even though his party saw him as a rising star on the political scene, he had decided to give up politics to go into ministry. He had become convinced that he couldn’t remain true to his convictions and remain in politics and he felt he could do more good in Christian ministry.

Debunk the myth that if it's Christian, it must be inferior

I tell that story not to discourage young Christian men and women from entering politics (after all, Daniel served the Lord in government), but to cite just one example of the excellence of the many who have given themselves in the service of the kingdom when they could be making their mark in the world. We need to debunk the myth that if it’s Christian, it must be inferior. I contend that those who serve the Lord are made more capable of excellence because of their connection with and devotion to their Creator and the favour that he bestows. This was certainly true of Daniel and his three comrades. They had entered king Nebuchadnezzar’s service, had not compromised on their devotion to the Lord and his ways and walked in the favour of God. This was so much so that *in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom*.

I know that the church often settles for less than excellence in what it does and the world has seen some of it and has not been impressed. But I am convinced that we have far more than our share of outstanding communicators, writers, teachers, musicians and servants who are not only as good as what the world has to offer but better. Sometimes even ten times better.

They Were Willing to Give up Their Lives

Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. -Daniel 3:28

Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13). It could probably be said just as well that greater worship has no one than this, that he is willing to lay down his life for his God.

Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, better known as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (a black friend of mine says “Shadrach, Meshach and a ‘bad negro’”) faced the very real prospect of being martyred for their devotion to the Lord. As foreigners who worshiped a foreign God, they faced the ultimate persecution for doing so. The edict had gone out that whoever did not fall down on

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cue and worship the image of the king of Babylon would be thrown into a blazing furnace. *All the peoples, nations and men of every language fell down and worshiped the image (3:7)–but not the three young Hebrew men. As a result, they were brought before the king and given a final chance: Either worship the image or die. They incited the wrath of the most powerful man in the world by saying, “If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up” (vs 17-18). Their answer was startling. But they knew the way of true devotion to the Lord: *They did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death* (Rev 12:11).*

Every day there are people in the world, most of them Christians, who have to choose between denying their God and preserving their lives. They trust in God, defy the authorities and refuse to give way to fear. Some, God rescues from the fiery furnace. Some become martyrs. I am not speaking of fanatics who blow themselves up to gain paradise or who set themselves on fire in an altered state of consciousness. These are neither noble nor rewarded. But consecrated men and women who will not bow to the threat of death for the sake of being true to God will be highly honored in heaven and on earth.

Are we willing to join their ranks? Is our passion such that we would be willing to be thrown into a fiery furnace rather than deny our God? And what about the lesser challenges to our devotion—those things which reveal our hearts and what our choice concerning martyrdom would really be?

He Was Neither Corrupt Nor Negligent

The administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent. -Daniel 6:4

Because the authors of the Bible were not apt to hide the blemishes of even the heroes of Scripture, there are very few major characters from Genesis to Revelation for whom there is no identification of fault. Joseph is one, Deborah another and of course our Lord a third. And Daniel is one as well. A man for all time, Daniel was the embodiment of integrity and an abiding inspiration.

More than anything else, honesty and diligence are important in achieving success

As the story goes, Daniel was a high-ranking administrator in the government of Darius. Darius favored Daniel above the other government officials and planned to appoint him over his whole kingdom (v3). Out of jealousy, Daniel’s colleagues set out to discover grounds to discredit him, but they could find none. The Scripture reports that *they could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent*. Here is the man that you want as a public servant—or a private one for that matter. He was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent.

Could that be said about me? ‘Fraid not. I have made promises I have not kept. I have fudged the truth so I wouldn’t look bad. And if someone wanted to dig up some dirt on me, they wouldn’t need an earthmover. But does the kind of character that Daniel displayed appeal to me? You bet. I want to be like Daniel: Faithful in prayer. Strong in wisdom and faith. Impeccable in integrity. Here is a noble goal: To be neither corrupt nor negligent in whatever you do. Honesty and diligence are more important than anything else in achieving success. Nothing can make up for a lack of it, no matter how smart, beautiful, talented or well-schooled you are. When you have found someone who is neither corrupt nor negligent, you have found a goldmine of a person.

If you maintain the kind of honesty and diligence that Daniel had, some may become jealous of you and try to bring you down. You will find favor with both God and man if you never compromise and always discharge your duties. This was the mark of Daniel.

There is an old Sunday school song entitled, “Dare to be a Daniel.” How ‘bout it? It wasn’t just about his boldness to pray to his God in the face of persecution, it was about his trustworthy life that was above accusation because he was neither corrupt nor negligent.

He Wrote Down the Substance of His Dream

Daniel had a dream, and visions passed through his mind as he was lying on his bed. He wrote down the substance of his dream. -Daniel 7:1

You can learn much from your dreams. If you are like me, you have what seem like significant dreams fairly often. Sometimes the dreams reflect and help explain things that are going on in your soul. Still other times there is a witness that God is communicating to you as “visions pass through your mind” while you sleep. In either case, I believe that it is of great advantage to keep a record of these meaningful dreams.

Near the end of the exile of the Jews in Babylon, Daniel received what might be termed a “night vision” from the Lord. While he was sleeping, he was shown things by God concerning the future. These were consequential things about the rise and fall of coming world empires. Daniel received both the vision and the interpretation and was so shaken by what he saw and heard that his face *turned pale*, and he didn’t tell a soul (7:28). But what he did do was write it down. He *wrote down the substance of his dream* so that it was available for both reference and posterity.

It is faithful stewardship that we record these dreams for remembrance, reflection and future guidance

There is something fascinating about the state of the mind during sleep. For most of us, it is a state that is more conducive to hearing from God. When we are awake our minds are often so preoccupied that we can’t hear the voice of God. The Lord could have shown Daniel these things during a waking hour but he chose to bring revelation to him while he was sleeping. And if the Lord chooses to communicate to us in “visions that pass through our minds as we are lying on our beds,” it is faithful stewardship that we record these dreams for remembrance, reflection and future guidance. And we need to write them down while they are fresh, so keep a pen and paper at your bedside. To do so would be an expression of both faith and diligence.

In these night visions, Daniel had a clear and compelling revelation of the coming Messiah. He saw *one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed* (vs 13-14). Hallelujah!

Daniel was both amazed and disturbed by everything he saw in this dream. But what a blessing that he wrote it all down.

We Have Sinned and Done Wrong

We have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes and our fathers, and to all the people of the land. -Daniel 9:5-6

In 1939, nine-hundred Jews sailed from Europe on an ocean liner named the “St. Louis” to seek asylum from Nazi Germany. Being refused entry into Cuba (despite possession of valid entry visas) they sailed north but were kept from entering any American port. They appealed to Canada as their last hope of refuge. Out of bigotry, as well as a fear of a mass immigration of European Jews, these were turned away by a Canadian official named Frederick Charles Blair and the ship had to return to Germany. The Nazi’s took this as a clear message that the Jews indeed were unloved in the world and worthy of extermination. Over two-thirds of those on board were subsequently murdered in Nazi death camps.

“Sin does not evaporate.” It can only be eradicated by confession and repentance

Sixty-one years later, the survivors of the St. Louis were brought to Canada in an effort to seek their forgiveness for Canada’s role in the infamous “Voyage of the Damned.” In one of the most sincere and powerful expressions of repentance I have ever witnessed, the grandnephew of Frederick Blair, a pastor named Doug Blair, confessed the sins of his granduncle and asked forgiveness of the survivors of the St. Louis. Is it possible to repent for the sins of your forefathers?

Daniel was a righteous man, and yet in prayer to God he identified with the sins of his forefathers and said, “*We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to...our fathers...*” It was the fathers who had sinned, and yet Daniel was confessing that sin as if it were his. He took ownership of that sin, confessed it and sought the forgiveness of God for it. It needed to be done but once. Someone had to represent Israel in spoken and heartfelt repentance before they returned from exile.

Yes, it is not only possible to repent for the sin of your forefathers, it is usually necessary. Dennis Wiedrick says, “Sin does not evaporate.” It can only be eradicated by confession and repentance. The sins of the fathers can and will be visited upon subsequent generations. Our ancestors in the flesh and in the faith are accountable for their own sins, but if we carry any heritage in them, we have the authority to deal with the abiding effect of that sin and say, “*We have sinned and done wrong*”

Everyone Whose Name Is Found Written in the Book

At that time your people--everyone whose name is written in the book--will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. -Daniel 12:1-2

Daniel is speaking of the end times--of what John's Revelation calls *the great tribulation* (Re 7:14). Daniel describes it as *a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then* (12:1). Jesus echoes Daniel's witness and calls it a *great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now--and never to be equaled again* (Mt 24:21). In the midst of this great tribulation there is assurance of ultimate deliverance. Deliverance, that is, for *everyone whose name is found written in the book*.

Does this sound familiar? The concept of a book containing the names of the saved is found many places in Scripture. The first indication of such a "book" is in Exodus 32:33 where the Lord says to Moses, "*Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book.*" Then David said, "*May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous*" (Ps 69:28).

When it comes down to it, the only thing that matters is whether or not your name is recorded in this book of life

Malachi observes that *a scroll of remembrance was written in his* [the Lord's] *presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honored his name* (Mal 3:16). Jesus spoke about it as well when he said, "*Rejoice that your names are written in heaven*" (Lk 10:20). And finally, John's Revelation contains explicit references to the book of life including: *If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire* (Rev 20:15).

So, is there a literal scroll in heaven inscribed with some indelible celestial ink (or maybe an electronic database), or are these references figurative depictions of an irrepressible truth? Does it matter? The fact is, these things are said for our exhortation and comfort. Our names are written in heaven and we can rejoice in the thought and be assured of our deliverance out of any tribulation--including the great distress that Daniel and Jesus said was coming on the world.

When it comes down to it, the only thing that matters is whether or not your name is recorded in this book of life. It is also of great importance and urgency that your neighbor's name be there as well. The people of God--those whose names are found written in the book--will be delivered, perhaps not from persecution or even martyrdom, but certainly from the lake of fire.

Is your name there?

Go, Show Your Love to Your Wife Again

The Lord said to me, "Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods..." -Hosea 3:1

It is an arduous undertaking for a spouse to forgive adultery. Marriage is a covenantal bond built on trust and fidelity. A spouse who violates that bond by sexual unfaithfulness severs the marital connection by breaching the exclusive oneness of the relationship. The damage is not irreparable, but it takes much grace and forgiveness for the marriage to be restored.

What then, when the Lord's people have been unfaithful to him? The Lord often uses the picture of a husband and wife to describe his relationship with us, but it is more than an analogy. There is a covenantal oneness established Spirit to spirit between the Lord and his people that is akin to the oneness between a husband and a wife. When we give ourselves to other lovers, the Lord has grounds for divorce. Will he seek to restore or will he give us what we deserve?

When we give ourselves to other lovers, the Lord has grounds for divorce

The Lord told Hosea, "*Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness*" (1:2). It is not clear whether this wife, Gomer, had already been an unfaithful wife with children born out of her infidelity or if it was recognized that this is what would happen later (my guess is the former). But Hosea married her and she bore three children, two of whom were named Lo-Ruhamah, which means "not loved" and Lo-Ammi, which means "not my people." Because of the unfaithfulness of the people of Israel, the Lord was signifying through these prophetic names that Israel was no longer loved nor worthy to be called his people.

If the Lord's call to Hosea to marry this "adulterous" wife is a peculiar one, then what he calls him to do later is extraordinary. Evidently, after the birth of their third child, Gomer left Hosea and became lover to another, perhaps even engaging in prostitution. Even so, the Lord said to Hosea, "*Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods..."*" So Hosea went and purchased her from slavery (perhaps from a "pimp") and took her again as his wife.

The illustration is clear. As difficult as it would be for one of us to do what Hosea did for Gomer, the Lord has it in his heart to do this for us when we are unfaithful. Let us never presume or take for granted the Lord's heart but to stay close to it--and allow his amazing love to keep us true.

How Can the Lord Pasture Them like Lambs in a Meadow?

The Israelites are stubborn, like a stubborn heifer. How then can the Lord pasture them like lambs in a meadow? -Hosea 4:16

Are you like a lamb in a meadow or are you like a stubborn heifer? Are you easily led by the Lord or do you have to be coerced to do his will?

The Lord speaks through Hosea concerning Israel and says that they are like a stubborn heifer. Now, I'm not a farm boy—about the farthest thing from it—but what I have heard (from my wife) is that it is difficult (at least for her) to get cows to go where you want them to go. That is why you need cowboys, heeler dogs, quads, helicopters or anything else that will get them doggies movin.'

Not knowing what a "heifer" is, I found out from my Simon and Schuster Encyclopedia that a heifer is any cow more than one year old which has not produced a calf. I find that interesting, and I ask, "What good is a cow more than one year old which has not produced a calf?" I may be missing something here but as far as I can see, once Bessie reaches maturity the only two places she is good for is the milk barn or the slaughter house. She should either be reproducing calves and producing milk or being served up medium-rare with some savoury grilled mushrooms.

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Now, I don't know about cattle, but I do know about cats. Until she has her first litter (or until she is spayed), a female cat can be a bit unsettled if not unruly. But once she gives birth to those little ones, she seems to settle down. If this is true for cows as well, then a heifer is that much more stubborn than your average contented mama cow. So, if Israel was a heifer, she would have been both stubborn and unproductive. Need we ask ourselves about our own stubbornness and lack of productivity?

But lambs in the meadow are a different story. The Hebrew here designates "lambs," which, of course, are young sheep. Sheep can be easily led, and even more so, when they are contented lambs in a meadow. Do you get the picture?

The Lord cannot pasture stubborn heifers. They are stiff-necked and unresponsive to his call. But the sheep know the voice of the Shepherd and respond when he calls.

God does not want stubborn heifers. He wants lambs in a meadow. So what about you? Are you a stubborn heifer or a lamb in a meadow?

An Enemy Will Pursue Him

The people have broken my covenant and rebelled against my law. Israel cries out to me, 'O our God, we acknowledge you!' But Israel has rejected what is good; an enemy will pursue him. -Hosea 8:1-3

There is a chilling concept found in the pages of Scripture indicating that if you reject the Lord, he will hand you over to your enemies. It is frightening to think about the implications. Simply put, rebellion opens the door to demonic attack.

Israel had rebelled. Hosea was sent by God to speak to that rebellious house. While Isaiah was preaching in the southern kingdom of Judah, Hosea was giving the word of the Lord to the Northern Kingdom, Israel. He lived and preached in the years encompassing the fall of Israel to the Assyrians. If you remember anything about the reckless abandon of idolatrous worship to which Israel had given themselves, you know why the Lord decided to hand his people over to their enemies. Even though they cried out and said, "*O our God, we acknowledge you,*" they had rejected what is good. The only thing left for them was to be pursued by their enemies.

***Rebellion opens the door to
demonic attack***

We are given choices in life. When we "reject what is good," then we become prey to what is bad. In the will of the Lord there is protection and covering from the evil one. As John Bevere has pointed out in his excellent book, "The Devil's Door," the only door the Devil has into our life is disobedience. If we reject what is good and disobey the Lord, we come out from under the protection of God's covering and become accessible to the pursuit of the enemy.

Hymenaeus and Alexander, one-time co-workers with Paul, were *handed over to Satan* because they *rejected...faith and a good conscience*" (1 Tim 1:20). Since these two former companions of the apostle had rejected what is good, the only thing left for them was to be handed over to Satan. This is what happened to Israel. They rejected faith and a good conscience and were pursued by their enemies. If we reject faith and a good conscience it will happen to us too.

When the Lord allows us to be pursued by our enemies, we are reaping what we have sown and are being subjected to a severe form of discipline. Ultimately, as it was with the case of Israel, and Hymenaeus and Alexander, the enemy's attack is on the very flesh which is instrumental in rejecting faith and a good conscience. The Lord allows this pursuit by our enemies in order to lead us back to our spiritual senses—and back to himself.

Take Words with You

Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God. Your sins have been your downfall! Take words with you and return to the Lord. Say to him: "Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips."
-Hosea 14:1-2

Sometimes, words are the only thing we have to offer when seeking reconciliation. Talk is cheap, but, then again, the words we bring to a situation can be invaluable. Words of repentance must be backed up with repentance. Words of love must be backed by love. And words of correction must be backed by discipline. But the words themselves carry a power of their own and can be, and often need to be, spoken as a sweet offering in the mending of relationships

Hosea, through the Holy Spirit, let Israel know that the door would be opened for them to return to the Lord. His advice was that when they return, they should bring something with them—something they could offer the Lord, something very important: Words. Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God. Your sins have been your downfall! Take words with you and return to the Lord. Say to him: "Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips."

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Now we know that the Lord did not always listen to the "words" that were brought before him by his people. An overriding principle of Scripture is that the Lord does not take heed to the outward appearance but looks at what is in the heart. "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me," is the lament of the Lord concerning his people (Is 29:13). You can't smooth-talk God—but your words, if they truly express your heart, are so important. Words are supposed to reveal the truth of what is in the heart. Words themselves have power—power to gain trust, power to motivate, power to heal. So, when there is a breach in a relationship, words must be brought as an agent of healing.

Those we have wronged wait to hear what we have to say. The only way reconciliation can begin is if we come with words from the heart. Hosea calls it "the fruit of our lips" that is offered in hopes of a gracious reception. When you approach someone for forgiveness, you must *take words with you*. So often, all a person is waiting for and wanting from you are your words. That offering is integral to the healing. Just one word can make all the difference.

The Lord wants to hear your words as well. If you need to return to the Lord, take your words with you. He is listening.

Declare a Holy Fast

Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly. Summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord.
-Joel 1:14

There are times when nothing less than a corporate fast will do. Whether as a family, a church or a nation, to seek the Lord with prayer and fasting is what sometimes must be done to be delivered from a crisis or to reach the next stage in God's redemptive plan.

Locusts had devoured the vegetation of Judah. Joel 1:4 sounds almost like the script of a modern day television reporter on location. With the devastated fields in the T.V. background, I can hear her reporting with microphone in hand: "What the locust swarm has left the great locusts have eaten; what the great locusts have left the young locusts have eaten; what the young locusts have left other locusts have eaten." A great and powerful "nation" had invaded and had laid waste the produce of the land (1:6).

**Sometimes the situation warrants a corporate fast
Sometimes, nothing else will do.**

What do you do in a situation like that? In the case of Judah, the prescription was a time of national fasting and prayer. It would start with the priests, the ones who ministered before God. They were to *spend the night in sackcloth* and intercession before the Lord (v 13). Then they were to: *Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly. Summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord.* This was a call for the entire nation to fast and gather at the temple of the Lord to call out to him for a reprieve from the devastation that had come upon the land.

There are other biblical examples of corporate fasting for the favor of God. Esther called all the Jews to three days of fasting as she prepared to intervene with the king on behalf of her people (see Esther 4:16). When Jonah preached judgment to the Ninevites, *they declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth* (Jnh 3:5). There have also been examples in modern history where leaders have declared a day of national prayer and fasting. Both Lincoln and Churchill did so.

Just recently we declared a 21-day fast in our church. It seems that everyone in the church took part in some form. The Sunday service we had at the end of the fast was possibly the most significant we have ever had. Coincidence? Hardly.

Sometimes the situation warrants a corporate fast. Sometimes, nothing else will do.

I Will Pour out My Spirit in Those Days

And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. -Joel 2:28-29

“*This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel,*” said Peter on the day the Holy Spirit was poured out during the feast of Pentecost (Ac 2:16)—a mere ten days after the ascension of the resurrected Christ. And ever since then, this passage in Joel has been given a special place in the life and teaching of the church of Jesus Christ. And rightly so.

In those days: There is often uncertainty and conjecture regarding when specific predictions from biblical writers might be fulfilled. “When will ‘those days’ be,” we ask? But in this case, there is no doubt when Joel’s prediction was fulfilled. The Spirit of God was poured out on “the day of Pentecost” and “those days” continue still.

I will pour out my spirit on all people: Even though the initial outpouring was on a small group of one-hundred and twenty believers gathered together in an upper room, at least fifteen different nations were represented in Jerusalem that day. As the gospel was preached, the promise was given to those gathered that they too would be able to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 2:38). God was now fulfilling Joel’s prophecy by pouring out his Spirit on all people.

No longer would it be an exclusive few who would prophesy and speak the word of the Lord

Your sons and daughters will prophesy: Moses’ wish that *all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them* (Nu 11:29) was now being fulfilled. Yes, there were those who prophesied under the old covenant, and yes, these included women—like Miriam and Deborah. But no longer would it be an exclusive few who would prophesy and speak the word of the Lord. (Incidentally, there are many conservative evangelicals who contend that to prophesy is the same as to preach a sermon, and yet do not allow a woman to preach. If sons and daughters are to prophesy then these conservative Christians have to be wrong on at least one account.)

Even though the Lord said, “*I will pour out my Spirit in those days,*” many Christians have settled for a trickle rather than an outpouring and have justified their inferior experience with weak theology regarding life in the Spirit. But *those days* are still here and the outpouring continues.

Revealing His Plan to His Servants the Prophets

Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets. -Amos 3:7

Amos was a shepherd from the mountain village of Tekoa, just south of Jerusalem. Though he had no spiritual pedigree (see Amos 7:14-15), the Lord called him as a prophet and he thundered out the word of the Living God for all Israel to hear. Amos’ testimony bears witness not only to the fact that the Lord calls whomever he wants to be his prophets, but that he also chooses to do nothing without first revealing his plan to them.

Amos’s statement, “*Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets,*” is a theological benchmark. In trying to understand who God is and how he operates, this little statement is invaluable. It tells us a lot about God. Forget the Deist, New Age or Hindu view that God hovers at mysterious arm’s length from his creation choosing to be a clandestine deity. Yes, the knowledge of God’s ways are *too lofty for us to attain* (Ps 139:6) but they are not beyond his revelation. Yes, it is his *glory to conceal a matter* (Pr 25:2) but only to those who are wise in their own eyes. God wants to be known and he wants his ways to be known. That is why he does nothing without first revealing it to his prophets.

Forget the view that God hovers at mysterious arm’s length from his creation

The implications of this statement are immense. Besides the assurance that we are dealing with a self-revealing God who wants us to “get the message” about what he is up to, it also means that the message is out actually out there, being confirmed by those on whom his favor rests. Since a matter is established by the testimony of more than one witness, the Lord most assuredly is revealing his plan to more than the Lone Prophet. This doesn’t mean that the going concern in the body of Christ is necessarily the revelation of what God is about to do next. The majority opinion is often wrong. But it does mean that there are faithful voices out there who really have heard from the Lord to whom the Spirit will testify to others the truth of what they are saying.

God never leaves himself without a witness. That’s why we have the Bible. The really important stuff is found there. It is stuff that was revealed centuries ago, much of which has been fulfilled, some of which is yet to be. It is stuff that the prophets themselves may not have understood but was given for understanding at the proper time. It is stuff that even angels have longed to look into (see 1 Peter 1:12). And it is stuff that the Sovereign Lord wouldn’t think about doing until he first revealed it—to his servants the prophets.

The Day of the Lord

Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord! Why do you long for the day of the Lord? That day will be darkness, not light...Will not the day of the Lord be darkness, not light--pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness? -Amos 5:18,20

The day of the Lord is both an Old Testament and New Testament concept. The expression, *Day of the Lord*, is found twenty-four times in the NIV and in virtually every occasion the different writers are referring to the same event. To understand the meaning of the day of the Lord is to understand what happens at the end of time as we know it.

Most of the eschatological constructs that I have seen are complicated. "Prophecy experts" market their foldout end-time charts which are big enough to side your house. I've just finished listening to a set of tapes by a brilliant man who does an impressive job explaining it all. It takes him a few hours just to give an introduction to the subject. But I wonder if the Lord intended for it to be complicated. Do we really need experts to explain it all to us?

The day of the Lord is the fearful and final day of judgment

The day of the Lord is a very simple concept. It is the fearful and final day of judgment for those who live on the earth. Amos says, "*Why do you long for the day of the Lord? That day will be darkness, not light. It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear, as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him*" (5:18-19). In other words, things will go from bad to worse. Those who try to escape it will not be able to. It is, as other biblical writers have put it, *a cruel day with wrath and fierce anger* (Is 13:9); *a day of clouds, a time of doom for the nations* (Ez 30:3); *a great and dreadful day* (Joel 2:31, Mal 4:5); *a day that will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire* (2 Pe 3:12). So even though the redeemed *look forward to the day of God and speed its coming* (2 Pe 3:12), we can understand why Amos asked, "*Why do you long for the day of the Lord?*"

The key eschatological question is this: "Is the day of the Lord and the return of Christ the same?" Because they both are described as coming like a *thief* (Lk 12:39; 1 Th 5:2; Rv 16:15), I say "yes." If this is the case, then what happens at the end is not complicated at all. When Jesus comes back, that's it. Don't count on getting a second chance if you are left behind. *It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear.* The day of the Lord, as Amos and others describe it, is a day of blackness—a day of judgment. And if you are not ready when that day comes, things will only go from bad to worse.

A Famine of Hearing the Words of the Lord

"The days are coming...when I will send a famine through the land--not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord. Men will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the Lord, but they will not find it. -Amos 8:11-12

If man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God (Dt 8:3; Mt 4:4), what happens if there is no word of the Lord? We know that we cannot live without food. Do we realize what a crisis it would be if there was a famine for the word of the Lord?

The Lord spoke through Amos a most ominous message. He said to Israel that he was going to send a famine through the land. *Not a famine of food or a thirst for water—God was going to send a different kind of famine—a famine of hearing the words of the Lord.* Amos predicted that there would be those who would stagger with malnourished souls searching for the word of the Lord but there would be none to be found. There would be a famine of the word of God.

Since they didn't relish the word of God it would be taken away

I cannot imagine living without the word of the Lord. There are times, I suppose, I take his word for granted—as I sometimes do my daily bread. But I am aware of my need for fresh manna every day. It would not take us long to miss our three square meals a day but how long would it be before we began to hunger for the word of the Lord if it were taken away?

Would God ever send this kind of famine today? You might say, "No, because we have his word in the Bible." Well, forgive me, but the word of God is more than the Bible. The people of Amos' time had the written word of God—but there was still going to be a famine of hearing the words of the Lord. The Bible cannot come alive unless the Spirit gives it life. The sin of Israel was that they did not seek or obey the word of the Lord. His words were plentiful, but they would have none of it. Since they didn't relish it, it would be removed.

Jesus lived Deuteronomy 8:3. The word of the Father was his subsistence. The only time that he didn't have the word of the Lord was when his connection with the Father was lost at Calvary. This was part of his anguish. He knew what he was talking about when he told the Devil that man does not live on bread alone.

Could you bear a famine of the word of the Lord any more than you could your daily bread? Truly, we do not live by bread alone but by the very words of God. And what a crisis it would be if there were a famine of these words.

On the Day You Stood Aloof

Because of the violence against your brother Jacob, you will be covered with shame; you will be destroyed forever. On the day you stood aloof while strangers carried off his wealth... -Obadiah 1:10-11

Often, the reason that people don't get involved when they see someone in trouble is that they don't want any trouble, themselves. Or, they may think that the troubled party brought it on themselves so, "Let them get what they deserve." It could also be the case that they may not have had the best history with the one who needs help and they actually relish the fact that some level of calamity has come to make life difficult for them. This would have been the case with Edom, Judah's neighbor and relative, who *stood aloof* in the day of Judah's trouble

Jacob and Esau were twin brothers. Jacob eventually became the nations of Israel and Judah, and Esau became the nation of Edom. Edom was bordered east of Judah and stood by as Judah was invaded by foreign armies and *strangers carried off his wealth*. Edom not only *stood aloof*, but they *rejoiced over the people of Judah in the day of their destruction* (v12). But the Lord said, "*You should not look down on your brother in the day of his misfortune*" (v12), and so, because they would not help their brother Judah when they were in trouble, Obadiah pronounced the Lord's judgment on Edom.

Indifference is not a virtue. It may well be the sin that sends the most people to a Christ-less eternity

Now, it may seem strange that the Lord would judge Edom for standing aloof (literally, "standing from a distance") when the foreign invasion of Judah was orchestrated by God. But Edom's attitude was not one of sympathy for Judah. In spirit, they had become just like the Babylonians who brought the destruction. In the Lord's eyes, there would be no difference. They reveled in the downfall of their ancient relatives and stood aloof in their day of trouble.

Indifference is not a virtue. It may well be the sin that sends the most people to a Christ-less eternity. To stand aloof when your brother is in trouble ranks with any of the so-called "sins of commission." Jesus' description of the "goats" in Matthew 25 is not about what terrible sins they committed—it was about what they didn't do. It was about those who "stood aloof" when those whom Jesus considered his brothers were in need.

There is a big difference between "standing by someone when they are in trouble" and "standing by when someone is in trouble." To stand aloof when your brother needs your help is hardhearted and cowardly and it brings the judgment of the Lord.

The Lord Provided a Great Fish to Swallow Jonah

But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights. -Jonah 1:17

In one way, I can see where people have a problem believing the story of Jonah, but in another way, I don't see the problem at all. The only premise that you need to accept this account as true is that God works miracles. Simpler yet, the only premise that you need is that God is.

To many people, the story of Jonah is nothing more than a fable. It is not even a question for them. What seriously thoughtful person, not to mention the critically minded scholar, could ever bring themselves to digress in their intellectual development to accept such a childish notion? Those who believe that this man, Jonah, was swallowed by a great fish and spent three days and three nights inside of it, certainly must be checking their brains at the door of whatever church is naive enough to teach this kind of myth as fact.

It may not be about intellectual honesty, but about intellectual conditioning

But what actually is the problem other than the impossibility of it happening? What is so hard to believe? Is there not a God? Is he not omnipotent? He wouldn't or couldn't "provide" a great fish to come and swallow Jonah so that Jonah's call could be redeemed? Oh, but the intellectual person is offended by such a story. But again, why? The essence of the offense and subsequent denial is that the disbelievers do not want to be seen as intellectual Bozos. To confess that you actually believe in the story of Jonah and the whale would be an automatic death sentence in some educated circles. You might as well confess your faith in Santa Claus, as far as some would be concerned.

But if you deny as true that Jonah spent three days in the *belly of a whale* (KJV) then you are in disagreement with Jesus on the subject. Jesus said, "*For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth*" (Mt 12:40). Not only did Jesus mention Jonah and the fish thing, he also affirmed as history the rest of the account of Jonah (see Matthew 12:41).

John Wimber used to say that God will often offend a person's mind in order to reveal their heart. Most of my audience would not find the story of Jonah and the whale hard to swallow (if you know what I mean). But if you have a problem believing the word of God at this point, it may not be about intellectual honesty, it may be about intellectual conditioning,—or worse yet, intellectual pride. Only a simple premise is needed to override that intellectual short-circuit: God is, and he is able.

I Am Filled with Power, with the Spirit of the Lord

But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression, to Israel his sin.
-Micah 3:8

There is a difference between being conceit and being confidence of who you are in God. The difference, surely, lies in the reason for the certitude. It is not conceited to affirm and declare the reality of the manifest presence and power of the Spirit of the Living God in your life—if in fact it is true.

Micah was contrasting his ministry with the cast of false prophets in the land. There were plenty of them to scratch the ears of a people who preferred lies to the word of the Lord. To wit, it was said, *“If a liar and deceiver comes and says, ‘I will prophesy for you plenty of wine and beer,’ he would be just the prophet for this people!”* (2:11). Besides Micah, Isaiah also spoke to that generation. Together, they were the minority who prophesied to God’s people and spoke the truth under the anointing of the Lord. So, in contrasting his ministry with the pseudo prophets of the day, Micah said, *But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might.*

***It is not conceited to affirm
and declare the reality of God
in your life***

If you ever wanted a mantra, this might be it. Not that you could conjure a life filled with power, the Holy Spirit, justice and might by merely repeating such a phrase, but the one who could profess such a thing in truth would be a force to be reckoned with. Micah must have been such a man. He knew what was on him and in him and he was not afraid to declare it.

Some of us wouldn’t think of stating such a thing publically. But why not? Because it wouldn’t actually be true? Because we carry around a false sense of humility? David was not afraid to say who he was in God. Nor was our Lord. Nor was Paul. These three, perhaps the three greatest men to walk the face of the earth, had a healthy balance of humility and bold confidence of the power from on high they had received. And I believe that the power was accentuated by their confession of it.

Micah had a job to do and the power of God was on him to do it. Listen to Micah: *“I am filled with power.” “I am filled with the Spirit of the Lord.” “I am filled with justice and might.”* Why do you think Jesus told his disciples to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came? He wanted them, and us, to be able to say what Micah said.

We have a job to do and such a confession, if said in truth, will help us do it.

Whose Origins Are from of Old

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times. -Micah 5:2

What do you understand about the Christ? Everything rises and falls on your Christology. It is the central issue to your salvation and your orthodoxy. The first and foremost sign of any cult is error in who they say Jesus is. What you believe about the Christ will determine if you are safely on base or out in left field, theologically.

Micah’s prophecy was that the Messiah would come out of the city of Bethlehem in the region of Ephrathah. When the Magi arrived in search of the new born king of the Jews and Herod wanted to know if there were any prophetic clues as to place of his birth, the chief priests and the teachers of the law immediately responded by quoting what we know as Micah 5:2 (see Matthew 2:5-6). It was well understood that Micah’s prophecy was about the Messiah. And among Micah’s various descriptions of the Christ is that his *origins are from of old, from ancient times*. When did the Christ originate and how is it that it could be said that he was from “ancient times?”

***He is the uncreated, begotten,
eternal and divine Son of God***

To start with, the pre-incarnate Christ can be found appearing in the stories of the Old Testament. He was the ancient priest, Melchizedek in the days of Abraham (see Hebrews 7:3), he was the “rock” from whom gushed forth water to refresh the Israelites in the days of Moses (see 1 Corinthians 10:4) and he was the one who walked in the fiery furnace with the three Hebrew young men in the days of Daniel (see Daniel 3:25). He was also the agent of all creation. When God said, *“Let us make man in our own image”* (Gen 1:26), who do you think he was talking to? *Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made* (John 1:3). He is known as *the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world* (Rev 13:8), and he said, *“Before Abraham was born, I am”* (John 8:58). And finally, John testifies, *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God* (John 1:1).

One thing that you have to understand about the Christ is that his origins are from old—from ancient times. “Ancient times” could also be translated “eternal times.” Some liberal theologians and cults may deny it, but the Christ has always been. He is the uncreated, only begotten, eternal and divine Son of God. This is part of understanding who the Christ is—and that understanding will go a long way in determining where you spend your own eternity.

Will the Lord Be Pleased with Thousands of Rams?

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? -Micah 6:7

“*With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God?*” the prophet asks (Mic 6:6). What is it that the Lord requires? Is it burnt offerings? Calves a year old? How about rams? Would God be pleased if, like Solomon, I sacrificed thousands of rams on the altar? Would ten thousand rivers of oil be enough? What if I offered up the ultimate sacrifice and gave my firstborn?

These, of course, are rhetorical questions that Micah asks. The Law prescribed that sacrificial offerings be presented to the Lord. In that light, those who wanted to come before the Lord had in mind to bring some kind of offering—and well they should. Different types of offerings were prescribed for different situations. There was the sin offering, the guilt offering, the burnt offering, the grain offering and the fellowship offering. There were animal sacrifices of pigeons, goats, sheep, cattle and oxen. There were drink offerings as well as the offering of oil and incense for worship.

What is it that the Lord really wants?

But Micah is out to make a point. What is it that the Lord really wants? If God is pleased with sacrifice, then surely a thousand rams would be impressive. But even if you had a thousand rams or ten thousand rivers of oil or were even willing to sacrifice your firstborn, this is not what God is looking for. Micah elaborates, “*He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God*” (v8).

Does this then negate the law? No, it is actually the essence of it. The sacrificial system was given to show that there must be atonement for sin, but there are matters of the law that have to do with the heart. Jesus said that we should be concerned about the *important matters of the law--justice, mercy and faithfulness* (Mt 23:23)—the very things of which Micah speaks.

If the Lord required thousands of rams, not everyone could give it. But if he requires justice, mercy and humility, that levels the playing field considerably. Your sacrifices are not as important as your obedience. As Samuel said to Saul, “*Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams*” (1 Sam 15:22).

Forget the rams. Justice, mercy and faithfulness is the better sacrifice.

His Way Is in the Whirlwind and the Storm

The Lord is slow to anger and great in power; the Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished. His way is in the whirlwind and the storm, and clouds are the dust of his feet. -Nahum 1:3

Four generations after the people of Nineveh repented in sackcloth and ashes at the preaching of Jonah they again were in trouble with the God of the Nations. Guilty of dark sorcery and odious violence (Assyrian commanders would make pyramids of the skulls of their beheaded captives), Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, was about to receive her punishment from the hand of the Lord.

As Nahum described Nineveh’s sin and God’s response, he makes some statements concerning the Lord’s nature. In chapter one he says, “*The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord takes vengeance and is filled with wrath...The Lord is slow to anger and great in power; the Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished*” (vs 2,3). He then says something that we all, at one time or another, have had a sense about: *His way is in the whirlwind and the storm.*

If you are like me, you find something both frightening and arresting about a storm. The power displayed in a summer storm with a great wind along with lightning and

The ways of God can be understood through our experience of the natural order

thunder is nothing less than awesome. And even though the power becomes unnerving and terrifying, especially if the storm turns out to be a hurricane or a tornado, there is still something about the power of the storm that witnesses of God. Perhaps this is why Nahum speaks of God’s way being found in the whirlwind and the storm.

Biblical writers are apt to describe the ways of God in terms of the elements and workings of nature. It follows that if the Lord is the author of nature, he would reveal his ways through it. Whether it is the mother hen who gathers her chicks under her wings or the earthquake that shakes the foundations of the earth, the ways of God can be understood through our experience of the natural order.

Notice that Nahum says that God’s “way” is in the whirlwind. He is not necessarily in the storm, but when we experience the wind and the storm we come to experience something of the nature of God. I think you must know what I mean. You’ve been there, hopefully, safely out of harm’s way, but you have watched, heard, and felt the whirlwind and the storm, and somehow there was a witness about a God who is both frightening and arresting at the same time— a relentless, powerful, imposing and breathtaking God.

Though the Fig Tree Does Not Bud

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior. -Habakkuk 3:17,18

Many believe that the book of Habakkuk originated as the prophet's journal which found its way into the public arena and was eventually put to music. Another possibility was that it started out as a song. Either way, in it we find some personal reflections that would have echoed the thoughts and feelings of many people living in Judah as Habakkuk and Jeremiah were preparing the people for the immanent invasion of the Babylonians.

How much of your praise depends on your provision?

As emotionally normal people are apt to do, Habakkuk gave expression to many different thoughts and feelings concerning things that seemed neither right nor fair to him. He asks, "How long, O Lord, must I call for help but you do not listen" (1:2), and "Why do you tolerate wrong" (1:3). When the Lord answers by telling him "I am raising up the Babylonians" (1:6), Habakkuk is honest enough with the Lord to question how God could use these wicked people to do his bidding. The rest of this short book of fifty-six verses is full of profound thoughts, memorable quotes and discerning insight.

At the end of what could very well have been his personal journal, Habakkuk makes this statement of faith: *Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.*

There are some who would not consider Habakkuk's statement one of faith. They would see it as a noble, yet unnecessary, resignation to the work of a spirit of poverty—a situation altogether outside the will of God. But his attitude is the same as Paul's who said, "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want" (Php 4:12). You see, Habakkuk, after considering so many vantage points on the will and the ways of God, came to a conclusion. Circumstances would not be allowed to dictate whether he would rejoice in the Lord or whether God was worthy of praise. He would not lose his joy, even if he were penniless.

How much of your praise depends on your provision? Thank and believe God for it but, no matter what, keep rejoicing in the Lord.

He Will Take Great Delight in You

The Lord your God is with you.... He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing. -Zep 3:17

I have this theory that what the Lord expects from us is a reflection of his own posture toward us. The great commandment, to love him with all that we are, is our reciprocation of his total love for us. And the great commission to go into all the world is a response on our part to the One who first went on mission to seek and to save the lost. When the Lord says that he abhors lukewarmness (see Revelation 3:16), I believe it is because there is nothing halfway in his own nature. We do not serve a God who is lukewarm about anything, especially us.

There is a fervency that the God of the universe displays in everything he does

The book of Zephaniah, like so many other biblical accounts, shows two different sides of the Lord—neither lacking passion. On one hand we see a God who has a fierce anger toward his enemies and a consuming disappointment and discipline for his people when they turn their backs on him. On the other hand, we see the Lord's incredible heart for those called by his name. One such example is where Zephaniah says, *Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart...The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing (3:14,17).*

When you read books like Zephaniah, the contrasts between the two facets of God's nature are so striking, they seem implausible. At one point God is going to wipe his people out and then, at another, he is rejoicing over them with singing. These sentiments do not spring from two different facets of God's nature. They come from one—his passion. Nothing that you see here in Zephaniah, or any other biblical account, will ever lead you to believe that God is anything other than passionate. Whether it is his zeal to mete judgment or his great delight in his people, there is a fervency that the God of the universe displays in everything he does. The zeal of the Lord of Hosts is a given.

This all-out-ness is a mark of the kingdom as well. The kingdom of God is forcefully advancing and the zealous lay hold of it (see Matthew 11:12). You are either in or you're out. There is a heaven and there is a hell and nothing in between. You are either for him or against him.

God would much rather take great delight in you and rejoice over you with singing than say, "Depart from me, I never knew you." But, because of his passionate nature, it will be one or the other.

A Purse with Holes in it

Now this is what the Lord Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.” -Haggai 1:5-6

Do you sometimes wonder why there is too much month at the end of your money or why you seem to get hit with that hefty repair bill at just the wrong time? Do you ever find yourself asking, “Where in the world did my money go?” Are you ever amazed at how your paycheck seems to take flight as soon as it gets into your hands? Assuming that your problem is not reckless spending or a lack of industriousness it could be that God is trying to get your attention about your priorities as they relate to him.

What happens when you do not seek his kingdom first? The Lord puts holes in your purse and gives wings to your money.

Not every case of economic struggle can be attributed to a lack of kingdom priorities, but in the case of Jews during the time of Haggai, it was. The Lord said to them, “*Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?*” (1:4). You see, the people had said, “*The time has not yet come for the Lord’s house to be built*” (1:3). But the Lord was not pleased and said, “*You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why? declares the Lord Almighty. Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house...*” (1:9). The people had planted much but harvested little. They put on clothes but they were never warm. They earned wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it. And it was the Lord who caused all of it because they did not give priority to the things of God.

Nothing gets our attention like an economic downturn. Nothing hurts quite like getting hit in the pocketbook. The promise that Jesus gave us was that if we seek first his kingdom and his righteousness then our material needs will be given to us by the Lord (see Matthew 6:33). What happens when you do not seek his kingdom first but pursue your own interests first? The Lord puts holes in your purse and gives wings to your money.

The Lord told the people through Haggai, “*Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored*” (1:8). They did. And on the very day that the foundation of the temple was laid, the word of the Lord came again through Haggai and his message was, “*From this day on I will bless you*” (2:19). And instantly, their purses no longer had holes.

I Will Give You a Place among These Standing Here

The angel of the Lord gave this charge to Joshua: “This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘If you will walk in my ways and keep my requirements, then you will govern my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you a place among these standing here.’” -Zechariah 3:6-7

Is it a good thing to want a place of standing? Is it a natural thing? If it is natural, what part of our nature desires a place of leadership and standing?

In a prophetic vision, Zechariah sees *Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him* (3:1). The devil is accusing him because, as high priest representing God’s people, Joshua is not in a place of favor with God seeing as he was *dressed in filthy clothes*. As he stands before the angel of the Lord his sin is taken away, he is given new garments to wear as well as this charge by the Lord: “*If you will walk in my ways and keep my requirements, then you will govern my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you a place among these standing here.*”

It is a good thing to desire a place of leadership and standing

One of the things you can take from this portion of Scripture is that it is a good thing to desire a place of leadership and standing. In this case, the Lord is offering it as reward for obedience. If it wasn’t a good and desirable thing then why would the Lord offer it as an incentive to obedience? To govern the house of God, to have charge of his courts, to have a place of standing among God’s people—these are good things and we should not put on false humility and deny the desirability of them.

But you say, “Didn’t Jesus teach us in Luke 14:7-11 that we should not desire the place of honor?” Not exactly. In Jesus’ parable, he is saying that we should humble ourselves and never presume that the place of honour should be ours and take it for ourselves. A place of standing and honour can never be taken—it can only be given.

So, when Joshua the high priest was told that he could govern the house of God and be given a place of standing, the Lord was offering him something good, something desirable. Paul said, “*If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task*” (1 Tim 3:1). Of course, the motive must be *noble*. I think that there is something good and natural about wanting to have a place of leadership and standing among your people. I’ve observed that the desire for significance is universal. And when that desire comes under the sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit, the Lord is glorified and we are that much closer to our destiny.

I Myself Am Going

This is what the Lord Almighty says: “Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come, and the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, ‘Let us go at once to entreat the Lord and seek the Lord Almighty. I myself am going.’” -Zechariah 8:20-21

I was at an evangelistic meeting where the speaker had given the invitation for people to come forward to publically acknowledge Christ and receive his forgiveness. A few people moved from their seats and began to come down to the front of the auditorium. The evangelist, sensing that the Spirit of the Lord was bringing conviction to many more than who were coming, made a suggestion. He encouraged those who wanted to come but were needing some support to ask someone to accompany them down to the front. In addition, he asked that if anyone could discern the moving of the Spirit of God on another's heart that they offer to accompany that person to the front to commit their lives to Christ. At that point, many more people began to stream to the front in two's, three's and four's.

You would probably be surprised how many people would come along if you just asked them

Some people might consider the evangelist's suggestion manipulation. I consider it to have been legitimate encouragement. Sure, we should be able to sing, “Though none go with me, still I will follow,” but the influence and encouragement of others in our walk of faith is invaluable and is often the thing that we need to begin our journey with the Lord. People don't like to, nor should they need to, go alone. Wherever it is that you are thinking about going, you are more likely to go if you know that someone else is also going.

Zechariah was prophesying the future of spiritual Israel. “Zion” would once again be a place where people would go to seek the Lord. People would be drawn by the thousands to where it was said they could actually find God. The prophetic depiction is that *the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, “Let us go at once to entreat the Lord and seek the Lord Almighty. I myself am going.”* Here we see a contagious excitement about seeking and finding the Lord. One person approaches another and says, “Hey man, have you heard? I know where we can find God. I'm going, do you want to come along?”

You would probably be surprised how many people would come along if you just asked them. Of course, it helps if you are at least halfway excited about the pilgrimage yourself because people want to know where they can find God. There are untold thousands who are ready *go at once to entreat the Lord and seek the Lord Almighty*. All they need is to be asked.

This Third I Will Bring into the Fire

“In the whole land,” declares the Lord, “two-thirds will be struck down and perish; yet one-third will be left in it. This third I will bring into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, ‘They are my people,’ and they will say, ‘The Lord is our God.’” -Zechariah 13:8-9

There is no way that you can reach your destiny in Christ without being tested. If you are going to be part of the remnant that God will truly call his own, you will of necessity be tested and refined by the purifying agent of fire.

There are a number of different interpretations of the poetic prophecy of Zechariah 13:7-9. There is much agreement about the meaning of verse 7. It is another of Zechariah's messianic foreshadows: *“Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me!” declares the Lord Almighty. “Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered...”* (see Matthew 26:31 and Mark 14:27). Understanding of the historical fulfillment of the next verse is varied. Some commentators see it as a reference to the Babylonian exile. Some see

Notice it is God himself who brings his remnant into the refining fire

its fulfillment in the Roman onslaught of the Jews in A.D. 70. Some see it as a portend of last days events. And some interpret the “remnant” as the church.

Whatever the historical case, there is a spiritual principle here that cannot be dismissed. Concerning this remnant, the Lord says, *“This third I will bring into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, ‘They are my people,’ and they will say, ‘The Lord is our God.’”* Likewise, Peter says, *“Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you”* (1 Pe 4:12 KJV), saying also, *“These have come so that your faith--of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire--may be proved genuine”* (1:7) (see also James 1:2-4).

Notice it is God himself who brings his remnant into the refining fire. We are not to be exempt from trials. If our highest calling is to be conformed to the image of Jesus (see Romans 8:29) then we must share in the same sufferings by which Jesus learned obedience (see Philippians 3:10 and Hebrews 5:8) and by which we share in his glory (see Romans 8:17). God himself brings us into the fire so that we may be purified.

I see no other way to be conformed to the image of Christ and reach our destiny in him. To be part of that remnant whom God will call his own is an honor. And if being refined by fire is required, then so be it.

“It Is Futile to Serve God”

“You have said harsh things against me,” says the Lord. “Yet you ask, ‘What have we said against you?’ ‘You have said, ‘It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements...’” -Malachi 3:13-14

Let’s be honest. There have been times we have questioned whether it was worth it to live for God. There have been times when we wondered what we were gaining from carrying out the requirements of the Lord. There have been times when we wanted to say, “It is futile to serve God.”

Some people of Malachi’s day were of this mind. They said, *“It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the Lord Almighty? But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape”* (3:14-15). They

There have been times when we wanted to say, “It is futile to serve God.”

compared themselves to those who didn’t serve the Lord. The arrogant were blessed, the evildoers were prospering and those who defied the Lord were going unpunished. The people of God were carrying out the requirements of the Lord and were seeking his face—but they didn’t seem to have much to show for it.

Does this sound familiar? We ask ourselves how far ahead we are by serving the Lord. Have we really gained by giving? What real difference are we making in people’s lives? How often do we have to fast and pray before we will see the move of God that we so desperately need?

Despite having been there myself, there are a couple of things that I see as fundamentally wrong with this mindset. The first is the overt lack of faith inherent in such an outlook. It is faith that pleases God (see Hebrews 11:6) and however valid such sentiments may seem, to say, *“It is futile to serve God,”* registers pretty low on the faith-o-meter. The second problem with saying such things is that God is disparaged, perhaps even distressed, by such statements. *“You have said harsh things against me,” says the Lord. To say, “What did we gain by carrying out his requirements?”* flies in the face of God’s goodness and trustworthiness.

No one expects to get nothing in return for their investment. The investment of our lives in serving God does pay off. *His commands are not burdensome* (1 Jn 5:3). *The Lord is faithful to all his promises* (Ps 145:13). So, *let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up* (Ga 6:9).