

Practical Bible Studies

A blue-toned photograph of an open Bible resting on a wooden surface. A pen lies across the left page, and a small cup is positioned below the Bible. The background shows wooden planks.

By Johnny Ramsey

**VOLUME II
JOB – MALACHI**

PRACTICAL BIBLE STUDIES

**Volume II
Job - Malachi**

Johnny Ramsey

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Preface

For a number of years brethren in many places have complained about the quality of Bible study materials. Especially in the area of teenage and adult classes, requests for challenging lessons have come forth. Due to the help and encouragement of godly congregations and spiritual elders and preachers, we have taken up the task and privilege of producing these materials. In a series of four books we will cover the entire Bible. The first section will be *Genesis* through *Esther* followed by *Job* through *Malachi*. Then, in the New Testament, we will have *Matthew* through *Colossians* and last, *I Thessalonians* through *Revelation*. The entire series will be called:

PRACTICAL BIBLE STUDIES

Special sections for serious reflection, meditation, questions and discussions will appear toward the close of each book of the Bible. May we use these lessons to the glory of God and the edification of the church of our Lord.

Special appreciation is now expressed to Betty Martin for her tremendous help in typing these materials.

Let us grow in the grace and knowledge of things divine, holy and eternal (II Peter 3:18).

—Johnny Ramsey

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The Book of Job

The blessings of adversity can often draw us nearer to Heaven as we seek for Jehovah *out of the depths of sorrow* (Psalms 130:1). We learn to love God more as He tenderly hears our plea (Psalms 116:1). One of the best commentaries on the message of the book of Job is Psalms 119, verses 67, 71. The writer tells us that affliction drew him nearer to God and His holy word. This certainly was true in the life and times of Job. Out of the furnace of affliction (Isaiah 48:10) and the crucible of suffering (I Peter 1:7-8) the pure gold of a devoted servant emerged and the chaff faded away. In a great gospel hymn by an unknown writer we find appropriate words:

“Take my life, O Father mould it
In obedience to Thy will;
And as ripening years unfold it,
Help me keep it child-like still.”

Job's contribution to all mankind can be summed up in the following truths drawn from the book:

- (1) Satan's power is proved to be inferior
- (2) Suffering is not necessarily due to sin
- (3) The righteous can and do suffer
- (4) Man is never really poor until he rejects God!
- (5) Momentary problems must not tower above eternal values
- (6) Material possessions and earthly ties do not endure

A verse in the New Testament, found in Romans 8:18 powerfully sums up the struggle Job faced:

“I reckon that the sufferings of the present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed.”

As Jesus stated in Mark 10:30 the righteous are blessed abundantly in this life and in the world to come — eternal bliss awaits the redeemed! Job learned this valuable principle in the midst of pain and loneliness. L. O. Sanderson, a prolific writer of gospel songs, adds these thoughts:

"Tempests are raging about us,
Fear to our spirit clings;
Helpless are we if without Thee—
Shelter us under Thy wings."

Job never did get an answer to the question: "WHY?" But he vividly and forever learned WHO was in control. Job's greatest battle was self-righteousness. His wife, along with Zophar, Bildad and Eliphaz — as well as a young prophet, Elihu — accused him of being so grave a sinner that Job rebelled and almost made claim to perfection. As Proverbs 16:18 reminds us so Job learned the pitfalls of an haughty spirit. God took his servant Job "down a notch or two" by asking him a few pointed questions calculated to produce humility. Jehovah asks Job:

- (A) Can you rule the world and correct its evils?
- (B) Where were you when the universe was created
- (C) Can you withstand the largest animals which God made?
(the hippo and the crocodile)
- (D) Can you create life or sustain the world?

Job's stubborn will had to fully yield to heaven's will before he could cope with the challenging problems of life. In each one of us is the certain need expressed in a song of faith . . . "HAVE THINE OWN WAY, LORD . . . Mold me and make me AFTER THY WILL . . ." Job stresses that God is our teacher, guiding us to a better life through the discipline of suffering (Hebrews 12:5-11). Truly, His grace is sufficient for us (II Corinthians 12:9). Learning to say: THY WILL BE DONE (Matthew 26:42; James 4:15) is a monumental step on the journey to glory!

Adelaide Procter, in a marvelous stanza about pain and suffering captures the exact sentiment of Job's struggle with self —

"In the cruel fire of Sorrow
Cast thy heart, do not faint or wail;
Let thy hand be firm and steady,
Do not let thy spirit quail;
But wait till the trial is over,
And take thy heart again;
For as gold is tried by fire,
So a heart must be tried by pain!"

There are five basic lessons we can draw out of the brilliant and dramatic book of Job.

I. Children of God are Surrounded by Heaven's Love.

In the early chapters of the book the Devil accuses Jehovah of "hedging Job about" so that Satan cannot get at him. And, it is a beautiful truth that the providence of the Almighty does overshadow us. *The eyes of the Lord are over the righteous* (I Peter 3:10-12). He does provide a way of escape when we are tempted (I Corinthians 10:13). He has promised to "never leave us nor forsake us" (Hebrews 13:5-6). All things have worked together for our good (Romans 8:28). What a blessing for us did the Devil confess!

II. Satan Is Relentless.

The boldness of the Devil is seen in his tenacious demand that God allow Job to be tempted. In Matthew 4 we remember Satan's face to face confrontation with Jesus. Perhaps the close call Job had is best found in chapter 19 verse 20:

"I am escaped with the skin of my teeth."

The great adversary of our souls seeks to devour us as I Peter 5:8-9 states. Satan desires to have us for himself (Luke 22:31) and we must not be ignorant of his cunning plans (II Corinthians 2:11).

III. Human Philosophy Falls Short.

Paul's terse comments in I Corinthians 1:8-25 reflect the blunt statement of Job to his three friends who were long on advice but short on spiritual depth. In Job 12:2 these words of irony cause us to smile:

"No doubt you are the people and wisdom shall die with you."

In 16:2 Job speaks again concerning their shallow attempts to console:

"Miserable comforters are you all."

In 38:1 God speaks to Elihu:

"Who darkeneth counsel with words without knowledge?"

When men realize that *the secret things belong to God* (Deut. 29:29) and that *the way of man is not in himself* (Jeremiah 10:23) they will be much smarter!

IV. Too Much Trust Can Be Placed In Family and Friends.

Had Job leaned on human support instead of divine guidance we would not find the happy end of our study. We should never be suspicious or morbid concerning human frailties but we must

put our ultimate confidence in our Creator. He never fails us. However, the greatest human hero still has feet of clay. The plaintive cry of Simon Peter in John 6:68 is appropos:

“Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.”

God will always remain constant and His sovereign authority will never fail. Let us, like Job, put our trust in Him (Proverbs 3:5-7). Only Jehovah can see the end from the beginning and Psalms 33:9, with Hebrews 6:18, informs us of His remarkable ability to *always* stand back of His word!

V. If God Made The World, Surely He Can Guide Our Lives.

Job learned to hush and let God do the talking as Habakkuk 2:20 teaches. When we turn loose, let go and let God lead us the basic solution to all human needs and problems falls in place. When we “bring every thought into captivity” under the Lord’s control we have taken a giant step toward Heaven (II Corinthians 10:5). Job, who had sinned against his Maker with hasty, accusing words, finally learned the magnitude of such evil. Sins of the tongue are so easy to commit and so hard to recall (Psalms 19:14). The words of Psalms 141:3 fit here precisely:

“Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips.”

Romans 3:4 points out the lesson: *Let God be True and every man be found a liar!*

In the last chapter of this wonderful book we thrill to the eloquent, touching words of 42:5-6. A humbled, grateful Job confesses:

“I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear: but now my eye seeth Thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.”

LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF JOB

One of the richest sections of Holy Scripture is the fabulous treatise on human suffering known as Job. This neglected book’s emphasis is the patience of God and the endurance of its titled character (James 5:11). There are at least ten major passages in Job that project lessons we all need to learn. Let me share with you several outstanding points in Job and then make application of these gems of Biblical revelation.

(1) Satan’s Energetic Work:

Even though Jehovah surrounds us with His infinite love the Devil tries incessantly to overwhelm us. Due to the frailty of our humanity

the great enemy of our soul often is victorious. As Jesus stated in Luke 22:31 Satan does indeed desire to capture us but we must not give him any opportunity (Ephesians 4:27). If the restless adversary (1 Peter 5:8) did not fear to tempt Jesus face to face (Matthew 4) we may be forever sure that he will confront us also! Chapter one of Job proves that the Devil has “unmitigated gall.”

(2) *We Must Be Humble Before Our Maker:*

One of the unique features of this quaint book is the struggle within Job himself. At times this treatise reminds us of Paul's personal battle in Romans 7. There are mountain peaks of devotion and deep valleys of despair in the life of Job. Moments of doubt and depression blend with grand vows of faith. In chapter 1:21 and 13:15 then finally in 42:5-6 we thrill to the ardent conviction of one of God's great heroes. Job admitted that he brought nothing into this world and would take nothing out. And, even though God would slay him yet would Job trust the Almighty. In the last chapter of the book, penitent and humbled, Job confesses his respect for the dignity of the Creator. There is a richness in the tones of Job's contriteness that “rivals” even the pathos and tenderness of Psalms 51. Job learned that God's will shall be done whether we do it or not!

(3) *The Short-Lived Prosperity of the Wicked:*

In Job 20:4-9 we powerfully learn how shallow and brief are the wages of sin! When we contrast this passage with Psalms 119:67-71 we plainly see the value of suffering even for a season if we let such tribulation make us more spiritual as over against the brief joy of earthly pomp and the enduring nature of torment for the wicked. A great commentary on this thought is Luke 16:19-31 and Matthew 6:19-21! Job's days were “swifter than a weaver's shuttle” and would “soon flee away” (7:6; 9:25) but he could look forward to an enduring reward.

(4) *The Light Christ Sheds On The Old Testament:*

We have often said that the Old Testament concealed and the New revealed. Graphically our study in Job illustrates this principle. In 9:33 of Job we read of the *longing* and *need* for a *mediator* or *advocate* to plead that ancient patriarch's case. Yes, someone between God and man — heaven and earth — to assist Job in his pitiful plight. That man's wife, three best friends and a young, self-appointed prophet only added additional sorrow to his life. How lonely was Job without a daysman to make intercession! But, today, Christians do have what Job longed for. (Please read I Timothy 2:5; I John 2:1; Hebrews 7:25).

(5) *A Yearning View of the Future:*

Job 3:17 definitely belongs in the hall of fame of beautiful verses. In the midst of intense pain and bitter tears of loneliness the man of God longs for the place "where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary be at rest." He knew that his Redeemer was alive and would bless all men in the last days (compare Job 19:25 with Acts 2:16-17). Just as "Jehovah blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning" (42:12) so shall God's tomorrow be brighter than today for all the faithful. Jesus answered the longing cry of Job 14:14 . . .

"If a man die shall he live again" . . .

in the famous setting of John 11 when He raised Lazarus from the grave. The only real suffering will belong to those who so live as to miss the triumph over death which Christ provides! Thanks be unto God for the victory that overcomes death, the grave and even the world (I Corinthians 15:55-57 and I John 5:4).

The short-lived prosperity of the wicked (Job 20:4-9) is contrasted with the enduring nature of Job's reward in 42:12—

"So the Lord blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning."

Truly, *from everlasting to everlasting Jehovah is God* (Psalms 90:1-2)! God's will shall be done whether we co-operate with Him or not. Job learned that valuable, essential lesson and that was more important than his suffering, his losses or his gains — because this lesson is a foretaste of glory divine. May God help us to walk more closely with Truth as the toils and pressures of life are overwhelmed by the sure confidence that the Lord will see us through earth's troubles and gently receive us to glory (Psalms 73:24).

The last few words of the book of Job tell us so much: "So Job died, being old and full of days." Our lives can be full also if we go with God!

THE BOOK OF PSALMS

Christ's favorite Old Testament section must have been *Psalms* because He quoted from it more often than any other book! As one reads the sacred pages of this lovely part of the Scriptures the power and beauty of verse after verse warms and thrills the heart. In the devotional setting of Psalms we can see the strength of meditating upon divine mandates as we strive to glorify God, our Creator. Perhaps the central thought of this book of praise is 95:6-7.

"O come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord our Maker. For He is our God; and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand."

The great need for adoration in our hearts for God is the major thrust of the Psalms. The shortest chapter in the Bible is Psalms 117. It contains a vibrant lesson:

"O praise the Lord, all ye nations; praise him, all ye people. For his merciful kindness is great toward us: and the truth of the Lord endureth forever. Praise ye the Lord."

Psalms 89:7 and 4:4 tell us of the necessity of standing in awe of Jehovah as we worship and serve Him in public homage and private actions. Four times in the first part of Psalms 107 we are exhorted to be grateful to God for all his magnificent blessings toward us!

Although David was only one of the writers of the book most people think of "the sweet singer of Israel" when they think of Psalms. Moses, Solomon, Asaph and the sons of Korah are some of the others mentioned in regard to the authorship of this rich section of Holy Writ. The longest chapter in the Bible is Psalms 119 with 176 verses, divided into 22 stanzas of 8 verses each. The overall theme of that lengthy section is the *Word of God*. Nearly every verse extols the virtues of Heaven's revelation to man. Typically, the contents of this chapter illustrate marvelously the salient themes of Psalms.

Psalms 119 **THY WORD IS TRUTH**

1. Seek God With All Your Heart
2. Hiding His Word In Our Heart

3. Open Thou Mine Eyes!
4. I Have Chosen The Way of Truth
5. I Long After Thy Precepts
6. I Will Speak of Thee Before Kings
7. Thy Word Has Brought Me To Life!
8. I Made Haste To Keep Thy Commandments
9. Tribulation Drew Me To Thy Precepts
10. Thy Law Is My Delight
11. Thy Faithful Commandments
12. Thy Word Is Settled Forever
13. How Sweet Are Thy Words
14. A Lamp and A Light
15. My Hiding Place and Shield
16. I Love Thy Commandments More Than Gold
17. The Entrance of Thy Word Giveth Light
18. Thy Word Is Very Pure
19. Thou Art Near, O Lord
20. Thy Word Is True From the Beginning
21. Seven Times A Day Do I Praise Thee
22. All Thy Commandments Are Righteousness!

The Psalms form a section of the Bible that is so eloquent, rich and deep and yet so simple in practical beauty that one truly stands in awe before God's majesty (119:161). The tenderness of Psalms 23, the power of chapter 93, the tempo of Psalms 8 and the challenge of 139 make daily reading of this Old Testament gem a must.

—The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want—Jehovah reigneth; He is clothed with majesty—What is man that Thou art mindful of him?—Search me, O God, and Know my heart—

Many Bible students believe that just for sheer beauty the Bible's grandest books are *Hebrews* and *Psalms*. It would be difficult to argue against that!

The Lord of Hosts is exalted in Psalms in a truly brilliant canopy of thoughts. Let us notice some of the richer tributes of praise.

THE LORD IS:

★ My Judge and Defense	7:8-10
★ The Refuge of the Poor	14:6
★ My Rock Fortress and Hightower	18:2
★ My Redeemer	19:14
★ The King of Glory	24:10
★ My Light and My Salvation	27:1
★ My Shield	28:7
★ My Hiding Place	32:7
★ My Refuge and Strength	46:1
★ A God Full of Compassion	86:15
★ Our Dwelling Place in All Generations	90:1

These are but a few of the heartwarming attributes of our Maker. One feels nearer to God when studying the treasures to be found in Psalms.

One of the fullest verses in the Old Testament is found in Psalms 62:8. Notice the wonderful three point lesson therein: "Trust in him at all times; ye people, pour out your heart before him: God is a refuge for us."

The reality of Christianity is never more beautiful than when in the hour of tribulation we exclaim: "O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!" God is a refuge for us! One real tragedy is the strange situation of those who mightily depend on God in the hour of trial and then forsake Him in the day of success, health and strength. Is our Father incapable of receiving our confidence when we have ascended from the valley of tears unto the mountain-peak of happiness? Or is this human defection of forgetting the source of our blessings just another tool of the Devil? Success is the one thing that some people cannot endure. The Deceiver of the whole world (Revelation 12:9) knows it. Let us trust in God at all times.

THE DIFFERENCE GOD MAKES

For years my favorite passage for comfort in time of heartache has been Psalms 46. At funerals no text calms troubled families more. It is balm for preachers and audience as well. The precious contents of this marvelous stanza superseded anything the famous poets ever wrote and bring solace in times of grief. The component

parts of the Psalm enrich one's daily sojourn and bring sunshine on a dreary day. It reminds me of a hymn we sometimes sing:

"Again the Lord of light and life
Awakes the kindling rays
Unseals the eyelids of the morn
And pours increasing day."

Jehovah is portrayed in this Psalm as One with tender power. We will not fear, come what may, because our Sovereign God is our *refuge, strength* and present help! What a tremendous solace and balm for sorrowful pilgrims in a strange land. Regardless of external pressures and earthly problems "the God of Jacob is with us." He is in our midst. Storms may surround us in skies heavy with portents of danger but our Creator "rules in the kingdom of men" (Daniel 4:25). Therefore, we are cautioned to *be still* and know that "there is no power but of God" (Romans 13:1). When we absolutely learn to be quiet and let our Maker do the talking (Habakkuk 2:20) the dark clouds turn to beautiful billows of peaceful scenes that cause rainbows to grace the canopy of heaven. Yes, there is a balm in Gilead to soothe our aching breast (Jeremiah 8). The difference God makes is graphically told in this beloved section of the Old Testament. While the world seems overwhelmed with turbulence the servant of the Lord has peace passing understanding (Philippians 4:7). Instead of chaotic existence followers of the heavenly cause possess tranquil hearts (I Timothy 2:2).

"It is enough: Earth's struggles soon shall cease, And Jesus call us
to heaven's perfect peace."

We find refuge in Christ today (Hebrews 6:18-20) regardless of national strife and personal conflicts. We receive strength in the name of the Savior to overwhelm all odds (Philippians 4:13). Though we always serve God with reverential awe (Hebrews 12:28) the Christian is delivered from the fear that captivates the world (I John 4:18).

Since "the God of Jacob" is with us we have power with the Almighty (Hosea 12:1-4). He will supply our every need (Philippians 4:19) and cause everything to ultimately bless our lives (Romans 8:28). Even the "sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared" to the glory that awaits faithful followers of the Lamb of God (Romans 8:18). More than conquerors are we as we press on toward the gates of that city that lies four-square. Through whatever awaits us in the meandering scenes of life just over on that golden shore are the redeemed of all ages. Praise

God for He truly is “a very present help” — our refuge and strength. The God of Jacob is with us and has sent His Son to provide us with a ladder reaching into Heaven (John 1:51).

Psalms 62:8 simply means to commit yourself wholly unto God! The phrase now under discussion includes prayer and spontaneous praise flowing from the created unto the Creator. In James, chapter 5, we read of the natural response of the spiritual life whether in sadness or in joy — let the Heavenly Father know! He knows, He cares, He blesses. Isn't it thrilling to hear someone just talk with God when his heart is on fire with love for eternal verities? Too much of the time our prayers are simply stilted, formalistic preachments. *We desperately need more fervent communion with our Maker in prayer.* Yes, in sorrow and sickness, in pain and bereavement, in success, happiness and victory — Pour out your heart unto God. He is our refuge, our solace, our balm, our strength!

“Then trust in God through all thy days;
Fear not, for He doth hold thy hand;
Though dark thy way, still sing and praise;
Sometime, Sometime, we will understand.”

In 124:8 we learn that *our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth!* Out of the depths we cry unto our Maker (130:1) and, lovingly, He answers (116:1). Truly, “happy are the people whose God is Jehovah!” (144:15). The One who cares so deeply for us looks down from heaven upon the children of men. This is a major point in the eloquent book of Psalms.

THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

No book of the Bible is more practical than Proverbs. It has a "down-to-earth" quality that is so rich and vibrant. One reads and follows the teachings of Proverbs to one's own profit. Similar to the essence of Christ's parables, the Sermon on the Mount and the book of James, is this section of the Holy Scriptures. Several Bible scholars have said that the contents of Proverbs should be likened to "nails fastened in a sure place." The wisdom found on its pages, in graphic, terse statements remind us of daily application of truth in our lives. Solomon was evidently the one used by the Holy Spirit (II Peter 1:21) to pen this part of God's revelation to man. In I Kings 4:32 we learn that Solomon wrote 3,000 proverbs. Wisdom is one of the eloquent themes of Proverbs and that was Solomon's strong point (I Kings 3:9). According to Ecclesiastes 12 the wisest action on our part is to "fear God and keep His commandments." The lack of understanding on Rehoboam's part (Solomon's son) helped divide the kingdom of Israel (I Kings 12). One of the pertinent themes of Proverbs is found in 1:7 —

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge."

In chapter 8:22-30 wisdom is personified. Many believe this passage to be a reference to Christ!

One of the finest themes of Proverbs deals with the greatest need in our world of today — the home as God desires it to be! Many verses deal with parental guidance as well as the obedience and respect children must possess to please Jehovah. Here are but a few of the powerful passages from Proverbs concerning the family life that pleases God:

12:7 — "The house of the righteous shall stand"

14:11 — "The house of the wicked shall be overthrown"

13:1 — "A wise son heareth his father's instruction"

13:24 — "He that spareth his rod hateth his son"

15:20 — "A wise son maketh a glad father"

10:1 — "A foolish son is a heaviness to his mother"

23:26 — "My son, give me thine heart"

22:6 — "Train up a child in the way he should go"

Paul told Timothy to remind Christians to *depart from iniquity*. Often we must flee from lustful temptations as Joseph did. The book of Proverbs speaks of the immoral woman who would lead men to perdition. In 7:27 we learn that "her house is on the way to hell, going down to the chambers of Death." In our own day of rampant sensuality we desperately need to be purer in heart, day by day!

Another warning thesis of Proverbs has to do with the danger inherent in alcoholic beverages. Abstaining from every form of evil (I Thess. 5:22) and engaging in nothing that hinders peace and edification (Romans 14:19) rules out even "social drinking" for the faithful child of God today. As Proverbs 20:1 and 23:29-35 informs us, wine truly is a mocker and strong drink is raging! The bleary eyes and vomiting stomach of a drunkard can be vividly seen in the language of Proverbs. Without a doubt "the way of the transgressor is hard and fools make a mock of sin" (13:15; 14:9).

This grand section of the Bible often deals, in a penetrating way, with attitudes and motives which really guide our lives and destinies. Envy, jealousy, hypocrisy, greed and hatred are warned against time and again in Proverbs. Notice these powerful passages:

- 14:30 "Envy is the rottenness of the bones"
- 17:15 "He that justifies the wicked and he that condemns the just, even they both are abomination to the lord."
- 4:23 "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life."
- 16:18 "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall."
- 16:32 "He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city."
- 23:17 "Let not thine heart envy sinners"
- 24:23 "It is not good to have respect of persons in judgment"
- 25:28 "He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down"
- 28:22 "He that hasteth to be rich hath an evil eye"

Proverbs carefully and pungently rebukes the sin of laziness in piercing language found in chapter 19 verse 15 and 24:30. God does not intend for us to sleep all day and laze around through life. Let us be ardent in His service!

Proverbs has some sterling words to say on the subject of absolute obedience to God rather than following our own notions or ideas. We are reminded that "every way of man is right in his own eyes" (21:2) and many ways that *seem* right to us may often eventuate on the road to destruction (14:12). Jeremiah was so right when he said in 10:23 of his book:

"It is not in man that walketh to direct his own steps." Therefore, we must walk in the path God has set for us—never removing the landmarks that please Him (Proverbs 22:28) as we "consider the days of old" (Psalms 77:5).

The brevity, finality and uncertainty of this life finds a characteristic reminder in Proverbs.

It would be impossible to improve upon the life God blesses His followers with. As Proverbs 12:28 affirms — so we believe!

"In the way of righteousness is life."

But, *when a wicked man dies, his expectations shall perish* (11:7).

No better counsel could be found to end this summary of the book than 7:2 of Proverbs:

"Keep my commandments and live; and my law as the apple of thine eye."

THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

The book of Ecclesiastes is a rare treatise on Solomon's last will and testament. It is a classic view of the preacher's review of his own life — mistakes and all! Earlier, in Proverbs 30:5-6, the wise man wrote, "Every word of God is pure; he is a shield unto them that put their trust in him. Add thou not unto his words, lest he reprove thee, and thou be found a liar." God will be a shield unto the faithful (Psalms 84:11), but we have a responsibility to follow the Scriptures accurately and lovingly. Solomon learned the hard way that to deviate from God's will brings sorrow and a barren life: "Trust and obey, for there is no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey."

In Ecclesiastes 8 & 9, one can find a real treasure of rich thoughts. We read the preacher's brilliant thoughts concerning the vain life and ultimate end of wicked men (Ecclesiastes 8:10-13). They may "fare sumptuously" on earth, but soon their little season of success abruptly ends in torment (Luke 16:19-39). It is just not worth it to put a high premium on mundane glory. Solomon relates the sad finale of seeing the wicked buried and how soon they are forgotten: "I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone from the place of the holy, and they were forgotten in the city where they had so done: this is also vanity" (Ecclesiastes 8:10). Their vanity echoes down the corridors of eternity as their empty, shallow existence ends without hope. Though sinners may commit evil "an hundred times and his days be prolonged" (Ecclesiastes 8:12), those days do not compare favorably with the brief sojourn of the righteous. A great gospel song tells the truth: "Perishing things of clay, born but for one brief day, Pass from my sight away, Jesus is mine!"

In the same context of Ecclesiastes, the writer mentions the notion (popular even in our day) that since wicked men are not punished immediately for each sinful deed, then "they got away with it." But we need to be assured that "God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Galatians 6:7). Solomon concludes this discussion by mentioning the fact that even if shameful men live a long time, it amounts to nothing worthwhile because "he feareth not before God" (Ecclesiastes 8:13).

Conversely, in Ecclesiastes 9 we rejoice to find the rich life and vibrant reward of the godly beautifully portrayed. To the one who

gives the best he has to the cause of truth (Ecclesiastes 9:10), there is hope and meaning in life. Since none knows the time of his departure from the scenes of earth, we must wisely choose the spiritual path that leads to glory. A poor wise man may be ignored by his fellows, but he is not ignored by God!

A ruler among fools and "a sinner that destroys much good" make sad contributions to a morbid society (Ecclesiastes 9:16-18). Millions in our time also have their values misplaced. Solomon personally learned, to his regret, that to emphasize the secular is a calamitous mistake (Ecclesiastes 2:1-11). The conclusion of the entire matter is found in Ecclesiastes 12:13, "Fear God and keep his commandments for this is the whole duty of man." Two centuries ago the cynical Sam Johnson wrote this sad commentary on mankind: "Wickedness is always easier than virtue, for it takes the short cut to everything." Solomon truly learned the folly of that philosophy.

SOLOMON'S SOLILOQUY — LIFE UNDER THE SUN

No book of the Bible challenges our close attention like the one called *Ecclesiastes*. It is a most unusual and often misunderstood section of scripture. We dare not read it casually nor treat it lightly if we wish to fathom its depths. The phrase, *under the sun* is mentioned 29 times in 12 chapters to illustrate the vanity of mundane interests and the insecurity of wealth, wisdom and earthly power. Solomon was the quintessence of these possessions and his very life manifests the shallow nature of worldly attainments. Riches do not satisfy as transitory values rapidly pass away. God's gifts should be enjoyed but must never be the aim or goal of life. As Solomon talks it over with himself he learns that the fear of Jehovah brings a sure reward in this spiritual pilgrimage. However, such an ending refers to the kind of life man *should* lead and not to that which *carnal* man seeks here below. If a strain of pessimism or fatalism seems to course its way through *Ecclesiastes* it belongs to the realm of what the writer "said in his heart" and not to the inspired answer to our dilemma God supplies.

Much like Romans, chapters six through eight, this intriguing soliloquy demands that we become dead to sin as we triumph over self *if* we ever enjoy the satisfaction of being children of our Heavenly Father. To be spiritually minded brings its own peaceful reward in our quest for life. There is one thing needful (Luke 10:42) and we are all fools if we think happiness comes from the abundance of things we own (Luke 12:15-21). When possessions possess us

we are of all men most miserable! The depth of the riches of God's wisdom cannot be fathomed (Romans 11:33) but we can soon learn how vain the search for earthly treasures can be.

Truly, apart from God, life is completely without meaning. The ultimate standard cannot be men's applause nor the evaluation of the world. If we use the world, as God's creation, to the Maker's glory we are wise. Sadly, Solomon tells us that millions allow the earthly scene to dominate them. There can be no higher purpose than to "fear God and keep His commandments." Even things good and praiseworthy pursued *for their own sakes* are totally void of meaning. Wickedness, oppression, luxury and pleasures are prevalent in society but valueless in glory. Such strivings prove to be empty, insignificant and soon fade into nothingness.

Although it may often *seem* that the wicked fare better than the righteous, Solomon astutely learned that before God, *it is not so!* Jehovah alone holds the key to our existence and we must trust Him as we take life day by day from His benevolent hand. If we cannot magnify the Lord in ordinary pursuits of life we will surely fail in everlasting responsibilities. God alone knows the whole plan; we can only live step by step! While its powers remain we must use life energetically because death universally awaits us. On one hand Solomon discusses the futility of life while on the other hand he gives the answer of practical faith to the riddle of the ages:

From whence do we come and why are we here!

Henry Van Dyke cogently captures the scene:

"Four things a man must learn to do
If he would make his record true:
To think without confusion clearly;
To love his fellow-man sincerely;
To act from honest motives purely;
To trust in God and heaven securely."

EARLY AND LATE

No chapter is more poetically beautiful than the last stanza of Ecclesiastes. In Solomon's last will and testament we find a succinctly dramatic section of Scripture. Truly a classic on life and death is this portion of the wise man's soliloquy. It begins with a charge to young people to remember their Creator early in life and ends with the well-known challenge:

"Fear God and keep his commandments
for this is the whole duty of man."

In between are some of the most graphic and gripping words in the Bible. Those powerful sentiments trace the decline in physical strength of senior citizens as they prepare for death's inevitable call when "mourners go about the streets." The language is picturesque and memorable indeed. It will remind Christians of an old gospel song:

"We are going down the valley one by one
With our faces toward the setting of the sun,
Down the valley where the mournful cypress grows,
Where the stream of death in silence onward flows."

A fervent decision to serve God, made early in our walk upon the earth, is truly wise. Waiting to choose Jesus as our standard and guide will always bring misery and shame. We shall have no delight, ultimately, in those years spent in sin and rebellion (Romans 6:21). And, sadly, some postpone Christianity so long they harden their hearts and die in their iniquity. Our blessed Lord lamented in John 8:21 . . .

"You shall die in your sins and where
I go you cannot come."

Indeed, we reap what we sow as Ecclesiastes 11:1 affirms:

"Cast your bread upon the water
and it shall return not many days hence."

It is the will of heaven that our body, soul and spirit "be preserved blameless" till Jesus comes (I Thessalonians 5:23). But millions seem determined to be lost in spite of God's provisions. F. L. Eiland pungently wrote these thoughts in song:

"Too late twill be for you to cry
When mercy's day has passed you by!
When solemn night of dark despair
Shall come upon you halting there."

Since "our days flee away" (Job 9:25) and no one knows when death shall come (Genesis 27:2) we must always live to the glory of our Maker (Isaiah 43:7). Solomon clearly enunciated this principle in 9:10 of Ecclesiastes:

"Whatsoever your hands find to do,
do it with all your might."

We should be faithful in life and death (Revelation 2:10) and never allow pride to rule our conduct, attitude or sojourn like Solomon did; for a haughty spirit provides for us a serious fall (Proverbs 16:18).

In one of literature's finest chapters we find in the last stanza of Ecclesiastes a vivid description of old age and its problems. Solomon speaks tenderly of trembling hands, feeble knees, stooped backs, dim eyes and deaf ears. He also mentions teeth that fall out and hair that turns white. Elderly folk usually lose energy levels, arise early, walk slowly, delight in very simple things and finally lose interest in life, generally. Then, when death comes the inspired page tells us:

"The body returns to the dust from which
it came and the spirit to God who gave it."

As we look back over this scintillating part of the Bible we are made aware of the vanity of earthly possessions and secular pursuits. Is it any wonder that the writer exclaimed:

"Vanity of vanities . . . all is vanity."

Empty, meaningless, zero, nothing is the conclusion one comes to without God and His blessed will! One of these days when, as Solomon wrote, "mourners fill the streets," it will make an eternal difference how we conducted our pilgrimage here below. Dickens wrote concerning each person having a particular vanity he personally liked best but *whatever* it may be, we learn in II Peter 3:11 that *all vain things will perish!*

"Perishing things of clay
Born but for one brief day
Pass from my sight away
But Jesus is mine."

When we see the vivid contrast between the foolishness of earthly wisdom and the enduring power of God's word we learn the proper respect for Jehovah and His commands. Solomon also mentions that we must keep our thoughts pure and lives holy in view of the righteous Judgment our Maker will bring to that final Day!

Surely, early and late, our emphasis here below should be to remember our Creator and to steadfastly obey His will. No doubt but that Solomon was regretful concerning his failure to do so. May we be wiser than the wise man in that regard.

SONG OF SOLOMON

The most overlooked Bible book must be Song of Solomon. It has been shunned by many because of the blunt language dealing with personal matters between a man and his lover. Much controversy surrounds the discussion of the exact purpose, as well as the subjects of this section of the Scriptures. Although nothing in the Song of Solomon — or elsewhere in the Bible suggests it, many have said that this book refers to Christ and the Church. A casual reading of the entire scope of the Bible disproves such a strange explanation. Others simply believe it to be a study of ideal married love. Too many folk fail to realize that the Bible “tells it like it is” instead of using terms that only suit *Western Civilization* and our own code of “proper terms.” Were it not for the shameful hypocrisy of American morals we would not be embarrassed over intimate words used between proper lovers anyway!

Some of the most beautiful thoughts in the entire Old Testament can be found in Song of Solomon. Verse after verse of tender touch fill its pages. Several very practical points can be gleaned from such a brief treatise. Let us now search them out.

In keeping with the gist of the prophets' books (Isaiah — Malachi) it seems that a plausible explanation of the thrust of Song of Solomon is this:

Jehovah often likens His people (Israel or Judah) to His bride. Much of the time she is a gadding or unfaithful wife (Jeremiah 2:32 and the book of Hosea, for instance). One of the great enemies of this divine marriage or spiritual arrangement was often the King. God “gave them a king in His anger and took him away in His wrath” (Hosea 13:11). It was the prophet of Jehovah that truly represented heaven's will. The prophet spoke for God to the people. Seldom was the prophet popular, however. He was usually poor and lonely and abused by the power of the King. When God's bride was loyal she listened to and loved the prophet. His power was the power of Truth while the King's power was the splendor and luxury of the palace. It took strength of character for Israel to yearn for the prophet and accept his message while the King beckoned to Israel with the lure of material prosperity. In this unusual book, Song of Solomon, there is a gigantic struggle between

the riches and honor of the King's court and the cry of the man of God out in the fields. To whom would the maiden be true?

Physical love, in the proper sphere, is referred to in I Corinthians 7 and Hebrews 13:4. Only the abuse of our modern age has made some of the passages in Song of Solomon seem vulgar or out of place.

But, now, let us notice four or five statements in the book that challenge us.

- (1) Chapter one reminds us of the beauty of Psalms 45. That passage is a stately discussion of the glory and majesty of palatial settings. The imagery of ancient days and customs can be clearly seen. In Song of Solomon 2:4 we have the beautiful verse: "His banner over me was love."
- (2) One of the most memorable verses is 2:15 which speaks of *tender grapes in vineyards spoiled by little foxes*. In Ezekiel 13:4 and Luke 13:32 false prophets and evil rulers are referred to as foxes! "Little sins" — added one by one — weaken our lives and little men (spiritually) enter our lives to corrupt good morals (I Corinthians 15:33). Actually, there are no little sins because there is no little God! But, Satan is sly and shrewd and often his diabolical plans ruin us with short steps on a long journey to Hell!
- (3) In 6:3 we have a verse that ought to be the theme of every married couple. If it were we would not have over 900,000 divorces each year in America. Notice the grand expression of this passage.

"I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine."

Please compare Psalms 34:3; Ephesians 5:33 and Ruth 1:16!

- (4) Chapter 8:6-7 tells us three powerful truths that alone make Song of Solomon worthwhile.

(a) **Love Is As Strong As Death**

In I Corinthians 13:1-8 we see the enduring nature or quality of love. It never fails! Our true love for God is reflected in our obedience to His blessed commands (John 14:15).

(b) **Jealousy Is as Cruel as the Grave**

Envy is rottenness of the bones (Proverbs 14:30). Cain's jealousy led to murder (I John 3:11-12.) Christ was crucified because of such evil passion by His enemies (Mark 15:10).

(c) **Nothing is As Powerful As Genuine Devotion**

When we truly seek first God's will for us (Matthew 6:33) even demons in Hell tremble. To be divided in our spiritual allegiance (Matthew 6:24) though, will separate us from God's love.

If we learn no other lesson from Song of Solomon let us never forget to always be loyal to divine mandates. A great commentary on the book could well be the words of I Corinthians 7:35 —

"Serve the Lord without distraction!"

INSIGHTS FROM ISAIAH

Psalms, Hebrews and Isaiah are generally regarded as the richest, most sublime literature of the Bible. Words often associated with Isaiah would be brilliant, exquisite and beautiful. Far too many people have neglected the vibrant treasures of this powerful treatise. Speaking to the disobedient folk of his own day the spiritual man of God warned of impending doom and then foretold a brighter future when the Prince of Peace would come (Isaiah 9:6). In a haunting refrain in 10:3 the decadent seed of Abraham had this question to ponder:

"What will you do in the day of
visitation, and in the desolation
which shall come from far? To
whom will you flee for help and
where will you leave your glory?"

Bowing down before idols made with hands and fashioned after pagan gods brought Israel and Judah nothing but ultimate sorrow. Flirting with heathen rulers and flitting back and forth between enemy nations for support had caused a vast chasm between Jerusalem and God. Putting trust in chariots, horses and symbols of pomp and earthly might had separated them from the genuine, lasting strength of heaven. James Rowe wrote a spiritual song that underscores the value of proper emphasis:

"When I need help to defeat the foe
Someone my shield to be
Always to Jesus in faith I go
He is the best for me."

But, sadly, apostasy was the order of the day as Isaiah struggled with shallow brethren seven centuries before Christ. Turning their backs upon divine blessings the people wandered aimlessly among the kingdoms of men seeking elusive prestige and acceptability. Just before gaining their desired status, however, the fruit-basket of earthly power turned upside-down. Then, vainly in search of some stability politically, off Israel went again yearning for solidarity apart from Jehovah. Syria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Assyria, Babylon — all, one by one, crumbled into dust and Judah's hopes were dashed once more. Standing in the shadows all the while was the Creator, ever pleading through the prophets, to come back home to their

Maker. It would be a long time coming and then by only a remnant of loyal servants. The calamity of such folly by God's people is described graphically in Isaiah 24:18. That verse tells of a man who walks down the road, falls into a pit, crawls out of the pit and is caught in a snare. God is not mocked; we do reap what we sow! Fanny Crosby wrote:

"Through this changing world below
Lead me gently as I go
Trusting Thee, I cannot stray
I can never lose my way."

But, alas, the folk Isaiah labored with trusted everyone and everything except Jehovah's mighty hand. As a consequence of such fool-hardy interest Isaiah 28:20 abruptly tells them:

"For the bed is shorter than that
a man can stretch himself on it:
and the covering narrower than
that he can wrap himself in it."

Sin has always paid a terrible dividend and Isaiah's fellows learned the hard way how Satan's schemes come marked with an extremely high cost. In chapter thirty-two one can read Isaiah's lament over a nation that should have been a bountiful harvest but instead became a horrible bunch of weeds! Had God's people turned to "the King in his beauty" as lawgiver, master and judge rather than to enemy rulers in their greed and error the future would have been much brighter (33:17; 34:8). No better advice, then or now, could exceed Isaiah 34:16

"Seek ye out of the book of the Lord, and read."

Evil companions brought to Israel a day of trouble, despair and vengeance (37:3). But, just as Jehovah had seen Hezekiah's tears and had heard his prayers (38:5) so would the Almighty turn to the faithful remnant in time of genuine need.

Then, down the stream of time, a great forerunner to Messiah would come to level the mountains and fill up the valleys so that no barriers would prohibit the arrival of Immanuel. John the Immerser was the fulfillment of that promise contained in Isaiah 40. But the grandest section of all in the illustrious book of Isaiah is the stanza known as chapter 53. In this precious jewel we see history written before it happened. Seven centuries after Isaiah penned the words, Calvary dealt with the sin problem of mankind. Philip, the evangelist, began at this very Scripture text and preached Christ to the man from Ethiopia (Acts 8:26-39). Here are the epochal lessons drawn from the exciting Messianic message of Isaiah 53:

Our Savior Is

- Eternal — Micah 5 tells us the One to be born to a virgin in Bethlehem had always been.
- Exclusive — John 3 tells us that God gave His only begotten Son!
- Efficacious — Revelation 1:5 tells of the power in the blood of Christ to cleanse our sin.
- Endearing — Acts 8 tells of the joy He brings to those who obey.
- Enduring — Even after His death seed would continue to be borne to His name (Isa. 53:10).
- Exceptional — Hebrews 7 tells us that our Saviour is holy, harmless, undefiled and made higher than the heavens.
- Excluded — But, even though exalted with a name above every other (Phil. 2:9) the Son of God is excluded from many lives due to sin and indifference (John 5:40)!

Isaiah blesses us with many treasures and insights of supreme elegance. Let us go again and again to this storehouse of divine beauty and pathos. Wilkin Bacon pungently wrote:

"Jesus the Savior came down from above
Came to bring mercy and love
Crucify Him the mob scornfully cried
So He on Calvary died
While on the cross He prayed: *Father forgive*
For they know not what they do
For us He died that for Him we might live
Can He depend on you?"

INSIGHTS FROM ISAIAH

- 1:18 — Let Us Reason Together
- 2:1-4 — Pentecost Predicted
- 3:26 — Desolate Mourning
- 4:6 — A Place of Refuge
- 5:20 — Upside Down Thinking
- 6:8 — Isaiah's Surrender To God
- 7:14 — The Virgin Birth (Matt. 1)
- 8:14 — Rock of Offense (Rom. 9:33)

9:6 — Prince of Peace Will Come
10:3 — God Alone Can Help You!
11:11 — A Remnant
12:2 — The Nations Cannot Save
13:1 — Babylon's Power
14:12 — Nebuchadnezzar Will Fall
15:1 — Moab Warned
16:6 — Sin of Pride
17:1 — Damascus a garbage dump
18:5 — Ethiopia Destroyed on Eve of Harvest
19:1 — Swift Judgment on Egypt
20:6 — How Shall We Escape?
21:9-11 — Fall of Babylon, Edom, Arabia
22:22 — Key of David — Rev. 3:7
23:15 — Overthrow of Tyre
24:23 — God Rules — Daniel 4:25
25:9 — We Will Wait For The Lord To Save
26:3 — Perfect Peace For the Faithful
27:6 — The Deeply Rooted Bear Fruit
28:16 — Solid Foundation (Christ Acts 4:11-12)
29:13 — Vain Profession of Godliness
30:1 — Rebellious Sinners
31:1-7 — Don't Trust In Egypt
32:13 — Thorns and Briers
33:22 — King, Judge & Lawgiver
34:16 — Seek The Word of God
35:6-8 — See Acts 3 — "The Lame Shall Leap"
36:7 — Trust not in Idols
37:15-20 — Prayer of Hezekiah
38:5 — Tears & Prayers
39:4 — What Have They Seen In Thine House?
40 — Forerunner of Christ — Matt. 3

- 41:10 — God Will Sustain — Heb. 13:5-6
- 42 — The Suffering Servant
- 43:7 — Man Made to Glorify God
- 44:6 — The Solidarity of Deity
- 45:1 — Cyrus, Persian Ruler Foretold (See Daniel and Ezra)
- 46:9-10 — Our Creator Has Always Been
- 47:5 — Babylon Punished
- 48:10 — Furnace of Affliction
- 49:6 — A Light To Gentiles (Luke 2:25-35)
- 50:1 — Sin Sells Out Cheaply
- 51:11 — Restoration For God's People
- 52:7 — Beautiful Feet
- 53 — Calvary (Acts 8:26-39)
- 54:17 — No Weapon Can Harm You
- 55:6-11 — Seek the Lord While You Can
- 56:7 — House of Prayer (John 2)
- 57:20-21 — No Peace For Sinners
- 58:11 — Continual Guidance
- 59:20 — The Redeemer (Rom. 11:26-29)
- 60:3 — Gentiles Amazed at Power of God
- 61 — Messiah Is Coming (Luke 4)
- 62:1-2 — New Name (Acts 11:26)
- 63:10 — Grieving The Holy Spirit
- 64:6 — Filthy Rags of our Righteousness
- 65:17 — New Heavens and New Earth
- 66:2 — Tremble at God's Word!

A very fitting summation of Isaiah and its relationship to the scheme of redemption is recorded in Isaiah 59 and Romans 11. The prophet had mentioned the sinfulness of the people. In Isaiah 59:20, we read of a vibrant way of hope:

"And the Redeemer shall come to Zion, and unto them that turn from transgression in Jacob, saith the Lord."

In the most difficult section in the epistle to the Romans, Paul mentions the plight of the Jewish religionists. He stated that through unbelief they had been rejected. Judah had rejected the goodness of God and thus felt the sting of His severity. The inspired apostle then referred to Isaiah 59:20 by informing the lost sheep of the house of Israel that one and all could be saved — even as he had been redeemed — “by the Deliverer who would come out of Zion.” This Redeemer would turn away ungodliness from Jacob when He took away their sins. It is true that the Son of God became “a stone of stumbling and rock of offense” (Isaiah 8:14-15) to many. Those who thus rejected Him will one day know the fierceness of His wrath (Isa. 49; Revelation 19:10-16).

Let us conclude our study of the grand book of Isaiah and its vital coalition with the salvation of man, the glory of God and Jesus Christ in the impressive language of Romans 11:33-36.

“O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given unto him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again. For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.” Truly, “Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable gift” (II Corinthians 9:15).

THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH

Let us walk awhile with the great man of God, Jeremiah, the weeping prophet. He spoke for Jehovah to the people of his own day. Jeremiah also gave the richest prediction of the New Covenant and the One who would be its author (Jer. 31:22-34). As we journey down the old paths with the man of Anathoth we learn that his own townspeople and kinsmen plotted to put him to death because Jeremiah's unbending loyalty to God's will made him seem to be unpatriotic to Judah. In a vivid parable the prophet even told his fellows to surrender to Babylon because Jehovah was using Nebuchadnezzar to humble his own impenitent flock. Jeremiah seemed to be guilty of treason (chapter 24)!

Six and one-half centuries before Christ, the good King, Josiah, provided a temporary revival of spirituality in the reading of the lost book (II Kings 23) of God's law. Jeremiah and Josiah were both young men — valiant spiritual leaders — but they worked with a decadent society that was strangely unaware of its own weakness. The young ruler was prematurely removed from the scene in a battle of Megiddo but the tender-hearted preacher remained on the scene for 50 years. His lament over Jerusalem is truly the classic collection of pathos and urgency in the Old Testament. Did Jeremiah cry in vain in Lamentations 3:40: "Let us search and try our ways and turn again to Jehovah."

God had put heaven's words upon the lips of Jeremiah and that dauntless servant taught faithfully the bitter truths Judah so desperately needed. The old paths had been forsaken; the sweet perennial spring of genuine might was replaced with broken, brackish cisterns of human philosophy. Misplaced emphasis upon the physical structure of the Temple had caused Abraham's seed "to dig their own grave." They had truly become a nation that knew not God! Can any language be more solemnly accurate concerning their plight than Jeremiah 3:25: "We lie down in our shame and our confusion covers us; for we have sinned against God — we and our fathers, from our youth even unto this day and have not obeyed the voice of the Lord our God."

Even though Judah was once as near to the heart of God as Jeremiah's belt was wrapped around him, now that relationship had rotted, decayed and passed from the scene. Like a vessel marred in the hands of the potter so the unbending, stubborn

minds of Jerusalem would be shattered and scattered among the heathen. Judah failed to benefit from the graphic message of Israel's fall to Assyria (II Kings 17). Now, it was too late to avoid 70 years of captivity in Babylon. There was no balm in Gilead; the harvest was over and Jeremiah's contemporaries were unsaved. They had learned too late that the way of man is not in himself. The calamity of Esau — regret without repentance — would be their portion.

Jeremiah was slapped in the face, thrown into dungeons, ridiculed, threatened, isolated and despised. Still, the burning fire of duty and the glowing flame of conviction could not be extinguished in his noble life. Mocked by King Jehoiakim, taunted by a false but popular leader, Hananiah, and misunderstood by the masses. Jeremiah remained to the very end a loyal servant of God.

Even after all his unpopular predictions came true — in the midst of the rubble that once had been stately Jerusalem — Jeremiah wept aloud as he viewed the indifference of the people. The once proud temple destroyed, the protecting walls broken down, the vessels used in divine worship stolen, the people in tears, the once joyous singing stifled . . . no wonder Jeremiah cried: **LET JERUSALEM COME INTO YOUR MINDS!**

It would be a long, hard, bitter and exacting struggle before restoration under Ezra, Nehemiah and Haggai. Judah would have to consider her ways and return to Jehovah. Before the resurrection of Jehovah's righteous cause the sorrowing people would pass through the valley of dry bones . . . : "Our bones are dried and our hope is lost" (Ezekiel 37).

The very ones who rose up early to commit iniquity would learn, through bitter tears, the high cost of low living. They could not sing the Lord's song in a strange land but they could yearn for another opportunity to walk the hallowed streets of Jerusalem. And, yes, they could, in the secret chambers of their weary hearts, thank God for Jeremiah who had always told them the truth.

Judah's evil was so apparent that God replied: "You have kindled a fire in my anger." The danger of trusting in man and earthly might is clearly evident as Judah's allies fail one by one. God's people are exhorted in tones of clarity:

"Blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord and whose hope the Lord is" (17:7).

The foolish man is one who gathers riches and has no hope in the day of evil for he has turned away from the fountain of living waters and shall be "destroyed with double destruction." The

servant of the Lord stands in the gate of the city and warns the stiff-necked people of their doom.

The next scene on the stage of drama is the famous potter's house. A marred vessel — due to clay that will not bend to the Master's touch — is highly illustrative of the unyielding nature of the Southern Kingdom. Good clay is pliable, free from impurities and has the proper consistency. Judah possessed not one of these necessary traits. If ever a passage emphasized the sovereignty of God and the belligerent nature of man it is this chapter (18) concerning Jeremiah's trip to the potter's house. As a result of the prophet's application of the incident his enemies conspire against him. "Let us smite him with our words" becomes the epitome of expression from evil hearts.

Adding insult to injury the prophet goes next to the valley of slaughter and breaks a potter's vessel upon the ground. This clearly indicates that God will break his people and scatter them in Captivity!

In Jeremiah, chapter seven, we have one of the most vivid pictures of degradation in Jewish history. We have therein one of the major weaknesses of God's people that culminated in the seventy years of captivity down in Babylon.

Jeremiah, God's voice to the people, strongly denounced the elect who put more trust in the Temple than in *Who* was there and *what* transpired there. Instead of showing the fruit of transformed, spiritual lives in the vineyard of God, they could only reply incessantly: "This is the temple of God; this is the temple of God; this is the temple of God" (Jer. 7:4). The Creator challenged their minds by virtually asking: "What good has it done you to come to the Temple for worship? You still live as before; you still reject my counsel." And, then, in an indirect, scathing rebuke to Zion, He tells Jeremiah to abstain from praying for folk who are so steeped in sin. Temple worship had not benefited those people. They had been to the Temple — but what happened there did not phase them.

Yes, we are about to draw a parallel. It is true that God no longer "dwells in temples made with hands" (Acts 7:48). Anywhere and any time a person worships "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24), Jehovah heareth. But, the church is the temple of the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 3). Therefore, when the church assembles for worship (Hebrews 10:25; I Cor. 11) we have the same general situation as the one mentioned in Jeremiah ?. The *place* isn't holy but the *events* are! I am also personally confident that the tragic results of Jeremiah's day are being repeated in our own era, too.

"OUT OF THE EMBERS — A TORCH!"

Jehoiakim's Pen Knife — Jeremiah 36

Six centuries after Jeremiah's gigantic struggle with Jehoiakim the Hebrew writer wrote these powerful words:

"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God — for our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 10:31; 12:29).

In view of this momentous truth was not Judah's king the apex of folly in his disdain of God's oracle? Could the coals of a winter fire dissolve the Lord of Heaven and earth? The smoldering embers of an ancient fireplace have not the power to remove the hand of Jehovah. Did not His finger emblazon the law on tables of stone and had not His mighty voice caused Sinai to quake? How could a puny mortal so flippantly disregard the awesome strength of the Mighty Maker of the universe? Why would the creature reply against The One who had made him? Perhaps Jehoiakim was the epitome of the vessel marred in the potter's hand or the flask broken upon the ground — shattered, scattered and forever good for nothing! In the swelling of the Jordan he would be consumed!

How tragic it is for men to reject the counsel of God and thus deem themselves unworthy of eternal life. There is no sadness comparable to the loss sustained when men do not like to retain Jehovah in their knowledge. Jehoiakim has some twin brothers today who rip, tear, slash, corrupt and wrest the Scriptures to their own damnation. But one day, in the Lord's own good time, out of the burning embers will arise the torch of Truth — the eternal verities by which we shall all be judged. And I am persuaded that men like Jereboam, Jehoiakim and Judas will wish they could go back and tear down those altars at Dan and Bethel, amend their attitude toward sacred truth and make no agreements with the Devil. For, truth crushed to the earth will rise again — unshackled by the burning embers of idolatry, indifference and lust. The banner of the King and the fiery gospel torch will shine in splendor in the hearts and lives of the redeemed. No earthly, timebound, temporal ruler can thwart the everlasting Father. Indeed:

"From everlasting to everlasting, thou art God."

God's word was a burning fire shut up in Jeremiah's bones. The childish action of a wicked, slothful king could not destroy it. And today, in the gospel age, when God's law is written in our hearts,

and not upon tables of stone, we should, out of the overflow of gratitude, follow the advice of Lucretius (70 B. C.):

"And like runners hand on the torch of life."

Jehoiakim stoked the fire of Jehovah's wrath and fanned a flame that glows in Hell. When will men learn that out of the burning embers of their mundane affections arises God's torch of Truth and sickle of Judgment? In many ways sinners hone to a white-heat sharpness the two-edged sword. There is no escaping from the evident fact that "each one of us shall give account of himself unto God." We plead with men everywhere to receive with meekness that Word which is able to save our souls or one day we shall pray for the mountains to fall upon us to spare us from the One who, in Justice, sits upon the great white Throne. As Revelation 6:17 reminds us:

"For, the great day of His wrath is come and who shall be able to stand?"

It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that the weeping man of Anathoth was always negative, morose and without loving sentiment. His emotions ran the gamut of Judah's sinfulness and Jehovah's holiness and beauty. In one of the richest scenes of the entire oracle we read in 9:24:

"But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the Lord which exercise *loving kindness, judgment and righteousness* in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the Lord."

In spite of these marvelous, majestic themes, Judah was bound for captivity and the dearly beloved of the Father was given into the hands of her enemies. This sad day came as a result of rebellion, rejection and remorse. That Judah was responsible for the bed she now laid in is graphically seen in the language of 12:17:

"But if they will not obey, I will utterly pluck up and destroy that nation, saith the Lord."

The boiling pot of God's wrath and the burning fire within Jeremiah's bones had not been able to stem the tide of apostasy. The sin and shame of Judah had but added fuel to the embers. The Southern Kingdom had come to the crossroads of decision and had gleefully followed the birds of prey into 70 years of tears under the weeping willows of Babylon. They would have a long time to recall the booming words of a sad, rejected prophet: "Hear ye and give ear? be not proud: for the Lord hath spoken" (13:15).

Perhaps the saddest verse in the entire book of Jeremiah is verse 16 of the sixth chapter:

"Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk therein."

Because of this wicked rebellious attitude, Jeremiah was told not to pray for them. Unless and until the sinful nation returned to the spiritual plateau which God demanded they were to remain in jeopardy because of the bondage of sin.

The great spirit of the prophet Jeremiah was heavy with the weight of Judah's neglect and pride. When they should have been clothed in sackcloth and ashes they were instead enamored by the fleeting glimpse of material gain and earthly prominence. While the false prophet shouted "Peace, Peace," pandemonium was about to break forth as the Lord's people were carried away captive.

I have no doubt that finally, in that wretched, foreign land of bondage, God's burning fire broke their hardened hearts and they shared in the tears of Jeremiah. That little spark of a contrite remnant would one day kindle, by the grace of God, a fire of shining radiance — the Lamb of God whose covenant of love would be emblazoned upon the hearts of men!

The boiling cauldron had overflowed into redemption's sweet song. We can only hope that Jeremiah was able to see, from the portals of glory, the fruition of his work. Thank God for men like him!

THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

The weeping prophet of Anathoth lived to see his words of warning fulfilled. Babylon did come and take God's people into seventy years of captivity. Precious vessels from the Temple were stolen, the sanctuary was destroyed and the walls of Jerusalem torn down. In the Septuagint the book of *Lamentations* is called *Tears of Jeremiah* and this is truly an apt description. There is no other part of Holy Writ so filled with sorrow, regret and pathos as the little, but powerfully beautiful *Lamentations*. Sadly, most of us know so few of the treasures contained therein. This section of the Bible contains a dimension seldom found elsewhere. We need to sincerely study these five chapters as they tell broken hearts 3 major truths:

- (A) Sin Brings Sorrow
- (B) Bondage Could Have Been Avoided
- (C) Divine Chastening Disciplines us!

It is interesting to note that pious Jews still recite *Lamentations* every Friday at the wailing wall of Jerusalem. It is also read in the middle of the summer when the Hebrew religionists have a memorial service remembering the devastation of the Temple under Nebuchadnezzar and later by Antiochus Epiphanes in 168 B. C.

Historians tell us that Jeremiah sat in a grotto or cave overlooking the city of David and wept bitter tears as he reflected in five funeral dirges the decline and fall of Judea. In fact, there is a place called "Jeremiah's Grotto" that is supposed to be the launching pad for the intriguing treatise known as *Lamentations*.

One of the more tragic notes of this book is the striking contrast between the past glory of Jerusalem and the present distress that had left the splendor of its streets and hallowed sections in shambles. There was a desperate need for penitence and a lingering aura of humiliation surrounding the gloom and darkness of a once proud citizenry. Jehovah's grace soothes their minds and the hope of restoration lifts their spirits or utter destruction would have immediately crushed their waning breath. In one of literature's richest chapters the writer personifies the City as a man who longs to make amends for the past and as one who desires similar punishment for the heathen nations that participated in the brutal

overthrow of its environs. There is an almost unbearable sorrow couched in the language of 2:16 where enemies of Israel tauntingly rejoice in Jerusalem's misfortune, saying:

"This is the day we have waited for."

Truly, Judah had so lived beneath her privileges that opponents were given occasion for blasphemy (II Samuel 12:14; Romans 2:24).

"We cannot be channels of blessing
If our lives are not free from all sin,
We will barriers be and a hindrance
To those we are trying to win."

Spiritual fools mock God when those of us who profess godliness stoop to the filth and faithlessness of worldliness. No wonder Jeremiah wept!

The great underlying problem that propelled Abraham's seed into seven decades of loneliness and foreign exile was indifference — a sin that plagues our affluent society today. In Lamentations 1:12 a haunting question lingers over the debris of the fallen city:

"Is it nothing to you — all ye that pass by? . . ."

In a contemporary passage in Ezekiel 8:17 we learn that it was "a light thing" to those who worked abomination. Mindful of Mark 5:40 where some "laughed Jesus to scorn," this refrain of Lamentations chronicles the universal disdain for things spiritual and eternal in their scope. Truly, mankind walks in where angels fear to tread!

Centuries before this setting that produced the tears of Jeremiah the great leader Joshua had cogently predicted such a calamity:

"When ye have transgressed the covenant of the Lord your God, which he commanded you, and have gone and served other gods, and bowed yourselves to them; then shall the anger of the Lord be kindled against you, and ye shall perish quickly from off the good land which he hath given unto you" (Joshua 23:16).

Judah had sown to the wind and now naturally reaped the whirlwind of such iniquity (Hosea 8:7). As myriads trudged wearily in abject despair toward Babylon they realized that their sin had "found them out." As Jeremiah's preaching had proved true and genuine the prophets and priests who had failed to speak honestly were escorted outside the city to be treated like *spiritual lepers*. There was scarcely a ripple of hope as the Jews realized their new ruler Zedekiah was vastly inferior to the sublime guidance of the Creator. There is a note of bitter realization in Lamentations 4:20 as the captives are reminded that under the shadow of such

a weak sovereign they must "live among the heathen." Earlier in this section of the lament Jeremiah boldly affirmed these forceful words:

"The Lord hath accomplished his fury; he hath poured out his fierce anger, and hath kindled a fire in Zion, and it hath devoured the foundations thereof."

Lamentations reveals the problems that persistent sinning always produces. As Shakespeare related in *Hamlet*, so this portion of sacred scroll admits:

"When sorrows come, they come not in single spies, but in battalions."

"THE WEeping PROPHEt; A BROKEN NATION AND A SOUL-SEARCHING GOD

It would be difficult to find a book in the Bible that is so apropos to our day as the little, unknown book of Lamentations. We can identify with Jeremiah as he wept over the decaying ruins of a once proud nation. The powerful preaching of God's prophet had not stopped the rushing tide of apostasy in Judah. The inevitable downfall that sin always brings had brought havoc and shame to Jerusalem. Out of the North, God's avenger, Babylon, had rushed through the sleeping Southern Kingdom and had battered down the walls of the once majestic city of God. Egypt had not been the strong arm Judah depended on for deliverance. Now, finally, the children of Jehovah were slowly turning back to the oracles of heaven. But, the damage had been done. The deep love of a saddened servant — Jeremiah — comes shining through in the tearstained lament of this book. Some of the real "heart" passages of the whole Bible can be found in Lamentations. However, it would be a mistake to think *tears* and *power* cannot blend together. There was no greater preacher in Old Testament days than Jeremiah. His burning, ringing rhetoric would long echo in the ears of his impenitent contemporaries.

Rather than basking in the comfort of "I told you so," Jeremiah is genuinely broken and contrite in spirit over the devastation of his beloved city. Jerusalem is in shambles and the prophet is in tears. It gave him no pleasure to realize that Judah's sins had produced such a calamity. He only regretted that their hardness of heart had made captivity a reality. If ever a scene brought vividly to mind the caustic wages of sin it was the burning destruction of a once glorious Jerusalem. The temple, which had been a

superstitious shrine to the Jews, was just a passing shadow as the prophet gazed sadly upon the panorama that had been the glory of by-gone years.

Jeremiah's reflections at this time remind us of the Psalmist:

"Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord . . .
I wait for the Lord, my soul doth wait, and in his word do I hope"
(Psalm 130).

Indeed, the wailing man of Anathoth made his feeling known when he exclaimed: "I am the man that hath seen affliction by the rod of His wrath" (Lamentations 3:1). The only hope of Judah was to "search and try their ways and turn again to Jehovah." They should have been forever grateful for God's spokesman who made the way back toward heaven a possibility. Perhaps we should lament over the fact that so few Jeremiahs exist today!

Praise the Lord for such a man and his magnanimous spirit.

The graphic words that so vividly typify the decline of Judah come from Jeremiah 7 —

"This is a nation that obeyeth not the voice of the Lord their God, nor receiveth correction: truth is perished, and is cut off from their mouth."

Truly, God's backslidden people were "strong in the land but not for truth." The Southern kingdom had been snared in the same trap of folly that had clasped Israel to its bosom. The people of Judah had rejected the counsel of Jehovah to err exceedingly in the way of their own misguided ambitions. Only utter ruin at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar could be the result of the bitter dregs of sin!

Can we visualize the sadness of God's great servant, Jeremiah? How shameful was the echo of the trite refrain:

"The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these."

Their trust in a building — instead of the Builder — was nauseating to the servant of the Lord. His clarion call to spiritual perception went unheeded by the masses who had made lies their refuge. Is it a strange thing that God put these words of stern rebuke into the prophet's mouth?

"But they harkened not, nor inclined their ear, but walking in the counsels and in the imagination of their evil heart and went backward and not forward."

The anguish in the soul of the prophet is best seen in the haunting refrain of Lamentations 1:12 and 5:7:

"Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by
and

Our fathers have sinned, and are not: and we have borne their
iniquities."

The wickedness of Judah's falseness had caused Jehovah's enemies to blaspheme. In Lamentations 2:15 the wailing prophet speaks:

"All that pass by clap their hands at thee; they hiss and wag their
head at the daughter of Jerusalem, saying, Is this the city that men
call the perfection of beauty, The joy of the whole earth."

God had given unto his unfaithful bride a writing of divorcement and "the law was no more; her prophets also find no vision from the Lord."

Neither the idols of their hearts, the altars in the grove, the constellations in the heavens, the beauty and glory of the Temple nor the expected military might of the Egyptians had stayed the hand of bondage. Judah had sown to the wind and verily reaped the whirlwind! The crying need of the day was set forth in Lamentations 3:40:

"Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord."

Does worshipping help or hinder you? True worship was designed for the purpose of drawing us nearer to our Maker, that we might draw others to him. How many souls have you saved as a result of your worship? *Personal worship will result in personal evangelism.* We will volunteer for service (Isaiah 6:8). The best soul winners I have known keep in close touch with Jehovah.

Indeed, the most wonderful motivation for Christians comes from soul-stirring, Bible-centered, God-ordained worship. May we always avail ourselves of every opportunity to grow spiritually thereby. The result of such occasions will shake the earth. Souls by the thousands will be redeemed. Our own existence will be doubly enriched. And, on the other shore, we shall be better prepared to join in the eternal adoration of our Father.

Beloved brethren, do we really worship? Or, have we just been to the Temple? Here is a test for us on this vital subject:

1. Do I truly feel nearer to Heaven?
2. Do I love the Lord and his church more?
3. Am I more determined to teach others of the way?
4. Is my love for the brethren stronger? Am I more forgiving?
5. Am I more determined to purge out my sinfulness?

6. Do I now look forward eagerly to the next assembly?
7. Have I begun to partake of the peace passing understanding?
8. Is there an urgency within to share my joy with others?
9. Am I determined to improve my participation in the worship?
10. Am I looking for work that needs to be done for the Lord?

The Scriptures point out that uplifting, spiritual homage, devotion and praise are calculated to produce such noble aspirations. But, it is apparent that we are not deriving such rich benefits from our periods of public worship today. *Every congregation, for instance, has a lot more worshippers than workers!* Actually, just as in Jeremiah's day, we can let assembly worship hinder us *unless* we practice what we preach (Phil. 1:27). When we "rest our case" upon the subtle idea: "We have been to the building" ("I never miss a service") notwithstanding our lives remain unchanged, we have actually become hypocrites of the deepest dye. No wonder that Jeremiah lamented!

THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL

One of the most dynamic sections of world literature is the Old Testament book called *Ezekiel*. There is just nothing else like it and the contents thereof are fascinating to say the very least. Sadly, many members of the church have never read or studied its pages and we have thus robbed ourselves of valuable treasures. The prophet's message builds conviction and dedication — two ingredients we could certainly use today. Much of the imagery and symbolism of *Revelation* was first revealed in *Ezekiel*. It is interesting to remember that John was exiled to Patmos for the tribulation and persecution Christianity naturally enjoined (*Revelation* 1:9) just as *Ezekiel* shared "lamentation, sorrow and woe" due to Babylonian Captivity (*Ezekiel* 2:10). Both books have the same background of bondage and persecution meted out to God's elect. Only the century and the evil ruler has changed; the principles of oppression and duress are parallel. However, the captives in *Ezekiel's* day deserved their doom of 70 years. Both John and *Ezekiel* were told to take "a little book and eat it up." This refers to the Word of God revealed unto them and given into their solemn trust. The message contained the portents of Jehovah's wrath poured out upon the nations and running over into the lives of saints who were embroiled with the world.

The contents of *Ezekiel* can be easily assigned to three divisions of thought:

- (A) Chapters 1-23: The Fall of Jerusalem As A Consequence of sin
- (B) Chapters 25-31: God's Judgment Upon The Nations
- (C) Chapters 33-48: Restoration of God's Cause

Although Jehovah had no pleasure in the death of the wicked He also had no patience with those who considered the abominations of iniquity as "a light thing" (*Ezekiel* 8:17 and 18:23). *Ezekiel*, as the champion of Chebar, is referred to as "son of man" over 90 times in this unusual treatise. He truly was a valiant preacher in an age that needed men like him. Even Noah, Daniel and Job could only have saved themselves had they all lived during this time! Because the fickle people of God thought Jehovah could not see their evil deeds (8:12) they had "idols in their hearts" (14:3)

that led only to captivity and ruin. One of the strongest rebukes in all of sacred script is contained in the piercing words of Ezekiel 33:31 —

“And they come unto thee as the people cometh, and they sit before thee as my people, and they hear thy words, but they will not do them: for with their mouth they show much love but their heart goeth after their covetousness.”

Because of such adamant hearts God had turned them into the snare of Nebuchadnezzar for seven decades of loneliness. In chapters 3 and 33 Ezekiel is given his charge from heaven as the watchman for the souls of Israel. If he failed to give them warning concerning the wrath of God their blood would be required at his hand. However, this fiery servant of the Almighty was so loyal to his summons that the exiles from Jerusalem knew “that a prophet had been among them” (33:33).

The most frequent phrase in the whole book of Ezekiel is God’s vibrant reminder:

“They shall know that I am the Lord.”

Ezekiel stressed the glory and holiness of the Creator, the sin of Judah that outraged heaven and the deliverance from the Captivity because of Jehovah’s “holy name’s sake” (36:21-24). Even though the citizens of Judea had waited so long to obey that hope was lost (19:5), their rebellion served to kindle the fire of grace that in God’s good time would deliver them. However, the intervening years would teach the Jews how painful can be the sad dividends of indifference and immorality. God is not mocked!

Ezekiel, chapter sixteen, is the most graphic unveiling of spiritual adultery in the entire Bible. Vividly set forth therein is the debauchery of idolatry committed by God’s gadding bride. In language so picturesque no one could question, the prostitution of the Lord’s cause is vividly discussed. Jeremiah had likened Judah to a wild beast, in heat, sniffing for lovers among the heathen. But Ezekiel 16 gets plainer than that! God tells His people that lewd women at least get paid for their immorality but His bride was paying the heathen to commit sacrilege with her! Such harlotry made the nations ridicule Judah’s ineptness and plot her overthrow. In a passage of stern rebuke the Jews are accused of something worse than burning their children in the fires of Molech. They had sacrificed their offspring to the Devil because their sin was so great their children would reap the consequences of it for years to come. The mothers of Judah had taught their daughters the panoply of whoredom! The influence and repercussion of Israel’s

passionate love scenes with Satan would echo loudly down the stream of time. God's unfaithful bride would be haunted by her infidelity and saddened by its impact upon following generations. Lest anyone complain that the parents sinned and the children were not, therefore, responsible for their own sins, Ezekiel 18:20 clarifies the point powerfully:

"The soul that sinneth, it shall surely die."

In chapter 28, verse 15, we learn that we are born spotless and sinless and become accountable before our Maker only *when* iniquity is found in our hearts. We may bear the *consequences* of other's faults but never the *guilt* of someone else's mistakes. The generation of Jews that went down into Babylonian bondage rightly deserved its fate!

In chapter 34 the great prophet sets forth a scathing denunciation of shepherds of the flock (evidently the weak kings of Judah) who were slothful, weak and unspiritual. Their guidance had been so shallow and their concept so carnal that God's sheep "were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them."

The famous Valley of Dry Bones occupies center stage in chapter thirty-seven. Seldom does one find such a poignant and delightful setting. The prophet, in a vision, sees a valley full of very dry bones. He sadly proclaims:

"Our bones are dried and our hope is lost."

But, muscle and sinew attach to the bones and there is a glorious scene of revival and resurrection. Jehovah is telling Ezekiel that Judah "was dead and is alive again" in a classic prediction of the Restoration of the Jews. This spiritual renewal is beautifully fulfilled in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Revelation 20 is likewise a picture of the resurrection of a cause seen by John as he is privileged to behold martyrs, *once* dejected, now seated on thrones — reigning with Christ (Ephesians 2:6)! To consummate this victorious drama first staged in Ezekiel's day we read these fitting promises as the curtain falls in 39:25-29:

"Now I will restore the fortunes of Jacob and have mercy upon the whole house of Israel; and I will be jealous for my holy name . . . Then shall they know that I am the Lord their God because I sent them into exile among the nations, and then gathered them into their own land. I will leave none of them remaining among the nations anymore and I will not hide my face anymore from them, when I pour out my Spirit upon the house of Israel, says the Lord God."

Ezekiel, the prophet of doom and punishment, had now become the herald of grace and glory. The mural of Judah's destiny — once dark and drab — was now filled with brilliant colors of hope. The presence of God in the midst of His penitent people caused the inspired penman to write fervently of the Temple and its radiant splendor. The land that had been so desolate would be filled with streams of living water to quench the longing of Jehovah's redeemed people.

Because Israel had partaken of the sins of the heathen they had shared in their judgment but now, due to God's grace, they would bask in rich provisions of restitution. Surely, the bold preaching of a fiery prophet, named Ezekiel, contributed to that grand arrangement. The calamity of sin had finally given way to the grandeur of forgiveness. Praise God for men like the prophets. We need a double portion of their spirit!

THE BOOK OF DANIEL

One of the truly sterling characters of the Bible would certainly be God's great statesman, Daniel. Used mightily by Jehovah, in the palaces of Babylon and Persia was this young, dynamic servant. The exploits of Daniel and the friends he influenced for righteousness paint one of the most vibrant murals of Old Testament history. In Daniel 1:8 we find a famous and fascinating statement that is typical of the courageous stand the young man took:

"Daniel purposed in his heart not to defile himself."

It would have been much easier and definitely simpler had he "gone along" with the natural setting within the throne-room of the King of Babylon. But Daniel's basic character of integrity before his Maker was involved. Like Joseph of Genesis 39 he just could not engage in evil and "sin against God." It takes real nobility of mind — true depth of conviction — to stand against *the popular way* but Daniel was not a man of convenience. His loyalty would be deeply tested but no ruler or threat would make him compromise. The New Testament teaches Christians to *depart from iniquity* (II Timothy 2:19) as they *abstain from every form of evil* (I Thessalonians 5:22). Hypocrisy will never be the trait of those who serve only Christ as Master (Matthew 6:24; Romans 12:9). We truly need servants of God, both young and old to be like Daniel! It takes lots of backbone to be a genuine worker for God. Let us remember:

"He who trims himself to please everyone soon whittles himself away."

Daniel represents stalwart commitment to heaven's purposes and as a result, provides a classic example to all of us who claim to serve God.

This man of valor worked in a difficult period of time in a unique role before pagan rulers who oppressed the people of God. Unlike the fiery prophet Ezekiel or the weeping seer of Anathoth (Jeremiah) who performed their tasks *with* Abraham's seed by the tents along the road to Captivity or down by the river of Babylon — Daniel's job was *within* the palace region of the enemy. He dealt with ancient potentates such as Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus and Darius. Daniel's brilliant teaching and godly life caused even the

Rulers to praise the God of Israel. Yet, such appreciation for the Creator often came in spite of Daniel's unflinching allegiance to Truth when error would have been much easier and more palatable! Daniel was not trying to please men but God (Galatians 1:10). As one studies this magnificent book he is reminded of Jesus' words in Luke 6:26:

"Woe unto you when all men speak well of you; for so did their fathers unto the false prophets."

The fiery furnace and the lion's den of the book of Daniel forever prove that the world will not *continue* to appreciate rebuke from Jehovah's valiant soldiers! Truth becomes offensive to folk who never intend to observe it.

One of the monumental scenes in the entire Bible can be found in Daniel, chapter two. Nebuchadnezzar, ruler of Babylon, conqueror of Judah, has a dream of great magnitude that troubles him deeply. A great image of gold, silver, brass and iron mingled with clay arouses his curiosity. Naturally his vast array of soothsayers or "yes-men" cannot help him to interpret the dream. This is just the spot for God's man, Daniel, to step into the spiritual spotlight. In 2:44 we find one of the boldest predictions concerning ancient world history ever to be recorded. Several centuries and empires are spanned in one single verse of Holy Writ. The sacred Scriptures recorded therein history before it happened! To the members of Christ's church or citizens of the Lord's kingdom no verse is more precious.

The image of a man, whose body was divided into four parts, represented *four* kingdoms. Daniel told Babylon's leader:

"Thou, O King, art the head of Gold."

Afterwards, three more dynasties would arise. Checking Bible teaching with world history one can easily discern the remainder of the imagery. Persia, the conqueror of Babylon was represented by the upper body of silver. The brass part of the body predicted the rise of Greece and Alexander the Great's conquest that overwhelmed the 127 provinces of Persian power. In the legs and feet of iron mixed with clay one sees the Roman Empire of the Caesars that finally gained ascendancy over the Greek's rule by destroying Carthage in 146 B. C. Daniel promised that God would set up His kingdom "in the days of those kings," referring to the fourth world-wide dynasty depicted in Nebuchadnezzar's interesting dream and image.

In the New Testament, during the Roman rule, according to Matthew 16:18-19 Jesus promised His kingdom. In Acts 2, on the

Day of Pentecost, God set up His kingdom just as Daniel 2:44 predicted. The last verse of Acts tells us that Paul, in Rome, was preaching that kingdom as a reality. In Hebrews 12:23-28 we find clear proof that the immovable kingdom Daniel had foretold existed and men were in it. See also I Thessalonians 2:12, Colossians 1:13, Acts 8:12 and Revelation 1:6-9. What a beautiful fulfillment of a powerful prophecy!

Daniel, chapter three, has the pulsating story of the fiery furnace and the courage of the three Hebrew friends of Daniel who would not bow down in worship before the idol of the King. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego declared openly:

"Our God Is Able To Deliver Us"

and He did! the intense blast of the furnace was strong enough to slay the men who placed Daniel's friends therein yet it did not affect the Hebrews at all! It became evident that the God of Israel was the true and living God. The pagan deities waned in their prestige during Daniel's days.

In Daniel 4:25 we read valuable words concerning the providence and sovereignty of Jehovah. His will shall be done because *God rules in the kingdom of men*. Great chapters, such as Jeremiah 18 and Romans 9 emphasize this same point. Faithful children of God never fear or dread earthly movements, totalitarian forces or weapons of warfare. Our Creator is in charge of our destiny and bombs, despotic governments or carnal enterprises cannot perplex us. As long as we hold to God's hand of love we cannot be swayed by fickle notions of earth. Truly, as Romans 8:31 confidently affirms, so we believe:

"If God be for us, who can be against us?"

There was no logical, earthly reason for Daniel and his friends to succeed against the awesome strength of Babylon and Persia but they did because Jehovah overwhelmed their foes. It reminds us of the joyous message of I John 5:4 —

"This is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith."

God's hand in history makes the future bearable and the present challenging. Truly, *the whole world is in His hands!* Pity the shallow person who tries to operate in this wicked world on his own power. Those who have turned their lives over to the Lord shall be abundantly blessed (John 10:10; Hebrews 13:6).

In Daniel, chapter five, we have the enthralling story of the tragic end of a weak and worldly ruler named Belshazzar. Nabonidus had left him in charge of Babylon while Nabonidus was in battle

against Egyptian forces. But, Belshazzar was a man devoted to "business tomorrow but pleasure today." Using the vessels stolen from the Temple in Jerusalem, the carnal potentate was in the midst of a banquet devoted to "revelling and such like" (Galatians 5:21). There are two tremendous statements from Daniel in this chapter that magnify the virtue of spirituality and the folly of serving fleshly appetites. Those who have a disdain for living "soberly, righteously and godly" (Titus 2:12) should often recall the solemn scene before Belshazzar's eyes as he viewed *the handwriting on the wall!* Over against the plaster wall — in the midst of the drunken feast — a hand appeared to write the famous words: *Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin!* Only Daniel could properly convey the meaning of those frightening thoughts. What courage it took for God's servant to tell Belshazzar that the message meant that he had been "weighed in the balance and had been found wanting." Daniel also reminded Belshazzar that his life would be taken from the earth that very night because:

"The God who made you — Him you have not glorified."

Prestige on earth does not necessarily mean power with the Almighty!

In chapter six we have the transition to Persian rule as the Medo-Persian empire had defeated Babylon. Because "an excellent spirit was in him" Daniel continued his place of authority and influence within the kingly court. This aroused the animosity of jealous men who secretly plotted against him. A statute was signed by royal decree forbidding worship for thirty days to any God or man — except the King! Upon hearing the law Daniel went to his chambers and prayed unto Jehovah just as he always had. Evil men now make Daniel's predictable righteousness a point of slander. According to the unalterable law of the Persians there was no alternative for Daniel. *The Den of Lions* was to be his fate! When the King realized his problem he tried desperately to change the arrangement but it was futile. In verse 16 of Daniel six, we have one of the most eloquent statements ever made by a pagan concerning Jehovah and his faithful servant. The King told Daniel, as the valiant statesman was placed in the den of lions:

"Thy God whom thou servest continually, he will deliver thee."

What a marvelous compliment to Daniel also! After Daniel was delivered, unharmed, from this challenge, Darius sent a decree to the world of this day. Notice the power and beauty of 6:26 of Daniel:

"That in every dominion of my kingdom men tremble and fear before the God of Daniel: for He is the living God, and steadfast forever, and His kingdom that which shall not be destroyed, and his dominion shall be even unto the end."

In verse 28 we are not surprised to read — "so this Daniel prospered" . . .

One of the powerful visions of Daniel's life can be found in 7:13-14 where he was privileged to see the Son of Man passing through the clouds unto the Ancient of Days. This was certainly fulfilled when Christ ascended from Mt. Olivet (Acts 1:11) in order to receive *dominion, glory* and a *kingdom* never to be destroyed. When the everlasting doors of glory opened wide to receive the King of Kings (Psalms 24) He received glory, power, honor and majesty forever (Ephesians 1:20-23; Romans 15:9-12; Revelation 5:10-12).

The rest of the book of Daniel dealt mainly with the rise of Alexander the Great, the Grecian Empire and the division of that Empire after the sudden death of Alexander. Students of ancient history and Bible teaching can see the fulfillment of these matters especially in the evil conduct of Antiochus Epiphanes and the Counter Movement of the Maccabees. The abomination of desolation, spoken of in chapters 9 and 11 of Daniel, was the defiling of the Temple by Antiochus on December 25, 168 B.C. In a revolt led by Judas Maccabees the evil ruler of Selucia, Antiochus, was purged three years later in a brilliant turn of events. When the Temple was cleansed the people called the glorious victory: *The Feast of Dedication* (John 10:22).

Finally, in 12:1-3 we see practical points for consideration by servants of God. Winning souls for the Master is wise procedure (Proverbs 11:30) because many are thereby *turned to righteousness*. Verse two probably has a dual meaning. First of all, it is parallel to Ezekiel's valley of dry bones. Israel was as good as dead because of sin. Her enemies discounted any future power for Abraham's seed. But God caused a spiritual revival or the resurrection of His cause in the resultant restoration of the Jews to their land under Ezra and Nehemiah. But Daniel 12:2 also gives us hope beyond the grave of the actual resurrection of the dead. Truly, the book of Daniel ends in a display of vibrant hope. Titus 1:2 says it boldly:

"In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began."

THE MESSAGE OF THE PROPHETS

The sterling work of Old Testament prophets paved the way for the coming of Christ. Except for Jonah they were stalwart men of God who courageously fought corruption and upheld decency and godliness on every hand. Undaunted by weak brethren who would not stand and the devastating power of ruthless nations they "bubbled forth" the message God put in their mouths (Jer. 1:9). Unpopular but respected were these valiant soldiers of heaven's cause. What a debt we owe to them! Seldom has the world seen anyone with such commitment to a cause and such willingness to even die for truth. We need thousands of preachers today who will be like the prophets of yesteryear!

Isaiah spoke of the blessings that come from waiting on the Lord in 40:31 of his message:

"They will mount up with wings as eagles; they will run and not be weary; they will walk and not faint."

Sometimes we have to be willing to slow down and walk with God. We cannot always run and fly. Some days are sad and dark and dreary. But, regardless of the pace of the world God will be there to guide us and sustain our earthly existence (Psalms 73:24). Jeremiah 8:9 informs us that no one is really wise unless they are familiar with the message of heaven. A man may have seventeen doctoral degrees but if he knows not the Bible he is spiritually bereft of brilliance. We have all known educated dummies and also uneducated (formally) wise men. We should use all the education we have to the glory of God and never let it get in the way of eternal matters. Or, we may be like the very ones Lamentations 4:5 describes. Such folk were raised in splendor but finished up in the garbage dump! Yes, pride goes before destruction. Arrogance pays a high premium. Ezekiel tells us exactly why Judah wound up in captivity for 70 years in Babylon. In 20:32 of that exciting book the fiery prophet rebukes the people of God for wanting "to be like the heathen." They got a front row seat in the arena of wickedness. Sinners always have the best seat in the house when Satan puts on his finest show.

Daniel shares with us the rich faith of the three close friends of God's devoted statesman. In 3:17 of that noble treatise we read thrilling words of conviction, in spite of the fiery furnace:

"Our God is able to deliver us."

Yes, one like unto the Son of Man walked with them and they came out untouched. Christ is introduced in Revelation as One

whose feet had walked in the furnace of affliction. We are blessed by such a comrade. Along the difficult route and in the challenging moments of the gospel way:

"In the hour of trial, Jesus plead for me
Lest by base denial, I depart from Thee
When Thou seest me waver
With a look recall
Not for fear of favor
Suffer me to fall."

The so-called minor prophets, Hosea through Malachi, have timely messages for us also. Let us list a few of their major warnings and promises that add enrichment to our lives.

1. Spiritual Ignorance Will Ruin Us (Hosea 4:6).
2. Inward Purity Is A Must (Joel 2:13).
3. We Cannot Escape God's Judgment (Amos 4:12).
4. Pride Will Overwhelm Us (Obadiah 3).
5. Turning Our Back On God Is Foolish (Jonah 1:3).
6. Integrity of Character Is A Blessing (Micah 6:8).
7. Living By Faith Is The Only Way (Habakkuk 2:4).

God mightily used the prophets for good. They were unusual men who sacrificed much and accomplished a noble work. Without them Christianity would never have arrived. Those humble men preached the message Jehovah told them to preach. Jeremiah speaks for all of them in 15:16 and 20:9 of his eloquent treatise:

"His words were found and I did eat them and they were the rejoicing of my heart."

"His word was in my heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones."

Those men had preached the oracles of God so long and so faithfully that nothing could persuade them to stop. Oh, how we need that spiritual heart-burn today. In season and out of season let us never leave the glorious work of proclaiming the glad message!

"I love to tell the story
For those who know it best
Seem hungering and thirsting
To tell it like the rest
And when in scenes of glory
I sing the new, new song
'Twill be the old, old story
That I have loved so long."

THE HEART OF HOSEA

The great book of Hosea is in a class all by itself! There is nothing else just like it throughout the rest of the Bible. There is sadness and doom coupled with hope and sweetness rippling across its pages. Some commentaries label Hosea as "more sob than sermon" and "a love story that went wrong" as they label Hosea as "the prophet of sorrowful heart." This grand treatise is a very tender section of Holy Scripture that ought to challenge and enrich our hearts. One of the sterling points in the entire book is found in 2:7 where we learn that life with Jehovah is always *the better way!* C. P. Jones wisely wrote:

"There's nothing so precious as Jesus to me;
Let earth with its treasures be gone;
I'm rich as can be when my Savior I see;
I'm happy in Jesus alone."

Hosea wept over Israel's sins seven centuries prior to Christ but the errors of God's people then parallel our problems today. One grave mistake in that long ago era was the fruitful nature of Israel in secular realms but its barren success in spiritual pursuits. The tragedy of secularism haunts the church even today! If all the talented folk who are supposed to be Christians would really stand up for Jesus, how bright and influential would be our plea. Hosea's heartache centered on this same problem in his day. Strong politically and economically Israel was "a half-baked cake" in spiritual matters. Good for nothing — raw on one side and burned on the other (Hosea 7:8)!

They had "eaten the fruit of lies" and had trusted in military might instead of the power of godliness (Hosea 10:13-15). As a result God's people were reaping the whirlwind of the seed sown in sin (8:7). Hosea's excruciating experience with his own faithless wife parallel God's sorrow with Israel, His gadding bride. Trusting more in "the nations around them" than in the true and living God brought shallowness into the Northern Kingdom. The citizens of Samaria, Israel's capitol city, needed to return to the Valley of Achor (Joshua 7) for the disciplinary chastening that would provide their only "door of hope" (Hosea 2:15). There was no truth, mercy or knowledge in the land and the very earth mourned (4:3)! The ancient landmarks were being removed (5:10) as Satan rejoiced over the adulterous actions of a decadent society.

It is chapter six that projects the major thrust of this eloquent treatise. One dynamic verse states:

"Let us press on to know the Lord."

This word for *know* refers to intimate knowledge as the Bible view of a husband knowing his wife (Matthew 1:25). Sadly, however, God's bride was unfaithful and flippant — "like the dew that goes away early." The Creator nonetheless demands steadfast love (6:6). The Scots have a term for this kind of devotion. It is *leal-love*, that is, love with absolute loyalty. In the RSV we learn how seriously degraded Israel had become. Hosea 6:10 vividly affirms:

"In the house of Israel I have seen a horrible thing; Ephraim's harlotry is there, Israel is defiled."

Surprisingly, the Northern Kingdom seemed to think they could hide their sins from the all-seeing God of Heaven. In 7:2 we read this piercing statement:

"But they do not consider that I remember all their evil works."

Yes, our Father above records all things in "a book of remembrance" (Malachi 3:16).

"They do not cry to me from the heart" is the startling avowal of Hosea 7:14. In Ezekiel 33:31 we have a similar word:

... "they hear what you say but they will not do it; for with their lips they show much love, but their heart is set on their gain."

Such disregard for divine emphasis made Israel like a *silly dove* (7:11) flitting back and forth between lovers (Egypt or Assyria) and forsaking the Lord. The vulture of iniquity and doom hovered over the house of God (8:1). Multiplying altars of idolatry, forgetting their Maker, trusting in weapons and material strength — these points made God promise "to devour their strongholds." Truly, *the days of recompense and punishment had come* (9:7)!

The orchards and vineyards were luxuriant but Israel was spiritually barren. They were fruitful but not for God! The very sons of Jehovah were guilty of double iniquity (10:10). As Isaiah 30:1 states:

"Rebellious children add sin to sin."

How desperately they needed to break up uncultivated soil and to sow a rich crop of righteousness (10:12). They had *eaten the fruit of lies* long enough! Yet, God loved them still and with deep compassion drew them with bands or cords of love. Indeed He loved them freely and fully (11:4; 14:4). Just as Hosea loved his unfaithful wife and redeemed her from a life of impurity Jehovah

maintained a love for a nation so steeped in infidelity. What a matchless concern!

Even the land would mourn (4:3) for the shame of the impurity of Israel who should have been *righteous, faithful and loving* to her bridegroom (2:19-20). A typical reference to the decline of spiritual fervor is 4:16-17 —

“For Israel slideth back as a backsliding heifer:
Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone.”

Jehovah has always demanded truth, mercy and sincere devotion of His servants (4:1). Loss of well-being before God is the result of failing to meet these requirements. Israel had destroyed this beautiful concord! *They had cast off the thing that was good* (8:3)! The great things of the law were counted as strange words; they had forgotten their Maker (8:12-14). It was way past time to *seek the Lord* (10:12). God has always demanded more than lip service. Hosea forever proves that Old Testament worthies offered praise from the depths of their hearts. Service without genuine commitment was no more acceptable then than now (Mark 7:7-13). Half-hearted worship never has been anything but noise (Amos 5:23). Jehovah would only receive mercy and not mere sacrifice (Hosea 6:6). Burnt offerings from singed consciences would never suffice. Obedience is better than sacrifice (I Samuel 15:22)!

Israel had played the harlot and had no right to rejoice (9:1). Because they would not listen to God they would aimlessly wander among the nations: They would cry for the very mountains to hide them from the wrath of their Creator but they would be buried under the ruins caused by sin! As the Northern Kingdom slipped more and more into the oblivion sin always brings, a deeply compassionate God would cry in the language of 11:8 —

“How Shall I Give Thee Up, O Ephraim?”

In the final chapter we learn that the Lord's ways are right and the just shall walk therein. But, the way of the transgressor is hard! Brother L. O. Sanderson provides us with a fitting close for these thoughts:

“We must go the narrow way
till the sun goes down;
God's commands we must obey
till the sun goes down;
Every day the Lord confessing
With true hearts our wrongs redressing;
If we would obtain the blessing
when the sun goes down.”

May we always show our love to God with reverential loyalty!

MAJOR POINTS IN HOSEA APPLIED

It is interesting to notice one main verse from each chapter in Hosea as it blends with great Bible thoughts found elsewhere in Holy Scripture. This will certainly show the practical lessons to be discovered in the richness of the Prophets.

In Hosea 1:10 we ascertain the great privilege of being God's chosen people. In Christianity that means *those who belong to the Lord* by virtue of choosing to obey Him (I Peter 2:9-12). In 2:15 of Hosea we learn the value of purity and discipline among the people of God. The Valley of Achor where Joshua purged sin from the Camp of Israel (Joshua 7) was still remembered in Hosea's day. In New Testament times Paul commanded brethren to "withdraw from that ungodly fellow (I Corinthians 5). In Hosea 3:4 we can see the absolute folly of turning our backs upon godliness. How lonely are those who claim to be followers of the Lord but, who, due to sin, must sing Jehovah's song *in a strange land* (Psalms 137:4)! In Hosea 4:6 we weep at the spiritual ignorance of Israel which destroyed them (13:9). Similar to those mentioned in Hebrews 5:12-14 those ancient people were so inept in divine matters they would not discern between good and evil. In Hosea 5:9 we see the futility of vain boasting when only impartial judgment from God awaits those whose vanity cannot bless them in the day of heaven's wrath (Revelation 6:17). Hosea, chapter six, mentions the superiority of mercy and knowledge to the sacrifice of burnt offerings. Truly, as Samuel clearly stated:

"To obey is better than sacrifice and to hearken than the fat of rams."

Horrible attitudes, resulting in horrible actions, now overwhelmed Israel (6:10). We need to learn how to behave ourselves (I Timothy 3:15).

In Hosea 7:8 we find one of the matchless gems of all the prophetic imagery. God's people were compared to a half-baked cake. They were good for nothing! Who wants a loaf of bread that is burned on one side and raw dough on the other side. Flirting with the world while claiming to be God's bride had ruined Israel! No one can serve two masters (Matthew 6:24; 12:30). In 8:7 of Hosea we see the sad dividends of sowing to the wind and reaping the whirlwind of our hypocrisy. God is not mocked (Galatians 6:7-8). In Hosea 9:10 men learn again that where our treasure is there will be our heart also (Matthew 6:21). The abominations of the heathen had become the objects of love for Israel. Instead of abstaining from evil Abraham's seed had embraced iniquity.

In Hosea 10:12 an urgent appeal for seeking Jehovah *now* is set forth bluntly:

"It is time to seek the Lord."

As Hebrews 3:15 tells us — so Hosea cried —

"Today, if you will hear His voice; Harden not your hearts." In 11:8 of Hosea the tragedy of impenitent hearts breaking God's heart should bring tears to our eyes. The plaintive cry of a compassionate Father blends with the honesty of our Judge in a never-to-be-forgotten sob:

"How shall I give thee up, O Ephraim?"

In Hosea 12:13 and 13:11 we learn again the value of the prophets — God's servants! Never the King — but always the true prophet represented the voice of the Creator. Kings usually hindered spiritual progress while Hosea, Amos and Micah salvaged a remnant from God's work. The bondage awaiting Israel was but the culmination of years filled with pride, rebellion and apathy. Had it not been for the prophets there would never have been a happy ending!

THE BOOK OF JOEL

Chapter 1

Hear now, you people; destruction is come,
Wasting and poverty, dearth is begun.
Gather your elders and pray for the land.
Cry, for the day of the Lord is at hand.

Chapter 2

This is a day of destruction and sword;
Yet there is hope for the called of the Lord.
Then shall His people abide without shame,
Having deliverance, safe in His name.

Chapter 3

Down to Jehosphat nations shall go;
Learning while there God's destruction to know.
Then shall He cleanse and replenish the land.
Judah shall dwell with the Lord in command.

The Bible In Verse By Alvy E. Ford

Joel is vivid like Nahum
Tender like Jeremiah
Sublime like Isaiah
Strong like Micah
Men, crops, fields mourn together

Notes On Joel — "Jehovah Is God"

Contemporary with Hosea and Amos — 770-750 B. C.

A Literary Gem — Polished beauty!

Locust physically wrecked Judah — now nations would overwhelm God's sinful people. All of this showed God's wrath upon His followers who declined rapidly in spirituality.

There would be national penitence. A solemn fast was needed. Chapter 1:16 proves that *the plague of locusts* was literal. In 2:18 we read that God is jealous for His land. The book begins in gloom and closes in brightness. Joel tells of present distress and the ideal future.

Joel is the Prophet of Pentecost. The famous use of Joel 2:28-32 by Peter in Acts 2:16-17 is indeed remarkable. Truly, because

of this fulfillment of prophecy “multitudes stand in the valley of decision” as “we rend our hearts and not our garments” (Joel 2:13; 3:14).

Plagues of locusts — exactly as Joel describes — historically recorded in the annals of Israel. In 1865, 1904 and 1915 such incidents took place. Notice this eye witness account by *National Geographic* writer in 1915:

“A few months afterwards, a much larger army alighted and gave the whole country the appearance of having been burned. Wherever they settled it looked as if fire had devoured and burnt up everything.”

Many Bible students believe the 4 phases of locust mentioned in 1:4-5 refer figuratively to four enemy nations — Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome who would subdue Judah (see Daniel 2:44 ff).

Joel 2:11 — *Who can abide the judgment of Jehovah* reminds us of Revelation 6:14-17; I Peter 4:17; I Thess. 5:2-3. In verse 17 there seems to be a parallel between *locusts* and *heathen*!

No prophet deals so little upon moral considerations (contrast Amos, Hosea and Micah). Joel's thrust is “The Locust Plague and What It Teaches.” The economic impact of this plague is subservient to the spiritual significance.

A vivid contrast is found in Joel 3:10 and Micah 4:3 (with Isaiah 2:4). Instruments of peace must be changed into implements for war and vice-versa. The nature of God's future kingdom (Pentecost, Acts 2) will be one of peace while Joel's day would fight against ungodly nations for its existence. Remember God ruled through Israel in a Theocratic way, that is, both in a civil and spiritual arrangement. But Christ's kingdom today is a divine monarchy and civil government is a separate arrangement (Matthew 28:18; Colossians 1:18; John 18:36).

The people of God should mourn when they cannot worship and serve their Maker is the theme of Joel 1:9-10. One of the memorable statements of this book is 2:23 where the need of heaven's blessing, “the early and latter rain,” is referred to.

The lingering *ideal* of Joel 2:28-32 is the truth that men cannot be conformed to God's image until His Spirit enters their lives and guides their destiny. We must therefore allow the Spirit's sword — *The Word of God* (Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12; John 6:63; Colossians 3:16) to mold our lives. The most beautiful verse states:

“I will restore unto you the years the locust have eaten” (2:25).

Compare this with the book of Job, Matthew 6:33 and Mark 10:29-30.

In the valley of Judgment multitudes stand today. One day the decision God has made concerning us will be forever final. May we humbly learn the vibrant message of *Joel* lest we be overwhelmed by much more than a plague of locusts!

THE BOOK OF AMOS

Elaborate, Insincere Worship is Greatest Crime. See 4:13-5:8-9:5-6

Background: "Samaria must be Destroyed." The nation is ripe for Judgment.

Purpose of Prophets: "The Gospel of The Lion's Roar"

Overview of Book

Inspiration — "words" — "saw" Jeremiah 1:9

- (a) The Sovereignty of God
- (b) The Sin of Inhumanity
- (c) Moral Responsibility 5:2

Chapter 1 — Verse 2

They spurn purity — Hate Reproof — Live Recklessly — Reduce Religion to Ritual — Opulence + Oppression

Chapter 2 — Verse 4 + 6 Frivolity + Corruption

Chapter 3 — Verse 3 + 12 Stress + Hollow Sabbath

Chapter 4 — Verse 11 + 12

Chapter 5 — Verse 15, 18, 19, (Context of 5:21-27)

Chapter 6 — Verse 1, 6, Every disaster is a new call to Repentance. (Psalms 119:71; Luke 13:1-5; Revelation 9:20-21).

Chapter 7 — Verse 7-8 (Amaziah + Amos) The Plumbline of Rectitude.

Chapter 8 — A great Famine + Basket of Rotten Fruit.

Chapter 9 — Verses 2 + 11 Buried In The Ruins of False Religion.

Amos 760 B. C. (Uzziah in Judah; Jeroboam II in Israel).

"Oldest Volume of Sermons In Existence."

One of most forceful preachers of judgment and repentance. A Religious Reformer

"Rude in speech but not in knowledge."

Amós means "Burden—Bearer."

"Might Had Become Right."

“Amos did not turn prophet to make a living; He left his living to make a prophet” — I Corinthians 9:16

Conviction cannot be inherited nor received by degree from a school!

The Essence of the Book: “Samaria (capital city of Israel) must be Destroyed” *Various Statements Concerning Amos and the People of His Day:*

“Much wealth in Israel; but little wisdom”

“Feasting and banquets took the place of religious endeavor”

“Might became right”

“The rich became richer; the poor, poorer!”

“Religion lost its vitality; morals were completely ignored”

“Religion cannot stand if divorced from morality”

“The shrines at Bethel and Gilgal were crowded with worshippers but God was not there”

“Everything appeared *outwardly* in order” (I Samuel 16:7)

“Politically and Economically Israel was Prospering but Morally she was rotting”

“Vain-glory had displaced Israel’s true glory”

“To Amos, Sin was open rebellion against Jehovah!”

Some have said: “Amos preached the Gospel of the Lion’s Roar”
Notice 1.2 — The Sheep outwardly Safe and Serene — Then the Lion roars and Judgment Is Imminent and Inescapable!

Book begins as God’s Fierce Wrath Is Pronounced Against: Syria, Philistia, Phoenicia, Moab, Ammon, Edom and Then Judah and Israel.

Not many truly great people come across the stage of life in any given generation. Such a rare jewel was the prophet from Tekoa, the courageous Amos. Few books ever written capture the heartbeat of a nation but the sterling quality of the Old Testament message of Amos is definitely in that category. Although removed from our present society by nearly three thousand years the dynamic drama of Amos is still vibrant, fresh and needed! For a treatise to never die its salient points must be practical indeed. Such a book is the nine chapter powerhouse known as Amos. Preachers of today need a double portion of his courage, conviction and commitment. He was not an after-dinner speaker but, rather a before Judgment proclaimer! Amos provoked men to think, pricked their conscience to action or prompted audiences to plead with the preacher to move on to other regions and leave them alone. Three of the most insistent servants God ever had on the subject of repentance were Ezekiel, Amos and John Immerser. They were also three of the most unpopular men who ever lived.

What a debt we owe to the unbending courage of Amos. The literature in the Bible bearing his name is a veritable storehouse of brilliant loyalty toward Jehovah and love for the very people who despised the unprofessional prophet who could not be hired or fired by men. Though a simple herdsman and fruit gatherer Amos proved to be a profound spokesman for God with a sermon long overdue. In the first stanza of Amos enemy nations are sternly rebuked for their shameful actions. Many transgressions had been committed by Edom, Egypt, Ethiopia, Moab, Syria and Philistia. God would not have wasted time rebuking them if (as some today erroneously say) the Gentiles were not answerable to Him! As the book of Amos continues the prophet rebukes Israel and Judah for their failures in the spiritual realm also. Not only were they guilty of mistreatment of the poor but their covetous hearts choked out spiritual growth that dishonored God. Adding to their sin-hardened hearts was another heinous crime — they discouraged the spiritual leaders of their day. Both the prophets and the Nazirites, who walked close to the Creator, were mocked by the contemporaries of Amos. Today, in the church, sadly, we often see weak, worldly members make light of godly brethren who will not partake of Satan's delights. We ought to be very careful lest we dishearten folk who strive "to walk hand in hand with Jesus." When the cause of Christ is bereft of spiritual giants we are all in a terrible state of affairs. If we were all as worldly as some brethren are the army of the Lord would soon perish from the earth. Amos 3:3 is a brilliant little verse that makes it crystal clear that unless we agree with our Maker we will walk alone down a very rocky, rugged road! One of the most misunderstood verses in the Bible is the famous one in Amos 4:12 . . .

"Prepare to meet thy God, O Israel."

That passage simply sets forth the solemn dictum that, due to their overt wickedness, Israel only had time to meet God in judgment because of sin grievously engaged in. They would not be able to escape punishment and bondage but would shortly reap as sown (Hosea 8:7). Words of an old gospel song are apropos on this striking issue:

"Too late, when death has barred the door,
Your wailings can be heard no more!
Rejected there, thy soul will be —
Shut out for all eternity."

Certainly one of the classic chapters in the Old Testament is the fifth stanza of Amos. In this part of the brilliant book we learn

of vain worship, pretended devotion, misplaced values and the scourge of materialistic pursuits. That which was offered as homage and devotion was called *noise* by Jehovah. The people had become so corrupt that they could not escape punishment for sins that separated them from their heavenly Father. A day of impending doom had come and Israel felt the retribution for iniquity, indifference and insincerity. Similar to the rich man of Luke 16 they had fared sumptuously for a long while but now a time of torment awaited them. Though Israel had been "at ease in Zion" the time of Jacob's trouble (Jer. 30:7) was just around the corner. Captivity on enemy soil would be their lot for many years due to a lack of spiritual perception that caused them to run roughshod over their fellows. Being insensitive to the need of others would result in years and tears of loneliness. Their actions, deeds and thoughts had alienated them from divine mandates and had dashed their vibrant hopes. What a tragedy it is when children of God squander blessed moments and opportunities. Austin Taylor wrote a grand hymn on the other side of the ledger:

"O blessed hope of life eternal
When my work on earth is done,
There will be no sin my soul to trouble,
When my work on earth is done.
My soul will reach its glad fruition
At home I'll live in peace forever
When my work on earth is done."

But, alas, Israel in the time of Amos, turned their back upon God, disregarded the needs of their neighbors and pursued a life of earthly pleasure. The measuring rod of heaven's will (Amos 7:7) was forsaken and the standard of the world was followed. Even the religious leaders disdained the messenger of Jehovah and urged the valiant Amos to leave their region and stop preaching to them. Many a great preacher has been run off by weak people through the years. We might ought to keep the preacher and get rid of the unspiritual complainers! Amos told Israel that they were like a basket of summer fruit. Yes, rotten and bad-smelling and thus, useless. Then the man of Tekoa added insult to injury by predicting a famine in the land. This famine would not be of bread and water but of the word of God (Amos 8:11-12). What a drought! It is back with us today. So many pulpits devoid of scriptural preaching. So many lives bereft of deep Biblical emphasis — this is our gravest problem in this decade. When we participate in this sad decline of the sacred text, taught and practiced, we are truly and absolutely spiritual criminals.

"Give me the Bible, lamp of life immortal
Hold up that splendor by the open grave
Show me the light from heaven's shining portal
Show me the glory gilding Jordan's wave."

If Amos were with us today would it be possible to find a place that would accept his urgent preaching? Would brethren invite him to go elsewhere with such stern teaching? Would that fearless prophet find much of the same message needed in our day? Have we really learned, with profit, what that courageous man of old boldly stated? Are we, too, at ease in Zion? Is our worship just merely noise? Is our day embroiled in another famine that plagues our land with an absence of the word of God? Are we on the brink of bondage and totally unprepared for what our indifference will bring inevitably to us? Amos did live 800 years before Christ but we surely need to listen to his sterling message *now*!

More Outstanding Verses

2:6 — Amos was a champion of the Poor. Samaria had become crossroads for wealthy merchant men — Either man was very rich or very poor!

2:12 — Don't Speak to Us, Prophets! 8:11-12

Read 3:1-3 — "Can 2 walk together except they be agreed?"

Read 3:13-15 — Materialism + Idolatry Go Together Acts 19; Colossians 3:5 Rich young ruler — "for he had great possessions"

Chapter 4 ("Ye were a brand plucked out of the burning" yet ye *did not return* to me! Jude 23)

God had sent *Famine, Drought, Mildew, Pestilence, Death* to Israel Yet: They did not return to Him! Therefore v. 12 (Revelation 9:20-22) (*Stench, Earthquake*)

5:15 "Hate the Evil; Love the Good"

Read 5:18-21 — Futility of Life When Man Opposes God!

6:1 — False Security. Notice verse 5 — *not* an argument against instrumental music in worship!

Chapter 8 A Basket of Summer Fruit. Israel Is Ripe For Judgment.

The End Has Come! Read 8:9-12! + 9:10

Chapter 9:13-15 Restoration (A final smiting of the Altars Jeroboam erected)

I Kings 13

See Acts 15

Conclusion:

A Faithful Remnant — Read 3:12

THE BOOK OF OBADIAH

I often refer to the contents and backgrounds of this book of the Bible as *the high price of a bowl of soup* because it tells of the overthrow of Esau's seed. Just as that ancient one sold out his bright future in exchange for carnal, physical pleasure so did his descendants in later years. And, in the era of the first century Esau's fellows were the Herods who opposed Christ and persecuted the Apostles. The lineage continued as unspiritual as their forefathers. In Ezekiel 35:5 we read of the perpetual hatred of the Edomites toward the children of Israel. Back in the wilderness wanderings of the seed of Abraham the inhabitants of Idumea had refused God's people access to their land. Also, according to Psalms 137 the Babylonians had Esau's posterity cheering them on as they plundered Jerusalem and ravaged the folk of Judah! No wonder God's wrath burned hot against those earthly people (Malachi 1:1-4). In Lamentations 4:21-22 Jehovah promised to uncover the sins of Edom.

By the time Obadiah depicts the scene involving the demise of Esau's seed those battle-scarred people had gained an awesome reputation for brilliant warfare. The natural rock-ribbed fortress of Mt. Seir had proved to be an impregnable defense and many an enemy had crawled back to lick his wounds when in battle with the Edomites. Such success had made these half-breed Jews cocky. Their pride was their downfall (Proverbs 16:18). Obadiah verse three, declares:

"The pride of thy heart hath deceived thee, O thou that dwellest in the clefts of the rocks."

God then promised, according to verse 4,

"Though thou mount on high as the eagle, and though thy nest be set among the stars, I will bring thee down from thence, saith Jehovah."

To illustrate the utter devastation of God's punishment upon Edom they are told that nothing shall be spared. Reminding them that thieves do not take everything and the reapers of fields and vineyards always leave a grape or a vegetable, the prophet then affirms that God will absolutely and thoroughly purge them! For the violence done to Jacob as well as mocking God's host when Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians came (II Chronicles 36) they would certainly reap the sad dividends of their cruelty.

In Isaiah 34:4-9 we find exacting and even piercing language concerning Heaven's wrath upon Edom:

"The sword of Jehovah is filled with blood . . . for Jehovah hath . . . a great slaughter in the land of Edom . . . For Jehovah hath a day of vengeance, a year of recompense for the cause of Zion."

Jeremiah 49:8 tells us that *the calamity of Esau* would come upon the arrogant, impenitent people who came out of his loins. Edom would become a curse and a waste! Remaining aloof when Judah needed help was parallel to the priest and the Levite of Luke 10 who "passed by on the other side" when their help was needed.

In Obadiah 15 we are reminded again of the *Day of Jehovah* — a prelude to the final Judgment — which many of the prophets emphasized (see Amos 5:18; Jeremiah 46:10). The awesome nature of this intensely woven little book in the Old Testament reminds me of what Jesus said in Mark 14:21:

"Better for that man had he never been born."

(see Obadiah, verse 16!)

Esau's shallow concepts were passed on to other generations. Truly, a little leaven affects a whole loaf. The high price of a bowl of soup eventuated in a carnal, worldly nation. May God help us to be wise in our decisions and points of emphasis!

THE BOOK OF JONAH

I. INTRODUCTION

Jonah is mentioned in II Kings 14:25 as prophet in Israel at the time of wicked King Jeroboam II.

"Jonah" means "Dove." The book is not like most of the Prophets' Books; it contains not the words of the prophet but his *actions*! "A Prophet at work."

Perhaps his association with Jeroboam II and with idolatry caused him to lack trust in Jehovah!

Some legends say he was the son of the Widow of Zarephath whom Elijah raised from dead; others that he was the husband of the Shunammite woman who extended hospitality to Elisha!

Even though some would down-grade the book of Jonah as "the biggest fish story ever told" notice this: —

- (1) Jonah was the only Old Testament Prophet Jesus directly compared Himself to!
- (2) He was from Galilee (Gath-hepher) — 3 miles from Nazareth.
- (3) Death, Burial, Resurrection of Jesus (Matthew 12:41-42; 16:4).

Two Mistakes of Pharisee — John 7

1. "No prophet out of Galilee"
2. Failed to recognize "one greater than Jonah."
- (4) Foreshadowed entrance of Gentiles into Covenant relationship with the Lord — notice Acts 11:18:

"Then to the Gentiles hath God granted repentance unto life."

(God was concerned with non-Israel in Old Testament days.)

IN FACT, THE GREATEST CASE OF CONVERSION ON FOREIGN SOIL IN OLD TESTAMENT TOOK PLACE AT NINEVEH! Just one lesson brought them to their knees, but Israel didn't hearken to thousands of lessons!

II. DISCUSSION (Time 740 B. C.)

- A. Nineveh: The Corinth of its Day! 600,000 population — "Their wickedness is come up before me" — 1.2

(Cain, Genesis 6, Sodom) 60 miles around (3 days journey through it); walls 60 feet high; 1,500 towers, 200 feet high — 3 chariots abreast could go around wall!

People of Assyria worshipped the fish God!

Twenty years later God used these Penitent People to Subdue His Impenitent Nation! But, 135 YEARS LATER NINEVEH FELL BECAUSE OF SIN!

(Book of Nahum) 3:1 — “Woe to the inhabitants of the bloody city.”

Zephaniah 2:15 — “These were the people who said, there is none besides us — they dwelt carelessly.”

- B. **Jonah:** His thoughts were not God’s thoughts at Joppa (Simon the Tanner — Acts 10).

Tarshish in Spain — noted for tremendous wealth and sin (run away from God — usually go to other extreme!)

(1) **Didn’t Want to go to Nineveh: Why?**

- a. Enemy — he hated them (Victory in Battle vs. Saving Souls).
- b. Might kill him.
- c. If preaching “took” God would bless.
- d. Strange place — rather preach at Home!

Patriotism Exceeded Spirituality.

JONAH WAS LIKE PHARISEES OF 1st CENTURY WHO COULDN’T REJOICE IN SALVATION OF OTHERS!

(2) **Four Great Lessons in Book:**

- a. Jonah’s Flight From Duty
- b. Preaching At Nineveh
- c. Jonah’s Anger
- d. God’s Mercy

One Key Word — REPENTANCE!!

REPENTANCE ISN’T JUST A ONE TIME STEP (Nahum)

C. **The Great Fish:**

God Prepared It — Jesus Calls It A Whale — Matthew 12.

In Mediterranean in recent years — 3 types: a. Spermacetic Whale, b. White Shark, c. Rorqual — from 25 to 75 feet long (Rimmer's Interview with Seaman in London)

III. POINTS TO STRESS:

- + God Means What He Says!
- + God Knows Where We Are!
- + God Cares For All Mankind!
- + God Is Affected By Our Actions!
- + God Uses Men and Nations!

An Object Lesson: How soon we forget!

(Tragedy of Nineveh's later fall — we must indoctrinate future generations!)

IV. CONCLUSION: Read 3:5-4:11

- A. The Power of Preaching God's Message
- B. The Power of Repentance
- C. God's Concern
- D. *The Lesson Of The Gourd* — Jonah concerned for it but not for souls.

LESSON FROM JONAH

- + Very Short Book of 4 Chapters and only 48 verses
- + However, Many Practical lessons
- + Time: 740 B. C.
 - Nineveh: Walls 60 feet high, 1,500 towers, 200 feet high (3 chariots abreast)
 - Assyria: Weak at this time
 - Later: Nahum
 - No parable or allegory but see Jeremiah 51:34

Book Was Read On Day Of Atonement

- + Jonah, The Reluctant Prophet! II Kings 14:25 (Jeroboam II)
 - "An ambassador is sent among the heathen" — Obadiah 1:1
 - "Wisdom cried aloud in her streets."
 - Proverbs 1:20

After his experience, Jonah preached as one raised from the dead.
God Later Used Penitent Assyria To Punish Impenitent Israel!

Jesus Wept Over Jerusalem: Jonah Over Nineveh — *But For Different Reasons!*

Jonah lived in Gath-Hepher — one hour from Nazareth!

A few miles north of Antioch of Syria are pillars Arabs erected to denote place Jonah was released by fish.

THE THINGS GOD PREPARED:

“a great wind” — “a great fish” — a gourd, — a worm, — vehement East Wind.

Beware of a Patriotism like Jonah's!

Sitting as a Vulture over Nineveh.

Have we ever failed to rejoice when men are saved?

QUESTIONS IN JONAH

- + What is Thine Occupation?
- + Why Hast Thou Done This?
- + Doest Thou Well To Be Angry?

Contrast Jeremiah 20:9 with Jonah 4:1

“Then I said — I will not make mention of him nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones and I could not stay.”

Joppa (Acts 10 & 11) — “Jonah was first apostle to Gentiles.”

Peter's Attitude Toward Gentiles

GENERAL POINTS

- (1) God's Knowledge Of All *Things* and Concern For All Men!
- (2) What Can Change God's Mind? 3:9-10
- (3) Man Is A Creature of Choice.
- (4) We Cannot Hide From God
- (5) Our Influence
- (6) Man Is Fickle
- (7) Power of Preaching & Repentance — “Follow Through”
- (8) Compassion

MAIN LESSONS

- (1) Jonah Paid the Fare (Romans 6:23) 1:3
- (2) "Salvation is of the Lord 2:10
- (3) "Preach What God Bids Thee" 3:2
- (4) "Thou Art A Gracious God" 4:2
- (5) Greater Concern for Gourd Than Souls!

Additional Points

In Harry Rimmer's book "Harmony of Science and Scripture", there is an actual example of a man from England who was swallowed by a whale and lived therein for 48 hours. When a group of fishermen killed the whale the man was taken out alive. Apart from the hair on his body coming off and his skin becoming browner and spotted, the man was all right. Mr. Rimmer interviewed him years later. *Also*, at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D. C., there is on exhibition the remains of a sperm whale that was captured off Florida in 1912. It measured 45 feet long, had a mouth 38 inches wide and weighed 30,000 pounds. At the time of capture it had a 1,500 pound black fish in its stomach. The information is on page 78 of "The Twelve Minor Prophets" by G. L. Robinson.

PORTRAIT OF THE PROPHETS

Often we leave the impression that the Prophet was austere, bold, scathing in rebuke, unbending and abrupt. As God's spokesman, however, he was also often very tender, compassionate and even sweet and gentle. Jeremiah's tears represented the genuine concern for the lost and the heart-broken attitude of the lonely servants who warned and begged the disobedient, rebellious people of their day. No prophet has a better blend of boldness and timidity, power and kindness than Micah. His lofty words on forgiveness, inner qualities of strength and buoyant future hope tug at the heartstrings of every Bible student. His prediction, in chapter four, of the kingdom of the Lord coupled with the beauty of expression in chapter 5 about the birthplace of our Savior in Bethlehem, will always rank exceedingly high on anyone's list of favorite Bible verses. Micah's three point summary in 6:8 of those ideal virtues that please our Creator challenge each one of us to nobler purpose, richer resolve and deeper motives. We owe a sincere debt of gratitude to those special servants of God — the Prophets — who give the Old Testament a unique touch of glory divine!

THE BOOK OF MICAH

Seven Chapters

Prophesied in Judah in 740-700

Remember that Israel was subdued by the Assyrians in 722 B. C. This forty years of Micah's prophesying was during a most significant era of time. Due to the stirring work of the prophets and the better rule of Judah's kings (in general) Judah existed as a kingdom until 586 B. C. when Babylon took them (completely) into captivity. Micah was a contemporary with Isaiah. His work was deemed even more important than it would otherwise be in that Micah taught and exhorted during the sinful degenerate reign of Ahaz, one of Judah's few evil kings. Idolatry was rampant in Judah at this time. An indifference towards divine matters was characteristic during the reign of Ahaz. So, in our common speech, Micah had his work cut out for him. Perhaps the best known and most often referred to texts in Micah center around chapter 5, verse two and Micah chapter six, verse eight.

Micah was from a little town in the western part of Judah called Moresheth. This area had previously been under the rule of Gath, one of the five great Philistine cities. During the reign of Uzziah some fifty years prior to Micah's time, it was brought into Judah's domain. Most writers agree that Micah follows Hosea in chronological order as a prophet. Following the evil rule of Ahaz there ensued in Judah a partial reformation under Hezekiah. No doubt the prophet Micah had something to do with this revival of spirituality. Some have thought that the latter portion of the book deals with the start of Manasseh's wicked reign. Chapter seven would coincide with such a theory as it tells of the corruption of God's people. Manasseh's 55 years over Judah was the period of idolatry and priestly impurities. One of the main rebukes in this book deals with the terrible influence of the leaders of the people of God who had embraced the sins of the day and thus led the common man astray. Micah hesitates not to speak against the capitol as well as those in the country regions about Jerusalem. Along with Amos, Micah condemned the rich for oppressing the poor and practicing cruelty to get the job done. Like Hosea, Micah became indignant at the disloyalty of Jehovah's bride — Israel. Similar to Malachi, Micah sternly denounced the empty formalism

of the priestly system and the “matter of fact,” “take it for granted” worship and ceremonial duties. In fact, most scholars agree that Micah was the most forceful and effective prophet in denouncing such practices which ate as a cankerworm into the life of Judah. Read Micah 6:1-8. In the midst of the sinfulness of the people and the impending doom, a bright promise of hope is pictured in Micah, chapter five. *One day the Messiah will come* — being born in *Bethlehem* — and all of Israel’s troubles will be over. The Lion of the tribe of Judah will bring peace and joy and love to the sin-cursed earth. “Micah emphasizes that Messiah is the hope of the world. In the shifting of foundations, the breaking up of the moral, religious and social orders, the hope of the world is the Christ whose kingdom of grace and redeeming power shall extend from pole to pole.”

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF MICAH

Let us first read the entire book: 7 chapters, 105 verses. This will give us an over-all view of the book of Micah. Sometimes, in reviewing a certain portion of Scripture we lose the general theme of a section in a minute, verse by verse study. A careful reading of Micah shows us that the greater matters dealt with are: Apostasy, Influence, Judgment, Doom, Restoration, Promise and Hope.

Chapter One

The evil of Samaria (capitol of Israel) and corruption of Jerusalem (Judah’s throne city) will cause the downfall of each kingdom. Idolatry and immorality and unconcern for Jehovah’s true worship form the basis for God’s rejection of His people. Mourning (baldness — Isaiah 22:12) would not save Israel and Judah from captivity. They had turned away from the Lord for too long a time. This is a picture of the wrath to come. Their strong cities would be brought to a heap of ruins — just as the effects of their debauched lives. Their riotous, rebellious ways finally caught up with them. Notice the unheeded warnings of Joshua 23:14-16 and 24:13-16.

Chapters Two and Three

The prophet, in vivid terms of certainty, condemns those who are evil doers. In chapter two he puts the spotlight on the greedy landowners who subdue the poor and run them from their property. Some have suggested that Micah was personally acquainted with such circumstances as he was a farmer and from a rural area in southwestern Judah. His language (inspired by God — II Peter

1:20-21) in this section would serve to substantiate such an idea. Toward the end of the chapter two he uses the figure of sheep, a fold, a shepherd. Very common in the Prophets.

Chapter three deals with the cruelty and shameful actions of the princes (leaders) of the land. Instead of leading correctly, they caused the sheep to go astray. When captivity comes, these evil despots cry for mercy even though they forget mercy in dealing with others. False prophets will see the fury of God's wrath because instead of helping the people they hypocritically deceived them. Verses 8-12 form the basis for one of the clearest passages in the prophets to explain the true situation concerning the decline of Israel and Judah. Micah wisely used Israel's imminent captivity as an object lesson to Judah. This section, depicting the sins of princes, prophets and priests, leaves this indelible impression: *No one was worthy of leadership but Jehovah*. Israel had foolishly forsaken Him as their king some 350 years before and their history thereafter was on the downgrade. Read I Samuel chapters 8 and 12.

Chapters Four and Five

After predicting the devastation of Jerusalem and the waning power of Judah in previous statements, Micah now portrays the greatest glory that will ever come to "the city of David" (II Samuel 5:7). Notice exactness of Micah 4:1 and Isaiah 2:2. Jerusalem will rise again; nearby, in Judea, in the small city of Bethlehem will Messiah be born. There will come a day when the idols of men and the warring disposition of the people of God will cease.

Chapters Six and Seven

The Lord's Controversy with His People. He asks: "Why have you forsaken me?" Was it because He hadn't done enough for them? Review of the love He had always extended toward them. They seemed to think (as do so many today) that mere outward entreaties of devotion would suffice. Jehovah rejected the cold, formal, precise offerings as coming from mechanical hearts — devoted to routine and not to sincere dependence on God. Verse 8 of chapter six points out the needful attributes of their lives. The futility of their offerings and the rejection of the same by the Father. Calamity would be visited upon them. They followed Omri and Ahab in wickedness (verse 16) and not the wise counsels of heaven!

Chapter seven is strong in denouncing the almost universal wickedness of man. Micah said the best man to be found was "like a brier . . ." and "a sharp thorn hedge." Men were so

untrustworthy that families couldn't even trust each other. Time was ripe for a reformation in Judah! Only God could deliver them from such turmoil. "And thanks be unto Jehovah. He shall deliver us," Micah exclaims. *Notice Ezekiel 36:21-24*. Enemies punished; Jerusalem restored; God glorified among His people and among the heathen — these are the themes of Micah.

In a practical way the book of Micah teaches us:

- (1) The need for humility.
- (2) The wages of Sin.
- (3) The over-ruling providence of God.
- (4) The Power in Repentance; the Purpose of Plain Preaching.
- (5) The Ultimate Victory of Truth and Right.

God's promise to cast their sins into the depth of the sea (7:19) is one of the richest promises of the Old Testament. Surely, there is no God like unto Him! May we, under the glorious sunlight of the Gospel age serve Jehovah with all our heart and soul!

THE MESSAGE OF NAHUM

One of the almost forgotten sections of the Bible is the small Old Testament book of Nahum. Several truly outstanding points grace its pages if we would but peruse the verses of the little book which gives us the sequel to *Jonah*. Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, had repented a century earlier under Jonah's reluctant preaching. God had spared the nation on that occasion but due to a hardened condition of sin "that bloody city" (3:1) would be severely chastened. Jehovah even stated that such wickedness caused the Assyrians to be scattered upon the mountains for "thy wound is grievous."

Some Bible students believe Capernaum received its name from "city of Nahum." The prophet's name means "comforter" but there is not much comfort in his message — especially for the rebellious city of Nineveh. Let us notice 5 outstanding points in this rich but overlooked section of the prophets.

(1) God Is A Jealous God

In the prologue to the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 Jehovah made it clear that He could have no rival for Israel's affection. Paul reminded the Corinthians of the exclusive claim God had upon the church (II Corinthians 11:2), Nahum stresses the same challenge to the people of his day — six centuries before Christ. And, even though the Creator is slow to anger He must be Lord of all or not at all! When we appear before the Judgment we will learn that "our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29).

(2) There Is A Limit To God's Patience

When our heart is like "an adamant stone" because we are *past feeling* due to a *seared conscience* our Father makes known that we are not even to be prayed for (Zechariah 7:12; Ephesians 4:19; I Timothy 4:2; Jeremiah 14:11). Nineveh, once delivered has now come to the heartless state of mocking God. Even though Jehovah has infinite compassion He also has comparable vengeance (Deuteronomy 32:35) upon the sacrilege and blasphemy of nations and individuals who are indifferent or arrogant in the face of clear warning.

(3) Sinners Cannot Withstand His Indignation

In 1:6 of this treatise we learn essentially the same message of the brilliantly worded stanza in Isaiah 10:3 . . .

"And what will ye do in the day of visitation, and in the desolation that shall come from far? To whom will ye flee for help and where will ye leave your glory?"

When evil men or nations profane "the holy name" (Ezekiel 36:20) there is nothing left but indignation and wrath (Romans 2) and *who shall be able to stand* (Revelation 6:17)? The people of Nahum's day learned *too late* the unwavering nature of the wages of sin (Romans 6:23). The sovereignty of God blends beautifully with personal purity.

(4) We Must Keep Our Promises To God

Nineveh, under the preaching of Jonah, had promised to leave iniquity and to serve God. But, this relationship needed to be maintained. It is not enough to once be faithful; this agreement must be sustained. The penitence of Assyria previously was all "a thing of the past" and the justice of God demanded present punishment. In Ecclesiastes 5:4 we learn that vows made to Jehovah must not be broken. This brings to mind a pertinent little poem . . .

"If you are told to do a thing
and mean to do it, really.
Never let it be by halves . . .
Do it fully, freely!"

Actually, that rhyme sums up the gist of Nahum as he warns the Israel of God not to follow the trail of tears Nineveh is walking on to her own doom.

(5) Every Generation Needs To Be Thoroughly Converted

This is the urgent reminder of Nahum. If there is a message of consolation in this unusual book it is the intriguing suggestion that Nineveh need never have fallen but for her own failure to indoctrinate the inhabitants of a city once cleansed by God in the precepts of heaven. It is so abundantly so today that "the church is only one generation from apostasy." Our failure to inculcate within our children the treasures of Christianity will lead ultimately to a departure from New Testament ideals. It is later than some think when we think rallies, entertainment and compromise will produce conviction, dedication and discernment in our youth.

As Nahum closes this grand study he reminds us all that Jehovah is sovereign ruler as well as our Deliverer in time of trouble. We can count on the benevolent hand of God in our greatest hour of distress. The one thing that wars against such rich provisions was the self-sufficiency of Nineveh reflected also in Jerusalem. In

a similar reminder to Laodicea our Lord told that cultured city of the first century that she was poor, miserable, wretched, blind and naked (Revelation 3:14-19). That pretty well sums up the emptiness and vanity of an existence that fails to give God first place. May we never forget the piercing language of Nahum 1:3 . . .

“Jehovah is slow to anger, and great in power, and will by no means clear the guilty.”

There is comfort in the sparkling treatise known as *Nahum* but sinners will have a difficult time finding it! Only the righteous notice “the beautiful feet” of those who bring glad tidings of peace (Nahum 1:15).

One of the most gracious reminders of the matchless love of God is found in the first chapter of Nahum, verse 7.

“Jehovah is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; and He knoweth them that take refuge in Him.”

In the language of Psalms 46, let us wisely make God *our* refuge and strength.

THE BOOK OF HABAKKUK

There is a little book in the Old Testament that is quite unique in pace, content, and richness. The powerful theme of *God's use of the nations* is the heartbeat of its pages. One of the great theses of the entire Bible is found among its verses:

"The Just Shall Live By Faith."

The powerful song, *The Lord Is In His Holy Temple*, is based on a graphic section within its hallowed words. The sadness of Babylonian Captivity is the setting and its writer had Jeremiah and Zephaniah as contemporaries. We speak, of course, of the dynamic but often overlooked, *HABAKKUK*. May we, together, peruse the pages of this valuable and exceedingly practical book of the prophets.

In Jeremiah 25:9 we learn that Nebuchadnezzar was "the servant of the Lord." In Daniel's masterful treatise we read of Jehovah ruling the kingdom of men. Habakkuk is that section of Holy Writ that poignantly illustrates those truths. God, the Maker of men can use His creation to glorify the heavenly purpose. Babylon was committed to evil — and would reap the just punishment for her sins — but in the interim the army of Chaldea would serve a noble purpose. God would use them to subdue His own wayward people and humble them for seven decades of bondage. A fine commentary upon this theme is found in Romans 9 when the sovereignty of Jehovah is discussed. The entire book of Habakkuk emphasizes that the Creator has oversight in the affairs of men.

The key to the anguished cry of Christ on Calvary is found in Habakkuk 1:13. Since God is "of purer eyes than to look upon sin" He had to momentarily look away from the One who "bore our sins in his own body upon the tree (I Peter 2:24). Jesus was not a sinner *but was made to be sin-offering for us all* (II Corinthians 5:21). Sin separates men from God (Isaiah 59:1-2) therefore Jesus cried:

"My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"

Taking our place, the Lord Jesus Christ felt the pangs of loneliness and sorrow we learn when we err. Truly, He gave Himself for our sins (I John 2:2) as the One who died for all (II Corinthians 5:14).

This wondrous little book of Habakkuk speaks of the virtue of plain preaching. We are urged to make it so clear that "he who runs may read it." In an age that boasts of telling it like it is we dare not muzzle the preacher or muffle the clarion call of the message of the gospel of grace (Acts 20:24). When we do we truly "sin against our own soul" (Habakkuk 2:10).

The powerful announcement that informs us of a divine mandate — the just by his faith shall live — makes Habakkuk memorable to the student of the New Testament. In Romans 1:17 and Hebrews 10:38-39 we see the application of this truism. Actually, that great verse simply states a fact: *Children of God are sustained by their constant fidelity to the Creator*. But, we must "continue steadfastly" (Acts 2:42) and "always abound in the work of the Lord" (I Corinthians 15:58) if we would be considered a faithful participant in the system of faith (Romans 3:27; Galatians 6:2-9).

The most brilliant section of Habakkuk is the last chapter that forms a beautiful acrostic poem in the Hebrew text. Many scholars refer to this part of the book as the purest language of the Old Testament. The mercy and justice of Jehovah find perfect blending therein.

But, the practical and dramatic urgency of Habakkuk's contribution to the Bible finds its climatic scene in chapter 2:14-20. The battle lines are drawn tightly. Will Judah continue to seek aid from idols and pagan deities or will they learn once and forevermore to seek the Almighty? As long as the people sought counsel and military strength from the nations and spiritual comfort from dumb idols fashioned by their own hands, they would be in bondage to sin. The prophet taunts them by inquiring as to the depth of understanding they could ever receive from images of gold or wood or stone. He tells them bluntly that they ought to hush and let God talk to them through His word instead of their bowing down and crying out to representations of man's wicked imagination.

Elijah fought the very same battle on Mount Carmel and handled the prophets of Baal in similar fashion. He even suggested to the devotees of idolatry that their god was asleep or off on a journey. Centuries later Habakkuk echoed the sentiments of the vanity of a life bereft of Jehovah's guidance. In I John 5:21 Christians are taught to *keep themselves from idols*. Covetousness which is idolatry (Colossians 3:5), is the shrine of materialism that beckons us today. Such emptiness, as the worship of possessions, keeps us from taking the Gospel to the whole world. Altars in the groves may have been the problem in Habakkuk's day but Cadillacs in

the garage can be just as deadly in our own era. The poet perceptively stated:

"The dearest idol I have known
Whatever that idol be
Help me to tear it from Thy throne
And worship only Thee."

Some brethren are obsessed with physical fitness, others with electronic gadgetry or political conservatism and racial problems. But, in the hour of calamity we shall not be delivered by our gym instructor, a psychiatrist, the science professor, or a rabid politician. Our place in the social register and our balance at the bank will pale into *nothingness* (That's about what I have in the bank anyway) when we stand before the Judge of all the earth. May we be wise enough not to wait until it is too late to heed the admonition:

"The Lord is in his holy temple — let all the earth keep silence before him!"

Habakkuk's urgent message is fresh and meaningful for our lives today.

Old Testament: "Not survival of fittest but suffering of the best."

5 Woes In The Book of Habakkuk **Chapter 2:6-20**

W O E:

1. To The Plunderer
2. To Those Who Think Only of Personal Gain
3. To The Oppressor
4. To The Tyrant
5. To The Idolater

THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH

There are so many glittering treasures in the small, but exceptional, Old Testament book of *Zephaniah*. The name of the prophet meant "Jehovah shall protect" or "hidden by the Lord." Like Jeremiah this unsung spokesman was a contemporary of Josiah, the valiant King of Judah (2 Kings 23). Evidently all three of these godly men were quite young and tremendously loyal to the cause of heaven. The people with whom they labored were on the verge of Babylonian bondage because their sinfulness had gone beyond the longsuffering of God (Jeremiah 7:23-28). Indeed, the Jews (2 Kings 16:6) "rose up early to corrupt all their doings" (Zephaniah 3:7). Such a head start on sin landed them in the snare of Nebuchadnezzar for seven decades.

Several scholars agree that "Zephaniah was the most uncompromising of all the prophets" and *his message simple and austere*. Dummelow captures the pace of the young preacher in these words:

"Youthful courage and undaunted zeal for righteousness ring through his brief prophecy."

Others, like Laetsch and Ellison, admit that "the death knell of irrevocable doom pulsates through all his utterances." Zephaniah was a very serious young man!

One runs the gamut of emotions — from fierce denunciation of evil to passages of exquisite beauty and tenderness in this seldom studied section of Holy Scripture. There are abundant principles *written beforehand for our learning* (Romans 15:4) in the book of Zephaniah. Let us give careful attention now to the three chapters and 53 verses that comprise this tiny but potent book.

Did you know that the most often printed hymn was based upon Zephaniah's reference to *The Day of The Lord*? This spiritual song of the thirteenth century — "O Day of Wrath, O Day of Mourning" — captured the graphic warning of Zephaniah 1:15:

A Day of:

WRATH, Trouble — Distress — Waste — Desolation —
DARKNESS — GLOOM — CLOUDS — Thick Darkness — The
Trumpet (Judgment) and Alarm!

Amos, Obadiah and Joel also refer to The Day of The Lord. It is possible that Revelation 1:10 alludes to the same occasion instead of the first day of the week!

To avoid such calamity Zephaniah mentions in 3:11-13 a golden moment of repentance, reformation, and restitution in the hallowed presence of the Creator. Because of the transformation such attitudes provide, the people of God would no longer be haughty and their trust in the Maker would deepen. A faithful remnant would "feed and lie down and none would make them afraid." The tranquil joy and peaceful satisfaction of godliness would be Judah's portion once more! This exact premise is captured for us today by E. V. Kelly in a gospel song:

"From the mire of sin's dark way
Cleanse my soul of every stain
Fold me Jesus now I pray
Beneath the shadow of Thy wing."

Sadly, however, the longsuffering of God produced the idea in weak hearts that heaven was unconcerned with the wickedness of sinful men. The tragic mixture of Assyrian star worship, Philistine superstition and silly paganism drove the people far afield from the Lord. They had been weighed in the balance and been far short of God's standard! *No star of hope is to be seen — only clouds and thick darkness from which flash the lightning bolts of the Lord's fierce wrath* is a statement from Laetsch that cogently sums up the problem of Zephaniah's audience.

One of the most interesting points of background is the searching Zephaniah, as artists have captured the scene, looking diligently for one righteous man even as Jeremiah 5:1 states:

"If ye can find a man, if there be any that executeth judgment, that seeketh the truth; and I will pardon it."

On the brink of captivity Zephaniah powerfully told the people that silver and gold could never deliver them. Whether he referred to their idols made of precious metal or the covetousness of wayward hearts the lesson is the same. Lack of trust in God leads to one form or another of false worship!

T. O. Chisolm furnishes devotees of Jehovah with the proper emphasis:

"Just to know that He is with me,
Just to have His promise true;
That He never will forsake me,
All my earthly journey through."

This well-paced book of prophecy reveals the oracle of the Ruler of the Universe in a cadence of shocking abruptness and impartial judgment. Revealed within this brief treatise is the absolute overthrow of Nineveh and the similar decline of Jerusalem for

horrendous crimes and flippant sins. Zephaniah is a summons to repentance and a challenge to awaken from spiritual stupor in view of the great day of The Lord that soon will press down upon them. Where sin abounds God will manifest Himself in retribution. As Paul would later state — God's goodness should lead them to repentance — but Zephaniah's "ardent vehemence of moral passion" contributed to a humbled remnant also! As Jack P. Lewis summarized in his excellent book on The Minor Prophets:

"The concept of correction also plays a vital role in the book of Jeremiah."

Sadly, Zephaniah's fellows made four drastic mistakes according to chapter 3:

- (1) They obeyed not.
- (2) They received not correction.
- (3) They trusted not in the Lord.
- (4) They drew not near to their God!

As 3:4 vividly summarizes: *They Have Done Violence To The Law.*

"O Day of wrath, O Day of Mourning
See fulfilled the prophet's warning
Heaven and earth in ashes burning!"

A few may escape this hour of reckoning but doom awaits the masses is Zephaniah's wailing cry. The heavenly Father desires to be the real King of Judah and when His subjects obey sincerely *a pure language* will be given them with which to praise their Maker (3:9-15). E. J. Young brilliantly captures this context in Zephaniah:

"The sovereign disposition of the destinies of Nations lies in the hands of the Lord and He will surely punish those who have ill-treated His chosen people."

It would be difficult to disagree with Young's three point outline of the book of Zephaniah:

- (a) The Day of The Lord
- (b) Rebuke of the Heathen
- (c) Jerusalem's Sin and Future Hope.

In the restoration of the Jews as poignantly told by Nehemiah, Ezra, Haggai, and Malachi we see the fruition of these hopes. Not one thing Jehovah promised failed to come to pass. And, ultimately, the Messiah came, *in due time* (Romans 5:6) to bless all nations!

One of Zephaniah's themes reiterated by Christ in Luke 12 is the divine maxim:

"Greater blessings mean greater responsibility."

There is a passage in Psalms 17:8 that beautifully sums up the meaning in the *Name* of Zephaniah and also the richness of the contents of his message:

"Keep me as the apple of the eye; Hide me under the shadow of thy wings."

Men like Zephaniah and messages like the burden of his courageous heart have enriched the history of the world!

The book of Zephaniah is a most unusual and interesting section of the Old Testament. The most vibrant language in the Bible concerning God's judgment upon the nations is found in its opening chapter. It will truly be a day of gloom, sorrow and darkness when evil powers come to their moment of accounting unto the Maker. Zephaniah was a contemporary of Jeremiah and Habakkuk. The background to their efforts was the seventy years of Babylonian Captivity for Judah. We learn in the second and third stanzas of Zephaniah exactly what caused the decline of Judah that resulted in bondage. No statement more graphically enunciates their sad demise than Zephaniah 3:7 . . .

"They rose up early to corrupt all their doings."

Getting a head-start on sin made them vulnerable to the wrath of Jehovah and the days of sorrow that iniquity always brings. Sowing to the wind the Jews had reaped the whirlwind as Hosea 8:7 clearly stated earlier. Finding too late that idols of silver and gold could not deliver them in moments of trial and trouble the seed of Abraham would awaken in a land not their own for seven decades of loneliness (Zeph. 1:18). Building their hopes on the vain trappings of heathen nations and bowing to peer pressure fostered by secular society had brought nothing but shame into their earthly endeavors. In two verses, 2:3 and 3:2 of Zephaniah, we have a vivid contrast that spells the difference in success and failure. The same principles contained therein apply in our day. Notice the contrast between evil men and righteous conduct:

Ungodly men obeyed not, received not correction and trusted not in the Lord. Conversely, to be spiritually minded demands that we seek the will of God, strive for meekness and follow the path of righteousness. The basic key to success in matters that are divine in nature is meekness which is not weakness. This term literally means to boldly submit our will to the Creator. A disobedient nation (Jer. 7:28) found the sad dividends of its behavior in the throes of bondage in a pagan land. There is a stanza in

a gospel song that reminds us of the sorrow and grief Judah must have felt in Zephaniah's day:

"The depths of my sad heart are troubled
Torrents of sin and of anguish
Sweep over my sinking soul
And I perish, I perish dear Master
O hasten and take control."

In every age, when people turn their back upon God and find themselves inclined toward wickedness, there will be days of darkness and chaos. We cannot walk in the shadows of spiritual infamy and expect the sunlight of purity to bless our souls.

"O heart bowed down with sorrow
O eyes that long for sight
There is gladness in believing
In Jesus there is light."

A great commentary upon these passages in Zephaniah is a brilliant passage in the first chapter of Deuteronomy that carefully chronicles the source of sorrow and tears. History merely repeated itself from Egyptian bondage to Babylonian captivity. Israel simply did not learn from the mistakes of the past. In the Deuteronomy reference we can see the tragedy of rebelling at the commandments of the Creator, complaining at heaven's provisions and discouraging one's fellows with words of negative import. Improper comparisons produced the sin of unbelief while Joshua and Caleb tried to impress upon the followers of Jehovah that their Maker would fight for them (Exodus 14:14).

In the heart of the New Testament we learn that murmuring against the Lord will result in nothing worthwhile. Rather, we should bow in humble submission to the Savior who provides all our needs (Philippians 2:11-14 and 4:19).

People have not changed much since Zephaniah's day and the results of their poor decisions ring out in our lives now. Lest we come to a time of bondage and separation from God we must come meekly and sincerely before the throne of mercy (Hebrews 4:16) as we strive to obey the precepts of glory (James 1:22). No passage could possibly capture the proper spirit better than Psalms 119:78-80:

"Let the proud be ashamed for they dwelt perversely with me without a cause: but I will meditate in they precepts. Let those that fear thee turn unto me and those that have known thy testimonies. Let my heart be sound in thy statutes, that I be not ashamed."

When the final Judgment Day peals forth may it not be a time of darkness or doom for us but, rather, a glorious comfort for the saints of God as we read in II Thessalonians 1:10!

"Beyond the sunset's purple rim
Beyond the twilight deep and dim
Where clouds and darkness never come
My soul shall find its heavenly home."

THE BOOK OF HAGGAI

The rebuilding of the Temple, after Babylonian Captivity, is the urgent theme of the Book of Haggai. In order to restore the dimension of worship and devotion unto Jehovah so as to enrich God's chosen people would be the thrust of Haggai's work. The task was not easy due to the materialism that had swept over Abraham's seed. For sixteen years the foundation of the Temple has laid barren while the Jews were busy finishing their own luxuriously styled houses! Promises made during 70 years of bondage had been forgotten or easily broken by an ungrateful generation. The very wood they needed for the Temple (II Kings 25:9) they were using for their own dwellings. In just a few short weeks Haggai was able to get more done than had been accomplished in over 15 years of slothfulness and selfishness. From the very day the Jews made up their minds to serve God faithfully — He blessed them! Ezra, chapters 1-6 form good parallel study with the short but powerful book of Haggai. Just two chapters and 38 verses encompass the dramatic book we now study. Haggai's name literally means "the happy one." Someone has well said that in Haggai, "God, not His prophet, dominates the page." Haggai was tremendously successful, however, because he lived to see the fruit of his labors. He was powerful though terse, crude and direct. Since he got the job done *his aim redeemed his style!*

In Jeremiah 7, prior to Captivity, Judah put too much emphasis upon the Temple. But the people of Haggai's day did not put enough stress therein. Of course, in New Testament days Stephen plainly stated:

"God does not dwell in temples made with hands" . . .

Haggai was primarily interested in hearts with proper devotion — yes, far more than bricks and mortar. He dealt with laziness, lukewarmness, self-centered thinking which sins nullified Jewish effectiveness as strongly as idolatry, immorality and social injustice!

Working during the Persian rule in 520 B.C., Haggai countered the defeatism and indifference of the people whose zeal had died. But he was able to build a fire in the hearts of those who had returned from Captivity to restore their former place of prestige with God. It was never easy for the dedicated servant of Jehovah

but with steadfast loyalty he persevered. When the Jews said, by way of excuse, "it is a time of poverty" Haggai replied:

"Yet, you can finish your own homes."

Truly, it is always a matter of where our heart is (Matthew 6:21) as we either seek first God's will (Matthew 6:33) or our own selfish interests. They were busily engaged in taking God out of their budget of time. In just 24 days of Haggai's relentless preaching they had done more than in many previous years. In 4 years they had finished the Temple (Ezra 6:15).

One of the major illustrations the prophet uses — inspired of God (II Peter 1:21) — is the fact that disease can be passed on to others but good health cannot be imparted. His point is evident: Judah's laziness was being picked up by others and the whole nation was infected. Truly, a little leaven affects the whole lump! Until Haggai's influence was felt and Judah repented they were referred to by God as *This* People but when they had changed their ways God called them *My* People!

Why had they waited 16 years to keep their promises to the Lord?

- (1) It is easier to *promise* than to *obey*!
- (2) Materialism, Rather Than Spirituality Dominated.
- (3) Defeatism (We can't make the Temple as pretty as Solomon's anyway!)
- (4) Procrastination — The Thief of Time! They said:

"The time is not now."

What was the tragic result of these matters? Haggai 1:6 graphically tells us the story . . .

"Ye have sown much, and bring in little, ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink, ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages puts it into a bag full of holes."

In other words, without God man labors in vain! But, when they *considered their ways* and turned to Heaven's will they were blessed. They learned that God's presence was incentive for toil and not an excuse for idleness. A great lesson was learned by all:

Void of God's blessings how empty life is!

If we learn nothing else from Haggai we are reminded once again of the purpose and power of plain preaching, necessary rebuke and a closer walk with God.

Haggai tried his best to get Judah to keep promises made to God but it was a struggle indeed. Selfishness and indifference caused the seed of Abraham to put their own comfort and social desires in front of Jehovah's commands. They even used the wood that was needed to refurbish the Temple for their own luxuriant homes. But, in the midst of temporal splendor the prophet of God reminded them that they were similar to men who earned wages but put them into a *bag full of holes!*

"There shall be showers of blessing
If we but trust and obey
There shall be seasons refreshing,
When we let Him have His way."

Sadly, however, Israel was intent upon their own way (Judges 17:6) and just would not yield to their Creator and the sublime will of heaven. Consequently, all their efforts ultimately were in vain because their hearts was far from humility, devotion and deity. C. Elliott appropriately wrote on this subject:

"Renew my will from day to day;
Blend it with Thine, and take away
All that now makes it hard to say,
Thy will be done!"

As a lad I once ran to the grocers two blocks away to purchase seven pennies worth of candy. That would purchase lots of licorice, jelly beans and lemon drops in those days. After filling a little brown sack with delicious morsels I searched in vain for all that money that had been saved for weeks. Tragedy had struck! I found only a big hole in my trousers because all the money was gone. As sad as those moments were, Haggai dealt with deeper sorrow when God's people wasted their golden moments and realized they had nothing to show for sixteen years of unspiritual behavior. Are there parallels today? Do we still observe bags full of holes in the conduct of those who claim to be servants of the Lord? We should be loyal and steadfast but are we always dependable?

"We have an anchor that keeps the soul
Steadfast and sure while the billows roll,
Fastened to the Rock which cannot move,
Grounded firm and deep in the Savior's love."

Bags Full Of Holes Today

1. Superficial Responses
2. Social Club Religion
3. Preachers Who Seldom Study

4. Elders Who Fail To Watch For Souls
5. Parents Who Stress Material Values
6. Folk Who Postpone Obedience
7. Brethren Who Drift Away From God

When people are encouraged by overly-persuasive pulpитеers to respond to shallow overtures of church-house religion the work of the Lord gains no lasting benefit. Just to "come forward" and sign a pre-printed card will never replace a lifetime commitment to loyal devotion. As Joel stated in the long ago, so we observe today, that men need to "rend their hearts and not their garments". More and more we are seeing pseudo-religion wrapped around a gymnasium, "a church staff" and social pyramids of dynamic dimensions that rival big business in techniques but show very little semblance of New Testament Christianity. If there ever was a bag full of holes it is reflected in the slick Madison Avenue production of syndicated religion. How precious is the pristine beauty of Bible preaching when contrasted with cathedral stage-shows that smack of Hollywood and sophistry borrowed from sectarians who never say anything substantial! Preachers who seldom study the Bible occupy those pulpits because *their parishoners* come seeking philosophy, fair speech and social graces rather than the old Jerusalem gospel.

Elders who forget that they are God's shepherds, watching for the souls of brethren (Hebrews 13:17) help to widen the hole in a useless bag. Some leaders look upon their role as a board member in a large corporation instead of an overseer in the house of God (I Peter 5:1-4). Spiritual giants of yesterday, who gently, but firmly, led the church to higher spiritual ground by sincere integrity (Psalms 78:72) are sorely needed in our midst today!

Parents who emphasize better cars, bigger houses, finer clothes and richer monetary gains eventually put all of their foolish concepts into a bag full of holes for their children (I Timothy 6:17). E. E. Hewitt wrote:

"There is gladness in my soul today
And hope and praise and love
For blessings which He gives me now,
For Joys Laid Up Above!"

Millions who postpone obedience to the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20:24) will realize, throughout eternity, the folly of such delay. Why would anyone knowing the truth purposely fail to respond to the love of the Savior? Why spend one day in the

service of Satan once we are apprised of heaven's provisions for our redemption?

However, one group of people puzzles me even more. We speak of those who once obeyed the fundamental commands of righteousness and then returned to the beggarly elements of the world (II Peter 2:21). If there is one bag full of larger holes than any other it would be the one apostates carry with them. Lost are they, though once saved (II Cor. 12:21; 13:5), and with no excuse, no reason, no hope, as long as they remain in such sad condition. Let us love their souls enough to diligently pursue their restoration to a fruitful life before God! An old gospel song entreats:

"I have wasted many precious years,
I now repent with bitter tears:
Lord, I'm coming home."

ZECHARIAH

THE PRIESTLY PROPHET

One of the very rare jewels in the radiant splendor of Holy Scripture is the rich lore of Messianic reference in the almost forgotten book of Zechariah. The stately phrases and captivating vocabulary blend beautifully with the anticipated arrival of the King of Glory so artfully projected on the pages of the next to last Old Testament section. Not even, Isaiah, proportionately, has so much to say concerning the One who would be Jehovah's fellow and "the great Shepherd of the sheep" (Zechariah 13:7; Mark 14:27; I Peter 2:25; Hebrews 13:20). The heart and core of the prophet's work centered around the coming of the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6; Zechariah 6:13; Colossians 1:20).

Zechariah 13:7

Awake, O Sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow saith Jehovah of hosts: smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered; and I will turn my hand upon the little ones.

The imagery of Zechariah is matched only in Ezekiel and Revelation and unfolds its brilliance to the careful student of the sacred text in a manner beyond fascination and awe that is best described as a deep longing to dig deeper and deeper into the treasures of divine revelation. Zechariah is the type of literature that draws its reader back again to the graphic material that graces its pages. Anyone who wants to love Jesus more will find spiritual food in abundance in Zechariah.

There are several night-visions and attendant excursions into the mind of Deity that enhance the vibrant hues of this book. We would sum up the contents of the first eight chapters with the following points:

- (A) Jehovah Rules — Not Only Israel — But the Kingdom of Men (Daniel 4:25).
- (B) Only A Remnant Remains Faithful (Ezekiel 36:21-24).
- (C) Men Will Reap What They Sow In God's Good Time (Hosea 8:7).
- (D) For the Righteous Even Calamity Will Become Blessing

- (E) Earthly Powers Rise And Fall; God's Will Stands Forever (Romans 3:4).
- (F) If We Become Worldly. We Shall Be Consumed With the World (Revelation 18).
- (G) A Spirit of Rebellion Prohibits A Life Blessed By God (Jeremiah 6:28-30)
- (H) *The Coming Of Christ Towers Above All Earthly Cares and Woes* (I Corinthians 15:54-57)

Zechariah emphasized the exuberant hope of redemption, deliverance and glory his exiled contemporaries had allowed to glow in their bosoms. He also rebuked them, as did Haggai, for allowing selfish, mundane considerations to deter them from keeping faith with the Lord in regard to promises made down in Babylon. Once released from the dungeon of despair the Jews had not kept their part of the bargain. Jehovah restored them to their homeland but their hearts had not been vitally changed.

One of the basic problems in their budget of time and energy was the classic disdain for "small things" (Zechariah 4:10; Ezra 3:12-13; Haggai 2:3). Because they could not immediately build a temple to exceed the sentimental glory they attached to the first one — destroyed by Babylon — they just quit altogether. They had to learn that *spiritual* glory emanated from the Spirit of God and not by their own might or power (4:6). The real glory of that second edifice would be the Lord *who suddenly came to his temple* (Malachi 3:1).

Contrary to earthly logic and royal expectations the Messiah would not come in grandeur and pomp nor would he be treated like an earthly potentate. Riding upon a small beast — as humble slaves were forced to do — instead of being astride a prancing horse — reserved for Rulers — Zechariah predicts history before it happened (Mark 11). Jesus of Nazareth, born of a virgin, from a non-priestly tribe, yes, as a *root out of dry ground* (Isaiah 53; Hebrews 7:14) shot forth from an ignoble beginning to sprout into the greatest One who ever lived! *Indeed, He is the Branch!*

From His wounded side poured forth the fountain for cleansing and for sin (Zechariah 13:1; John 19:34). Jewish days of fasting would become moments of spiritual feasting when, last of all, God sent His Son (Matthew 21:37) as the one, last sacrifice for sin (Hebrews 9:28; 10:12). The rejected Shepherd would become the Messianic King in the most dazzling paradox the world would ever see.

Because of this hope men would longingly latch on to those who belonged to heavenly matters and cry:

"We will go with you for we have heard that the Lord is on your side" (Zechariah 8:23).

God's protecting care and the unifying nature of His peace (Beauty and Bands of chapter 11) formed an unbeatable tandem. The ache of bondage was now translated into the longing for redemption.

Zechariah formed the bridge over which they marched into promised land!

JEHOVAH'S FELLOW

One of the richest passages in Zechariah has to do with "Jehovah's fellow" — the Shepherd smitten for the sheep (Zechariah 13:7; Mark 14:27). This one prophetic statement ruins the Watchtower Society and its perverted view of Jesus. The One who shed His blood as "a fountain for cleansing and for sin" (Zechariah 13:1; John 19:34) is *Fellow - Jehovah* (Colossians 2:9; John 14:9; Isaiah 44:6; Revelation 1:17).

There is no finer Old Testament reference to the Diety of Christ.

But Zechariah is resplendent throughout in its Messianic overtones. The vibrant, rippling language of this priestly prophet never ceases to enthrall the sincere Bible student. The adamant hearts of many of his associates (7:11-13) only caused a deeper commitment to God's

Zechariah 7:11

But they refused to hearken, and pulled away the shoulder, and stopped their ears, that they might not hear. 12 — Yea, they made their hearts as an adamant stone, lest they should hear the law, and the words which Jehovah of hosts had sent by his Spirit by the former prophets: therefore there came great wrath from Jehovah of hosts. 13 — And it is come to pass that, as he cried, and they would not hear, so they shall cry, and I will not hear, said Jehovah of hosts;

way in his prophetic work. There are many touching verses in Zechariah that mirror the agony and loneliness of the Savior in the scenes that surrounded Calvary. The thirty pieces of silver Judah received (11:12-13; Matthew 27:1-5) the wounds of Jesus (12:10; Psalms 22:16) and the purchase of the potter's field (Jeremiah 32; Matthew 27:9) all weave the fabric that majestically portrayed the suffering of our Redeemer!

The Persian rulers who dominated the political scene in Zechariah's day sent out "carpet-baggers" to spy on the vanquished

hosts of Judah. These governmental agents were known as "The Kings Eyes and Ears" (Israel and The Nations, by F. F. Bruce, page 102). But, Zechariah worked for the One whose eyes "are in every place, beholding the evil and the good" (Proverbs 15:3; Zechariah 3:9; 4:10; 9:1).

One of the grandest themes of this great book is the evangelistic thrust it pursues. The scope of Zechariah's view is worldwide, and not selfishly reserved for Jewry (2:11; 6:15; 14:16). In fact, a fascinating statement in chapter eight speaks of men of every nation being drawn to the God of Heaven through the dispersion of Abraham's seed (8:23). The major purpose of the book of Zechariah seems to be *Holiness Unto the Lord* (14:20) as the people are constantly reminded by Jehovah:

"Return Unto Me and I Will Return Unto You."

The urgency of rebuilding the Temple was borne out in their deep need of spiritual refinement as the dimension of worship, loyalty and dedication was added to their impoverished lives. Described as "the apple of His eyes" Judah had nevertheless disgraced the high and holy calling of godliness. The people had learned that Jehovah is a jealous God who demanded full allegiance to divine mandates (1:14; 2:8). Returning from seventy years of bondage, they were nonetheless promised this glorious blessing — if they steadfastly remained pure:

"I will strengthen them in the Lord; and they shall walk up and down in his name, saith the Lord" (10:12).

Critics of the Bible base one of their strongest complaints against the Book of Books upon Matthew's reference to the purchase of the potter's field with the 30 pieces of silver to *Jeremiah* instead of *Zechariah* (Matthew 27:9-10). There are several rebuttal arguments by faithful Christians. Here are several points to consider:

- (1) Some simply refer to the matter as a copyist's mistake saying that oldest manuscripts do not use either prophet's name merely stating: "the prophet said."
- (2) Others strongly contend that Zechariah wrote only chapters 1-8 of the book bearing his name and that Jeremiah is the penman of 9-14 from which the statement is quoted.
- (3) Many prefer the very logical view that since *Jeremiah* was listed first in the Hebrew Old

Testament as representative of all the prophets *Matthew* simply calls his name when referring to the lesser known prophet Zechariah.

- (4) There is, however, great merit in the view that we have a composite prophecy — Jeremiah was told *to purchase* a field (Jeremiah 32) and the *details* of the transaction are found in Zechariah 11. At any rate this is an extremely interesting “puzzle.” Praise God for the challenge of Bible Study!

The Savior, wounded in the house of friends, (13:6) would shed precious blood in redemption’s sweet song. This would more than compensate for the mourning in the plains of Megiddo (12:12) when Josiah was slain by Satan’s servants. The short-lived revival begun by that good King would become an eternal restoration consummated by the glory of the Messiah. The cry of “Hosanna” — save us we pray — would one day be a genuine tribute to the fulfillment of that hope every prophet of God longed to see. Truly, Zechariah did his part well in the mural the prophets painted with graphic words and golden hues.

Jehovah would be a wall of fire about them and the glory within them until the Prince of Peace came as the fruition of Heaven’s plan and the eloquent work of the prophets. What a debt we owe to such men of God!

Zechariah 13

In the day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for uncleanness.

THE BOOK OF MALACHI

One of the most unusual sections of the Bible is the last book in the Old Testament. Malachi, Jehovah's servant, records some powerful points for our spiritual consideration. He deals with people who were tired of serving their maker and offered to Him polluted, crippled sacrifices no earthly ruler would accept. The folk of that era evidently forgot God's *book of remembrance* as they were even guilty of robbing the very One who gave them life and breath and all things! Many of the men were putting away the wives of their youth and taking foreign mates that were like "the outlandish ones" Solomon married (Nehemiah 13:26). They profaned the name of Jehovah by disdaining the Table of the Lord and by becoming weary of following the precepts of heaven! They were rebuked for not glorifying God because their heart was not in their worship (Amos 5:21-23). Unlike the Levites of earlier days who had "a covenant of life

Malachi 1:

11 For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name *shall be* great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense *shall be* offered unto my name, and a pure offering: for my name *shall be* great among the Gentiles, saith Jehovah of hosts. 12 But ye profane it, in that ye say, The table of Jehovah is polluted, and the fruit thereof, even its food, is contemptible. 13 Ye say also, Behold, what a weariness is it! and ye have snuffed at it, saith Jehovah of hosts; and ye have brought that which was taken by violence, and the lame, and the sick; thus ye bring the offering: should I accept this at your hand? saith Jehovah. 14 But cursed be the deceiver, who hath in this flock a male, and voweth, and sacrificeth unto the Lord a blemished thing; for I am a great King, saith Jehovah of hosts, and my name is terrible among the Gentiles.

and peace," Malachi's contemporaries did not *stand in awe* of God's name. They therefore, caused many to stumble by such example and faulty instruction. When men profaned the sanctuary of the Lord (2:11) no blessing from heaven could be expected. Such faithless abomination would render unto them the wages of inevitable doom.

The tears that covered the altar of God were representative of the sorrow of the world that produces death and not godly sorrow that brings genuine repentance (II Corinthians 7:10). They

were great actors but poor servants of Jehovah! The One who introduced the sanctity of marriage was deeply grieved over the rising divorce problem in Israel. He still hates "putting away" when He has "joined together" (Matthew 19:1-9). How up to date is Malachi!

Malachi 2:15

Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth. 16 For I hate putting away, saith Jehovah, the God of Israel, and him that covereth his garment with violence, saith Jehovah of hosts: therefore take heed to your spirit, that ye deal not treacherously.

In spite of being reminded that our Creator has a *book of remembrance* the people were still guilty of sorcery, adultery, swearing, oppression, unconcern for the needy and a lack of reverence toward God! In both a warning and a promise of blessing Malachi is privileged to point toward a brighter day when the Messiah would come. He would be preceded by a messenger or forerunner who would come "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17). As Isaiah 40 previously predicted this one would remove every barrier and suddenly — Christ would come to His Temple! John the Immerser, minutely fulfilled this prophecy.

Put Me To The Test, God affirmed

Malachi 3:

6 For I, Jehovah, change not; therefore ye, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed. 7 From the days of your fathers ye have turned aside from mine ordinances, and have not kept them. Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith Jehovah of hosts. But ye say, wherein shall we return? 8 Will a man rob God? yet ye rob me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings, 9 Ye are cursed with the curse; for ye rob me, even this whole nation. 10 Bring ye the whole tithe into the store-house, that there may be food in my house, and prove me now herewith, saith Jehovah of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough *to receive it*. 11 And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast its fruit before the time in the field, saith Jehovah of hosts. 12 And all nations shall call you happy; for ye shall be a delightsome land, saith Jehovah of hosts.

If Malachi's fellows would give and live as they had purposed and promised Jehovah would open *the windows of heaven* and pour out blessings beyond their ability to fathom (Romans 11:33-36). And He is still "able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20). L. K. Zahn captured this resplendent thought in a gospel song:

"For He once was rich indeed Laid all His glory down; That by His grace our ransomed race Should share His wealth and crown."

Perhaps the saddest words the people uttered against their Maker were these:

"It is vain to serve God."

Malachi 3:

13 Your words have been stout against me, saith Jehovah. Yet ye say, What have we spoken against thee? 14 Ye have said, It is vain to serve God; and what profit is it that we have kept his charge, and that we have walked mournfully before Jehovah of hosts? 15 and now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are built up; yea, they tempt God, and escape.

They esteemed the arrogant and evildoers instead of humbly following Jehovah's precepts. When the righteous were distinguished from the wicked and the special possession of God was made known, those peculiarly His, would have their names enrolled in heaven. Conversely, the last brief chapter tells us the scathing rebuke and overpowering wrath of the Judge of all the earth upon the children of disobedience. For the penitent would come healing; for the persistent sinner the sun of righteousness would never shine.

Malachi stresses more than any other book the tragedy Isaiah spoke of in his day — Isaiah 28:15 —

"They made lies Their refuge."

As a result, the people in Malachi's day, fulfilled the sad refrain of Jeremiah 3:25:

"Our confusion covers us"

Though captivity had given way to the brighter day of Restoration for the Jews, they were nonetheless unthankful and unholy! The Persian governor was treated with greater respect than the God of heaven. In fact, the very people Jehovah had delivered from Babylon and blessed with countless benefits now turn on their Benefactor with sarcastic, senseless and shallow questions. The creature actually argues with the Creator! The spiritually apathetic nation is filled with hypocrisy just as in the days prior to Haggai's insistence that the Hebrews arise and rebuild the Temple. The emptiness of their lives could only be corrected by a closer walk of gratitude before God!

There are *seven* basic debates in the people's controversy with the Almighty One.

- (1) Wherein hast Thou loved us?
- (2) How have we dishonored Thee?
- (3) When did we profane the Covenant?
- (4) How do our words weary God?
- (5) When shall we return?
- (6) Wherein do we rob God?
- (7) What have we spoken against Thee?

Even the questions set forth how insensitive the Jewish nation had become. Their secular prosperity caused them to forget God as the source of “every good and perfect gift” (Acts 14:17; 17:29; James 1:17). The Lord was exceedingly tired of their *words*. Promises unkept become very tedious!

Malachi 2:

17 Ye have wearied Jehovah with your words. Yet ye say, Wherein have we wearied him? In that ye say, Every one that doeth evil is good in the sight of Jehovah and he delighteth in them; or where is the God of justice?

They had given God the scraps and He was tired of it. His patience now turns to rebuke. The table of Jehovah was contemptible to them even though they had known for a long time that they were *supposed* to “bring the *firstfruits* to the Lord” (Exodus 23:19). Seeking *first* God’s kingdom was not their strong point.

Malachi 1:

8 And when ye offer the blind for sacrifice, it is no evil! and when ye offer the lame and sick, it is no evil! Present it now unto the governor; will he be pleased with thee? or will he accept thy person? saith Jehovah of hosts.

Just as some folk today spend more for dog food or cat litter than they do for the church of the Lord — the gospel of Christ — so were the carnal minds of Malachi’s contemporaries! They were robbing God because their attitude was oriented to mundane desires. There must “first be a willing mind” and the folk Malachi worked with just did not care that much about everlasting values (II Corinthians 8:5 and 8:12).

God’s blessings were blocked by man’s stingy nature! Jehovah had always cared for them — even as far back as the cleavage between Esau and Jacob. When the evil descendants of Esau opposed the righteous seed of Abraham’s lineage, the Father in

heaven protected His own. But now, the prophet laments, the men were forsaking the wives of their youth. Divorce, which God hates, was running rampant (Malachi 3:6; 2:16). Judah had not kept the promises made to their Deliverer. Because they said: "It is vain to serve Jehovah," there was no genuine purpose in their daily existence. They were very unconcerned in regard to worship and purity. The devout commitment to their gracious God that once characterized Judah was now only a faint memory. God's *book of remembrance* was recording very few noble deeds because His people were shedding useless tears (3:16) and "Their words wearied Jehovah."

But, there were a few precious jewels among the briers and thorns who looked for Christ to come. One in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17) would come to pave the way for Messiah — and then, suddenly, the Lord would come to His Temple! In the midst of evil and unconcern, God flashed a ray of hope — a vibrant future — for the faithful! The Old Testament closes telling us that a Savior is coming. Praise God for Jesus!

DISCUSSION POINTS FOR VOLUME 2

Job

What practical lessons do we learn concerning sorrow, suffering, loneliness, hope and future joy? Use these passages in the book of Job:

1:21; 3:17; 7:6; 13:15
20:4-9; 30:20; 42:12.

Psalms

Notice genuine principles of worship that build us up spiritually. Use these passages in Psalms:

1:2; 8:3-4; 27:4; 42:1; 89:7
95:6-7; Psalms 100.

Proverbs

This practical book on daily conduct proves that attitudes make or break us. Our concepts result in conduct. Discuss these passages in Proverbs:

3:5-7; 4:23; 6:16-19; 14:30;
16:18; 18:21; 27:1.

Ecclesiastes

Earthly fame and wealth often prohibit happiness. Such things cannot satisfy. Fully discuss the following texts in Ecclesiastes:

2:1-11; 8:10; 11:1; 12:13-14.

Song of Solomon

This rare book discusses true love between husband and wife and loyalty before God. Discuss 2:15 and 8:6 concerning little things that hinder love and devotion and the contrast between genuine love and harmful jealousy.

Contrast II Corinthians 11:2
and Exodus 20:1-5.

Isaiah

What lessons do we learn from the rich passages of Isaiah listed below?

26:3; 40:31 and 58:11.

Discuss 2:1-4 and chapter 53.

Jeremiah

Discuss the following verses in the powerful book of Jeremiah.

2:13; 3:25; 6:16; 7:23-28;

8:20; 10:23 and 15:16.

Contrast 31:31-34 and Hebrews 8:6-13.

Lamentations

Why did Jeremiah weep over Jerusalem in this five chapter funeral dirge? Read and discuss these verses:

1:12; 2:16; 3:40; 4:5; 5:7.

Their pathetic and painful sins would truly be punished!

Ezekiel

This courageous prophet was one of the greatest preachers of repentance God ever had. Discuss the passages listed below:

3:17-20; 18:20; 20:32

36:21-24 and chapter 37.

Daniel

One of the marvelous heroes of the Old Testament was the bold young man Daniel. Read and discuss these verses:

1:8; 2:28; 2:44; 3:17

4:25; 5:22-31; chapter six;

7:13-14; chapter nine; 12:1-3.

Hosea

This tender prophet reflects the sadness God felt for Israel's folly. Discuss these passages:

4:6; 7:8; 8:7; 10:12; 13:11.

Joel

Eight hundred years before Christ this prophet tried to get God's people to repent and thus prepare for the last days (Read Acts 2:16-18). Discuss these rich passages in Joel:

2:13 and 3:14.

Amos

No preacher ever told the truth more boldly than Amos. This book has so many rich verses. Discuss these:

3:3; 4:12; 5:15-21; 6:1;
8:1; 8:11-12.

Obadiah

This one chapter book tells of the overthrow of Edom. Discuss verse 3.

Jonah

This reluctant prophet is a clear study of selfishness and unconcern for others. Read and discuss the entire short book. Especially notice 3:2 and the closing of the last chapter.

Micah

The high ethics of godliness can be found in 6:8. Discuss the three points contained therein. Also notice:

5:1-3 and 7:3-4 and 7:18-19.

Nahum

The sequel to Jonah. God now destroys Nineveh because they were no longer penitent. Discuss 1:3. Why do we have a tendency to excuse and clear the guilty today?

Habakkuk

God used the Babylonians to subdue Judah. Read Jeremiah 25:9. Discuss these powerful verses in Habakkuk:

1:13; 2:2; 2:4; 2:10; 2:15; 3:17-19.

Especially be aware of the context of 2:16-20.

Zephaniah

This short but beautifully worded book discusses *the day of the Lord* wherein evil nations would meet their doom. Read and discuss the first chapter and then tie together these points:

1:18; 2:15; 3:7.

Haggai

This prophet rebukes the laziness and selfishness of God's people. In three weeks Haggai gets them to do more than they had accomplished in 16 previous years. Discuss:

“A Bag Full of Holes” — 1:6

and

“Consider Your Ways” — 1:5

and

“From *this* day I will bless you” — 2:19

What a difference a real prophet made!

Zechariah

The priestly prophet mentions many things Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled as Messiah. The entire chapter 13 is a classic.

Especially discuss 13:1 and 13:7 (Mark 14:27).

Read and discuss 4:6 and 7:11-14.

Malachi

A century after Babylonian Captivity the people of God were as sorry and ungrateful as ever. Worship was tedious to them and they were robbing Jehovah of their offerings. Read and discuss:

1:13; 2:16; 3:6; 3:8-10.

Question:

How do we rob God today?

Discuss:

Talents

Energy

Money

Prayer

Concern

May all of these discussion points help us to grow.

REVIEW OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the beginning —

God made the heavens and the earth. He made man in His own image. He made woman as a helper to man. God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Everything was in a state of Paradise and bliss between the Creator and His creation. But, Satan entered the picture and caused Eve to sin and she in turn persuaded Adam to violate God's law. Because of sin Adam and Eve were turned out of Eden and removed from the Tree of Life! Sin separated man from his Maker (Isaiah 59:1-2).

Angels were placed at the entrance of the Garden to forbid reentry. Not until Jesus died for the sins of the world was it possible for sinful men to be reconciled to God (Ephesians 2:16).

Two of the sons of Adam and Eve figure prominently in the next few chapters of Genesis. Cain slays his brother because his own works were evil and his brother's righteous! Cain's infamous words: "Am I my brother's keeper?" reflected his selfish, envious attitude (Jude 11).

In Genesis 5 we read of Enoch *who walked with God* and therefore pleased God (Hebrews 11:5).

However, in chapter 6 we learn of Noah and the Ark and the flood by which Jehovah destroyed the world because of sin. After the flood subsided and 8 righteous ones were saved (I Peter 3:20) God placed a rainbow in the sky to remind men forever that the righteous are rewarded and the ungodly are punished. There will be a Judgment Day. Remember that the next time you see a rainbow in the sky!

Genesis 11 tells us of the Tower of Babel and the confusion men introduce into their lives when they forsake God and try to leave Him out of their plans.

In chapter 12 of Genesis a great hero comes upon the scene to form a bulwark of faithfulness referred to throughout the Bible. Abraham, one of heaven's finest servants, will play a valiant role in the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Through his seed (Genesis 22:18) the Savior came (Galatians 3:16-29). Preservation of Abraham's seed becomes the major point of the Old Testament. In Romans 9, Paul makes it clear that one must be linked with

Abraham spiritually — through Sarah and Isaac — and not just physically to inherit a blessing. Read also Galatians 4:21-21. Abraham always obeyed God but the Jewish Nation, out of his loins, seldom obeyed Jehovah. Jesus makes that point loud and clear in John 8. In the Bible, Abraham is called *the friend of God* because he worked righteousness in true obedience (James 2:23; Genesis 26:5). Abraham believed in God so much that he was even willing to sacrifice his son of promise, Isaac, at God's command. Hebrews 11:17-19 tells us of his strong faith and trust in the Creator to raise Isaac from the dead if needs be!

In Matthew 8:11 we read marvelous words from the lips of our Lord. He tells us that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob shall be in heaven with the redeemed of all ages.

Isaac's sons, Esau and Jacob, will also have difficulties as we read in the middle chapters of Genesis, the book of Obadiah, Psalms 137 and Malachi 1:1-5. Esau's descendants were rebellious toward heaven's will while Jacob's posterity kept Abraham's seed alive. God sent Joseph before them to preserve them down in Egypt in a time of famine (Genesis 45:5). Joseph was truly one of God's noblemen!

But Exodus tells us that after Joseph's death a Pharaoh came along to persecute instead of preserve royal seed. In fact, blessings, had turned to bondage and privilege to punishment! But Jehovah raised up a lonely, timid shepherd on the backside of Midian to deliver His people from the ungodly, tyrannical hand of Egyptian power. Moses, the meekest of all leaders, led Israel out of Egypt through the Red Sea, across the wilderness of Sin and up to the border of Canaan, the promised land. In Exodus 7-11 the great ten plagues ensued and the mighty hand of God rescued His people. The Passover of Exodus 12 finds its fulfillment in Jesus for I Corinthians 5:7 tells us that:

"Christ is our Passover."

In Exodus 20 we find the Ten Commandments given to those whom God led out of bondage from Egypt (20:1-3). At Mount Sinai Jehovah gave a special *law*, to His special *people* and led them to a special *land* for a special *purpose* — the coming of a special *person* — Jesus Christ.

In Leviticus we have the three major feast days or memorials for the Hebrew people:

- (a) Feast of Tabernacles
- (b) Feast of Passover
- (c) Feast of Pentecost

Found in Leviticus 23, these feasts reminded the Jews for centuries of God's care for them in the wilderness, His deliverance from death of the firstborn and His giving of the law at Sinai. But the brightest day of all each year was a brilliant reminder to them of the coming of the Redeemer as the *Lamb of God* who would take away sin (John 1:29). The Day of Atonement, Leviticus 16, was the famous scene of the Scapegoat. The vibrant beauty of the Suffering Servant of God (Isaiah 53) on whom our sins were placed was depicted there. For Christ, offered once for sin (Hebrews 9:28) truly was the Lamb without blemish (I Peter 1:18-19).

The most dramatic book, as we review the Old Testament, has to be Numbers. It took only one night for Israel to get out of Egypt but it took 40 years to get Egypt out of them! Wandering in circles for 40 years, because of sin, is an apt reminder of what disobedience will do for men. On the edge of the *Promised Land* (see Genesis 15, Joshua 23:14 and Nehemiah 9:7-9) Israel did not enter *because of unbelief* (Hebrews 3:19). Korah's anarchy was not tolerated as the ground was opened by God to swallow alive those rebels (Jude 11; Numbers 16). Balaam could not place a curse upon Israel so he just taught them to sin so that Jehovah would turn His back upon them (Numbers 31, Revelation 2, Jude 11).

In Deuteronomy and Joshua we find the Law Restated, blessings upon the righteous and doom for the ungodly. Also, Moses' death — dying short of the land of promise because of presumptuous sin (Numbers 20) — and the subsequent leadership of Joshua, God's unsung hero. Fifty years of conquest and prestige in Canaan under Joshua form the thrilling saga of the brilliant, spiritual guidance of Joshua. His grand and eloquent speech in Joshua, chapters 23 and 24, forms a classic summary of Jehovah's goodness to Abraham's seed!

The period of the Judges is truly a decadent era. After Joshua's death we must wait 350 years for another truly sterling character to come upon the scene — Samuel. While everyone "did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 17:6) generation after generation went downhill spiritually. By the time Samuel arrived upon the scene the indifference of Israel formed this request:

"Give us a King that we may be like the people round about us."

Earlier, in the Wilderness, Numbers 14, they had wanted a Captain to lead them back to Egypt. Now, they desired a King. Not content, fully, to just follow their Maker, they allow the pull

of the world to draw them away from God. Their request was granted but their longing proved to be their undoing (Read Psalms 106:15; Hosea 13:11).

In I Samuel through II Chronicles we have the United Kingdom (Abraham's seed still intact in the 12 tribes of Israel) of 120 years where Saul, David and Solomon each reigned 40 years and thereafter, the Divided Kingdom of some 375 years wherein there was a cleavage of rule. The Northern Kingdom of ten tribes with Samaria as the major city and the Southern Empire of Judah with two tribes with Jerusalem as headquarters, separated Israel.

In the declining years of the divided kingdom era the kings became so corrupt and the people under their unspiritual guidance became so wicked that God allowed them to go into Assyrian bondage (Israel) and later for *Judah*, Babylonian Captivity. In II Chronicles 36 we have one of the saddest and most graphic chapters of the Old Testament. Jehovah used the Babylonians to subdue His own disobedient people as Habakkuk tells us. In fact, Jeremiah 25 refers to Nebuchadnezzar as *God's servant*. Jehovah rules in the kingdom of men (Daniel 4:25). His sovereign will shall be done!

During the one hundred years prior to Captivity, the seventy years of bondage and the century following Babylon, God spoke through His prophets. Great men of nobility, from Isaiah through Malachi *spoke for God* to the people. The prophets became *the mouth of Jehovah*. Perhaps no two ever did a more loyal job for Heaven than Jeremiah and Amos. Those stalwart men of God spoke truth when the people cried for comfort (Jeremiah 5:31; 6:14; Amos 5:18-19). There was "a famine in the land" of the word of God and the prophets spoke and wrote so clearly that running men could read it! See Amos 8 and Habakkuk 2!

Ezekiel's courageous preaching and Daniel's virtuous life occupy center stage during the seven decades Babylon ruled over Abraham's seed. Ezekiel's famous "Valley of Dry Bones" (Chapter 37) foretold the restoration of the Jews to their land. This took place in Ezra and Nehemiah's day (Nehemiah 9:7-9). Every land promise given the Jews was fulfilled *then!*

The Persians conquered Babylon and God's theocracy, Israel, was scattered or dispersed all over ancient pagan territory. Synagogues were built so the Law could be read on the Sabbath. Gradually those among whom the Jews were living attended the assembly to hear the prophecies concerning the Messiah. Two centuries after Captivity ended the Septuagint translation was made available wherein the ancient Hebrew law was now read in the

Greek language, the vernacular of the world! *Christ is coming* became the hope even of devout Gentiles.

As the Old Testament comes to a close the walls of Jerusalem have been rebuilt by Nehemiah, the Temple erected under Haggai's successful endeavors and the Law reinstated by Ezra's evangelism. However, it would be untrue to suggest that inward devotion and spiritual purity dominated the scene. Actually the last book, Malachi, depicts the apathy and rebellion of the Jews — even as God's great servants, Mordecai and Esther preserve Abraham's seed from destruction. The land was almost desolate because God's people would not "humble themselves and pray and seek His face" (II Chronicles 7:14).

The Old Testament closes promising what Isaiah 40 foretold — One who would come in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17; Malachi 3) to prepare the way for Messiah — then suddenly the Lord would come to His Temple!

As we open the New Testament, the virgin (Isaiah 7:14) gives birth to a Savior (Matthew 1:21) in Bethlehem as Micah 5:2 predicted! *In the fulness of time God sent forth His Son* born of a woman (Galatians 4:4). God's eternal purpose was consummated in the gift of *Immanuel* (Matthew 1:23) the Redeemer out of Zion (Isaiah 59:20).

In the beginning — God! As we begin the New Testament — God with us!

Christ had truly come to bless the world.

About the Books

Christians in many places have desired quality Bible study materials. Especially in teenage and adult classes have these requests been made. Several godly congregations, elders and preachers encouraged the author of these four volumes to write some lessons to help fill this need. This volume is part of a set of four books which covers the entire Bible in one year. They are popular for Bible classes and for personal study. The set includes: *Volume I (Genesis - Esther)*, *Volume II (Job - Malachi)*, *Volume III (Matthew - Colossians)*, and *Volume IV (1 Thessalonians - Revelation)*.



About the Author

Johnny Ramsey is well qualified to write this series of books. He has been preaching the gospel for over fifty years, and has helped train other men to preach.



Johnny Ramsey

He is especially well known for his ability to preach lessons which cover the whole Bible in one series of meetings.

He has authored *Practical Bible Studies* plus *Cover to Cover*, *Bible Treasures*, and two books of sermons. He has preached in Gospel meetings all over the United States.

Iris Ramsey has been the faithful and dedicated helpmeet of Johnny for half a century. She is a very good Bible teacher in her own right. Both Johnny and Iris were honored at Freed-Hardeman University's Christian Training Series in 2002 for their practical Christian service.



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