

# MY SERVANTS THE PROPHETS

*Zephaniah*

*Haggai*

*Malachi*



*14<sup>th</sup> Annual*  
West Virginia  
School of Preaching  
Victory Lectures  
*October 26-30, 2008*

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*My Servants – The Prophets:  
Zephaniah, Haggai, Malachi*

14<sup>th</sup> Annual  
**West Virginia School of Preaching**  
Victory Lectures

*Hosted by:*  
Hillview Terrace  
Church of Christ  
Moundsville, West Virginia

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## Foreword

This year, with the study of the Books of Zephaniah, Haggai and Malachi we complete our study of the general theme *My Servants—The Prophets*. We also complete the study of the Minor Prophets. It may be that at some future time we will offer studies in the Major Prophets, but at this time that has not been decided by the Lectureship Committee. We feel that all studies of the Sacred Scriptures are vital, but few, if any, more vital than a study of the Minor Prophets. Those who have heard and read the Lectures from previous years have expressed appreciation for the hard work and devotion of the speakers; this has been deeply appreciated by those who have made important contributions to these Victory Lectures.

When one picks up a book such as the one you hold in your hands, he probably never stops to consider the great amount of work, time, and energy that has gone into the production of such a vehicle. Here, is enshrined the efforts of many people, whose works will still be sought in a hundred years, for books are designed to be here for the benefit of readers long after those who made them have gone to rest in the bosom of mother Earth. The labor expended to make such an instrument is done with pleasure and gratitude with the hope that those in the generation of our great-grandchildren, and beyond, as well as those living today will wish to peruse the pages of these books. Untold hours have gone into writing, editing, correcting, and preparing this book, and all the former ones, but it has been for those who have accomplished it a thrilling labor of love.

In this year's book the reader will find something that has never appeared in any of our previous works, and so far as we know, has never appeared in any of the lectureship books presented to our brotherhood, and that is a Scripture Index. The placing of this index, which is designed to serve as an aid for those who will wish to study and quote from this book, has been an additional labor of love. For those who have ever made indices of any kind there is thorough understanding of this statement. We are grateful to Lyn

Miller of the Bridge Street congregation for her expertise and hard work in building this index. The building of an index is never easy and the building of one that lists in order every passage of Scripture quoted or referenced in such a book as this is doubly hard, for the speakers on these lectures have been more than generous in the use of the Holy Book in their several works. However, for scholarly purposes, as well as convenience purposes, we believe that this index has been worth the effort.

There are many persons to whom gratitude should be expressed. In addition to her work in building the Scripture Index, Lyn Miller has spent numerous hours typing, arranging and checking materials, and proofreading. Shirley West has worked diligently for many hours reading and checking for errors. W. Terry Varner, fellow instructor and lectureship committee member, has contributed through his good work in proofreading and checking works cited. Due gratitude is expressed to my co-editor Charles C. Pugh III, one of our faculty at West Virginia School of Preaching, for his work in editing along with others. Charles is a fine co-worker who goes about a serious task with a well-balanced attitude. We also express appreciation to Emanuel Daugherty, a fellow WVSOP faculty member, who wrote the Introduction. Of course, gratitude is expressed to each of the lecturers who accepted their assignments and did their work so well.

We send this book to you, as in former times, with the hope that you will use it to the glory of our God and Savior Jesus Christ.

*D. Gene West  
12 August 2008*

## *Special Acknowledgement*

With deep appreciation to D. Gene West for service rendered as one of the editors of this volume. "For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love . . ." (Heb. 6:10). Thank you, Gene.

*Charles C. Pugh III  
16 September 2008*

# *Dedication*

After much protestation on the part of the dedicatee, the Lectureship Committee decided to dedicate this year's book to a man who is dear to all of us and a faithful servant of Jesus, our own Director, Denver E. Cooper. Brother Cooper is one of the best known Gospel preachers in the Ohio Valley where he has lived and worked most of his life. The faculty and staff of West Virginia School of Preaching love and respect this man for his passionate love of the truth and his commitment to the cause for which Jesus died. He is deeply loved and respected by many others for the same reasons.

Denver was born in Cairo, WV, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April, 1923, to the late Jesse and Sarah Cooper. Denver and his brother Don made up the Cooper family of children due to the death of a sister Doris who passed away in 1931. Most of his early life was spent in Parkersburg, WV, where he attended the Lynn Street Church of Christ and came under the influence of some of the most outstanding preachers of the early 1900's.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 1945 after graduating Freed-Hardeman College (now University), he married the former Florence Smith of Sistersville, WV. They have been constant and loving companions now for more than sixty-three years. The Coopers are the parents of nine children and twenty-five grandchildren. Denver has served churches in Ironton, OH; Harrisville, WV; Philippi, WV; Chester, WV; Ravenswood, WV; Weirton Heights, Weirton, WV; Moundsville, WV; Timberville, VA; and Valley Bend, WV. In 2003 he returned to Moundsville at the request of the elders of the Hillview Terrace congregation to serve as the second director of West Virginia School of Preaching, succeeding Emanuel B. Daugherty. Since that time he has worked ceaselessly on behalf of the school in raising funds and seeking students. His labors are arduous and his success is great.

He has preached in every facility provided by brethren from fine meetinghouses to tents and has labored hard to convert and

confirm precious souls into the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. He has served the church while supplementing his income in various ways, for his talents are many. He has never complained because the brethren could not or would not increase his support, for his chief concern has been faithful service in the Kingdom of our Master.

In addition to his education in the public school system of Wood County, WV, his preparation to preach the Gospel included studying at Freed-Hardeman College. He sat at the feet of such great men of yesteryear as N. B. Hardeman, W. Claude Hall, L. L. Brigance and a host of others who prepared men to carry the Gospel to the world. For several years he served on the Board of Directors of Ohio Valley College (now University), and for a while as interim President of that institution. He was one of the prime movers in establishing West Virginia School of Preaching under the oversight of the Elders of the Hillview Church. Several men were prime movers in establishing this school after the idea for such a school was first suggested by the late and beloved R. C. Oliver.

We know of few people who are more optimistic regarding service for Christ and the future of the church than brother Cooper. All associated with the school find it both a joy and a pleasure to work with him. We are thankful to God for every good thing done by this servant of God. It is with a deep sense of rejoicing that we dedicate this book to Denver and to his good and loving wife Florence. Paul said, "Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor" (Rom. 13:7). It is with deep pleasure that we honor brother and sister Cooper by dedicating this book to them.

*D. Gene West*

## *Eldership Honored*

### *Camden Avenue Church of Christ*

From its humble beginning in an old store building on Pike Street in South Parkersburg, WV, to its present place of meeting, the Camden Avenue Church of Christ (formerly South Side Church of Christ) has, by the grace of the Almighty, been blessed with a rich heritage. This legacy is to a great degree the result of much faith, loyalty to truth, hard work, devotion, persistence, brotherly love, sound preachers, and dedicated godly and visionary elders.

From the beginning of West Virginia School of Preaching the Camden Avenue congregation and its elders have been supportive of this work. Their generous financial support and spiritual encouragement continues to be of great practical benefit to the Director, Faculty, and students. Their support of the school, like their lives and work, has been constant, consistent, and commendable. It is our pleasure to honor the present elders of the Camden Avenue congregation who carry on in the great tradition of past elders in this good church. We must add that for every good elder who serves in the Kingdom of Jesus Christ there is an equally good wife who aids and encourages the leadership of her husband in every way she can. We honor the nine elders of the Camden Avenue church and the good wives who assist them in their great and ceaseless work in the Kingdom of Christ.

**Patrick Barclay** was baptized into Christ by his father, Ron, an elder at the Rosemar Road congregation. He and his wife Kim were married in 1977. They are the parents of two sons. Their family includes one granddaughter. Pat is employed as Operations Manager at Suddenlink Communications. He has served as a deacon in both the North End church and at Camden Avenue. He was appointed an elder on March 30, 2008.

**James Galloway** was reared in Vienna, WV, and baptized into our Lord by Ross Swindler. Jim and his wife Charlotte married in 1963, and are the parents of two daughters and one son. Their family also includes three grandchildren. Jim is retired. He was

appointed a deacon of Camden Avenue Church in 1985 and has served as an elder since December, 1990.

**Gary Herridge** was reared in Illinois and came to work for the DuPont Company in Parkersburg in 1966. He was baptized into Jesus in 1966 by Phil Sturm. Gary and his wife Sharon were married in 1966. They are the parents of two sons and the grandparents of five. Gary is a former board member of Ohio Valley University and currently serves as an advisor to the Engineering Department of Oklahoma Christian University. Gary is now retired and has served as an elder of the Camden church since July 7, 1980.

**Clayton Huber** was baptized into the body of Christ at the Sunrise Church of Christ by the late Clifton Inman in 1975. Clayton and his wife Verna were married in 1975 and they are the parents of four children. He is employed by Dominion Gas Company. He formerly served as an elder in the Central Church of Christ in Clarksburg, WV. He served Camden Avenue as a deacon before being appointed an elder March 30, 2008.

**Paul Inman** is a son of the late Clifton and Pauline Inman and was baptized by his father in 1964. He has attended Camden Avenue most of his life. He attended both Ohio Valley College and Oklahoma Christian College, both of which are now Universities. Paul served on several mission trips with Project Italy. He and his wife Nancy have been married since 1975 and are the parents of three children. Their family includes two grandchildren. Paul is a retired school teacher. He was appointed an elder November 19, 2000.

**Stanley Inman** is also a son of the late Clifton and Pauline Inman. He was baptized into our Lord by his father. He attended both Ohio Valley College and Oklahoma Christian College. Stanley is married to the former Debi Seelbach and they are the parents of six, all of whom are active members of the Camden church. He began serving this congregation as a deacon in 1999 and was appointed to the eldership March 30, 2008.

**John Life** grew up attending the Camden Avenue church. He attended both Ohio Valley College and Oklahoma Christian

College. John and his wife Karen have been married for thirty-two years and have two daughters. He is employed by DuPont. He began serving as a deacon in 1999. He is very active in working with Friday night sings and teaches singing workshops. He was appointed to the eldership of Camden Avenue on March 30, 2008.

**Ron Riddle** was baptized into Christ by Tim Hatfield in 1990. He and his wife Peggy were married in 1990. They are the parents of four, and their family includes twelve grandchildren. He began serving as a deacon at Camden Avenue in 1999 and was appointed to serve the church as one of her elders March 30, 2008.

**Dearll Vincent** was baptized into the Lord in 1967 by Waldo Kress. He and his wife Carol were married in 1958 and are the parents of two daughters and one son. The Vincents also have four grandchildren. They have been members of the Camden Avenue church since 1981. Dearll served as a deacon in this congregation and was appointed one of her elders December 2, 1990.

It is a great privilege to honor these men and their wives. One of the greatest needs of the churches today is strong and dynamic elders to lead the flock from Earth to Heaven. May God bless these men and their families with many years to serve Him in the great work they are doing for the cause for which Jesus died.

# Introduction

With the lectureship this year, West Virginia School of Preaching completes a very thorough study of the Minor Prophets. We began this in-depth study of the lesser prophets in 2002 when the entire lectureship was devoted to a study of the Book of *Zechariah*. In 2004 the lectureship was on the books of *Hosea*, *Joel*, *Amos*, and *Obadiah*. Then in 2006 it was our pleasure to provide a lectureship on the books of *Jonah*, *Micah*, *Nahum* and *Habakkuk*. The lectures for 2008 are centered on the books of the prophets, *Zephaniah*, *Haggai*, and *Malachi*, thus completing our planned series on all the Minor Prophets. A total of 29 lessons will be delivered from these three short books consisting of a total of nine chapters. That so many lectures can be gleaned from such a small amount of material shows how potent and power-packed are these small volumes of Holy Writ.

Though brief in words, the message of these three prophets of God is anything but “minor”! *Zephaniah*’s sermon on “The Day of the Lord” in the first chapter (1:14-18), ought to cause great soul-searching and sobriety of mind and heart for men and women of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as it did in the ancient citizens of Jerusalem and Judea 600 years before the advent of the Christ. *Haggai* had the difficult task of motivating self-centered people who had recently returned from seventy years of Babylonian Captivity to see their spiritual needs more than their material needs. Until they could “consider their ways” and focus on the things of God, i.e., the rebuilding of the temple, they would continue to put their money in “a bag with holes”(1:5-6). *Malachi*, God’s last writing prophet, uses a series of arguments wherein the prophet would point out the sins of the people, then answer the quibbles they would make in rebuttal. The words “yet ye say,” “but ye say,” “and ye say,” are key words in the arguments *Malachi* uses over and over again to address the problems of God’s people four-hundred years before the birth of Jesus. *Malachi*’s book helps us to see the problems, which would develop, that Jesus would encounter with the scribes, Pharisees and rulers of the Jews in His public ministry.

The men to appear on the 14<sup>th</sup> Annual West Virginia School of Preaching Victory Lectureship are seasoned veterans of many years of service for our King. They have fought the good fight, most of them, for many decades and continue to wield the sword of the Spirit, “both edges and broad-side.” Through long years they have weathered the storms of many spiritual battles—by argument and debate, by papers and public preaching, through books and published articles, by counsel and advice, by evangelism both at home and abroad, they have held the banner high. They have tempered their swords in the fires of adversity and have not failed to “preach the word, in season and out of season.”

You will see, also, that they have honed and sharpened their swords by preaching from the prophets. The prophets were the preachers of their day. In a true sense the word “prophet” and “prophecy” and “prophesy” can as well apply to Gospel preachers of the modern day. No true Gospel preacher would claim to speak by inspiration as those in Bible times did who were directly guided by the Holy Spirit, and certainly none would dare to say his message is predicting future events as revealed to him by God. *Predictive* prophecy is to foretell the future and is the secondary meaning of the term. The primary meaning of the word “prophecy,” is to *speak forth* giving out the message of God to one’s contemporaries. It is what is simply called in the New Testament, *preaching*. The Old Testament prophets preached to their contemporaries urging them to live lives pleasing to God (Leon Wood, *The Prophets of Israel* 67-68). Preachers of the New Testament and those today preach to their contemporaries to cause them to believe and obey the “Good News” of the Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. It is in this sense that the preacher of today is being a prophet.

The messages of *Zephaniah*, *Haggai* and *Malachi* have now circulated throughout the world for 2,400 to 2,600 years. Their books are brief at best, but they are important to the overall Scheme of Redemption as portrayed in the other books of the Bible. Those who are serious students of God’s Word would be much less knowledgeable, less wise if these three little books were

missing. They fill a place in the plan of salvation that the Holy Spirit of God determined to be important to fill out the Bible story. Those who neglect these small books are the losers. It is our prayer that each one who reads the lectures found in this book will have a greater appreciation for the place of Zephaniah, Haggai, and Malachi in the divine canon.

*Emanuel Daugherty*

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# Historical Background To Zephaniah

Earl Edwards

*Zephaniah* means “hidden by Jehovah” (Smith 762). The Greek Septuagint calls him “Sophonias.” There are four Zephaniahs mentioned in Scripture: a Kohathite, the son of Tahath (1 Chron. 6:36-37); the son of Masseiah, a priest and possible temple ruler



**Earl Edwards** has preached the gospel for over 55 years. He served from 1989-2008 as Director of Graduate Studies in Bible at Freed-Hardeman University.

during the reign of Zedekiah (588 BC) who is mentioned in Jeremiah 21:1; the father of a certain Josiah mentioned in Zechariah 6:10; and the one who is the subject of this study, the ninth of the twelve minor prophets.

The first verse of the book says that this Zephaniah was the “son of Cushi,” who was the “son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah.” [All Bible quotations are from the New American Standard unless otherwise indicated.] The Hezekiah spoken of is “probably” the one who was king of Judah in the period 714-690 BC (Hahlen and Ham 191), otherwise it would be difficult to give a reason for running his ancestry back four generations. That would date him a little less than 100 years after his great-great-grandfather who was one of the better kings of Judah.

I would guess that Zephaniah lived in Jerusalem “because of his detailed knowledge of the conditions there, which knowledge is reflected in his book” (Lewis 46). Notice especially the

descriptions of princes, judges, prophets and priests in 3:1-4; and the localities mentioned in 1:10-11. In 1:12, he depicts God as searching “Jerusalem with lamps” to punish those who falsely accuse Him. Jack P. Lewis notes that “artists of the Middle Ages regularly represented Zephaniah as the man with the lamp, searching Jerusalem for sinners to bring them to punishment” (46).

## The Religious Climate of His Time

Our prophet was a contemporary of Jeremiah and of the prophetess Huldah (2 Kings 22:14-20). He exercised his prophetic ministry during the reign of the reformer, King Josiah, who reigned from 640-608 BC (see Zeph. 1:1). Though some would call it into question, Merrill Unger is probably correct in asserting that “he was doubtless instrumental in Josiah’s revival (2 Kings 22-23; 2 Chron. 34-35)” (42). In fact, if Hezekiah was his kinsman, that would mean he was the only prophet who was of royal blood and it would mean he was an “insider,” and would therefore probably have more influence with Josiah.

It will be remembered that in Josiah’s eighteenth year of reign (622 BC) the high priest, in the process of repairing the temple, “found the book of the law” (2 Kings 22:8). After Josiah repented and consulted the Lord (through Huldah, the prophetess), he read the book publicly and committed himself to following it. He then cleansed the temple of all the “vessels that were made for Baal, for Asherah, and all the host of heavens; and he burned them outside Jerusalem” (2 Kings 23:4). It was a great renewal by a good and sincere king but, unfortunately, idolatry was so ingrained in the people by that time that “the movement proved superficial” (Unger 428). The impending captivity was, therefore, about to become a reality (Jer. 2:11-13).

## A More Precise Date

As already discussed, Zephaniah prophesied in Josiah’s reign (640-608 BC), but can we know a more precise date for his activity? Josiah’s reform climaxed in the year 622 and it seems our prophet began speaking out before that time. In fact, in chapter one verses 4-5, he is quoted as saying:

So, I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this place, and the names of the idolatrous priests along with the priests. And those who bow down on the housetops to the host of heaven, and those who bow down and swear to the Lord and yet swear by Milcom.

It seems clear that at the time this prophecy was uttered, idolatry was being openly and flagrantly practiced in Jerusalem itself and since, as noticed, Josiah put a stop to that as a part of his reformation, we conclude with G. B. Gray that “Zephaniah prophesied in the earlier part of Josiah’s reign, before the Reformation” (987). In this student’s judgment, Zephaniah’s prophecies were pronounced somewhere around 630-625 BC and, again, very likely had an influence on causing the “repair” of the temple (2 Kings 22:5), which in turn caused Josiah to accentuate the efforts he had begun (in the twelfth year of his reign) to purge the country of idolatry (2 Chron. 34:3). This led, eventually, to the full-blown reformation which climaxed in 622 BC.

### **The Enemy Which Threatened**

Frequently, Old Testament prophets dealt with external conditions which affected God’s people. For example, Joel dealt with a plague of locusts which had invaded the land. He uses that to call God’s people to repentance. Zephaniah’s main message has to do with a “day of the Lord” which was about to come to punish God’s people (see especially 1:14-18). This “day” was connected, as Lewis says, with “a nation” which “threatens Judah” in Zephaniah’s time (47). That idea seems to be validated by the kind of language found in 1:10-11:

“And on that day,” declares the Lord, “There will be the sound of a cry from the Fish Gate, a wail from the Second Quarter, and a loud crash from the hills. Wail, O inhabitants of the Mortar, for all the people of Canaan will be silenced; all who weigh out silver will be cut off.”

“The Fish Gate, the Second Quarter, and the hills are all on the north side of the city, the side most vulnerable to attack” (Hahlen and Ham 202). It seems, indeed, that God was to use a particular nation to punish His people. But what nation does Zephaniah have in mind? It is known that the Scythians (nomadic tribes from north of the Caspian and Black Seas) attacked Assyria and the Mediterranean coast in 632 BC and the years following. However, there is no evidence that the Scythians ever attacked Judah. Probably Zephaniah was looking ahead to the punishment that God would inflict on His people *through the Babylonians* who were already beginning their rise to power. As J. T. Carson says, Judah’s “ultimate oppressor and instrument of God’s judgment was Babylon” (737). Babylon’s attacks against Jerusalem began in about 604 BC and culminated in Jerusalem’s destruction in 586 BC.

### **More About the Idolatry of His Time**

After Zephaniah’s great-great-grandfather Hezekiah’s reign (714-690 BC) in Judah came Hezekiah’s son, Manasseh, who did great evil. In fact, Homer Hailey says, “It is doubtful that at any period of its history Judah had a more wicked ruler than Manasseh. He sought to undo all the good his father had done” (223). The inspired writer says he “rebuilt the high places which Hezekiah his father had destroyed; and he erected altars for Baal and made an Asherah, as Ahab king of Israel had done, and worshiped all the host of heaven and served them” (2 Kings 21:3). As noticed earlier, some of the people of Jerusalem also worshiped Milcom (Zeph. 1:5). This is the kind of idolatry which was being practiced in Judah during the reigns of Manasseh and Amon who were the two kings who reigned just previous to the good king Josiah who began his reign in approximately 640 BC. Now, what do we know about the idolatry being practiced in Jerusalem and Judea?

First, we saw that Manasseh “rebuilt the high places” (2 Kings 2:3). In its narrower sense, “high places” is used of every recognized place of worship provided with an altar and other apparatus of the cult of some pagan deity. These were *originally* built on the tops of hills or mountains because the worshipers felt

they were closer to their god(s). Manasseh rebuilt those pagan places of worship. At some of these sites even “skeletons of young infants” have been found by archeologists (Kennedy, “High Place” 353). In fact, we know that Ahaz, King of Judah who took the throne in 734 BC, actually “made his son pass through the fire” (2 Kings 16:3), as did Manasseh in the decades just previous to our prophet (2 Kings 21:6).

Second, Manasseh “erected the altars for Baal” (2 Kings 21:3). The altars are, of course, those built-up structures on which sacrifices are offered or incense is burned to a given deity. The deity in this case is Baal. The word itself means *possessor* or *controller*. “With a similar meaning, it is applied to numerous Canaaniteish local deities” (Koenig 78). Thus, we find “Baal-Hazor” (that is, the Baal worshiped at Hazor, a site where Absalom’s sheep shearers were, 2 Sam. 13:23), or “Baal-Meon” (a city of Moab, Num. 32:38), etc. In Zephaniah’s time there were evidently many of the “altars for Baal” in use among God’s people.

Third, Manasseh “made an Asherah as Ahab king of Israel had done” (2 Kings 21:3). Ahab was king in Israel from about 875-853 BC, over two hundred years before Zephaniah. He was evidently the first among God’s people to make “an Asherah.” An *ASHERAH* was an “image” or an idol. It “evidently consisted of a core of wood overlaid with precious metal, since it could be at once burned and ‘stamped to powder’ (cf. 2 Chron. 15:16).” It was an image of a female “Canaanite deity” (Kennedy, “Asherah” 56). The plural form is Asherim or, rarely, Asheroth. She is the female counterpart of Baal. The basic element of the Baal image was stone while that of the Asherah was wood. Especially in earlier times, she was worshiped as the “goddess of fertility.” Manasseh had even placed an “image of Asherah that he had made” in the temple (2 Kings 21:7). What an affront to the God of heaven!

Fourth, Manasseh and those who followed him “worshiped all the host of heaven” (2 Kings 21:3). We are dealing with a pagan-type worship of the heavenly bodies. C. W. Emmet correctly says the “‘host of heaven’ is mentioned as the object of the idolatrous worship; it is frequently coupled with ‘sun and moon,’ the stars

being obviously meant; where ‘sun and moon’ are not specifically mentioned, the phrase may be used as including them as well” (367). In fact, the sun, moon and the constellations are named as objects of worship in 2 Kings 23:5. So, we have the astral bodies being worshiped and the words of Zephaniah indicate that they were even building altars for this worship “on the housetops” (1:5). The flat roof of that day lent itself to such altars. Manasseh had built altars to worship this “host of heaven” in “the two courts of the house of the Lord” (2 Kings 21:5)! These altars were ordered torn down and burned by Josiah in his reform (2 Kings 23:4).

Fifth, we are told that some of the people of Jerusalem were also “swear[ing] by Milcom,” even though they continued worshiping the Lord (Zeph. 1:5). Milcom was “the national deity of Ammon. Solomon established a sanctuary for him on the Mount of Olives which seems to have continued till it was destroyed by Josiah (I Kings 11:5, 33; II Kings 23:13)” (Nesbit 617). Obviously, the people of Judah had forgotten the very first of the Ten Commandments, “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Ex. 20:3). On that same occasion, God had said, “You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God” (Ex. 20:5). How could they worship the true God and at the same time worship Milcom?

### **Lessons from the Time of Zephaniah**

First, “Bad company corrupts good morals” (1 Cor. 15:33). I am sure that many of the people of Zephaniah’s time never intended to go as far as they eventually did. The same is true with us today. Some of us are forced to work with ungodly people, but when we start spending our free time with them, we wind up being like them—with our morals corrupted!

Second, little compromises lead to big departures. Put yourself into Zephaniah’s time and imagine yourself as a resident of Jerusalem who is invited over to a friend’s house. This friend is one who has an altar to worship the “host of heaven” on his roof. At first, you just go up and watch him as he participates but, little by little, you are involved with him and you eventually find

yourself in full-fledged worship of the stars, as well as Jehovah. Little compromises lead to big departures!

And last, true followers of God will speak out against evil. Ahab was the king of Israel from 875-853 BC. He married Jezebel (from Tyre) and the two of them did much to lead Israel away from God. In fact, he “did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before Him” (1 Kings 16:33). Some spoke out against his evil ways: Elijah (1 Kings 17:1) and Micaiah (1 Kings 22:13-18). But others, even of those who called themselves “prophets,” never raised a voice against him (1 Kings 22:6). Zephaniah was one who had the necessary courage. He cried out that God said, “I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem” (Zeph. 1:4). We, too, must have the “courage of our convictions.”

God help us to learn these and other lessons from the prophet, Zephaniah.

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#### Biographical Sketch

Earl Edwards was born in Moundville, MO, in 1933. He received his higher education from Lipscomb University (B.A. in Communication 1956); Harding Graduate School (M.Th. in Bible and Missions 1983); and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, IL (Doctor of Missiology 1985).

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Earl worked in the Italian mission field from 1960-1976, and served as Professor of Missions at Harding University during the 1976-77 term. He served as Director of Graduate Studies in Bible at Freed-Hardeman University from 1989-2008. Since 2008 he serves as an adjunct Bible professor at FHU. He is the author of several tracts, books (both in English and Italian), contributed several manuscripts for lectureship books, and articles for brotherhood papers.

He was married to the former Gwendolyn Hall from 1953 until her passing in 1986, and has two children: Terry, his wife Kim, and their six children live in Henderson, TN. Their daughter Karen and her husband Drew have two sons and live in Houston, TX.

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# Overview Of Zephaniah

*Rodney Nulph*

I would like to begin by expressing my sincere gratitude to the WVSOP lectureship committee along with the good elders of the Hillview Terrace Church of Christ in inviting me to be a part of this wonderful lectureship program. It is indeed a great honor to be



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a graduate of such a sound, biblical school of preaching. It is also quite humbling to appear on this series of lectures with such great Gospel preachers, many of whom are my mentors in the faith and close personal friends. May God be glorified and souls encouraged as we overview the great book of Zephaniah.

## The Man

The name “Zephaniah means ‘Jehovah hides,’ or ‘Jehovah has hidden,’ or ‘treasured’” (Hailey 222). He was the ninth in order of the Minor Prophets, who prophesied against Jerusalem and Judah during the reign of King Josiah (Zeph. 1:1). The prophet Zephaniah could be classified as anything but an ordinary prophet. In fact, his unusual style could be seen by some as even unkind or cruel. “Zephaniah’s writing has been called ‘pessimistic, harsh and negative.’ Certainly if he were preaching today, his ‘approach’ would be much criticized” (McGill 383).

Undoubtedly, Zephaniah’s unique style could be linked to his godly ancestry. With justifiable delight, Zephaniah traces his lineage back to the honorable King Hezekiah (Hizkiah KJV) (cf. Zeph. 1:1). Zephaniah was “the great-great-grandson of King

Hezekiah, one of Judah’s most famous rulers. He has royal blood in his veins, but more important, he has the message of God on his lips” (Wiersbe 615). With a royal lineage in his background, Zephaniah would have had a greater standing with princes and rulers as he faithfully denounced the sins of the people of God and proclaimed the sure destruction that would soon come.

Zephaniah labored with righteous Josiah in reestablishing the true worship of Jehovah in the land. In fact many commentators believe that Zephaniah and Josiah were close in age. “There can be little doubt, I think, that Zephaniah was of the royal house, and of about the same age as Josiah, if not a little younger” (Morgan 109). Zephaniah was truly a person of great character! “Several scholars agree that ‘Zephaniah was the most uncompromising of all the prophets’ and **his message simple and austere**” (Ramsey 158). Simply stated, Zephaniah was a man with the message of God on his lips and a heart full of courage to deliver that message. Truly, a man worthy of our consideration! Beyond doubt “Men like Zephaniah and messages like the burden of his courageous heart have enriched the history of the world” (161).

## The Background

As to the background concerning this prophecy, Zephaniah prophesied during a dismal, dark time for Judah. God’s people had become enamored with false worship and had sunk to a low that God could no longer tolerate, thus judgment was inevitable. “Judah was on the verge of Babylonian bondage as divine judgment for her sins” (Dunn 379). Many, if not all, of the sins of these once godly people are listed in the great book of Zephaniah. Judah had become captivated with the worship of idols and had mixed false worship with the true worship of Jehovah, which included worship to Baal and Malcham (cf. Zeph. 1:4-5). Judah had taken for their garments “foreign apparel” (Zeph. 1:8), and were active in leaping over the threshold in imitation of the heathen priests (Zeph. 1:9; cf. 1 Sam. 5:5), which was essentially a custom of those who worshipped the Philistine Dragon of Ashdod.

Judah had become guilty of violence and deceit (Zeph. 1:9), and her princes, judges, prophets and priests had become cruel, ungodly men, which included doing “violence to the law” (Zeph. 3:3-4). They had failed to listen to God and to heed His divine instruction (Zeph. 3:2, 7). Because she had gone so far from God, Judah is about to feel the wrath of God’s divine judgment! “They had been weighed in the balance and had been far short of God’s standard” (Ramsey 159).

The sinful and ungodly attitudes and actions of the people during Zephaniah’s prophecy were no doubt a manifestation of ungodly leaders prior to this time. Manasseh ruled for a lengthy fifty-five years (cf. 2 Kings 21:1), and had corrupted the people. “So Manasseh made Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to err, and to do worse than the heathen, whom the LORD had destroyed before the children of Israel” (2 Chron. 33:9). Following the ungodly rule of Manasseh, his son, Amon, came to the throne. Amon ruled for 2 years in Jerusalem (cf. 2 Chron. 33:21), and sadly it is written of him:

But he did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD, as did Manasseh his father: for Amon sacrificed unto all the carved images which Manasseh his father had made, and served them; And humbled not himself before the LORD, as Manasseh his father had humbled himself; but Amon trespassed more and more. (2 Chron. 33:22-23)

Due to the evil, ungodly influence of Manasseh and Amon, the nation was in shambles, both politically and spiritually. “Zephaniah, like Jeremiah, of whom he was a contemporary, had his work cut out for him!” (Connally 339).

### **Righteous Josiah and His Reforms**

Although the nation has been led down a dark and treacherous spiritual path by Manasseh and Amon, Zephaniah’s prophecy comes during the time of spiritual refreshing and godly leadership from the righteous King Josiah. King Josiah came to the throne

when he was eight years old and reigned for 31 years in Jerusalem (2 Chron. 34:1). Of no other king was it said, “And he did that which was right in the sight of the LORD, and walked in all the way of David his father, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left” (2 Kings 22:2). “Josiah kept his eye on the goal and reached it with satisfaction in a reign of 13 years. He made an early and right start and progressed and was persistent to the end” (Lockyer 139). It was during the times of this righteous king that Zephaniah prophesied, thus the reforms of Josiah are truly notable and worthy of our contemplation and summary.

**Josiah purges the land (2 Chron. 34:3-7).** Josiah began his reforms by purging Judah and Jerusalem of “the high places, and the groves, and the carved images, and the molten images” (2 Chron. 34:3). And of interest is the fact that this faithful, righteous king did not stop by purging only Judah and Jerusalem but went on to purge much of the land. “And he burnt the bones of the priests upon their altars, and cleansed Judah and Jerusalem. And so did he in the cities of Manasseh, and Ephraim, and Simeon, even unto Naphtali, with their mattocks round about” (2 Chron. 34:5-6). Josiah’s purging the land of idols was a noble beginning for reformation and gives clear insight to his courageous and unwavering loyalty to God.

**Josiah prepares the house of God (2 Chron. 34:8-28).** Part of the righteous reforms that Josiah initiated was preparing the House of God for true worship. “Josiah’s work was not only negative, correcting irregularities, but positive in that he sought to establish real godliness in the nation” (Lockyer 141). The temple, which had been sorely neglected and grossly disrespected, was repaired, which enabled and encouraged the true worship of Jehovah God to be restored. One of the great and memorable elements that occurred during the preparing of God’s House was the finding of the Book of the Law (cf. 2 Chron. 34:14-15).

The discovery of those ancient scrolls in the Temple was both exciting and discouraging to Josiah. Hilkiah, the high priest, announced the find to Shaphan, the scribe, and

delivered it into his hands to read (II Kings 22:8). Shaphan then read the book before the young king, who was so terrified by its judgments of God upon apostasy that he rent his clothes. He promptly deputed Hilkiah, Shaphan, and other trusted servants to certify that this was indeed the faithful law of God. This they did by consulting Huldah, the prophetess, who resided in Jerusalem. She confirmed that the curses of the book would come upon Judah, but because of the humble faithfulness of Josiah, God would not bring them to pass during his lifetime. (McClish 194)

With the Law found and the House of God cleansed, worship and faithful living had once again become reality. Although short lived, righteousness and faithfulness were at least present in Jerusalem once again, thanks to the purging of idolatry and the preparing of God's House brought about by righteous Josiah.

**Josiah practices faithfulness (2 Chron. 34:29-35:19).** Following the purging of the land of idolatry and preparing the house of God, Josiah put into practice that which he preached. First, Josiah publicly read the word of the Lord in the hearing of all the people (2 Chron. 34:29-30). After the reading of the Book of the Law, Josiah committed himself to hold fast to that which he read and strongly encouraged those present to do the same (2 Chron. 34:31-33). Lastly, Josiah proclaimed that the Passover be reinstated as per God's instructions. Josiah prepared the Passover in such a meticulous way that it is written, "And there was no passover like to that kept in Israel from the days of Samuel the prophet; neither did all the kings of Israel keep such a passover as Josiah kept, and the priests, and the Levites, and all Judah and Israel that were present, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem" (2 Chron. 35:18).

Josiah was a truly unique and inspiring King in Judah. His righteousness, reformation, and respect for the true God of Heaven, ought to encourage the faithful of today. Judah had become so hard-hearted toward God's goodness that sadly, the reforms of Josiah were only momentary and Zephaniah's prophecy would be a devastating reality in the not so far future!

## The Date

There are a couple of significant facts that help us in dating the prophecy of Zephaniah. The first of which is found Zephaniah 1:1. As was already noted, Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of righteous King Josiah, who reigned from 640 to 609 BC. Along with this fact, Zephaniah speaks of the destruction of Assyria (which occurred in 612 BC) as in the future (cf. Zeph. 2:13). Thus the book of Zephaniah can be dated between 640 BC and 612 BC, although most scholars date this book of prophecy more precisely between 635 and 625 BC.

Because Josiah's religious reforms began c. 628 BC, and because Zephaniah catalogs lists of sins prevalent prior to the reforms (1:3-13; 3:1-7), the time of Zephaniah may be dated more precisely as occurring ca. 635 to 625 BC. Zephaniah's forceful prophecy may even have been a factor in the reforms that took place. (Nelson 271)

It is also interesting to note that "the prophecies of Zephaniah were contemporary with a portion of those of Jeremiah, for the word of the Lord came to him in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah. Chronologically, Zephaniah was contemporary with Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Nahum, and Huldah, the prophetess" (Lavender 321).

## The Message

Zephaniah's book is made up of several concise prophecies which he delivered during the early days of righteous Josiah's reforms. In very clear language, Zephaniah announces the coming of God's wrath and destruction upon all those who had sinned. "The book of Zephaniah repeatedly hammers home the message that the day of the Lord, judgment day, is coming when the malignancy of sin will be dealt with. Israel and her Gentile neighbors will soon experience the crushing hand of God's wrath. But after the chastening process is complete, blessing will come in the person of the Messiah" (Nelson 271).

Zephaniah's inspired prophecy deals with the notable fact concerning both the goodness and severity of Almighty God. "Severity and tenderness are constantly manifesting themselves as we watch the divine dealings with men. This contrast is especially clear in the message of Zephaniah" (Yates 163). A brief summation of Zephaniah's prophecy can be seen in Paul's inspired warning to those in Rome, "Behold therefore the *goodness-and severity of God*: on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off" (Rom. 11:22, emp. added). Concerning the severity of God, Zephaniah wrote, "I will utterly consume all things from off the land, saith the LORD" (Zeph. 1:2). And of God's goodness he wrote, "The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing" (Zeph. 3:17). A message which is as fresh and relevant today as when it was first delivered. "Zephaniah exhorts us to constant diligence in maintaining a right relationship with God. But should we fail in that, he assures us there is hope when we return to God" (Gear 57).

### **The Contents of the Book**

Zephaniah's prophecy could be divided into three main areas, two of which deal with judgment, the last of which deals with mercy.

**God will judge Judah (1:1-2:3).** Zephaniah bears the burden of declaring God's judgment and pending doom upon Jerusalem and Judah. Zephaniah declares this judgment in a very vivid and clear manner. A terrifying statement indeed begins this prophecy, "I will utterly consume all things from off the land, saith the LORD" (Zeph. 1:2). God's wrath, due to sin and calloused hearts, is coming and who shall escape? In chapter one verses 4-6, "The prophet describes three kinds of sinners . . . those who have forsaken Jehovah and who worship only idols, vv. 4-5a; those who worship *both* Jehovah and the idols, v. 5b; and those who have forsaken the Lord openly and want nothing to do with Him, v. 6" (Wiersbe 615). What contemplation for us today!

Zephaniah continues to speak of the great terror of the Lord in quite devastating and distressing language:

The great day of the LORD is near, it is near, and hasteth greatly, even the voice of the day of the LORD: the mighty man shall cry there bitterly. That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, A day of the trumpet and alarm against the fenced cities, and against the high towers. And I will bring distress upon men, that they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the LORD: and their blood shall be poured out as dust, and their flesh as the dung. Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the LORD'S wrath; but the whole land shall be devoured by the fire of his jealousy: for he shall make even a speedy riddance of all them that dwell in the land. (1:14-18)

And although God's judgment was coming upon the nation as a whole, Zephaniah still pleads with those individuals who would listen to "seek the Lord, seek righteousness, and seek meekness" (Zeph. 2:3). "Nothing could now save the nation as a whole. Zephaniah's urgent call to repentance was therefore addressed to individuals. Even in the midst of such mass destruction so vividly foretold by the prophet, there was hope for the meek persons who repented to survive (McGill 385). What a truly sobering picture of God's judgment on a people and a nation who were once in His favor, but due to sin's demise, they have fallen and destruction is inevitable.

**God will judge the nations (2:4-3:7).** Interestingly, not only is God's wrath coming upon those who were once faithful to Him, but His wrath and destruction will also be felt by Judah's neighbors and foes. The coastal cities of the Philistines are the first to be condemned. All but one (Gath) of the nations of Philistia are specifically named:

For Gaza shall be forsaken, and Ashkelon a desolation: they shall drive out Ashdod at the noon day, and Ekron shall be rooted up. Woe unto the inhabitants of the sea coast, the nation of the Cherethites! the word of the LORD is against you; O Canaan, the land of the Philistines, I will even destroy thee, that there shall be no inhabitant. (Zeph. 2:4-5)

The “Cherethites” were simply another name for the Philistines. “Then he names Moab and Ammon (vv. 8-11), both of whom came from backslidden Lot (Gen. 19:33-38). They had mistreated God’s people and proudly ‘magnified themselves’; therefore God would humble them. Their lands would be ruined. Their idols would prove powerless” (Wiersbe 616).

Next on God’s list of wrath is Ethiopia, which also was occasionally a terror to God’s people (cf. 2 Chron. 14:9), thus they too will be slain with the sword (Zeph. 2:12). Assyria, along with her capital city Nineveh will be so thoroughly and utterly consumed that their land will be “dry like a wilderness” (Zeph. 2:13). Interestingly, Zephaniah is the last writer to ever speak of Nineveh as an existing city. It is little wonder why God would choose to so completely destroy Assyria and especially the capital city of Nineveh given what they thought of themselves, “This is the rejoicing city that dwelt carelessly, that said in her heart, I am, and there is none beside me . . .” (Zeph. 2:15a). Truly God meant what He said, “Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18)!

Zephaniah then turns from his denunciation upon the foreign nations and gives great insight to Jerusalem’s prevalent problems. Jerusalem is spoken of as a “filthy and polluted” city, one who has not hearkened to the voice of God (Zeph. 3:1-3). “It is not simply a wicked city, one that has never known or worshiped God. This is the place where God had put His name. It is a rebellious city. It possessed God’s Law and rejected it. It should have been pure as the bride of God. But it was polluted. Instead of justice, it had become a city of oppression” (Conley 334). Once again we are

reminded of inspired truth, “Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people” (Prov. 14:34). It appears that Jerusalem had sunk so low that God affirmed, “Her prophets are light and treacherous persons: her priests have polluted the sanctuary, they have done violence to the law” (Zeph. 3:4). We see first hand in this clear condemnation of those who were supposed to be religious and righteous people that “if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch” (Matt. 15:14b). Zephaniah’s prophecy is clear, the “ditch” of God’s wrath is Jerusalem’s future because “they rose early, and corrupted all their doings” (Zeph. 3:7b).

**God will restore His people (3:8-20).** At the end of this great book, Zephaniah closes with a wonderful encouragement and ray of hope. Although God will utterly consume Jerusalem and the foreign nations, there will be a faithful remnant that will return with God’s favor. This concluding section of the prophecy without doubt refers to the return of God’s remnant from Babylonian captivity to the land of Canaan. However, it also has reference to the wonderful spiritual remnant (i.e. Christians), in the Gospel era.

We have here one of the many instances in the Old Testament where events are prophesied that took place before the coming of Christ but serve as types of the Christian age. Thus Adam was a type of Christ. The tabernacle was a type of the church. The sacrifices were a type of the death of Christ. And the salvation of the faithful remnant from Babylon is a type of the church, the called-out of God. (Conley 336)

Zephaniah affirms that the returning remnant will speak “a pure language that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to serve him with one consent” (Zeph. 3:9b). “The lips that had been profaned by the names and worship of idols would be purified so that they may call in unison on the name of Jehovah, speaking from purified hearts through cleansed lips (cf. Isa. 6:5, 7; Jer. 1:9; Dan. 10:16)” (Hailey 243). During the Babylonian captivity the

Jews were purged of idolatrous worship and inter-mingled reverence. “The remnant who returned rebuilt the temple, restored the law, and reinstated the true worship of God, no longer with heathen corruptions, but with pure religion” (Dunn 382). This purified remnant would be saved because they now trusted in Jehovah, did no iniquity, spoke no lies, nor had a deceitful tongue in their mouths (cf. Zeph. 3:12-13).

Zephaniah concludes the last part of his book with the joyous delight that is found in God’s faithfulness (Zeph. 3:14-20). Truly the ultimate faithfulness of God is seen in the person and work of the promised Messiah, sent to redeem all of mankind from the binding captivity of sin. The prophet looks beyond the return of the remnant from Babylonian captivity to the Gospel age, wherein men will call upon the name of God (i.e. obey the Gospel) for salvation and eternal safety.

What a contrast between the Jerusalem of Zephaniah’s day and of that glorious day yet to come! Instead of weeping and suffering and fear and death, there will be joy and singing and safety. God will dwell in the midst of them:

“And they shall call his name Immanuel; which is being interpreted, God with us” (Matt. 1:23). God will rejoice over them, will rest in His love of them, and will sing with joy over them. When the Lord brings back their captivity (whether from Babylon or from sin), He will make a name for them, and they will be praised among all the peoples of the earth. (Conley 336-37)

### **Practical Lessons from Zephaniah for Today**

The great book of Zephaniah teaches us some inspiring and notable lessons that can easily be applied to the present.

**The influence of evil.** One of the clear messages in the book of Zephaniah is the fact that evil has a negative influence on a nation. Due to the evil, ungodly influence of Manasseh and Amon, Judah had lost sight of God. The book of Zephaniah is an inspired commentary on the wise man’s words, “By the blessing of the

upright the city is exalted: *but it is overthrown by the mouth of the wicked*” (Prov. 11:11, emp added). Judah fell and was overthrown by the Babylonians because of the condemning affect of evil and its devastating influence. When we fail to respect God and His Word sure destruction is to follow! “Every sin, every refusal to obey God, is a gamble—a gamble none can win! The only safe course is to trust the immutability of God’s justice and to seek, therefore, His mercy” (Pharr 117). God lovingly warns us, “Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people” (Prov. 14:34). The spiritual Israel of God today (i.e. the church, cf. Gal. 6:16), must be ever vigilant that we do not allow evil to negatively influence us. “And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God” (Rom. 12:2).

**The importance of the godly.** Another clear message seen in the book of Zephaniah is the importance of the godly. Although the nation of Judah and the surrounding heathen nations as a whole felt the devastation of God’s wrath, how many individuals were pardoned because of the godly stance by men like Josiah, Zephaniah, and Jeremiah all of whom were godly contemporaries? Only eternity will divulge all of the true good that was done by these godly men. It was not Zephaniah’s job to save the entire nation of Judah; it was merely his job to warn them of God’s message! What a sobering thought for those who are God’s spokesmen of today (i.e. Christians, cf. Matt. 28:18-20). God is relying upon the godly of this nation as well to sound forth His inspired warning of His coming wrath and retribution upon all of mankind. However, “. . . [I]f the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?” (1 Cor. 14:8). God help us and encourage us to “Sound the Battle Cry!”

**The interest of our God.** Possibly the most encouraging of all the lessons learned from the book of Zephaniah is the message of hope found in the interest of our God. God was interested in sinful Judah turning from her sins and coming back to Him. God is willing, yea more than willing, to restore the penitent and forgive

the cleansed. In bringing back the faithful remnant from Babylonian captivity, God proves to mankind that His ultimate interest is for men to repent and come back to Him. Truly Peter, by inspiration, knew this, “The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). What a refreshing thought is ours, God is interested in saving humanity (cf. John 3:16-17).

### Conclusion

Truly, “For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope” (Rom. 15:4). God’s message through the prophet Zephaniah teaches the valuable lesson of preparation for God’s judgment makes way for blessings that follow. God’s message to us today is no different. “Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:19)! God help us to be converted through our obedience to the Gospel of Christ (cf. Mark 16:15-16; Acts 2:38; et al.) so that we too can look beyond the coming judgment for the blessings that follow!

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### Biographical Sketch

Rodney Nulph, a native of rural Pennsylvania, upon graduation from high school and trade school spent the next 11 years laboring as an electrician. After much deliberation and prayer, the Nulphs moved to Moundsville, WV, where Rodney attended West Virginia School of Preaching from which he graduated in June 2006. He has worked with the church in Blairsville, PA, and in Proctor, WV. He and his wife Julene are the happy parents of a 4 ½ year old son, Joshua, and a 1 ½ year old daughter, Brielle. Rodney and his family currently work the church in Sandyville, WV.

# God's Judgments On Jerusalem's Gods

Adam Davis

## Introduction

The book of Zephaniah is not an easy book to read. It is not a book you would read before going to bed, unless you enjoy nightmares. Why? Zephaniah proclaims a dark day of destruction



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that he calls “the day of the Lord,” “the great day of the Lord,” “the day of the wrath of the Lord,” and the “day of the anger of the Lord.” What a dreadful day it would be. Zephaniah says,

The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter; the mighty man cries aloud there. A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements. I will bring distress on mankind, so that they shall walk like the blind, because they have sinned against the LORD; their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung. (1:14-17)

I think George Adam Smith summarized the tone of Zephaniah's prophecy well when he said, “No hotter book lies in the Old

Testament. Neither dew nor grass nor tree nor any blossom lives in it, but everywhere is fire, smoke, and darkness, drifting chaff, ruins, nettles, saltpits, with owls and ravens looking from the windows of desolate places” (47).

Zephaniah delivers a strong and serious message to God's people and the world. It is a message that must be heard and heeded by all. The message: Sin will not be tolerated, repent or perish. As we will see, God's desire is not destruction but deliverance (2:33; 3:17). However, Zephaniah understood that earnest warnings are sometimes greatly needed to draw us back to God.

## Historical Context

To understand Zephaniah's prophecy, one must have knowledge of the historical context.

King Hezekiah was followed on the throne by his twelve year old son Manasseh. Manasseh was without doubt the most unrighteous ruler in Judah's history. He did his level best to destroy all the good that his father had done. 2 Kings 21:1-9 says of Manasseh's reign:

Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Hephzibah. And he did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, according to the despicable practices of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel. For he rebuilt the high places that Hezekiah his father had destroyed, and he erected altars for Baal and made an Asherah, as Ahab king of Israel had done, and worshiped all the host of heaven and served them. And he built altars in the house of the LORD, of which the LORD had said, “In Jerusalem will I put my name.” And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the LORD. And he burned his son as an offering and used fortune-telling and omens and dealt with mediums and with wizards. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger. And the carved image of

Asherah that he had made he set in the house of which the LORD said to David and to Solomon his son, “In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name forever. And I will not cause the feet of Israel to wander anymore out of the land that I gave to their fathers, if only they will be careful to do according to all that I have commanded them, and according to all the Law that my servant Moses commanded them.” But they did not listen, and Manasseh led them astray to do more evil than the nations had done whom the LORD destroyed before the people of Israel.

Manasseh was succeeded by his son Amon, who followed in his father’s wicked footsteps.

Amon, whose name was that of an Egyptian god, was twenty-two years old when he became king. His policy was exactly that of his father Manasseh in the beginning of his reign. He went to work to undo the last reforms of his aged father and went to excess in his enthusiastic advocacy of idolatry. His behavior was so disgraceful that his own servants slew him in the second year of his reign (Hester 240).

During the reigns of both Manasseh and Amon, Judah sank to astounding moral and spiritual depths. In the year 640 BC, at the age of twenty-four, King Amon was assassinated by his servants, and his eight year old son, Josiah was made king. At the age of 16 Josiah began his historical reformation.

Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign, and he reigned thirty-one years in Jerusalem. And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, and walked in the ways of David his father; and he did not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. For in the eighth year of his reign, while he was yet a boy, he began to seek the God of David his father,

and in the twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the Asherim, and the carved and the metal images. And they chopped down the altars of the Baals in his presence, and he cut down the incense altars that stood above them. And he broke in pieces the Asherim and the carved and the metal images, and he made dust of them and scattered it over the graves of those who had sacrificed to them. He also burned the bones of the priests on their altars and cleansed Judah and Jerusalem. And in the cities of Manasseh, Ephraim, and Simeon, and as far as Naphtali, in their ruins all around, he broke down the altars and beat the Asherim and the images into powder and cut down all the incense altars throughout all the land of Israel. Then he returned to Jerusalem. (2 Chron. 34:1-7)

Josiah’s reforms were the most extensive of any that were attempted by any king who ever reigned over Judah. In the process of cleansing the temple Hilkiah the priest discovered the lost book of the Law of Moses. Someone has said, “The Bible had been left on the shelf for so long, and ignored, that no one could even remember where it was—or even cared!” When Josiah realized what had been found he assembled all the people of Judah, from the greatest to the least, and read the Book of the Covenant to them (2 Chron. 34:29-30). The temple was cleansed and the Passover was observed with great enthusiasm.

There is a great amount of debate as to when during Josiah’s reign Zephaniah prophesied. Did he preach before, in the middle, or at the end of Josiah’s reformation? It is the belief of this writer that he presented his message before Josiah’s reformation, and may well have had a lot to do with the institution of the king’s reforms. I believe this for two primary reasons. First, if the reforms had already taken place or were currently underway, it seems only reasonable for Zephaniah to make some mention of them. Yet there is not even a single hint of Josiah’s work. Second, it seems clear from reading the book in its entirety that idolatry was extremely rampant. From the language used by Zephaniah it

does not sound as if any reforms have taken place. The high places of the Asherim, the carved and metal images, and the altars of Baal seem to be very much a part of Judah's religious worship.

### **The Consumption of All Things**

"I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth," declares the LORD. "I will sweep away man and beast; I will sweep away the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, and the rubble with the wicked. I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth," declares the LORD. (Zeph. 1:2-3)

Zephaniah begins with a series of statements starting with the phrase "I will." All of which signify destruction. The Lord declares that he is going to consume all things from the face of the earth, birds, fish, and mankind. Of course this is reminiscent of Genesis six, where Moses wrote,

The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them." (Gen. 6:5-7)

Zephaniah's inclusion of the creation is interpreted in various ways. However, I agree with Homer Hailey when he said, "This all-embracing declaration is not to be explained away simply as hyperbole, for other prophets had shown that the animal creation is affected by man's sin (Joel 1:18; Hos. 4:3; Jer. 12:4)" (228-29).

The entire creation suffered from the effects of man's sin. The apostle Paul wrote,

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (Rom. 8:20-23)

David Lipscomb said concerning this passage:

As a result of Adam's sin, the whole creation was cursed and fell away from its original design and became subject to the reign of death....The hope is entertained that when the deliverance comes to the children of God, when they are delivered from the bondage of corruption and from the prison house of the grave, then the whole creation will share this deliverance and be freed from the corruption and mortality to which it has been subjected by the sin of man. It shared the corruption and mortality of man's sin, and will share his deliverance from it. (153)

Man's wickedness was so pervasive that God deemed the destruction of all things necessary. It is amazing the depths to which man's sins reach, especially that of idolatry. It amazes me that man is willing to bow down to the creature rather than the Creator. Man seems determined to worship anything or anyone other than God. Paul said:

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them up

in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. (Rom. 1:21-25)

Jeremiah commented on the ridiculous idea of serving an idol:

Thus says the LORD: “Learn not the way of the nations, nor be dismayed at the signs of the heavens because the nations are dismayed at them, for the customs of the peoples are vanity. A tree from the forest is cut down and worked with an axe by the hands of a craftsman. They decorate it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so that it cannot move. Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good.” (Jer. 10:2-5)

He went on to say, “Every man is stupid and without knowledge; every goldsmith is put to shame by his idols, for his images are false, and there is no breath in them. They are worthless, a work of delusion; at the time of their punishment they shall perish” (Jer. 10:14-15).

When we picture someone bowing down to something that they fashioned with their own hands, we laugh and shake our heads in disbelief. We say to ourselves, “How can anyone be so foolish?” However, idolatry is still alive and well today. While we may not bow down to golden statues or wooden images or the stars of heaven, idolatry is still very much a part of modern society. Our idols are simply found in our hearts. An idol is anything that replaces the one true God in our lives, whether it is money, our jobs, entertainment, sex, or our country. God must be the sole focus of our devotion and worship.

## The Condemnation of Judah’s Idols

I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal and the name of the idolatrous priests along with the priests, those who bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens, those who bow down and swear to the LORD and yet swear by Milcom, those who have turned back from following the LORD, who do not seek the LORD or inquire of him. (Zeph. 1:4-6)

Zephaniah zeros in specifically on the idols of Judah and Jerusalem. He pronounces their utter destruction, starting with Baal. Zephaniah declares that God is going to utterly destroy from Jerusalem the remnant of Baal. Some have concluded that this reference to “the remnant” suggests that the reforms of Josiah had already taken place, that Josiah had been successful in purging Judah from the worship of Baal. Thus, only a remnant remains. However, I believe this is a reference to the total extermination of Baal worship. By the time God is done with these idolaters not even a hint of Baal worship will exist among His people. He will completely root it out. This was accomplished by the Babylonian captivity.

Not only will God annihilate Baal worship, but He will also cut off the “name of the idolatrous priests along with the priests.” The KJV says, “*and* the name of the Chemarims with the priests.” Who are the Chemarims? Homer Hailey comments, “The ‘Chemarim’ were the idolatrous priests of the baalim and high places who had been appointed by the kings of Judah to serve these and to burn incense to the hosts of heaven (II Kings 23:5, cf. margin ASV, also Hosea 10:5)” (229).

God will “cut off” the Chemarim as well as the “the priests.” Who are these priests? Hailey says, “the legitimate priests of the temple who had been unfaithful to Jehovah would share the same fate with the priests of Baal” (229).

Also condemned are those who “bow down on the roofs to the host of heavens.” The reference to the roofs indicates that the worship of idols had become a family affair. Homes in those days were fashioned with flat roofs that were used by the family to relax in the cool of the evening. But it had become a place of worship. “The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough, to make cakes for the queen of heaven. And they pour out drink offerings to other gods, to provoke me to anger” (Jer. 7:18). Jeremiah seems to imply that the idolatrous worship was almost universal as if the worship of the heavenly bodies had profaned every roof top. “The houses of Jerusalem and the houses of the kings of Judah—all the houses on whose roofs offerings have been offered to all the host of heaven, and drink offerings have been poured out to other gods—shall be defiled like the place of Topheth” (Jer. 19:13). “The Chaldeans who are fighting against this city shall come and set this city on fire and burn it, with the houses on whose roofs offerings have been made to Baal and drink offerings have been poured out to other gods, to provoke me to anger” (Jer. 32:29).

Then we have those who “bow down and swear to the LORD and yet swear by Milcom, those who have turned back from following the LORD, who do not seek the LORD or inquire of him.”

These were of a divided loyalty, swearing partly by Jehovah and partly by Malcam. The latter was one of the baalim, whom they reckoned as their king—not an earthly king, but a king among the deities. These claimed to worship Jehovah but constantly had the names of baalim upon their lips. They did not give Jehovah their undivided heart and worship. A third class of worshipers is introduced, those “that are turned back from following Jehovah.” These are utterly indifferent to Jehovah; they have turned back; they have not sought nor inquired after Him. They could not care less for His favor or disfavor. (Hailey 229-30).

## Conclusion

God is a jealous God. He hates idolatry and will not tolerate it among His people or by the world. Zephaniah has clearly declared that God will judge those who divide their loyalties or abandon the one true God. Heaven help us to always seek the Lord and inquire of Him.

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## Biographical Sketch

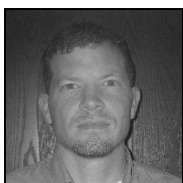
Adam L. Davis was born in Charleston, WV, on September 17, 1979, and raised in Jackson County, WV. He is married to the former Heather Shelburne (2000) of Chester, VA. They have two sons: Joshua (deceased) and Elijah who is 11 months old.

Adam has worked with the Salem Church of Christ in Glen Easton, WV, and the Hampton Church of Christ in Hampton, VA. He presently serves as minister with North Beckley Church of Christ, Beckley, WV.

# *The Sin Of Complacency*

*Brad Poe*

I accept this assignment with gratitude towards the elders who oversee the church of Christ at Hillview Terrace, Gene West who serves as its evangelist and Denver Cooper who directs West Virginia School of Preaching.



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The prophets surely served God. Zephaniah is a gorgeous book and it is my pleasure to contribute to the understanding of 1:7-13.

## **Preface**

The superscription (1:1) contains two useful pieces of data which bring themselves to bear upon the passage of 1:7-13.

First, Zephaniah's pedigree lists four generations, a deviation from the standard (cf. Hos. 1:1; Joel 1:1; et. al.). The genealogy may have been lengthened to include "son of Hezekiah," a king whose career is well documented in Scripture (2 Kings 18:1f; 2 Chron. 29:1f; Isa. 38:1f). Learning this personal background—he is a descendant of royalty—yields a reference point for Zephaniah's perspective and explains why the passage at 1:7-13 shows familiarity with the city of Jerusalem.

A second useful piece of information is the phrase "in the days of Josiah, the son of Amon, the king of Judah." This note time-stamps the prophetic work and gives the reader an historical context for the piece. Josiah is known for his reforms (2 Kings 22:1-23:30; 2 Chron. 34:1-35:27) which requires an accommodation with references in the passage which refer to idolatry and its attendant

vices as happening (1:4-6, 8-9; cf. also 3:1-3, 7). Since Zephaniah's prophecy came "in the days of Josiah," and Zephaniah names vices corrected by Josiah's reforms, there are two possibilities: either the oracle dates during the early, pre-reformation stage of Josiah's reign (ca. 639-621 BC) or the oracle was an agent of reformation utilized by Josiah (ca. 621-609 BC).

## **Declaration: The Day of the Lord (1:7)**

The unit begins at verse 7 with a command for silence, "Hold thy peace at the presence of the Lord God," with a rationale, "for the day of the Lord is at hand."

Anyone who has read the Bible and paid attention is familiar with the expression, "the day of the Lord." By the time of Zephaniah it already has a place in the prophetic vocabulary by the Spirit, appearing in Obadiah (15), Joel (1:15), Amos (5:18f) and Isaiah (2:7ff). The expression retains its value even through the New Testament period of revelation (cf. 2 Peter 3:10). Generally it can be said that the day of the Lord was used to identify an approaching judgment of God which was specified, then, by the context or use by the Bible writer. That is, while Zephaniah and Peter both use the expression and it means God's judgment in both cases, they refer to two different events.

From 1:7 through 2:3, the word *day* is used 16 times which makes it a hermeneutical key to understanding the focus of this unit of prophecy. Zephaniah wants to talk about that day. He warns (1:7-8), describes (1:9-18), and coaxes repentance (2:1-3). The day is near (1:14), universal (1:2-3; 3:9f), and terrible (1:15). But, to which day does Zephaniah refer? While some have hypothesized that the coming judgment was attacks by Scythian marauders, the traditional and favorable interpretation is the approaching fall of Jerusalem to Babylon. Zephaniah's subject is the same as that of his contemporaries Jeremiah and Habakkuk. Thus, Josiah's revolution which dismantled the infrastructure of idolatry and recovered the institutions of the Law was successful but temporary. Judah's downward spiral was irreversible. "The day of the Lord" would come.

The oracle of Zephaniah contains an eerie word picture which expands the prophetic alarm, presenting the day of the Lord as “the day of the Lord’s sacrifice” which He “hath prepared” and to which He “hath bid his guests.” The event of judgment over the horizon is obscured from Judah’s line of vision but it is visible to Zephaniah because of the word of the Lord which came to him. And it will not be what victims think. The bloody raid by the Chaldean soldiers will stand as a legislated ritual, consecrated, having God’s fingerprints all over it. By appearances, it would be a chaotic, messy slaughter; in reality it will be a formal, clean sacrifice. Guilty people almost always see their penalty as unwarranted or deranged; but when viewed within the context of God’s orderly program, their punishment is warranted and sane, the exact right thing for Him to do.

**Description: I Will Punish (1:8-12a)**

Following verse 7 which introduces *the day of the Lord* in Zephaniah’s terms, the oracle begins an elaboration on the day by marking specific classes of people targeted by God’s judgment, namely princes, idolaters, merchants and the complacent.

“I will punish the princes, and the king’s children, and all such as are clothed with strange apparel.” Because Josiah cannot be the direct subject of this statement one is forced to interpret these categories in exclusion of him. Peaceful transitions of power usually happen with some overlap of personnel and staff so the categories can be taken in a broader sense to mean heads of tribes or families, royal princes generally, perhaps any officials left over from previous administrations. *Strange apparel* (foreign dress) either means uniforms of the cultic priests or the habit of copying the style and customs of foreign nations, probably the latter. In any case, rank would not insulate the top tier of society from penalty.

“In the same day also will I punish all those that leap on the threshold, which fill their masters’ houses with violence and deceit.” There is no consensus on the identification of those that leap on the threshold, a phrase that has a variety of interpretations, including these: violent thieves who *leap* over the thresholds at the

doorways to private residences in order to take other people’s property; the superstitious practice of leaping over thresholds to avoid demonic spirits supposedly lurking beneath; the pagan practice of priests of the Philistine deity Dagon (1 Sam. 5:4). Lexical matter favors a pagan ceremony since the word translated *threshold* is a sanctuary in all other Old Testament usage (1 Sam. 5:4; Ezek. 9:3; 10:4, 18; 46:2; 47:1). Immediate context favors thieves since the text adds, “which fill their masters’ houses with violence and deceit.”

“‘And it shall come to pass in that day,’ saith the Lord, ‘that there shall be the noise of a cry from the fish gate and an howling from the second, and a great crashing from the hills.’” The fish gate was located on the north-northeastern section of the city wall around Jerusalem (Neh. 3:3; 7:39; 2 Chron. 33:14), perhaps indicating the direction from which the terror of that day would be initiated. In this case, catastrophe would not come from the south nor would it be a Philistine invasion from the west but a larger, unnamed world empire from the north. More specifically, this verse is predicting the noises which will accompany judgment. There was a certain way that defeat sounded in that age and it sounded like verse 10.

“Howl, ye inhabitants of Maktesh, for all the merchant people are cut down; all they that bear silver are cut off.” The name *merchant people* is literally *Canaanites* an idiom, perhaps a derogatory one, for the Judean market people referring to their idolatrous or corrupt ethics (cf. Hosea 12:7-8). To *bear silver* is to handle money. When Israelite culture turned idolatrous and bad there was a whole, alternative industry that became attached to it, an industry that was very much like surrounding cultures. Besides immoral and relational vices, there were business vices. These included traffic in illegitimate goods or dishonest traffic by dealers and traders in legitimate goods to take advantage of the poor, disenfranchised or weak.

“And it shall come to pass at that time, that I will search Jerusalem with candles, and punish the men that are settled on their lees: that say in their heart, The Lord will not do good, neither will

he do evil.” God’s guarantee to search Jerusalem with candles describes the efficiency and scope of His dragnet. No hiding place—grave, sewer, loft or hole—will allow escape. God will judge methodically and with intentionality. Commentary on who He will judge in this particular announcement is below.

### ***Derelicts: The Men That Are Settled on Their Lees***

This statement at verse 12 contains my assignment, *The Sin of Complacency*.

“The men that are settled on their lees” is a word picture borrowed from the handling of wine. *Lees* or dregs is the solid matter in wine which settles at the bottom of the container, and the wine was usually left on this layer of sediment for a set period of time to enhance flavor, body, odor and color. However, left too long, the liquid becomes syrupy, the color dark and the taste strong. Men that are settled on their lees, then, became a proverb for an undisturbed and complacent condition.

“[The men] who say in their heart, The Lord will not do good, neither will he do evil.” This class of lethargic citizen is further described by a certain false theology, perhaps unspoken but nevertheless formative, which assigns to God the same lethargy which characterizes them. These theologians were helped along by their idols, who did not speak or move (Isa. 41:23; Jer. 10:5) and they assigned the true God to that category. It is often the case that people who refuse revelation and resort to other measures to inform their faith ultimately contrive a *god* that reflects their own lifestyle, and so here. They are sedentary so God must be too.

Every evil age must adopt a god, if it adopts one at all, who is too lazy, distracted, or disinterested to move in their direction so that it can go about its business and do its own thing. But that age must also decide to distrust history, for history contains a record of the action of the one real God in the affairs of men. Hebrew history surely contained such a record. But Zephaniah had contemporaries who wanted to insist that “God will not do,” almost as stupid as insisting that “fire will not burn” or “gravity will not pull,” for God has demonstrated that He most surely will do.

Yet, the indictment against God is narrower. The age did not just think that He will not do, but that “He will not do good, neither will he do evil.” To these He is more than inactive, He is indifferent. When it comes to ethics and justice, not only will God not intervene, He does not care. In morality, God is non-partisan and refuses to choose sides.

Regarding these men, “their goods shall become a booty, and their houses a desolation: they shall also build houses, but not inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, but not drink the wine thereof.” Penalty is coming, not an event they will watch from afar and shake their heads at, but it will strike where they live, in their own backyard. While acquisition of Canaan saw the tribes draw water from wells they never dug, possess homes they never built and eat fruit from orchards they never planted, because of disobedience, foreigners would come to live in their houses and make wine from their grapes, just as God warned (cf. e.g. Deut. 28:39). Verse 13 is the last statement in this unit. Verse 14 repeats the refrain which claims the day of the Lord is *near* from verse 7, although it continues to elaborate upon that big idea, the calamity of God’s judgment which is approaching.

### ***Danger: The Sin of Complacency***

The sin of complacency was addressed by Jesus to The Twelve (cf. Matt. 25:41-46) and by the New Testament writers to the churches as well (cf. James 2:15-16). And it is worth addressing to audiences today.

The environment of every generation is unsuitable for, and a threat to, God’s religion. But every generation has a particular personality or trait that makes it unsuitable and unsafe. That is why God legislated to separate Israel from the nations around her, the church must be in the world but the world cannot be in the church and a Christian must insulate himself from the culture in which he finds himself submerged.

No one is forced to argue, for example, that persecution or poverty or a time of crisis brings unique pressures to bear upon the church. The unfriendly first century conditions which Luke

narrates in *Acts of the Apostles* tested Christianity. Resistance to faith and congregational life applied by a hard and hostile generation, and the dangers that come with it, are apparent. That being said, it is equally inarguable that an easy generation applies its own resistance. That is, Christianity also gets tested when conditions are mild. The absence of persecution, the presence of wealth and a time of luxury can bring its own pressures to bear.

Complacency is a real risk in our age of leisure, and that is not fresh news to any serious modern Christian. Our energy level for works is low. Inertia is in the pew.

There are exceptions, but as a rule, do leaderships in American local congregations deal with church goers who are intimidated or disinterested? How many buildings are empty because people are hiding in caves and how many are empty because people are cocooning at home? Do people not return on Sunday nights because of fear or a ball game? Are they unavailable because they are in jail or because they are fishing, entertaining, golfing, or at the mall?

Bad times tend to produce lean, hard, active disciples and good times end to produce fat, soft, lazy ones.

But here is an application of this text. Complacency is a vice that few people can be talked out of. A Bible lesson will almost never fix it. There is a reason why God used pagan soldiers to push people off their sofas: He could not preach them off. Go ahead, get behind the pulpit this Sunday morning and turn loose a fist-pounding sermon against indifference or in favor of involvement and then in the foyer, those people who shake your hand on the way out the door, see if they come back that night.

Average church goers prefer withdrawal to engagement. But if they will not get up and be ambitious to seek an active spiritual lifestyle then, figuratively speaking, God may strike a match and light a candle to search for them. The undisturbed, sedentary man must be disturbed. Reform sometimes comes only by a big stick. Pain makes us listen. Take joy if life circumstance has shaken you up to get you back out, busy and disciplined again.

A complacent church, “settled on its lees,” is ripe to be bothered and that makes my Christian walk in this age a bit unnerving.

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#### Biographical Sketch

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# *The Call To Repentance*

*Robert Johnson*

## **Not a “Minor” Prophet**

It is my task today to examine the message of God's Servant Zephaniah. His message deserves our time and careful attention for it is “the word of the Lord” which came to Zephaniah (Zeph. 1:1).



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With the inspired Word, Zephaniah was thoroughly equipped for the task God had given him, as we too have all we need with the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Specifically, we will be considering Zephaniah's revelation of God's call for repentance in the first few verses of chapter two. Tradition has assigned Zephaniah to the category of the minor prophets, based on the size of his existing written revelation. But, it should be noted that anyone who boldly speaks the truth of God is of major importance. As we will see, Zephaniah may have had an important influence on one of the greatest spiritual revivals in the history of the Kings of Israel.

Little about Zephaniah's personal life and service to God can be known for certain beyond what is written in his book. There are two questions which usually come up in the study of Zephaniah's writing. First, was he of royal lineage? This is a likely possibility since he alone among the prophets gives a portion of his genealogy, and that going back to someone named Hezekiah (Zeph. 1:1). This position may have provided him some unique opportunities to proclaim the Word of God to those in influential positions. The other usual question is when did he pen the words of this prophecy? We know that it was in the “days of Josiah . . . King of Judah”

(1:1). But was it early in his reign, before Josiah's religious reforms or after the reforms when a “remnant of Baal” (4:1) still infected the hearts of the people of God? Regardless of how these questions are answered, the lessons we can glean from Zephaniah's prophecy are relevant to our time.

## **Judgment Is Inevitable**

Zephaniah's message is dominated by God's certain, inevitable judgment and destruction on Judah, Jerusalem and the heathen nations of Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Ethiopia and Assyria. This judgment is described as the destruction of all life. “I will consume man and beast; I will consume the fowls of the heaven, and the fishes of the sea, and the stumblingblocks with the wicked; and I will cut off man from off the land, saith the LORD” (Zeph. 1:3). It appears that the final judgment is in Zephaniah's view as well as the more imminent destruction and captivity soon to fall upon them from the North in the person of the Babylonians. Coffman points out that the Hebrew for man is ‘adam’ and that ‘land’ should be rendered ‘earth,’ thus making Zephaniah's vision of judgment and destruction big enough to include God's ultimate final judgment of mankind (130). Perhaps he saw the same event later revealed to Peter:

The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall **melt with fervent** heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. (2 Peter 3:9-10, emp. added)

F. C. Eiselen breaks down Zephaniah's judgment as follows:

Concerning this day he says (a) that it is a day of terror (1:15), (b) It is imminent (1:14), (c) it is a judgment for sin

(1:17), (d) it falls upon all creation (1:2, 3; 2:4-15; 3:8), (e) it is accompanied by great convulsions in Nature (1:5), (f) a remnant of redeemed Hebrews and foreigners will escape from its terrors (2:3; 3:9-13). The vision of the book is world-wide. The terrors of the day of Jehovah will fall upon all. (Eiselen 3146)

His serious and sober focus on the doom of the wicked world around him is Zephaniah's primary means of motivation. This has caused some to nickname Zephaniah *puritan* or *protestant* (Yates 165). But his message is not just about destruction which cannot be turned back; it is about individuals responding in meek repentance so that they might be hid from God's wrath when it comes. Yates says Zephaniah "presents the terror and the tenderness of divine love" (163). The certain coming judgment of God should also be a central part of our preaching today if we hope to bring people to repentance.

### **The Challenge of Preaching Repentance**

Zephaniah, along with all the prophets, had before him a challenging task. Preaching which leads to true repentance is a multifaceted process. First of all, it involves an audience who has, by their choices, caused themselves to be separated from God and subject to His anger. It should be good news when a preacher shows them the way back to God's favor and acceptance. But Zephaniah's kind of preaching is not usually received as good news. In fact, God's call to repentance means very little to those who are ignorant of their need to repent, who have become content to do "that which is right in their own eyes."

Since the Garden of Eden, Satan has been assisting willing participants in the creation of new and ungodly standards of behavior. He helps convince them that they can actually benefit by rejecting the Words of God. Those original lies spoken to Eve are believed by most all those who come under the wrath of God for their disobedience: "Ye shall not surely die" and ". . . your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil."

(Gen. 3:4-5). These lies can be summarized this way. God does not mean what He says, nor will He do what He said He would do (i.e. rejecting and rebelling against the authority of God's Word has no bad consequences). The second lie is that rejecting the Words and standards of God leads not to ignorance, but to enlightenment. By doing what you want you will be elevated to *god* status (shall be as gods). Once you have the status of god, then you logically become the one who determines (knows) good and evil. Paul spoke of this Satan-assisted ignorance when he said, "But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: in whom *the god of this world* hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them" (2 Cor. 4:3-4, emp. added).

Before the call to repentance can have any meaning, the prophet must educate the people in God's Word and how they have rejected their Creator. They must be taught how their disobedient lifestyle has angered and brought upon them the anger and wrath of the true God. From God's point of view the matter was simple. His people had not kept their promises and had rejected Him and His Word as the authority in their lives. God's promise of destruction was really a reminder that He keeps His Word.

### **Context: Repent from What**

It is helpful for us to notice some of the spiritual and political conditions of Zephaniah's time. Remember the Nation of Israel was founded on a covenant made with God. God promised them a land, protection and all their needs. They promised God they would honor Him and live in obedience to His revealed will. "And Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD, and all the judgments: and all the people answered with one voice, and said, All the words which the LORD hath said will we do" (Ex. 24:3). They also promised to recognize and serve the Only True God.

I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt

have **no other gods** before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments. (Ex. 20:2-6, emp. added)

Many years had passed since Israel had made this promise. They had come through the period of the Judges, the Kingdoms of Saul, David, Solomon, and the many rulers of the divided kingdoms. By Zephaniah's time the Northern ten tribes of Israel, with their self appointed kings and man-made religion, had already been defeated and carried away into captivity. Judah was not far from the same fate.

As is most often the case, the spiritual condition of a nation is influenced by its leaders. The Chronicles give a detailed account of the deplorable state of Judah in Manasseh's time (Josiah's grandfather):

But [Manasseh] did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD, like unto the abominations of the heathen, whom the LORD had cast out before the children of Israel. For he built again the high places which Hezekiah his father had broken down, and he reared up altars for Baalim, and made groves, and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served them. Also he built altars in the house of the LORD, whereof the LORD had said, In Jerusalem shall my name be for ever. And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the LORD. And he caused his children to pass through the fire in the valley of the son of Hinnom: also he observed times, and used enchantments,

and used witchcraft, and dealt with a familiar spirit, and with wizards: he wrought much evil in the sight of the LORD, to provoke him to anger. . . . So Manasseh made Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to err, and to do worse than the heathen, whom the LORD had destroyed before the children of Israel. And the LORD spake to Manasseh, and to his people: but they would not hearken. (2 Chron. 33:2-6, 9-10)

Manasseh did humble himself before God and make some reforms before his death. Unfortunately, he was followed by his son Amon who “. . . humbled not himself before the LORD, as Manasseh his father had humbled himself; but Amon trespassed more and more” (2 Chron. 33:23). This brings us to King Josiah, the son of Amon, a king who “. . . did that which was right in the sight of the LORD, and walked in the ways of David his father, and declined neither to the right hand, nor to the left” (2 Chron. 34:2). Finally, a God-fearing leader! But, it was too late to save the nation as a whole from the destruction and captivity of which Zephaniah spoke. This had been the hard fact since the days of Hezekiah (Josiah's great grandfather; Isaiah 39:5-8). Judah had a serious problem with idolatry, with not keeping their promises and with rejecting the true God. What should have been an obvious abomination to them was an accepted way of life which destined them to face the wrath of God.

### **The Word of God Neglected**

The nation of Israel had so neglected the word God had given, that the Book containing the covenant had been lost without any obvious concern for its absence. Their forefathers had neglected God's admonition to keep the Word close:

And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou

liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates. (Deut. 6:6-9)

Now they faced the wrath of God, without even fully understanding why. This is where Zephaniah comes in. There is not time to examine every detail of the sins he notes, but we will examine the main themes. Remember that each sin is disobedience to the Word of God by which they had agreed to live.

### **Zephaniah's Summary of Sins: Idolatry and Syncretism**

The exodus from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan should have forever demonstrated the power of the true God of Israel over the powerless imaginary gods of the pagans. But the facts of history did not keep them from their ongoing adulterous affair with the world's gods. Previous reforms had not rid Judah of its idolatry. Judgment is promised against those who still had respect to the Canaanite gods (Baal and Malcham Zeph. 1:4-5). Even worse was the fact that the false gods had been politically correct and tolerated for so long that the people could no longer see a distinction between them and the true God. *Syncretism* is attempting to worship and accept the true God and the pagan deities at the same time, even as equals (Polytheism). Zephaniah pronounced wrath upon them that “worship the host of heaven upon the housetops; and them that worship and that swear by the Lord, and that swear by Malcham [Moloch]” (Zeph. 1:5). They had come to believe that God's creation and the imaginations of men were as equally worthy of worship as God Himself. (They “...worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator” Rom. 1:25).

God forbid that the religious leaders of Israel preach that their God was real and that all others are false! How can we get along with our neighboring nations if we believe that one belief is better than another? (Remember how Solomon supported idolatry to get along with his pagan wives? 1 Kings 11:4-9). How sad it is when

men, in their attempts to please themselves and others, thrust themselves into the wrath and eternal judgment of God. Jehovah will not share His position of being the only true God worthy of worship with His creation or the imaginary gods of men. The true God is a jealous God (Ex. 20:5). Repentance is renouncing what is powerless and vain and standing with what is powerful, real and true before it is too late.

This was not the first time that God's people had thought of Jehovah on the same level as the false gods. In Elijah's epic contest with Baal, the question was simple. Will you stand with the real God, or a powerless imaginary God. “And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? If the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word” (1 Kings 18:21). They would not take a stand because they had not kept the record of the powerful acts of their God before their mind. Fear may also have caused them to stand with Ahab more than God. God had become to them just another powerless object of religious devotion. They were soon reminded of the true God's power.

Zephaniah promises punishment for this same ignorant indifference in his time. How awful when the people of God forget His mighty deeds and get to the point where they actually believe, “The Lord will not do good, neither will he do evil” (Zeph. 1:12). When people come to believe that God is not active in the affairs of men, then there is little motivation to seek and obey Him. Zephaniah points out this symptom of forgetting God when he speaks of those who “are turned back from the LORD; and those that have not sought the LORD, nor inquired for him” (Zeph. 1:6). Continued faith in the true God requires that the faithful be constantly taught and reminded of God's Word (Rom. 10:17). Wrath is predicted for those who did not seek the Lord. The writer of Hebrews echoes the need to be a seeker when he says, “. . . [H]e that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently *seek him*” (Heb. 11:6, emp. added). God can be a rewarder or He can be a punisher, but He is anything but inactive!

Before moving from the sin of idolatry, let us note that much of the temptation to idolatry is the desire to fit in, to be accepted, or to be in style with the world around us. This trend to be like the other religions of the world is the root of many errors in our brotherhood today. Many of our brethren think the idea of holding carefully to the old paths found in God's New Testament as ignorant and foolish. They are too *wise* and *educated* to dwell on the old ways of the past. Zephaniah promised God's wrath on those who had turned from the old ways.

One example of ignoring God's Word from the past had to do with something as simple as the clothes the people wore. Zephaniah pronounces punishment on the "princes and the king's children, and all such as are clothed with strange apparel" (1:9). The wealthy and influential had adopted pagan customs and clothing. And do not be fooled, the clothing they wore did say something about the God they sought to serve. In fact, the Word of God had instructed the Israelites to specifically wear clothing which reminded them to be obedient to God's commands.

And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, and bid them that they make them fringes in the borders of their garments throughout their generations, and that they put upon the fringe of the borders a ribband of **blue**: And it shall be unto you for a fringe, that ye may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the LORD, and do them; and that ye seek not after your own heart and your own eyes, after which ye use to go a whoring: That ye may remember, and do all my commandments, and be holy unto your God. (Num. 15:37-40, emp. added)

Why would Zephaniah mention their pagan clothing? Because God had given instructions concerning their clothing. Instead of reminding them to obey God's commands their clothing revealed their loyalties to pagan gods and customs. God's wrath and punishment awaits those who are deceived into thinking it is okay

to accept ungodly clothing, man made religions and unscriptural religious customs. Jesus spoke of religious devotions which were a waste of time and effort: "But in **vain** they do **worship** me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (Matt. 15:9, emp. added). Careful attention to God's revealed way of serving Him is the only way to honor and show His importance in our lives. We cannot compromise our loyalties to God's Word. "No man can serve two masters" (Matt. 6:24). The Apostle Paul said, "Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?" (Rom. 6:16). The New Testament also promises the wrath of God on idolaters. It should be noted for those of our time that "covetousness . . . is idolatry" (Col. 3:5).

For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no man deceive you with vain words: for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience. Be not ye therefore partakers with them. For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light: (For the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth;) Proving what is acceptable unto the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them. (Eph. 5:5-11)

### Sins Against Their Fellow Man

When people lose their respect for the true God, they also soon lose their respect for those who are created in the image of God. Israel's promise to keep God's Word included keeping the words which had to do with fair and just treatment of their fellow man. When one trusts in worldly things instead of God, covetousness (desire for things) becomes their means to security. They believe that wealth and prosperity can provide them with everything they need. Taking what others have is an easy and preferred way to satisfy their desires. Zephaniah promises punishment to those that

*leap on the threshold* (burglary) and “fill their masters’ houses with violence and deceit” (1:9). He assures them that “neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the Lord’s wrath” (1:18).

The New Testament makes it clear that one’s true love and respect for God is ultimately revealed by one’s love and service to his brethren (Matt. 25:40; John 13:34; 1 John 4:20). God views how we treat others to be vicariously what we are doing to Him (Matt. 25:40). Judah was not just ignoring and mistreating God, they were also abusing those who were made in the image of God, even their own brethren. God’s anger is understandable.

### **Gather Yourselves Together: The Call to Repentance**

Judgment is surely coming. The complete destruction of all living things is certain. Neither the nation of Judah nor any other nation of man shall stand. God’s judgment against the godless world we live in cannot be turned back. But for those who will humbly turn and repent, mercy may still be possible.

Gather yourselves together, yea, gather together, O nation not desired; Before the decree bring forth, before the day pass as the chaff, before the fierce anger of the LORD come upon you, before the day of the LORD’S anger come upon you. Seek ye the LORD, all ye meek of the earth, which have wrought his judgment; seek righteousness, seek meekness: it may be ye shall be hid in the day of the LORD’S anger. (Zeph. 2:1-3)

### **Josiah’s Response to the Invitation**

Let us conclude this lecture with the suggestion that Josiah is a living example of the kind of repentance for which Zephaniah called. It is this same kind of repentance which will also hide us in the day of God’s wrath and judgment of mankind. Zephaniah’s preaching must have had some impact on Josiah “doing that which is right in the sight of the Lord.” One man’s preaching can plant the seed which prepares other men to hear God more fully.

Zephaniah’s words may well have primed Josiah’s thinking for what he was about to find. It was Josiah’s discovery of the neglected Word of God (in the temple renovations) which further educated his heart to true repentance and obedience. Note that full and complete repentance was not possible until the complete Word of God was made known. Josiah’s greatest reforms began with reading and understanding the lost and neglected Word of God. “And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the law, that he rent his clothes” (2 Kings 22:11). Josiah’s personal response when he discovered how he and his people had dishonored and disobeyed the true God was sorrow, grief and humility. This is the response God requires: “For **godly sorrow** worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death” (2 Cor. 7:10, emp. added).

Josiah’s next step was to verify that God meant what He said in the Book concerning His wrath against disobedience and idolatry.

Go ye, inquire of the LORD for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that is found: for great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book, to do according unto all that which is written concerning us. (2 Kings 22:13)

Ignoring the advisers who would have told him that God would not “do good, neither will he do evil,” Josiah with all his being believed that God would keep His Word. Paul reminded the Jewish Christians of his day to think this same way about God’s Word: “. . . [L]et God be true, but every man a liar; as it is written, That thou mightest be justified in thy sayings, and mightest overcome when thou art judged” (Rom. 3:4).

Josiah then made it his priority to gather all the people of Judah together and expose them to the reading of God’s Word.

And the king sent, and they gathered unto him all the elders of Judah and of Jerusalem. And the king went up into the

house of the LORD, and all the men of Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem with him, and the priests, and the prophets, and all the people, both small and great: and he read in their ears all the words of the book of the covenant which was found in the house of the LORD. (2 Kings 23:1-2)

Next, Josiah put the Word of God into action by obeying it. He made his own personal commitment to keep the Word of God with all his heart. The people followed his example. “And the king stood by a pillar, and made a covenant before the LORD, to walk after the LORD, and to keep his commandments and his testimonies and his statutes with all their heart and all their soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. And all the people stood to the covenant” (2 Kings 23:3).

Josiah, at age eighteen, led the people on a journey back to the old paths which God had originally commanded them. He led his people in removing from their sight and their lives all the reminders of idolatry. He then bound on Judah a love for God’s Word and a carefulness to obey which was like no other king before him. Concerning his scriptural keeping of the Passover the Bible says, “And there was no passover like to that kept in Israel from the days of Samuel the prophet; neither did all the kings of Israel keep such a passover as Josiah kept, and the priests, and the Levites, and all Judah and Israel that were present, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem” (2 Chron. 35:18). Sounds like doing things just like the Lord said for them to be done is a good path to follow. Imagine an eighteen year old, with the word of God as his guide, conducting a Passover superior to any King before him. The rest of his life, he led all of Israel to serve the LORD, the God of their fathers (2 Chron. 34:33).

### **Just Like Zephaniah Said**

Here are the main points we have observed in our lesson. Zephaniah delivered the word of the Lord to those facing God’s anger and wrath. They no longer served the God of their fathers, as

revealed in His Word. Josiah found the book given by God in the temple. We see in Josiah a leader with a heart which was humble and ready to believe that God means what He says and will do what He promises to do. He was a leader who was not just a talker, but a “doer of the work” (James 1:25) to the blessing of himself and all his people. This was the repentance Zephaniah had called. Josiah had gathered together many and led them to careful obedience. They would now be hid from the wrath of God to come. But God’s judgment for the past would come after Josiah’s death.

And like unto him was there no king before him, that turned to the LORD with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; neither after him arose there any like him. Notwithstanding the LORD turned not from the fierceness of his great wrath, wherewith his anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations that Manasseh had provoked him withal. (2 Kings 23:25-26)

In conclusion, the Word of the Lord which came through Zephaniah reveals some important realities. God’s judgment and destruction are real and inevitable, and even God-fearing leaders will not be able to turn back the wrath of God on this wicked world. But, those who meekly and humbly submit themselves in repentance to learn and obey the Word of God will find a final place of peace and will be hidden from the wrath and vengeance of God. Josiah found such a hiding place with God, just like Zephaniah had promised. Repentance requires accurate knowledge of the Word of God, believing God means what He says. Repentance is also a commitment to obey the Word with one’s whole heart.

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### **Biographic Sketch**

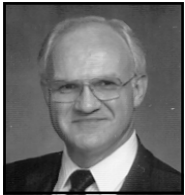
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# God Against Ancient Enemies

D. Gene West

## Introduction

In modern parlance if you were to call a person a “philistine” it would be, for the most of us at least, an insult. For the word has come to mean, according to *Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary of*



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*the English Language*, “a person who is lacking in or hostile to or smugly indifferent to cultural values, intellectual pursuits, aesthetic refinement, etc., or is contentedly commonplace in ideas and tastes” (1454). In other words, we use the term to refer to people who are crude, rude, lewd, and perhaps nude! It is far from being a compliment in any sense of the word. In today’s world the word may refer to a large minority, if not the majority of the people one would meet on the street. We are virtually surrounded by the “philistines” in every community. As a matter of fact, many Americans take pride in “thumbing their noses” at values that many of us hold precious and dear, as did our forefathers, especially those truths of the Sacred Volume.

However, it would probably come as a surprise to many today, especially those who are unfamiliar with the Sacred Scriptures, to learn that a nation of people once existed who wore the name “Philistines.” The Hebrews called them *Pōlishtim*, while the Greeks called them *Philistinoi* and in Latin they were called the *Philistini* (Webster 1454). Philistia was a small, but fiercely war-loving nation which occupied the southeast corner of the Mediterranean Sea, just to the west of Jerusalem, in what today is

known as the Gaza Strip. They seemed to have been a maritime people and remained close to the seashore. Their principle cities or city-states as some call them were Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod and Joppa which were all seaport cities. Inland a few miles they also occupied the cities (city-states) of Gath, Ekron and Beth-dagon. Their principle god was an idol by the name of Dagon, whose temple the awesomely strong Samson pulled down around their ears—and his as well. Perhaps a word about Dagon is appropriate at this juncture, since he was one of the most important Mesopotamian gods of that era.

J. F. Healey wrote an interesting but brief article on this particular heathen god in the *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*. We will draw some information from this source. Healey wrote,

Dagon is the Hebrew form of the name of the god Dagan, who was an important Mesopotamian and West Semitic deity. Dagon occurs as a Philistine deity in the Hebrew Bible, specifically as the god of Ashdod (1 Sam 5:1-7 and 1 Macc 10:83-84; Judg 16:23 [Gaza]; 1 Chr 10:10 [Beth-Shan?]). . . . Dagan is one of the most persistent deities of the world of Semitic religion. His worship is well attested from the third millennium BCE in the Elba texts and he appears in Sargonic personal names, but neither source gives any hint of the precise nature of the deity. . . . Sargon attributed his conquest of Upper/Western Mesopotamia to Dagan and worshipped him in Tuttul. (216)

The Philistines, it seems did not worship him as a god of war as did Sargon, but a god of fish and corn, or grain. He would have been to them a god of both fertility and harvest. Healey continued,

Biblical evidence of Philistine worship of Dagon (below)—the form of the name recorded for this is Dagon, reflecting a shift of *ā* to *ō*—is uninformative in detail, but clearly implies that the deity was taken over by the Philistines as a

national god. We must assume his worship had been wide spread throughout the coastal (corn-producing?) area which the Philistines came to call their own. . . . 1 Sam 5:1-7 contains the most important of the Biblical references to Dagan/Dagon. The passage concerns the bringing of the Ark of the Covenant by the Philistines into the temple of their god Dagon in Ashdod. The introduction of the captured Ark into a temple is meant to be a sign of submission to the god of the particular temple. According to the story in 1 Sam, however, the statue of Dagon fell down (in submission) before the Ark and was smashed. (216, 218)

When and how the Philistines came to occupy this area of Palestine, we do not know, but we do know they came there very early, even before the Hebrews conquered and settled in the Canaan land. They occupied a territory some sixty miles long and thirty-five miles wide at the widest point (southern most border) and twelve miles wide at the most narrow (northern most border) (Guthe 85). Theirs was the land on the coast of the Mediterranean from the Kanah River to the north to the River of Egypt to the south. This area of Palestine is very favorable for habitation. Of this whole area, the unimpeachable N. B. Hardeman in *The Bible Searchlight and the Holy Land* remarked,

The climate of Palestine is about like that of our own Southern Dixie land. A line running from Jerusalem would go through Savannah, Ga., Montgomery, Ala., Jackson, Miss., and on to San Diego, California. The average temperature is 76°. It has but two seasons, viz.: a wet, lasting from November to April, and a dry, from April to November. The annual rainfall is about 48 inches. (276)

When King David subdued these people c. 1000 BC he conquered most of their territory and confined them to the very small area of the cities of Ashdod and its environs down to

Ashkelon and its environs; an area of about ten miles long and five or six miles wide.

### Who Were the Philistines?

They were, according to Genesis 10:6-14, which is the earliest mention of them in the Bible, the descendants of Noah through his son Ham. Ham fathered Cush and Cush Nimrod. The Philistines were descendants of Nimrod through Mizraim who was the father of Casluhim. From this man “came the Philistines and Caphtorim” (Gen. 10:14). In *Zondervan’s Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, D. K. Huttar set forth the following claim: “In the Table of Nations (Gen.10) the Caphtorim are the descendants of Egypt” (749). Hence, the Philistines were probably an early tribe of Egyptians, some of whom settled in the land formerly mentioned, some on the Isle of Crete and some in the area of the Mediterranean world known as Cappadocia. Again, D. K. Huttar reported,

Outside the Bible words similar to Caphtor occur in cuneiform texts of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C. *Kaptara* is described as a land beyond the Upper (Mediterranean) Sea and within the knowledge of Sargon of Akkad. . . . In Egypt. texts about the same time that Linear B replaces Linear A on Crete suggests that *Keftiu* was the Egypt. word for Crete. On this evidence two main theories have been constructed: (1) that Biblical Caphtor is used in the same sense as *Kaptara*, *Kptr*, *Keftiu* and refers to Crete; (2) that the words do not refer to the same place even though they may be related and that Biblical Caphtor refers to Cilicia. In this latter view it is admitted that *Keftiu* means Crete but it finds the closest parallels to the Biblical Caphtorim in Cilicia. (749)

So, we must come to the conclusion that with absolute certainty we cannot know from whence came the Philistines who inhabited the lower eastern shoreline of the Mediterranean Sea. For all we

know, they were a tribe of ancient Egyptians that settled and remained there, since that portion of Palestine, during the Old Egyptian Kingdom (2686-2180 BC) belonged to the Egyptian Empire. That Empire stretched from Syria to the North, past the confluence of the White and Blue Nile Rivers to the South, East as far as the western banks of the Red Sea and West to Libya. Casluhim became the father of both the Egyptians and the Philistines; therefore they had to be a related people. However, in opposition to some of these thoughts Deuteronomy 2:23 indicates that they had not been there from time immemorial, for here Moses wrote, “And the Avim, who dwelt in villages as far as Gaza—the Caphtorim, who came from Caphtor, destroyed them and dwelt in their place.” Unfortunately, he does not tell us when this event occurred. From the statements of Moses in the Deuteronomy reference, the only thing we know is that the conquest of Avim took place some time before the arrival of the Israelites in the Land of Canaan. 1 Chronicles 1:12 confirms the Genesis 10:14 record as does Jeremiah 47:4 and Amos 9:7.

To make a confusing bit of history even more so, we learn that the Cherethites were associated with the Pelethites—the Philistines, according to 1 Kings 1:38. However, the Cherethites were not a nation of people, but a clan of the Philistines (Ezek. 25:16; 2 Sam. 8:18) (Lewis 51) who served as the royal bodyguard of the King, in this case Solomon whom the aged King David had just named as his successor and heir apparent to Israel’s throne. That being the case, they (the Cherethites at least) had become trusted allies and friends of the great King David and his successor King Solomon. From enemies to friends is something that does not often occur! Beyond this we know little. Beyond this we will not go, for Zephaniah speaks not of the beginning of these people, but of their end.

### **The Philistines and the People of God**

The interaction between the Philistines and the people of God actually began long before the nation of Israel was ever formed. Abraham made a covenant with Abimelech king of the Philistines

in Genesis 21:32. Also, we read of Isaac, son of Abraham coming in contact with the Philistines during a famine in the land where he was dwelling. He went to Abimelech king of the Philistines in Gerar and dwelt in that city for a considerable period of time after being warned by God not to go down to Egypt. It was here Isaac lied about Rebekah his wife saying she was his sister. When this matter was cleared up, Abimelech showed great kindness and courtesy to Isaac, commanding his people that if any touched this man and his wife they would be put to death (Gen. 26:12). Isaac stayed in that land, sowed and reaped and became a very prosperous man. Finally, Abimelech commanded him to leave Gerar for he was too mighty for the Philistines, so Isaac departed and dwelt in the Valley of Gerar and reopened the wells of Abraham that had been filled by the Philistines (Gen. 26:8-18).

Since the Book of Genesis concerns itself more with the development of God’s people—Israel—after this, there is not a carefully recorded history of the dealings of the Patriarchs with the Philistines, except for the final incident recorded in Genesis 26:26-31. Here we learn of Abimelech coming from Gerar to Isaac who was dwelling in Beersheba, for he had been driven slowly but surely out of the whole area of the Valley of Gerar. When Abimelech came to Isaac, the great Patriarch wanted to know why he had come since the King had shown all the evidence of hating Isaac and had allowed him to be driven out of his land. Abimelech related to Isaac the Philistines had observed Yahweh was indeed blessing Isaac, so Abimelech wanted to make a peace covenant with Isaac that they would do no harm to one another. Consequently, there was a great feast made to confirm the covenant of peace between them and the next day Abimelech returned home, and here we have the end of the dealings between Abimelech and the Patriarchs. Nearly half a millennium later the Philistines and Israelites would again interact.

After the Israelites settled in the “Promised Land,” they were often at odds with the Philistines, as was previously mentioned in the case of Samson. Others of the Judges found it necessary, with the help of Yahweh, to battle the Philistines, as well as the

Ammonites, Moabites, and Edomites. There were other intruders into the Land of God's people, but we are not concerned with those at this point.

From this background on the Philistines, we wish now to turn to some background material on the great prophet Zephaniah and his prophecy concerning the eradication of the Philistines. Let us begin by looking at:

### **Zephaniah the Prophet**

In an old but valued two volume set of books called *The Bible Educator*, one can read from the pen of Samuel Cox, in volume two, these words concerning our prophet,

In all probability, Zephaniah was a prince as well as a prophet, in virtue of his descent from Hezekiah, the pious king of Judah, who, aided and taught by another royal prophet—Isaiah—wrought a notable reformation in the faith and morals of the chosen people. In the title prefixed to this prophecy his pedigree is traced, through four descendants to a Hezekiah, and abruptly terminates, as though, the name being well known to fame, there were no need to carry it further. Ordinarily, only the name of a prophet's father is given. The fact that, contrary to custom, Zephaniah's pedigree is traced up to his great-great-grandfather is an indication that this ancestor, Hezekiah, was a man whose name was held in memory and honour. We find no Hezekiah known to fame in the Hebrew annals, save Hezekiah the king; and therefore it is probable that the Hezekiah from whom Zephaniah was proud to descend was that devout king who for a time arrested the downward current of Hebrew history. . . . Zephaniah, descendant of King Hezekiah, prophesied "in the days of Josiah, king of Judah," who also set himself, aided by Jeremiah and the other prophets, to reform public faith and morals. Thus Zephaniah serves as a link between Hezekiah and Josiah, the two most godly and zealous monarchs of the later ages of the Hebrew kingdom. (223)

If, indeed, the Prophet Zephaniah descended from the great King Hezekiah, then he would have been a distant cousin to King Josiah in whose reign he prophesied. It would not be beyond the nature of God to use a member of the royal family as a prophet, provided he was willing to denounce the evil of that family, as well as all other evil persons in the Kingdom.

Cox, whose writing leads us to believe he was deeply impressed by the prophet Zephaniah, continued in this vein,

Zephaniah, of whom we know nothing save his pedigree and his function, was raised up and inspired of God to correct these errors; to rebuke these sins; to denounce the judgment of the Lord on all unrighteousness of men; to disclose the merciful intention and purpose of judgment; to exhort men to seek the Lord, in humility and righteousness; to assure them that, if they returned to the Lord whom they had abandoned and denied, the Lord would have mercy upon them and redeem them from all evil. In this task or mission he must have been greatly aided by the zeal and sympathy of the king. (223)

Jack P. Lewis, who among us is a preeminent student of the Minor Prophets, gave us a succinct but thorough introduction to this important book of prophecy in the following words:

The name "Zephaniah" means "He whom Jehovah has hidden." The Greek and Latin Bibles call this prophet Sophonias. His book is the ninth in the sequence of the minor prophets. While there are three men in the Old Testament with this name (1 Chron. 6:36; Jeremiah 21:1; Zeph. 1:1), there is no reason to connect the other two with the prophet. . . . Zephaniah traces his ancestry back four generations (Zeph. 1:1) and is the only prophet to do so. The reason is uncertain, but it has been conjectured that it is because his ancestor Hizkiah is to be identified with King Hezekiah. If so, it should be remembered that Zephaniah

and Hezekiah are separated by about one hundred years. . . . It is often thought that the prophet lived in Jerusalem because of his detailed knowledge of conditions there, which knowledge is reflected in his book. Efforts to determine whether the prophet is old or young are entirely conjectural. Taking a hint from Zephaniah 1:12, artists of the Middle Ages regularly represented Zephaniah as the man with the lamp, searching Jerusalem for sinners to bring them to punishment. We have no further details about the prophet. (46)

The late highly respected Homer Hailey wrote of the man Zephaniah in these clear words,

Zephaniah means “Jehovah hides,” or “Jehovah has hidden,” or “treasured.” This meaning of the prophet’s name has led some to conclude that he was born in the trying time of Manasseh, the wicked son of Hezekiah, who filled Jerusalem with blood (George Adam Smith); however this is purely conjectural. . . . The prophet traces his ancestry back four generations to Hezekiah. This is unusual and indicates that the good king of the days of Isaiah and Micah was the great-great-grandfather of Zephaniah. This would make the prophet of royal blood. . . . Nothing is known of the prophet’s occupation, nor is there anything in his book that indicates what it might have been. His reference to Jerusalem as “this place” (1:4) suggests that Jerusalem was his home. His acquaintance with the conditions of the city (3:1ff.) further confirms this point. (222)

A. Cohen a Jewish Rabbi, in his book *The Twelve Prophets* had this to say about the writing style of the magnificent prophet Zephaniah,

Zephaniah does not rival Isaiah in sublimity, nor match the eloquence and imaginative powers of Hosea. Yet he yields

to none in the impressive and forceful manner in which he delivers his warning that the cloud of retribution will soon burst in a deluge of fire and blood. His harp of inspiration, though not attuned to the finer harmonies of the greater prophets, touches the peaks of oratorical music when he describes the day of reckoning. So graphically does he delineate the visitation that no other prophet can be said to have drawn the picture more realistically. The horror of the scene is heightened by the background of terrifying gloom in which it is set. . . . The style alternates between stern denunciation and soothing comfort; and what he lacks in charm and deep insight into human nature is amply compensated for by the vigour and clarity of his diction. (232)

The style of Zephaniah’s writing does not become a matter of concern for English readers, for it is pretty much as the other writings in the twelve Minor Prophets of our Old Testament. But for those who study in the ancient Hebrew it is a matter of concern and their concern is a boon to us, for we learn of differences in the original that are not apparent in our English versions either new or old. E. Henderson, in his *The Book of the Twelve Minor Prophets with Commentary*, commented on the style of Zephaniah’s writing. He wrote,

In respect to style, Zephaniah is not distinguished either for sublimity or elegance. His rhythm frequently sinks down into a kind of prose; but many of the censures that have been passed upon his language are either without foundation, or much exaggerated. In point of purity it rivals that of any of the prophets. He has much in common with his contemporary Jeremiah, and some, after Isidore, have regarded him as his abbreviator. A careful comparison of the two, however, proves the futility of this hypothesis. Occasionally he borrows the language of former prophets. (321)

As previously stated, style of Hebrew writing is of no great importance to most of the modern students of the Bible who study the Bible in their first language. Consequently, we deem it wise to turn to other matters.

### **The Date of Zephaniah**

We believe that it is important to attempt to ascertain, within a range of years, the date of this great work, because it has a bearing on whom the destroying armies that would come on Judah and Philistia were. It must be remembered that Zephaniah was a *pre-exilic* prophet contemporary with the unrivaled Jeremiah. This helps immeasurably in setting the time of Zephaniah's writing. However, the prophet set the time within a short range when he wrote, "...in the days of Josiah, son of Amon, king of Judah" (Zeph. 1:1). Yet, this statement does not give us exact calendar years. Brother Hailey commented,

Thiele concludes that the reign of Josiah was from 641/640 to 609 B.C. Others place it from 639 to 608 B. C. It was during his reign that Zephaniah prophesied (1:1). Eiselen places the date at 626 B.C.; Robinson places it at 625 B.C. It would be safe to suggest 630 to 625 B.C. as the probable date of his work. If 626 B.C. is accepted, then the ministries of Jeremiah and Zephaniah began the same year. (222-23)

### **The Enemy Who Would Destroy Philistia**

Perhaps, we will do well to look briefly at who the enemy was that Zephaniah saw coming against Judah and Philistia. On this matter, Hailey set out the following thoughts:

Scholars are divided over the occasion that gave rise to his prophesying. Some think it was provoked by the invasion

of the Scythians, who poured south from the northern steppes about this time. These ruthless hordes invaded the Assyrian empire and followed the Mediterranean coast south to the border of Egypt where they turned back. Others think that his prophesying was prompted by the rise of the Chaldean power, which Zephaniah saw as the ultimate threat of a general world judgment. The weight of evidence lends greater credence to the latter view. (223)

To reinforce the final statement of Hailey above we turn again to Jack P. Lewis and find that he has written regarding the same enemy, but in a little different vein. Lewis wrote,

It has been most popular to identify this nation with the Scythians who broke out from near the Caucasus about 630 B.C. Herodotus (*The Histories* I.103-106) tells us of the Scythian invasion of the fertile crescent and of their pressing down to the border of Egypt where they were bought off by Psammetichus I, king of Egypt. On their return they plundered the temple of Celestial Venus in Askelon. Herodotus tells us that their dominion over Asia lasted 28 years. It is known that they joined the Medes and Babylonians in the destruction of Nineveh. . . . The Scythian hypothesis has played a very major role in the interpretation of both Jeremiah and Zephaniah. Its shortcoming is that as far as Judah is concerned, the Scythian menace never really materialized. Herodotus does not speak of an invasion of Judah. While Bethshean is called Scythopolis in an inscription of 218 B.C., there is no evidence that the name actually goes back to a Scythian invasion. With the publication of the records of the Neo-Babylonian empire, it is widely recognized that the time has come to abandon the Scythian hypothesis in the interpretation of Jeremiah. Perhaps the same is also true of Zephaniah. There is no valid reason to make a prophet predict an invasion that never materialized unless the evidence is conclusive that he did so. (47-48)

Since Jeremiah and Zephaniah were contemporaries and were both prophesying in the same place—Jerusalem, one must ask the question, Why would one prophet predict the downfall of the nations of Judah and Philistia by Nebuchadnezzar and the other predict the downfall of the same nations at the hands of another nation twenty to forty years earlier? Jeremiah specifically said that Judah would be carried away by Babylonia. From Jeremiah 27:6 we read, the prophet’s unequivocal quotation from Yahweh which said, “And now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, My servant; and the beasts of the field I have also given him to serve him.” Would not “all these lands” include more than the just the Land of Judah? Is not the use of the plural here indicative of the fact that Jeremiah spoke of more than a single land? If that is the case, then all the lands would fall during the same invasion by the Babylonian hordes. We believe that to be the case.

#### **When was Zephaniah’s Prophecy of Philistia Fulfilled?**

Since the Scythian invasion did override the nation of Philistia, one is tempted to conclude that Zephaniah speaks of that invasion. However, there is one fly in the apothecary’s ointment. Three other prophets, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Amos all spoke of the destruction of Philistia. It is evident that both Jeremiah and Ezekiel spoke just preceding the fall of Jerusalem and their language indicates that Philistia is still standing as a nation, but will fall in the very near future. If Amos prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (786-746 BC), even if he prophesied during the last years of Jeroboam (760-750 BC) (Yates 7), one could not use his prophecy of the downfall of Philistia to satisfy the statements of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Ezekiel prophesied against Philistia in 26:15-17 in these words,

Thus says the Lord GOD: “Because the Philistines dealt vengeance and took vengeance with a spiteful heart, to destroy because of the old hatred, therefore thus says the Lord GOD: I will stretch out My hand against the

Philistines, and I will cut off the Cherethites and destroy the remnant of the seacoast. I will execute great vengeance on them with furious rebukes; and they shall know that I am the LORD, when I lay My vengeance upon them.”

It should be noted that Ezekiel spoke of a “remnant of the seacoast” that would be destroyed, which would allow for an earlier invasion by the Scythians or Egyptians, or both, that had brought this vengeful nation to its knees, so to speak, but Jeremiah 47:1-7 spoke of a future attack from the north, even before Pharaoh attacked Gaza. Andrew W. Blackwood, Jr. makes this comment on the Pharaoh smiting Gaza. He wrote, “Verse 1 dates it *before Pharaoh smote Gaza*. The Talmudic *Seder Olam* says that Pharaoh attacked Gaza after failing to relieve Jerusalem from Nebuchadnezzar” (292). If the Talmudic *Seder Olam* is historically correct, then the fall of Gaza of which Jeremiah spoke would have to have taken place in late 585 or early 586 BC. This is too late to correspond to the Scythian invasion of the coastland. The fall of Philistia would then come, according to this oracle, at the same time as, or just after the fall of Judah.

This suggests a further question for consideration, which is: Is there any record of the Babylonian armies ever returning to Palestine after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC? Or, one might also ask if there is any record of Babylon’s invasion of Moab, Ammon, Edom, Egypt, Philistia, or Phoenicia while they were in the area during or after the fall of Jerusalem? The Bible records, as one might expect, close with the fall of Jerusalem, although both Jeremiah and Ezekiel speak of the fall of the above-mentioned nations after they finished their record of the fall of Judah. Consequently, we must turn to secular history rather than Sacred.

George Rawlinson in the third volume of his *The Five Great Monarchies of the Ancient Eastern World* informed us that Nebuchadnezzar conquered the great and proud city of Tyre in 585 BC. He had besieged this city for a full thirteen years when she fell to him. Thus we learn that while the ominous war-lord of the Neo-Babylonian Empire was in the area of the world that we today

refer to, generally, as Palestine, he was prosecuting more than one war. Rawlinson further suggests that when Nebuchadnezzar saw the fall of Jerusalem was imminent, due to the capture of Zedekiah, he left Riblah and traveled to encourage his troops in the siege of Tyre (53, 54). This would certainly explain why Nebuzaradan, Nergal-Sharezer, Rabmag (Jer. 39:3), and other Babylonian officials were left in Jerusalem for the “mopping-up” operation and there is no mention in Scripture of Nebuchadnezzar’s visiting the city to see his accomplishment. Rawlinson also wrote, “Such—so far as they are known—were the military exploits of this great king. He defeated Neco, recovered Syria, crushed rebellion in Judæa, took Tyre, and humiliated Egypt” (55). The crushing of Judæa, the taking of Tyre, and the humiliation of Egypt all took place between the years of 585 and 570 BC. It seems only reasonable to this student that as he was moving his armies through the small and unprotected countries mentioned by Zephaniah, including Philistia, he would simply have destroyed them as well, making a clean sweep of the whole area, thus fulfilling every prophecy God had spoken regarding these nations through His prophets, Amos, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zephaniah, and making it unnecessary to return to that area of the world. No prophecy of God has ever failed, even if we cannot find the day and the hour in which it took place. Man may blunder in his efforts to satisfy his need for a neat calendar and miss the whole point of God’s perfect prophecies.

#### **A Brief Look at the Text of Zephaniah 2:4-7**

For all the grief the Philistines brought on the people of God down through the centuries when they had occupied neighboring territories, God decided to destroy this people once and for all. This may seem very strange to us today, but it must be remembered the people of God would soon go into Babylonian captivity, and when they returned God intended they should no longer be molested by such nations as the Philistines. This was, though we may not see it, a part of God’s plan to introduce His Son into the world to bring salvation to all who will submit to Him.

We begin by setting forth the passage we will briefly review:

For Gaza shall be forsaken, and Ashkelon desolate; they shall drive out Ashdod at noonday, and Ekron shall be uprooted. Woe to the inhabitants of the seacoast, the nation of the Cherethites! The word of the LORD is against you, O Canaan, land of the Philistines: I will destroy you; so there shall be no inhabitant. The seacoast shall be pastures, with shelters for shepherds and folds for flocks. The coast shall be for the remnant of the house of Judah; they shall feed their flocks there; in the houses of Ashkelon they shall lie down at evening. For the LORD their God will intervene for them, and return their captives.

House pointed out that “the prophet’s third speech concludes with a new part of the plot, the judgment of foreign nations. Yahweh is in control of all peoples. Zephaniah singles out Philistia, a traditional enemy, as the first recipient of condemnation, and others are added later” (65).

In addition to House’s general statement regarding what is going on in this passage of Scripture, we wish to add another by John Phillips a staunch Premillennialist. He wrote as follows: “Judah was encircled by its hereditary foes. The prophet foresaw that the nations surrounding Judah would take sardonic satisfaction in seeing the hated Jews being carried off into captivity and their country being reduced to a heap of rubble by Nebuchadnezzar” (233). Phillips sees this prophecy as about to be fulfilled again, since the modern nation of Israel is surrounded by anti-Semitic nations. We fear Mr. Phillips is in for a rude awakening. How can an already *fulfilled* prophecy be fulfilled again, if the word “fulfilled” has any meaning?

However, regarding Zephaniah 2:4 Phillips did make this interesting comment,

Taking in the coastland, Zephaniah wrote, “Gaza shall be forsaken, and Ashkelon a desolation: they shall drive out

Ashdod at the noon day, and Ekron shall be rooted up” (2:4). Here the prophet addressed four of the five great Philistine cities. The fifth, Gath, had made a fiefdom of Judah by both Uzziah and Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 26:6). The vision of Ashdod being driven out at noon is interesting. Noon is the hottest time of day, the customary time for a siesta, not a likely time for an invasion of an ancient oriental land. So the reference to “the noon day” must have indicated that disaster would fall on the enemy when least expected. (233)

The language of Zephaniah is not difficult to understand. He is simply saying, from north to south the land of Philistia will be utterly destroyed. On this matter Motyer made an interesting comment when he wrote,

Zephaniah presents a stylized picture of Philistia, tracing the cities from north to south, for he is not thinking of Philistia as the historical entity of his own day but using it as an eschatological picture. It is as if he were saying, Here is a principle that will govern the final settlement of world affairs in the day of the Lord. (931-32)

Though Motyer seems to want to make the “day of the Lord” apply only to the end of all time, there have been many days of the Lord, or days of judgment mentioned in the Scriptures. This is one of those days—a day when Judah and all the surrounding nations are brought under the judgment of God who used the Babylonian army to defeat all. Zephaniah even spoke of this judgment being a day of the Lord (1:7). However, it should not be forgotten that we learn from Jeremiah, chapters 50 and 51, that there was a great day of judgment coming on the nation of Babylon as well when her capital city would be reduced to nothing more than a heap of rubble. Zephaniah speaks, stylized or otherwise, of the total destruction of Philistia. We should also remember that the judgment of God on Philistia came right after the general call to repentance found in the first three verses of this chapter.

Turning our attention now to verse five we read, “Woe to the inhabitants of the seacoast, the nation of the Cherethites! The word of the LORD is against you, O Canaan, land of the Philistines: I will destroy you; so there shall be no inhabitant.” Zephaniah began this verse by pronouncing a curse (woe) on the inhabitants of the seacoast, which is but another way of referring to Philistia. On this matter Orelli wrote, “The Philistines are called, after the geographical position of their country, inhabitants of the *region by the sea*” (269). He continued, “*Canaan*, their land is called, not merely because it lies at one end of Canaan, but because this name, ‘lowland,’ originally belonged to the flat coast-land, especially the Phœnician, but also, as it seems, to the Philistine” (268).

Next Zephaniah referred to these people as, “The nation of the Cherethites.” Many if not most commentators say that Zephaniah is simply referring to these people as Cretans, thus designating the part of the world from which they came. We take a different view. It is our contention that Zephaniah is reminding these people of a time—the days of David and Solomon—when they lived in cooperation and harmony with the Israelites, the men of the clan of the Cherethites serving as bodyguards to the two greatest kings Israel ever had. The prophet, it seems to us, is reminding these people of all they have lost and is telling them of all they will lose when it comes time for the armies of Nebuchadnezzar to sweep south from Tyre to Egypt. Though they once guarded the greatest of Israel’s kings (2 Sam. 8:18; 15:18; 20:7, 23; 1 Kings 1:38, 44; 1 Chron. 18:17) this will not stop the onslaught that is coming in the near future.

The prophet continued, “The word of the Lord is against you, O Canaan, land of the Philistines. . . .” Canaan is no doubt used here to refer to them as people of the lowland as we noted earlier from the comments of Orelli. It also may serve as a reminder to these people that they were not Semitic, or the people of God in any sense of the word. They were Canaan in the sense that they were idolaters as were all the Canaanite tribes that inhabited the land before the coming of Israel. The Philistines were not one of the Canaanite tribes, although they did inhabit a portion of the Canaan

Land and had for hundreds of years. A comment from *The International Critical Commentary* on Philistia being called Canaan is appropriate, “In the Egyptian inscriptions, the name Canaan is applied to any part of the land of Palestine; but nowhere else in the OT. does it denote Philistia alone. . . . Here it may have been used as an opprobrious epithet, stigmatizing the Philistines as rascally traders” (Smith 217).

The message to these people is “the Lord is against you.” Since time immemorial these people had stood against the people of God, and therefore against Yahweh as well. But it is time for the tables to be turned and Yahweh is against them and that surely spells nothing but disaster.

But God made the message abundantly clear when the prophet quoted Him as saying, “I will destroy you; so there shall be no inhabitant.” Scholars tell us the word “destroy” in this passage means that God would cause these people to utterly perish from the Earth. The extent of the destruction would be so complete that “there shall be no inhabitant.” The land would be utterly desolate of Philistine inhabitants! God was in the very process of bringing about the ruin of this semi-savage nation.

We come now to Zephaniah 2:6 which reads, “The seacoast shall be pastures, with shelters for shepherds and folds for flocks.” In order to understand the import of this verse, we must remember that there was a very important trade route to the south east which crossed Philistia from her seaport cities. What the verse is saying, in effect, is that all the commerce formerly known by Philistia will be completely destroyed along with the nation. O. Palmer Robertson in his commentary on Zephaniah made these astute comments:

The prophet expands on his description of the effects of the devastation of Philistia. Instead of continuing as a commercially favored territory through which the major trade route connecting three continents perpetually passed, this seacoast will be reduced to open pastureland, totally void of commercial enterprise. All the age long endeavors

of the Philistines to establish and maintain this flourishing commercial center will be vain. (300)

Hence, where business, commerce and wealth once flourished, when God completed His destruction of this ancient enemy of Israel, their land would be used for the pasturing of sheep and the huts (caves) of the shepherds who tended them. What a fall from greatness this would be, especially from the viewpoint of the Philistines!

Theodor Laetsch, while essentially saying the same thing as Robertson, nevertheless put the matter very succinctly when he wrote,

Instead of a mercantile, belligerent people inhabiting the land, seeking to heap up riches for themselves to increase their own power, there “shall be dwellings and cottages for shepherds and folds for flocks.” “Dwellings,” the Hebrew term denotes primarily the temporary resting places or settlements of nomads and shepherds, and often acquires the sense of pasture, meadow. “Cottages” (Gr.N.), most probably caves, natural or artificial, in which shepherds and sheep sought shelter at night or in stormy weather. And here these terms are to be taken not in a merely physical sense, but in a nobler, spiritual sense. . . . (368)

Laetsch also commenting on the history of the destruction of the area known as Philistia, made these telling and interesting comments:

Time and again these cities [those mentioned in this text] were destroyed during the many wars that ravaged Palestine in the centuries following this prophecy. Pharaoh Necho devastated Philistia (Jer. 47:1-7); Alexander the Great depopulated Gaza and repopled it from the neighborhood (Arrian, *Anabasis* II, 27). Later Philistia became a Syrian province and in the Maccabean

wars was raided and ravaged repeatedly by the Jews (1 Macc. 5:68; 10:67-68; 11:60ff; 13:43ff.). About 65 B.C. Pompey incorporated Ashdod and Gaza as free cities in the Roman province of Syria. (368)

The Philistines were totally defeated, more than once after Nebuchadnezzar and they never rose to power again. If their descendants can even be found today, the DNA detectives have not yet done so. The prophecy was fulfilled to the “nth” degree, as has been the case with every prophecy given by God, and few if any given by mere men.

This brings us to the final verse in our text which reads as follows: “The coast shall be for the remnant of the house of Judah; they shall feed their flocks there; in the houses of Ashkelon they shall lie down at evening. For the LORD their God will intervene for them, and return their captives” (Zeph. 2:7). This final verse is not only prophetic so far as the physical aspects of it are concerned, but it has spiritual overtones as well.

This portion of the prophecy no longer speaks of the annihilation of the nation of Philistia; rather it speaks of conditions that would exist once the children of Israel have returned from the seventy years captivity. It is a passage filled with hope, not for Philistia for she must be punished for her rebellion against God and the persecution of His people, but for the “remnant” who would return from the captivity to possess the land again, as God made the final preparation for the advent of His Son and the presentation of the Kingdom to the world. On this matter Robertson commented to the effect,

Now a new perspective on the judgment of Philistia is introduced. A new motivation for repentance on the part of the nation of Judah also emerges. For the first time the prophet mentions explicitly the expectation that a *remnant* shall remain. After the judgment of God has passed through, some community shall be left. . . . To this remnant shall be granted the full possession of the land of promise, including

the *territory* of the Philistines. The blessing of the law book of Deuteronomy shall be renewed, for they shall dwell in houses they had not built. As a flock under the protection of the Almighty, *among the houses of Ashkelon in the evening they will lie down*. Neither wild beasts nor marauding bands shall threaten their security. (300)

Willis made some interesting remarks on this portion of the verse when in his commentary of this magnanimous prophet he wrote:

The idea of a remnant (Heb. *Shě’ērît*) for Israel was introduced when the Assyrians were a threat to the divided nation. Northern Israel would be taken (721/722 B.C.) and Southern Israel, Judah, would remain as a remnant (2 Kings 19:31; 21:14; Isa. 37:4, 32). Jerusalem was not destroyed as it would be after some 115 to 130 years. Ezekiel asked a question similar to that of Abraham. “Ah, Lord GOD! Wilt thou destroy all the residue of Israel in thy pouring out of thy fury on Jerusalem?” (9:8; cf. Gen. 18:23-33). Habakkuk prayed (and/or sang). “In wrath remember mercy” (3:2). Zephaniah’s prophecy of a remnant showed Judah that God would still extend his mercy toward his people (cf. Jer. 23:3; 31:7; Amos 5:15). After the prophesied seventy years of Babylonian captivity (Jer. 29:10; cf. Dan. 9:2), God let a remnant return to Palestine under his shepherd, the Persian king Cyrus (Isa. 44:28; 2 Chron. 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4). Sadly, the remnant had to be reminded of its special status by other prophets (Hag. 1:12-14; 2:2ff.; Zech. 8:6-12). Zephaniah prophesied that they would return to Palestine and **feed thereupon: in the houses of Ashkelon**. They would rest and **lie down in the evening** in the land. This time, **the LORD their God shall visit them**, not with a visitation of judgment (Heb. *pāqād*, see commentary on “visitation” at 1:2), but of inspection, overseeing, blessing,

and “care” (LXX-E; cf. Exod. 3:16; 4:31; Job 31:14; Ps. 8:4). (194)

The final portion of this passage closes with the strong declaration that these things would most certainly come to pass, “For the LORD their God will intervene for them, and return their captives.” The word “for” here carries the import of “because.” All the things regarding Philistia mentioned by Zephaniah would certainly come to pass because Yahweh would intervene, act in behalf of, the exiles and return them as former captives to live in their land which would include Philistia. It must be emphatically asserted that when God acts on behalf of His people, the desires of His heart are carried out, no matter how impossible they may look to man. Robertson made an extended comment on this sentence, but one that deserves our attention,

The prophet does not further identify this remnant that shall survive the devastating judgment of God. Apparently they are the “humble” that have “sought the Lord” as described earlier (cf. 2:3). . . . The meek shall inherit the earth (cf. Matt. 5:5). This possession shall come as a gift of the Lord, even as the original possession of the land was a precious grant. Although many sad calamities would have to be undergone before the territory of Philistia would be possessed, the assurance of the Lord’s word must have provided significant encouragement for the “humble” to “seek humility” (Zeph. 2:3). . . . Earlier the prophet had spoken of the “visitation” of God in terms of future salvation. When the Lord moves into action on behalf of his people, he shall revive lost blessings. (301)

## Conclusion

There are two or three lessons that need to be emphasized for the modern reader. Though they are rather obvious to all, yet they need to be accentuated. (1) It is a dire mistake to become an enemy of God, for He has never been bested in any battle with mere man. (2)

If one does become an enemy of God, he can reject that stance and become God’s friend at any time, and he shows great wisdom in doing so. (3) Those who choose to remain God’s enemies can reasonably expect to be punished by a loving God who will not suffer rejection and enmity forever. To think He will do so is folly raised to its highest power! It is much better to die at peace with God than have to utter such words as were uttered by a Duke of Buckingham, an avowed atheist on his death bed, “I sported with the holy name of heaven. Now I am haunted by remorse, and, I fear, forsaken by God” (qtd. in Lockyer 94).

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## Biographical Sketch

D. Gene West was baptized into Christ by the late Jess W. Nutter, April 11, 1950 and began preaching in February, 1953. He currently serves the Hillview Terrace Church of Christ in Moundsville, WV. He also teaches English Grammar, Hebrews, Philippians, Philemon, Romans, Galatians, Ezekiel, Acts, Jeremiah, Lamentations, and Revelation at West Virginia School of Preaching. This school, which has sent out nearly 53 preachers in the last eleven years, is a work of the Hillview Terrace church in cooperation with other churches and interested persons.

He and his wife, the former Shirley Bissett are the parents of three children, Kandi Davis, Mary Amy Kessinger, and Todd C. West. They are the grandparents of six grandchildren. He graduated Freed-Hardeman University, West Liberty State College, Fairmont State University, and has done graduate work at Southern Christian University and West Virginia University. After nearly ten years of intense study, in 2005 brother West authored a moderate preterist commentary on the Book of Revelation entitled: *Avenging His Holy Saints, Apostles and Prophets*. It is a hardbound book of some 847 pages, including the indices. He previously authored *Messianic Prophecy Outlined*, which has now gone through its fourth printing. He is also the author of tracts on Islam, the Names of God, one on Homosexuality and some others.

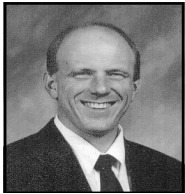
He holds an average of four Gospel meetings per year, speaks frequently on brotherhood lectureships and makes bi-annual missionary trips to the British Isles where he works mostly with churches in Scotland and England. He gave minimal assistance to the British brethren in the publication of a wonderful anthology, edited by brother Joe Nisbet of Aberdeen, Scotland, entitled *Historical Survey of the Churches of Christ in the British Isles*, and serves as American agent for the sale of that great book.

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# *The Pride Of Idolatry*

*Andrew J. Robison IV*

Idolatry—the placement of priority on any entity or idea above the one true God—is a sin whose temptation’s core is a thinly disguised avenue of “the pride of life” (1 John 2:16). The worship of graven images, self, false philosophy, and even money (Col. 3:5)



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often pose as humility to some sort of perceived deity. The practice, however, needs exposed as the height of human arrogance.

## **The Pride of Idolatry in Zephaniah’s Text**

Zephaniah’s second chapter highlights the hubris of the various enemies of Israel. From the West (the Philistine cities, vv. 4-5), the East (Moab and Ammon, vv. 8-9), the South (Ethiopia, v. 12), and the North (Assyria, vv. 13-14), insults and arrogant threats had been hurled against God’s people. God was ready to punish these idolatrous nations for this (vv. 10-11). It was the idolatry of these peoples that made them so audacious against the true God of Israel and the world. Consider some examples:

The descendants of Lot and his incestuous daughters (Gen. 19:30-37), Moab and Ammon, consistently wrought havoc against the Israelites. The king of Moab sought diligently to hire a diviner to curse the children of Israel (Num. 22-25). This Balaam, though, could not utter such a curse due to the controlling power of God. God made a donkey talk to Balaam, and God forced Balaam to utter only blessings toward Israel. This, though, did not dissuade the arrogance of the diabolical duo (Balak the king, and Balaam

the sorcerer, Num. 22:7; 24:1). He who loved the wages of unrighteousness (2 Peter 2:15), counseled (Num. 31:16) the sensuous solicitation of Israelite men with the immoral women of Moab and ally Midian. Since he could not get the job done through a plain old sorcerer’s curse, he resorted to playing to the pleasures of lustful men. And it worked. Israel committed the sin and many died in the Lord’s justly ensuing plague (Num. 25; 1 Cor. 10:8). Such persistence is explicable only by irrepressible pride.

A later king of Moab, Mesha, exhibited the pride and degradation of idolatry by claiming himself to be the son of Chemosh, the Moabite god (on the Moabite Stone, discovered in 1868, which offers a secular parallel of the sacred record in 2 Kings 3) (Nicol, “Chemosh” 602), and offering his eldest son as a human sacrifice in a vain plea for deliverance (2 Kings 3:26-27). Why would people so fight against the inevitability of eventual submission to the overriding will of the one true God? One struggles for an answer other than simplistic pride. Unfortunately, this pride worked its way through the lust of the flesh into Israel on more than the occasion of Balaam. Solomon, due to his love of his foreign wives, erected an altar to “Chemosh, the abomination of the Moabites” (1 Kings 11:7). Such pride would not go unpunished. The people of Chemosh (Jer. 48:46) had many judgments pronounced against them throughout the prophets (Jer. 48; Isa. 15-16; Ezek. 25; Amos 2), including the text of Zephaniah 2.

Moab’s twin, Ben-Ammi, fathered a people no less hostile to God and His chosen nation. Ammon, with Moab, were oppressors of Israelites during the era of the Judges (Judg. 3, 10-11). They had their bouts with Saul (1 Sam. 11, 14:47) and David (2 Sam. 10). Then, Solomon again capitulated to the desire of his wives by honoring the Ammonite abomination, Molech (1 Kings 11:7). This Molech infected the children of Israel down through the time of Manasseh, claiming countless infant sacrifices (2 Kings 21:6; 23:10), even against the express warnings of God early in Israel’s formation (Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5). It is thought that the several mentions of Israelites passing children through the fire are a direct

reference to the heathenish practices of the followers of the dark god Molech (Nicol, “Molech” 2074). God would penalize these pagan nations’ pride (Zeph. 2:8-9).

Assyria’s religion focused on “the national god Asur or Assur, whose high priest and representative was the king” (Sayce 292). This warrior-god was supposed to be the leader of this military people. The pinnacle of their pride is shown in the military invincibility they claimed against the God of Israel in the record of Sennacherib’s siege of Jerusalem (2 Kings 18-19; 2 Chron. 32; Isa. 36-38). The messenger of Assyria’s king called to the people of Judah:

Has any of the gods of the nations at all delivered its land from the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim and Hena and Ivah? Indeed, have they delivered Samaria from my hand? Who among all the gods of the lands have delivered their countries from my hand, that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem from my hand? (2 Kings 18:33-35)

The great error was in equating the God of heaven with the gods of men’s imaginations. And it was compounded by the presumption of the Assyrian king’s superiority over the God of all the Earth. Their pride, indeed, was a prelude to their fall. One hundred eighty-five thousand Assyrians were struck dead in one night and Jerusalem, humble before God, was spared (2 Kings 19:35-36). The audacious king met an inauspicious end (2 Kings 19:37).

According, again to Zephaniah, the Assyrians would meet doom for their arrogance (2:13-15).

### **Pride, Idolatry, and Forced Submission**

The Bible is clear that pride is a cause of idolatry. Gentiles of old, who should have known God by their observation of His design in nature (Rom. 1:20), chose rather to “worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom. 1:25). Note the shameful,

demeaning progression of these Gentiles. Choosing not to glorify God, and exchange the truth of God for the lie, God gave them up to practice their vile passions, tying themselves up ever more tightly in the consequences of their sin (Rom. 1:18-32). They could have saved themselves from such debasing suffering, but they simply chose their way over the Lord’s, blatantly eschewing the principles of Jeremiah 10:23 and Proverbs 3:5-6.

The Bible is equally clear about the consequences of such pride. Ezekiel records that Judah “set up idols in their hearts” (14:3), and thereby nullified their right to appeal to God in time of need (cf. Judg. 10:11-14). This separation from God could only lead to more idolatry in consequence (unless those evil hearts found penitence). The inspired record speaks of desperate people willing to sacrifice the last shred of dignity to continue appealing to the gods they have created. Like Saul, who, after the Lord had departed from him, sought counsel through a witch (1 Sam. 28), those who expend their effort to make their idols trap themselves in the foolish plight of bowing to the thing they have made. Isaiah paints the mocking picture of men who cut down a tree, burn half of it in the fire, and form the other half into an image to which they fall down and pray, “Deliver me, for you are my god!” (44:13-17). This utter foolishness (cf. Rom. 1:22) is due to the judgment of God:

They do not know nor understand; For He has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, And their hearts, so that they cannot understand. And no one considers in his heart, Nor is there knowledge nor understanding to say, “I have burned half of it in the fire, Yes, I have also baked bread on its coals; I have roasted meat and eaten it; And shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?” He feeds on ashes; A deceived heart has turned him aside; And he cannot deliver his soul, Nor say, “Is there not a lie in my right hand?” (Isa. 44:18-20)

Professional psychoanalysis aside, any Bible student can ascertain the progression. Men are too proud to submit to the will

of God. Being religiously-minded creatures, though, they seek worship of something. They form, first in their hearts, a god who will demand no more than they want to give. They digress to actually make an image with their hands. By the time they have spiraled downward this far, they are so bound up in sin that pride will not permit them a return to sensibility (cf. Prov. 11:2). They have invested too much of themselves.

This spectacle of fallen men is tragic. They end up being in self-imposed submission to a nothingness they have imagined. "...they shall be ashamed because of their sacrifices" (Hos. 4:19). The "harlotry, wine, and new wine" that accompany these idolatrous practices "enslave the heart" (Hos. 4:11). They are like stubborn calves (Hos. 4:16) in their refusal to recognize their idiocy and repent. They will not submit of their own volition. But the day will come when they will. They will end up being in a desperate condition in eternity, when they will realize the Deity and oneness of the true God. The eternal regret of self-imposed submission to idols will begin in the day of forced submission to Jesus Christ (Philip. 2:9-11).

How much better it would be to submit to God at the first. Notice the contrast within the 115<sup>th</sup> Psalm: Verses four through seven point out the helplessness of the idols. Verse eight describes the condition of the idolaters: "Those who make them are like them; So is everyone who trusts in them." But, verses one through three show the up-front humility of those who choose to submit themselves to God at the first: "Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, But to Your name give glory, Because of Your mercy, Because of Your truth. Why should the Gentiles say, 'So where is their God?' But our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases."

### **Pride and Modern Idolatrous Parallels**

The idolatry of Moab calls to the student's mind the immorality with which Balaam eventually deceived the people of God (Rev. 2:14), and the witchcraft he sought to use. As per Solomon's observation "there is nothing new under the sun" (Eccl. 1:9), it is pertinent to observe that immorality and witchcraft rear their despicable, idolatrous heads against God to the present day.

One might observe the lasciviousness of American society and rightly conclude an obsession with illicit sensuality. Whereas ancient cults worshipped their various goddesses of fertility with rites of ceremonial prostitution, modern America seems to, as the cliché goes, "skip the middle man," and directly worship extramarital sex itself. But there are those who advocate by their fiction a return to the days of the worship of "the sacred feminine." This was an overriding theme in Dan Brown's 2003 bestseller, *The Da Vinci Code*. This phenomenon, though, is not reserved to fiction in this postmodern world. A 2002 book reports interviews with two self-professed, so-called "sacred prostitutes" who hope to ply their grotesque trade to achieve "higher forms of spiritual awakening and ecstasy" (Hopman 131). Is this not, at its core, the pride of humanity choosing to follow unrestrained lust over the helpful discipline of God (cf. 1 Thess. 4:1-8; Heb. 12:5-11; 1 John 5:2-3)? It is quite in accord with a combination of the "lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (1 John 2:16) that men willing to bow to the lusts of the flesh over God's instructions will resort to worshiping that which they love.

Like Moab, America indulges itself in witchcraft. Some just want to be entertained by the astrology sections of newspapers and the psychics appearing on talk shows. But these seemingly benign forms of sorcery just serve to allure unsuspecting, godless seekers into deeper delusion. Witchcraft, in all its darkness, is alive in this enlightened age. Hinton, West Virginia, is the location of the "Church and School of Wicca, one of the first federally recognized churches of Wicca" (Hopman 34). Their hypocritical pride is evident. They claim their ethic is summarized in this simple rhyme: "Eight words the Wiccan Rede [counsel] fulfill: If it harm none, do what you will" (Frost). That is enough to show the pride of their religion. But then, the founders of the church emphasize the need for discipline, not admitting adherents who have not followed their prescribed course. "Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools" (Rom. 1:22). While proudly claiming freedom from oppressive Christianity (which the founders of the church do (Hopman 40-41), they simply invent another form of discipline,

and form their own church to propagate it, essentially making themselves gods to whom others must pay tribute. (This they do without making a selfless sacrifice to establish a church, as did the glorious Christ [Acts 20:28].)

Witchcraft of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries seems to have some connection with modern paganism. Paganism, broadly, refers to any person claiming none of Christianity, Judaism, or Islam. In the last one hundred years, however, it has been more distinctly associated with those who ground their religion in nature. (“pagan,” *Online Etymology Dictionary*). This author is not the first to wonder about the connection of radical environmentalism and animal rights’ movements with religions that teach the worship of “Mother Earth” and the inherent equality of all living things (Chrichton, Ostrowski). This “save the earth” movement again displays the pride of idolatry. Who are humans to think that they are the sustainers of the world (cf. Heb. 1:3)?

The people of Ammon worshiped the god Molech (Moloch, Milcom) (Acts 7:43; 1 Kings 11:5, 33; Zeph. 1:5). The name aptly derives from words meaning *king* and *shame* (Gigot). Since Israelite times the name has stood for the darkness of debauchery in completely selfish religion. When a people are moved to give up the most innocent of lives (babies) in continual infant sacrifices, the disgust of humanity and heaven are warranted (cf. Jer. 7:28-31). How different is a selfish America which legalizes the slaughter of the unborn to preserve the materialistic lifestyles of the healthy and vital? One of the main reasons for abortion is a family’s (or individual’s) lack of financial means. While it is good advice to prepare financially for children, the slaughter of life for a perceived financial lack can only be traced to selfishness for maintaining current lifestyle, and an abhorrence of the idea of self-sacrifice (changing lifestyle, giving up dreams and goals, etc.). Some just do not want children because they would have to change too much. This is transparent pride, and worship of self (humanism).

Embryonic stem cell research poses as compassion for those humans can see suffering. Can we not harvest the stem cells from

embryos and reshape the direction of those brand new cells to create cures for the Parkinson’s patient? The argument fails to take into account the numerous lives—not visible to the naked eye—that are destroyed to save the life of the visible (not to mention the eagerly reported fact that more promising stem cell research is accomplished through adult stem cells and umbilical cord stem cells—without any destruction of human life). It is simply a restructuring of ethics—an ouster of God’s decrees for the preferences of some elitists of humanity.

And this is in accord with humanism. *The Humanist Manifesto* asserts its disgust with outmoded religion as having answers to modern problems. It claims, essentially, the human process of inquiry (scientific and philosophical) as the new god of ethics. Consider the following excerpts from *Humanist Manifesto I*:

The time has come for widespread recognition of the radical changes in religious beliefs throughout the modern world. The time is past for mere revision of traditional attitudes. Science and economic change have disrupted the old beliefs. Religions the world over are under the necessity of coming to terms with new conditions created by a vastly increased knowledge and experience.

Humanism asserts that the nature of the universe depicted by modern science makes unacceptable any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values. Obviously humanism does not deny the possibility of realities as yet undiscovered, but it does insist that the way to determine the existence and value of any and all realities is by means of intelligent inquiry and by the assessment of their relations to human needs. Religion must formulate its hopes and plans in the light of the scientific spirit and method.

Is this not merely the dethroning of one god to exalt another, in the vein of Israel’s ancient sins?

Following such tenets to the full is Princeton University philosopher and ethicist Peter Singer. This thinker has made his career in challenging the edges of socially accepted practices. His lectures and books have made the case that animals should have equal rights with man, and that ethics regarding the deaths of helpless humans be re-thought.

Jettisoning the traditional distinction between humans and nonhumans, Singer distinguishes instead between persons and non-persons. Persons are beings that feel, reason, have self-awareness, and look forward to a future. Thus, fetuses and some very impaired human beings are not persons in his view and have a lesser moral status than, say, adult gorillas and chimpanzees. (Bailey)

This is the logical outcome of humanistic, evolutionary thinking. Most self-proclaimed humanists or atheists, though, really do not follow the natural ethical consequences of their own belief systems. Singer does, and is successful at it. *World Magazine* quotes *The New England Journal of Medicine* and the *New Yorker* to point to his success as “the most influential” (*New Yorker*) philosopher alive. Here is a man who is placing himself in a position of an ethical god, and people are starting to listen to him. That is quite frightening in view of the following quotes from a *World Magazine* article in 2004. An interviewer reports on his answers to tough ethical questions, beginning with the topic of homosexuality:

That (homosexuality) for him is intellectual child’s play, already logically decided, and it’s time to move on to polyamory. While politicians debate the definition of marriage between two people, Mr. Singer argues that any kind of “fully consensual” sexual behavior involving two people or 200 is ethically fine.

For example, when I asked him last month about necrophilia (what if two people make an agreement that whoever lives longest can have sexual relations with the

corpse of the person who dies first?), he said, “There’s no moral problem with that.” Concerning bestiality (should people have sex with animals, seen as willing participants?), he responded, ‘I would ask, ‘What’s holding you back from a more fulfilling relationship?’ [but] it’s not wrong inherently in a moral sense.”

If the 21st century becomes a Singer century, we will also see legal infanticide of born children who are ill or who have ill older siblings in need of their body parts. Question: What about parents conceiving and giving birth to a child specifically to kill him, take his organs, and transplant them into their ill older children? Mr. Singer: “It’s difficult to warm to parents who can take such a detached view, [but] they’re not doing something really wrong in itself.” Is there anything wrong with a society in which children are bred for spare parts on a massive scale? “No.”

When we had lunch a month after our initial interview and I read back his answers to him, he said he would be “concerned about a society where the role of some women was to breed children for that purpose,” but he stood by his statements. He also reaffirmed that it would be ethically OK to kill 1-year-olds with physical or mental disabilities, although ideally the question of infanticide would be “raised as soon as possible after birth.” (Olasky)

Christian people are quick to see this truth: For all the fancy wording and philosophical couching of it, all Singer is doing is a sleight-of-hand swap. Like a thief who takes a precious item and tries to fool a weight-sensitive alarm system by replacing it with a counterweight, Singer leads an army of so-called progressive thinkers in taking God’s ethic off the shelf and quickly substituting another. The impulsion to do this is nothing more than the pride of man.

Continuing with the outline of Zephaniah’s text, it might be noted that, as the Assyrians placed their king as high priest of their god of war, some people today still trust, quite falsely, in military

might. Some in America even believe her military simply cannot be defeated. It is just too big and powerful. Those who think such fail to remember the truth that God is in control of the nations, and often gives governmental control to the lowest of men (Dan. 4:17).

## Conclusion

Nature abhors a vacuum. In this author's lifetime, the change agents of society have sought to make society godless. Faith was fostered only in science and Darwin. But secular atheism simply does not last. Eventually, idolatry will follow. That is the progression of Romans 1. The Gentiles were not thankful for the evidence (Creation) of God's existence. The rain and fruitful seasons by which God gave Himself witness (Acts 14:17) were simply not enough for them to continue their allegiance to the Divine. But they did not last long in that state. They started worshipping the creature rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:25).

An illustration of this natural progression is in the testimony of the compiler of the interviews that made the herein oft-cited book on paganism. Raised by atheist parents (her father a diplomat in the State Department and a Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Army), the emptiness of worship did not persist with her generation. Listen to her story:

My religious upbringing was eclectic. Both of my parents professed to be atheists, and my brother and I were cared for by a series of maids and governesses, most of whom exposed us to their religious traditions. In Spain I was taken to Latin masses in old cathedrals where the service began with music, candles, and the wonderful smell of burning frankincense. At the age of eight, I adopted the habit of having an altar in my bedroom, a habit that persists to this day. At that time the altar was dedicated to Mary, complete with flowers and other offerings. As a teenager, I began practicing Zen meditation to develop my inner being. By the time I was at Bard College, I was an initiate in Transcendental Meditation and Kundalini Yoga. Later,

when I was at the California Institute of the Arts, I studied Tai Chi and Hatha Yoga, and read extensively in other traditions. Eventually, I settled down to study with a Sufi master whose teachings were supremely ascetic: no singing and no dancing.

I had a numinous experience while I was still with the Sufi master that transformed my spiritual imagination. My husband and I were driving down a stretch of highway that was bordered by forest on both sides. He was listening to a hockey game on the radio, and the announcer happened to mention that it was the day of the Winter Solstice. As soon as I heard what day it was, I felt a strange and compelling longing inside. I knew that there was something I was supposed to do, but I wasn't sure what. All I knew was that I had to get out of the car and into the woods.

I finally convinced my husband to pull over, and I walked straight into the forest. I kept walking until I came to a tiny stream that was partly frozen over. I knelt on the ground and cupped my hands in the frigid water. When I looked up, I could see the sun in the sky, and when I looked down, I could see the brown earth and leaves. Somehow I *knew* that I had found what I had been seeking. I was in the presence of the Fire, the Water, and the Earth. I anointed myself with the water and felt a sense of relief. I now realize that this was my first hint of the Pagan path that would unfold in later years.

At the end of eight years, I left the ashram, my marriage, and the teacher, feeling like I was "starving in the desert," and found myself drawn to the Native American path. My experience in the forest was echoed in their reverence for the sacred: animals, trees, plants, spirits, and human beings. I attended Native gatherings and local meetings with like-minded individuals for five years until some Native American friends told me that while it was a good thing for me to honor their ancestors, I should look to my own European ancestors. I immediately thought of the Celts, of

whom I had heard so much from my mother, and of her French and German ancestors.

I became hooked when I first heard that there were practicing Druids and that one could study with them, learning about Celtic history and religion. I was already a great fan of traditional Celtic music and dance, and so it was an easy transition to the myths, the poetry, and finally the Gods and Goddesses.

I have been a Druid officially since 1985, and I am happy to say that I know that I have at last located my spiritual home. I have never once been disappointed in this path. Today my altar celebrates the Goddess in Her many guises—Brighid, Mary, the Venus of Willendorf, Isis, the Goddess Elen (the Green Woman and the Horned Goddess), Quan Yin, and others. There is a place for the God on my altar too, in His guise as the Horned One, the Green Man of the forest.

My own spiritual search led me to one of the most ancient paths and inspired me to seek out others who had discovered Paganism. (Hopman xi)

Please forgive the lengthy quote, dear reader, but it serves to call Christians to these anti-idolatry tasks:

First, fight against atheism and evolutionary thinking. They only lead to a replacement system of ethics that leads not to the proverbial “Brave New World,” but to a frightful one indeed that will incur the judgment of God eventually, and a lot of additional suffering along the way.

Second, broaden the scope of congregational teaching. In the information age, or, as Michael Crichton calls it, “the disinformation age” (Crichton), there are more falsehoods to fight in teaching the Gospel of Christ. While still pertinent and needed, no longer do answers to denominational tendencies suffice. One must preach against idolatry with all the fervor of the Minor Prophets. Why, because it is here. It is alive and at home in America. The examples in this lecture only scrape the surface.

And it will continue to flourish until true Christianity begins to grow again. This will require more time spent in study, more research for awareness, and more dedication from parents willing to make sure their kids get the teaching they need. No, there is nothing new under the sun. Heathenism has been around for all time. The present day still requires an ongoing fight for Satan does not give up. And his forces seem to be on the rise due, perhaps in part, to the apathy and complacency (Zeph. 1:12; Amos 6:1) of those who know the truth but fail to create opportunities to impart it more and more effectively.

Third, and finally, seek to avoid pride. It still, by Divine decree, precedes a fall (Prov. 16:18) and receives all the scorn of Scripture, including these frightful verses in the midst Zephaniah 2:

This they shall have for their pride, Because they have reproached and made arrogant threats against the people of the Lord of hosts. The Lord will be awesome to them, For He will reduce to nothing all the gods of the earth; People shall worship Him, Each one from His place, Indeed all the shores of the nations. (10-11)

God always reclaims His place as Lord of all, though sometimes it requires the severest of judgments being wrought on the practitioners of idolatry (cf. Ezek. 15:7).

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### **Biographical Sketch**

Andy Robison is a graduate of Ohio Valley College and Harding University. He has preached in Pennsboro, Farmington, and Parkersburg, WV. He has been with the Hopewell Church of Christ in Washington, WV, since 2001. He and his wife Marsha have two children, Hannah and Andrew.

# *The Great Day Of The Lord*

*Earl Edwards*

Celano is a small town seventy miles east of Rome, Italy. One of its most famous citizens was a certain “Tommaso Da Celano.” From about AD 1215, he was a follower of St. Francis of Assisi. In fact, he later became his biographer. Likewise, he is “one of those to whom the sequence DIES IRAE is attributed” (Da Celano). DIES IRAE, DIES ILLA (Latin, “day of wrath, that day”) is “a hymn which has been translated into numerous languages” (Lewis 50) which begins as follows:

O day of Wrath! O day of mourning!  
See fulfilled the prophet’s warning!  
Heaven and earth in ashes burning!  
Oh, what fear man’s bosom rendeth  
When from heaven the judge descendeth,  
On whose sentence all dependeth!  
Wondrous sound the trumpet flingeth,  
Through earth’s sepulchers it ringeth,  
All before the throne it bringeth.  
Death is struck and nature quaking,  
All creation is awaking,  
To its judge an answer making.  
Lo! the book exactly worded,  
Wherein all hath been recorded;  
Thence shall judgment be awarded. (Hymns 336)

The “prophet” spoken of in the first verse of this hymn is our Zephaniah and many of the concepts in it come from our text for this lesson—chapter one, verses 14-18.

As noted in the first lesson of this series, Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of the good king Josiah of Judah. Josiah was preceded by Manasseh and Amon, two evil kings, who led Judah deeply into idolatry. Josiah was crowned king as a boy of eight

years of age, around 640 BC. Probably between 630 and 625 BC (when King Josiah was around 20 years of age), our prophet, Zephaniah, began prophesying about God’s future punishment for Judah’s unfaithfulness. As noted in the first lesson, that unfaithfulness included idolatry (worship of the Baalim, Milcom, and other pagan gods) which had even penetrated inside the temple itself (2 Kings 21:7), and included the sacrificing of children to these idols (2 Kings 16:3; 21:6). Though it is not certain, it is probable that Zephaniah’s condemnation of such gross idolatry may have helped to add impetus to the great reformation or restoration of Josiah’s reign. Listen to Zephaniah as he pronounces “the Word of the Lord” (1:1).

So I will stretch out My hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this place, and the names of the idolatrous priests along with the priests. And those who bow down on the housetops to the host of heaven, and those who bow down and swear to the LORD and yet swear by Milcom, and those who have turned back from following the LORD, and those who have not sought the LORD or inquired of Him. (1:4-6)

[All Scripture references are from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.]

In fact, as suggested in the previous lesson, Zephaniah’s words may have caused the young king, who was already beginning to purge the country of idolatry, to accentuate his efforts and bring about a full-blown reformation which climaxed in 622 BC (the eighteenth year of his reign).

The central message of Zephaniah was that God was to send an invading nation against Judah. “On that day” there would be the sounds of invasion, “the sound of a cry from the Fish Gate, a wail from the Second Quarter, and a loud crash from the hills” (1:10). As suggested in the first lesson of this series, the nation in question is probably not the Scythians, as some believe. In fact, there is no evidence that the Scythians invasion of Assyria and the

Mediterranean coast in 632 BC reached into Judah. Therefore, it is probable that our prophet was predicting the coming of another nation which is just beginning its rise to power; *Babylon*. Nebuchadnezzar (also called Nebuchadrezzar), perhaps the greatest of the Babylonian kings, defeated Pharaoh Necho of Egypt at the great battle of Carchemish (a city located about 100 miles due east of what we know as Antioch of Syria) in “B.C. 605” (Smith 437). This battle is spoken of in Jeremiah 46:1-5:

That which came as the word of the LORD to Jeremiah the prophet concerning the nations. To Egypt, concerning the army of Pharaoh Neco king of Egypt, which was by the Euphrates River at Carchemish, which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon defeated in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah: “Line up the shield and buckler, and draw near for the battle! Harness the horses, and mount the steeds, and take your stand with helmets on! Polish the spears, put on the scale-armor! Why have I seen it? They are terrified, they are drawing back, and their mighty men are defeated and have taken refuge in flight, without facing back; terror is on every side!” declares the LORD.

After winning the battle with Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar then “recovered Coele-Syria, Phoenicia and Palestine, [and] took Jerusalem” in about 604 BC (Smith 437). His defeat of Jerusalem is described in Daniel 1:1-4:

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the vessels of the house of God; and he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and he brought the vessels into the treasury of his god. Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, the chief of his officials, to bring in some of the sons of Israel, including some of the royal family and of the nobles,

youths in whom was no defect, who were good-looking, showing intelligence in every branch of wisdom, endowed with understanding and discerning knowledge, and who had ability for serving in the king’s court; and he ordered him to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans.

Among those “youths” who were carried away to Babylon (also called Chaldea) was, of course, the young man called Daniel who was to become a great prophet of God (Dan. 1:6). Again, these latter events happened in 604 BC.

But, twenty to twenty-five years *earlier*, our prophet Zephaniah was prophesying in Jerusalem to God’s people who, especially under King Manasseh of Judah (698-642 BC), had become steeped in idolatry. Zephaniah prophesied that God would punish His people with a “great day of the Lord” (1:14).

### **The Background of Such a “Day”**

Jack Lewis thinks the phrase “day of the Lord” goes back beyond Amos (49). Shailer Mathews says it was a “day in which Jehovah was expected to punish sinful Hebrews and the enemies of Israel, and to establish at least the righteous remnant of his people in political supremacy” (179). Amos was the first prophet to write about this day when he wrote his book in about 760 BC. He seems to presuppose that the Jews of his time had a concept similar to what Mathews has described. Amos says, “Alas you who are longing for the day of the Lord, for what purpose will the day of the Lord be to you? It will be darkness and not light” (5:18). Obviously the Jews of his day believed they were such a great people that the God of heaven would be obligated to come and bless them (cf. “day of light”), but Amos says, in reality you are disobedient and so God will come to punish you (a “day of darkness”).

In the beginning the Jews probably used the phrase to refer to a day of triumph for God and His people *at the end of history*. However, as Lewis says: “The prophets reinterpreted the phrase to be a day *within history* . . . in which a nation would receive its

doom” (49, emp. added). However, Lewis correctly admits that as Zephaniah predicts destruction for the people of Judah, it is “difficult to avoid feeling that he is [sometimes] speaking of the final day (e.g., 1:2-3; 3:8)” (50).

In fact, it seems that the punishment of Judah’s disobedience in the prophetic period prefigures and becomes a precursor to the punishment of all disobedient at the end of time, that is, that which will take place in the greatest “day of the Lord” (1 Thess. 5:2), which will be a day of punishment and of reward (Matt. 25:46).

The “major theme of Zephaniah is the approaching day of the Lord” (Lewis 49). The core passage in which he discusses that day is 1:14-18. Listen to what he says about it.

Near is the great day of the LORD, near and coming very quickly; Listen, the day of the LORD! In it the warrior cries out bitterly. A day of wrath is that day, a day of trouble and distress, a day of destruction and desolation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet and battle cry, against the fortified cities and the high corner towers. And I will bring distress on men so that they will walk like the blind, because they have sinned against the LORD; and their blood will be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung. Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to deliver them on the day of the LORD’S wrath; and all the earth will be devoured in the fire of His jealousy, for He will make a complete end, indeed a terrifying one, of all the inhabitants of the earth.

Though this is the core passage, Mark Hahlen and Clay Ham are correct in pointing out that the discussion of this great “day” permeates most of the book (178). Most of the material about the “day” can be outlined as follows (Carson 737):

- ❖ Judgment declared (1:1-6).
- ❖ Judgment delivered (1:7-13).
- ❖ Judgment described (1:14-18).
- ❖ Judgment may be avoided (2:1-3).

We will discuss it under these headings with emphasis on number three.

### **Judgment Declared (1:1-6)**

Notice the prophet affirms that we are dealing with “the word of the Lord” (v.1), not the prophet’s own words. This is a message from God Himself.

This great God says He will “completely remove all things from the face of the earth,” including “man and beast” and “birds” and “fish” (vv. 2-3). Homer Hailey rightly says, “The judgement is portrayed as comparable to that of the great flood in its universal scope. . . . This all embracing declaration is not to be explained away simply as hyperbole, for other prophets had shown that the animal creation is affected by man’s sin (Joel 1:18; Hos. 4:3; Jer. 12:4)” (228-29).

But, the principal judgment God here declares is against His chosen people in “Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem” (v. 4). “Jerusalem seems to be regarded as the fountainhead of the rampant evil and idolatry of the period. When God acts in such judgment, He begins at the house of God. All traces of the worship of Baal, the god of the Phoenicians, would be *cut off*.” The “remnant of Baal” (v. 4) which God promises to destroy indicates “the last vestige of it” (Carson 738). This would include: “The idolatrous priests whom the kings of Judah had appointed to burn incense in the high places in the cities of Judah and in the surrounding area of Jerusalem, also those who burned incense to Baal, to the sun and to the moon and to the constellations and to the host of heaven” (2 Kings 23:5).

The last two verses of this section (vv. 5-6) describe the kinds of people God will punish in the coming *day*: “those who worship the stars, those who mix the worship of Jehovah and other gods and those who do not worship Yahweh at all. Worshiping the starry host . . . [was] practiced . . . especially [by] the Assyrians . . . to facilitate an unobstructed view of the stars . . . it often took place on rooftops” (Hahlen and Ham 196).

Note that some mixed the worship of Milcom with that of Jehovah (v. 5). Milcom (also called Molech—originally from

*Melek*, the Hebrew word for “king”) was the so-called “fire god” of the Ammonites. As far back as the 900’s BC, Solomon had built “a high place” for this god “on the mountains east of Jerusalem” (1 Kings 11:7). And in the decades before our prophet Zephaniah, as noted earlier, several kings of Judah sacrificed their sons on this pagan altar which was situated in the Valley of Himmon (2 Kings 16:3; 2 Chron. 28:3; 33:5-6). As Hahlen and Ham say of Milcom/Molech:

Most biblical references associate him with human sacrifice (Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5; 2 Kings 23:10; Jer. 32:35), an act considered the ultimate sacrifice by Israel’s neighbors. To swear by Yahweh and by Molech is religious syncretism, and this amounts to an outright rejection of Yahweh (Zeph. 1:6) in view of the demand for exclusive devotion (Exod. 20:3-6). (197)

### **Judgment Defined (1:7-13)**

As Lewis says, Zephaniah gets his point across by using “sacrificial feast imagery” (49). The “guests” (v. 7) at the banquet of sorts which the Lord has “prepared” (v. 7) “are the nations whom Jehovah has called to witness and execute His judgment. Habakkuk points to the Chaldeans [see Hab. 1:6] as the executors of the judgement” (Hailey 230).

Among those to be punished on that “day of the Lord” which is “near” (v. 7) are “the princes, the kings sons” (v. 8) because they have been guilty of “violence and deceit” (v. 9). This probably refers to “wealth obtained through oppressive means” (Hahlen and Ham 202). Still others who should “wail” (v. 11—an imperative) because they will be punished, are those of the “Mortar” district (v. 11), “a location on the west side of the city, probably the Tyropoen Valley, where the market district developed near the roads leading to the coastal plain” (Hahlen and Ham 203). People of this district were known as “commercialists” who were “dishonest” (Rinaldi 1243) and the Lord will, therefore, punish them. Those who “weigh out silver” (i.e., are involved in trade) will be “cut off” (i.e. killed or exterminated) (v. 11).

He will also “punish on that day” (v. 9) all who are guilty of mixing pagan customs with the worship of Jehovah. Among the things named with which the Lord is displeased are the following:

- ❖ “All who clothe themselves with foreign garments” (v. 8). This undoubtedly has to do with special garments connected with pagan worship such as those worn by Baal worshippers. In fact, 2 Kings 10:22 speaks of the “garments for the worshipers of Baal.” To put these on and be seen in them indicated an allegiance to a god other than Jehovah.
- ❖ “All who leap on the temple threshold” (v. 9). Though it is debatable, this very probably has reference to “the priests of Dagon who avoided treading on the threshold of his temple because the idol had fallen upon it (1 Sam. 5:5)” (Carson 739). That is, we are dealing with a pagan superstition brought into God’s house!

And now as the Lord further defines His judgment upon the people of Judea, He even describes the sounds that will be heard as the invading enemy breaks into Jerusalem. There will be a “cry from the Fish Gate, a wail from the Second Quarter, and a loud crash from the hills” (v. 11). The locations mentioned:

[A]re all on the north side of the city, the side most vulnerable to attack. The Fish Gate is a gate along the city’s north wall west of the temple mound (2 Chr 33:14; Neh 3:3; 12:39), probably named for its proximity to a fish market (perhaps Neh 13:16). The New Quarter refers to the Second Quarter (cf. ESV, NASB, NRSV) or Mishneh (cf. NJPS), a newer part of the city created when Hezekiah built a defensive wall around the western hills of the city (2 Chr 32:5). During the reign of Josiah, the prophetess Huldah lived there (2 Kgs 22:14). “The hills” probably refers to the hills within the city, namely Moriah (2 Chr 3:1;

cf. Gen 22:2), Ophel (2 Kgs 5:24; Micah 4:8), and Zion (2 Sam 5:7; 1 Kgs 8:1). (Hahlen and Ham 202)

From one part of this northern section will come a “cry,” from another a “wail,” and a “loud crash” from another. These are the sounds of their city being “taken and their society . . . crashing about their heads in the destruction. This heightens the terror of the occasion” (Hailey 231). In fact, Their “houses” will be rendered “desolate” and their “wealth will become plunder” (v. 13). It seems the only thing left to do is to run and hide from the punishment of this great day, but even that will not work! Because the Lord (not the prophet) will “search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish” the guilty (v. 12). In this same period of time, Jeremiah quotes God as saying He will “roam to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem . . . and seek in her open squares, if you can find a man who does justice, who seeks truth, then I will pardon her [Jerusalem]” (Jer. 5:1). But, since God evidently did not find even one who did justly, He sent the Chaldeans to punish His people. And He will have the Chaldeans to “search Jerusalem with lamps” (v. 12) to be sure all the guilty are punished.

Again, here at the end of this section he describes in a different way those who will receive the punishment. They are people who:

- ❖ Are stagnant in spirit” (v.12). The KJV renders it “are settled on their lees.” As J. T. Carson explains, “The phrase is a picture of wine which has been standing undisturbed for a long time. The prophet uses it to describe those who, for want of the humbling discipline of God, have become ‘thickened’ and insensitive toward Jehovah” (739). The phrase is “proverbial for indifference (cf. Jer. 48:11)” (Hahlen and Ham 203).
- ❖ They are people who “say in their hearts, the Lord will not do good or evil!” (v.12). That is, as David Pharr says, “These men gamble that God is indifferent toward what they do. They see nothing

to be gained by righteousness and nothing lost by sin . . . his attitude was not said openly, but ‘in their heart’” (116).

What an awakening it will be when God sends the Chaldeans to punish them in the great “day of the Lord”!

### **Judgment Described (1:14-18)**

Indeed, “Zephaniah’s description of the day is vivid and electrifying” (Hailey 233).

First, he emphasizes that it is “near” and “it is coming very quickly” (v. 14). Evidently he is saying it will not be for the next generation, it will be *for this one*. If, as indicated, our prophet was speaking in about 630-625 BC and if, as advocated, the nation involved is indeed Babylon, it would have begun in 604 BC—about twenty years after the prophet spoke. Merrill Unger, too, believes Zephaniah was talking about “the imminent invasion . . . under Nebuchadnezzar” (428).

Brodie Crouch points out that the threat against “the king’s sons” in 1:8 was “actually fulfilled when Judah was taken into captivity. The sons of King Zedekiah were slain in his sight before his eyes were put out (II Kings 25:7)” (61). Zedekiah himself was a son of the Josiah who was king in Zephaniah’s time. So, this “day” was to come upon the generation with which Zephaniah was dealing.

Regarding this “day of the Lord,” we are told that “the warrior cries out bitterly” (v. 14). As Hailey says, “It will be a bitter day, a day of such complete defeat that the strong men who have fought violently to defend their city and homeland will weep bitterly at their failure” (232-33). They cannot win because the Lord is fighting with the Chaldeans to punish His people.

This day will be a day of “wrath” (v. 15); that is, God’s “retributory punishment for an offense or a crime” (wrath). Note again the poetical thoughts of Tommaso da Celano, “O day of Wrath! O day of mourning! See fulfilled the prophet’s warning!” Indeed, the arrival of the enemy nation will bring “trouble” and “distress” to the residents of Judah (v. 15).

Carson aptly points out:

The description which follows here has features in common with the other prophets. With the physical display of clouds and thick darkness (15) cf. Am. v. 18, 20; Is. xiii.10; Joel iii. 15; with the sense of alarm (or shouting) (16) cf. Am. I. 14, ii. 2; men will be utterly unable to escape and their hoarded treasures will be of no value (cf. Ezk. vii. 19; Is. xiii. 7) against the *fire of his jealousy* (18; cf. Na. I. 2; Ezk. xxxvi. 5, xxxviii. 19) until He shall make a *speedy riddance* (RV ‘terrible end’). (739)

Hahlen and Ham state, “The final clauses of verse 16 identify the objects against which this dreadful day would be directed: ‘the fortified cities’ and the ‘corner towers.’ Combined with the mention of trumpets and battle cry, it makes explicit a militaristic nation that has previously been covert” (205-06).

As one reads the words of God which are referred by the prophet, he almost feels like he can *see* the war clouds hanging over the city and *hear* the confusion and the shouting of battle cries and *smell* the dust and smoke as the corner towers and cities fall! He can see the utter desolation and he cries out, “Why does all this have to happen?” And the Lord immediately gives the answer: “Because they have sinned against the Lord; and their blood will be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung” (v. 17).

The people had thought the Lord would do neither “good or evil” (v. 12), but they were terribly wrong. The Lord does bless the righteous and PUNISH THE WICKED.

But, could they not maybe “bribe the enemy” with all their “silver” and “gold” (v. 18) so they would not be punished? As Hahlen and Ham say, “The practice of paying attackers to avoid or leave attacks is common (see 2 Kings 15:17-20; 18:13-15; 24:8-14)” (207). But, it WILL NOT WORK this time because Jehovah God has sent the attackers to administer HIS punishment. “Neither their silver or their gold will be able to deliver them on the day of the Lord’s wrath” (v. 18).

Carson is right when he says:

These prophecies were partially fulfilled in the judgments which fell on Judah and the surrounding nations of the sixth century B.C. but it must be clear that this application of the passage *does NOT EXHAUST* its meaning. . . . [that will] await the “day” when universal judgment will be visited on all wickedness and the wrath of God will be poured out on all who know not God and obey not the Gospel. . . . (739)

In fact, the last verse of this section contains elements which can only be fulfilled at the end of history in the “day of the Lord” par excellence which we call the final judgment (cf. 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Peter 3:7-10). Note that “all the earth will be devoured” and He will make a “complete end” which will involve “all the inhabitants of the earth” (v. 18). That is why Lewis says, “The judgment that Zephaniah sees upon Judah enlarges itself to include the nations” (50). In addition to these verses in chapter one, note how many other verses in chapters two and three deal with God’s judgment of other peoples. No wonder Unger says, “The imminent invasion of the Chaldeans under Nebuchadnezzar is treated as a prefigurement of the apocalyptic day of the Lord in which all earth judgments culminate (cf. Isa 2:10-22; Joel 1–2; Rev. 19:11-21)” (428).

### **Judgment May Be Avoided (2:1-3)**

Though it is certain that God will punish those who continue to rebel against His will, there has always been a way to avoid the wrath of our God—repentance. In the same era, the prophet Jeremiah was likewise speaking out about how God would punish His rebellious people. But at one point God told him:

Stand in the court of the LORD’S house, and speak to all the cities of Judah who have come to worship in the LORD’S house all the words that I have commanded you to speak to them. Do not omit a word! Perhaps they will listen and everyone will turn from his evil way, that I may repent of the calamity which I am planning to do to them because of the evil of their deeds. (Jer. 26:2-3)

Zephaniah says the same thing in this brief section. He addresses his remarks to the “nation without shame” (v. 1) that is Judah which had forgotten how sin should make one blush! He says to the citizens of that nation, “gather yourselves together” (v. 1). Giovanni Rinaldi may be correct when he says these words are an “invitation to participate in a rite of penitence” (1249). As Carson says, though the translation of this verse is difficult, “the sense is clear. It is a solemn summon to the nation to penitence” (739-40).

And he urges them to do it quickly “before the decree takes effect” (v. 2); that is, before the approaching “day of the Lord” overtakes them (cf. 1:14), before the Babylonians come to attack the city. Notice that this repentance must take place “before” (repeated three times in verse 2) “the decree takes effect.” Otherwise, as the New English Bible renders, you will be “sent away and vanish like chaff.” Chaff is the straw-like hull that comes off of the head of small grain, like wheat or barley, and is quickly blown away by the wind. If they do not repent, they will become victims of the “anger of the Lord” (v. 2) in the “day” of the Lord.

He calls those who are listening to “seek the Lord” and to “seek righteousness . . . [and] humility” (v. 3). The term *seek* is generally associated with *prayer* (Hahlen and Ham 197). The three-fold repetition of the term seek probably refers to intense and prolonged prayer in which one asks forgiveness for his rebellion. This fits with the fact that they are also told to “seek righteousness” and to “seek humility.” The meaning of this effort seems to be explained in the description of the humble as being those who “have carried out His ordinances” (v. 3). As Carson says, “The meek [or humble] man is not necessarily the weak man, but the one who bows, or humbles himself under the hand of God, as opposed to the ‘proud’ and the ‘evil-doers’” (740).

If one repents and seeks God then it is possible that he will be “hidden” in “the day of the Lord’s anger” (v. 3). As Hailey says:

The prophet does not promise certain escape. Rather, “it may be ye will be hid” for the wickedness is so great and the judgement so terrible that even those who seek righteousness . . . may suffer. . . . [But] If there is to be

any way of escape . . . [it will be by being hidden] under the shadow of the wings of the Almighty. (234-35)

No one can hide himself from God’s judgment when He searches for men to punish them (1:12), but “perhaps” some can “be hidden” (2:3) by God Himself so as not to be a victim of the Lord’s “anger.” “Be hidden” is passive and it indicates someone else (i.e. God) hides me.

So, these three verses constitute a call to repentance in order to avoid the coming calamity. Lewis says this is “not a general call to repentance that can turn aside the calamity. It would seem that the day of grace is already passed. Doom awaits. There is no hope of recovery, but only that some may escape” (51). However Jeremiah, who as previously noted, is prophesying in the same period and regarding the same calamity has God saying, “Perhaps they will listen and everyone will turn from his evil ways, that I may repent of the calamity which I am planning” (Jer. 26:3). This passage appears to teach that the calamity could have still been avoided had the nation repented. Of course, we know the nation as a whole did not repent, so the nation was conquered in 586 BC by Babylon. However, some few possibly did repent and so “were hidden” by God and therefore survived the destruction (cf. 2 Kings 25:11-12).

## Conclusion

For those who rebel against Jehovah, He has decreed that there will be a “great day of the Lord.” There was such a day for the rebellious in Judah in the sixth century before Christ, and there will be such a day for all who rebel against God. “A day of wrath is that day, a day of trouble and distress. A day of destruction and desolation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness . . .” (Zeph. 1:15).

No wonder the uninspired poet who had meditated on this inspired description wrote,

O day of Wrath! O day of mourning!  
See fulfilled the prophet’s warning!  
Heaven and earth in ashes burning!

Oh, what fear man's bosom rendeth  
When from heaven the judge descendeth,  
On whose sentence all dependeth! (Hymns 336)

As we contemplate that final “day of the Lord” par excellence, God help us to “seek the Lord” (Zeph. 2:3) so that we can “be hidden” by Him through the love expressed in His Son.

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# *No Fear Of The Lord*

*Emanuel Daugherty*

It has been with eager anticipation that I have awaited the opening of the WVSOP Lectureship! The lectures this year are “winding up” a series of four books we have done on the Minor Prophets. They are called “Minor” Prophets only because their



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books are shorter than Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, and Ezekiel. In 2002 we did an entire lecture series on the Book of Zechariah. In 2004 we lectured on the prophets Hosea, Joel, Amos and Obadiah. Then in 2006 we did a lecture series on the prophets: Jonah, Micah, Nahum and Habakkuk. This year we are finishing the Minor Prophets with Zephaniah, Haggai and Malachi. Books by our brethren on the Minor Prophets are scarce, so if you have not purchased this four-volume series you ought to do so. All the lectures of the school of preaching are sound in doctrine, very readable expositions of Scripture, and delivered by faithful men. Every preacher, Bible class teacher, and student of the Bible ought to have these books, as well as every saint desiring to increase their Bible knowledge.

I am grateful indeed, to have been asked by the Lectureship committee to appear on the WVSOP Lectures this year. My task this hour is to speak from the Book of Zephaniah 3:1-7 on the theme, “No Fear of the Lord.”

## **Recalling the Context**

Zephaniah is the prophet charged by God to announce to Jerusalem and Judah their soon to come Captivity. In chapter one the prophet gives **A Declaration of Retribution**—setting forth Jehovah as jealous of His people, and with fierce and powerful words he describes the Lord’s judgment to come with wrath and fury as a consuming fire, and the great and dreadful day of the Lord as being a terror on whom it falls. Chapter two is **An Exhortation to Repentance**—the end is described as imminent, the day of grace is about to slip from them. If there is to be any repentance it must come immediately with great humility and sincerity. A warning for Judah to repent is seen in the description of God’s wrath against the Gentiles of the coastal regions, Ethiopia and Moab are presented in 2:5-15 implying that the same is coming upon them if they do not heed the word of God. Chapter three begins with Jehovah’s indictment of the citizens of Jerusalem—their failure to hear, their disobedience stemming from a lack of fear of the Lord, the chapter closes with **A Promise of Redemption** to the remnant.

It will be shown in this lesson that the judgment of God is just and that the citizens of Jerusalem and Judah truly displayed “No fear of the Lord” in their thoughts or life style.

## **Recipients of the Judgment**

God, through His prophet, turns His anger on Jerusalem. God’s people are guilty of rebellion and are corrupted in their spiritual and moral soul as a result. Perhaps some time has passed since the condemnation of chapter one and the warnings to the nations in chapter two. The threats of judgment have gone unheeded and are sloughed off. Are those of old, like those of our modern age, guilty of silencing the voice of God by being enamored with the prosperity of materialism, or thinking that God is only for those who are weak and backward in their thinking?

The heart of the nation is hardened more than ever. Her end is in sight. A “woe” is pronounced upon Jerusalem and the nation. The funeral dirge so dramatically described in Jeremiah’s Book of Lamentations has begun. Jerusalem is described as “filthy and

polluted;" the American Standard Version is they are "rebellious and polluted." They are cursed with "woe" because they are an "oppressing city." Rebellious! Filthy! Polluted! Oppressing! Rebellious to His rule! Polluted in His worship! Oppressing to His righteous! What a legacy for God's people!

Four failures of her people are cited:

**One**, she **obeyed not** the voice of God. Israel enjoyed a privilege given to them by the God of heaven that He had accorded no other nation on Earth! They had actually heard the voice of God speak to them! (Deut. 4:32-35). Furthermore, He had spoken to them by the written Law of Moses and the voices of the prophets throughout their history, but they obeyed not the Voice!

**Two**, she **received not correction** (instruction). Again, the Lord had chastised them repeatedly by subjection to other nations. She did not learn the lessons of her history. Stiff-necked, stubborn and hardened in heart, she refused to repent of her sins.

**Three**, she **trusted not** in Jehovah; Israel had no faith in her God. With Babylon breathing down their neck, her leadership clamored for protection from Egypt, and some were still loyal to Assyria, their hateful, inveterate enemies! They looked for a political solution to solve their spiritual illnesses!

**Four**, she **drew not near** to God. This refers to her worship. Her daily sacrifices and burnt offerings were designed to keep Israel close to the Lord, but their hardened, rebellious hearts took them further and further from Him.

### Reception of the Indictments

Jerusalem's sins are laid at the door of her leaders both civil and spiritual. Homer Hailey says "they were unfit for the high calling to which they had been appointed or chosen" (240).

It was not the enemy without, but the "fifth column" within that was destroying her. Those who were charged with the correcting of evil were themselves promoting it. The four groups of officials identified are: **her princes, judges, prophets, and priests**. See also Ezekiel 22:27 and Proverbs 28:15

**Her princes** are roaring lions. Those who are of royal blood charged with the well-being of her citizens act more like beasts

than overseers of the children of God. These "politicians" are like Satan, roaring lions, walking about seeking whom they may devour (1 Peter 5:8). Lusting after more prey, and serving as the role "models" for the Pharisees of a more distant day who were condemned by Jesus for "devouring widows houses;" stealing from the weak and helpless instead of coming to their aid (Matt. 23:14; James 1:27).

Zephaniah said, "Her **judges** are evening wolves" ". . . that slink about in the twilight, greedily devouring all they can find, leaving nothing til the morrow" (Hailey 241). How terrible for those who under the pretense of law and justice mercilessly fleece their victims and whose avarice and greed are never sated. Jesus' justice and judgment are against such (Matt. 23:25). When the judges of a nation are in cahoots with the criminals then the citizens are in serious trouble!

"Her **prophets** are light and treacherous persons." These are the false prophets, the self-appointed, self-called (Jer. 23:16, 21); they are frivolous, irresponsible and unfit (Micah 2:11; 3:5, 11). *Light* is from the word **pochazim** and means "vainglorious, boasting . . . to boil up, or boil over, and when applied to speaking, to overflow with frivolous words" (Keil 150). They were treacherous for they spoke from their own mind but claimed to be sent by God. Their agenda was to look out for themselves rather than addressing the needs of the people. They were guilty of speaking "smooth things, prophesying deceits" (Isa. 30:10).

There is no more solemn office than that of serving as prophet of God. It was never an office that produced ease and popularity for the faithful prophet. It was a thankless task. It required the public condemnation of sin, in the lowly and in the mighty. It required calling an often heedless people back to their God. It often cost the prophet his life (Matt 23:37). But there were many false prophets as there are false preachers today. They were always ready to speak smooth things and prophesy lies (Isaiah 30:10). (Conley 245-46)

“Her *priests* . . . profaned the sanctuary . . . violated the law.” The sanctuary stands not only for the temple, but all that was holy—persons, rites, things, and places. To *profane* is to make something holy into something common and ordinary, thus destroying its value as a sacred object (Lev. 10:1-2, 10). They did violence to the law by perverting it—their perverse interpretations making it void (Mark 7:1-23). God cannot be honored without honoring His law. Jeremiah shows how false prophet and wicked priest worked hand in hand to do evil. “The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so: and what will ye do in the end thereof” (Jer. 5:31). Jesus accused the priests of His day of sophistry using the doctrines and commandments of men that made void the law of God (Mark 7:6-13).

### Reality and Reasonableness of Jehovah (5-7)

While the princes, judges, prophets, and priests “in the midst of her” corrupted Jerusalem’s citizens “*Jehovah in the midst of her is righteous*.” There is no iniquity or perverseness in Him. In this city filled with sinners, Jehovah is just. His justice and righteousness is put in the light every morning, proclaimed to the nation daily by his true prophets and priests who teach the nation and rebuke the evil. “. . . His norm is one of never-relaxing holiness and mercy new every morning” (Laetsch 375).

The mercy of God to His people of Israel and Judah and to all mankind is seen in four reminders of God to man:

**One**, God’s judgment, being brought to light every morning, calls attention to the daily morning and evening sacrifices designed to remind the people of their sin and need for God and show His wrath against the guilty to cause them to repent (Ex. 29:38-43). But the unjust know no shame. The daily ministrations of God as certain as the rising Sun had no effect on these callous leaders. The writer of the Book of Hebrews reminds us of the practice of the priests in offering daily sacrifices, “*and every priest stands daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sin*” (Heb. 10:11, emp. added). But they had failed to learn from the daily offering of lambs, bulls and goats that the

wages of sin is death, therefore, they continued in the despicable crimes against God and man.

**Two**, as each morning the rising sun sheds its light upon the earth, so too, each morning, day by day, God dispensed His justice—rewarding the good and punishing the wicked through His daily providence. “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning, great is your faithfulness, the Lord is my portion, says my soul, therefore I will hope in him” (Lam. 3:22-23).

**Three**, His mercy is seen in the sending of the prophets. When Israel had been scattered among the nations by Assyria, and when Judah had been taken away to 70 years in captivity in Babylon, God reminded them:

Moreover all the leaders of the priests and the people transgressed more and more, according to all the abominations of the nations, and defiled the house of the LORD which He had consecrated in Jerusalem. And the LORD God of their fathers sent warnings to them by His messengers, **rising up early and sending them**, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place. But they mocked the messengers of God, despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, till there was no remedy. (2 Chron. 36:14-17, emp. added)

**Four**, just as His mercy and justice are dispensed every morning, so too, is the testimony of His existence given every day: “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard. Their line has gone out through all the earth, And their words to the end of the world” (Ps. 19:1-4a).

It is the ultimate crime of men to fail to see their Creator and Lawgiver as they awaken every day. Men will not spend eternity in Hell because God did not love them, teach them, warn them, or pity them. They will be lost in spite of God’s efforts to save them

(2 Peter 3:9). They had no fear of the Lord! They spurned His grace and mercy and threw it back in His face!

The Lord, through the prophet Zephaniah, reminds them of God's justice meted out against foreign nations which ought to have caused Judah to take heed, but it did not. Did Israel and Judah think they could practice the same sins as those around them and go unpunished? Did they think the warnings of their true prophets were only designed to aggravate and harass them? Could Judah not see from the destruction of the nations round about her, and even her sister Israel carried away by the Assyrians, that God meant business? That He could and would bring them to a destructive and ignominious end? Amos had warned Israel of the consequences of her folly of rebellion and disobedience (Amos 4:6-12).

Each time a Jewish merchant traveled out of his country and saw the condition of these heathen cities due to God's wrath they should have been warned. Just as the nations who lived in Canaan before them had been destroyed because of sin, so should Judah have taken heed to the prophets, but they did not.

"I said, 'Only fear thou me; receive instruction.'" Here Judah is reminded of what God had said by His prophets. The message was not long and drawn out, or difficult to understand. On the contrary, God's message has always been quite simple and basic when setting forth the principles of life and what one must do to be saved (Deut. 10:12-13; Mic. 6:8; Hos. 4:6, Jer. 3:6-15; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; etc). The Lord promised Judah would not be "cut off" but she had not lived up to her part of the covenant.

The prophet says she *arose early*. Was Judah eager to do God's bidding, to accept their chastisement and repent? Not at all! They had arisen early in their eagerness to sin! They were deliberate and unashamed (Mic. 2:1). In response God also sent His prophets early (Jer. 7:13: 11:7; 2 Chron. 35:15), but God's people spurned His grace and sinned more and more.

George Adam Smith says of the Book of Zephaniah:

There is no great hope in his book, hardly any tenderness and never a glimpse of beauty. . . . No hotter book lies in all

the Old Testament. Neither dew nor grass nor tree nor any blossom live in it, but it is every where fire, smoke, and darkness, drifting chaff, ruins, nettles, salt pits, and owls and ravens looking from the windows of desolate palaces.  
(48)

Evidently Mr. Smith did not read the last chapter of the book. To the thoughtful student of the Scriptures, Zephaniah offers great hope, God's mercy is offered even in the late evening of Jerusalem and Judah's terrible demise. Again it must be repeated, Jerusalem and Judah, the last hope of God to bring His Son Jesus into the world was given every opportunity to save themselves, but they would not. In spite of all that God had done for their salvation they rejected their last hope. God's loving hand of grace and mercy was outstretched to them and "they bit the hand that fed them."

What a powerful, challenging message is given to the world today. We who live in the day of the grace of Jesus Christ (John 1:17) must accept that grace or we, too, will be lost eternally.

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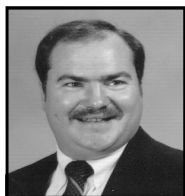
### **Biographical Sketch**

Emanuel Daugherty was born in Philippi, WV, January 12, 1939. He was baptized February 5, 1950, by Miris Wright in Warren, OH. He married Judith R. Null, July 16, 1958, and to their union was born: Bruce (Gayle), preaches 10<sup>th</sup> & Clairmont church of Christ Cambridge, OH; Ramona (Stephan) Haynes, Fishinger Kenny Church of Christ, Columbus, OH; Rachel (Maken) Cornell, Alkire Road, Grove City, OH; Rebecca Poe, husband Brad preaches for the Rome Church of Christ, Proctorville, OH. The Daugherty's have eight grandchildren, four boys and four girls. He graduated from Braceville HS, Trumbull County, Ohio 1956, Memphis School of Preaching 1968, Alabama Christian School of Religion (Southern Christian University) 1982. He has preached for the Alkire Road church in Grove City, OH 1968-1989; Dewey Avenue church in St Marys, WV 1989-1994. He taught nine years at Central Ohio School for Preachers and Teachers, Columbus, OH 1971-1980; and served as Director and Teacher for West Virginia School of Preaching 1994-2003. He has held Gospel meetings in West Virginia, Ohio, Illinois, Kentucky, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee and Wisconsin. Brother Daugherty has written *A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*. He currently serves as a faculty member of West Virginia School of Preaching and preaches for the Salem Church of Christ, Marshall County, Glen Easton, WV.

# *The Faithful Remnant*

*Bruce Daugherty*

Can people have hope today? In the midst of terrorist strikes, international war, political scandal, economic hardship, and natural disasters, one might be tempted to believe that hope is an illusion. But the message of God, given through His prophets long ago, says



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that in the midst of doom and destruction, hope is possible for those who trust in the Lord.

Two basic themes are found in the Old Testament prophets: judgment and hope. On the one hand there is judgment. God has an accounting day; sin will be judged. On the other, there is hope after the discipline of judgment. Both themes are combined in the idea of the faithful remnant. Several Old Testament prophets speak specifically to the idea of a remnant: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Joel, Amos, Micah, Zephaniah, Habbakuk, Haggai, and Zechariah. Even books which do not specifically utilize the term, contain the concept (Hasel 130). This lecture will focus on the idea of the faithful remnant as found in the third chapter of Zephaniah.

## **Brief Overview of the Book**

Zephaniah is the prophet whose name means “he whom Jehovah has hidden” (Lewis 46). He gives his genealogy going back four generations to King Hezekiah (715-687 BC). Thus, he is of royal descent from the lineage of David. Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of Josiah, possibly during the days of Josiah’s

reformation (2 Kings 23:1-16). He was a contemporary of Jeremiah.

The book of Zephaniah has been labeled as the “hottest book of the Old Testament” (Hailey 226). The prophet gives a clear condemnation of those who say they follow God but do not. Because of this hypocrisy on the part of His people, the judgment of God comes on Judah. The timeless message of the book serves as background for Jesus’ condemnation of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees (Matt. 23:3-32).

A brief outline of the book is:

1. The Day of the Lord (1:1-2:3).
2. Oracles against the Nations (2:4-15).
3. Sins of Jerusalem (3:1-8).
4. Future Salvation (3:9-20).

## **Zephaniah’s Prophecy of the Remnant**

Therefore, wait for Me, says the Lord, until the day I rise up for plunder. My determination is to gather the nations, to My assembly of kingdoms, to pour on them My indignation, all my fierce anger, all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of My jealousy. For then I will restore to the peoples a pure language, that they all may call on the name of the Lord, to serve Him with one accord. From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia My worshipers, the daughter of My dispersed ones, shall bring My offering. In that day you shall not be shamed for any of your deeds in which you transgress against me; for then I will take away from your midst those who rejoice in your pride, and you shall no longer be haughty in My holy mountain. I will leave in your midst a meek and humble people, and they shall trust in the name of the Lord. The remnant of Israel shall do no unrighteousness and speak no lies, nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth; for they shall feed their flocks and lie down, and no one shall make them afraid. (Zeph. 3:8-13)

The context of this prophecy concerning the remnant comes after God's indictment of Jerusalem for her sins (Zeph. 3:1-7). Then the nations are gathered for judgment (Zeph. 3:8). Once God has judged in His indignation, His anger, and His jealousy, then healing and hope can begin. The Lord promised a remnant would be made. This remnant would be purified in their language as they called on the name of the Lord (Zeph. 3:9). This pure language would permit unity in their service to Him. This remnant would consist of worshipers gathered from where they had been scattered to the ends of the earth (Zeph. 3:10). No longer would God's people be ashamed by transgressions resulting from a spirit of pride and haughtiness (Zeph. 3:11). Joy would characterize the remnant as they would sing and shout in their gladness (Zeph. 3:14). The reasons for their joy were several: judgment was taken away (Zeph. 3:15); the Lord was in their midst (Zeph. 3:15, 17); the Lord would gather back those who had been taken captive (Zeph. 3:19-20).

### Defining Terms

Isaiah was told to meet King Ahaz with his son *Shear-Jashub* (Isa. 7:3). The son's name literally meant "a remnant shall return." "The name testified to the wicked King Ahaz and to all Israel, that for their sins God was about to drive Israel from their land, but yet by grace there was hope in the remnant that would return" (Cohen 894). The Hebrew word *shear* has a basic meaning of "remnant; that which is left; that which has survived after judgment or catastrophe" (894). An additional five different Hebrew stems, with various shades of meaning, are translated as remnant (Hasel 130). The Greek translation of this term in the Septuagint is *λειμμα* which carries the same basic meaning "remnant." Herntrich says that the term implies both "judgment and salvation," but in the main "it has a comforting character" (198). Other Greek words in the New Testament translated as "remnant, or the rest" are *λειπω* and its derivatives.

Context must determine whether the remnant being spoken of is historical, which could be faithful or faithless such as the remnant of the Judeans left with Jeremiah (Jer. 42-44). The remnant could

also refer to a spiritual remnant (Mic. 5:3). Or it could be a combination of the two. After all, ". . . it is obvious that the boundary between the secular and theological use of the concept will be a fluid one" (Herntrich 197).

The concept of the faithful remnant had its precedents in Hebrew history. Noah and his family represented a righteous remnant during the wicked days before the flood (Gen. 6:8ff; 7:1). Joseph preserved his family in Egypt when famine threatened the region (Gen. 45:7). In despair, Elijah complained that he was the only loyal servant left in Israel during the dark days of wicked Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kings 19:14). But God comforted His prophet with the assurance that He still had his loyal 7000 (1 Kings 19:18)!

### Hope in Judgment

Zephaniah's picture of the day of the Lord offered little hope.

The great day of the Lord is near; it is near and hastens quickly. The noise of the day is bitter; there the mighty men shall cry out. That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of devastation and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet and alarm against the fortified cities and against the high towers. (Zeph. 1:14-16)

A faint glimpse of hope was offered to those who would repent:

Gather yourselves together, yes, gather together, O undesirable nation, before the decree is issued, or the day passes like chaff, before the Lord's fierce anger comes upon you, before the day of the Lord's anger comes upon you! Seek the Lord, all you meek of the earth, who have upheld his justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility. It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the Lord's anger. (Zeph. 2:2-3)

But the sad truth was that there were very few in Zephaniah's time who heeded the call to repentance. The warning of coming

judgment was met with indifference. “And it shall come to pass at that time that I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and punish the men who are settled in complacency, who say in their heart, ‘The Lord will not do good, nor will he do evil’” (Zeph. 1:12). For a time the nation enjoyed a revival under the leadership of King Josiah, but the young king was killed in battle with Pharaoh Necho (2 Kings 23:29). Josiah’s reform was a case of too little, too late. And so judgment came on Judah and Jerusalem.

Yet there was still hope in the prophecy of the remnant. God’s prophet Amos spoke of the judgment as a sifting process in which God would preserve His faithful (Amos 9:8-9). But it must not be thought that the faithful would be exempted from suffering in the process. Think of what they had to endure in the painful sifting. Jeremiah was treated cruelly by his fellow Israelites and dragged off to die in Egypt (Jer. 38:6; 43:1-7). Daniel and his three friends were forced to become eunuchs in the service of the kings of Babylon (2 Kings 20:17-18; Isa. 39:7; Dan. 1:3-4). They faced the fiery furnace and the den of lions (Dan. 3, 6). Ezekiel had to suffer the death of his wife as he lived in exile, suffering with the rest of the captives (Ezek. 24:16-18). Esther and Mordecai had to prevail among the intrigues of the Persian court to save the Jews from genocide (Esth. 4:13-16).

For the faithful, their survival was a purifying process. The refining fire of the gold and silver smiths burns away the dross and impurities so that the metals are made more valuable. In the same way, the judgment executed on God’s people in the form of the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities refined God’s people. In the hideous and horrible experience of the exile, their faith was purified, strengthened, and exalted. “God’s purpose is not to wreak vengeance but to cleanse and refine and save those who will allow Him to save them” (Yates 168).

The preservation of the remnant is the work of God. “I will leave in your midst” (Zeph. 3:12). It is by God’s grace that the remnant is preserved. But the real question is, “Who will belong to it?” The promise of the remnant is a summons to faith (Hertrich 203-4).

## Description of the Remnant

Zephaniah points out five characteristics of the remnant that would come through the judgment. First, they would be *humble*. God’s refining fire would remove pride and haughtiness from the community and from the heart. “The purging of conscience (Heb. 9:14; 10:2) is the spiritual side of the divine work of salvation, making us acceptable to God but by that same transaction we are set within a pure community (Eph. 2:4-6; Heb. 12:22-24) and belong to it as personally delivered from the infection of pride” (Motyer 952-53). As Jesus described the people of the kingdom of heaven He spoke of those who were “poor in spirit, mourning, and meek” (Matt. 5:3, 4, 5).

Second, they would *trust in the name of the Lord*. Cognizant of their need of God, they trust in Him. The term in the passage has a literal meaning of “take refuge.” It describes an active trust that runs to the Lord for shelter (Motyer 954). They can do this because they know the name of the Lord. “The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe” (Prov. 18:10).

Third, this remnant of Israel would *do no unrighteousness*. Earlier in the chapter, Zephaniah had described God saying, “He will do no unrighteousness” (v. 5). Now, the remnant has taken on this characteristic of their God. This demonstrates two basic truths. One’s belief about God has an influence on his conduct. There is a universal tendency to become like the God one worships (Yates 168).

Fourth, this remnant *speaks no lies*. “A lie is something that pretends, not merely contrary to truth nor the insubstantiality of falsity, but the lie masquerading for truth” (Motyer 954). This reference may also have in view religious lies (i.e. idolatry) “. . . probably referring to the religious lies of idolatry and false prophets that had characterized those before them” (Hailey 244).

The last characteristic, *nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth*, relates to the fourth. Zephaniah had leveled the accusation of deceit against Jerusalem (Zeph. 1:9). In the remnant, deceit will have been purged from them. God’s people in every age must know His hatred toward lies and deceit (Prov. 6:16-19; James 1:26; 3:5).

## Portraits of the Remnant

Judgment came on Jerusalem. The people were led into seventy years captivity. Historically, a remnant of Jews led by Zerubbabel returned from captivity (Ezra 2:64). Later they were joined by Ezra, the ready scribe and leading men of Israel who returned with him (Ezra 7:7-8, 28; 8:1-21). They would be joined by Nehemiah and his brethren some thirteen years later (Neh. 2:1-9).

The captivity had purged the Jews of idolatry. But other sins still prevailed. Neglect of spiritual matters was addressed by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. Moral and spiritual decline was denounced by the prophet Malachi. Ezra and Nehemiah had to contend with problems of mixed marriages.

By the time of the birth of Christ, Jewish society had been purged of the sins of idolatry and mixed marriages. But the Sadducees had modernistic tendencies and had compromised the priesthood. A spirit of separatism was centered in the Pharisees but so too was a spirit of pride and hypocrisy.

But among these Jews there could be found a remnant, humble in spirit and ready for their Messiah. Notice how the birth narrative of Luke goes to great length to point out the seemingly insignificant people that were found at the birth of Jesus. The forerunner's parents were Zacharias and Elizabeth. They are described: "And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless" (Luke 1:6). This lowly couple from the Judean hill country formed part of the faithful remnant of a spiritually prepared people.

Luke proceeds to tell of the Virgin Mary. Mary's quick obedience to the angelic announcement (Luke 1:38) and her song magnifying God are indicators of her faithfulness (Luke 1:46-55). But her song also contrasts the "poor and lowly" with the "high and mighty." She declared, "For He has regarded the lowly estate of His maidservant" (Luke 1:48) and "He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted the lowly" (Luke 1:51-52).

When Jesus was presented at the temple two more persons give testimony to the presence of a faithful remnant in Israel. First, there was Simeon who is described as being, "just and devout,

waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him" (Luke 2:25). Then there was Anna, the prophetess. The Bible says, "And this woman was a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers, night and day" (Luke 2:37).

In addition to these humble, righteous people noted by Luke at Jesus' birth, John adds another individual to the remnant in the beginning of Jesus' ministry. "Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, and said of him, 'Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!'" (John 1:47).

In these faithful, righteous, humble people are found the representatives of the faithful remnant in the larger, historical group which had come through the captivity. They are the ones Paul spoke of when he said, "They are not all Israel who are of Israel" (Rom. 9:6) and "Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace" (Rom. 11:5).

## Relevance of the Remnant

Dark days of apostasy were not limited to ancient Israel or the first Christians (Gal. 1:6-10; 1 Tim. 4:1-3). If departure from the faith could come in the days of living apostles and the miraculous measure of the Holy Spirit, it is not to be doubted that some today will depart from the faith. When men are willing to mix true religion with false (Zeph. 1:6); when they are indifferent to the Lord's cause (Zeph. 1:12); when they are confident in their silver and gold (Zeph. 1:18); when there is rebellion and impurity (Zeph. 3:1); when leadership is corrupt (Zeph. 3:3-4) then we should not be surprised by apostasy.

It must be remembered that God will judge sin. Whether judgment on sin occurs within history, or at the last great Day, it needs to be remembered that sin will be punished. "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit receive everlasting life" (Gal. 6:7-8).

Just as the word remnant gave hope to Judah long ago, so should the word speak of hope to us today. There is hope for the

future, even in judgment. This hope is not based on human worthiness, works, or achievement. It is based on faith in God. Why? “He never fails” (Zeph. 3:5). As Paul told Timothy, “This is a faithful saying: For if we died with Him, we shall also live with Him. If we endure, we shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He also will deny us. If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself” (2 Tim. 2:11-13).

The assurance of hope for the remnant does not mean that there will be no difficulties for the faithful. In love, God disciplines His children (Prov. 3:11-12; Heb. 12:3-11). Christian living in the face of suffering, trials, and difficulties should still be characterized by hope.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us. . . . For we are saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance. (Rom. 8:18, 24-25)

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:6-9)

Paul said that the Israelites of his day had stumbled because they were pursuing salvation on a basis of works, not faith (Rom. 9:32-33). Jesus will be chief stone or He will be the stone of stumbling (Isa. 28:16; Matt. 21:42-45; Acts 4:11). The key to being a part of the remnant, whether Jew or Gentile, whether then or now is faith. Jesus said, “many are called but few are chosen” (Matt. 20:16; 22:14). The difference between stumbling or

standing; between the many and the few is whether one persists in self-righteousness or whether one chooses to believe in God’s righteousness in Christ. God will have His remnant, will we prove faithful?

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#### Biographical Sketch

Bruce was born in Warren, OH, on April 19, 1959. He is married to the former Gayle Gleaton of Stockbridge, GA. Bruce and Gayle have been married for 27 years. He has two sons, Michael, age 21 and Vincent, age 18. Michael is a senior at Marietta College (Ohio) and Vince is a freshman at Harding University.

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In addition, Bruce has served as an instructor in the Florida School of Preaching, 1995-2000 and in the West Virginia School of Preaching, 2001 to present.

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# *Polluted Offerings*

*Steve Higginbotham*

From the beginning of time unto the present day, worship has been a challenge. In the very beginning, Cain's worship was found to be unacceptable to God because it was not "by faith" like his brother Abel's sacrifice (Heb. 11:4).



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Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron were consumed by fire from Heaven as they carelessly and presumptuously worshiped God on their own terms, rather than obeying the terms God had given them (Lev. 10:1-11).

During the personal ministry of Jesus, the Scribes and Pharisees, the religious elitists of the day, worshiped God vainly, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men (Matt. 15:8-9).

Even the New Testament church discovered that acceptable worship could be challenging. The apostle Paul said that the Colossian brethren had engaged in "will worship," or a form of self-imposed religion which was of no value (Col. 2:23).

While mankind has witnessed marvelous advancements through the years, some of which our ancestors could not have even dreamed, yet we have not advanced to the point that acceptable worship is no longer challenging. Surely all of us, at one time or another, set out to worship God, and only upon reflection did we realize that we did not worship Him acceptably at all.

Malachi 1:6-14 provides revealing insights into the challenge of worshiping God acceptably. At this time in Israel's history, the priests as well as the people were worshiping God with polluted

offerings. As one examines this section of Scripture, he can see at least three reasons why Israel's worship was unacceptable to God.

## **They Were Not Giving What Was Due**

The whole idea behind worship is to offer praise and homage to one who is worthy. "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing. . . . Blessing and honor and glory and power be to Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever!" (Rev. 5:12, 13b). In Malachi 1:6, God asks, "Where is My honor?" and "Where is my reverence?" It was absent. The people were making offerings to God, but without due reverence and respect. The people were offering to God that which was sick, lame, blind, blemished, and even stolen (Mal. 1:8, 13-14). In response to such action, God reminds the people that He is a "great King" and "His name is to be feared among the nations" (Mal. 1:14).

Israel had failed to comprehend who it was that they were worshiping. Consequently, they did not give God His due respect. When one fails to consider who he is worshiping, and why He is worthy of worship, then he will surely fail to worship God acceptably. However, when one properly considers and meditates upon the attributes of the God he is serving and worshiping; he cannot help but be in awe of Him, and humbled in His presence.

The sense of awe of which I write can be observed in the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 6:1-8). Isaiah had a vision in which he found himself in the presence of God. The Lord was sitting on a high throne, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above the throne were seraphim who cried out, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is filled with His glory!" The posts and the door were shaken by their voice and the house was filled with smoke.

Then Isaiah said, "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts." One of the seraphim then flew to Isaiah and touched his mouth with a live coal and told him that his sins were taken away and that he had been purged.

Isaiah then heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Upon hearing the Lord’s question, Isaiah responded by saying, “Here am I! Send me.”

This vision of Isaiah contains several elements that demand our attention. First, notice the greatness of the One sitting on the throne. Do not miss the majesty, power, and excellence of His presence. Even the angels worshiped Him. When one worships God, he must first be aware of the awesome glory of the One He is worshiping.

Second, notice the humility of Isaiah. In the presence of God, he realized his frailty. There is no place for pretense, no “put on face” that could hide who he really was. Clearly he realized he was in the presence of One who was greater and mightier than himself, and that he and the One sitting on the throne were not on equal ground. Isaiah was humbled and felt inadequate in God’s presence, much like the prophet Micah who said, “With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the High God?” (Micah 6:6). A worshiper today must realize that God is not on equal standing with him. When one worships God, he is not in the presence of a peer, but in the presence of the Most High and Holy God! Such awareness can only invoke humility and a sense of inadequacy in a worshiper.

Third, notice the graciousness of God. As sinful and unclean as Isaiah was, God purified him and took away his sins. This action was not performed out of any obligation, but rather out of the graciousness and good pleasure of God’s will. A worshiper needs to comprehend the character and graciousness of the God he worships. How can one who understands the goodness of God not love and adore Him?

And fourth, notice Isaiah’s awareness of his indebtedness to God’s grace. In light of God’s graciousness toward Isaiah in cleansing him of his sins, how could he dare remain silent when God asked, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?” Could one who had been given so much refuse or ignore any request of the Giver?

True worship begins when one comprehends God’s greatness and attempts to give Him what is due Him.

### **They Were Not Giving What Was Right**

From the beginning of time, worship has been regulated. Man has never been left to his own devices to worship God as he saw fit. Jesus reminded us that God must be worshiped in “spirit” as well as “in truth” (John 4:24). Israel was guilty of offering worship that was unauthorized or not in harmony with truth. They were offering the blind, lame, sick, and blemished. However, the Word of God explicitly instructed them to give the very best. No less than 17 times in the book of Leviticus did God command that the offering that were made had to be “without blemish.” While Israel may have called what they were offering to God, “worship,” in reality it was disobedience. They were not giving God what was right.

If we are to refrain from offering “polluted offerings” to God even today, we must give attention to the Word of God, and offer to Him only that which He has authorized. If one surveys the current landscape of our brotherhood, he will not have to look far to find some who have abandoned the need for authority in worship. They have given up on the idea that God regulates worship. They have wholly bought into the idea that they are at liberty to offer God whatever they wish, and that God will be anxious to accept it.

Not too long ago, a preacher was asked if there was anything wrong with worshipping God by sacrificing a sheep on an altar as an expression of Christian worship. His reply was as follows, “Only from the sheep’s point of view!” He then proceeded to say,

If you were honestly, from your hearts, engaging in this act of worship to express genuine thanksgiving to your God, and you both believe this to be acceptable to Him, and it was done in such a way that none of your brethren were caused to stumble and none who were lost were hindered from being drawn to the Lord, and if you did not seek to bind this practice upon others, then I would find no reason to condemn your worshipful expression. (Maxey)

What this brother has failed to realize is what Israel of old failed to realize: God has regulated worship, and one must worship him

in harmony with truth. We need to call people back to the Bible, and seek a “thus saith the Lord” for what we offer to God as worship. We must learn to speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent. Whatever we do in word or in deed, must be done in the name of (by the authority of) the Lord (Col. 3:17; cf. Acts 4:7). We must call people to respect the authority of God’s word, and to act only in harmony with His revelation.

I challenge all of us to heed the words of the Puritan preacher, Richard Baxter (1615-1691) who stated:

For what man, dare go in a way which has neither precept nor example to warrant it? Can that be obedience which has no command for it. . . . O, the pride of man’s heart, that instead of being a law-obeyer, will be a law-maker! For my part, I will not fear that God will be angry with me for doing no more than He has commanded me, and sticking close to the rule of His Word, in matter of worship; but I should tremble to add or diminish! (24).

### **They Were Not Giving What Was True**

Their sacrifices and offering were given without any true devotion to God else they would not have offered what they did. To Israel, worship was not an expression of their heart-felt devotion toward God, but rather had become a weariness to them (Mal. 1:13).

I dare say that people routinely come to worship today, and fall miserably short of achieving what they set out to do. Countless Christians will awaken early on Sunday morning, get dressed in their Sunday finest, and travel to a church building without giving a single thought as to why they have done so.

Failure to prepare for worship has caused many to offer to God what is unacceptable. Furthermore, some Christians have deceived themselves into thinking that their thoughtless, rote routine is acceptable to God.

How else can one explain:

- ❖ Christians sitting with lips closed tightly as songs of praise and adoration are being sung to God?
- ❖ Passing notes and whispering about matters which have nothing to do with God throughout the lesson, prayers, and Lord’s Supper?
- ❖ Taking “mental vacations” which pass the time with exciting adventures, thoughts as to the outcome of a ballgame scheduled for later that afternoon, or just the mundane affairs of life such as juggling bills, or planning the day’s menu.
- ❖ Unresolved feelings of hatred and bitterness toward a brother or sister sitting in the very same building, and possibly even on the same pew?
- ❖ “Clock watching” while a lesson from God’s Word is presented; and sometimes even feelings of dismay when one responds to the Gospel because it lengthens the worship service?
- ❖ Being so tired from a night of carousing that every ounce of mental industry is exhausted in simply trying to keep one’s head from bobbing up and down during the service.

For some, the challenge of worship has nothing to do with focusing upon the majesty of God, but rather to simply find ways to politely pass the time. I have personally heard of people counting the ceiling tiles, counting how many times the preacher said, “um,” keeping track of how many times someone in the assembly coughed, and counting how many unknown songs there are in the song book. Having engaged in this for 20 or 30 minutes, the final amen is said, and this Christian goes home having *faithfully* completed his weekly obligation with plans to return at the next appointed time to *worship* again.

Obviously, some have lost the focus of worship. Worship is more than just a roll call of the redeemed. It is more than just an hour of polite quietness. Neither is worship something one observes, but rather something in which one participates. Personally, I cringe every time I hear a well-intentioned comment from the pulpit about the fine audience we have today. Those in the assembly who

gathered themselves together are not the audience of worship, but rather the participants. It is not the place of the assembly to critique the performance, but to engage and be participants in the performance. Cornelius had it right when he said, “We are all present before God” (Acts 10:33). God is the object of worship, and He is the audience that critiques the performance of each worshiper.

The fact that the worshiper is not the audience critiquing a performance, but rather a participant being critiqued by the audience, who is God, should cause one to seriously evaluate his worship to God. So, from a practical perspective, what can one do to better prepare himself to acceptably worship God in spirit and in truth? The following are a few suggestions:

First, prepare for worship the night before. Get things ready. Make sure the alarm clock is set. Awaken early enough so that your morning does not have to be a mad rush. Lay out clothes to be worn the following morning. Locate Bibles and have them available. Leaving these items undone until the last minute often results in conflict and anger, which puts the worshiper in the wrong frame of mind.

Get sufficient rest the night before. Saturday night might be the night on which the world stays out late and plays, but a Christian needs to keep in mind that he has an appointment with his Lord the following morning. One’s activities on the evening before worship will have a formative affect, positively or negatively, on one’s readiness for worship Sunday morning. One’s appointment to worship God must take precedence over any fun that one might have which would leave him too exhausted to acceptably worship the one who gave his Son for him. One would certainly get a good night’s sleep prior to a major exam or an important sporting event. Then why would one not demonstrate the same preparation for worship, which is infinitely more important?

Use your Bible; do not just carry it with you. Open it to the passages that are mentioned and read from the text that is being discussed. Following along in your Bible not only verifies the truthfulness of what is being taught, which is a noble activity (Acts 17:11-12), it also helps to keep your mind from wandering away from God and His message.

Cleanse yourself from all sin. Did not the Lord, Himself say: “Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” (Matt. 5:23-24). How can one possibly worship God acceptably while he harbors and shields sin in his life? Listen to David as he speaks about the integrity of heart and life that is necessary for those who come to the Lord’s house to worship. “Lord, who may abide in your tabernacle? Who may dwell in your holy hill? He who walks uprightly, and works righteousness, and speaks the truth in his heart” (Ps. 15:1-2).

Arrive on time. I once heard a preacher say that habitual tardiness reflects a deficiency in character. I cannot find fault with that sentiment. Tardiness is a disruption to the entire assembly, and is a distraction for every other worshiper. Not only is the one who is habitually tardy robbing himself by missing part of the worship, typically he is also so frazzled by the time he arrives that he fails to have the proper frame of mind for worship. When one takes the time to consider the majesty of God and the opportunity worship provides mankind, habitual tardiness would become unthinkable and viewed as an offense.

I believe we would be aided in our preparation for worship if we would also remember four biblical avenues of preparation recorded in Hebrews 10:22, “Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”

- ❖ **Draw near with Sincerity.** Going through the motions of worship is unacceptable. Being present for some reason other than to glorify God is inadequate.
- ❖ **Draw near with Faith.** We must trust the one we are worshiping, and believe that He is all the things He claims to be which make Him worthy of our worship.

- ❖ **Draw near with Humility.** Do not lose sight of just how inadequate and unworthy we are as we stand in His presence.
- ❖ **Draw near with Purity.** God will not, and cannot be worshiped by worshipers whose lives are unclean and stained with sin.

If one will prepare himself for worship by giving what is due, what is right and what is true, his worship will be acceptable to God, and his spiritual life will be deepened by the communion and fellowship with God that worship affords.

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#### **Biographical Sketch**

Steve Higginbotham is a native of West Virginia being raised in Chester, WV. He received his higher education at Freed-Hardeman University. After graduation Steve worked with the Nitro, WV, congregation for five years. For the past 19, he has worked with the South Green Street Church of Christ in Glasgow, KY. He speaks in several gospel meetings, lectureships, and youth rallies each year.

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# Overview of Haggai

Tim Canup

## Introduction

It was because of their sins, which primarily consisted of idolatry (although it included other such things as oppression of the poor, immorality, and indifference), God punished the southern



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kingdom of Judah. Beginning in 606 BC, Judah was carried away into Babylonian captivity and the temple was finally destroyed in 586 BC. In 536 BC, after the Medes and Persians had conquered Babylon, King Cyrus signed a decree allowing the children of Israel to return home to Jerusalem.

Upon returning home, they began to rebuild the Temple by laying the foundation. However, because of opposition from their enemies, work was halted (cf. Ezra 4:6-24). For 16 years the temple, God's house, laid in ruins! In 520 BC, God sent His messenger, Haggai, with a message to these people, who, to say the least, were master procrastinators! The primary thrust of Haggai's message was, "Get Busy!" Goebel Music noted that Haggai was the "first of three post-exilics, he both illuminates and inflames, with all the urgency of his being, the rebuilding of the temple" (257). Because of the preaching of Haggai (as well as that of Zechariah), four years later (516 BC, cf. Ezra 6:14-15) the temple was complete!

Haggai's book may be the second shortest of the Old Testament; however, these 38 verses are packed with a very powerful message from God. Twenty-six times (Hailey 303) in 38 verses Haggai uses

such phrases as, "Thus says the Lord" or "the Word of the Lord," which indicates and emphasizes his source of authority. The book of Haggai can be divided into four messages, delivered on three different occasions (Smith 479). Haggai's message basically consisted of a rebuke followed by word of encouragement for them to get busy rebuilding the temple. They had no excuse. God was with them and no enemy could overtake them if they only kept their trust in the Lord! Haggai reminded them of this in a most effective way. By citing Ezra 5:1-2 (emphasis on the last phrase of verse 2), Goebel Music wrote concerning Haggai's effectiveness: "This prophet of God may have lacked the poetical eloquence of some, as his style seems to bear out, but when it came '*to the work,*' he was '*a helping hand*'" (257). It seems Haggai had an attitude that was: "do as I do" rather than "do as I say."

## Haggai's First Message (Chapter One)

Haggai was very exact in dating his messages, even down to the day. In the first verse of the book he wrote, "In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, saying." King Darius began his reign in 522 BC, thus it would have been about 16 years after they had returned home. "Converting the chronological data supplied by Haggai, scholars have computed that this prophet's ministry began on August 29, 520 B.C." (Smith 492; cf. Finegan 234).

Haggai's first message was a rebuke for indifference. In verse two, Haggai revealed that God knew their true heart: "Thus speaks the LORD of hosts, saying: This people says, The time has not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built." Notice God referred to them as, "This people" rather than, "My people," which indicates His displeasure with them. Their mind-set was that it was not a good time to be working on the temple. However, in light of their attitude, God responded with the thought provoking question: "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins?" (vv. 3-4). Hailey noted:

This gives a true insight into the real interest and labors of the people. “Ceiled houses” indicates a degree of luxury and concern for themselves as they lived comfortably in expensive wainscoted dwellings. It may have been excusable for the people to build comfortable and conveniently furnished houses if first they had built the house of God. The irony of the charge is that while they spent their energies and wealth, probably using the materials gathered for the house of the Lord, in their own dwellings, “this house lieth waste.” By no means is this the last time the people of God have looked to the building of their own ceiled houses while the house of the Lord lay waste. (304)

These people had failed to put things in their proper priority. They had put their own cares and concerns first! God has always, from the very beginning, demanded to be first in men’s lives (cf. Ex. 20:1-6; Matt. 6:33, et al.). “Indeed, it seems that in course of time the people began almost to welcome opposition to their task because it furnished them an opportunity to construct their ‘ceiled houses’ for themselves, Hag. 1:4. But lean years followed, due, as Haggai reminds them, to Jehovah’s displeasure, 1:1-11” (Robinson 140). Brother David Pharr pointed out:

. . . [T]he real cause for their procrastination was selfishness. This is shown in verses 4, 9. Actually it was honorable and necessary to provide shelter, clothing, and food; but they had their priorities reversed. They were working so hard to provide for their own comfort that they had no time left for God’s work. They had scheduled God’s work out of their lives (Cf. Philippians 2:21; 1 Corinthians 13:5). (120)

Hobart E. Freeman noted:

In this section Haggai reproved the people’s unfaithfulness in setting aside their spiritual obligations while they

promoted their own prosperity, which, because of their selfishness, never actually materialized. They had deluded themselves into believing that if they first made themselves prosperous and satisfied their own needs, they would then be in a better position to meet their obligations to the Lord. What they failed to see, however, was that when one neglects to discharge his obligations to the Lord first, whatever he does for himself will not prosper. Hence, Israel found to her dismay that when she pleaded exemption from her responsibilities to the Lord on the basis of the severity of the times and lack of resources, her condition grew worse instead of better inasmuch as God withheld the rains and smote them with drought. (326)

Therefore, because of their attitude, God called for them to examine themselves. “Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways!” (v. 5). God desired for them to “consider” which means “literally, *set your heart upon*” (Deane 2) their ways or to stop and look at their actions in light of His will. God was the One who had provided all things; therefore, since they had forgotten Him, or at least had taken Him out of first place, He then had cut off their blessings. Notice verse six: “You have sown much, and bring in little; You eat, but do not have enough; You drink, but you are not filled with drink; You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; And he who earns wages, Earns wages to put into a bag with holes.” Their attitude had affected their blessings. God had made all their labors to be in vain!

Haggai’s rebuke was then followed by an exhortation to “Get Busy!” In verse 7, Haggai again called for them to “Consider your ways!” Then in verses 8-11, Haggai instructed them to “Go up to the mountains and bring wood and build the temple, that I may take pleasure in it and be glorified, says the LORD” (v. 8). The temple was not for God’s benefit, it was for the people. The temple was necessary for them to worship, by which God took pleasure in them. How could they have properly worshipped God without the temple for those sixteen years? Haggai reminded them that their current condition was a direct result of their lack of placing God first. Notice his words:

You looked for much, but indeed it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? says the LORD of hosts. Because of My house that is in ruins, while every one of you runs to his own house. Therefore the heavens above you withhold the dew, and the earth withholds its fruit. For I called for a drought on the land and the mountains, on the grain and the new wine and the oil, on whatever the ground brings forth, on men and livestock, and on all the labor of your hands. (1:9-11)

W. J. Deane noted, “I called for a drought. . . . There is a play on words in the Hebrew: as they had let the Lord’s house lie ‘waste’ (*chareb*) (vers. 4, 9), so the Lord punished them with ‘drought’ (*choreb*)” (3).

Haggai, who must have been a powerful and motivating speaker, brought results by his preaching. Haggai reported: “Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, **obeyed the voice of the LORD their God**, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the LORD their God had sent him; **and the people feared the presence of the LORD**” (1:12, emp. added). Too many times today we have forgotten the power of the Gospel and have parted from it and have adopted the philosophies of men. Haggai, as he so often reminded them, simply spoke God’s message. He realized he was not a policeman, just a messenger and a servant. How we so need such like-minded men in our pulpits today!

Haggai concluded his first message with another word of encouragement. “Then Haggai, the Lord’s messenger, spoke the Lord’s message to the people, saying, **I am with you, says the LORD**” (1:13, emp. added). Haggai encouraged them to get busy! In essence he told them, “You have no excuse! God is with you!” Perhaps we all need to be reminded from time to time that “If God be for us, who can be against us?” (Rom 8:31b) and “God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power” (2 Tim. 1:7).

RESULTS! Just twenty-three days after Haggai began preaching, they began working. “So the LORD stirred up the spirit

of Zerubbabel . . . and the spirit of Joshua . . . and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and worked on the house of the LORD of hosts, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month, in the second year of King Darius” (1:14-15). God stirred these people to action by the preaching of His humble, but powerful, servant. We should never underestimate the power of the preaching of God’s message!

Consider a few additional applications for us today, which abound in these first few verses. First, we need to constantly consider our ways in light of the Word of God (2 Cor. 13:5). That is the challenge for every one of us! We must examine ourselves to determine whether or not we are right with God. There is a time and a sense in which we are to examine one another, but we must first make sure we are right ourselves. Secondly, when we get our priorities out of focus, God is NOT pleased. We need to honestly consider our ways to make sure God comes first in every aspect of our life, e.g., our time, effort, money, etc. Thirdly, procrastination is always destructive. It is easy to put things off. We often spend more time and energy getting out of a task than if we just tackled it in the first place. How the church would be growing if only we would not procrastinate.

### **Haggai’s Second Message (2:1-9)**

James E. Smith commented:

The second chapter of Haggai contains three oracles delivered on two different dates. In these oracles Haggai issues a call to courage (vv. 1-9), a call to patience (vv. 10-19), and a call to hope (vv. 20-23). The prophet’s purpose was to bolster the temple builders. While it took the prophet only one message to restart the temple work, it took three oracles to encourage the builders to stay with the work. (503)

In verses 1-9, we see a comparison being made between the old and the new temple as well as another word of encouragement. The Word of God came again to Haggai on the twenty-first day of

the seventh month (could be compared to our October 21), and asked, “Who is left among you who saw this temple in its former glory? And how do you see it now? In comparison with it, **is this not in your eyes as nothing?**” (2:3, emp. added). There were some present who had lived before the captivity, who had seen Solomon’s temple, when they saw the current temple, wept greatly and were sorely disappointed. Ezra recorded:

But many of the priests and Levites and heads of the fathers’ houses, old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this temple was laid before their eyes. Yet many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard afar off. (3:12-13)

So God encouraged Zerubbabel, Joshua and all the people to “be strong . . . and work; for I am with you” (2:4). In verse 5, we see that God reminded them of the covenant He had made with them when He brought them out of land of Egypt, which covenant He would not break, if they only kept their part (that is, faithfully obeyed and served Him). At the end of the verse, God reminded them, “. . . so My Spirit remains among you; **do not fear!**” (2:5b, emp. added).

Having given them this word of encouragement, God then reinforces this by speaking of a future glory of a better temple (verses 6-9). In verses 6-7, Haggai wrote, “For thus says the LORD of hosts: Once more (it *is* a little while) I will shake heaven and earth, the sea and dry land; and I will shake all nations, and they shall come to the Desire of All Nations, and I will fill this temple with glory, says the LORD of hosts.” Haggai qualified the time of this prophecy when he said “it is a little while,” that is, it is something yet to come. The Hebrews writer applies this prophecy to the kingdom or church (cf. Heb. 12:25-29). At the end of verse 7, when Haggai spoke of this temple, he was not referring to the one they were building (cf. end of verse 9); but rather to the one built by Christ; the spiritual temple, the New Testament church.

Halley wrote concerning this passage:

This is distinctly a Messianic vision. Haggai’s mind was on that Temple, which he was helping Zerubbabel to build. But his words were God’s words; and God’s mind, in a sense deeper perhaps than even Haggai himself realized, as on another Temple, yet to be, of which Solomon’s Temple and Zerubbabel’s Temple were but dim pictures: the Church, built not of stones, but of Souls of the Redeemed. The Church, of Fadeless, Endless, Ineffable Glory, the Consummation of all God’s wondrous works, is the Temple of God (I Corinthians 3:16-17; II Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:21) of which Haggai here dreamed. (377)

Having spoken of the future glorious temple to come, God said, “The silver *is* Mine, and the gold *is* Mine, says the LORD of hosts. The glory of this latter temple shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, says the LORD of hosts” (2:8-9). The point Haggai is wanting them to understand is not be sad about the size of the current temple; a bigger and better temple shall come; that is, a spiritual one. Besides, God owns all the silver and gold in this world, so they had nothing with which they could build that would impress Him. God does not dwell in any temple made with hands (cf. Acts 17:24f), rather in the spiritual temple, the church. Therefore, God desires for us to be a holy temple unto Him by our godly lives and our worship to Him (cf. Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:5f). Clinton R. Gill observed:

It is patently obvious that Haggai cannot be saying that when the second temple is complete it will be more splendid than the first. This simply could not be true in the nation’s post-exilic circumstances. Historically it was not true, even with Herod’s embellishments during the Roman era. Haggai is looking to something far more meaningful than stone and mortar. Lump Solomon’s temple, Zerubbabel’s temple, and Herod’s temple all together and

their glory cannot surpass that of the real temple, the church. (249)

### Haggai's Third Message (2:10-19)

It had been three months since Haggai's last message when he began the third one (cf. verse 10). "The first half of the message is composed of two questions to the priests, their answers, and a conclusion: the people and their works are unclean" (Hailey 311).

The first question and the priest's answer is found in verses 11-12: "Thus says the LORD of hosts: Now, ask the priests concerning the law, saying, If one carries holy meat in the fold of his garment, and with the edge he touches bread or stew, wine or oil, or any food, will it become holy? Then the priests answered and said, No." In other words, Haggai was asking them: "Can the holy thing make the unholy holy?" (cf. Gill 251). They answered correctly: No, it cannot.

Then Haggai asked them the second question, "If one who is unclean because of a dead body touches any of these, will it be unclean? So the priests answered and said, It shall be unclean" (v. 13). Haggai was asking them, "Can the unholy make the holy unholy?" (cf. Gill 251-52). Again, they answered correctly. What was Haggai's point in asking these questions? He was trying to get them to examine themselves in light of the answers to these two questions. Notice Haggai's conclusion. "So is this people, and so is this nation before Me, says the LORD, and so is every work of their hands; and what they offer there is unclean" (v. 14). Highers wrote:

The conclusion was that pollution contracted by touching the dead could be passed to another, while ceremonial cleanness could not. It is easier to catch disease than it is to "catch" health. The problem with the people was their failure to rebuild the temple; consequently, they were unclean and so was everything they touched. (39)

God's people had come home, built their own fancy houses and simply ignored God's house, the temple. The temple is where they

were to offer sacrifices for their sins, which they could not do because it was in ruins. Haggai is trying to get them to understand they are not made holy simply by returning back home to the "holy land." They had sins which needed to be atoned for by sacrifice, which undoubtedly they had not yet done. Sometimes people today have the idea that being in a church building or sitting through a service will make an unholy life holy.

In verses 15-19, Haggai shows them that obedience will result in God's blessing by comparing different points in time. In verses 15-16, he wants them to consider the time from when they came home until about 3 months earlier (when they had resumed work). Things had been bad. They did not have enough. God had not blessed them because of their misaligned priorities. We are told God tried to get their attention: "I struck you with blight and mildew and hail in all the labors of your hands; yet you did not *turn* to Me, says the LORD" (v. 17).

Having pondered on the fact of God affecting their labors, Haggai then wanted them to consider the past 3 months (since the work had resumed to the present time – vv. 18-19). Notice verse 19, "Is the seed still in the barn? As yet the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree have not yielded *fruit*. **But from this day I will bless you**" (emp. added). God is encouraging them to keep up the work. Although things have been bad in the past, if they keep God in first place, things will get better!

### Haggai's Fourth Message (2:20-23)

According to verse 20, Haggai's final message came the same day as the previous one. In the latter part of verse 21 and 22, God instructed Haggai to speak to Zerubbabel saying, "I will shake heaven and earth. I will overthrow the throne of kingdoms; I will destroy the strength of the Gentile kingdoms. I will overthrow the chariots and those who ride in them; The horses and their riders shall come down, Every one by the sword of his brother." This is a word of encouragement and comfort to this leader that God is in control (cf. Dan. 4:25).

On the same day on which the Lord promised to the people the return of the blessings of nature, Haggai received a second revelation, which promised to the community the preservation and care of the Davidic monarchy, represented for the time by Zerubbabel, in the midst of the storms that were about to burst upon the power of the world. (Keil and Delitzsch 497).

Then God showed that Zerubbabel was His signet: “In that day, says the LORD of hosts, I will take you, Zerubbabel My servant, the son of Shealtiel, says the LORD, and will **make you like a signet ring; for I have chosen you**, says the LORD of hosts” (v. 23, emp. added). God prophesied to David:

When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his Father, and he shall be My son. If he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men and with the blows of the sons of men. But My mercy shall not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I removed from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever. (2 Sam. 7:12-16)

Then we recall God’s words to Coniah in Jeremiah 22:24-30 that he would be sent into captivity and would die there. Notice verse 30, “Thus says the LORD: Write this man down as childless, A man who shall not prosper in his days; For none of his descendants shall prosper, sitting on the throne of David, and ruling anymore in Judah.” God fulfilled these prophecies just as He said He would. Now they are back from captivity and they have no king. They have felt great opposition from their enemies as they attempted to do God’s work. This is a confirmation for the people that Zerubbabel is God’s appointed leader and for them to follow him. He is God’s man; he has God’s authority. James E. Smith commented:

The Lord promised to make Zerubbabel “as a signet.” A signet was worn on the finger or on a cord fastened round the neck. A signet was equivalent to a signature in a world where most people did not write. Thus Zerubbabel would be God’s signature, his authoritative leader among the remnant. In similar words Yahweh had rejected Zerubbabel’s grandfather, Jehoiachin, from the throne (Jer 22:24). Thus these words attest the reinstatement of the Davidic line. Zerubbabel would be Yahweh’s pledge that all of the ancient promises made to David (2 Sam 7:12-16) would be fulfilled. (513)

### Conclusion

The nation of Israel faced many oppositions and enemies. Yet, by the power of God, they were able to overcome them. We today, spiritual Israel (the church), also face many oppositions and enemies. God’s message today is basically the same as the one He sent to physical Israel through the preaching of Haggai. God told them, “Do not worry about what is going on around you. You get busy doing My work and I will bless and take care of you.” Remember the words of the Hebrews’ writer: “Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, I will never leave you nor forsake you” (13:5). May we always have the mind-set to be willing to put the Lord first, roll up our sleeves and be busy doing His work. As the words of the old hymn say, “There is much to do, there is work on every hand!” May the Lord bless our efforts in His Kingdom!

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### **Biographical Sketch**

Tim Canup was born in Galax, VA, and is the youngest of five children of Jimmy and Mary Canup. His father is also a Gospel preacher. Tim is a 2001 graduate of West Virginia School of Preaching. He has done local work with churches in Statesville and West Jefferson, NC, and is currently working with the Centerview Church of Christ in Elizabethton, TN. He has written articles for the local newspaper, conducted a weekly radio program, and directed the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> Annual "Back To The Bible" Lectures. He teaches the Book of Hebrews and the Minor Prophets at the Tri-Cities School of Preaching and Christian Development in Elizabethton, TN. Tim and his wife, Cindy, have been married for eight years. They have one son, Andrew, who will be 2yr. in February.

# God Loves-Hates

John Board

God loves all religions—God Hates America! Such slogans show a misconception regarding God's loves and hates. At the time of the writing of this lecture, more than one high profile figure has had to distance themselves from the hate filled messages



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proclaimed by their “ministers” in the name of God. Others would leave the impression that no matter whom or what you are—God loves you as you are.

The people of Malachi's day also seemed to misunderstand God's love. Because of this misunderstanding, they sought evidence that they felt would prove God loved them. Malachi corrects the misunderstanding with the true source of knowledge—God's Revelation. Malachi was not backward in proclaiming what the people of God needed to hear. The people, like Job of old, seemed to want to have their day with God in court. Malachi will provide God's answer to the charges leveled against Him (Mal. 1:2-5).

Some believe Malachi is not a proper name at all. Although it is true that the same Hebrew word appears in 3:1 and it is not translated “Malachi” but “my messenger,” most believe Malachi to be a proper name (perhaps a contraction of the name Malachijah) meaning “my messenger.” God's messenger brought a much needed message to God's people.

## An Examination of the Terms “Love” and “Hate”

In Luke 14:26 Jesus declares the relationship of the disciple to the teacher; if one was to follow Jesus he would need to “hate” father, mother, wife, children, and even his own life in order to be a disciple. A similar concept was understood by the Talmudim (close followers of a Jewish Rabbi). These students were taught that they were to hold their teacher in higher esteem than their own father because although their father brought them into the world, their teacher through wise instruction would bring them into the world to come. But to “hate” their family members—is this what Jesus demands? Even as God, does He require that following Him demands an apparent contradiction in one of the commandments—honoring father and mother?

The problem lies in the carry over of the principle from the Hebrew language. Biblical Hebrew lacks the necessary elements to express the comparative sense, i. e., “more than” or “less than.” In comparative words or in words of different degrees (like first and second) biblical Hebrew often expresses them as extremes. For example “first” and “second” may be expressed as “first” and “last.” Although in English *love* and *hate* are viewed as opposites, in biblical Hebrew they may be related terms expressing loving more or less.

Take for example a passage in Deuteronomy (21:15-17):

If a man have two wives, one beloved and another hated, and they have borne him children, both the beloved and the hated, and if the firstborn son be hers that was hated, then it shall be, when he maketh his sons to inherit that which he hath, that he may not make the son of the beloved firstborn before the son of the hated, who is indeed the firstborn. But he shall acknowledge the son of the hated as the firstborn by giving him a double portion of all that he hath, for he is the beginning of his strength; the right of the firstborn is his.

Here a man was not allowed to abandon a “hated” wife's son's rights of inheritance. The passage also discusses favoritism between two wives rather than literally loving one and hating the

other. The passage indicates that he bears children by both. In an effort to soften the wording various translations have rendered the term in other ways. Consider the NKJV rendering below:

If a man has two wives, one loved and the other unloved, and they have borne him children, both the loved and the unloved, and if the firstborn son is of her who is unloved, then it shall be, on the day he bequeaths his possessions to his sons, that he must not bestow firstborn status on the son of the loved wife in preference to the son of the unloved, the true firstborn. But he shall acknowledge the son of the unloved wife as the firstborn by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the beginning of his strength; the right of the firstborn is his. (Deut. 21:15-17).

Although various translations try to soften the word, *sane* (Strong 119) is used more than 140 times and is always translated as “hate” or words indicating “foe” or “enemy.” A literal translation cannot soften the apparent invective; for this reason the metaphor is often best explained by an idiomatic interpretation.

Another passage that uses the love/hate concept:

And when the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren. And Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben [that is, See a son]; for she said, “Surely the LORD hath looked upon my affliction. Now therefore my husband will love me.” And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, “Because the LORD hath heard that I was hated, He hath therefore given me this son also.” And she called his name Simeon [that is, Hearing]. (Gen. 29:31-33)

Here there seems to be a contrast of degree and not an absolute love/hate relationship. Here Leah is hated (*senuah* from *sane*) and Rachel is loved. That a comparison is intended seems to be clear from the previous verse which states that Rachel is “loved more than Leah.”

In addition, think of how Jesus understood the idea of loving and hating. He even seemed to suggest a comparison aspect in these words. Not only in the passage mentioned above but also in Matthew 6:24 where He instructs regarding trying to serve God and mammon, he notes if you try to do so, you will love one and hate the other.

An analogous use of the love/hate motif is found in Malachi 1:2-5. In the Midrash God is described as “hating” the angels. The explanation given to understand such a statement is that God chose to give man the Torah rather than the angels (*Exodus Rabbah* 51.8). In other words, God chose man over the angels. It appears to be in this sense that Malachi indicates God’s “love” for Jacob (Israel) and His hatred of Esau (Edom). Esau (Edom) was not hated absolutely. The Aramaic *Targum* conveys the sense well as it paraphrases the latter phrase, “and I rejected Esau.”

An additional benefit to understanding the passage in Malachi is Paul’s inspired use of the phrase in the Book of Romans. In his comments on Romans 9:13 regarding love/hate, Reese writes:

The context of this passage in Malachi indicates that it is the nations of Israel and Edom, rather than their individual founders, Jacob and Esau, that are in view. The aorist tense verbs (loved, hated) are probably intended to summarize God’s different use of the two nations down until Malachi’s time. How are we to understand the words “loved” and “hated?” “Loved” is God’s attitude that led Him to choose Jacob for His special tool. “Hatred” is the attitude that led him to decide not to use Esau. Once more it is necessary to keep these things in mind with reference to the selection of Jacob. Was Israel elected to eternal salvation and the Edomites rejected? No! Israel was elected by God to an *historical function*, in the interest of His world-wide redemptive scheme, that they might be a blessing to all peoples. This election to service had no reference to eternal destiny. Whether or not Jacob is saved, that depended on Jacob. Whether or not Esau was damned, that depended upon Esau. But whether the Messiah comes through Jacob or Esau that depended upon God. (440-41)

### ***Examination of the Background***

After the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722-21 BC, the Southern Kingdom remained faithful for over one hundred years. In 606 BC, the Southern Kingdom began an Exile that exhibited three phases. As punishment from God as foretold by Jeremiah and others, the Babylonians carried Judah into captivity. As predetermined by the LORD, Judah would remain in captivity seventy years. At the end of this God determined time, the people of God were allowed to return to the promised land. Like the carrying away, the restoration into the land was in three phases as well. Under Zerubbabel they began rebuilding the temple. Under Ezra some of the practices contrary to God were ended. Under Nehemiah the walls were rebuilt providing the fortification of Jerusalem.

After the restoration, the problem that led them into captivity, idolatry, was no longer a problem, but other problems arose. Because of complacency and perhaps disappointment, the efforts to rebuild the temple ceased. Ezra and Nehemiah had to deal with selfishness, worldliness, and apathy.

Enter Malachi—one of the Post-Exilic prophets. The people of God have been back in the land approximately 100 years (the temple has been rebuilt and time enough has passed for the people to become apathetic). Rather than having built a strong relationship with God because He had returned them to their land, the people were questioning God and His love. Earlier prophets had promised that a Messiah would come! The people were questioning that promise as it had gone unrecognized to this point. The people's religion had become shallow and they were selfish. Many were simply going through the motions of worship. They would leave their assemblies and with that departure would also be the departure of their religion. Malachi lived and prophesied in a time much like 21<sup>st</sup> century America.

### ***Examination of the Text***

“I have loved you,” says the LORD. Yet you say, “In what way have You loved us? Was not Esau Jacob's brother?” Says the LORD. “Yet Jacob I have loved; But Esau I have

hated, And laid waste his mountains and his heritage for the jackals of the wilderness.” Even though Edom has said, “We have been impoverished, But we will return and build the desolate places,” Thus says the LORD of hosts: “They may build, but I will throw down; They shall be called the Territory of Wickedness, And the people against whom the LORD will have indignation forever. Your eyes shall see, And you shall say, ‘The LORD is magnified beyond the border of Israel. (Mal. 1:2-5)

Lindsay Warren refers to this passage as the fundamental affirmation of the book of Malachi. He notes as the fundamental affirmation the LORD's statement “I have loved you.” Warren notes, “All else that it says should be viewed in the light of that fundamental truth” (411) .

Malachi, in his characteristic style of asking and answering questions, teaches Israel that God still does love them despite their doubts. In spite of all the blessings He had given them, they questioned His love. They had settled in awaiting the coming Messiah and when He did not come by their timetable they had grown discouraged. Their discouragement led them to ingratitude and their ingratitude led them to disobedience.

Malachi provides proof of his affirmation that God loves them. The proof was found in the fact that God loved (chose) Jacob/Israel and hated (rejected) Esau (Edom). In order to get the point of this statement, let us recall some events of Old Testament history. Jacob and Esau, Isaac's sons, were twin brothers. Although Jacob was to be born after Esau, Jacob was the one designated the child of promise; it was upon him, not Esau that God's hand rested. Through Jacob (re-named Israel) the nation Israel came into being. His twelve sons were the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel while Esau's offspring became the nation of Edom.

The statement, “Jacob I have loved and Esau I have hated,” needs some comment. Hatred here is not the acidic combination of bitterness, fear and self-centeredness that human beings usually think of when they say they hate someone. The Lord does not hate

people in the sense that He wishes them evil or delights in their hurt. But God is committed to and loyally bound up with Jacob and his children in a way in which He is not committed to Esau and his children. A bond existed between Israel and God which did not exist between God and Edom. The difference in His relationship with each of these two nations is so pronounced it can be illustrated in terms of the difference that exists between the emotions of hatred and love.

The proof of what Malachi had said was right in front of their eyes. Edom, because of their choice to turn against God, remained in ruin but Israel had been restored by God to their land. Edom may have plans to rebuild, but because God was not with them, their plans to rebuild would meet failure. At the time these words were penned, the circumstances of these two nations, Israel and Edom, were very similar. They were both small and set-upon countries. The Edomites had been routed from their territory by the Nabateans, the invaders from the desert, and were now living in the Negev, the wilderness in the southern reaches of Israel. Though they thought of themselves as proud and strong people, God had not chosen them as an important race. The Edomites never again regained their territory. They finally passed from the affairs of human history. Their race dwindled by contact with other nations until they had lost their identity. Today you cannot find an Edomite anywhere in the world. The fact that God would be with Israel and through them would come the Messiah along with the fact that the LORD was against Edom, would again show His power to the world.

### Examination of Ourselves

In making application of this passage, this writer would like to slightly expand the thoughts of John L. Kachelman, Jr., from his work entitled *Studies in Malachi: The Holiness of God*. Kachelman provides the following (115):

Jacob Loved but Esau Hated (1:2) Here in brief summary is God's scheme of redemption:

- a. It was motivated by love.

- b. It would separate the godly from the ungodly.
- c. It was accomplished according to the promise.
- d. It would demonstrate the grace, mercy, and justice of Jehovah God (Rom. 9:11).

This author is indebted to John L. Kachelman for these seed thoughts. Of course any error in application of these seed thoughts is solely the error of this writer.

God's love of Israel stemmed from His love of man and His plan to redeem man (John 3:16). God's love/selection of Israel and his hatred/rejection of Edom was based in the same factor that God's selection or rejection of man today is—man's choice. Though Israel doubted God's promise, they had no reason to do so. God's promise of a Messiah would be realized, just as His promise to Christians today that the Messiah is coming again (2 Peter 3). God had no obligation to Israel or man today based upon some inherent right that they might claim.

The purpose of this section was to help the Jews of the restoration community, who were thinking that God had abandoned them and forgotten His promises to them, to think again. Even though they seemed to be experiencing a similar fate as their ancient enemy, the Edomites, God would restore them, because He had entered into covenant relationship with them. He would keep His promises, both to the Israelites and to the Edomites, for better and for worse respectively. This reminder of the Lord's love provided positive motivation for the priests to return to the Lord, and it should have the same effect on all God's people who read these verses.

From the beginning, through His care in Creation, through His intimate walks with Adam in the Garden, through His promises to Abraham, through the law which He gave to Moses, through military victories of Joshua and the Judges, through the life and hymns of David, through the proclamations of the prophets, from the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, and the preaching of the apostles, from the beginning God has said over and over again, "I love you," to the human race. Man has replied, "How have you loved us?"

Please awaken and realize how God has loved you. If you seek to see His love, you will find it. Read, be amazed, allow your faith to grow, and then share God's love with others.

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#### **Biographical Sketch**

Son of John D. and Margaret Board, John was married to the former Brenna S. Wiley of Fairmont, WV, in 1991. They have two daughters, Kayleigh (13) and Emaleigh (8). John received his secular education from Oak Glen High School (83) and WVU (83-85). He received his biblical instruction from the Virginia Avenue Church of Christ in Chester, WV, Freed-Hardeman College (BS), Southern Christian University (M.A. in Biblical Studies and Masters of Divinity in Christian Ministry), and Amridge University. After FHC John began working with the Oakwood Road Church of Christ alongside D. Gene West. In 1991 John and Brenna began working with the Church of Christ in Yreka, California with John serving as their minister. From 1993 to 2008 John and Brenna worked with the Church of Christ in Bridgeport, WV. Currently John is working with the church in Elizabethtown, KY. John has been blessed to be involved with West Virginia Christian Youth Camp in various capacities, to be part of mission

works in Merida and Cancun, Mexico, and through the World Wide Web, and to have been a past instructor in the West Virginia School of Preaching.

# *I Am With You*

*Don Cooper*

Studying the life and times of Old Testament prophets reminds one of the words of the apostle Paul, “For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope” (Rom. 15:4).



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The subject of our study, Haggai, was a prophet of God. As such he was a messenger, one who spoke to the people of Israel for God. I would like to think that he played a role very similar to that of preachers of the Gospel today, except that he spoke by direct inspiration and preachers today must receive their message from the Scriptures which are inspired of God (2 Tim. 3:16-17). This requires diligent study on their part (2 Tim. 2:15).

Haggai is also known as the prophet of encouragement. His particular mission was to challenge the Jews to proceed with the building of the temple. They had been released from captivity by the Persian King, Cyrus, who at first consented to rebuilding the holy city Jerusalem and the temple in which God would be worshipped. However, he rescinded his edict on the grounds that Judah had been an enemy to all of the surrounding nations. Thus, God's people might have felt justified in delaying the rebuilding of the temple on the basis of Cyrus' restraining order which after his death was renewed by his son Cambyses. But, now sixteen years after their release from captivity and under the rule of Darius who

lifts that ban, perhaps for political reasons, they are still delaying the work that should have been most important to them.

What possible reason could they give for their negligence? It should be observed that when one really does not want to do something, no legitimate reason is forthcoming. Delivering the message of God to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, who was high priest, Haggai quotes God as saying of the people, “This people says, ‘The time has not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built’ (Hag. 1:2). The Lord's displeasure at such reasoning can be seen in His response found in the verses that follow. They had found time to build paneled houses in which to dwell. The truth is, they were guilty of the same sin that many people of our day are guilty of, putting self first, and God last.

God's people were so forgetful. As one traces their journeys it is crystal clear that when they obeyed God they were abundantly blessed. But, when they disobeyed Him they were punished. Had they not just been released from Babylonian captivity to which they had been sentenced for disobeying God? Should they not have been grateful for their new found freedom to return to their homeland and resume their worship to God?

Before being too hasty in criticizing them, perhaps we should examine ourselves to see if we are not like them in many respects. Many of God's people today are heard to make such statements as “I'll be back to the Lord just as soon as my schedule permits”, or “I intend to spend more time in prayer and studying the Bible.” “One of these days” seems to be the norm for so many people today. Tragically, “one of these days” does not come for many and they die out of service to the Lord, reminding us of the case of Felix who trembled at the thought of judgment but stopped short of accepting Christ (Acts 24:24-25).

It should be noted that, as we mentioned at the outset of this lesson, Haggai was a messenger often referred to as an “encourager.” But, he also was capable of delivering some stern warnings from God as we can see in verse six of Haggai chapter one. Please remember that we are to learn from them (Rom. 15:4). Jesus tried to persuade people in His day that continuing and

completing the task is more important than just beginning. In fact, He said, “No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62).

Let us now turn our attention to the words spoken by Haggai which were intended to encourage them to get busy and complete their work of rebuilding the temple of God. This had then been delayed by sixteen years while they indulged themselves. They are told that when they resume their duties they have the promise of God, “I am with you” (Hag. 1:13). The time had come and was long past when they should stop delaying the rebuilding of God’s house. It was time for them to put aside their selfish desires and concentrate on doing God’s will. Then, and only then, He would be with them and bless them, as He had in the past. What lessons are to be gained by us today as we ponder God’s promise to His people?

First, men today need to recognize the reliability of God’s promises. Unlike promises made by man, God’s promises never fail. The apostle Peter wrote, “The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some men count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

Men sometimes delay obeying the Gospel for fear of being ridiculed or even persecuted by enemies of Christ. The Lord has invited sinners to come to Him for refuge. He promises, “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). One who truly trusts in the Lord will not allow love even for mother or father to keep him from doing the Lord’s will (Matt. 10:37-39). We ought to be encouraged by the words of the Savior, knowing that He will provide us with a relationship that is far dearer than any known to man on this Earth.

Those who are members of the body of Christ, the church, ought also be reminded of the promises that God has made toward us, His children. Do we allow worldly matters to keep us from being faithful to our duties to Him? Dare I say that in the fifty-six and one half years I have given to preaching the Gospel that the most difficult task has been that of keeping the “saved” saved? I believe that I speak for elders in the church also. Much of their time is

devoted to leaving the ninety and nine and searching for the ones that have strayed. What is the cause of such negligence on the part of those who profess to be followers of Christ? The reasons are many, but can be summarized in just a few words. They refuse to put the Lord first.

In His Sermon on the Mount Jesus addressed this problem by reminding His followers of the care which the heavenly Father has for His creatures. He states, “. . . [D]o not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink nor about your body, what you will put on.” (Matt. 6:25). He then reminds them of the birds of the air, how the Father feeds them, adding “Are you not of more value than they?” (v. 26). He then turns to the matter of clothing the body and reminds them of the lilies of the field “how they grow: they neither toil or spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these” (vv. 28-29). Equivalent to what God promised the Jews through Haggai and other prophets, Jesus offers the following words of encouragement, “If God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? (v. 30). Messengers of God (elders, preachers and other concerned Christians) must continue to remind the weak and straying of the words of Christ. Instead of spending all of one’s time worrying about what one is going to eat, drink or wear one needs to “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things shall be added to you” (v. 33). Christ concludes that portion of His sermon by admonishing His listeners to remember that they need not worry about tomorrow, for it will take care of itself. He is promising, “I am with you.”

In our affluent age the temptation is to seek earthly gain and forsake that which is spiritual. The apostle Paul instructed the young evangelist, Timothy, to warn people about that very thing (1 Tim. 6:6-19). Contrary to what some of the television evangelists of our day would have people to believe, God does not always reward righteousness with prosperity. If that were so we would not have to worry about family budgets nor would the church ever have to be concerned over enough money being available to carry out the work of the Lord. I believe that such a philosophy is

contrary to 1 Timothy 6:5. Paul describes such as being “destitute of the truth.” Probably there were those who were rich who came to know the truth and who became Christians and were a part of the early churches. However, instead of praising riches Paul tells Timothy to warn of the dangers thereof. Did not Jesus also preach the same message, recorded for us in Matthew 6:19ff? The rich will be saved, not because they are rich but because they, too, put the kingdom of God first. The warning is issued, “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (6:24). On another occasion Jesus posed the question, “For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matt. 16:26). Then, even as Haggai delivered the promise from God that He would be with them in their labors, Christ promises to reward man “according to his works” (v. 27).

Let us further note how God’s promises affect us today and under what circumstances. Several times in His word we are given assurance that we are never alone, that He cares for us and gives us the help we need to overcome whatever difficulties we may encounter in this life. If we believe Him who promises, we will not falter and delay in doing His will promptly.

In times of cares and trials of life we have God’s help if we will cast our cares upon Him, “for He cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7). In Luke 8 Jesus tells the story of the sower. In that parable He describes the different types of soil into which seed falls, and the results thereof. Among the unfruitful soil was (is) the thorny ground. He says that this typifies those who hear (believe) but who are soon “choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity” (v. 14). One needs God’s help in such times. The apostle Paul reminded the Corinthians that “No temptation has over taken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make a way of escape, that you may be able to bear it” (1 Cor. 10:13). God has not offered us immunity from troubles and trials, but He has

offered us His presence in such times of need. We need to “take heed lest we fall” (v. 12). We need to “cast our cares on Him.” He will lead us through the darkest moments of despair and will help us do battle with Satan and his attempts to lure us back into his kingdom.

I have in my possession, and preach it many times, a sermon outline entitled, “Three Things The Devil Wants To Do.” I expect many of my preaching brethren have the same outline. It was preached by the late beloved Fred E. Dennis, whom I heard preach many times in my youth. The points were, (1) He wants to keep you out of the church, (2) If he can not keep you from obeying the Gospel he wants to lure you back into his kingdom, and (3) If he cannot do either one of these he wants to keep you as inactive in the church as possible. None of these attempts by Satan will be successful if one will place one’s trust in Him who faithfully keeps His promises. Already cited in this lesson is Matthew 11:28-30 in which Jesus promises rest to those who will take upon themselves His yoke and learn of Him.

It should be encouraging to the soul winner that the Lord has promised to be with him. As recorded by Matthew, the great commission includes the promise of the Savior’s help in converting and strengthening those converted, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:18-20). I sense in the church today a reluctance to believe that promise made by Christ to His followers, thus passed on to us today. We are not being evangelistic, yet we wonder why the church is not increasing in number as it once did. We are failing to teach our neighbors, friends, and even family members who are not Christians. I know how difficult this can be, but we surely do not believe that it is impossible to convert sinners today. I believe that it is not the difficulty of the task that thwarts evangelism, but it is the negligence of God’s people to commit to the task of “going” into the world and preaching to every creature. We, like the Jews of Haggai’s day have laid down on the job of doing God’s will in

favor of excuse making. We are somewhat repeating their excuse, “the time is not yet.” Unfortunately, such attitudes will hinder many lost souls from ever hearing the soul saving message of the Gospel (Rom. 1:16). How long has it been since you committed yourself to a Bible study with your family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, or others? The Jews laid the foundation of the temple and then spent sixteen years indulging themselves, building fancy houses in which to live, etc. ***Today, the biggest obstacle in the way of converting the lost is the luke-warmness of those charged with doing the converting.*** Does this please the Lord? Certainly not! (Rev. 3:16). This sin is obvious when elders plan Gospel meetings, lectureships, training sessions, etc. and those who profess close relationships with the Lord do not support them by attending. The time spent in such works is almost nil in many places today. We are too busy watching television, attending athletic events, camping, fishing, and the like to take time for the Lord’s work. The Lord’s plea is still seek first the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33). Christians should remember that the Lord has promised to be with those who are gathered in His name (Matt. 18:20). And, we are admonished, “not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb. 10:25).

I really cannot think of a time in the life of man when one does not need the presence of the Lord. We have noted that He has promised to be with us in times of troubles and cares. He is with us when we obey the Gospel. He is with us in times of temptation. He is with us when we commit to teaching others. He is with us when we assemble to worship. We sing a hymn often which is entitled, “I Need Thee Every Hour.” No truer words were ever written that express the Christian’s dependence on God and His Son, Jesus Christ.

And, one day we shall come to the end of life’s journey. Unless we are among those still standing when Christ comes again we shall experience what we call death, the separation of body and spirit. The Hebrew writer declared, “And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment” (9:27). What will it be like? The answer to this question depends on how we have lived our life.

As already noted, man is going to give “account of himself to God” (Rom. 14:12). The Corinthians were told, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (1 Cor. 5:10). Jesus said, “Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation” (John 5:28-29).

But, the Lord has made provisions to be with His people even in time of suffering and death. He wrote the seven churches of Asia, using the aged apostle John as his penman, about what they might expect as a result of serving Him faithfully. To the church at Smyrna, specifically, He wrote:

I know your works, tribulations and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested; and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. (Rev. 2:9-10)

As unto the Jews in Haggai’s day, the Lord was saying, and continues to say to us today, “I am with you.” What awaits those who are faithful unto death is the crown of life. To whom is eternal rest promised? Allow the voice from heaven to answer, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. Yes, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them” (Rev. 14:13).

Probably the most often quoted Psalm is the 23<sup>rd</sup>. The Psalmist expresses his own comfort at the thought of dying in these words, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me . . .” (v. 4). And, he concludes that beautiful psalm with these words, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; And I will dwell

in the house of the Lord Forever” (v. 6). How comforting to know that in life and in death we have the Lord by our side if we so choose. Christ has promised, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Heb. 13:5). He will keep that promise, for He is “the same yesterday, today, and forever” (v. 8).

The one who wrote most of the New Testament wrote concerning the second coming of Christ and assured us that no one will be excluded when He comes again. Even those who are in graves will come forth, and those who might be still living will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And, please note, “And we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:17). Paul urges the faithful followers of Christ to “comfort one another with these words” (v. 18). He who had suffered for Christ did not allow such to deter him from his mission. But, putting aside all thoughts of self pity, he looked forward to putting off the earthly tabernacle and receiving “a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (2 Cor. 4:18b).

Dear friend, if you are out of Christ, you need to take heed to the many warnings found in God’s Word toward those who obey not the Gospel of Christ. When Christ comes again it will be to reward the faithful. But, it will also be a time to punish the wicked and disobedient. He will take “vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thess. 1:8). You need not be among that number.

Dear brother in Christ, if you have begun the Christian life but have allowed Satan to gain possession of your life once again, you need to take heed to the warnings found in God’s Word concerning the end of those who forsake the Lord (Heb. 10:26). Take steps today to be reconciled to God by repenting, confessing, praying and renewing your zeal towards those things that are truly important to your spiritual well-being.

Often we hear those who are out of Christ or those who have fallen out of love with the Lord say, “I know I should, and I intend to get right with the Lord.” But, how many times have we witnessed those whom we loved dearly put off obeying the Gospel or being restored until it was too late? They failed to take seriously the thought of how short life really is (James 4:14b). I and others

have stood at the graveside of those who could have had the company of the Lord as they journeyed through the valley of the shadow of death, but they delayed until it was too late. The words of Paul come to mind on such occasions, “. . . Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2b).

Before closing this lesson I would like to take the opportunity of offering some words of encouragement to my fellow preachers, especially those younger preachers who are present or who will read this message. Do not become discouraged and give up. Take your cue from such prophets as Haggai who delivered God’s message to a people who were less than enthusiastic in their work for God. Others like Isaiah often wondered concerning the worth of their labors. He is quoted as asking, “Lord, who has believed our report?” (Rom. 10:16). The worth of your labors is extolled by Paul (vv. 10-15). All who would please the Lord are to be “steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58). To the Galatians Paul wrote, “And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart” (6:9). Those who preach must put their trust in the Word of God, for it will not return void to the Lord, “But it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it” (Isa. 55:11b).

These are difficult days in which to preach God’s Word. However, are they any worse than the days in which Christ personally ministered? Or, are we threatened and put to death like Stephen (Acts 6)? Have any of us suffered the hardships of Paul and other faithful servants of Christ? Yet, he considered himself to be more than a conqueror and added, “For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39). ***Preachers are involved in the greatest work on earth, that of saving souls.*** Be grateful that you have been given the opportunity to serve the Lord in such a rewarding work. Your reward in this life is seeing souls

obey the Gospel which sets them free from the shackles of sin. Your reward eternal is that “crown of life.”

“Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season” (2 Tim. 4:2a).

### **Biographical Sketch**

Don Cooper has preached for the church in LaGrange, OH since October, 2005. Previous to that he served the church in Wadsworth for twenty years. Other churches which he has served in his fifty-six and one-half years of preaching include Ashland, Mansfield, Reynoldsburg and Toronto (all in Ohio), Hillview Terrace in Moundsville, WV, Westside in Baltimore, MD, and Eastside in Baltimore, MD. He began full time work in March, 1954, with the church in Washington, PA. Prior to that, he held Sunday appointments following his studies at Freed-Hardeman College (now University).

He and his wife Jan were married on March 7, 1954. They are the parents of four children, five grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. They have also served as foster parents for seventeen children.

# *The Glory of God's House*

*Earl Edwards*

The “house of the Lord” is another name for what is many times referred to as the “temple” in the Bible (2 Chron. 5:1; Jer. 7:1-4). [All Bible quotations are from the New American Standard unless otherwise indicated.] As William Smith says, “There is perhaps no building of the ancient world which has excited more attention since the time of its destruction as the temple which Solomon built at Jerusalem” (678).

But why has it attracted so much attention? Probably because of its claim to be the place where the God of heaven placed His throne among the Israelites. Nearly 1500 years before Christ, God told Moses to build a box-shaped “ark” on which he was to also place what we would call a type of “cover” which was called a “mercy seat.” God told Moses to build it as follows:

You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold, two and a half cubits long and one and a half cubits wide. You shall make two cherubim of gold, make them of hammered work at the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub at one end and one cherub at the other end; you shall make the cherubim of one piece with the mercy seat at its two ends. The cherubim shall have their wings spread upward, covering the mercy seat with their wings and facing one another; the faces of the cherubim are to be turned toward the mercy seat. You shall put the mercy seat on top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony which I will give to you. There I will meet with you; and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony, I will speak to you about all that I will give you in commandment for the sons of Israel. (Ex. 25:17-22)

In other words, that “seat” which formed the cover (or lid) of the ark became, in a sense, God’s earthly throne from which He spoke to His people through Moses. No wonder it has attracted attention!

It might be well, before we get to our discussion of the temple, to note a bit more detail about that “ark of the covenant” which was the most significant piece of furniture in the “house.” Of it, the *Illustrated Dictionary and Concordance of the Bible* says:

The Israelites’ most holy cult-object [was] a wooden chest, built by Bezalel upon God’s instruction to Moses at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 25:10-22; 37:19). Made of acacia wood and covered with gold, it was 2½ cubits (c.3½ ft., 1.10 in.) long; its breadth and height were 1½ cubits (c. 2½ ft, 70 cm) (Ex. 25:10). Above it was a cover of pure gold, and at both sides, a cherub (Ex. 25:17-20). Moses placed the tablets (the “testimony”) of the law given to him by God on Mt. Sinai (Ex. 25:2; Deut. 10:1-5) within the ark, which was therefore called “ark of the testimony” (Ex. 25:22), “ark of the covenant of the Lord” (Deut. 10:8; Josh. 3:3), “the ark of the Lord” (I Sam. 4:6) and “the ark of God” (I Sam. 4:11, 17-18, 21-22). From above the cover, between the cherubs, God spoke to Moses in order to give him his commandments (Ex. 25:22). Thus the ark was a concrete sign of the divine presence in Israel (cf. Ex. 25:8). (113-14)

It is of the “temple” in which this “ark of the covenant” was situated that our prophet, Haggai, speaks. “But, who was Haggai? When did he live and what work did he do?”

## **Haggai and His Time and Work**

The name Haggai (haggay) “apparently derives from the word for ‘festival’ or ‘feast’; suggesting that the prophet may have been born during one of the Hebrews’ three annual feasts” (Hahlen and Ham 249). In the Septuagint, the name is *Aggaïos* and in the Latin Vulgate it is *Aggaeus*.

We know nothing about this prophet's background. "With regard to his tribe and parentage, history and tradition are alike silent" (Smith 226). Outside of the book that bears his name, he is mentioned only in Ezra 5:1 and 6:14. Both of these passages mention him, along with the prophet Zechariah, as being responsible for motivating the Jews of the sixth century BC to rebuild the Jerusalem temple. In the Greek Septuagint translation, certain Psalms (such as 138, 146, 147, etc.) have a heading attributing them to Haggai and Zechariah (cf. Alden 571).

When his name is associated with that of Zechariah, he is named first (as in Ezra 5:1; 6:14). This probably indicates that he was the older of the two. Though his name is not specifically listed among the returnees named in Ezra, "it is likely that he had returned to Jerusalem [from Medo-Persian captivity] with Zerubbabel (in 538)" (Alden 572).

Many of the residents of Jerusalem and Judah had been carried into Babylonian captivity by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC when he destroyed Jerusalem (1 Chron. 6:15). Babylon was then conquered by the Medo-Persians in 539 BC and the Hebrew exiles became their slaves. In 538 BC, one of the Medo-Persian kings, Cyrus, sent out a proclamation designed to make possible the rebuilding of the Jewish temple. Here is Ezra's account of that proclamation:

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying: "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! Let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel; He is the God who is in Jerusalem. Every survivor, at whatever place he may live, let the men of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, together with a

freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.'" (1:1-4)

It is interesting to note that the "Cyrus Cylinder" found in 1879 and now in the British Museum contains materials which "closely correspond to the spirit of the 'protective decree' . . . especially as found in Ezra 1:2-4" (Oxford 377-78).

As a result of this "proclamation" over 49,000 Hebrews (Ezra 2:64) returned under the leadership of Zerubbabel who served as governor and Jeshua (also called Joshua) who was the high priest (Ezra 2:2; Neh. 12:1). After they arrived back in Judea, they rebuilt the altar and offered sacrifices "in the seventh month" after their return (Ezra 3:1-3). In the "second year" and the "second month" of that year, they started rebuilding the temple (Ezra 3:8). Then Ezra writes,

Now when the builders had laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD according to the directions of King David of Israel. They sang, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, saying, "For He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever." And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. Yet many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' households, the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, while many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the shout of joy from the sound of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard far away. (3:10-13)

So, the rebuilding was begun with enthusiasm, but that soon changed partially because of the relentless hostility of "the enemies of Judah" (Ezra 4:1), principally the Samaritans. They did all they

could to impede the rebuilding. Ezra tells of their opposition in these words, “Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and frightened them from building, and hired counselors against them to frustrate their counsel all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia” (Ezra 4:4-5).

This opposition “together with economic hardships linked to inflation, drought and crop failure (Hag. 1:6, 9, 11), made the task too daunting for the small community of the return” (Hahlen and Ham 255).

As noted, the exiles returned to Jerusalem in 538 BC and then they started rebuilding the temple in “the seventh month” (Ezra 3:1), evidently of the year 537 BC. Almost immediately they became discouraged and the work ceased in that same year. For one reason or another, it was neglected until the year 520 BC. In fact, that is the year that God raised up Zechariah and our prophet, Haggai.

### The Book of Haggai

Haggai is unique in a lot of senses. It is a short book with only 38 verses. In the Old Testament, only Obadiah is shorter. His prophecy can be precisely dated; the year 520 BC; that is the “second year of Darius” (1:1). He has a *singular* purpose—to see the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple completed (1:8). Further, he is one of the few prophets who lived to see his message bring forth the fruits desired. “The Jews complete the second temple (Ezra 6:15) on the third day of the month of Adar in the sixth year of Darius (March 12, 516 BC), some three-and-a-half years after they began building again” (Hahlen and Ham 256).

It is the series of oracles presented by Zechariah and Haggai which result in the rebuilding (Ezra 6:14). Our prophet presents four different oracles (all delivered in 520 BC):

- (1) A discussion of their excuses for not rebuilding the temple while they *had* rebuilt their own houses (1:2-11).
- (2) Encouragement for those who are disheartened

because this temple is not as beautiful as Solomon’s had been (2:1-9).

- (3) A discussion whose purpose is to show that God had not blessed them materially because they had not obeyed His will in rebuilding the temple, but as they proceed with the rebuilding this will change (2:10-19).
- (4) Assurance that God will protect them through their governor, Zerubbabel, while the rebuilding is being done (2:20-23).

Our concern in this lecture and the next one is the second of these oracles.

### The First Part of the Second Oracle (2:1-5)

“The word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet saying” (v. 1). A *prophet* (Hebrew *nabi*) refers to one who speaks “for another.” In fact, Aaron was given to Moses as his “prophet,” to speak for him (Ex. 7:1). Haggai was a prophet in the sense that he spoke for the Lord. He spoke “the words of the Lord,” not his own opinions or ideas. In fact, literally “by Haggai the prophet” would be “by the hand of the prophet” (Alden 579). It is *God’s Word* delivered through the prophet’s hand. Now, this second oracle was delivered, “on the twenty-first of the seventh month” (v. 1), in mid-October of 520 BC. This is almost a month after work on the temple was resumed. As McIlmoyle says.

There is a winsome graciousness about the timing of this message. It arrived on the last day of the feast of tabernacles (cf. Lv. xxiii. 34). This was usually a festival of gladness and thanksgiving for harvests safely home. This year the crops are poor. The people are despondent. The old men, as they look at the results of a month’s work on the temple, are inclined to be retrospective and to compare present conditions with the glories of the past. There were fewer such old men now to weep than when the foundations were first laid (Ezr. iii. 12, 13) but their grief

was no less intense. And the old men's pessimism tempers the young men's morale. Into their gloom comes God's message to buttress their failing spirits by a renewed assurance of His presence with them (4, 5; cf. I. 13), with the obvious assumption that, where He is, difficulties cannot count. (745)

The prophet was told to "Speak now to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, the governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest and to the remnant of the people . . ." (v. 2). These are exactly the same people to which he had been told to address the first oracle (1:1, 12). Zerubbabel was the governor, that is, the civic leader, who helped to lead the exiles back to Jerusalem in 538 BC (Ezra 2:2; 3:2; 3:8; 5:2, etc.). He is also the "son of Shealtiel." Likewise, he was the grandson of Johoiachin (Jeconiah in Matt. 1:12). According to 1 Chronicles 3:19, Pedaiah was his father and Shealtiel his uncle; *but* this problem may be dealt with either through adoption or the levirate law. Zerubbabel was, then, an heir to David's throne; and it was understandable that the magnanimous Cyrus and Darius should allow such a man to be the governor of the province of Judea (Alden 579).

The prophet also spoke his message "*to Joshua*," who is identified as "the son of Johozadak." He is the same person

. . . known as Jeshua, son of Jozadak in Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra 2:2; 3:2, 8-9; 5:2; Neh. 7:7; 12:1). Perhaps he is the grandson of the chief priest Seraiah whom the Babylonians execute[d] shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem (2 Kgs. 25:18-21) and the son of Jahozadak who is taken into exile (I Chron. 6:15). Zechariah 3:1-10 portrays the cleansing of Joshua and the removal of the guilt of sin, and Zechariah 6:10-15 identifies him as a royal figure who builds the temple. (Hahlen and Ham 279)

So, Haggai addresses his message to Zerubbabel the civic or political leader and to Joshua the religious leader. He also

addresses it to "*the remnant of the people*." This phrase is also used in 1:12, 14. Mark Hahlen and Clay Ham note that it is:

. . . used only after members of the community . . . are obedient to the voice of Yahweh . . . the term [i.e., phrase] may not apply to the entire community that returns from Babylon . . . only [that] part of the community who responds in obedience. (287-88)

Then comes the first part of the message of this oracle.

"Who is left among you who saw this temple in its former glory?" (v. 3). As Giovanni Rinaldi says, "The temple of Solomon was destroyed by the soldiers of Nebuchadnezzar about seventy years before this date. Possibly some octogenarian could possibly remember it" (1253). Rinaldi is probably correct. Haggai is probably talking about the "glory" of the temple Solomon had built in about 1000 BC. With reference to the glory of Solomon's temple, Lange affirms that "the gold and silver alone accumulated by David are at the lowest reckoned to have amounted to between two and three billion dollars" (qtd. in Smith 679). That seems to fit with what the inspired writer said of Solomon: "the king made silver as common as stones in Jerusalem, and he made cedars as plentiful as sycamore trees" (1 Kings 10:27). And it is clear that he made extensive use of gold in the temple itself. The inspired writer says of Solomon,

Then he prepared an inner sanctuary within the house in order to place there the ark of the covenant of the LORD. The inner sanctuary was twenty cubits in length, twenty cubits in width, and twenty cubits in height, and he overlaid it with pure gold. He also overlaid the altar with cedar. So Solomon overlaid the inside of the house with pure gold. And he drew chains of gold across the front of the inner sanctuary, and he overlaid it with gold. He overlaid the whole house with gold, until all the house was finished. Also the whole altar which was by the inner sanctuary he overlaid with gold. (1 Kings 6:19-22)

Size-wise, the temple now being rebuilt was even a little larger than that of Solomon. The current one was to be about 90 feet long and 90 feet wide (Ezra 6:3); whereas Solomon's was a bit smaller (1 Kings 6:2). But, without doubt, from the standpoint of embellishment with gold and silver and cedar, the "former glory" that characterized Solomon's temple would "lay this one in the shade." And it seems virtually certain that the term "glory" here "refers to the grandeur or magnificence of the temple building (cf. 2 Chr. 32:27; Ps. 49:16-17) rather than to the entrance of Jehovah's glory into it (cf. Exod. 40:34-35; I Kings. 8:11)" (Hahlen and Ham 292).

The prophet then asks a second question: "And how do you see it now?" (v. 3). That is, what is your opinion about the current house which we are building. Had they had the courage to answer the prophet openly (which they evidently did not), they probably would have said, "Really, there is no comparison at all. This one is like a shack as compared to the magnificent structure of Solomon."

But, the people do not speak up and so the prophet asks a third question: "Does it not seem to you like nothing in comparison?" (v. 3). It should be kept in mind that only 49,000+ Jews had returned to Judea in 538 BC. Obviously many stayed in Babylon. And, though not a certainty, it seems reasonable to believe that on the whole, the richer who had obtained property in Babylon are the ones who remained, while the poorer most likely were those who volunteered to return to Judea. It is true that the returnees were assisted by others in their efforts to return and rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:4; 2:68-69; Neh. 7:70-72), but those were small sums as compared to the money Solomon had spent on the temple of his time. As Jack Lewis says, this temple under construction "did not compare favorably. After all the returned community was not as rich as Solomon (cf. I Kings 10:27)" (71). As Robert Alden says, "There was no way these relatively poor exiles could have matched the extravagances of Solomon with his professional craftsmen working with imported wood and huge quantities of gold" (585). That is, no real basis for comparison existed. Alden is correct as he goes on to say that this third question . . .

. . . virtually puts the discouraging sentiments into the mouths of the audience. They were all thinking it and now Haggai has said it. The new is inferior to the old, and that fact along with other discouraging circumstances had thoroughly depressed the people and stifled their initiative (585).

Now their feelings are out in the open. The problem has been clearly stated. Now God can (through Haggai) deal with the true feelings of the people. What follows is God's answer to their need. Here is what they need to do.

"'But now take courage, Zerubbabel,' declares the Lord, 'take courage also Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and all you people of the land take courage,' declares the Lord" (v. 4a). The admonition given here to both leaders and the people is take courage. Other translations render it "be strong" (NKJV, ESV). It is very similar to what God told Joshua when He put him in Moses' place and told him to take the people into Canaan to conquer it. He said, "Be strong and courageous, for you shall give this people possession of the land . . ." (Josh. 1:6). As Alden says, "The problem was essentially one of attitude. So the primary command is to take courage" (585).

The threefold repetition of *be strong* [or take courage] recalls . . . [also] the encouragement of David to Solomon in preparation for building the [first] temple, an encouragement also paired with the command to work (I Chron. 28:10, 20). (Hahlen and Ham 293)

To "take courage" or "be strong" means to be brave or fearless, to be daring. It means to put all of your faculties and determination into what needs to be accomplished. No wonder, then, the Lord immediately follows up "take courage" with another command: "and work" (v. 4b). As Alden points out, when they took courage as admonished "the command to 'work' would be fulfilled quite naturally" (585). That is, in their situation, if they really took courage, they would immediately get to work! And notice *who* it is

that says you need to take courage and get to work. “Thus declares the Lord” (repeated three times in v. 4). The command is from God Himself.

But God does not just give them the stark command and leave them on their own. He says take courage and get to work “*for I am with you*” (v. 4b, emp. added). As McIlmoyle says: “In close connection with the . . . command stands the reiterated promise of God’s presence” (746). Just like David had assured Solomon that God “is with you” in building the first temple (1 Chron. 28:20), just so God would be with these returned exiles as they rebuild it. As Alden says, “The most uplifting thing they could hear was that God was with them” (585). In fact, this assurance is “the only guarantee of success of the effort . . .” (McIlmoyle 746). If God is with you, who can successfully withstand you? The obvious answer is “no one, because all things are possible with God” (Mark 14:36). Then, God goes on to tell them why He will be with them: because He had promised to do so. But when did He make such a promise? “As for the promise which I made you when you came out of Egypt, My Spirit is abiding in your midst; do not fear.”

At first blush one might be tempted to think that God had forgotten with which century’s people He was dealing. After all, about nine centuries had passed since He had delivered their forefathers from Egypt and all of them had been dead for hundreds of years! But, as McIlmoyle properly reminds us,

God is the God who keepeth covenant . . . to a thousand generations. The individuals pass but the nation remains. National covenants cannot die of old age. This covenant made with Israel in the days of their release from Egypt is counted by God as still in force in the days of Haggai. “I am still with you, ready to fulfil My part of the contract,” says God. “Are you ready to fulfil yours?” (746)

In fact, very probably the passage referenced in the above quote from McIlmoyle is the one where God says, “Know therefore that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with

those who love Him and keep His commandments” (Deut. 7:9). What a wonderful God He is! Despite centuries of unfaithfulness on the part of His people, He is ready to bless them again **IF** they will but obey. In fact, this great and faithful God also makes a promise: “My Spirit is abiding in your midst” (v. 5). This is very similar to what He had promised in verse 4, “I am with you.” However, the mention of coming out of Egypt may have reminded them of what they had heard from their ancestors and read in the Pentateuch about the pillar of the cloud leading them by day and the pillar of fire which gave them light by night (Ex. 13:21). But, God assures them, that His Spirit will be with them despite the lack of such a visible sign. However, there is a condition: that they dedicate themselves to Him alone and rebuild His “house.” If they will do this, there will be no reason to fear the enemies which surround them and threaten them. In fact, God then gives a command: “Do not fear” (v. 5b). As Alden says,

Undoubtedly fear gripped many of the returnees—fear that God had written an eternal “Ichabod” over Jerusalem, fear that no amount of praying or piety would induce Him to bless them again, fear that the whole endeavor was in vain, fear that the political enemies would in fact win, fear that all was lost. (585)

How very reassuring the words of God given through Haggai must have been: “My Spirit is abiding in your midst; do not fear!”

## Conclusion

The God of heaven is a powerful and loving God who is, in every century, very capable of building a glorious house if human beings will keep their end of the covenant. Today, we Christians are God’s house. Paul told Timothy he wanted him to be careful how he conducted himself “in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). When we live obedient and godly lives, then God is glorified and His house is a glorious one which radiates light to

this dark world. God help us to realize that, as long as we obey His Word, His Spirit is in our midst and therefore we should never fear.

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# Overview Of Malachi

James Rankhorn

It is indeed a great honor to be invited to participate in WVSOP's Victory Lectures. I would like to thank the elders of the Hillview Terrace Church of Christ for their oversight of this fine congregation and the school of preaching. Having been privileged



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to attend a school of preaching, I know what a valuable service they are doing in the kingdom, to oversee the training of men to preach the glorious Gospel of Christ. I also would like to thank my brother in Christ and friend, Denver Cooper, for extending the invitation to me. I am also thankful to him for his friendship and encouragement through the years I have known him, and for his tireless work for the cause of Christ. I have been assigned, *An Overview of Malachi*, for this lecture.

Malachi, a prophet in the days of Nehemiah, directs his message of judgment to a people plagued with corrupt priests, wicked practices, and a false sense of security in their privileged relationship with God. Using the question and answer method, Malachi delves deeply into their problems of hypocrisy, infidelity, mixed marriages, divorce, false worship, and arrogance. So sinful has the nation become that God's words to the people no longer have any impact. Following Malachi's ringing condemnations, God will remain silent for 400 years. Only with the coming of John the Immerser (Mal. 3:1) does God again communicate to His people through a prophetic voice.

The meaning of the name *Malakhi* is "my messenger." "Linguistically, *malakhi* may reasonably be regarded as an abbreviation of *malakhiyah*, meaning "messenger of Jehovah." (Robinson 157). This is entirely appropriate of the book which speaks of the "Messenger of the covenant" (Mal. 3:1). "Messenger" is mentioned three times in 2:7 and 3:1. The Septuagint used the title *Malachias*, even though it also translated it "*by the hand of his messenger.*" The Latin title is *Maleachi*.

## The Author of Malachi

The only Old Testament mention of Malachi is in chapter one, verse one. Nothing is known of Malachi (not even his father's name) except what is revealed in the book. He was a vigorous, courageous spokesman, a true prophet, filled with zeal for the cause which he represented. He must denounce the indifference of the people, rebuke them of their sins and stimulate them to reform.

## The Time of Malachi's Prophecy

Although it is difficult to establish an exact date for the writing of Malachi, internal evidence can be used to come to an approximate date. The Persian term for governor, *pechah* (Strong 94) (Mal. 1:8; cf. Neh. 5:14; Hag. 1:1, 14; 2:21), indicates that this book was penned during the Persian domination of Israel (539-333 BC). Sacrifices were being offered in the temple (Mal. 1:7-10; 3:8), which was rebuilt in 516 BC. It is evident that many years had passed since the sacrifices were instituted, because the priests had grown weary of them, and corruption had infiltrated the worship. Also, Malachi's message was inspired by the same problems with which Nehemiah dealt: corrupt priests (Mal. 1:6; 2:9; Neh. 13:1-9), neglect of tithes and offerings (Mal. 3:7-12; Neh. 13:10-13), and intermarriages with pagan wives (Mal. 2:10-16; Neh. 13:23-28). Nehemiah came to Jerusalem in 444 BC to rebuild the city walls, thirteen years after Ezra's reforms (457 BC). Nehemiah returned to Persia in 432 BC, but came back to Palestine about 425 BC and dealt with the sins described in Malachi. Therefore, it is likely that Malachi proclaimed his message while

Nehemiah was absent between 432 and 425 BC, almost a century after Haggai and Zechariah began to prophesy.

### **Keys to the Book of Malachi**

The key word in this book is an appeal to backsliders. The inspired dialogue in Malachi's prophecy is designed as an appeal to break through the barrier of Israel's disbelief, disappointment, and discouragement. The promised time of prosperity has not yet come, and the prevailing attitude that it is not worth serving God becomes evident by their moral and spiritual corruption. However, God reveals His continuing love in spite of Israel's indifference. His appeal in this book is for the people and priests to stop and realize their lack of blessing is not caused by God's lack of concern, but by their disobedience of the covenant law. When they repent and return to God with sincere hearts, the obstacles to the flow of Divine blessing will be removed. Malachi also reminds the people that a day of reckoning will surely come when God will judge the righteous and wicked.

The key verses of Malachi are:

You have wearied the LORD with your words; yet you say, "In what way have we wearied Him?" In that you say, "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and He delights in them," Or, "Where is the God of justice?" Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming," says the LORD of hosts. (Mal. 2:17-3:1)

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse. (Mal. 4:5-6)

The key chapter in Malachi is chapter 3. The last book of the Old Testament concludes with a dramatic prophecy of the coming of the Lord and John the Immerser: "Behold, I send My messenger, And he will prepare the way before Me..." (Mal. 3:1). Israel flocked to the Jordan River 400 years later when "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord'" (Matt. 3:3) appeared, breaking the long silence of prophetic revelation. Malachi chapters 3 and 4 record the coming of the Messiah and His forerunner.

### **A Brief Survey of Malachi**

The great prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah are not yet fulfilled, and the people of Israel became disillusioned and doubtful. They begin to question God's providence as their faith imperceptibly degenerates into cynicism. Internally, they wonder whether it is worth serving God after all. Externally, these attitudes surface in mechanical observances, empty ritual, cheating on tithes and offerings, and crass indifference to God's moral and ceremonial law. Their priests are corrupt and their practices wicked, but they are so spiritually insensitive that they wonder why they are not being blessed by God.

Using a probing series of questions and answers, God seeks to pierce their hearts of stone. In each case the Divine accusations are denied. How has God loved us? (1:2-5); How have we (priests) despised God's name? (1:6-2:9); How have we (the people) profaned the covenant? (2:10-16); How have we wearied God? (2:17-3:6); How have we robbed God? (3:7-12); How have we spoken against God? (3:13-15). In effect, the people sneer, "Oh, come on now: it's not that bad!" However, their rebellion is quiet, not open. As their perception of God grows dim, the resulting materialism and externalism become settled characteristics that later grip the religious parties of the Pharisees and Sadducees. In spite of all of this, God still loves His people and once again extends His grace to any who will humbly turn to Him. Malachi is broken into three sections: the privilege of the nation (1:1-5), the pollution of the nation (1:6-3:15), and the promise to the nation (3:16-4:6).

***The Privilege of the Nation (1:1-5).*** The Israelites blind themselves to God's love for them. Wallowing in the problems of the present, they are forgetful of God's works for them in the past. God gives them a reminder of His special love by contrasting the fates of Esau (Edom) and Jacob (Israel).

***The Pollution of the Nation (1:6-3:15).*** The priests have lost all respect for God's name and in their greed offer only diseased and imperfect animals on the altar. They have more respect for the Persian governor than they do for the living God. Moreover, God is withholding His blessings from them because of their disobedience to God's covenant and because of their insincere teaching.

The people are indicted for their treachery in divorcing the wives of their youth in order to marry foreign women (2:10-16). In response to their questioning the justice of God, they not only received a promise of the Messiah's coming but also a warning of the judgment that He will bring (2:17-3:6). The people have robbed God of the tithes and offerings due Him, but God is ready to bless them with abundance if they will put Him first (3:7-12). The final problem is the arrogant challenge to the character of God (3:13-15), and this challenge is answered in the remainder of the book.

***The Promise of the Nation (3:16-4:6).*** The Lord assures His people that a time is coming when the wicked will be judged and those who fear Him will be blessed. The day of the Lord will reveal that it is not "vain to serve God" (3:14).

Malachi ends on the bitter word "curse." Although the people are finally cured of idolatry, there is little spiritual progress in Israel's history. Sin abounds, and the need for the coming Messiah is greater than ever.

### **Making Application of Malachi to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians**

When we see a brother or sister in Christ who is living in sin, are we concerned about them, or do we just shrug it off? Do we, as Christians, hate sin or accept it? Do we deny sin in our lives or do we delight to live in it? It seems that every where we turn today, we are being told there is no sin. A New Age Christ study course,

*A Course in Miracles*, which Oprah and Friends are pushing, teaches "*there is no sin*" (Smith 2). As Christians, truly desiring to go to heaven, we must not get caught in the ever-expanding teaching of watered-down sin. We must understand that sin is sin! So many of us today have rationalized sin so much that it just goes by without our ever realizing what has taken place. In a way, Malachi dealt with a similar problem as he wrote to the Hebrew people. Malachi makes specific charges against the priests and people.

We begin by looking at the charges which would apply to 21<sup>st</sup> century religious leaders. In Malachi's day, the priests had allowed the worship services to become so distasteful to God that God would rather the doors to the temple be closed, instead of their hypocritical worship being offered there. But such would never happen to us today because, "We love God too much." Remember 1 Corinthians 10:12 says, "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." Why had their worship become such a horrible thing in the eyes of God? Simply, they had changed the pattern of worship which God had given. This reminds me of things I have heard from brethren and members of denominations. For example, from brethren I have heard, "If we add this or that to the worship services we feel that it will make our worship 'more meaningful,' and we don't think God will mind." From members of the denominations I have heard, "Why don't you let us worship God in 'our' own way?" Friends, the story of Uzzah and the incident with the Ark of the Covenant should serve as a strong reminder of what happens when we go against God's commands (2 Sam. 6:3-8). Three times in the Scriptures we are warned not to "add to" His commands (Deut. 4:2; Prov. 30:6; Rev. 22:18-19). From these clear statements we can understand that we neither have the right or authority to change what God has set forth for us in His Word. Not only must we do what God has commanded, but we must do it as He has specified. Elders in the Lord's church will be tempted to make changes in the worship to please the people and swell numbers at the cost of being displeasing to God. We must constantly be reminded that the only way to be a friend and servant of God is to obey His commands (John 14:6, 15; 15:14).

Those who desire the praise of men, Jesus said, “they have their reward” (Matt. 6:5). We must strive to preach the word and it alone (2 Tim. 4:2)!

In chapter one, we learn that the priest’s reverence toward God was far less than it should have been. But this is not limited to Malachi’s day! Many today have been lead astray by the smooth speech of false teachers (Rom. 16:18). Many believe that if the church merely holds services in a community today, that is enough. All the while, false teachers are spreading their error by every means available. Oh how the church needs awakened to the urgent need to spread the Gospel to a lost and dying world. People throughout our world must be given the opportunity to hear and obey the saving Gospel message (Rom. 1:16; Matt. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-16). Each child of God must be willing to “spend and be spent” in spreading the Gospel in order that we might be found pleasing in His sight (2 Cor. 12:15)!

In Malachi 1:13, we find the priests had allowed the worship to become a “weariness.” There is a great danger of this happening today! It seems that so many come to Bible study and worship services and simply go through the motions. Whether elders, deacons, preachers or members of the Lord church, none are immune! God has commanded that we are to worship Him “in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). When we come to Bible study and worship services we should have the mind set of molding our lives to the truths learned from a study of God’s Word. In order to be pleasing to God we must offer Him true worship! Just attending Bible study and worship services is only the beginning!

Not only did Malachi make charges against the religious leaders, but he also made charges against the people. In spite of God blessing the people so richly, they were unconscious of the love that God had shown them. Far too many times today we accept the blessings from God and we forget the Bestower of those blessings. We must constantly offer thanksgiving for the physical and spiritual blessings that are bestowed upon us daily (Matt. 6:25-33; Eph. 1:3).

The charge of wrongful marriage relationships was made against the people. In the beginning God created one man and one woman

and joined them together (Gen. 2:21-24). This was the Divine pattern for the home, one man for one woman for life. God always has and will forever hate divorce (Mal. 2:16). The teaching of Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:1-9, is simple and very clear. Sometimes these passages are seen as a “hard” commandment and people will ignore them so they can do what feels right in their heart. Sadly, in many cases, people have put their salvation in jeopardy by becoming involved in unscriptural marriages. The cost of being a disciple of Jesus is very high! Let us always be willing to pay the price, no matter how high it may be. Your soul’s eternal destiny lies in the balance!

Finally, we make mention that the people were charged with robbing God (Mal. 3:7-12). Not that they were taking anything from God, but they were not giving as they had been commanded. Tragically, I am afraid this problem exists today within the Lord’s church. How many members of the Lord’s church go out and lavish upon themselves the wants and desires they have, and then give the scraps to God? The apostle Paul command, “Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper . . .” (1 Cor. 16:1-2). Our giving is to be done “cheerfully” and not “grudgingly” (2 Cor. 9:7). Each week, before we attend worship services on the first day of the week, let us consider the blessings and prosperity which the Lord has given us during the week and give accordingly. Let us determine not to endanger our soul by improper giving. The Bible does say, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35).

Malachi should serve as a powerful warning to the church of today! As one studies this book, one should be humbled as they examine themselves in light of God’s revelation. May the Lord’s people arise from their spiritual slumber and respond to the unfailing love of God, for one day we shall all “stand before the judgment seat of Christ” (2 Cor. 5:10).

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### Biographical Sketch

James was born in Altus, OK, in 1960. He is the son of Arthur and Joretta Rankhorn. He graduated from Altus High School in 1978 and attended two semesters at Southwestern Oklahoma State College, majoring in Industrial Art. He married the former Melanie Barnett in 1990. They have one son, Kadry, age 14.

James was baptized into Christ February 14, 1986, at the Hudson and Elm Church of Christ where he grew up, by J. D. Barnett, who would later become his father-in-law. He is a 1994 graduate of Brown Trail School of Preaching in Bedford, TX. Upon graduation, he spent eight months as an associate minister with the Iowa Park Church of Christ in Iowa Park, TX. In March 1995, James began work with the Sandyville Church of Christ in Sandyville, WV, to establish the West Ripley Church of Christ, in Ripley, WV, whom he served from 1995-2005. In July 2006, he began work as minister with the Sunrush Church of Christ in Chillicothe, Ohio.

James holds two to three Gospel Meetings a year. He has spoken on the Midway, Greater Kanawha Valley, Ohio Valley, and West Virginia Christian Lectures. He has also spoken on Men's Motivation Days, Vacation Bible Schools, and at preacher's meetings in Moundsville, Parkersburg and St. Albans, WV.

# God's Signet—Zerubbabel

Charles J. Aebi

The story of Zerubbabel is related in the apocryphal Book of 1 Esdras as follows: Zerubbabel had been one of three personal bodyguards of King Darius I of Persia (3:4, 13). He was elevated to the rank of the king's cousin or kinsman by winning a contest in



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which he described truth as being stronger than wine or the king, which the other bodyguards said were the strongest. He insisted that women were stronger than wine or the king, but that truth was to be exalted above even them, and the people all agreed, so Darius gave Zerubbabel the gold vessels taken from the temple by Nebuchadnezzar and ordered governors and others to give Zerubbabel all he needed to rebuild the temple. Darius then sent Zerubbabel, Sheshbazzar, and Jeshua from Babylon to Jerusalem with whomever of the Jews wished to go with them to do the rebuilding job (1 Esdras 4:13-42).

Ezra 1:7-11, however, tells a different story. Ezra says that King Cyrus, not Darius, gave the gold and silver vessels to Sheshbazzar and issued the original decree to have the Jews return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple, and in Ezra 5:14-16 Governor Tattenai says that Cyrus had made Sheshbazzar the governor at Jerusalem.

Was Zerubbabel also called Sheshbazzar? Jewish tradition holds that they are two names for the same man, and Josephus in his *Antiquities of the Jews* (11.1.3 – book XI, chapter 1, paragraph 3) thinks they are the same person; he says that Cyrus gave the vessels to Sanabassar (Sheshbazzar), then says he gave them to

Zerobabel (Zerubbabel) the governor of the Jews. Both Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel are called “governors,” and both are said to have laid the foundations of the temple (Ezra 3, 5; Hag. 1, 2; Zech. 4:6-10). It was not uncommon for one's name to be changed when he was given a position of authority; this happened to Daniel and his three Hebrew friends (Dan. 1:7) and also to kings like Jehoiakim (formerly Eliakim) and Mattaniah who became Zedekiah (2 Kings 23, 24). The main objection to Zerubbabel also being named Sheshbazzar seems to come from the apocryphal book of 1 Esdras chapters 4 and 6, where, as referred to above, Zerubbabel is portrayed as a close friend and bodyguard to King Darius I, who gives him the temple vessels to take back to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. Esdras is in direct contradiction to Ezra on several points and, like other apocryphal books, contradicts itself, Scripture, and secular history. Other objections are raised by Yamauchi and Youngblood, who say, “Furthermore, it is likely that Sheshbazzar was an elderly man at the time of the return, while Zerubbabel was probably a younger contemporary” (673). The only evidence to support these assertions is that Zerubbabel is associated with Joshua the high priest, but Sheshbazzar is not. No one is certain about it, but the weight of the evidence seems to favor them being the same man, a governor named by Cyrus and later reconfirmed by Darius.

And what office did Zerubbabel actually hold? Wilson says they may be the same person, but he thinks it more likely that Sheshbazzar was the governor of Judea under Cyrus and that Zerubbabel was governor under Darius; Wilson also thinks Zerubbabel served as *tirshatha* – tax collector for Persia (3147-48). Haggai referred to Zerubbabel as the governor (Hag. 1:1; 1:14; 2:2; 2:21), and Ezra reported that the governor beyond the River wrote to King Darius to say that Sheshbazzar, Cyrus' governor, had laid the foundation for the temple (Ezra 5:14, 16) though in chapter 3 Ezra said that Zerubbabel had laid the foundation. Yamauchi and Youngblood in the *NIV Study Bible* suggest that “Although Sheshbazzar presided over the foundation of the temple in 536 BC, so little was accomplished that Zerubabel had to preside over a second foundation some 16 years later;” they think Zerubbabel was

a popular leader while Sheshbazzar was the official governor (673). The explanation is simpler if Zerubbabel is actually Sheshbazzar, and it is hard to imagine that the huge stones that would have made up the temple's foundation would deteriorate in 16 years. Lockyer probably echoes the feeling of most writers when he says, "Sheshbazzar was perhaps the name given to Zerubbabel by the Babylonians" (349). Hailey thinks the fact that Ezra 3:8-10, 5:16, and Zechariah 5:9 referring to both names as having laid the foundation of the temple "confirms the identity of the two as one man" (303). M'Clintock and Strong think Zerubbabel probably had served like Daniel in the service of the king of Babylon and was recognized as a prince of Judah, thus had been given the Babylonian name Sheshbazzar and was kept on when Cyrus conquered Babylonia and made governor of Judah by Cyrus (10: 1088-89). Keil agrees with this (176).

Zerubbabel is said by Ezra, Haggai, and Matthew to have been the son of Shealtiel (Ezra 3:2; 5:2; Hag. 1:1, 12, 14; 2:2, 23; Matt. 1:12; Luke 3:27); however, 1 Chronicles 3:17-19 lists Zerubbabel as the son of Pedaiah (Shealtiel's brother) and the son or grandson of Jeconiah. Since these are all biblical accounts and not opinions of apocryphal writers or uninspired historians, we must find an explanation for this and other problems in Zerubbabel's genealogy. Keil thinks that Zerubbabel's legal father Shealtiel apparently died and his second brother Pedaiah begot Zerubbabel by Shealtiel's widow in a Levirate marriage (176). Wilson says,

It is probable that Shealtiel had no children and adopted Zerubbabel; or that Zerubbabel was his levirate son [son by his brother's widow]; or that, Shealtiel being childless, Zerubbabel succeeded to the rights of sonship as being the next of kin. Whatever may have been his blood relationship to Jeconiah, the Scriptures teach that Zerubbabel was his legal successor, of the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> generation. (3147)

Since Jeconiah was to die childless (Jer. 22:30) or have no direct descendant to reign as king of Judah, one of these explanations may account for Zerubbabel being in the direct line of Davidic

descent as an ancestor of Christ. Whatever the explanation for the problems in Christ's genealogies listed in Matthew 1 and Luke 3, we may be sure they would have been attacked and disproved by unbelieving Jews in the first century if those problems did not have ready explanations by the traditional genealogical understandings of that time. There was no doubt in Jewish reasoning that the Christ was to be the Son of David, as Matthew 22:42 plainly shows. The Jews were famous for "endless genealogies" (1 Tim. 1:4) and may have skipped one or more generations, but they knew even then what the blood lines were.

As the kingdom of Judah wound down into Babylonian captivity, the last king recognized by God as being of the Davidic line was Coniah (Jeconiah). Jeremiah prophesied against Coniah in clear, unmistakable language: "Write this man down as childless, A man who shall not prosper in his days; For none of his descendants shall prosper, sitting on the throne of David, And ruling anymore in Judah" (24:30). Jeconiah with others from Judah, was taken into captivity in Babylon, where he died. The meaning of Jeremiah is that though Jeconiah did have descendants, they did not reign on the throne of David. "And after they were brought to Babylon, Jeconiah begot Shealtiel, and Shealtiel begot Zerubbabel" (Matt. 1:12).

Besides being mentioned in the genealogies of Jesus in Matthew 1 and Luke 3, Zerubbabel is referred to 21 times in the books of 1 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah (according to my computer's count). The short book of Haggai refers to Zerubbabel seven times, including in its opening and closing verses:

In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest. . . . 'In that day,' says the LORD of hosts, 'I will take you, Zerubbabel My servant, the son of Shealtiel, says the LORD, and will make you like a signet *ring*; for I have chosen you,' says the LORD of hosts.'" (Hag. 1:1; 2:23)

The first two of the four messages of Haggai are addressed to both Zerubbabel and Joshua, and the last just to Zerubbabel, but the content of all four messages clearly is intended for the people of Judah who had returned from captivity and were being urged to complete the rebuilding of the temple. All four messages were delivered by Haggai in the year 520 BC from the sixth to the ninth month (September to December).

The rebuilding of the temple had been started in 536 BC by edict of Cyrus (2 Chron. 36:22-23), but from 530-520 the work had been stopped by interference from the Samaritans whose offer of help had been spurned by the Jews because of the impurity of the Samaritans' religion; "They feared the LORD, yet served their own gods" (2 Kings 17:33). In 520 Haggai appeared on the scene, and before that year was over Zechariah was also prophesying there. Both prophets, though with different approaches, were urging the leaders and the people to finish the work on the temple. Their success is recorded in Ezra; the temple was completed in 516 BC. J. S. Wright notes that it is often assumed, on the basis of Haggai 2:20-23 and Zechariah 6:9-15, that Haggai and Zechariah persuaded the Jews to crown Zerubbabel as king, an act of rebellion quickly put down by Persia, but Wright points out that "There is no shred of evidence for or against this theory" (1359). Zerubbabel's honor by the Jews lay more in his work in rebuilding the temple than in his governing, as is evidenced by it being often called "Zerubbabel's temple."

Haggai's four sermons may be titled and described briefly as follows:

- (1) "The Time is Now"—delivered 6/1/520 (1:1-15). God sent drought because they had stopped work on the temple. Result: Zerubbabel and Joshua got the remnant back to work by Sept. 24, 23 days after Haggai's first message was delivered.
- (2) "The Good Old Days"—delivered 7/21/520 (2:1-9). It may not look that way now, but the new temple will ultimately be more glorious than the old one built by Solomon.

- (3) "Whose Fault Is It?"—delivered 9/24/520 (2:10-19). God withheld blessings because the people, not the leaders, were slack. The blame did not lie with Zerubbabel and Joshua.
- (4) "God Bless the Faithful Few"—delivered 9/24/520 (2:20-23). God encouraged Governor Zerubbabel with the assurance that God had chosen him for this work.

In the true spirit of the prophets, Haggai speaks God's Word fearlessly, and, unlike some other prophets, Haggai got quick results. God blessed him and the remnant's other leaders with political as well as moral support. In no uncertain terms, King Darius I ordered Judah's enemies to stay away from them and even to give them financial support, and the building was completed in 516, the sixth year of King Darius I.

It is the fourth message of Haggai that is the topic of note here; the entire text follows:

And again the word of the LORD came to Haggai on the twenty-fourth day of the month, saying, "Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying: 'I will shake heaven and earth. I will overthrow the throne of kingdoms; I will destroy the strength of the Gentile kingdoms. I will overthrow the chariots; and those who ride in them; the horses and their riders shall come down, every one by the sword of his brother. 'In that day,' says the LORD of hosts, 'I will take you, Zerubbabel My servant, the son of Shealtiel,' says the LORD 'and will make you like a signet ring; for I have chosen you,' says the LORD of hosts. (2:20-23)

The shaking of Heaven and Earth and destruction of Gentile kingdoms were spoken of in Haggai's second message in 2:6-7 as well as in 2:21-22. Robinson supposes this shaking to involve some of the confusion existing during the conquests of Cyrus,

Cambyes, and Darius I (140-142), but Lewis says, “Be the hidden import of this oracle what it may, we notice that the Messianic line is traced through Zerubbabel (Matt. 1:12; Luke 3:27)” (72-73). This writer will stick with Lewis and not attempt to pinpoint the time in history described in Haggai’s shaking of the kingdoms. If “that day” is a day of the Lord as in several other Old Testament prophets, it could refer to the shaking of the Persians or other kingdoms of that time. If, however, the shaking is spiritual and connected with the establishment of Messiah’s kingdom, it could refer to the events of Acts 2 as does Joel’s prophecy of the day of the LORD cited in Acts 2:16-21, or it could refer to the time when the shaking implies the removal of everything but the immovable kingdom of Christ when the day of the LORD comes to call an end to time.

The LORD is with His people and against those who oppose and persecute them; it was so in Moses’ day and it would be true in Zerubbabel’s day, but other passages extend it further. The writer of Hebrews 12:18-29 refers to the shaking of the Earth at the Mount Sinai lawgiving and quotes Haggai 2:6, saying that the things which are shaken this time will be removed or eliminated, meaning earthly things. ***The thing that cannot be shaken is the eternal kingdom of Christ, and it cannot be shaken (Heb. 12:28).*** It is the kingdom that Daniel said would never be destroyed (Dan. 2:44); it is the kingdom of Christ that began on the Pentecost of Acts 2 and included Gentiles as well as Jews after Acts 10. James in Acts 15:14-17 quoted Amos 9:11-12 to the effect that the fallen tabernacle (kingdom) of David was rebuilt so that Gentiles and Jews alike could seek the LORD in the same way. It is the church that Jesus built and that the power of death, whether of the death of Jesus or of the deaths of Christians, could not prevail against (Matt. 16:18-19).

Zerubbabel, along with Joshua the high priest, supervised the rebuilding of the temple as described in Ezra, Haggai, and Zechariah. He was chosen and authorized by God to do so and to thereby act as God’s signet or signet ring (Hag. 2:23). It was not just Cyrus, but God, who commanded the rebuilding of the temple, and in making Zerubbabel his signet to do this, He revived the

Jewish hope of the Messiah coming to rebuild the people of God into an eternal kingdom. What most Jews did not understand was that this was to be the spiritual kingdom that we know as the church of Christ, not a reconstituted physical kingdom of David headquartered in Jerusalem and ruling the world. Many Protestants still do not understand it and so reject the church as God’s eternal kingdom; they think the kingdom will begin when Christ returns and that it will last for 1,000 years.

In Haggai 2:23, Zerubbabel is assured that he is God’s signet or signet ring; the word “ring” is not in the Hebrew and is not found in some translations. The New King James Version puts it in italics to show that it is added by the translators to give us what they think is the intended meaning. Webster defines *signet* as “a seal, especially one used as a signature in marking documents as official . . . a mark or impression made by or as by a signet” and a *signet ring* as “a finger ring containing a signet, often in the form of an initial or monogram” (1325). Herbert Wolf says that a signet ring was “a kind of seal that functioned as a signature (see Est 8:8) and was worn on one’s finger (Est 3:10). . . . Its mention here probably reverses the curse placed on King Jehoiachin in Jer 22:24. . . . Zerubbabel then would then be a guarantee that someday the Messiah descended from David would come” (1404).

Hailey says:

The signet, or seal, was a ring or cylinder engraved with the owner’s name or some design. It was worn on the finger or on a cord about the neck, and was used to make an impression of ownership or authorship on clay tablets; or if papyrus was used, the impression was made on wax affixed to the material. The signet was considered precious because it was the authentic designation of the owner. (314)

M’Clintock and Strong say signets were often made of stone or terra cotta set in a frame and rolled over documents made of clay and later baked, and when in rings were worn usually on the little finger of the right hand (9: 735-36). The signet was used throughout Old Testament times to authenticate documents. When

Xerxes gave Esther and Mordecai his signet to use to make a decree to save the Jews, he said, “You yourselves write a decree concerning the Jews, as you please, in the king’s name, and seal it with the king’s signet ring; for whatever is written in the king’s name and sealed with the king’s signet ring no one can revoke” (Esth. 8:8). Centuries earlier, Tamar used Judah’s signet to convict him; when he thought her a prostitute he gave her his signet and cord and staff, and when he accused her of adultery she produced his signet and cord and staff to prove he was the father of the child she would have (Gen. 38:18, 25). Genesis 41:41-42 shows the use of signet rings: “And Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.’ Then Pharaoh took his signet ring off his hand and put it on Joseph’s hand; and he clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck.” The honor given Zerubbabel as the LORD’S chosen servant to be like a signet to Israel involved more than just assurance that the temple would be completed successfully, though it did give him encouragement to that end; it underscored to Israel their Messianic hopes.

The promise made to David (II Sam. 7:11-14) is now revived in Zerubbabel, a descendant of David through Coniah, and the one through whom the seed would come. . . .The people are now back in their homeland and Jehovah has assured them of temporal blessings, of the overthrow of the heathen, and of the fulfillment of the spiritual promise through Zerubbabel. The honor bestowed upon Zerubbabel was not realized in him as a person, but in his office and lineage. Matthew confirms the fulfillment of this promise as he points out that Jesus is the heir to the throne of David through Coniah and Zerubbabel (1:12, 16). (Hailey 315)

Nevertheless, “Zerubbabel was in his day the representative of the Davidic monarchy” (Davis 655).

He was a type of Christ in bringing back the people from Babylon, as Christ delivered us from sin death [sic] and hell: he built the temple, as Christ built the Church; he protected his people against the Samaritans who would hinder the building, as Christ protects His Church: he was dear and joined to God, as Christ was united to Him, and hypostatically united and joined His Humanity to the Word. The true Zerubbabel then, i.e. Christ, the son and antitype of Zerubbabel, is the signet in the hand of the Father. (Pusey, citing Lap. 320).

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### **Biographical Sketch**

Charles J. Aebi is a native of southwestern Pennsylvania. He was raised with a denominational background, but obeyed the gospel in 1949 and began preaching in 1952. He has a B.S. degree from Penn State, an M.A. from Abilene Christian, and a Ph.D. from Ohio University.

Charles has served as minister for churches in Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Texas, and has preached and held workshops in several states and in foreign countries. He has served as an elder for several years each in three congregations. He currently serves as a minister and an elder for the Barlow-Vincent Church of Christ in Vincent OH. He taught Bible for 34 years at Ohio Valley College (now University), serving 15 years as academic dean and 6 years as chairman of the Bible Department. He retired from the college in 1998 and now teaches at the West Virginia School of Preaching.

Charles and his wife Imogene have four children and twelve grandchildren. All of the men in the family preach; all of the men and women teach Bible classes; and all the grandchildren but the next to the youngest have obeyed the gospel. Six are attending Christian colleges.

# *The Shaking Of The Nations*

*Earl Edwards*

Earlier this year (2008), an earthquake which measured 5.4 on the Richter Scale hit Illinois, Indiana and several surrounding states. Fortunately, its epicenter was not located in an inhabited area; otherwise, the damage would have been greater and there would have been loss of life. One person who lived more than sixty miles from the epicenter described how he was awakened and how he experienced a great sense of fear because he could not find anything to grab, hold to, or stand on that was stable. Everything was trembling and SHAKING!

When the writer of Hebrews quotes verse six of our text in Haggai chapter two, he notes that in that passage God promised to “shake not only the earth, but also the heaven” (Heb. 12:26). [All Scriptures are taken from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise indicated.] In that passage, the Greek word for *shake* is *seis*, the future form of *sei* which means “to shake, agitate, cause to tremble . . . metaphorically to agitate the mind” (Thayer 573). Of course, we get our English word *seismology* from this word.

The shaking spoken of in our passage in Haggai chapter two is a shaking which God will do. Men may “shake things up a little” from time to time, but their shaking is “not in the same ballpark” with God’s. Here it is “the Lord of hosts” (v. 6) who is about to do the shaking. As Mark Hahlen and Clay Ham say, “. . . [T]he Hebrew text uses the emphatic pronoun I to stress that it is Yahweh who acts, and the participle ‘shaking’ suggests that Yahweh is acting at present” (296). From the usage made of this word *shake* in Hebrews 12, we clearly understand that everything built by man is subject to being shaken and only the permanent things or institutions or kingdoms *that God has built* “cannot be shaken” (Heb. 12:28). But, who is Haggai? When did he live and what work did he do? And what is the context of the “shaking” he speaks of here in chapter 2:6-9?

## **Haggai—His Time and Work**

The name Haggai (haggay) “apparently derives from the word for ‘festival’ or ‘feast’; suggesting that the prophet may have been born during one of the Hebrews’ three annual feasts . . .” (Hahlen and Ham 249). In the Septuagint, the name is *Aggaïos* and in the Latin Vulgate it is *Aggaeus*.

We know nothing about this prophet’s background. “With regard to his tribe and parentage, history and tradition are alike silent” (Smith 226). Outside of the book that bears his name, he is mentioned only in Ezra 5:1 and 6:14. Both of these passages mention him, along with the prophet Zechariah, as being responsible for motivating the Jews of the sixth century BC to rebuild the Jerusalem temple. In the Greek Septuagint translation, certain Psalms (such as 138, 146, 147, etc.) have a heading attributing them to Haggai and Zechariah (cf. Alden 571).

When his name is associated with that of Zechariah, he is named first (as in Ezra 5:1 and 6:14). This probably indicates that he was the older of the two. Though his name is not specifically listed among the returnees named in Ezra, “it is likely that he had returned to Jerusalem [from Medo-Persian captivity] with Zerubbabel (in 538) . . .” (Alden 572).

Many of the residents of Jerusalem and Judah had been carried into Babylonian captivity by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC when he destroyed Jerusalem (1 Chron. 6:15). Babylon was then conquered by the Medo-Persians in 539 BC and the Hebrew exiles became their slaves. In 538 BC, one of the Medo-Persian kings, Cyrus, sent out a proclamation designed to make possible the rebuilding of the Jewish temple.

As a result of this “proclamation” over 49,000 Hebrews (Ezra 2:64) returned under the leadership of Zerubbabel who served as governor and Jeshua (also called Joshua) who was the high priest (Ezra 2:2; Neh. 12:1). After they arrived back in Judea, they rebuilt the altar and offered sacrifices “in the seventh month” after their return (Ezra 3:1-3). In the “second year” and the “second month” of that year, they started rebuilding the temple (Ezra 3:8-13).

The rebuilding was begun with enthusiasm, but that soon changed partially because of the relentless hostility of “the enemies

of Judah” (Ezra 4:1), principally the Samaritans. They did all they could to impede the rebuilding. Ezra tells of their opposition in these words, “Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and frightened them from building, and hired counselors against them to frustrate their counsel all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia” (Ezra 4:4-5).

This opposition “together with economic hardships linked to inflation, drought and crop failure (Hag. 1:6, 9, 11), made the task too daunting for the small community of the return” (Hahlen and Ham 255).

As noted, the exiles returned to Jerusalem in 538 BC and then they started rebuilding the temple in “the seventh month” (Ezra 3:1), evidently of the year 537 BC. Almost immediately they became discouraged and the work ceased in that same year. For one reason or another, it was neglected until the year 520 BC. In fact, that is the year that God raised up Zechariah and our prophet, Haggai.

### The Oracles of Haggai

It is the series of oracles presented by Zechariah and Haggai which result in the rebuilding (Ezra 6:14). Our prophet presents four different oracles (all delivered in 520 BC).

- (1) 1:2-11 is a discussion of their excuses for not rebuilding the temple (while they *had* rebuilt their own houses);
- (2) 2:1-9 is an encouragement for those who are disheartened because this temple is not as beautiful as Solomon’s had been;
- (3) 2:10-19 is a discussion whose purpose is to show that God had not blessed them materially because they hadn’t obeyed His will in rebuilding the temple, but as they proceed with the rebuilding this will change;
- (4) 2:20-23 is an assurance that God will protect them through their governor, Zerubbabel, while the rebuilding is being done.

Our concern in the previous lecture, and this one, is the second of these oracles.

### The First Part of the Second Oracle (2:1-5)

We need to keep in mind that this second oracle was delivered in about mid-October of 520 BC, about a month after work on the temple had resumed (v. 1). We should also remember:

- ❖ Haggai addressed the oracle to Zerubbabel, the governor, who was also an heir to David’s throne; to Joshua, the high priest; and to the “remnant” of the people who were willing to listen.
- ❖ Haggai addressed the feelings of the builders who were probably about to get discouraged and quit again because the very plain structure they were building seemed “nothing” in comparison with the beautiful house of Solomon which some of the older ones had seen.
- ❖ Haggai transmits God’s *promise* according to which, if they continue to work faithfully, He will be “with” them and His Spirit will abide in their “midst” to bless them.

And now we come to the last part of the second oracle which is the text for this lesson. This is the text which speaks of the “shaking” referred to earlier. Here is the text:

For thus says the LORD of hosts, “Once more in a little while, I am going to shake the heavens and the earth, the sea also and the dry land. I will shake all the nations; and they will come with the wealth of all nations, and I will fill this house with glory,” says the LORD of hosts. “The silver is Mine and the gold is Mine,” declares the LORD of hosts. (Hag. 2:6-9)

## Progressive Fulfillment

As we approach this prophecy, we need to remember that some prophecies are characterized by what some Bible students call “double fulfillment.” I choose to call it “progressive fulfillment.” An example of this is found in Amos 9:11-15, where God through Amos said the “fallen booth of David” would be restored. That passage also speaks of the material aspect when physical Israel would “rebuild the ruined cities.” Amos prophesied that in about 760 BC. We know that part of that prophecy was fulfilled by Haggai’s time (in 520 BC) because he says that the returnees were already living “in your paneled houses” (Hag. 1:4). So, part of the prophecy was fulfilled in Haggai’s time. However, not all of it was fulfilled then. In fact, the “fallen booth of David” was not restored in Haggai’s time. It is generally agreed that this deals with the continuation of “the David dynasty” (Unger 412) which God had promised would never completely fail (2 Sam. 7:12-13). And James, by inspiration, says specifically that this restoration of the “tabernacle [or booth] of David” had happened in the setting up of the church with Jesus reigning as its Head (spiritual king). In fact, he likewise thus justifies the inclusion of the Gentiles which were mentioned in Amos’ prophecy. He says all of this in his Jerusalem council speech recorded in Acts 15:13-18. As J. W. McGarvey says, Jesus’ spiritual kingship is the only possible fulfillment of that part of Amos’ prophecy because “after that downfall [around 580 BC] no man of David’s race became a king until Jesus was enthroned in heaven” (66). Thus, part of that prophecy was fulfilled around 520 BC and another part in approximately AD 33. This is what I choose to call “progressive fulfillment.” We will see that same type of fulfillment in Haggai 2.

As we approach our detailed discussion of this text, please note once again that Haggai is transmitting a message from “the Lord” (v. 6), from “the Lord of hosts” (v. 7), and again, “the Lord of hosts” (v. 8), and from “the Lord of hosts” (repeated twice in v. 9). This message is sent *through* the prophet, but it *originates* with God Himself. This great God Jehovah assures the discouraged builders that He is going to do some “shaking.” First, He says:

## He Will Shake the Universe (v. 6)

God says this shaking will take place “once more in a little while” (v. 6a). Other translations read, “yet once, it is a little while” (KJV) and “once again, in a little while” (RSV). There are actually two concepts embedded in the phrase: “yet one” AND “little is it” (Hahlen and Ham 295-96). The inspired writer of Hebrews will emphasize the “yet one” idea in Hebrews 12:26-27, but Haggai emphasizes the “little is it” aspect; that is, God is going to do some “shaking” which would begin in a “little” while, that is, “shortly after the time of Haggai” (Keil 196). That is not to say the “shaking” would be limited to the generation of Haggai, but it will *begin then* in time to produce some results which would benefit that generation with the embellishing of the temple which was then being reconstructed. As Hahlen and Ham say:

. . . [T]he participle “shaking” suggests that Yahweh is acting at present. The exceptional action of Yahweh, here described as a kind of cosmic cataclysm, signifies a change in favor for Haggai and his readers (cf. Isa 51:6). The word “shake” (r~‘as) appearing later in 2:21 evokes the images of the crossing of the Red Sea (Ps. 77:18), the shaking of Mount Sinai (Ps. 68:8), etc. . . . (296)

So, the shaking began in Haggai’s generation, but it was not limited to his age. In fact, the writer of Hebrews quotes our verse (Hag. 2:6) and speaks of the giving of the new Messianic covenant and its kingdom as another shaking (Heb. 12:25-29).

Therefore, as to the time frame of the shaking of this passage, Homer Hailey says, “. . . [T]he shaking within the natural world and of the nations seems to point to the divinely decreed rise and fall of nations *from that time up to the coming of the Messiah*” (310, emp. added). And, as Hailey says, the shaking of the *heavens* and the *earth* and the *sea* and the *dry land* mentioned here seems too extensive to be limited to just Haggai’s time (310).

There was, indeed, a “shaking” of the mountain (Ex. 19:18) and even of the whole Earth (Ps. 68:8) when God descended on Mount Sinai to give the Law. However, the shaking spoken of here will be

more significant. As Carl Keil correctly says, “The approaching shaking of the world will be much more violent; it will affect the heaven and the earth in all their parts, the sea and the solid ground . . . [that is] *the universe* . . .” (191, emp. added). Hahlen and Ham are undoubtedly correct when they say, “The verse uses theophanic imagery to express the far reaching implications of the reconstruction of the temple, which will affect *all creation*” (296, emp. added).

God’s plan depended on re-establishing worship of the one true God in Palestine with a nation dedicated to Him. From that nation would spring a Savior who would offer salvation to all nations. If the temple had not been rebuilt, evidently God with His divine ability to know all things, knew that plan would not have been realized. So, this great Father, *who controls all things, was to shake the universe to make it happen*. After all, is not He the One who knows “the ordinances of the *heavens*” and fixes “their rule over the *earth*” (Job 38:33, emp. added)? Is not He the great God who takes “hold of the ends of the earth” and “causes the wicked [to] be *shaken out* of it” (Job 38:13, emp. added)? Indeed, *he shakes the universe*.

### **He Will Shake the Nations (v. 7)**

And in all of His shaking would be included the shaking of the nations. Listen again to the prophet. He says, in verse 7, “‘And I will shake all the nations; and they will come with the wealth of all nations; and I will fill this house with glory,’ says the Lord of hosts.”

But there is some disagreement as to how a part of this verse should be translated. The King James Version translates the second line as follows: “and the desire of all the nations shall come,” instead of “the wealth of all nations.” The New King James Version varies some but renders “desire” and even capitalizes “Desire” so as to make it Messianic. However, the American Standard Version basically agrees with the New American Standard rendering of “the precious things.” Most other more recent versions (like the Revised Standard Version) have rendered the passage by words like “precious things” or “treasures.” Merrill

Unger is one who favors the King James, New King James sort of rendering. He says, “The Masoretic Hebrew text has ‘desire’ (hemdath) feminine singular with a plural verb. Thus, it is more properly translated as ‘the Desire of all nations’ shall come, construing the passage as Messianic” (433). But, please notice his inconsistency. He admits he has a “feminine singular noun with a plural verb.” How can that be more proper?

This student believes Hailey deals with this problem correctly when he writes (of the Messianic view):

This view is rejected on three counts: (1) the grammatical structure of the sentence: the word rendered “desire” is singular and in this instance the verb “shall come” is plural; . . . (2) none of the four evangelists quoted or referred to this word of Haggai in connection with Christ’s teaching; (3) God has never had but one house. It may have taken different forms and degrees of glory, but always there was but one. (310)

Jack Lewis agrees with Hailey (*Minor* 71-72). In fact, Lewis has written a lengthy article refuting the Messianic interpretation which he concludes with the following words:

More recently interpreters would think that *things*, rather than a *person*, are being spoken of and would interpret *chemdah* in the light of silver and gold mentioned in verse 8. A return from exile with Zion’s children bringing silver and gold is described in Isaiah 60:9, and the nations bringing their wealth (*chel*) in Isaiah 60:11. . . . One cannot see how the coming of the Messiah would offer comfort to people who are discouraged for lack of resources to build. Verse 8 with its allusion to silver and gold suggests material concerns, and that verse is confirmatory of verse 7 . . . the context seems to make the interpretation self evident. (“Desire” 10-11)

Thus, the Lord's shaking of the nations will cause them to "come with" their "wealth" or "treasures" (RSV), according to verse 7. Within about fifty years after this prophecy, we know that gifts for completion of the temple were received from King Darius of the Medo-Persian Empire (Ezra 6:8-15), as well as from Artaxerxes of the same empire (Ezra 7:12-26). In the case of this latter ruler, gifts of "silver and gold" are specifically mentioned in Ezra 7 in verses 15, 16, 18 and silver alone ("up to 100 talents") in verse 22. And in later times (around 185 BC) according to secular history Seleucus IV of Syria likewise gave from his treasures to help beautify the Jerusalem temple (2 Macc. 3:2-3). Especially the gifts of Ezra, chapters 6 and 7 would have constituted a real encouragement to Haggai's hearers. Such must have been a reminder to them of the fact that their God was, indeed, the "ruler over all the kingdoms of the nations" (2 Chron. 20:6). He does, in fact, "possess all the nations" (Ps. 82:8).

So the Lord, the Almighty God, who "created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1) still owns and controls everything in the universe. Thus, the *silver* is His and the *gold* belongs to Him also as do the "cattle on a thousand hills" (Ps. 50:10). That being true, He could easily shake the nations and cause them to contribute of their riches to those who were rebuilding the temple. That is what He said he would do, and He did it!

### **The Results of His Shaking of the Nations (vv. 8-9)**

In verse 8, God promises He will fill this reconstructed house with His *glory*. While it is true that the same term *glory* (Hebrew: *kabhad*) describes the presence of God as it entered the tabernacle when it was constructed (Ex. 40:34-35) and abandoned that temple when His people embraced idolatry (Ezek. 10:18-19), the term "glory" does not refer to God's presence here. Rather, in context, its *immediate* reference is, as Keil says, with "the valuable possessions of the heathen [their silver and gold] the Lord will glorify His temple or fill it with *kabhad*" (194). It is clear that it is "with the wealth of all nations" that God says He "will fill this house with glory" (v. 7b, emp. added). This translation fits perfectly with the mention of the silver and gold in verse 8. As

Lewis says, "The context suggests material splendor (as Haggai 2:3) rather than the cloud that came on the tabernacle in the desert . . ." ("Desire" 1).

Now having defined the term *glory* in this context, note what the prophet says of that *glory* in verse 9. The King James translates, "The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former saith the Lord. . . ." This translation leads one to believe that the comparison is between Solomon's magnificent and richly embellished temple and the rather plain one now under construction. But nearly all newer translations render the passage in a manner similar to the NASV: "the latter glory of this house will be greater than the former" (cf. ASV, RSV, etc.). Thus, the comparison is no longer between Solomon's temple and this temple. Rather it is between this partially constructed temple as it is now and what *this same* structure will look like after it has been finished and the nations have contributed their wealth to help beautify it. Hahlen and Ham suggest that this promise "may be fulfilled [centuries later] with the enlargement and embellishment of Zerubbabel's temple by Herod the Great" (299). However, as one looks at the context of the passage which deals with Haggai's contemporaries who were discouraged because this temple seems nothing (v. 3), it is much more likely he is promising a greater glory that those then living would actually be around to observe.

Finally, the prophet says God promises that "*in this place, I shall give peace*" (v. 9b, emp. added). Though *this place* does sometimes refer to the temple itself (cf. 1 Kings 8:29-30; 2 Chron. 6:20-21, etc.), Keil is probably correct in saying that here "This place is not the temple but Jerusalem" (195). And Jerusalem is the capitol of the nation so it represents the nation as a whole. So to this place God promises *peace*.

Hahlen and Ham suggest: "The granting of peace (*shalom*) brings to an end the curse of drought and unproductive labor (Hag. 1:6, 9-11) . . . some versions (e.g., NRSV and NJPS) translate the word [*shalom*] as "prosperity," a sense recalling the earlier economic difficulties" (300). In other words, if the people will repent and obey God by rebuilding the temple, their purses will no longer seem to have holes in them (cf. 1:6), they will see better

crops (cf. 1:10); and the drought will cease (cf. 1:11). In other words, when they repent and obey God, the tension in their relationship with God will be removed and there will be peace.

### Conclusion

Though this prophecy of Haggai had to do with physical Israel, the truths she needed to learn are truths we desperately need today also:

- ❖ God still controls the universe because He owns it.
- ❖ God owns it; therefore, He still controls the single nations and He is capable of using them and their wealth as He wishes.
- ❖ He can and will embellish His spiritual house (the church) today if we will only obey Him.
- ❖ If we are willing to do that, He promises His peace which Paul says “surpasses all comprehension” (Philip. 4:7).

God help us to attain this peace.

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# *A Bag With Holes*

*Larry Lemasters*

## **Introduction**

My assigned lesson is *A Bag with Holes* taken from the Old Testament Book of Haggai 1:1-11. This book bears the name of the prophet Haggai. It is said that the name “Haggai” means “festival”



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or “festive” in Homer Hailey’s work (297). And George L. Robinson suggests “Haggai” has the meaning of “festival of Jehovah” (138).

Within the two chapters of this short book, the prophet Haggai takes no credit for these messages of truth that are given. According to Homer Hailey, “. . . [H]e uses the appeal ‘saith Jehovah,’ ‘the word of Jehovah of hosts,’ and similar expressions twenty-six times in the four short addresses of thirty-eight verses” (298).

The occasion of the book of Haggai takes us back to the time when God’s people had become negligent to do His will. The time was “in the second year of Darius the king” (Hag. 1:1), which according to G. L. Robinson was “known to be 520 B.C.” (139). God has providentially brought about the release of the Jews from Babylonian captivity and enabled them to return to their homeland in Judah—where Jerusalem was located. Some seventy years before the city of Jerusalem had been reduced to ruins by the Babylonians. The reason God used the Babylonians to punish the people was because of the idolatry and sin which they had committed. This was prophesied in Jeremiah 20:4, “. . . [A]nd I

will give all Judah into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall carry them captive to Babylon, and shall slay them with the sword.” We can also read that it was “because they forsook the covenant of Jehovah their God, and worshipped other gods, and served them” (Jer. 22:9). This captivity and the length of it were also prophesied in Jeremiah 25:11, “And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

## **God’s Displeasure with the Jews**

Now the Jews, upon their return from captivity in Babylon, were to set up and reestablish their worship unto God, which they did according to Ezra 3:2ff, and also rebuild the house, or temple of God. However, all they got accomplished in this construction was to build the foundation of the temple (Ezra 3:11). From these early beginnings, about sixteen years had gone by. As noted by Alan E. Highers, “Zerubbabel led the first group of exiles back to Jerusalem in 536 BC” (38). With this lack of interest and dedication, God was not pleased as they still had not built His house. God had brought the Jews back to their homeland, however, their excitement about it all settled down to a less than desirable attitude about doing the Lord’s will. God expected them to rebuild His temple. However, the attitude of the people is revealed in Haggai 1:2 when God charged them with, “This people say, It is not the time for us to come, the time for Jehovah’s house to be built” (ASV). Yet, it seems strange that they would offer this excuse when they had already made a beginning some sixteen years earlier, but had ceased their work after having “laid the foundation of the temple of Jehovah” (Ezra 3:10). Now it is true there were some hindering factors, but even so, it would appear they had some misplaced priorities and a lack of commitment when it came to doing the Lord’s work.

It appears obvious that part of their problem is they had a conflict of interest. Rather than building God’s house, they were consuming their time in the building of their own houses, and apparently, elaborate ones at that. It is here God finds fault with them. It is written, “Then came the word of Jehovah by

Haggai the prophet, saying, Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your ceiled houses, while this house lieth waste?" (Hag. 1:3-4). Also of interest, their "ceiled houses" is rendered in the NKJV as "paneled houses." Clearly, any Christian who is thinking at all, knows that there is also an application that can be made here of our lack of involvement in the Lord's work. The apostle Paul though tells Christians, "Wherefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58).

As far as physical appearances are concerned, we will sometimes find that our meeting houses are run down, in need of painting, cleaning, etc. Here, it would seem that many have become rather lethargic when it comes to doing the Lord's work.

But even worse, is that our concerns about spiritual matters are not what they should be either. To fellow Christians, the apostle Paul warned, "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). But of those who do fall, brotherly concern needs to be shown them. The Bible teaches in Galatians 6:1-2, "Brethren, even if a man be overtaken in any trespass, ye who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; looking to thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ."

Then there are also those who have never heard the Gospel that can save them. And to this, Jesus said to His disciples, "Say not ye, There are yet four months, and then cometh the harvest? behold, I say unto you, Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields, that they are white already unto harvest" (John 4:35). But yet, it appears that the things of God are not really important to many of us.

### **A Call to Consider Their Ways**

The prophet Haggai told the people of their failure to do God's will and rebuked them for it. Then he told them in Haggai 1:5b to, "Consider your ways," or to think about your situation. Things have not been going very well for them. In fact, they were having a tough time making it. Another passage that would apply here would be Lamentations 3:40 in which it is written, "Let us search

and try our ways, and turn again to Jehovah." Certainly, these Jews to whom Haggai gave warning also needed to do some serious evaluation of themselves in order to get right with God, and then get on with the work He gave them to do.

Haggai reminded these Jews, in Haggai 1:6, of their situation. He wrote, "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 earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes."

Why was this happening to them? It would seem that they had no idea that this was happening to them because of their failure to obey God. They had turned to their own interests instead of God's, and consequently, their priorities were wrong. God's house lay in ruins and their primary concern was with their own houses. David R. Reid comments, ". . . [T]he Lord had withheld His blessing on their land. Their herds were unproductive and their harvests were puny. The people were investing a lot of time and labor to get ahead but there was no progress. In essence, they were throwing their money into bags with holes!" (3).

Wrong priorities will always and eventually leave you holding a bag with holes. When one replaces the interests of God with his own, he will eventually face a great deal of disappointment and loss. Yet, there are those who cannot seem to see this far ahead. Reid has written, "Although there may be some short-term 'gains' in pleasure and popularity or prosperity, wrong priorities ultimately result in no gain at all" (3).

To illustrate this point, we ask what about all of the things that we have involved ourselves in this past year? How much of it ended up in a bag with holes? If you paid a big price for a meal and it turned out to be very bad, you may have felt this way. Or if you paid a car repair bill that did not take care of the problem, you may feel like you threw your money into a bag with holes in it.

These Jews who had returned from captivity in Babylon some sixteen years earlier were told to consider their ways. Life had become a struggle for them. They were having a tough time seeing to their needs and making ends meet. They had sown much and were bringing in little. They were eating, but did not have enough.

This means that they had to be careful not to waste any of their food. They probably had to eat small portions so as to stretch their food out for additional meals. They had drink, but not enough to satisfy their thirst. They had clothing, but not enough to take care of all their needs. It was like throwing their money “into a bag with holes.”

Here we ask: Why were their crops not producing like they should? Why were their wages insufficient to take care of their needs? The answer is that they were not being blessed by God. Why were they not being blessed by God? The answer is that they had sin in their lives and they were not right in the sight of God.

Take note that they were earning “wages to put into a bag with holes.” This means they picked up their earnings and commenced to use them, but it was suddenly all gone! It was as though they had put it into a bag with holes. Furman Kearley commented, “This is what happens when inflation gets a hold of you. You earn wages, but by the time you get home with it, prices have already gone up. So it doesn’t buy what it would have bought upon the time of getting paid. And so economic conditions were bad.”

Even in our own land, here in America, we have been experiencing inflation at a rapid rate. The prices of gasoline and diesel fuel have been jumping up in price daily. The price of heating fuel for our homes has increased dramatically. Buying food for our families, needed medicines and other items that we need to survive have sky-rocketed in price. Why is this happening and why are people suffering from such terrible inflation? Many are working so hard and have little to show for it.

Do you not think that America needs to consider her ways? What about all of us as individual citizens of this country, should not we all consider our ways? Oh, how this country, in so many ways has been going down the wrong road! God, His Son Jesus Christ, and a righteous way of living have been rejected by so many. Ungodliness of all kinds has been embraced by many of our citizens.

What about those of us who are members of the Lord’s church “which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28)? Could it be we have neglected to put God’s house first—we have not put

the Kingdom of God and His righteousness first in our lives, and that we have not done the things we ought to please Him and bring glory to His name? Could that be what is taking place in our lives? Here we remember Jesus told us, But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness . . . in Matthew 6:33.

America, with all her citizens, needs to recognize there is a God (the one and only God) in heaven above and we need to humble ourselves before Him with penitent hearts and a desire to do His will. He sent His Son Jesus for this very reason that we might obey His Gospel to be forgiven of our sins, and thus to look forward to a home in heaven. Jesus said, “. . . Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned” (Mark 16:15-16).

If America, including those of us who are children of God, would only seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteous ways and live therein, we would have His blessings upon us. Furman Kearley stated:

The only reason America has been blessed in these past two to three hundred years is because there has been a history and a tendency on the part of our people and leaders to love God and the truth and holiness and righteousness and exalt Him. But if we continue in our ways of sin, well then we will earn a whole lot, but it will go into a bag with holes and we will sow much but will bring in little and the day will come when starvation will be the lot of many in this land.

How tragic it is for all who reject God and His will. Without God, we cannot survive as a nation. Henceforth, the need for the church is to take the Gospel throughout the world!

Again, we see that it was important for the Jews to consider their ways to recognize that God had been judging them and was also in the process of chastening them. They had been experiencing a famine of sorts, consequently, due to crop failures. They had little money to buy clothing or food. They were receiving God’s discipline as Haggai was bringing to their attention.

In the New Testament, the Hebrews writer tells us, “It is for chastening that ye endure; God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father chasteneth not?” (Heb. 12:7) J. Vernon McGee writes, “When God disciplines us, there is a reason for it. The child of God needs to consider his ways. He needs to examine his own heart to see why God is putting him through the mill or using sandpaper on him” (686).

Next from Haggai 1:7, we see that God repeated the charge to the people to “Consider your ways.” Here we see that God is putting strong and necessary emphasis upon their taking a serious look at their condition and recognizing why it is so. Brodie Crouch commented:

It is obvious they are not prospering because they are negligent and indifferent toward the house of God. It is true they had met opposition, but they have surrendered to the opposition. After sixteen years the temple is still not built and there are still some who insist the time was still not right for the completion of the work. (69-70)

There will always be opposition to the Lord’s work, and if we have been in the Lord’s church for very long, we know this is so. But even wherein this is the case, we must stand strong and continue on with the Lord’s work as we rely on the strength and help with which He aids us. As Christians, we should remember that Jesus promised, “. . . [A]nd lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.”

Furthermore, as we strive to do the Lord’s work, we must not allow ourselves to become discouraged by those of our number who try to talk down our doing the Lord’s will. As to the Jewish people who had long since returned from Babylonian captivity, it seems as they went along with their daily activities, they, like Felix in Acts 24:25, were waiting for some convenient season to do the Lord’s work. It is highly unfortunate, but we too will, many times, find ourselves at a stand-still when it comes to the Lord’s work. So, yes, in many respects, we too need to *consider* our ways.

### **Get on with Building the Temple**

God, through His Prophet Haggai commanded the people, “Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house; and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified, saith Jehovah” (Hag. 1:8).

Prior to this command as J. Vernon McGee points out, “. . . [T]he children of Israel had a conflict of interests. They had put their own houses before God’s house. They were putting their selfish ends ahead of God’s program” (887).

This meant that, in order to obey God’s command, they would need to reverse the order of their priorities. Doing God’s will would now take first priority over any of their own desires. Going up to the mountain and doing all that it took to bring back the wood for the Temple was going to require a lot of hard work. It would also mean that their own interests in their dwelling places would become secondary. Previously, they had put the Lord’s work on hold. Now they would have to put off doing some of their own things for a while.

As we think about members of the Lord’s church today, we know many times, individuals will say, “I have got to do this or that,” when they miss the worship. Others, according to Mark A. Copeland, as they make their excuses, will say, “I will serve the Lord as soon as I finish my schooling . . . get on top of the responsibilities of my job . . . raise my children. In each case, is not the bottom line the same? The Lord’s house lies in ruin while we go about our own way with our own lives” (2).

As we think about this, we would note that Ronnie Hayes has written, “What are you putting first in your life? Money, position, power, family or even self is often put ahead of God (Matthew 10:37-39). If one is going to worship God acceptably, he will put God first in his life” (151).

After God commanded the people to get on with the building of the temple, He further explained that He is the One Who frustrated things for them and told them why. God said, “Ye looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it. Why? saith Jehovah of hosts. Because of my house that lieth waste, while ye run every man to his own house” (Hag. 1:9).

This says they were being chastened by God for their sinful neglect to do His will, or to build His house “that lieth in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house” (Hag. 1:9b ESV). Homer Hailey commented on this verse saying, “Jehovah blew upon what little they were able to harvest and bring in, causing it to disappear like chaff” (305). James Burton Coffman makes this profound statement: “The great impact from this verse is the truth that God will not bless a people determined not to do his will” (193).

God had His prophet say, “Therefore for your sake, [i.e. on account of their sinful neglect] the heavens withhold the dew, and the earth withholdeth its fruit” (Hag. 1:10). Without rain or needed moisture from dew, they harvested very little. J. Vernon McGee phrases it, that God said, “I turned off the spigot; I didn’t give you any water” (889). Clearly, by this time God had gotten their attention!

The prophet Haggai, in 1:11, was very clear about the fact God sent this drought that was causing them so many problems. This verse declares, “And I called for a drought upon the land, and upon the mountains, and upon the grain, and upon the new wine, and upon the oil, and upon that which the ground bringeth forth, and upon men, and upon cattle, and upon all the labor of the hands.” From all indications, this drought affected everything and everyone.

Even today, when drought is experienced in our own land, we are made to wonder about it, and to question, why is this happening? The people in Haggai’s day apparently thought it was just bad luck, or just something that happens every so often, until God revealed to them why it was happening. But, what about us when we experience it? Do we think it is only a natural occurrence? It may be, but again, there may be more to it than that. J. Vernon McGee wrote, “I wonder if God would like to get through to America and say, ‘Look, has it ever occurred to you that I may be behind the problems you are having? Did it ever occur to you that I am trying to get your attention off *things* and onto Me?’” (889).

Again, we are mindful of the effects of inflation and how hurtful it is. We all feel it, as prices have gone up tremendously. Prices

have soared and created a real hardship for many people. We ask, why? Why is this happening? Could it be God is using this as a means to discipline (or to chasten) us as a people? Could it be because people have turned their backs on God and have rejected His will? What about the corruption of morals in this country? Could this have something to do with it? Why, it seems that many people cannot even blush or be embarrassed anymore when they do or say something wrong or sinful. Also, when people see or hear indecent things out of other people it does not seem to bother them much anymore. Even of God’s people in the Old Testament times, it was said:

Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? nay, they were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush: therefore they shall fall among them that fall; at the time that I visit them they shall be cast down, saith Jehovah. Thus saith Jehovah, 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. (Jer. 6:15-16)

What about those of us who are in the Lord’s church? Have *we* been doing God’s will? In many cases it would seem we are giving the appearance we are, but, in some cases, it may be we are not doing nearly what we should be doing.

The Jews who returned from Babylonian captivity were worshiping God too, but they were negligent in the building of God’s house. What about us? Are we spreading the Gospel and experiencing growth in our local congregations? Truth of the matter is, we know we could be doing a lot better than we are. It would seem that, in so many cases, our faith in God and our work in the Kingdom of God is no longer the top priority of our lives. In many localities we are neglecting so much when it comes to maintaining what we have, and when it comes to moving forward in the work of the church. It seems we too need to change or *repent* of our failures and become active in doing the things God’s children should be doing.

Did not the Laodiceans need to repent of their luke-warmness and get busy serving the Lord? (Rev. 3:14ff) Yes, they certainly did! Truth be told, there are a lot of us who need to make serious changes in our Christian lives so we may again get on with doing God's will.

## Conclusion

According to Jesus we need to lay up our treasures in Heaven, rather than just here on Earth "where moth and rust consume, and where thieves break through and steal" (Matt. 6:19-21).

For many who have trusted in riches, and who think only about material things of this life, when all is said and done, the final result will be as though they had put their treasures in *A Bag with Holes!*

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## Biographical Sketch

Larry is the son of Eileen Lemasters and the late Lawrence P. Lemasters. He was born and reared in Brooke County, WV. He married the former Linda Gamble on June 21, 1964. They have two children: Ronnie Lemasters and his wife Ute of Fort Knox, KY, and Lori Camarata and her husband Jeff of Dacula, GA. They are also the grandparents of Britni (19), Chris (14) and Cameron (11) Camarata.

Larry graduated from the Bear Valley School of Preaching in Denver, CO, in 1973. He also attended West Virginia Northern Community College and International Bible School in Florence, AL.

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# The Joy Of The Remnant

Paolo Di Luca

The Word of God is full of wonderful messages that can uplift the inner man looking for consolation and encouragement in times of desperation and discouragement. It is a pure spring from which we can draw, and draw again. And as we draw from it springs the



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indispensable nourishment of everlasting life. The passage in this session of study contains a much needed message not only for the times of the prophet, but also today.

Zephaniah, the prophet of God, has a special message to deliver to a very troubled people in a very troubled time! Assyria was losing power, the Scythians were invading from the north while Babylon was, at that time, the leading Empire. King Manasseh (697-642 BC) had led the people of Judah into a much deeper idolatry than ever before and had favoured the adoption of foreign customs and foreign traditions. King Josiah tried to reverse this trend but died on the battlefield before he could finish the work he intended to do. His successors did not continue in that work of restoration but allowed the people to return to their sinful actions.

Jerusalem, “the holy city,” in those days was not manifesting much holiness at the point that even the Gentiles were calling Jerusalem “the rebellious and wicked city” (Ezra 4:12, 15). Instead of being holy, the city was filthy and polluted from sin. Instead of bringing peace (as its name means) Jerusalem was full of disobedience and wickedness! Even the religious leaders were not living the way of righteousness. So the prophet’s major theme was

the proclamation of the coming of “THE DAY OF THE LORD,” a day in which God will judge all nations and will call every man to be accountable of his own life!

Even if the message was a terrible warning of the future, the text is composed of a beautiful encouragement from the prophet of God (Zeph. 3:14-17) and a comforting promise from the Lord (Zeph. 3:18-20). They both are directed to whom Zephaniah has referred to as the “remnant of Israel” (Zeph. 3:13).

The *remnant* is that which remains of an original body or substance. In reference to God’s people, it indicates those who are faithful to His original truth despite apostasy and opposition. Several Hebrew root-words and their derivations express the idea of a *remnant* (Strong).

- ❖ *yathar*, “that which is left over” (cf. Jer. 39:9; Mic. 5:3; Zeph. 2:8-9).
- ❖ *shâ'ar*, “that which remains,” (cf. Zeph. 1:3-4; 2:7; 3:13; Hag. 1:12, 14).
- ❖ *serach*, “residue” (cf. Ex. 26:12).
- ❖ *peleytah*, “one who escapes” (cf. Ezek. 14:22).
- ❖ *sariyd*, “a survivor” (cf. Isa. 1:9, Joel 2:32).

In the New Testament, *remnant* or *left over* is the equivalent of the Greek root-words and their derivations:

- ❖ *kataleimma* (cf. Rom. 9:27).
- ❖ *leimma* (cf. Rom. 11:5).
- ❖ *loipoi* (cf. Matt. 22:6; Rev. 11:13; 12:17; 19:21).

The prophet Isaiah well expressed the reality of the remnant when he considered: “Unless the Lord of hosts had left to us a very small remnant, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been made like Gomorrah” (1:9). In other words, the remnant is the hope for the future, the possibility of continuation, survivors.

Among people professing religious faith, the remnant is always a relatively small minority, as Paul implied: “Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, the remnant will be saved” (Rom. 9:27).

God's remnant people are well aware that they are saved by grace and not by any merit in themselves. "Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace" (Rom. 11:5). God's remnant has a deep appreciation of His forgiveness and mercy, and therefore enjoys the full benefits of His salvation and truth.

Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in mercy. He will again have compassion on us, and will subdue our iniquities. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will give truth to Jacob and mercy to Abraham, which You have sworn to our fathers from days of old. (Mic. 7:18-20)

The remnant are a people of unshakable integrity, who love truth and are totally honest as affirmed by Zephaniah: "The remnant of Israel shall do no unrighteousness and speak no lies, nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth; For they shall feed their flocks and lie down, and no one shall make them afraid" (3:13). Although Satan deceives the whole world, he does not succeed in deluding the remnant, for they are loyal to God. They keep the commandments and have the testimony of Jesus. "And the dragon was enraged with the woman and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Rev. 12:17).

The remnant has a world-wide evangelistic influence that is expressed in preparation of the Judgement Day. According to Joel:

The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord. And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be deliverance, as the Lord has said, among the remnant whom the Lord calls. (2:31-32)

Zephaniah 3:14-20 is the conclusion of the book and provides a message of hope and comfort. There are at least three reasons for this:

- (1) The message of hope is a great stimulus to obedience. Those were difficult times and the remnant needed all the encouragement possible to continue to submit themselves to God's Will and to His commandments.
- (2) The message of hope shows the faithfulness of God. The remnant needed to be reassured of the truth that God keeps His promises and that the blessings promised will arrive at the appropriate time.
- (3) The message of hope comforts and alleviates all the sufferings that are faced because of the devotion of the remnant to God.

The remnant does not have many human reasons to rejoice and to celebrate, but has completely different motivation. Any man can sing when his cup is full of delights, but the remnant alone has songs when the cup is bitter and discouraging. The children of God have the certainty of the victory and that is the reason why they must sing and rejoice. The Lord is with the remnant. He is in the middle of them. He is protecting them!

Surely it is difficult to belong to the remnant who stands true to the Lord and to His Word no matter what others may do or say. The ability to persist in the faithful walk with the Lord is enabled by the knowledge that one day God will defeat all His enemies and will reign in righteousness. That is why in verse 14 we read of a threefold exhortation for the remnant to sing, shout, and be glad and rejoice with all our heart. They must rejoice not because they are perfect, but because of the special relationship they maintain with God who takes away the condemnation of their sins! The remnant is not afraid. They trust in the affirmations of God to be there for them and to help them out even if the enemy is stronger and bigger in number.

Charles H. Spurgeon, preaching about this trust, brought these considerations:

Splendid was the courage of Alexander when they told him that there were hundreds of thousands of Persians. “Yet,” he said, “one butcher fears not myriads of sheep.” “Ah!” said another, “when the Persians draw their bows, their arrows are so numerous that they darken the sun.” “It will be fine to fight in the shade,” cried the hero. . . . When Athanasius was told that everybody was denying the Deity of Christ, then he said, “I Anthanasius, against the world”: *Athanasius contra mundum* became a proverbial expression. (A Sermon for the Time Present)

The joy of the remnant comes from the realization that the Lord is in their midst and He is the one fighting for them, as it happened at the time of King Jehoshaphat, when Jahaziel, the son of Zechariah, received from the Spirit of God this encouraging message:

. . . Listen, all you of Judah and you inhabitants of Jerusalem, and you, King Jehoshaphat! Thus says the Lord to you: “Do not be afraid nor dismayed because of this great multitude, for the battle is not yours, but God’s. Tomorrow go down against them. They will surely come up by the Ascent of Ziz, and you will find them at the end of the brook before the Wilderness of Jeruel. You will not need to fight in this battle. Position yourselves, stand still and see the salvation of the Lord, who is with you, O Judah and Jerusalem!” Do not fear or be dismayed; tomorrow go out against them, for the Lord is with you.” (2 Chron. 20:15-17)

John Gill commented, “The congregation of Zion, as the Targum; the church of Christ in Gospel times, which has great reason to sing and rejoice, because of the coming of Christ, redemption by him, and all other benefits and blessings of grace; because of the Gospel, and the ordinances of it, and the numbers of souls

converted, both among Jews and Gentiles. . . .” Even if Jerusalem was a “rebellious” and “wicked” city, composed of sinful people (Zeph. 3:1-2) and godless leaders (Zeph. 3:3-4), God is still righteous (Zeph. 3:5-8) and is still trying to correct His people, but they do not want to listen or obey to Him. So the message is directed now to the remnant, to those who listen and obey! The remnant will not be ashamed because their sins have been removed in that special day in which they became part of that small group of faithful! Their deep repentance and their honest confession of faith brought them to salvation, and they have all reasons to rejoice and to live their obedience to God with joy.

The people of God sing and shout because of what God has done for them and because of all the blessings they enjoy in their special relationship with their heavenly Father (Eph. 1:3). God has taken away the punishment they deserve, has defeated all of their (and His) enemies, and He Himself is willing to dwell with them and in them.

So they have plenty of reasons to sing. What can be more important than enjoying the presence of God? There is no greater reason of joy than to have your Lord and Creator with you. With the coming of Jesus, the remnant is able to enjoy this reality even more. Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the prophesy of Isaiah (7:14) that is mentioned also by Matthew: “Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel, which is translated, ‘God with us’” (1:23). Since that wonderful night in which that baby was born at Bethlehem, we have been blessed with the incarnation of the Logos. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Even if His physical body is gone, the remnant is still enjoying His spiritual presence, as He promised: “. . . [A]nd lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (Matt. 18:20). Surely the remnant of the Lord has reason to rejoice and to shout their joy in God. But not only He is there, He is active in using His power toward them! Verse 17 holds four beautiful and comforting images of God’s actions in favor of the remnant:

- (1) He ***“will save.”***
- (2) He ***“will rejoice over”*** the faithful ***“with gladness.”***
- (3) As a loving mother, ***“He will quiet”*** them ***“with His love.”***
- (4) As a proud father, ***“He will rejoice over”*** them ***“with singing.”***

***“The Lord your God that in your midst . . . will save”*** (v. 17, emp. added). Yes, He is so mighty that He has the power and the will to save the remnant. His arm is not shortened. His power is not weakened. He is still “a just God and a Savior” (Isa. 45:21).

***“The Lord your God that in your midst . . . will rejoice over you with gladness”*** (v. 17, emp. added). What encouraging truth for the remnant! Jehovah, the living God, is described as being proud of His church with pleasure. He looks upon the souls of the redeemed and His heart is glad. The infinite heart of God is filled with joy at the sight of the remnant. His delight is in the church of His Son. ***“The Lord takes pleasure in those who fear Him, in those who hope in His mercy”*** (Ps. 147:11).

***“The Lord your God that in your midst . . . will quiet you with His love”*** (v. 17, emp. added). There is nothing that the soul of man searches more for than this: to find rest! The remnant finds the well deserved rest in God! They know that “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Philip. 4:7). The image expressed here is one of a mother that comforts a crying child (that is bothered by something that makes him suffer). Her loving actions, voice and touch, calm the crying infant so he can relax and he become silent while enjoying her love. The happiness of the remnant in God’s love is so great. There are no human words to truly and completely express it. No language can express the joy of God in His love and, therefore, He uses no words. Silence in this case is infinitely expressive.

***“The Lord your God that in your midst . . . will rejoice over you with singing”*** (v. 17, emp. added). We often talk about God as the One Who wants the salvation of our souls, Who is pleased in our obedience, and Who gives comfort and consolation to the needy!

But here we have another image of our Lord that we seldom highlight: our God is a SINGING GOD! Singing is the natural external manifestation of the internal state of joy and happiness. Our Father in heaven sings over the faithful remnant! These are important reasons for the remnant to rejoice and to live with joy their walk on this earth.

Beginning at verse 18, we read of the actions God will take to deal with the rebellious and also what He is going to do for the remnant. Among them are those grieved and troubled because they cannot meet at the appointed time and place of religious worship. They are afflicted because they are unable to have the freedoms and opportunity that is ours today (things we often take for granted). But on that glorious day, the Day of the Lord, He will bring all the remnant together! The Lord will, in His own due time and way, gather out of all places His people to join in eternal worship in His own house.

That is not all. The word “behold” in verse 19 calls attention to a very exciting event: God will take care also of the enemies of His own remnant. How terrible, and how wonderful, will be that day of retribution!

It is interesting to note that the Word of God has only one horrifying expression for those who afflict the remnant: “I WILL DEAL.” Instead how sweet and comforting are the images presented for the remnant: There will be healing for the lame; The Lord promised He would take care of such; Save them from all their sins and out of the hands of all their enemies; Bring them through all difficulties and discouragements. Being truly converted, they will be spoken of well everywhere and by everyone, and so they will be praised for their acknowledgment of their sins; for their sincere repentance; for their faith in Christ and for their ready submission to His Gospel. The fame of their conversion will be manifest and they will have glory and honour in all heavenly places even if not on the earth.

Then we have the closing of the message at verse 20 where we read the final promise. The Lord will gather the remnant, from wherever they are and allow them to return to their own land, gathered together in one body!

From our study we can clearly see the analogy of the Lord's church and with the promise of the house of the Father. The faithful Christians are the blessed remnant who are enjoying and will enjoy all the blessings of the prophecy of Zephaniah. The final joy of the remnant is given by the relationship with the Saviour, by the faithful obedience to the Will of God that will ensure the access to the blessed eternal home in heaven!

The concept of joy is prominent in the Gospels:

- ❖ The birth of Jesus is anticipated with joy as we can see in Mary's song (Luke 1:46-55).
- ❖ The wise men "rejoiced with exceedingly great joy" when they saw the star (Matt. 2:10).
- ❖ The message of the angels to the shepherds was one of "great joy" (Luke 2:10).
- ❖ Finding the treasure hidden in the field brings "joy" (Matt. 13:44).
- ❖ The conversion of a sinner brings great joy (the lost sheep - Matt. 18:13; the lost coin - Luke 15:8; the lost son - Luke 15:23, 24, 29, 32).
- ❖ The appearance of the risen Jesus brings joy (Matt. 28:8-9).
- ❖ Paul encourages us to have joy "in God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:11).
- ❖ Peter talks about being "glad with exceeding joy" when we "partake of Christ's sufferings" (1 Peter 4:13).
- ❖ John reports the joy of those who die faithful to the Lord (Rev. 14:13).

The remnant of God has only good reasons to have joy!

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#### Biographical Sketch

Paolo was born in Milan, Italy, and was raised in Ferrara, Italy. He is married to the former Cindy Inman, daughter of the late Clifton, a well-known Ohio Valley preacher for over 50 years, and Pauline Inman.

Paolo's education and training have come from various courses of study in Italy and the United States, and from working with his father Gilberto (who preached the Gospel for 50 years in Italy) and other missionaries in Italy.

He preached for various congregations in Italy from 1983 to 2006, at which time he and Cindy decided to move to the United States. Paolo began working with the Bridge Street congregation on June 4, 2007.

In addition to pulpit preaching and personal evangelism, Paolo has also prepared and recorded radio programs, participated in public debates, directed Bible camps for children and teenagers, worked (in Italy) with campaign groups from the United States, and participated in numerous other evangelical activities. He also has been co-editor for various monthly papers, published both on paper and on the Internet, and has maintained two web sites.

Paolo and Cindy have one son, Marco, a student at Freed-Hardeman University.

# *The Corrupted Priesthood*

*Steve Stevens*

And now, O ye priests, this commandment is for you. If ye will not hear, and if ye will not lay it to heart, to give glory unto my name, saith the LORD of hosts, I will even send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings: yea, I have



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cursed them already, because ye do not lay it to heart. Behold, I will corrupt your seed, and spread dung upon your faces, even the dung of your solemn feasts; and one shall take you away with it. And ye shall know that I have sent this commandment unto you, that my covenant might be with Levi, saith the LORD of hosts. My covenant was with him of life and peace; and I gave them to him for the fear wherewith he feared me, and was afraid before my name. The law of truth was in his mouth, and iniquity was not found in his lips he walked with me in peace and equity, and did turn many away from iniquity. For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. But ye are departed out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble at the law; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith the LORD of hosts. Therefore have I also made you contemptible and base before all the people, according as ye have not kept my ways, but have been partial in the law. (Mal. 2:1-9)

The exiles had been back in Judea from Babylonian captivity for over one hundred years. That is a considerable amount of time to instruct people in the Word of God and for improvements to be made in matters of spiritual life and worship. The sad truth, however, is that instead of getting better over this course of time Israel and in particular the priests had become worse. Malachi reveals several shortcomings concerning the priests who were to lead the worship of the Lord of hosts.

- ❖ “A son honoureth his father, and a servant his master: if then I be a father, where is mine honour? and if I be a master, where is my fear? saith the LORD of hosts unto you, O priests, **that despise my name**. And ye say, Wherein have we despised thy name?” (1:6, emp. added).
- ❖ “Ye **offer polluted bread** upon mine altar; and ye say, Wherein have we polluted thee? In that ye say, The table of the LORD is contemptible” (1:7, emp. added).
- ❖ “And if ye **offer the blind for sacrifice**, is it not evil? and if **ye offer the lame and sick**, is it not evil? offer it now unto thy governor; will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person? saith the LORD of hosts” (1:8, emp. added).
- ❖ “But **ye have profaned it**, in that ye say, The table of the LORD is polluted; and the fruit thereof, even his meat, is contemptible” (1:12, emp. added).
- ❖ “But cursed be the deceiver, which hath in his flock a male, and **voweth, and sacrificeth unto the Lord a corrupt thing**: for I am a great King, saith the LORD of hosts, and my name is dreadful among the heathen” (1:14, emp. added).

The priests despised the name of God. They offered polluted sacrifices upon His altar. Specifically, they sacrificed blind, lame, sick, and torn (v. 13) animals to God to pay their vows. They complained of the weariness of serving and worshipping God

instead of appreciating the privileges God had given them. They accepted and approved of the deceiver who offered a corrupt thing as a sacrifice to God. When one's view of God and the things of God become distorted, twisted, and perverted that erroneous belief leads to an improper attitude concerning who God is and what He desires. The result is a corruption of the service to and the worship of the true and living God of heaven.

The lack of respect for the authority of God and His Word produce ill-fated compromises that serve as the root of much trouble among God's people and the world in general. The consequence of such corruption is that God himself declares, ". . . I have no pleasure in you . . . neither will I accept an offering at your hand" (Mal. 1:10). It is impossible to please God and therefore one's worship is rejected. Our study of this theme will be divided into three parts. First, **the commandment** of God concerning the priests (vv. 1-4); secondly, **the covenant** the priests no longer kept (vv. 5-7); and thirdly, **the corrupted** priests and how they became so (vv. 8-9).

The commandment of verses 1-4 does not refer to a commission or instruction to the priests. It refers to what the Lord has resolved to bring upon them as punishment if they do not heed the warnings given in chapter one verses 6-13. God sets forth the conditions for them to correct these matters.

First of all, the Lord declares *hear* what I have said. It is an age old human problem. We do not want to hear God's Word. Yet, hearing the Word of God is fundamental to pleasing Him. "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). "But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him" (Heb. 11:6). A God pleasing act of service or worship must be based upon what God's Word teaches and our hearing of that truth and obeying of it.

Secondly, they must "lay it to heart." The priests must "put or place" (Cohen 872) God's will into their heart. The desire to obey God and the effort to do His Will can only come from within. No one can do it for you. The Psalmist David had long ago written the preventive formula for this type of corruption: "Wherewithal shall

a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word. . . . Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee" (Ps. 119:9, 11).

The Lord clearly sets forth the punishment that awaited the priests if they did not change. God would "curse" their "blessings" and, in actuality, already had cursed them. The expositors are divided as to what these blessings have reference. Some contend that it is the blessings God gave them concerning their revenues, tithes, and atonement money. Others contend they refer to the blessings pronounced by the priests upon the people of Israel. Contextually, it seems all blessings would be included without the necessity of trying to categorize them into mutually exclusive packages.

Furthermore, God states, "I will corrupt your seed." The word *corrupt* here refers to a rebuke, a chiding by the Lord. It is "a check applied to people through strong admonitions or actions" (Stiners 170). What does the text mean by seed? Again, the commentators are divided into three major camps. One group contends it refers to the seed which was planted in the ground. Thereby God would eliminate the harvest and the priests would receive 10% of nothing. A second group views *seed* as the offspring of these priests. They contend God did not want this generation of corrupt priests rearing a new generation of disobedient children to serve God and would therefore prevent them from having children. The third group uses a textual variant that repoints the Hebrew word *seed* to mean *arm*. They claim that since the priests raised their arm to bless the people of Israel this would complete the picture of God making the blessings of the priests over the people into curses.

Moses delivered very similar words to the entire nation of Israel:

Cursed shall be the fruit of thy body, and the fruit of thy land, the increase of thy kine, and the flocks of thy sheep. Cursed shalt thou be when thou comest in, and cursed shalt thou be when thou goest out. The LORD shall send upon thee cursing, vexation, and rebuke, in all that thou settest

thine hand unto for to do, until thou be destroyed, and until thou perish quickly; because of the wickedness of thy doings, whereby thou hast forsaken me. (Deut. 28:18-20)

The curse in Deuteronomy obviously covers both meanings of the word *seed* and includes both the “fruit of the body” and the “fruit of thy land.” The context of Malachi 2:2 certainly will allow either. The word *seed* itself is ambiguous allowing both meanings. Since either is possible and both are defensible, why not allow the curse to cover both? It is certainly in harmony with the parallel curse issued by Moses prior to the conquest of the land of Canaan. There is no need to change the word by repointing the Hebrew and make it mean arm.

Finally, if the priests did not obey the Lord He would “spread dung” on their faces. The prophet uses a powerful figure that represents dishonorable and shameful treatment of the priests resulting in their uncleanness and removal from serving before God and Israel. What a vivid portrayal of how God perceives our dishonoring and shameful treatment of Him. The purpose of God’s people has always been to bring glory to Him. When our worship of Him and service to Him are less than what He requires of us then we deserve to be abased, shamed, and humiliated ourselves.

The covenant between God and the Levitical priesthood was originally made for life and peace. The priests were so honored because they feared God and trembled before His name. The term ‘fear’ has five general categories of Biblical usage. (1) Emotion of fear; (2) the intellectual anticipation of evil without emphasis upon the emotional reaction; (3) Reverence or awe; (4) righteous behavior or piety; and (5) formal religious worship (Bowling 399-401). As a youth I clearly remember the adults around me referring to good Christian men and women as God-fearing men and women. This description is seldom heard among us today. God has always needed God-fearing men and women, and boys and girls. The God-fearer implements his “fear” (reverence; awe) in practical righteousness (right behavior; worship of God). The God-fearer avoids evil (Job 1:1), and walks in the ways of the Lord (Ps. 128:1). The priesthood initially feared the name of the Lord.

Malachi declares they now “despise” it (1:6). When we lose our sense of reverence and awe for God, and the things of God, it impacts our righteous behavior and worship of God.

The “law of truth” was in the mouth of the priest. Iniquity could not be found in his lips. The priests were to be the messengers of the Lord of hosts. This puts them in some exclusive company. The Scriptures refer to the angels as messengers of the Lord as well as the prophets as His messengers.

The priesthood was to “keep knowledge.” The word *keep* means to “exercise great care over; to express the careful attention to be paid to the obligations of a covenant, law, or statute” (Hartley 939). Strong defines it as “to hedge about (as with thorns)” (541). God put in place the system to deliver truth to His people. The priests were to serve as the **protectors** of the truth of God and then as the **proclaimers** of the Word of God to Israel. What an important lesson for us today. We must protect the truth of God. We need to be sure it is pure, and that it has nothing added to it or nothing taken from it. No substitutions or compromises are acceptable. God’s Word must remain as the incorruptible seed (1 Peter 1:23). However, just to protect it and keep it safe is not enough. Seed is meant to do something besides lay dormant in storage. It must be sown into the medium it was intended to grow. Thus, protection is but a part of the responsibility. We must also proclaim the word to a lost and dying world. Sow it into the hearts of men. Certainly, there are various types of hearts. Some will reject the word, others will contend with the word, and a few good and honest hearts will bear fruit. Our responsibilities involve both the protection and proclamation of the truth of God.

The priest was also to be a participant by walking with God according to the truth. By his example and teaching he would turn many away from iniquity. What a great privilege and honor had been entrusted to the priesthood. What was required of those so entrusted? That they fear God, live for God as an example to others, and that they speak the Word of God to Israel. How tragic that they lost sight of their privileges from God and responsibilities to God. Why did they allow their hearts and lives to become so **corrupted**? How could such a thing take place?

First, they “departed out of the way.” They left the “way of the righteous” (Ps. 1:6), the “way of truth” (Ps. 119:30), the “way of the Lord” (Prov. 10:29), the “way of holiness” (Isa. 35:8), and entered “a way which seemeth right” (Prov. 14:12) the end of which are the ways of death. The verb ‘departed’ means to “turn aside, defection” (Patterson 621). God admonished Joshua as he assumed the leadership of Israel, “. . . [D]o according to all the law, which Moses my servant commanded thee: turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that thou mayest prosper whithersoever thou goest” (Josh. 1:7). The priests of Malachi’s day turned away from the law of Moses.

Not only did they personally depart from the old paths, but they also caused many to stumble at the law. This is a rare usage of the word *stumble* in the Old Testament Scriptures. Usually it refers to the physical act of falling down, however, here it has the sense of “to cause one to fall into sin” (Harris 457). The priests were refusing to live according to the law of Moses personally, they were failing to teach the truth of God’s Word to Israel, and they were accepting sacrifices to offer in worship to God that were inferior to the standards of God’s Word. The result was the corrupting of their own lives, the lives of the nation of Israel, and the worship of the God of heaven.

They corrupted the covenant of Levi. In Exodus 29 God cleansed, consecrated, and sanctified Aaron and his sons to minister unto Him in the office of the priest. In Numbers 25:1-13 he made a covenant of peace with Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, because “he was zealous for my sake among” Israel. This hallowed covenant with the priesthood had been corrupted. The word *corrupted* means “to destroy” and most often in the Old Testament makes its object God’s own covenant people and their possessions (Hamilton 917). Think of a computer file that somehow becomes corrupted. The majority of the file is there intact. However, the fragment of that file that is corrupted destroys the usefulness of the entire file. Until it is fully restored the whole file is worthless!

The conclusion of all these matters resulted in God making these corrupted priests *contemptible* and *base* before all the people. The

priests were even “partial in the law.” Literally this means “to raise the face” of another to show favoritism (727). This respect of persons was expressly forbidden by the law (Lev. 19:15). The priests wanted to be popular and well liked by all the people. To accomplish this they twisted the law of God, lowered the standards required by the law for sacrifices, and encouraged the people to practice an easy and cheap religion. The irony of it all is that Israel lacked respect for these corrupted leaders. Character and integrity are most desirable qualities in God’s people, especially their leaders.

The root of this problem is in their concept of God. If our idea of God is so low that we think He is pleased with a cheap, watered-down, half-hearted worship, then we do not know the God of the Bible. Any god who would require certain things of us and then allow anything less than our best at what he has demanded is not a god at all. Certainly, he is not worthy of worship.

The corrupted priesthood of Malachi’s time teaches us some much needed lessons for our time. Spiritual corruption is contagious and will spread far and wide no matter what its source. Its effects will continue into future generations in time and have consequences in matters of eternity. Yet, it all begins quietly within the deepest recesses of one’s heart where it festers and grows. After consuming the host it moves by influence and teaching to consume others. Its advances must be stopped from within as well as without.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

Steve Stevens is a native of West Virginia. He was baptized by his father, Earl Stevens, at the Dewey Avenue Church of Christ in St. Marys, WV, on January 22, 1967. He preached his first sermon at the Daybrook Church of Christ on June 25, 1964, at the age of nine. He began preaching on a regular basis, holding gospel meetings, and directing Vacation Bible Schools in June of 1970. He served as minister for Norway Church of Christ outside of Fairmont, WV, from 1975 to April 1, 1981. On April 1, 1981, he began his work as preacher with Hundred Church of Christ where he still serves presently. He is married to the former Karen Barnhart of New Freeport, PA, and they have been blessed with eight children. Steve was one of the eight charter faculty members for West Virginia School of Preaching from 1994 to June of 2000. After a five year recess he resumed teaching New Testament Greek in August of 2005.

# *Will A Man Rob God?*

*Denver E. Cooper*

I am sure that those who have respect for God will immediately reply, “Of course not! Who would even think of robbing God?” We usually think of someone with a gun, a knife, or some object holding up a shop owner or store keeper and taking all he can get



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from him. Of course, it would not be possible for a human to hold God, a spirit, at gun point and steal anything He has. Then would it even be possible to rob Him? Well, God says it would be possible. In Malachi 3:8-9, God says, “Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me! But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation.” Do you suppose you ought to change your minds? I am reasonably certain those ancient people changed their minds.

Ten times Malachi shows the people interrupting God with an objection by using the phrases: “ye say,” “yet ye say” four times, “and ye say” twice, “but ye say twice,” “in that ye say once, and “ye say also” once. Malachi appeals to God as his source of information twenty-five times, and “saith Jehovah the God of Israel” once.

Indifference to both the moral and ceremonial aspects of the divine law now characterized the people of God. They had been back from Babylon for over a hundred years; But instead of becoming better they had become worse. God had always made His blessings conditional. Do what is right, and I will bless you.

Fail to do what is right, and I will not bless you was what God had promised. The fact of the case is that the people had failed to do what God said do, but they could not understand why God had turned against them. God had done all He could. He had chastised them by the captivity. He had brought back a remnant and had settled them in their land. He had graciously forgiven their sins and shown His ability and disposition to keep His glorious promises to them. There was no more He could do until the coming of the Messiah. Is it possible the church today could be so indifferent morally and religiously?

While we are reasonably certain no one would rob the church of anything, we ought to be aware that it is not impossible. I have known a deacon in years gone by who was caught by the overseers of a congregation with a pretty large sum of money in his coat pocket which he had just taken from the contribution basket he was passing to the audience. By the number of years he had been a deacon the elders determined he had robbed God of several thousand dollars.

In yet another instance a treasurer had removed from the treasury several thousand dollars which belonged to the Federal Government that should have been paid by the treasurer for the income tax of the preacher. These brethren were kind-hearted and forgiving in that they did not level charges.

Another case came to my mind in which the treasurer and his wife walked off with the whole treasury of a rather new congregation. The amount was about \$9,000. How would you like to stand before the Lord in the Day of Judgment having such to your account? How in the world would one be able to face the Lord?

Well, we might just want to know how, and if, we can rob God today. The ancient people of God had robbed Him of money. They apparently did not give to Him as their law demanded. God called this robbery (Mal. 3:8-9). In Acts five, we have the story of Ananias and Sapphira. They possibly had witnessed the contribution which had been made by Barnabas, a man of good character and reputation, along with other Christians, who sold their land and brought the price and laid it at the apostle’s feet. I do

not know what was said to encourage the Christians to do as they did, but, evidently they were encouraged to give to help those who were in need. Thousands had come to Jerusalem for the Passover and for whatever reason would either be delayed or not ever able to return to their homes. There was a couple present who also decided to sell a possession. They agreed between themselves to hold back part of the price. Perhaps they got to thinking they needed repairs to their house or needed some new clothes or maybe even thought of buying a new chariot. I do not know what they had in their hearts, but whatever it was it indicated they were covetous. They loved the money they received from the possession. Peter asked Ananias,

Why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land? While it remained, was it not thine own? And after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? Why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? Thou hast not lied unto man but unto God. And Ananias hearing these words fell down, and gave up the ghost: and great fear came on all them that heard these things. And the young men arose, wound him up and carried him out and buried him. (Acts 5:3-6)

How would you respond if such a tragedy occurred today? I wonder how many would learn only too late they should have been a little more careful in purposing to give to the Lord?

But that is not the end of the story.

And it was about the space of three hours after, when his wife, not knowing what was done, came in. And Peter answered unto her, Tell me whether ye sold the land for so much? And she said, Yea, for so much. Then Peter said unto her, How is it that ye have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of them which have buried thy husband are at the door and shall carry thee out. Then fell she down straightway at his feet, and yielded up the ghost: and the young men came in, and found her dead

and carrying her forth, buried her by her husband. And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things. (Acts 5:7-11)

It is interesting to note that Peter gave Sapphira the opportunity to repent of this sin. She could have said, "I tried to tell Ananias that he should not try this conspiracy, but he would not listen." But she did not. Do you wonder how so much time passed between the two deaths and that no one got to her to inform her of the husband's death? Did Peter give a warning to the crowd that they should be quiet? I do not know. However, we should learn from this that we cannot lie to God about our contribution or anything else and He not know about it.

The church gained respect from those out of the church, as well as from those who were members of the church, when they saw the practice of such corrective discipline passed on the church. Brethren, church discipline will work today if we will put it to practice.

Does it not make you sad when you hear a preacher telling people they are saved when he has told them something that came only from the lips of some man and not from God? I heard a preacher just recently who told the audience of several thousand they did not need to do one thing in order to be saved. God had done it all. He took special pains to inform them they did not need to be baptized. Many are they who are robbing God by wearing human names as religious designations. Of course, if one has not obeyed the Gospel he is not a Christian. He has no right therefore to wear the name Christian. If one wears the name not having been obedient to the divine plan of salvation he is robbing God. The name Christian is used three times in the New Testament. I believe God gave the name Christian to disciples at Antioch, because "the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch." Isaiah had declared, "And the Gentiles shall see thy righteousness, and all kings thy glory; and thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord shall name" (Isa. 62:2). Peter says, "But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters. Yet if any man

suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this behalf” (1 Peter 4:15-16). When the apostle Paul was preaching to Agrippa he asked, “King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest. Then Agrippa said unto Paul, almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian. And Paul said, I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds” (Acts 26:27-29). We should not rob God by being called by any name except that which gives honor to Jesus Christ.

I often run into people who attempt to give me honor by calling me by various religious titles. *Reverend* and *Pastor* are the two most frequent ones used. I worked with a funeral director who insisted on calling me brother. I was not his brother, but he was determined that if he could not call me Reverend or some other title he had to call me brother. All such titles are out of order. No man was ever called by any of the above titles in the New Testament. The preacher is often referred to as minister or evangelist but is never called Reverend. The title Reverend belongs only to God. In Psalm 111:9 we have these words: “Holy and reverend is his name.” God’s name is “holy and reverend” but man’s is neither. And then again some so-called religious teachers take the name of “Father.” Jesus knew this would come to pass, so we hear Him saying, “and call no man your father upon the earth for one is your Father, which is in Heaven” (Matt. 23:9). To take a title which belongs to God is cheating God. It is robbing Him. It is disobeying the command of God. Let us not be guilty of cheating the Father of His honor by using the titles which are devised of men.

The heart is a very valuable instrument when used in the service of God. Ancient people were admonished, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself” (Luke 10:27). When our attention is divided with the world and we attempt to serve God at the same time, we are robbing God of our hearts. This is often evidenced when we assemble for worship. What have we determined to do when we get to the meeting house? Is it just a place where we renew friendships? Perhaps compare the

purchase of new clothing during the past week? Or perhaps we are making arrangements for an outing with some of our best friends. Often my wife and I, as we travel, notice great crowds of people at the various ball fields along the way. Whether they include Christians I do not know, but certainly the folks who are assembled have no intention of getting to a place of religious assembly. They are robbing God of the first day of the week. It should be the case that Christians have made preparation for worshiping God far in advance of getting to the meeting house. Often I see a bumper sticker which says, “Oh, for Friday night.” I am reasonably sure those in the car have their hearts set on something other than worship on Sunday. Too many are too much in love with the sinful things of the world. John says,

Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof, but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever. (1 John 2:15-17)

There are several things we may ask ourselves to determine if we are in love with the world. (1) Does the thing in which I am about to engage cause me to delay doing what I need to do for the Lord? A brother came in my office just a few days ago exclaiming that he knew he should have visited someone who was ill, but he delayed it because he had a personal matter he preferred to do. He thought he had robbed God of a good work. (2) Does it bother my conscience to engage in the practice? If it does you may be robbing God of your heart. (3) Does it create within me a fleshly appetite that is carnal and may lead me to forsake the Lord? If it does, I may be robbing God.

We must be careful. James indicated that sin is progressive. It often starts out as a very small rather insignificant matter, but results in a great problem. James says:

Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God; for God cannot be tempted with evil neither tempteth he any any man. But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lusts, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death. (1:13-15).

We may use our bodies in such a way as to rob God. After hearing so much information regarding the misuse of drugs, it seems to me impossible that any person, especially a young person could be persuaded to take into his body that which might destroy it. The use of alcohol and the harm it does to the human body, to say nothing of the damage it does to the lives of innocent people is unthinkable. Most of us preachers have conducted the funeral services of those who have been killed by a drunk driver. Several years ago I had opportunity to speak to a young lady who was about to be married. She needed to obey the Gospel. While I was talking to her the mother stepped over and said to me, "Now don't persuade her to obey the Gospel because there are things she is wanting to do which she can't do if she is a Christian." Mother was helping her to rob God of her heart. The young lady was traveling to get her wedding gown on Tuesday following, with her fiancé, when they were hit head on by a drunken driver. She lost her life, *out* of Christ. She robbed God of her body and soul.

Recreational drugs are robbing God of many bodies. Young and old are killing themselves either accidentally or intentionally by the use of drugs. In our area, small babies have been found dead who had been given large amounts of drugs. Mothers often fill their bodies with dope of all kinds without any regard for the safety of the small baby within them. It is not infrequent that one learns of a mother or father who, because of intoxicants or drugs, has thrown the little baby against the wall or on the floor and killed it. He is robbing God of the bodies and souls of those who are destroyed. We must remember that, "We are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Cor. 6:20). The Roman brethren received these words from the apostle Paul. "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the

mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service" (Rom. 12:1).

Joseph was a young man who must have learned his lesson very early in life. When the wife of Potiphar did all that she could day-after-day to seduce young Joseph, he refused her invitations. Of Joseph it is said, "But he refused, and said unto his master's wife, behold, my master wotteth not what is with me in the house, and he hath committed all that he hath to my hand; There is none greater in the house than I, neither hath he kept back any thing from me but thee, because thou art his wife, how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Gen. 39:8-9). Joseph believed the sin of adultery would have robbed God. It is too bad so many in our day and age do not see it that way. Some advocate cheating on one's companion as a means of improving the marriage relationship. Yet Paul declares, nevertheless to avoid fornication, "let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband" (1 Cor. 7:2). It certainly sounds as if the Lord does not believe that cheating improves marital relationships. In some cases older people who are receiving government checks are leaving the church to be with each other because if they marry they will lose their pension money. I believe they are robbing God of their bodies. The philosophy of the people of Malachi's time robbed God. Malachi said, "Ye have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet ye say, Wherein have we wearied Him? When ye say, every one that doeth evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delighteth in them, or, Where is the God of judgment?" (Mal. 2:12). Is it not strange they could not see the evil in their ways? That reminds me of the church at Laodicea. Jesus told those Christians, "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would that thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth. Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing, and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked" (Rev. 3:15-18). Might it be a good thing for one to ask of this church? If Jesus were to come to us for a visit would he find a similar condition? Are we satisfied with our present condition? Are we robbing God?

Another gift from God to each of us is our time. How do we use it? Often most of it is wasted. We all have 168 hours to deal with every week. Is it too much to ask that four or five hours be used assembling with the saints of God to worship Him? “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another; and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching” (Heb. 10:25). A brother in Christ just informed me how discouraged he was because most of the members did not show up on Sunday evening. They had 39 on Sunday morning and 9 on Sunday night. Did they rob God of their time? Some churches have a reasonably large audience on Sunday morning, only to be disappointed on Sunday evening or Wednesday when only about 50% of the morning service is present. Are we obeying God? I expect many are not. Moses tells us in Psalm 90:12, “So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.” How time does fly. It has been said that time is the stuff life is made of. The older we get the more we realize the truth of it. Benjamin Franklin said “if time be of all things the most precious, the wasting of time is the greatest prodigality.” When I was a boy I thought of and counted the years that I might have remaining upon this earth. Now that I am older, I think in terms of how many days yet remain of my life. Dear hearer, if you knew you had one hundred days yet remaining of your life, how would you like to spend them? Yet, not one of us knows just how many days are ahead for us. Do you allow personal things and trivial matters to take you away from that which the Lord expects? Remember the Lord said, “I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day. The night cometh, when no man can work” (John 9:4). Do not forget that Laodicea had a warning which reminded them they thought too much of themselves. Matthew records:

When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: And he shall set the

sheep on the right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto those on his right hand, Come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord when saw we thee an hungered, and fed thee? Or thirsty and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? Or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren ye have done it unto me. Then shall he also say unto them on the left hand, Depart from me ye cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was an hungered and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not; sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not. Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord when saw we thee an hungered, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison and did not minister unto thee? Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal. (Matt. 25:31-46)

It is important Christians worship God in the manner He has prescribed. There are four kinds of worship described in the New Testament. The apostle Paul found the Athenians worshiping God ignorantly. With all the idols created by them, there was one whom they did not know. Paul declared, “For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription; To the Unknown God: Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship him declare

I unto you” (Acts 17:23). Jesus said, “But in vain ye do worship me; teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (Matt. 15:9). Paul describes yet another type of worship in Colossians 2:23, when he says, “Which things have indeed a show of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honor to the satisfying of the flesh.” Then Jesus describes the worship He desires when he says, “God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him” (John 4:23). Hence, we see there are four kinds of worship described in the New Testament, only one of which is acceptable to God. True worship consists of singing, praying, the Lord’s Supper, giving, and preaching the doctrine of our Lord Jesus Christ. The five acts, and only these five, may be engaged in if we please God.

Still another way in which we often rob God is by our influence. Every Christian has an influence. It is either good or bad. The apostle Paul warns us, “Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners” (1 Cor. 15:33). Much as we would like for it to be the other way around, that is that good companionships influence one always to do right, it is often just the opposite. Jesus states,

Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men. Ye are the light of the world: A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. (Matt. 5:13-14)

The evils of literature, TV, pornography, the sights of immodesty on the public streets of our cities may influence one to have a bad influence. The wrong company is most certainly spoken against by the apostle. Young man or young lady, be careful of the company you keep. The frequent association with one of questionable

character may be just enough to gain for you a bad reputation. It does not take long for bad language to take hold of one to the point that he is using bad language and perhaps engaging in acts of immorality. Be careful where you go and what you do. There is always someone watching. Especially, remember the all-seeing eye of our Father is upon you at all times. Let us not ever be guilty of robbing God of that which belongs to Him.

### **Biographical Sketch**

For biographical information about Denver Cooper, please see the dedication to this book, page vii.

# Harbinger Of The Lord

*Dan Kessinger*

It is debated whether or not a prophet named Malachi actually existed. Since his name means “messenger,” and since that wording is used so prominently in the book, it is sometimes supposed that “Malachi” was a pseudonym of sorts (Lewis 82).



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The controversy shares some characteristics with the question of whether or not Theophilus was a real person or a description of any lover of God, but in neither case, there is much reason to deny this was a real person’s given name. To the contrary, the definitions of most Jewish names at least hint of their heritage of faith. Particularly, in the case of the prophets, it seems as though many of them bore names of prophetic significance. Such naming seems important to God Himself, since He Himself dictated many names and changed others. The practice of changing a name significantly was also employed by our Lord, famously in the case of Simon Peter.

The name Malachi (messenger) takes on a special role in the writing of this prophet. Though one might remember that God’s work included building up as well as tearing down, it seems Old Testament prophets were usually dispatched into situations that cried out for corrections. A great number of these were sent into generations not only steeped in sin, but also lacking a conscience. Thus, prophets were mostly unheeded. They were preachers to deaf ears, signers to the blind.

Like his brethren before him, the first order of business for Malachi was to alarm the populace as to the depth and seriousness of their condition. Since the beginnings of the reconstruction, relatively good times had led people into ease and apathy. Where idolatry had been the constant bane of the pre-exilic Jews, there is no evidence that it continued to plague them after their seventy years of captivity. However, there were other more subtle attitudes that were pervasive both before and after their destruction. Incidentally, these seem to plague every generation of believers. It was (and is) a tendency to forget God and spiritual things in times of prosperity. In the pre-exilic days, it manifested itself in idolatry. In post-exilic days, it first was evident in the temple taking a backseat to the construction of personal dwellings, and in ignoring God’s marriage laws. Spiritual apathy was also evident in a stagnation of service to God, particularly in the case of sacrifice. Malachi’s task would have been difficult; a spiritual sleeper is difficult to awake, to a large degree because he prefers his comfortable bed.

This setting helps one to appreciate the prophecies of a day still centuries to come. Another messenger would arise to awaken a generation asleep in spiritual stagnation. Before the glorious, sunny Messianic days of righteousness (Mal. 4:2) could come, there must be a spiritual awakening. Elijah must return and make preparations for the King.

## The Role of Harbinger

There is little doubt John was the prophet promised by Malachi. In an angelic announcement before his birth, John’s mission is described as being “in the spirit and the power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17). After lauding John’s greatness, Jesus specifically made reference to Malachi 3:1 (Matt. 11:10). In verse fourteen he added “And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come.” If for no other reason than Jesus’ clarification, one can be confident the promised messenger of Malachi 3 and the promised Elijah of Malachi 4 are one and the same.

Jesus also stated there had been none greater than John, but the least in the kingdom would be greater (Matt. 11:11). This

statement reinforces the role of John as a harbinger, not a resident of the Kingdom of God. His service and character were unquestioned, but his opportunities to serve ended before the Kingdom began. His role was to prepare the world for the Kingdom of God, not to be a member of it. When John died he was still preaching “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Matt. 3:2).

Malachi 3:1 reads: “Behold, I send My messenger, And he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming, says the LORD of hosts.” The Harbinger concept is described thus by James Smith in *The Promised Messiah*:

Messengers ran before dignitaries to alert villages along the travel route of their approach. Every obstacle—holes in the road, rocks, trees—had to be removed (cf. Isa. 40:3-5). Every care was exercised to see that the coming one was greeted with a reception befitting his station. The higher the position of the dignitary, the more illustrious the messenger who preceded him. (461-62)

As described by Malachi, there can be no doubt as to whether the first messenger or the second (whose work is described in vv. 2-3) is to be preferred. As great as the harbinger was, he is not to be confused with the king who was to follow. Though John’s career paralleled that of Jesus in many ways (including angelic birth announcement and miraculous conception), there was no doubt as to which cousin was superior. John himself showed little confusion on the topic, calling Jesus the Lamb of God (John 1:29), protesting his unworthiness to baptize Jesus (Matt. 3:13-14), and stating explicitly “It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose” (John 1:27). He was the harbinger, not the king.

As harbinger, John was called upon to announce the arrival of the king. In one sense the arrival of the king was as humble and ordinary as any birth in man’s history. In other ways, no birth was

ever so widely heralded. While the world slept, the king was born in a stable. Yet to seeking eyes, even the stars shouted the news (Matt. 2:2), while an angelic host proclaimed peace on earth, and good will toward men (Luke 2:14) to shepherds. The contrasts are incredible to contemplate.

But these were not the only announcements of the Messiah. It was the culmination of hundreds of years of prophecy, and the fulfillment of God’s plan from eternity. As the last of the Old Testament era prophets, John provided the summation of their Messianic visions. Only he stood on the brink of the glorious age of the Messiah. Only he could proclaim the actual coming of the Lamb of God, not in a distant misty future, but in the person of his cousin and friend. As Malachi had prophesied, he prepared the way. He did that by introducing the world to the Savior.

As harbinger, John’s role was also to prepare hearts for the Messiah, which he did by preaching. Matthew 3:1 reads “In those days John the Baptist came preaching. . . .” To the message that the Messiah had come, John added the message of repentance in preparing for him. Of course all of the former prophets had preached repentance as well. It is most significant that of all of the prophets, John seems most successful in reaching the lost. Unlike any before him (except for perhaps Jonah, who found hearers in Assyria) John was embraced by the populace who “counted him a prophet” (Matt. 14:5). This is not to say John preached a compromising righteousness in order to broaden his appeal by any means. Perhaps his popularity is a testimony to the perfect plan of God, sending him at precisely the time when there were hearts prepared to hear. Did repentance during John’s ministry mitigate the need for repentance because of Christ? John’s message was to repent in view of the kingdom of the other messenger.

This then illuminates the text of Malachi 3, which reveals two messengers. The first comes only with a preview of the message of the second, significantly identified as the Lord Himself. He is not entering the house of a stranger when he enters the temple, but into His own house. Though all the faithful are children of God, Jesus had a claim on that relationship like no other. No wonder He was so grieved at the abuse of His Father’s house (Matt. 21:13 et

al.). The distinction between the two messengers is similar to that of Moses and Jesus, as read in Hebrews 3:5-6. “And Moses indeed was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which would be spoken afterward, but Christ as a Son over His own house, whose house we are if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end.”

Though the faithful harbinger of Malachi 3:1 may prepare listeners to enter it, the temple belongs to another. The second messenger is able to add the authority of ownership to the command to repent. As a harbinger of repentance, John was sent to turn hearts and tune minds to the message of repentance from the Lord Himself. He intends to cleanse His own house.

Understanding John’s role as harbinger of the message of repentance also explains his emphasis on baptism. Some erroneously explain the distinction in the two baptisms by claiming that John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance, while that of Jesus was for the forgiveness/remission of sins. This view is difficult to defend in view of Mark 1:4. “John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.” This view also ignores the fact that New Covenant baptism is also inexorably linked to repentance in Acts 2:38 and Romans 6:1-4. Understanding John’s role as harbinger alleviates the need to find a theological distinction between the two baptisms. Though he preached repentance to people under the old covenant, he was preaching repentance in preparation for the new. His authority to command baptism emanated from the new kingdom, though it was preached and obeyed in the old one. From John, sinners learned they ought to repent and be baptized in view of the Messiah and His coming kingdom. From Jesus, sinners learn they ought to repent and be baptized because of the Messiah and His extant kingdom.

### **The Messenger of Fire**

In Malachi 3:2-3 we read: “But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner’s fire and like launderer’s soap. He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, and purge them

as gold and silver, that they may offer to the LORD an offering in righteousness.”

In this text the work of the Messiah is described rather than the work of the harbinger. But their ministries are linked together by the common use of the word *messenger*. So there is to be a similarity in the work and message of the harbinger and the Messiah. To further clarify the concept of this text, consider that the harbinger was to be Elijah, according to Malachi 4:5: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.” When one contemplates the character of Elijah and John, a picture of the Messiah also emerges as the messenger of fire. Fiery purification was the essence of the whole of Old Testament prophecy, a characteristic that stood in bold relief among all three. John could be viewed as the living epitome of the prophetic office; Jesus Himself called him “a prophet . . . and more than a prophet” (Matt. 11:9). John is closely identified with Elijah for obvious reasons, including his crude apparel, cruder diet, and life in the wilderness. There are other less obvious but more critical areas of comparison. Until John, Elijah seems the epitome of Old Testament prophets. Though all were marked by a rejection of earthly values and prosperity, none are more clearly so than the austere Elijah. Elijah’s faithfulness in the face of opposition and rejection from all quarters could scarcely be more emphatic than it was. There is a good reason that on the mount of transfiguration, God chose to represent the prophets in the person of Elijah, choosing him rather than one of the literary prophets.

How is fire significant to the office of the Messiah? Elijah’s ministry was intensely dramatic not only in his messages, but also in that they were frequently punctuated by visible fire. Fire from Heaven consumed the sacrifice on Carmel (1 Kings 18) and two companies of soldiers (2 Kings 1); he ascended to Heaven in a whirlwind, chariot, and horses of fire (2 Kings 2). These had been no parlor tricks; they pointedly demonstrated God’s power over nature, His approval of His servant, and the purifying destruction of His power. When one also contemplates Elijah’s unbending and unyielding character, his fiery condemnations, and his message of

purification, it would seem reasonable to characterize him as a prophet of fire.

There was no visible fire associated with the ministry of the harbinger, or of the Messiah. However, the fiery character of the two Elijahs is identical; the purifying fire of the Messiah is also unmistakable. In a sense, John's character bridged the gap between the literal fire of Elijah and the purifying fire of the Messiah. Jesus lauded John's character in Matthew 11:7-9, saying:

What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in king's houses. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet.

Like the Messiah who praised him, the second Elijah's fire was metaphorical.

The second messenger's (the Messiah's) fire is significantly described. The question is asked "But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears?" In this verse (Mal. 3:2), He is first called a refiner and then a launderer. In the next verse, the imagery of the fuller or launderer is abandoned in favor of the refiner exclusively. How do these two images fit together, and also describe the prophetic fire of the second Elijah, John?

A better understanding of the work of the ancient launderer may help in understanding why the Messiah is described in these two terms that at first seem dissimilar. The word translated "fuller" or "launderer" has as its root a word translated "to trample" (Strong 54). Thus it is no gentle cleansing, but a thorough washing by stamping with the feet. True cleansing is not possible on "gentle cycle"! Like the feet of the fuller, the violent fire of the refiner is necessary to accomplish true cleansing; anything short of these images will not accomplish the purpose. Do these images negate God's graciousness, or that of His cleansing Messiah? The third image, "purifier" (v. 3), helps to clarify His nature; it illuminates the trampling of the launderer and the fire of the refiner in their

true context. The unpleasantness is temporary, necessary to accomplish God's purpose in blessing His people spiritually. They are means, not the end. Though "purifier" is synonymous with "refiner," it seems to describe the last stages of preparation. It signifies purity, soundness and clarity; it is rooted in the idea of "brightness." The purifier and the refiner are one and the same, but the word seems to focus on the polishing of the final product (Strong 45). Purifying fulfills the goals of all of the previous trampling and melting, and beauty emerges.

One of the challenges of the Messiah included how many indulged in a faulty view of His fire. Even those who were closest to Him, who believed in His cleansing fire, failed to see beyond the conflagration.

And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did? But He turned and rebuked them, and said, you do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them. And they went to another village. (Luke 9:54-56)

James and John were quick to make the connection between the fires of Elijah and the fire of the Messiah; they were slow to see that fire in the gentle context of a purifying Messiah. In Him, the eventual purpose of God's fire was to be fulfilled.

A careful reading of Malachi might also have prevented another misunderstanding of the Messiah's fire. To whom is it first directed? This section seems to answer the question of Malachi 2:17, "Where is the God of justice?" It is implied that God ought to do something about the sinful nations that continually plague Judah; it is further implied that if He fails to do so, he is not just. Indeed, God is concerned about unrighteousness wherever he finds it. But these Jews were making the classic mistake of failing to attend to their own houses. They were convinced that God ought to burn and trample these nations, thus vindicating his people. They had failed to consider their own impurity. Being a part of the

family of God is a responsibility as well as a privileged blessing. “For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?” (1 Peter 4:17).

Among the Jews, the Messiah was thought to be a vindicator of earthly Israel, and a destroyer of her oppressors. In certain quarters, particularly among Zionists and Premillennialists, this short sighted view remains pervasive today. Even among His own disciples, Jesus was continually asked when He would restore the kingdom to Israel, for the last time on the day he ascended back to the Father (Acts 1:6). Malachi 3:1-3 declares God’s justice is universal, and any cleansing of the Messiah would begin with the corrupt priesthood. Though God is concerned with sin everywhere, it is most offensive when it corrupts His own house. In Ezekiel 9:6, the destroyer of all is to begin with the sanctuary. The cleansing of the house of God must be considered to be a priority over cleansing elsewhere.

The Messiah will not ignore the sins of His own people, but His goal is purification, not destruction. The fact that both John and the Messiah were sent to Israel is not just proof these had been the people of God, and thus would receive the kingdom first. It also demonstrates the need for repentance among God’s people. Elijah, John, and Jesus are linked in an illustration of the power of God’s fire to at once cleanse, prepare, purify, and beautify. God’s people are blessed, not cursed by fire from above, but only if they practice patience. 1 Peter 1:7 “. . . [T]hat the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ. . . .”

Like Elijah, the Messiah and His harbinger would arrive amidst fierce fires. Those who desired purity would find themselves lovingly purified. Those who resisted would find themselves rejected and destroyed. The harbinger of fire came preaching “And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Matt. 3:10).

### **The Messenger of the Day of the Lord**

Malachi 4:5-6 reads, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse.”

Clearly Malachi 4:5-6 addresses the same forerunner as the previously studied section, a fact that might not have been immediately apparent to all early readers of the text. Consider John denied being the Christ, the prophet, and Elijah (John 1:20-22). He confessed that he was the voice crying in the wilderness, in reference to Isaiah 40:3-5. But Jesus stated that He was in fact Elijah, according to Matthew 11:13. And in announcement of the birth of John, the angel quotes from this very text in Malachi. “He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, ‘to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,’ and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” (Luke 1:17). Why the discrepancy? Was John mistaken when he denied being Elijah? Was he less than honest with the inquiry?

Most likely, John adjusted his reply in accordance with the context of their question. There was much misunderstanding of Messianic prophecies among Jewish authorities of the day. Certain evidence of it can be seen in their asking John if he were “the prophet,” when he had already denied being the Christ. “The prophet,” a reference to Deuteronomy 18, and the Messiah were one and the same; if he were not the Christ, he was also not the prophet. Asking the questions separately indicates there was uncertainty on this issue. This misunderstanding also caused Rabbis to theorize there were two Messiahs: a suffering servant and a conquering king. Jesus’ affirmation that John had been Elijah was evidence John did fulfill the prophecy of Malachi 4:5-6. John’s denial was probably in the context of being a reincarnated Elijah, as perhaps some believed.

The modern student has the advantage of having seen the fulfillment of these prophecies, so he is able to understand that not only was John Elijah, but also in what manner he was Elijah. It is important one sees John in his full and complete Elijah-like

character. There was a reason the Lord chose Elijah to represent the entire prophetic age in Matthew 17. In being transfigured with Moses, they seemed to represent the entirety of the Old Testament: the Law, represented by Moses, and the prophets by John. As we have previously considered, the selection of Elijah was a significant decision. As much as any other, Elijah seemed to typify what it meant to be a prophet, with his being called to communion with God alone in the wilderness, and his utter rejection of worldly values. It was likewise no coincidence John dressed in a similar primitive fashion, and subsisted on primitive victuals. John was Elijah, the prophet's prophet.

The text speaks of the coming "Day of the Lord," a phrase bristling with power in anticipation of the arrival of God. Days of the Lord number more than many modern students realize who limit it to the second advent of Christ. While certainly this is the "Day of the Lord," there were others. The destruction of Samaria in 722 BC, Jerusalem in 586 BC, and in AD 70 are days of the Lord. So likewise were even more tempered eras of destruction of Israel. What made them collectively the "day of the Lord" was the judgments came from God's hand. The description of John's preaching as heralding the "day of the Lord" is perhaps the most unlikely of all. While the incarnation of Christ surely fulfills the requisites of a day in which God's presence is specially noted, this is a day of retribution. It is called a great and dreadful day. What is the connection between the preaching of John and the day of the Lord?

The most obvious answer is a temporal one. Because of the rejection of the Christ whom John preached, there certainly was a judgment on Israel in AD 70. But it seems this is too simplistic a view to capture the moment in its true context. As the harbinger, John's preaching was not intended just to spare the nation from destruction. He ushered in the era of a kingdom without physical or racial borders. In the broader sense of Malachi 4:5-6, the day of the Lord can be considered as the day of Jesus, thus His entire earthly ministry and even the entire tenure of His kingdom. In this sense, the day of the Lord only began with Jesus. It will end when He returns.

Days of the Lord are usually an open secret, since they are thoroughly announced. Though the timing of the destruction might not be specified, there is little excuse for being unprepared because of the role of the prophet and the prophetic announcement. In this section of Malachi, there is little excuse for being unprepared for the Messiah's day on Earth. Elijah himself, the prototypical prophet would return to announce the day of the Lord. Considering the kingdom-oriented preaching of John, his sterling character, and Jesus' description of him (Matt. 11:11-14), to limit the harbinger's prophecy to the destruction of Jerusalem seems incomplete.

John's preaching can probably be summed up in the word "repent," especially in view of the coming day of the Lord. He came preaching "repent for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:4). It is not coincidental at all that the Lord's preaching is also described as "repent for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17). In keeping with the prediction of Malachi that the day would be great and dreadful, John's preaching could be fairly described as direct to the point of being harsh (but certainly not unkind). As harbinger of a great and dreadful day, the ultimate kindness would be to proclaim preparation for the day of the Lord through repentance. Of course, the text of Malachi verifies this view with the prediction of turning of hearts, a hint of the success John would enjoy among the people who counted him as a prophet (Matt. 14:5).

To the last, the last prophet of the Old Testament points out to all sinners the need of repentance and faith in the promised Redeemer, the Angel of the Covenant, the Sun of Righteousness. This promise connects the Old Testament, the time of prophecy, and hopeful waiting, with the time of fulfillment and joyous realization, the era of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. (Laetsch 547)

This call would remain in force throughout the kingdom age, beginning with Peter's answer to the question "what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37-38).

Days of the Lord include a promise of salvation to the faithful, whether in reference to those who would escape the destruction of Titus (Matt. 24) or those who receive rest at the end (2 Thess. 1:6-8). But they always seem to include impending doom directed toward those who are slated for destruction. This is not to say the Kingdom of our Lord is marked by destruction more than salvation. But to ignore the profound impact suggested by “day of the Lord” is to place one’s self in peril of suffering God’s vengeance. The section also ends with a threat of a curse upon those who fail to prepare.

As did Isaiah, Malachi closes his book with a reference to everlasting damnation in a final appeal to his people to forsake their wickedness and in sincere repentance to return to the Lord, their Covenant God. Compare Paul’s last words addressed to the Jews at Rome...The Masoretes repeated v. 23 [4:5] after v. 24 [4:6], and the LXX reversed the order of the last two verses in order to have the last book of the Bible close, not with a curse, but a blessing. That is not the way for unbelief to escape the curse. None but Jesus saves! (Acts 4:12;10:43.) (Laetsch 547).

The day of the Lord is a great day, but it is a dreadful day.

John’s preaching of judgment shared features with that of the Lord himself, suggesting the new era of the Messiah is in fact the day of the Lord discussed here. John denied that being physical children of Abraham was sufficient to secure a relationship with God (Matt. 3:9), implying a spiritual and racially integrated kingdom to follow. John preached God’s judgment included an emphatic separation. His illustration was the separation of wheat and the chaff (Matt. 3:12); Jesus used sheep and goats (Matt. 25:32), but the principle is identical. These principles would remain constant through the preaching of Jesus on Earth, but would be common to all of God’s judgments through the kingdom era. They will be most evident on the day of final judgment. It could certainly be noted that all temporal judgments serve to illustrate the ultimate day of God’s judgments.

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#### Biographical Sketch

Dan is the son of Bob (deceased) and Doris Kessinger. He and his wife, the former Mary Amy West have two boys, D. J., and Thomas.

Dan graduated from Walton High School in Roane County, WV, and attended Ohio Valley College where he earned associate and bachelor degrees in Biblical Science.

Dan preached his first sermon in the Spring of 1982 at the Mt. Zion Church of Christ in Walker, WV. He has served congregations in Belle, Long Valley, Gandeeville, Proctor, and since February of 1994, the Dewey Avenue Church of Christ in St. Marys.

In addition to his local work (including a weekly radio program), Dan conducts gospel meetings and appears on lecture programs each year. He is a frequent contributor to religious journals, and is the author of *A Cloak of Malice*. He has worked with West Virginia Christian Youth Camp since 1984 and West Virginia School of Preaching since 1995.

# The Unchanging God

W. Terry Varner

Suppose you were in prison with only a narrow window. You gaze out this window on the outside world. You can see the sun, moon, stars, trees, birds, etc. Everything you see may be true, but at the same time it is very limited. Now suppose that you are freed from your imprisonment. Your view is now enlarged as you walk



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outdoors, but it is limited by the horizon of some ten or twelve miles in distance. You climb a mountain or you look through the powerful 100" (2.5m) Hooker reflecting telescope at the Mount Wilson Observatory near Los Angeles and your distance is pushed out accordingly; however, you still see only a small fraction of the total world and universe, though your observations are real and true. Our comprehension of God Almighty is comparable. We can know much that is true about God even though we do not and cannot know all there is to know about Him.

To speak on the subject of "The Unchanging God" demands we do so with the greatest of reverence and the deepest of modesty. It has been stated that the greatest and most profound thought of man is about God! God is set forth in the Bible as infinite, eternal, immutable, omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, omni-benevolent, et al. God's nature and attributes are beyond our full comprehension. Why? There is a "qualitative difference" between God and human beings. If we do not start with that, we can never be right anywhere. . ." (Lloyd-Jones 132)

There are many passages dealing with the unchangeableness or immutability of God; however, we briefly introduce our lecture with three biblical passages:

Psalms 102:25-27 contrasts the deterioration and changing nature of God's creation with His unchanging nature. The Psalmist contrasts the things of nature, "They will perish . . . wear out . . . change . . . discarded," with God, "You will endure . . . You are the same, And Your years will have no end." Nature changes, but God's nature does not change!

"For I am the Lord, I do not change; Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob. Yet from the days of your fathers You have gone away from My ordinances And have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the Lord of hosts. 'But you said, In what way shall we return?'" (Mal. 3:6-7). The background to the text is simple. Israel sinned almost perpetually against God. God loves them. The book affirms that "God has loved and still does love Israel, in spite of Israel's sins" (Warren 411) and desires they repent. Both His love for Israel and His requirements for dealing with their sins are unchanging. Man changes in his relationship with God, but God's love for man and His condemnation of sin is unchanging!

James teaches that all good things come consistently from God and can be expected to continue, because God is unchangeable! "Every good and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning" (James 1:17).

Scripture reveals God's nature and attributes. God's nature and attributes, in turn, answer the questions: What is God like? How might we expect Him to act? Accordingly, the Bible speaks of "the *unsearchable* riches of Christ" (Eph. 3:8, emp. added). Unsearchable meaning "not able to track out. . . untraceable, incomprehensible, inscrutable" (Reinecker and Rogers 529, 374). Likewise, the Bible speaks that Christians are to "rejoice with joy *inexpressible* and full of glory" (1 Peter 1:8, emp. added). Inexpressible means "to which words are inadequate" (Thayer 44).

The five major points in this lecture are, with some modifications, taken from Chapter 7 titled, *God Unchanging*, in the masterful

book, *Knowing God*, by J. I. Packer. We highly recommend serious students of God's Word to acquaint them self with this rich book, studying it seriously, as well as, studying many other writings of Packer.

### God's Life Does Not Change

One of the fundamental differences between God Almighty and man is that man is finite, mutable, and ever changing in nature. God is infinite, immutable (immune to alteration), and changeless in nature. A. W. Pink states, "He cannot change for the better for he is already perfect; and being perfect he cannot change for the worse" (35).

The student has no reason to doubt the unchangeableness of God. The Bible uses various phrases to depict God's as unchanging. Consider:

- ❖ His Nature—"You are from everlasting" (Ps. 93:2).
- ❖ His Kingship—God is the "everlasting King" (Jer. 10:10).
- ❖ His Life—God "alone has immortality" (1 Tim. 6:16).
- ❖ His Eternality—"from everlasting to everlasting You are God" (Ps. 90:2).
- ❖ His Consistency—"You are the same, And Your years will have no end" (Ps. 102:27).
- ❖ His Existence—"I am He, I am the First, I am also the Last" (Isa. 48:12).
- ❖ His Unchangeableness—"For I am the Lord, I do not change" (Mal. 3:6).

Man has a beginning—a birth (Job 5:7; 14:1; 15:14) and end—death (Heb. 9:27), as do all things, but not so with God! The age-old question, "Who made God?" is answered with simplicity. God did not need to be made, for He was always there. He has always existed, and He is always the same—unchanging.

The unchangeableness of God is difficult for man to understand because man and all things in and around man are in constant change. Charnock shows this contrast between the changeableness of man and the unchangeableness of God.

If a man continue in being as long as Methuselah, nine hundred and sixty-nine years; yet there is not a day, nay, an hour, wherein there is not some alteration in his substance. Though no substantial part is wanting, yet there is an addition to him by his food, a diminution of something by his labor; he is always making some acquisition, or suffering some loss: but in God there can be no alteration, by the accession of anything to make his substance greater or better, or by diminution to make it less or worse. (319).

In the same line of thinking, Packer writes of the unchangeableness of God, "He does not grow older. His life does not wax or wane. He does not gain new powers, nor lose those that He once had. He does not mature or develop. He does not get stronger, or weaker, or wiser as time goes by" (69). Contrast the changeableness of our life with Packer's statement concerning the unchangeableness of the nature of God. Each second a man lives, he grows older. Man's life wanes from time he is born until he dies; i.e. each individual lives life only so long. Some die at birth, some die beyond the centenarian years, and others die in between. A twenty-one year-old has more strength than a newborn. A seventy-plus year-old does have the strength of his early youth. The longer a man lives he is in the process of maturing—at least he ought to be—and developing physically beyond the years of his birth. Years makes man wiser—at least they ought—than when man was born.

The Bible declares God's unchangeableness or existence without variability by the words *eternal* and *immutability*. The biblical phrase, "he shall endure" (Ps. 102:26, 12) signifies the *eternality* of God Almighty. The word *immutability* (Heb. 6:17-18) means "that God does not and cannot change his mind" (Erickson 104; cf. Heb. 13:8; Mal. 3:6). To argue that God is the same is to argue that God cannot be changed into Someone other than who He is!

God is "the Father of lights, with whom there is *no variation or shadow of turning*" (James 1:17, emp. added) in comparison with the lights or heavenly bodies.

This word conveys the idea of passing from one condition to another, and may here perhaps mean simply the change from light to darkness. We may find a contrast suggested between the natural sun, which varies its position in the sky from hour to hour and from month to month and the Eternal Source of light, who is absolutely unchangeable. (Ross 35)

The word variation is from *parallage* meaning “for the setting of the teeth of a saw, for stones set in alternately, or for a sequence of beacons or seasons; generally denoting some regularity or system in change” (Adamson 74). The conclusion is simple—God is unchanging or shows no variableness! God gives man all good things and man can expect God will consistently give him all good things.

The latter word means “indissoluble; not subject to destruction” (Thayer 21). The life of the Levitical priests was frail, short-lived, and corruptible. Whereas, the life of Jesus and His priesthood is not subject to decay and destruction. “The idea is that the commandment was outward and perishable, liable at any time to be changed or abrogated, but the life of Christ is inherent and imperishable” (Milligan 261). The contrast is clear—man changes but God is unchangeable! The text shows a fundamental difference between God—the Creator, and God’s created—man. “For I am the Lord, I do not change” (Mal. 3:6).

### God’s Character Does Not Change

Inspiration’s words, “I do not change” (Mal. 3:16) emphasizes that nothing alters God’s character. Packer writes, “He never becomes less truthful, or merciful, or just, or good, than He used to be. The character of God is today, and always will be, exactly what it was in Bible times” (69).

What a contrast between God and man. Man lies, God does not! “God is not a man, that He should lie” (Num. 23:19). Man is not always merciful, just, and good to his fellowman; therefore, inspiration reminds us, “For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment:” (James 2:13). Man’s character changes day-to-day, but God’s character does not change!

In setting forth the fact that God’s character does not change, consider two names of God given in the book of Exodus. *First*, in Exodus 3:14, God gives His name to Moses as, “‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And he said, ‘Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, I AM has sent me to you.’” The text occurs in the commission of Moses to deliver Israel from Egyptian bondage. Moses, who had been absent from Egypt for forty years, asked God, “What is his name? what shall I say to them?” (Ex. 3:13). God said, “I AM WHO I AM . . . you shall say I AM has sent me . . .” (Ex. 3:14). Note the present tense. God did not say, “I was.” Lloyd-Jones argues that inherent in the name “I AM” is also the idea “that God is still in control of everything” (137). Allis gives an excellent explanation of “I AM”:

Moses is told God’s name (iii.13 f.): “I am” represents the first person (*ehyeh*) of the imperfect of the verb “to be”, of which the name *Lord*, i.e. Jehovah (*yahweh*) would then be the third person, and mean “He is” or “He will be”. It would then describe God either as the One who *is*, the self-existent and eternal, or as the One who reveals Himself (“I will be what I will be”) in word and deed. That this name was not unknown to Moses is clearly indicated (verse 15). (63)

*Second*, God gave Moses in Exodus 3:15-16 His everlasting and memorial name as, “The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob.” His name and memorial is Yahweh (Jehovah or Lord). “Thy name, O Lord, endureth for ever; and thy memorial, O Lord, throughout all generations” (Ps. 135:12; cf. 30:4; 97:12; Hosea 12:5). Yahweh is translated in our English versions as Jehovah or Lord. The meaning is significant suggesting that His name, person, nature, and mighty works are to be recalled by His children throughout time. “The Hebrew word *yhwh* is, in fact, the third person of the root *hayah* (*hwh*). If the simple Qal sense is maintained, it carries the fundamental idea of the self-existence of God, and simply means ‘I am the One who is’ (Davis 64-5). Heffren asserts that “the word Jehovah conveyed the idea of

the ‘Self-existent One,’ or the One Who provides for the needs of his people” (9).

Combining the name “I AM” with the names “Jehovah, Lord, or Yahweh” suggests the unchangeableness of God’s character, as well as, His eternality and His all-sufficiency. Nichols states well, “Eternal truths are placed in the present tense to emphasize there is no beginning, nor end. Since God is eternal, he is self-sufficient and all-sufficient: the GREAT I AM” (46). Serle gives richness to the meaning to the name Jehovah in the following by showing that *Jehovah*:

. . . [S]tands simply for the *divine essence*, or for him *who is*, and *who necessarily MUST BE*. . . . It [Jehovah] regards the *future Eternal*, and demonstrates the *immutability* of the divine existence. . . . The title JEHOVAH includes the *past*, the *present*, and the *future Eternal*; that is, according to *our conceptions*: for all things, and every division of that duration which we understand by time, are *present* with him though successive to us. . . the name JEHOVAH [means]. . . He *that IS, that WAS, and that IS TO COME*.  
(3)

### God’s Truth Does Not Change

Jesus states with clarity, and yet in simplicity, “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. . . . Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth” (John 8:32; 17:17). The Godhead is expressed to man in truth, words, and actions (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3-4). “In the Bible God issues explicit prohibitions and positive precepts, setting boundaries as to what one is to do and not to do. . . . The Bible simply abounds in definitive statements of truth that are to be believed and appropriated” (Van Kooten 146).

Man is a creature of God (Gen. 1:26-27; 2:7); therefore, signifying his ever changeableness. Charnock states, “. . . [T]o be a creature is to be made something from nothing, and, therefore, creation is a change from nothing to something. The being of a creature begins from change, and, therefore, the essence of a creature is subject to change. God only is uncreated, and therefore, unchangeable” (336).

Man speaks. God speaks. The contrast between the words of man and God’s Word shows nothing in common! Man, at times, has to recall his words. Man changes his mind because of newly found truth or his words no longer express what he believes, and/or his words call for, at times, an apology. Consequently, man’s words are unstable—NOT SO WITH GOD’S WORDS! Because God is interested in the eternal welfare of man, God speaks or has revealed Himself to man in His Word. Without the truth of His Word, man *cannot* attain to any *certain knowledge* of God’s will for his life. Without the truth of His Word, man *cannot* know the *true nature* of God nor how to worship God in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). Without the truth of God’s Word, we *cannot* know the *origin of the world*, the *origin of man*, *man’s fall*, and the *promised redemption*. The following syllogism sets forth the case that the Bible is from God.

**Major Premise:** If the Bible is from God, then the Bible is divine revelation.

**Minor Premise:** The Bible is from God.

**Conclusion:** Therefore, the Bible is divine revelation.

In that the Bible is the Word of God and God has all power, then the Word of God is omni-authoritative. The Word of God is empowered with authority from the Divine God in order:

- ❖ To serve as a staff of lie (Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4).
- ❖ To serve as a lamp and light to guide man (Ps. 119:105).
- ❖ To save the obedient (1 Peter 1:22; Rom. 1:16-17).
- ❖ To edify man (Acts 20:32).
- ❖ To judge man (John 12:48; Rev. 20:11-15).
- ❖ To not return to God void (Isa. 55:11; Luke 8:15).

Empowered with authority and being the truth of God, these involve the Bible’s inerrancy and trustworthiness because “the

word of God stands forever” (Isa. 40:8). The Bible is verbally and plenary inspired by God and is truth. “. . .[I]t is impossible for God to lie” (Heb. 6:18; Tit. 1:2). This being true the Word of God is non-contradictory and non-changeable.

Combined with the Word’s authority and trustworthiness is the Word’s eternality, unchangeableness, or indestructibility. Jesus said, “. . .[M]y words will by no means pass away” (Matt. 24:35) and “. . .[T]he Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:34-35). That the Word of God is unchangeable is seen in Peter’s statement, “the word of God which lives and abides forever” (1 Peter 1:23). The word abide is from *meno* means “not to perish, to last, to endure” (Thayer 377).

Consider the following testimony concerning the eternality and indestructibility of the Word of God:

- ❖ “The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of God stands forever” (Isa. 40:8).
- ❖ “Forever O Lord, Your word is settled in the heavens” (Ps. 119:89).
- ❖ “Concerning Your testimonies, I have known of old that You have founded them forever” (Ps. 119:152).
- ❖ “[T]he Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35).
- ❖ “These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches” (1 Cor. 2:13).

We must conclude that the Word of God is as unchangeable, as is the Author—the Unchangeable God! Therefore, we conclude the Word is authoritative, inerrant, and trustworthy. Man can obey and trust His Word. Packer summarizes the Word:

. . .[C]arries with it the idea of stability. When we read our Bibles, therefore, we need to remember that God still stands to all the promises, and demands, and statements of purpose, and words of warning, that are there addressed to New Testament believers. These are not relics of a bygone age, but eternally valid revelation of the mind of God

toward His people in all generations, so long as this world lasts. As our Lord Himself has told us, “The Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35). Nothing can annul God’s eternal truth. (70).

### **God’s will [plans or purposes] Does Not Change**

Malachi 3:6-7 shows the unchangeableness of God’s will (plans or purposes). It is the case that over the centuries Israel sinned against God. God was unchangeable toward them. God’s law condemns the sin and requires the sinner to return to Him for forgiveness. In describing the importance of the unchangeableness of God, Henderson writes, “. . .[T]he Divine immutability secured the preservation of the Jewish people from destruction, notwithstanding their flagrant wickedness, till he had accomplished all his purposes of mercy. . . . There was still mercy in store for the Jews, if they would only repent” (458-9).

God’s justice and mercy cannot permit Him to change His Divine law against sin. God’s holiness cannot permit Him to refuse to take Israel back into fellowship if they repent. Laetsch comments: “Therefore He will be a swift witness against all transgressors of His law. Yet this unalterable holiness and mercy does not cancel or even interfere with His unchanging grace and mercy” (537).

It is the case that God’s will is unchanging. The psalmist writes, “The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations” (Ps. 33:11). “Forever O Lord, Your word is settled in heaven” (Ps. 119:89). Packer writes: “What He does in time, He planned from eternity. And all that He planned in eternity He carries out in time. All that He has in His word committed Himself to do will be infallible done” (71).

When we speak in reference to God’s purposes we are including all those things within God’s intended plans, whether material or spiritual. There is no part of His eternal purposes, plans, or scheme that changes—they are **all** unchanging!

God’s will is totally different than man’s will. In discussing the fact that God and man are different in purposes, Pink writes, “God’s purpose never alters. One of two things causes a man to

change his mind and reverse his plans: want of foresight to anticipate everything, or the lack of power to execute them. But as God is omniscient and omnipotent, there is never any need for Him to revise His decrees” (36).

We cannot leave this point without discussing the texts which speak of God *repenting*. Samuel says, “And also the Strength of Israel will not lie or nor relent” (1 Sam. 15:29, NKJV). Relent is translated repent in the King James Version. Other Old Testament texts speaking of God relenting or repenting are Genesis 6:6, Exodus 32:11, Numbers 23:19, 1 Samuel 15:11, 2 Samuel 24:16, Joel 2:13, and Jonah 3:10.

Butterworth makes the following comment on *nacham* (repent, KJV) as meaning:

. . .[B]e sorry, repent, change one’s mind. (a) The word is used to express two apparently contrasting sentiments in 1 Sam 15, where God says, “I am grieved (*nhm*) that I have made Saul king” (v. 11; cf. v. 35), but where Samuel also announces that “the glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind (*nhm*), for he is not a man, that he should change his mind (*nhm*)” (v. 29). The explanation seems to be that God does not capriciously change his intentions or ways of acting. It is the change in Saul’s behavior that leads to this expression of regret. The reference is notable as being one of the rare occasions when God is said to repent or change his mind concerning something intended as good (cf. Gen 6:6). (82)

From the above information, we understand that when the Bible refers to God’s repentance (*nacham*) it is a clear reference to His sorrow. *Nacham* is a *relational* term showing that God acts differently toward man’s response to His law; i.e. the sinner refusing to repent is condemned, which evokes God’s sorrow (*nacham*); whereas, the sinner willing to repent evokes God’s forgiveness, mercy, and love. When the KJV states that God ‘repents’ (*nacham*), it is *totally relational* and has *absolutely nothing to due with God’s essence of unchangeability or immutability*. Cottrell in explaining God’s repentance states: “The

most obvious answer is that quite often an announced course of action is conditional, depending on the human response to the announcement” (496).

### God’s Son Does Not Change

In order to give evidence that it is the case that Jesus, God’s Son, does not change consider the following arguments. *First*, Paul declares of Christ, “For in Him dwells all the *fullness* of the Godhead bodily” (Col. 2:9, emp. added). The word fullness is from *pleroma*. The word affirms that Christ is fully God or Deity. Robertson says, “‘all the *pleroma* of the Godhead,’ not just certain aspects, dwells in Christ and in bodily form (*somatikos*. . .here only in N.T.), dwells now in Christ in his glorified humanity. . . . The fulness of the Godhead was in Christ before the Incarnation (John 1:1, 18; Phil. 2:6), during the Incarnation (John 1:14, 18; 1 John 1:1-3)” (491).

*Second*, the implication of the unchangeableness of God’s Son is suggested with Paul’s contrast between the Levitical priests and Jesus, who is our High Priest. The Levites became priests “after the law of carnal commandment;” whereas, Christ became Priest “after the power of endless life” (Heb. 7:16). The contrast between the two is seen by the words *carnal* from *sarkikes* and *endless* (*akatalutou*). The former word means “*belonging to the realm of the flesh* in so far as it is weak, sinful, and transitory, and in these respects is the opp. of the spirit” (Arndt 750). The latter word means “not able to be destroyed, indestructible” (Rogers and Rogers 531).

In the same way God is the eternal “I AM,” Jesus is also called “I AM” (John 8:58). Jesus refers to Himself as:

- ❖ “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35).
- ❖ “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12).
- ❖ “Before Abraham was, I AM” (John 8:58).
- ❖ “I am the door . . . the good shepherd” (John 10:9, 14).
- ❖ “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25).
- ❖ “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).
- ❖ “I am the true vine” (John 15:1, 5).

Possessing eternity, Jesus is “the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8). Paul writes of Jesus, “Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25). Jesus as our Savior is unchanging! The fact that this is so should be strong assurance, comfort, and consolation to all children of God.

## Conclusion

The essence of God’s nature is involved in describing and understanding Him. All of His attributes are inter-related in accurately describing His work of redemption.

In eternity, the wisdom of the Godhead planned man’s redemption “with the precious blood of Christ . . . before the foundation of the world . . . who raised Him from the dead . . . so that your faith and hope are in God. . . . Since you purified your souls in obeying the truth” (2 Peter 1:19-22).

The first recorded Messianic prophecy is Genesis 3:15 and contains both the crucifixion of Jesus, “And you [Satan] shall bruise His heel” and the resurrection of Jesus, “He shall bruise your head [Satan].” Progressively, God revealed Himself through the Patriarchal and Mosaical dispensations. “[W]hen the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law” (Gal. 4:4). After about three and one-half years of ministry, “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3-4).

The unchangeableness or immutability of God not only brought about our redemption from sin, but also guarantees God will change nothing concerning His way of salvation, His establishing and maintaining the church, His elements of worship, His demanding we live for Jesus and abstain from the powers of sin. The unchangeable God and the unchangeable Scheme of Redemption gives the obedient child of God the motivation to be faithful through the vicissitudes of life, while anchoring his soul with hope. No wonder Paul writes of the unchanging God as, “He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself” (2 Tim. 2:3).

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### **Biographical Sketch**

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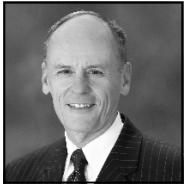
He and his wife Lillie have three sons and a daughter, eleven grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.

# The Sun Of Righteousness

Charles C. Pugh III

## Introduction

In 2007, Dr. Antony G. N. Flew, the British philosopher who likely has been the best-known atheist and critic of belief in God during the last fifty years, stunned the philosophical world with



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his book, *There Is A God*, in which he accepts “the existence of a self-existent, immutable, immaterial, omnipotent, and omniscient Being” (155).

One of the contributors to Flew’s book is Roy Abraham Varghese who wrote an appendix for the book in which he critically evaluates the arguments of such “new atheists” as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris. In his book, *The Wonder of the World-A Journey from Modern Science to the Mind of God*, Varghese lists a hundred wonders of the world. He defines a wonder as “any phenomenon or hard fact that intrigues and awe-inspires” (397). The thirty-third “wonder” of the world as categorized by Varghese is “**The Sun.**” He wrote: “Every second the sun turns 44 million kilograms of mass into energy. Also, sunlight has the precise color required for chlorophyll to absorb it and perform photosynthesis, without which we wouldn’t be here to read this” (405). The Sun is a creation of wonder. It is a specific example of the system of the heavens that declares the existence and glory of God (cf. Ps. 19:4-6). “Perched 93 million miles away from Earth, the Sun has a surface temperature of approximately twelve thousand degrees Fahrenheit and twenty-seven million

degrees Fahrenheit at its core” (Pugh, *Acclamation* 16). Its mass is an “incomprehensible three hundred thousand times greater than the Earth’s” (Strobel 216).

The fourth century writer Ambrose stated:

It is true that it [the sun] is the eye of the world, the joy of the day, the beauty of the heavens, the charm of nature and the most conspicuous creation. When you behold it, reflect on its author. When you admire it, give praise to its creator. If the sun as consort of and participant in nature is so pleasing, how much goodness is there to be found in that Sun of justice [righteousness]? If the sun is so swift that in its rapid course by day and night it is able to traverse all things, how great is he who is always and everywhere and fills all things with his majesty. (qtd. in Ferreiro 309)

The above reference to the “Sun of justice [righteousness]” is one of the 150 references to the Sun in the Bible (Ryken, Wilhoit and Longman 827). The reference is found in the Book of Malachi. It is the assigned text for this study and written by the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC prophet to Israel. It reads as follows:

“For behold the day is coming, burning like an oven, And all the proud, yes all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up,” says the Lord of hosts, “That will leave them neither root nor branch. But to you who fear My name, ***The Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings***; And you shall go out and grow fat like stall-fed calves. . . .” (Mal. 4:1-2, emp. added)

Malachi uttered this last word of Old Testament Hebrew prophecy in the time of Nehemiah, or soon thereafter. His final word is a great announcement that then “abode upon the heart and consciousness of this people for four hundred years” (Morgan 120): ***The Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings***. In his scholarly commentary Verhoef says this “is one of the most significant texts in the prophecy of Malachi. At the same time it

represents an exegetical labyrinth for the interpreter” (327). What is the meaning of “Sun of Righteousness”? Is it a specific reference to a Person (Messiah)? Is it a Messianic title? Or is it “only a figure of speech for the righteousness of Yahweh. His righteousness will shine *like the* sun in some future day” (Smith, J. E., *Messiah* 465). Is righteousness to be explained here in “the sense of a person or a matter”? (Verhoef 328). If it is the former, then it is descriptive of Christ. If it is the latter, then the matter of righteousness is like the shining sun. The idea would be “that righteousness itself is regarded as a sun” (Keil 468).

### Ancient Biblical View of Interpretation

Historically, the view that the Sun of Righteousness is a reference to the Messiah (Christ) has been predominant among biblical interpreters. “Early Christians took Mal. 4:2a to be a messianic prediction and applied it to Christ as savior” (Deutsch 113). Keil says,

By the sun of righteousness the fathers, from Justin [ca. 110-165] downwards, and nearly all the earlier commentators understood *Christ*, who is supposed to be described as the rising sun, like Jehovah . . . and this view is founded upon a truth. . . . (468)

Ambrose (ca. 333-397) affirmed, “Christ is the Sun of justice foretold by Malachi” (qtd. in Ferreiro 307). Verhoef summarizes, “According to most ancient interpreters the ‘righteousness’ here represents the Messiah, either as Christ incarnate or in his function as Judge of the world, or as both” (328). Accordingly Pusey says, “The title, *the Sun of Righteousness*, belongs to both Comings” (497). The amount of evidence available from ancient students and scholars of the Scriptures causes us to agree with the conclusion of Coffman who wrote, “The instinct of the ancients regarding who is meant by the Sun of Righteousness is a far better guide than the doubts of the world’s current crop of scholars” (294).

If the consensus of ancient scholars has been that “The Sun of Righteousness” is a Messianic title, then why the trend to deny this? Lewis summarizes the basis for this denial: “This is a very doubtful interpretation since Hebrew uses a feminine pronoun ‘her wings’ to agree with sun (*shemesh*) which is a feminine noun in Hebrew” (87). However, the fact is that the Hebrew Bible uses both feminine and masculine genders to refer to the Sun. J. M. Powis Smith clarifies: It (Sun) is “Usually masc., but fem. here and in Gn 15<sup>17</sup> Je 15<sup>9</sup> Na 3<sup>17</sup> Is. 45<sup>6</sup>, as in Ar.. The choice of the fem. here may be due to the influence of the genitive . . . Epexegetical genitive . . .” (84-85). Davidson’s *Hebrew Grammar* says, “. . . [M]any words are of both genders, though in general where this is the case one gender is largely predominant in usage over the others, e.g. . . . sun fem. (less often masc.)” (61). Also, in Hebrew, the feminine is used in “names of organs of the body of men or animals, especially such organs as are double . . . *hand* . . . *ear* . . . *horn*. . . . Names of *things productive*, the elements, *unseen essences* . . . as *earth* . . . *fire* . . . *soul* . . . *spirit*” (61, emp. added). The contextual flow of the Bible verifies that it is the case “that celestial body [the Sun] cannot represent anyone ever heard of on [E]arth, except the Lord Jesus Christ” (Coffman 295). Furthermore, if the feminine pronoun does not fit here (Mal. 4:2), as numerous translations (ASV, NASV, RSV, NIV, ESV) imply because they substitute the neuter (it), then why not substitute the masculine (*His*) as does the KJV and NKJV? *Such would be consistent with the totality of biblical doctrine concerning the Messiah.*

Not only is it the case, as we shall observe, that the implications of the figure of *the Sun* make it necessary the *Sun of Righteousness* is a reference to the Christ, but the term *Righteousness* also implies that this is the case, especially in view of Jeremiah 23:5-6; 33:14-16. Jeremiah wrote:

“Behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord, “That I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness; A King shall reign and prosper, and execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will

dwell safely; Now this is His name by which He will be called: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNES” (Jer. 23:5-6).

The parallel text (33:16-17) affirms “this is the name by which SHE will be called . . .” (emp. added). Because the title is here applied to Jerusalem some say it also properly belongs to Israel in 23:6. However, the context strongly supports this as designating a personal Messianic title and was interpreted thusly by the Jews in the *Targum*, *Midrash*, and *Talmud* (Smith, J. E., *Messiah* 347). The designation given Messiah here designates the very essence of this One. He is the Lord. He is Our Righteousness. As connected with verse five, the title implies His deity and His vicarious, substitutionary work.

“But of Him you are in Christ Jesus who became for us wisdom from God and righteousness” (1 Cor. 1:30). Israel being “ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law” (Rom. 10:3-4). “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). Paul affirmed that he suffered the loss of all things that he might gain Christ “and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness . . . but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith” (Philip. 3:9). The Gospel of Christ is the power of God unto salvation, because in it is revealed the righteousness of God (i.e. how God makes men righteous) (Rom. 1:16-17). All our righteousnesses are like filthy rags (Isa. 64:6) but, in Christ, through the merits of His blood, we are forgiven and made righteousness (Eph. 1:7). The One designated by Jeremiah as “THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS” (23:6; 33:16) is the same One of whom Isaiah prophetically spoke when he stated, “. . . By His knowledge My righteous servant shall justify many . . .” (53:11). By a knowledge of Him (i.e. hearing, believing, and obeying the truth of the Gospel, (cf. Heb. 8:11-12), sinful man is made free from the guilt and consequences of his sin (unrighteousness, cf. 1 John 5:17a; John 8:32).

Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., shows the connection between the aforementioned prophecy in Jeremiah and our text in Malachi. He wrote:

Meanwhile the righteous God will come as “*the Sun of Righteousness*” (4:2). No doubt Malachi means to point to Christ when He speaks of this one who is the “Light of the world,” “the LORD our Righteousness” (Jer. 23:5-6). Did not Zechariah blend together Malachi 4:2 with Isaiah 9:2 in Luke 1:76-79, in that he saw the messianic connotations in the name “Branch,” which also had the same root “to sprout, or to spring forth” in it, and thus linked up with the “sunrise” of the Greek translation of Malachi 4:2? Thus righteousness, with all its attending consequences, will arise for those who fear the name of God. (486)

“Therefore, those scholars who view the sun as pointing to the Messiah as the One characterized by righteousness, One acting righteously and producing righteousness, have the correct understanding of the passage” (Van Groningen 933-34).

### **The Great Sun**

Z. T. Sweeney (1849-1926) edited a volume titled, *Pulpit Diagrams* (n.d.). Fifty years ago, the Gospel Advocate Company published this work in a new edition. The book contains 48 brief sermons and corresponding visual charts and diagrams that illustrate the main points of the sermons. I am indebted to W. Terry Varner for calling my attention to a section titled “The Great Sun,” based on Malachi 4:2, which appears in Sweeney’s work (32-33). The following diagram, excluding terminology, is taken from this book. With a few exceptions, the terminology used to identify the main points in the material that follows is my own. It is the artwork done by D.O. Darling under the aforementioned title, “The Great Sun,” and the basic premise, that I document from Sweeney’s work. He wrote, “A Beautiful metaphor: the Sun of Righteousness compared to the sun of the solar system” (32). “Here is one of the most picturesque descriptions of the Messiah to be found in the Old Testament” (Gill 405).

### **Messiah's Rising**

With the rising of the sun comes a new day. God asked Job, "Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place?" (Job 38:12). The Psalmist declared, "The day is Yours, the night also is Yours; You have prepared the light and the sun" (Ps. 74:16). In the fullness of the time (Gal. 4:4), God made the Sun of Righteousness (Messiah) to rise and His coming resulted in a new day of God's dealings with man. "God, who at various times and in different ways spoke in

time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son . . ." (Heb. 1:1-2). Isaiah prophesied: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined" (Isa. 9:2). Matthew applies this to Jesus' Great Galilean Ministry (Matt. 4:12-16). James E. Smith wrote,

When Zacharias prophesied concerning his son John he tied together Malachi 4:2 and Isaiah 9:2. "And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Highest, for you shall go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways. To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:76-79).

Verse 76 is an obvious allusion to Malachi 3:1. Furthermore, the angel cited the book of Malachi in his prior description of the mission of Zacharias' son (Luke 1:17). This makes it likely that the *dayspring from on high* in Luke 1:78 is Zacharias' allusion to the Sun of Righteousness. (*Messiah* 465-66)

" . . . Malachi's focus is salvifically eschatological, referring to an entirely new and grand era, not merely . . . a few years . . . ahead of his own" (Stuart 1387).

Prophetically, Malachi declared that the Messianic (Christian) Dispensation involves both judgment and blessing. "For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble, and the day which is coming shall burn them up. . . . The Sun . . . shall arise with healing . . ." (vv. 1-2).

As the great sun suddenly springs up above the Plains of Moab, spread his rays of light over all the country, and flashes them over Judah and Jerusalem, giving life and light, so the Sun of Righteousness, the messenger of the covenant

shall come and shall send his rays of divine righteousness which shall burn up the wicked and bring its blessings to his own. “Ye shall go forth and gambol as calves of the stall,” i.e., be happy and prosperous and blessed. “And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I do this thing, saith Jehovah of hosts.” This passage is paralleled in Matthew 3:11-12. (Carroll 342)

The expression “healing in His wings” (v. 2) is “the picture of the sun rising, that is, the Day of Yahweh beginning, in a manner that brings righteousness” (Stuart 1388). The Gospel, proclaimed in its fullness for the first time on Pentecost following the resurrection of Christ, is the power of God unto salvation and therein is the righteousness of God (i.e. how God makes man righteous) revealed (Rom. 1:16-17).

### **Messiah’s Glory**

There is the sense in which the Sun is the most conspicuous thing the eye of man sees. Henderson called it “. . . the most glorious and beneficent object which meets the human eye” (461). Such, in part, is because of its size and heat. In addition to its surface temperature of approximately twelve thousand degrees Fahrenheit at its core, the Sun’s “diameter is 864,938 miles which makes the sun 109 times larger than the Earth. Approximately 1,300,000 Earths could fit inside the Sun” (Pugh, *Acclamation* 16-17).

When Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James, and John, His “face shone like the sun” (Matt. 17:2). When John was “in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day” (Rev. 1:10) he saw His countenance to be “like the sun shining in its strength” (Rev. 1:10-12, 16). The writer of the Hebrews epistle describes Jesus as “being the brightness of His [God’s] glory and the express image of His person” (Heb. 1:3). Alford says on this that “the Son of God is, in this his essential majesty, the expression, and the sole expression, of the divine Light,—not . . . its reflection” (7). Rogers explains:

The active meaning has the idea of emitting brightness, so it means that the *shekinah* glory of God radiated from Him . . . not so much that of reflection, but rather the radiation through the source of the light. *It is as the sun radiates its rays of light. . . . It refers to the brilliant radiancy from the person of God. . . .* (516, emp. added)

Just as the Sun is unique and conspicuous in its distinctiveness to the human eye even so He is “*The incomparable Christ*. There is nobody like him; there never has been, and there never will be” (Stott 17). As the Psalmist acknowledged in his “Fairest Lord Jesus!” Psalm: “You are fairer than the sons of men . . .” (Ps. 45:2).

### **Messiah’s Light**

“Most of the Bible’s references to the sun are to the sun as the source of light” (Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman 827). A key passage which connects the Messiah with the metaphor of light and significantly links this with Malachi is Luke 1:76-79. As suggested earlier it is likely that the reference “the Dayspring on high has visited us” (Luke 1:78) is an allusion to the Sun of Righteousness (Mal. 4:2). *Dayspring (anatole)* “was a term used among Greek-speaking Jews to describe the expected king of the House of David. . . . [T]he idea of a rising light had been widely associated with the birth of the Messiah or his coming” (Brown 390). The word refers to “the Davidic Messiah as Light that arises or as a Branch” (Rogers 110). Not only is it the case that this metaphor (i.e. Light) as used in the Luke passage (1:76-79) connects with Malachi 3:1; 4:2, but the connection is also observed in the Gospel of John:

And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John [cf. Mal. 3:1]. This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light [cf. Mal. 4:2], that all through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light which gives light to every man who comes into the world. (1:5-9)

Man needs light to dispel darkness, and to guide him in life's situations where he is bewildered and perplexed. Warren observed:

In ordinary times, when men think of the sun, they think of the source of light. They think of warmth, good cheer, vitality, strength, beauty, and fruitfulness. Many times the sufferer (especially those who have suffered for a long time) come to dread the night. They dread that time of night when all of the others in the family are asleep, but they, the sufferers, lie awake because of both the pain which tears at their bodies and the fear which torments their spirits. How, in the midst of the long dreary hours of the night, they long for the light of the morning sun! How they long for the first faint rays of light in the eastern sky. How blessed to the sufferer is the light of the sun! (*Sun* 12)

“The light of the sun brings day and its absence brings night” (Steidl 81). Jesus claimed, “I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life” (John 8:12). He lived in the world, and is the Sun of the world. “The great and wise of every land—poets, philosophers, inventors, teachers—may be compared to the stars, but He alone is the Sun” (Stalker qtd. in Nicoll 508). He enlightens man to the greatest knowledge. He reveals God in the greatest way. He brings us out of darkness and through the shadow of death and will deliver us to a land that is fairer than day far above and beyond the stars and the Sun. There will be no night there. No lamp or light of the Sun will be needed for the Lord God will give light (Rev. 22:5). He is “my Lord and my God” (John 20:28), and “. . . the Lord God is a sun and a shield . . .” (Ps. 84:11). If you want to triumph over darkness, stand in the presence of the Sun of Righteousness!

Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and He delivered them out of their distresses, and He led them forth by the right way, that they might go to a city for habitation. . . . For He satisfies the longing soul, and fills the hungry soul with goodness. Those who sat in darkness

and in the shadow of death [cf. Matt. 4:16; Luke 1:79], bound in affliction and irons—Because they rebelled against the words of God, and despised the counsel of the Most High. . . . They fell down and there was none to help. Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble. And He saved them out of their distresses. He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and broke their chains in pieces. . . . He guides them to their desired haven. (Ps. 107:6-7, 9-14, 30)

### **Messiah's Life**

“Merely as a physical phenomenon, the sun . . . is the ultimate source of life and as such is a fitting metaphor for God himself . . .” (Ryken, Wilhoit and Longman 827). This is metaphorically presented in the Sun of Righteousness who rises with “healing in His wings.” *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* says, “This draws on the imagery of the sun as the source of life” (827). Strobel, in *The Case for a Creator*, includes a chapter on the evidence for God from astronomy and says, “[T]he key to continued life on Earth is the sun . . .” (216).

Jesus not only claimed to be the way and the truth, but He said, “I am . . . the life.” Here is an example of the figure of speech known as metonymy (the effect is put when the cause is meant). Life is what Jesus produces. He is the source of life. He came that we might have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10). In Him was life (John 1:14). To have life we must come to Him (John 5:40). He is the bread of God from heaven that gives spiritual life (John 6:33). Thus, He is the bread of life (John 6:48). He gave His flesh for the life of the world (John 6:51). Unless we eat of His flesh and drink of His blood, which is equivalent to hearing and obeying His words (John 6:63), we have no life (John 6:53). He is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25). Through His appearing, He has abolished death and “brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tim. 1:10). He is the life, because His way of life

provides the “promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come” (1 Tim. 4:8). Christianity provides the greatest way to live now (in this life), and the greatest way to prepare for death and what lies beyond, with the promise of eternal life. Through a knowledge of Him, we have all things that pertain to life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3).

**THE WAY-THE TRUTH-THE LIFE.** He is not merely a way, a truth, or a life. He is exclusively **THE** way, **THE** truth, and **THE** life. There is no other way of salvation (Acts 4:12). There is no other source of the truth that saves (cf. John 16:13; John 8:31-32). There is no other source of eternal life (1 John 5:12). (Pugh, *Things* 74)

Combining both the life and light imagery, Paul wrote that Jesus Christ “. . . has abolished death and brought *life* and immortality to *light* through the gospel” (2 Tim. 1:10, emp. added). Warren explained in the following:

. . . [T]here is a sense in which every person is “immortal” from the moment of conception. This is the case because the soul of a person does not die when his physical body dies (Matt. 10:28). Thus, there is a sense in which one might use the word “immortal” to refer even to wicked men. This is the case because there will never be an end to any human being (no human being—not even the grossly wicked ones—will ever cease to exist). Jesus brought life and immortality to light (II Tim. 1:10) in explaining that the *soul*—while subject to spiritual death—is not subject to the same death as is the *body*. It was in explaining that the soul (in contrast to the mortality of the body) is not subject to the same death as is the body that Jesus brought life and immortality to light (II Tim. 1:10). This truth was enhanced by His own resurrection from the dead. (*Immortality* 235-36)

### **Messiah’s Influence**

The influence of the Sun is felt and seen universally. The Psalmist said, “Its rising is from one end of heaven, and its circuit to the other end; And there is nothing hidden from its heat” (Ps. 19:6).

The sun, like the stars, brings its message to every gazing eye. . . . It obediently runs its God-given track, spreading its influence across the planet. . . . Its healing is felt by people from one end of the globe to the other. If anyone, anywhere, should miss the lesson that the sun teaches, it is not because he has not been blessed by its rays or been under the spell of its warmth. (Cloer 248)

Not only is it the case that the sun benefits and blesses all persons (cf. Matt. 5:45) everywhere on Earth but, through it, as Warren wrote,

God gives His message in such fashion that all men around the world can understand that He is God . . . a “silent” message that reaches around the entirety of the world. No one has an adequate excuse for not knowing it. God has a universal message in nature, and He has a universal message today in His gospel.” (*Heavens* 109-10)

The Sun of Righteousness (Messiah), just as the physical Sun, exercises a great impact and influence. In fact, the Messiah’s influence goes far beyond the Earth. Jesus said, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven *and* on earth . . .” (Matt. 28:18, emp. added). Malcolm Muggeridge, noted British satirist of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century wrote,

The coming of Jesus into the world is the most stupendous event in human history. . . . [T]he conclusion—to me inescapable—that whatever is truly admirable . . . in art and literature, in music and architecture, in the quest for knowledge and in the pursuit of justice and brotherliness in

human relations, derives from that same event, I cannot but see it as towering sublimely above all others. (7)

Pelikan at the beginning of his wide-ranging book, *Jesus through the Centuries*, wrote,

. . . Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western culture. . . . If it were possible, with some sort of supermagnet, to pull up out of that history every scrap of metal bearing at least a trace of his name, how much would be left? It is from his birth that most of the human race dates its calendars, it is by his name that millions curse and in his name that millions pray. (1)

The influence of the Messiah (the Sun of Righteousness) extends even beyond the physical world to “the principalities and powers in heavenly places” who are impacted by the manifold wisdom of God evidenced in the church according to the eternal purpose of God accomplished in Christ (Eph. 3:10-11). Peter wrote that angels desire “*to look into*” the things of the Christ relating to His sufferings “testified beforehand” in the prophetic Scriptures, and “the glories that would follow” (1 Peter 1:11-12, emp. added). “To look into” (*parakupsai*) means “to stretch forward the head, esp. through a window or door . . . ‘to catch a glimpse of’” (Rogers 568). So influential and powerful are the things of the Christ that even the angelic, heavenly beings desire to catch a glimpse of this Sun of Righteousness! They join together in multitude “ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice” that this One, whose countenance is like the sun shining in its strength, is worthy to receive power, riches, wisdom, strength, honor, glory, and blessing (cf. Rev. 1:16; 5:12).

### **Messiah’s Preeminence**

All of the above, and more, implies the preeminence of the Christ. Paul wrote, “And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He

may have the preeminence” (first place in everthing-NASV, Col. 1:18). Deaver affirmed,

The “Sun of Righteousness” is without doubt the Messiah, the Christ. . . . In this, the Christian age, God deals with **ALL MEN** only upon the terms of the Gospel of Christ. What the sun is to the solar system, the Christ (the Sun of Righteousness) is to the Scheme of Redemption and to all humanity. (329)

In our solar system, everything revolves around the Sun. It is the center. In his volume, *The Astronomy of the Bible*, Professor Mitchel stated:

The great center, the mighty reservoir of light and heat, is made exhaustless; pouring for ever from its bosom a flood of light and heat . . . with a velocity overwhelming. . . . The earth, the recipient of these beams of heat and light, must turn its various faces to the source of life. . . . Not a blade of grass, or a delicate flower shoots into life, that is not dependent on the entire organization of the vast scheme of planetary worlds, which sweep in concord around their common center. (75-76, 78)

As there is the sense in which physical life on Earth revolves around the Sun, so there is the sense in which the person and work of Jesus Christ is the center of human existence and destiny. “The most inexhaustible, inspiring, and important subject that can ever occupy the minds of men is the person and work of Jesus Christ” (Smith, W. 52). Fairbairn summed it up eloquently in the following:

The greatest problems in the field of history centre in the Person and Life of Christ. Who He was, what He was, how and why He came to be it, are questions that have not lost and will not lose their interest for us and for mankind. For the problems that centre in Jesus have this peculiarity:

they are not individual, but general—concern not a person, but the world. How we are to judge Him is not simply a curious point for historical criticism, but a vital matter for religion. Jesus Christ is the most powerful spiritual force that ever operated for good on and in humanity. He is today what He has been for centuries—an object of reverence and love to the good, the cause of remorse and change, penitence and hope to the bad; of moral strength to the morally weak, of inspiration to the despondent, consolation to the desolate, and cheer to the dying. He has created the typical virtues and moral ambitions of civilized man; has been to the benevolent a motive to beneficence, to the selfish a persuasion to self-forgetful obedience; and has become the living ideal that has steadied and raised, awed and guided youth, braced and ennobled manhood, mellowed and beautified age. In Him the Christian ages have seen the manifested God, the Eternal living in time, the Infinite within the limits of humanity; and their faith has glorified His sufferings into a sacrifice by the Creator for the creature, His death into an atonement for human sin. No other life has done such work, no other person been made to bear such transcendent and mysterious meanings. It is impossible to touch Jesus without touching millions of hearts now living or yet to live. He is whatever else He may be, as a world's imperishable wonder, a world's everlasting problem, as a pre-eminent object of human faith, a pre-eminent subject of human thought. (1-2)

### **Messiah's Joy**

One of the results of the rising of the Sun of Righteousness is “healing in His wings; and you shall go out and grow fat like stall-fed calves” (Mal. 4:2). The sun is a source of great energy. “. . . [E]ach square yard of the surface generates 70,000 horsepower, and its surface area is  $7 \times 10^{18}$  (7 billion billion) square yards! . . . Yet the fraction of the sun's energy that actually arrives on the earth is only two-billionth” (Steidl 85). “The Sun is like a giant nuclear engine. It gives off more energy in a single second than

mankind has produced since the Creation. It converts 8 million tons of matter into energy every second” (Thompson 4).

The Sun of Righteousness has “healing in His wings.” This is a metaphor that pictures “healing for broken hearts and perplexed minds” (Smith, J. E., *Minor Prophets* 650). The “wings” of the sun are its rays, and it is the picture of warmth, happiness, joy, and spiritual energy (cf. Stuart 1388) that are the result of forgiveness and salvation. Poole says, “[H]is beams and rays shall bring health and strength, with delight and joy, safety and security” (1029). Connected with this is the figure of “skip about like calves from the stall” (NASV) or “leaping like calves from the stall” (ESV). Van Groningen comments, “[T]here will be great joy, expressed in an exuberant manner. Anyone who has witnessed calves in springtime turned loose in a pasture will have no difficulty understanding Malachi's metaphor” (934). Kaiser says, “[T]he long winter of suffering for the righteous would come to a glorious end. Those who feared God's name would feel as invigorated as calves released after a long winter boxed in a stall (Mic. 2:13)” (486). Feinberg summarizes, “Through the redeeming activity of the Deliverer the godly will go forth, escaping the judgment to come upon the evildoers. . . . Such will be . . . their vitality, and their joy, that they will gambol as calves of the stall” (267). “The sun emits two kinds of rays: the one which cause light, and the other which cause heat, the first are not life-giving; but the second are the agency which calls the principle of life into active energy” (Row 41-42). The Sun of Righteousness is not only the source of illumination through the light of the Gospel (cf. 2 Cor. 4:3-4), but He also brings joy as one obeys the Gospel (cf. Luke 2:10; Acts 8:39; 1 Peter 1:8).

The prophet Isaiah declared this marvelous joy of the salvation of Christ when he wrote, “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord. My soul shall be joyful in my God; For He has clothed me with the garments of salvation. He has covered me with the robe of righteousness” (Isa. 61:10).

### Messiah's Truth

McGarvey and Pendleton ask, "If one refuses to believe in the sun when he sees its light, feels its heat and witnesses its life-giving power by what sign will you demonstrate to him the existence of the sun?" (385). Likewise, it is argued, "The personality of Jesus was the great proof of His divinity, but the Jews, though familiar with that personality, refused to consider it, and kept clamoring for a sign" (385). As the existence of the sun is obvious, even so I affirm the person of the Sun of Righteousness (Jesus Christ) is beyond human invention. Citing the work of the philosopher, John Stuart Mill, in his classic work on Christian Evidences, C. A. Row reasoned it is inconceivable that Jesus could have been a human invention because His character is "absolutely above the conceptions of His followers, of the primitive Christians, or even of the Apostle Paul. . . . His character and teaching stands at an elevation far above their conceptions" (85-86). More recently, Dinesh D'Souza argues, "The Christ we encounter in the New Testament is so extraordinary that it's hard to imagine the Gospel writers inventing such a person" (295).

Ernest Renan was a brilliant 19<sup>th</sup> Century linguist. In 1848 he won the Volney Prize for his *Essay on the Semitic Languages*. He was appointed professor of Hebrew at the College de France in 1862. But he used the occasion of his inaugural lecture to denounce the deity of Christ. He was promptly dismissed but later restored to his teaching position. His most famous work was *The Life of Jesus* published in 1863. He argued Jesus was a deluded fanatic, and the Christian religion was not a divine purpose. However, the final words he wrote in this book are as follows:

But whatever may be the unexpected phenomena of the future, Jesus will not be surpassed. His worship will constantly renew its youth, the tale of his life will cause ceaseless tears, his sufferings will soften the best hearts; all the ages will proclaim that among the sons of men there is none born who is greater than Jesus. (227)

### Conclusion

Theodoret of Cyrrhus (AD 393-466) in his commentary on Malachi 4:2 summarized the meaning of our text:

This applies both to the first coming of our Savior and the second: in the first he rose like a kind of sun for us who were seated in darkness and shadow, freed us from sin, gave us a share in righteousness . . . and provided healing for our souls. In the second coming for those worn out in the present life he will appear either in accord with their will or against it, and as a just judge he will judge justly and provide the promised good things. Just as the material sun in its rising awakens to work those in the grip of sleep, so in his coming he raises up those in the grip of the long sleep of death. (qtd. in Ferreiro 311)

The observatory of the biblical prophets has many telescopes of all shapes and sizes, but they are all focused ultimately on the One who is the Great Sun—the Sun of Righteousness—Jesus Christ. More important than knowing how the heavens go is knowing how to go to heaven through the person and work of the Sun of Righteousness—the Light of the world (Mal. 4:2; John 1:6-9; 8:12). He is truly the center of the great Scheme of Redemption. May He be the center of our lives (cf. Philip. 1:21). And may we, in the words of John Stott, ". . . [A]cknowledge Jesus Christ . . . as deserving the description 'incomparable'. For he has neither rivals nor peers" (13).

Sun of my soul, Thou Savior dear,  
It is not night if Thou be near;  
O may no earthborn cloud arise  
To hide Thee from Thy servant's eyes.

Abide with me from morn till eve,  
For without Thee I cannot live;  
Abide with me when night is nigh,  
For without Thee I dare not die.

John Keble

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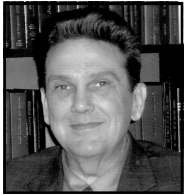
### Biographical Sketch

Charles C. Pugh III is in his 42<sup>nd</sup> year of preaching the Gospel of Christ. He is one of the founders of West Virginia School of Preaching where he serves as an instructor. He has studied and taught for more than 30 years in the field of Christian Apologetics and teaches three apologetics courses at WVSOP as well as other courses. Since 1999, due to a vocal fold disease, much of his work has been concentrated in the areas of writing and publishing. He is the author of several books and tracts and owner of Threefold Publications. He preaches several Gospel meetings yearly and appears on various lectureships. He and his wife Sharon have two daughters, one son, a granddaughter, and grandson.

# Harsh Words Against God

*J. D. Conley*

What a valuable addition this book will be to our libraries. The West Virginia School of Preaching Victory Lectureship books are among the finest in the brotherhood. Presently, there exists a need for material on the Minor Prophets. This offering on Zephaniah,



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Haggai, and Malachi will help meet that need. But without the sound guidance of the Hillview Terrace eldership, there would be not only no book, but no lectureship or school either. The fact this marks the 14<sup>th</sup> annual Victory Lectureship is a credit to their leadership. Gratitude is also extended to the school's director, Denver Cooper, each member of the faculty, and to the lectureship committee. Without their tireless efforts this series of lectures would not be a reality. It has been a rich blessing to attend most of the lectures in the school's history. It has been a distinct pleasure and high honor to have now appeared on this my 8<sup>th</sup> Victory Lectureship. Let me express my sincerest thanks to the committee for the invitation.

## Introduction

In my nearly half century of living upon God's creation I have never witnessed the degree of disrespect for Him as I am currently seeing. His holy name is thrown around like a rag doll, or slung like a bag of garbage into a dumpster. But it is not just His sacred name that is flippantly tossed about, His very character/nature, behind His holy appellation, is being assaulted. Many intellectuals,

Hollywood celebrities (dare I use those two terms in the same sentence?), socialites, the so-called movers and shakers, seem to be gripped by a loathing for the Almighty. At every turn there seems to exist a sustained and fevered pitch of vitriol for our Creator. As a child of God, this both saddens me and angers me. Yet, it is "no new thing" (Eccl. 1:9). Permit me to offer a sordid smattering.

## Attacks and Assaults Displayed

Unfortunately one does not have to think long and hard to come up with a vast array of harsh words that have been spoken against God. The list of those who have done so is indescribably long and getting longer each day. These verbal forays range from "mildly" offensive to out and out blasphemy. In either case God is offended. If the list contained only one offender the list would be one name too long and the lone infraction heinous. Alas, to our supreme disappointment, such a brief cast of ungodly characters does not exist. Provided you are up for it, let us peruse the broad gamut of offenders and hear a few of their demeaning quotes:

- ❖ "Who is the Lord that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I know not the Lord, neither will I let Israel go"—Pharaoh (Ex. 5:2).
- ❖ "Hearken not unto Hezekiah, when he persuadeth you, saying, The Lord will deliver us. . . . The Lord should deliver Jerusalem out of mine hand"—Sennacherib (2 Kings 18:32-35).
- ❖ "And who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands?"—Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 3:15).
- ❖ "If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross. Likewise also the chief priests mocking him . . . said, He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him. He trusted God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God" — Chief Priests, Scribes and Elders (Matt. 27:40-42).

Though it may be argued these harsh words were uttered in abject ignorance, they were nonetheless cruel and blasphemous. But what about those who should know better?

The white-haired showboat televangelist, Jesse Duplantis, takes God's name in vain in almost every sentence that leaves his mouth. His sermons, (monologues), are laced with countless frivolous references to God. His carelessness with God's name is readily apparent after only listening for a few minutes. Duplantis needs to read and heed the following, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain" (Ex. 20:7).

Even the notable C. S. Lewis, who penned one of the greatest books ever on the existence of God, *Mere Christianity*, began to question his faith in God as seen in his disappointing work, *A Grief Observed*. Written after his wife died of cancer, he questioned not God's existence, but His character:

Meanwhile, where is God? . . . [G]o to Him when your need is desperate . . . and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as turn away. . . . Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not "So there is no God after all," but "So this is what God is really like. Deceive yourself no longer." (6, 7)

Although toward the end of the book Lewis seems to come around with a modicum of his faith in God restored, his angry speculations caused him damage and God harm.

Then we have the insipid input of Hollywood. Philip Pullman in his movie *The Golden Compass*, would like to assume the mantle of Lewis, sans Lewis' religious convictions. Pullman's flick depicts a couple of twelve year-olds killing God, entailing of course both harsh words and actions against God. The gullible Godless public have two more Pullman movies to anticipate, provided his two other books in the trilogy are put on film.

At last year's 59<sup>th</sup> Emmy Awards, the fouled-mouth comedian, Kathy Griffin, a self-styled militant atheist, spewed these despicable words upon accepting her award:

"A lot of people come up here and thank Jesus for this. He had nothing to do with this. \_\_\_\_\_! This award is my god now." [Note: For the entire quote, Google: "Kathy Griffin's Jesus Remark"]

Her railing remarks were cut from the pre-taped telecast of the show by the Academy of Television's Arts and Sciences. When asked about her speech backstage, the unremorseful and caustic Griffin added: "I hope I offended some people. I didn't want to win the Emmy for nothing."

Unfortunately, harsh words against God are not limited to the Bible, literature and Hollywood. Atheism, and the hatred for God so closely associated with it, is big business. Harsh words against God make money. Atheism, like all other sins, is becoming more mainstream in our culture. Anti-theism may be even bigger business. One of the more notable anti-theists is Christopher Hitchens, the proud author of the putrid book, *God Is Not Great*. The anti-theist differs from the atheist in that the atheist bases his unbelief in God on so-called evidence. Whereas an anti-theist is a bit more like an agnostic who may grudgingly concede, "God may exist" but with this twist, "I don't want Him to!" This is the camp Hitchens and many in Hollywood and higher education choose to be in today. Anti-theism is more flexible than atheism in it allows for Hitchens, and those like him, to defame and ridicule God, something contradictory and counterproductive for an avowed atheist to do. Nothing is more absurd than for an atheist to take God's name in vain. But the anti-theist is permitted that luxury, (so he thinks). What words could be more harsh against God than the title of Hitchen's book? Perhaps someone should write a book entitled, *Hitchens Is Not Great*. I wonder, would it sell?

Our greatly lamented brother in Christ, Thomas B. Warren, had the unpleasant task of grappling with the venomous atheist Joe E.

Barnhart. In 1980, during *The Warren-Barnhart Debate On Christian Ethics versus Utilitarian Ethics*, Barnhart referred to brother Warren's God in these repulsive terms, most of them more than once:

. . . Cosmic Being . . . Cosmic Sadist . . . Cosmic Godfather . . . Cosmic Lunatic . . . Cosmic Cat . . . Cosmic Despot . . . Cosmic Sociopath . . . Cosmic Stalin . . . Cosmic Hoodlum . . . Cosmic Creep . . . Cosmic Butcher . . . Cosmic Nazi. (Warren and Barnhart 17, 18, 38, 39, 40, 80,150, 153)

Barnhart omitted the most important one, "A Cosmic Long Sufferer."

The staunch Darwinist Richard Dawkins, professor of zoology at Oxford University, has offered his heartfelt words regarding God:

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all of fiction: jealous, and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynist, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully. (31)

Of course more ilk could be tossed into this putrid cauldron of quotes. In her lifetime, "The Most Hated Woman in America," Madeline Murray O'Hair, effectively spewed forth enough blasphemy to sway our Supreme Court to remove prayer from school.

The blatant atheistic philosopher, Fredrick Nietzsche, smugly spoke of himself as: "Successor to the dead God," and "An Atheist by instinct" (qtd. in Hubben 98, 99). In the 1960's a man by the name of Thomas J. J. Altizer, took Nietzsche's idea of a dead God monopolizing it with his popular "God Is Dead." campaign.

All three of these staunch enemies of God have now moved on to considerably warmer nether-regions. O'Hair was murdered,

Nietzsche spent the last 11 years of his life in an asylum, and now much to Altizer's chagrin, he is dead, and God is not. This is, perhaps, a fitting and providential demise for this trio.

### **Atrocious Attitudes Deplored**

I must confess I found these harsh words hard to type. It is my conviction that Christians should take insults toward God *personally*! Harsh words against God should make our blood boil and flesh crawl. "Do not I hate them, O LORD, that hate thee? and am not I grieved with those that rise up against thee? I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them mine enemies" (Ps. 139:21-22). *Amen*, David! "I beheld the transgressors, and was grieved . . ." (Ps. 119:158). If the likes of Griffin, Hitchens, and Dawkins intended to push my buttons, they accomplished more than that, they *jammed* them! Brace yourself, there will be more "button jammers" to come. Paul promised, "Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them" (2 Tim. 3:12-14).

In the face of such discouragement and disgust may we recall these words of Jesus, "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven" (Matt. 5:11-12). David wrote, "Fret not thyself because of evildoers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity. For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb" (Ps. 37:1-2). Remember, "God is angry with the wicked every day. . . . The Lord is furious; the Lord will take vengeance on his adversaries, and he reserveth wrath for his enemies" (Ps. 7:11; Nah. 1:2).

What is more hurtful than for a Christian to hear the holy name of God smeared? Furthermore, what other evil can compete with that? What is a more patently false and fruitless endeavor than the character assassination of God Almighty? Is this not most deplorable? Is this not cause for righteous indignation to well up

and be properly vented? Yes, and we must fight and contend against the onslaught, (Jude 3). But unlike our Godless antagonists, we subscribe to a set of Divine rules that dictate how this battle is to be waged. We do not have the supposed freedom to lash out like our opponents. When confronted with such vicious barbs may we be “Wise as serpents, harmless as doves” (Matt. 10:16). Let us clothe ourselves in the glowing garb of the Beatitudes, speaking the truth in love and showing patience at every turn, always remembering vengeance belongs to God. (Matt. 5:1-12; Eph. 4:15; 1 Peter 2:20; Rom. 12:19). Never forget “God is not mocked” (Gal. 6:7). While God *has* been mocked so vehemently throughout history, and up to this very moment, what Paul is actually telling the Galatians is that God is not mocked with impunity. There will be a horrific price to pay! No one is going to get away with profaning His high and matchless name. None should be fooled in this most serious matter just “because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily” (Eccl. 8:11).

“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31). “Our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29). Let all those who profane His holy name beware! His Son is coming, “In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that **know not God**, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power” (2 Thess. 1:8-9, emp. added).

Let us now turn our attention to yet another set of harsh words aimed at God in our short but important text, Malachi 3:13-15.

### Ancient Age Described

Malachi writes:

Your words have been stout against me, saith the Lord. Yet ye say, What have we spoken so much against thee? Ye have said, It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the Lord of hosts? And now we

call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered. (Mal. 3:13-15)

Having read this passage how many of us would be prone to say, “Wait just a minute Malachi, you *must* be exaggerating. After considering all of these terrible things that have been said about God, by comparison these folks don’t seem all that bad. There is not an atheist in the bunch!”

While the words Malachi etched are not incendiary as the ones noted earlier, they are nonetheless harsh. It should be understood one need not curse God or stomp on His name to be guilty of harsh words against Him. All one needs to do is simply accuse God of ungodliness, using common ordinary words, and that is sufficient to get the dirty job done. This is exactly what the Jews in the text did. Whereas they did not use vile and vicious verbiage in their speech, the venom was there. God was insulted. Words do not have to be vulgar and blasphemous in order for God to be accosted. If our hearts are polluted our words will come out harsh (Matt. 12:34).

Let us consider some things that prompted these stout words against the Lord. Clearly the overall context of the book shows that the people’s actions were against God. Actions usually follow words, but words can also follow actions. Such was the case here. There were a host of calloused actions on the Jews’ part that pre-empted their heartless words. Namely, not only had the people become spiritually lax, so had the priests. Defective sacrifices were being offered. The people were being stingy in their giving. Divorce had become commonplace and, to compound the problem, the people had become skeptical with God and dis-enamored with righteousness. They had drawn the awful conclusion that serving God was a colossal waste of time. To say the least, God was not pleased with their pathetic attitude. Through Malachi God now has some harsh things to say Himself.

“Your words have been stout against me, saith the Lord” (v. 13). God had been withholding His blessings for the reasons mentioned earlier. Now He gives them yet another reason, “You have said strong things against Me.” Notice, these infidel Jews recoil in

shock, “What have we spoken so much against thee?” They could not fathom the charge. Maybe they thought, “Lord we haven’t cursed you or taken your name in vain, why are you so upset with us?” God enlightens them in the next verse.

“Ye have said, It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the lord of hosts?” (v. 14). Sounds like something an anti-theist would say, does it not? “God is there, but so what?” “Where has my faith in Him gotten me?” “Since He does not seem to care for me, why should I care for Him?” Harsh words? Certainly! “It is as if they were serving the Lord for hire and as if He were indebted to them for their service” (Hailey 422).

“Even repentance they have declared to be useless” (Clarke 804). They claimed to have repented but they sure had a strange understanding of the concept. They mourned not over sin, but over lost blessings. They grieved not because of broken fellowship but a broken supply line. Repentance to them was motivated not by godly sorrow but by human greed. They saw repentance as a twisted way in which to be materially blessed. I wonder how many today see repentance in that vein, no more than superficial sorrow expressed in return for God’s continued blessings? Make no mistake, this kind of thinking will incur God’s wrath now as much as it did then.

“And now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered” (v. 15). How presumptuous can God’s people become? How offensive these words must have been to God! “The proud happy?” “If you want to be happy become a arrogant sinner, they seem to enjoy life, they appear to prosper.” That is the thrust of what was being advanced here. But this is not all these complainers had to offer. Listen to what Hailey wrote: “The murmurers further charged that the proud who worked wickedness were built up by Jehovah and that, though they tempted Jehovah, they escaped from judgment” (Hailey 422).

God is accused of not only setting the wicked up to prosper but perhaps the meaning also suggests God installs the wicked in places of trust and power. Furthermore He does so without the

wicked ever having to give an account for their evil behavior. Stout words? Yes. Words that cut God just as deep as anything an atheist, agnostic, skeptic, anti-theist, or Hollywood producer can shout.

### **Astounding Accompaniment Denounced**

At their core, the people in Malachi’s day were no different from you and I. This is why we must ever be on guard against adopting any of their unspiritual similarities. How many times in our lives have we been guilty of doing the same thing as these ancient Jews? Could it be that our accompaniment with them is astoundingly close? O maybe we have not been as blatant as they were in our words, maybe we have not verbalized our thoughts to anyone, much less God, yet there still exists a chord of similarity with them. We see the wicked prosper in every way. Even those who claim to be preachers are blessed with millions of dollars, private jets, and huge congregations. They enjoy lavish lifestyles and preach in grandiose cathedrals. Disheartened, we look around and wonder, “Where is God?” “Why am I not blessed as much?” “I am a *true* Christian, I have repented of my sins.” “I give, I worship,” “I...” It is real easy to morph over? Before long we begin feeling sorry for ourselves, much like Malachi’s audience. Self-pity turns into resentment and bitterness. From there it is just a twitch of the tongue until harsh words against God begin to come out of *our* mouth! To borrow from a context where foolish speech is condemned, “Let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints” (Eph. 5:3).

This is precisely why this text, (Mal. 3:13-15), is extremely germane to those of us in the Lord’s church today. How many times have you heard a brother or sister say, “Well, I didn’t get anything out of the worship service today,” as though the service revolves around meeting their so-called felt needs. That is not to say there are no personal benefits gleaned by attending worship. We are edified, encouraged, and educated in God’s Word. But if the only reason we attend worship is to receive and not give, then whatever it is, it is not worship. If we look at worship as a way to *get* something from God as opposed to *giving* something to God, then we make God our servant, not our Lord. Essentially these

Jews were turning God into an idol. “God, we will serve you provided you give us what we want.” They were trying to manipulate God! No wonder they were venting their frustration! But, have we ever shared something in common with these Jews? Have we ever found ourselves serving and worshipping God as a means to an end? Is that not akin to idolatry? Those in Malachi’s day were promoting the idea the proud and the wicked were blessed because they were getting what they wanted out of their gods. Whereas, the one true God was falling down on the job in blessing them in spite of their supposed mourning and ordinance keeping. How many in the Lord’s church have the same mindset? I am afraid too many. For instance, how many feel compelled to give only because it is a requirement for eternal life? “Do I have to give as I have been prospered, every first day of the week?” Listen, those are stout words. “Must I attend every worship service of the church?” Once again, stout words. “Must I visit the wayward?” Stout words. To even ask the question implicates waywardness in the one asking it, does it not? “I don’t want to teach Bible class, or lead singing, or prayer. Get some one else.” Stout words? A “have to” or “don’t want to” attitude is displeasing to the Lord. He desires those who will serve and worship Him from a heart of love and devotion. Jesus says, “But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: **for the Father seeketh such to worship him**” (John 4:23, emp. added). This searching on the part of God should not be a “needle in the haystack” endeavor. Our loving Father in Heaven should not have to probe and hunt for a true worshipper or devoted servant. A single gaze from Heaven should be sufficient to satisfy His holy quest.

Selfishness is the astounding accompaniment between worshippers then and worshippers now. May we grasp that selfishness was, and is, at the root of it all, and not wanting to serve God is just as selfish as wanting to serve Him for the wrong reasons. Someone has correctly remarked so-called good works that do not rise from genuine faith and gratitude are simply hot checks drawn on an empty bank account.

### Appropriate Application Demanded

“Worship weariness” was a problem for the Jews then as it is for more than a few members of the Lord’s church today. So many fail to understand the meaning of the word *worship*. A better understanding and appreciation for this word and the very act itself will go a long way in eradicating selfishness from our lives. Once the selfishness is gone, the harsh words and stout attitudes toward Deity will be gone as well. The word *worship* means, “to make obeisance, do reverence towards, to kiss.” (Vine 1247) “The principal OT word is . . . *shahah*, ‘depress,’ ‘bow down,’ ‘prostrate’ . . .” (Crannell 3110).

The emphasis on these definitions is clear. The emphasis is not on the worshipper, but on the One who is worshipped. Worship is the exercise of our human spirit directed reverently toward God. It is undertaken not to satisfy our needs or desires but to express the worthiness of God Himself. It is to ascribe to God His supreme worth.

Worshippers must see the emphasis in true worship is on giving, not receiving. Those of Malachi’s day were takers, not givers. They had fooled themselves into thinking they were givers by pretending to “keep God’s ordinance and by walking mournfully.” The sad reality was they were selfish and ungrateful takers, using their relationship with God as a wish list. Those who find worship dull, and Christian living drudgery, have much in common with the folks of Malachi’s day. Harsh words against God will sooner or later proceed from their mouth. If your heart is not in it, your speech will betray you (Matt. 12:34). Essentially is that not what takes place every time a brother or sister in Christ complains about the sermon being boring, the songs uninspiring, the prayers too long? Is that person not exposing the fact they are unhappy with God and His divine arrangement? Little wonder a person leaves empty when their worship has been empty of everything but complaints. This is not to excuse sloppy singing and sorry sermons, however, when it comes to worshipping God if we are thinking more about ourselves, than we are about God, we have things backward, and we are right in line with the heartless worshippers in the text.

May we be ready and willing to give God the best we can. The vain worshippers in the text were giving God the leftovers. Conversely, may we put our “whole heart” into our worship and service to God, (Ps. 9:1; 111:1; 119:2, 10, 34, 58, 69, 145). It is clear God will accept nothing less. I fear our convenience-crazed society has gotten a stranglehold on the church. If we cannot get it done quickly, easily, and as cheaply as possible we are not interested. David said, “Neither will I offer burnt offerings unto the Lord my God of that which cost me nothing” (2 Sam. 24:24). If God was displeased with anything less than the best from His people in the Old Testament, (cf. Mal.1:7-8, 10; Amos 5:21; Hos. 6:4-6; Isa. 1:11-15), what makes us think He is pleased with not only less than our best, but less laced with an invective? All those who callously ask, “What is in it for me?” (Mal. 3:13-15), do not understand what worship is all about.

#### **Agreeable Answer Disclosed**

We must finally come to realize worship and daily living for Christ is a completely selfless act. Jesus has not sugarcoated this truth. It entails self-denial and cross bearing (Matt. 16:24). There is a steep cost involved (Luke 14:32). I wonder if those who have harsh attitudes about worship and stout mindsets regarding Christian living have ever even read, much less understood, what our Lord demands of us? Peter preached a most potent truth when he spoke these seven words to Cornelius and his household, “Jesus Christ: he is Lord of all” (Acts 10:36). When you and I became Christians, we made the most important decision of our lives. We also made the best decision of our lives. But what escapes so many members of the church is this—when we became a Christian we made the *last* decision of our life. We no longer live for self. We no longer think and say, “What’s in it for me?” What consumes us is “Was God pleased?” “How did I do?” The farthest thought from our mind is “It is vain to serve God” “What profit is it?” Woe be unto us should the Father ever say to His Son’s church, “Your words have been stout against me.” May that day never come!

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#### **Biographical Sketch**

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# Remember God's Law

*Terry G. Jones*

God had chosen Israel to be His special people. He loved them, made of them a great nation, gave them a land flowing with milk and honey, provided for them and protected them. Yet, the history of Israel is marred by their repeated rebellion against God and



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repudiation of His Law. God had raised up prophet after prophet to condemn their wickedness and call upon them to repent and return to Him.

Since the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt until this day, I have even sent to you all My servants the prophets, daily rising up early and sending them. Yet they did not obey Me or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck. They did worse than their fathers. Therefore you shall speak all these words to them, but they will not obey you. You shall also call to them, but they will not answer you. (Jer. 7:25-28)

God had done everything possible to help them be a faithful people. Following their exodus from Egypt, Moses was called upon the mountain to receive God's law for them to follow. They were given the responsibility to know that Law, remember that Law, and pass that Law down to their posterity.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:4-9)

Faithfulness to God is not possible where there is forgetfulness of His Law. God chastised Israel by saying, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being priest for Me; because you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children" (Hos. 4:6).

In the closing words of the Old Testament Scriptures a final plea is made to God's people to remember His Law. "Remember the Law of Moses, My servant, which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments" (Mal. 4:4). This plea was issued during a time when God was sorely displeased by the sinful service of the people. Malachi had earlier addressed four areas where they were in flagrant disobedience. Israel had (1) Despised the name of God (1:6); (2) Defiled the worship of God (1:7); (3) Departed from the Law of God (2:8); and, (4) Dealt treacherously with the covenant of God (2:10-16). In spite of this, God pleads with them one more time to remember the Law of Moses. "It would be some four hundred years before Jehovah would speak again. In the interim, if they are to survive as His people, the law must be remembered" (Gill 405).

As it was imperative that Israel remember the Law of Moses, it is equally vital folks today remember the Law of Christ. Not only is it important to remember God's Law, there are several characteristics of God's Law that must be remembered.

### Remember the *Inspiration* of God's Law

The word *inspiration* is found only once in the New Testament. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). When giving consideration to the subject of inspiration, attention must be given to three things. The first of which is *origin*. All Scripture is of *divine origin*. That is, it is from God. The phrase "given by inspiration of God" is translated from the Greek word *theopneustos* which literally means "God-breathed." This does not simply mean that it is from God. It means it literally is the Word of God. The Bible is not of human origin, it is from God. Peter stated, "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man..." (2 Peter 1:20-21). The apostle is stating that no Scripture is of private origin. That is, it did not originate with men, but with God. Commenting on Malachi 4:4, James E. Smith makes the following astute observation:

This is a fitting climax to the entire Old Testament. The law of Moses after all came by divine command in the range of mountains called "Horeb." The particular peak where Yahweh entered into a covenant with his people was Sinai. The mention here of the place where the law was given would serve the dual purpose of (1) reminding the readers of the awful wonders that accompanied the giving of that law; and (2) underscore the divine origin of that law. (651)

Second, consideration must be given to *agency*. God gave His Word through human prophets. The Book of Hebrews opens with these words: "God, who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets" (1:1). Peter adds to that, "For prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). So, all Scripture is of divine origin and came to us through human agency as the prophets were guided by the Holy Spirit. Jeremiah, the prophet, clarified it immensely when he said, "Then the Lord put forth His hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord

said to me: 'Behold, I have put My words in your mouth'" (Jer. 1:9).

Third, consideration must be given to *authority*. Since all Scripture is from God then it is final authority. All of Israel's wrongs could have been corrected if only they would remember the law God gave to Moses. It is immensely important to note that hundreds of years had passed since Moses received the Law, yet it had not changed and the people were still amenable to its authority. Many today fail to honor the authority of the Bible. That is evidenced by immoral lifestyles, hypocritical living, and innovative worship practices. If all men would accept the authority of the Scriptures religious division would shortly become extinct. Jesus said, "... [T]he Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35).

### Remember the *Inerrancy* of God's Law

To believe in the inspiration of God's Law leads one to remember the *inerrancy* of God's Law. That is, to believe the Bible is without error and, that it is, in its entirety, truth. Paul claimed to be "in hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began, but has in due time manifested His word through preaching, which was committed to me according to the commandment of God our Savior" (Titus 1:2-3). The apostle claimed to be preaching the word he had received directly from God. Given the fact it is impossible for God to lie, then that word is absolutely true.

We believe the Scriptures are without error because they were given by God, and God "cannot lie" (Tit. 1:2). The Scriptures take on the nature of the One who gave them. How could a perfect God convey His message to us in an imperfect way? If we believed the Scriptures contained error, how could we say they are "infallible" in faith and doctrine? (Highers 121)

Jesus said, "And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). In Psalm 19 David made several clear statements that verify the inerrancy of God's Law. He said, "The

law of the Lord is *perfect*” (7a); “The testimony of the Lord is *sure*” (7b); “The statutes of the Lord are *right*” (8a); “The commandment of the Lord is *pure*” (8b); “The judgments of the Lord are *true* and *righteous* altogether” (9) (emp. added). Surely, David wanted us to remember the inerrancy of God’s Law.

It is difficult to talk about the inerrancy of the Bible without noting its amazing unity. It is incomprehensible that the sixty-six books of the Bible were written by about forty men over a span of 1500 years without error or contradiction. Of course, this is humanly impossible. This is indisputable evidence that the Bible is from God and the men who wrote it were all guided by the Holy Spirit. In his comments on Malachi 4:4, Matthew Henry made the following powerful observation.

Observe here, 1. The honourable mention that is made of *Moses*, the first writer of the Old Testament, in *Malachi*, the last writer. God by him calls him *Moses my servant*; for the righteous shall be had in everlasting remembrance. See how the penmen of scripture, though they lived in several ages at a great distance from each other (it was above 1200 years from Moses to Malachi), all concurred in the same thing, and supported one another, being all actuated by one and the same Spirit. (1504)

### **Remember the *Indestructibility* of God’s Law**

Jesus said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away” (Matt. 24:35). It is difficult for men to comprehend something as being indestructible and it will last forever. Clothes rot, cars rust, buildings fall, and empires collapse. We search all of creation and can point to nothing that lasts forever. However, the Word of God is everlasting and indestructible. Peter asserted, “All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, but the word of the Lord endures forever” (1 Peter 1:24-25).

Regardless of these inspired declarations, men continue to launch assaults upon the Bible in futile efforts to destroy it. Jehoiakim attempted to destroy the Word of God by taking a knife and cutting

it into pieces and throwing it into the fire (Jer. 36:22-23). The skeptic Voltaire said that within fifty years the Bible would perish. Voltaire has perished but the Bible prevails. In the early 1900’s, Robert Ingersoll said in regard to the Bible in a lecture, “In fifteen years I will have this book in the morgue.” Within fifteen years Ingersoll was in the morgue but the Bible endures.

Generations of men have arisen with a determination to annihilate the Bible, but they have never succeeded. Celsus tried it with the brilliancy of genius and failed. Porphyry tried it with the hammer of philosophy and failed. Lucien attempted it with the keenness of satire and failed. The Roman emperor Diocletian came on the stage of history and tried to destroy it with other weapons. He inaugurated the most terrific attack against a book the world has ever known. He issued edicts that every Bible should be burned and those who possessed a copy of the Scriptures should either surrender it or be executed. Many Christians perished rather than surrender the sacred text. When Diocletian thought he had accomplished his goal of eradicating the Bible from the Roman empire, he erected a monument to commemorate his great victory. It was only twenty years later that his successor, Constantine, enthroned the Bible as the infallible judge of truth. (Johnson 290)

The Bible has clearly distinguished itself from all other books. How is it that the popularity of other books is short-lived and then pass into extinction, while the Bible thrives century after century? “The Bible books were confirmed inspired by the mighty works of God and were therefore carefully guarded by the Jews. Such is evidence that they were truly confirmed and considered inspired thousands of years ago. And that consideration has hovered over them since the day they were written unto this present day” (Dickson 390-91). To remember God’s Law is to remember its indestructibility.

### **Remember the *Indisputable Accuracy* of God's Law**

The Bible's greatness can be seen in many ways, not the least of which is its *indisputable accuracy*. Many have fallen victim to the temptation to discredit the Bible because of some seeming inaccuracy, only to have later discoveries prove the Bible to be true. The Scriptures have never been proven false in any of its claims. There are several areas in which the Bible proves itself to be incredibly accurate.

First, the Bible is historically accurate. Human history books are constantly being revised and updated, but that is not necessary for the Bible.

In the late 1800's, Sir William Ramsey was a scholar who was skeptical of the authenticity of the book of Acts. He set out upon an archaeological expedition in Asia Minor with the specific purpose of disproving the historicity and accuracy of Luke's narrative. After years of research and exploration, Ramsey was forced to conclude that Acts was historically accurate. In Acts, Luke refers to thirty-two countries, fifty-four cities, and nine Mediterranean islands. He refers to ninety-five persons, sixty-two of whom are not named elsewhere in the New Testament. Every single allusion, where checkable, has been shown to be absolutely accurate. As just one example, when Luke mentions in Acts 13:7 that Sergius Paulus was a "proconsul" in Cyprus, scholars were certain the Bible had to be wrong since Cyprus was an imperial province and the proper title for its ruler would be "propraetor." But then it was discovered that by Paul's day it had become a senatorial province and Luke's title was absolutely correct. (Miller 440)

Second, the Bible is geographically accurate. Although many of the geographical references in the Bible have been thought to be untrue, none have been proven to be such. Furthermore, the more investigation that is done the more accurate the Bible is proven to be. Following an extensive study of the Bible lands, J.W. McGarvey made the following assessment.

That there is a general agreement between the Bible and the geography of Palestine is a well-known fact. Its plains, mountains, valleys, rivers, lakes, cities, and deserts are in all parts of the Bible correctly named and correctly located. The political divisions known to exist are invariably recognized, as are also all the changes of government through which the country passed in the course of its long and varied history. In not a single known instance, from the beginning to the end of the book, is there a failure in any one of these particulars. . . . But the ground for astonishment is not fully realized until we remember that all other historical writings that have come down to us from antiquity are notoriously erroneous. As modern research into ancient history has been prosecuted, errors in all the particulars mentioned above have been detected in ancient writers, and even among modern writers themselves the chief task of those of later date is to correct the errors of their predecessors. To such an extent is this true that intelligent readers of history can read only the later works; and the man who would now put into the hands of a youth such a work as Rollin's "Ancient History," written only 150 years ago, and a standard work during an entire century, would be regarded as unfit to teach the young, unless he accompanied the work with some other of more recent date to correct its errors. But no one has ever yet found cause to publish a corrected edition of Bible history, nor have the researches of modern antiquaries had any other effect than to confirm and illustrate its local allusions and its historical statements. On this fact alone we might base our argument for the entire credibility of the Bible writers; but this is only the beginning of the story. (377)

Third, the Bible is scientifically accurate. Many have claimed the Bible cannot be expected to be scientifically accurate but fail to point out specific areas of fallacy. The Bible is not a science book, but when it states something of a scientific nature it can be trusted. If God gave us nature and the Bible then we would expect them not to contradict one another. "For God is not the author of

confusion . . .” (1 Cor. 14:33). The Bible and true science are completely compatible.

The Bible contains several scientific statements that, not until recent times, have been verified by scientists. For example, Job stated God “hangs the earth on nothing” (Job 26:7). How did he know that? Men have believed the Earth was held up by Atlas, or by four elephants, but the Bible contained the truth all along.

Matthew Fontaine Maury, after reading Psalm 8:8 which speaks of the “paths of the sea,” set out to chart the sea’s paths. Those paths are still recognized and often utilized today to accommodate sea travel. Maury, who lived in the 1800’s, became known as “the pathfinder of the seas” (cf. Pugh 60). However, David wrote of them centuries before.

### **Remember the *Immutability* of God’s Law**

It is imperative one remember the Word of God never changes. God’s word is eternal and is not subject to change. “Forever, O Lord, Your word is settled in heaven” (Ps. 119:89). “Concerning Your testimonies, I have known of old that You have founded them forever” (Ps. 119:152). The Psalmist had a clear understanding of the immutability of God’s Law.

One of the great mistakes of the human race is failure to recognize that God’s Word does not change. Jude 3 says, “Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.” That which is contained in the Bible is God’s complete revelation which He has delivered to guide man for as long as this world stands. God never has, nor will He ever, make additions or alterations to that which He has given. Furthermore, He has sharply warned man against attempts to change His Word (Deut. 4:2; Rev. 22:18-19). In writing to the Galatians, Paul spoke of those who “want to pervert the gospel of Christ,” and said, “let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:7-8).

Sadly, many tamper with the Bible to justify their social drinking. Many search for loopholes in order to justify an unscriptural

marriage. Many are re-studying the Bible in an attempt to find authorization for mechanical instruments of music, an expanded role for women, hand-clapping, and a host of other contemporary innovations. Jesus said, “He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day” (John 12:48). The Bible is not like Webster’s Dictionary that has gone through numerous editions and revisions. We must remember in the last day we will be judged by God’s immutable Word.

Through His prophet Malachi, God commanded Israel to remember His Law. “Forgetfulness of the law is at the bottom of all our transgressions of it; if we would rightly remember it, we could not but conform to it” (Henry 1504). Forgetting God’s Law leads to apostasy, but daily walking in His precepts will produce a life of holiness and lead to eternal bliss.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

Terry G. Jones was born in Parkersburg, West Virginia and was raised in Toll Gate, West Virginia. He is the son of Glenn and Linda Jones. He married Melinda S. Hilvers on August 10, 1985. They have two sons: Austin (22) and Quintin (19).

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# The Treachery Of Divorce

Roger Rush

I want to begin by expressing my appreciation to Denver Cooper and the elders of the Hillview Terrace congregation for the opportunity to be a part of this lectureship. A study of the prophets is a richly rewarding undertaking, and I am pleased to be invited to



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contribute to this study. This week's study of the prophets will surely be a blessing to all who are here, or have the opportunity to read the lectureship book.

You may have heard or read the story of Glynn "Scotty" Wolfe. A little over a decade ago it was in all the newspapers. Maybe you saw it on television, or heard it on the radio. What was it that was so newsworthy? According to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, Mr. Wolfe held the record for having the greatest number of marriages in a monogamous world. If you are curious, he had been married 29 times. Sometimes described as a flamboyant, Bible-thumping minister, "Scotty" died of heart disease June 10, 1997, at a nursing home. He was 88. He died 10 days before his first wedding anniversary with his 29th wife, Linda Essex-Wolfe, the world's most-married woman, with 23 husbands. They had planned to renew their vows on their anniversary. Even though they lived apart—she in Indiana, he in California—their 11-month marriage lasted longer than some of their others. Mr. Wolfe's shortest was 19 days, while Essex-Wolfe once ended a marriage after 36 hours. Both of their longest marriages lasted seven years.

Not a single account I read or heard seemed to find Mr. Wolfe's achievement the least bit objectionable. We have such a cavalier attitude toward marriage. There is no stigma attached to divorce, no incentive to keep a marriage intact, and thus, no motive to work through problems and build a stronger relationship. But, is this the attitude toward marriage we discover in the Scriptures? Absolutely not!

God intended marriage to be a lifelong commitment between a man and a woman. The wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives (Rom. 7:2; 1 Cor. 7:39). In the same manner, the husband is bound to his wife. He is to leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife (Gen. 2:18). Marriage was, and still should be, "until death do us part!"

How does God feel about divorce? Let Him answer that question for Himself. "I hate divorce," says the Lord God of Israel" (Mal. 2:16, NIV). Easy divorce cheapens marriage and is contrary to everything the Bible has to say on the subject. It is time we reaffirmed the message of the Bible on marriage. God intended one man and one woman to join their lives in the bonds of holy wedlock for life. In the home formed by this union, children were to be conceived. Cohabitation outside of marriage was, and continues to be, sinful. Yes, there are a lot of troubled marriages in our world. But the problem is not with the institution of marriage. The problem stems from our failure to accept and obey what the Bible teaches regarding marriage.

Marriage is a partnership. Both parties must be committed to success or failure is inevitable. No matter how hard one may try, if the other is unwilling to cooperate, the marriage will not survive. Success demands that we bring to marriage an unwavering commitment to the permanency of the institution, and that our partner share that commitment. When that commitment is lacking heartache will surely come!

Remember, if you find yourself in a troubled marriage, the trouble is not with marriage but with you or your mate (or both of you). The problem can be fixed, but only if you both want to fix it!

The Seventh Commandment says: "Thou shalt not commit adultery" (Ex. 20:14). Adultery involves sexual activity on the part

of a married person with someone other than his or her spouse. Fornication is voluntary sexual intercourse of an unmarried person with another unmarried person of the opposite sex. In the Bible fornication also encompassed adultery, incest, prostitution, and homosexuality. The Scriptures are clear. No adulterer or fornicator can inherit the Kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-10). By that statement it is simply meant one cannot engage in sexual immorality and still be a faithful child of God. Forgiveness is possible, but the sin must cease (1 Cor. 6:11).

Sexual sin has always been a problem for society, but it is a problem of epidemic proportions today. Aids, venereal disease, abortion, illegitimacy, divorce, and broken homes are all byproducts of sexual misconduct. The sexual revolution of the past forty years has brought disaster to its advocates.

I do not mean to suggest sexual sins are worse than other sins, because all sin is bad. However, I do want to underscore the fact that the consequences of these kinds of sin are often overwhelming. Sexual sin invariably affects more than those directly involved in the illicit activity. Parents, spouses, and children all suffer when the laws of God regarding sexual conduct are violated. Free love is seldom love, and never free! Certainly one can be forgiven of sexual misconduct if he repents. David was (2 Sam. 12:13). Yet, the scars of his transgression remained!

Intimacy in marriage is an expression of love shared by a man and woman who have committed themselves to one another for life. It is good, right, and proper (Heb. 13:4). Sex outside of marriage is always SINFUL!

When something goes awry, the normal human response is to play the blame game. That simply means we refuse to accept personal responsibility, and point the accusing finger at others. This practice is as old as mankind. When Adam was confronted in the garden, he blamed his wife (Gen. 3:12). When Eve was questioned, she indicted the serpent (Gen. 3:13).

One poet expressed the process in the following verse: "He wrecked his car. He lost his job. Yet, throughout his life, he took his troubles like a man, and blamed them on his wife." We have all done it. Our first response is to look for a scapegoat in order to

divert attention from our own failings. It may work with our peers, but it never works with God.

Paul warned: "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life" (Gal. 6:7-8, ESV). God is never fooled. Ananias and Sapphira may have been able to pull the wool over Peter's eyes, but they could not put anything past God. Their deaths serve as a divine demonstration of what will ultimately happen to all who believe God can be fooled.

Some day, and I know not how soon, all of us shall be called to account for the life we have lived and the choices we have made. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil" (2 Cor. 5:10). Our lives will be open books. Every deed we have done, every word we have spoken, every thought we have entertained is known by our Creator (Heb. 4:13).

There is no acceptable excuse for bad choices. There is no way we can shirk responsibility for the bad choices we have made. We may blame our parents, our teachers, our friends, even God Himself, but it will not work. Our only hope is to take responsibility for our choices, choose to follow Christ, and find forgiveness through His blood.

Given the precarious position of marriage in modern society, the message of Malachi is made all the more relevant. The prophet, a contemporary of Ezra and Nehemiah, rebuked the sinfulness that infected the people of his day, with a special emphasis upon the cavalier attitude which had developed toward the sanctity and permanency of marriage. Note the prophet's indictment (Mal. 2:10-16):

Have we not all one father? hath not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously every man against his brother, by profaning the covenant of our fathers? Judah hath dealt treacherously, and an abomination is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah hath profaned the

holiness of the LORD which he loved, and hath married the daughter of a strange god. The LORD will cut off the man that doeth this, the master and the scholar, out of the tabernacles of Jacob, and him that offereth an offering unto the LORD of hosts. And this have ye done again, covering the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping, and with crying out, insomuch that he regardeth not the offering any more, or receiveth it with good will at your hand. Yet ye say, Wherefore? Because the LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant. And did not he make one? Yet had he the residue of the spirit. And wherefore one? That he might seek a godly seed. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth. For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away: for one covereth violence with his garment, saith the LORD of hosts: therefore take heed to your spirit, that ye deal not treacherously.

At least three serious issues arise from the passage under consideration. First, there was the matter of mixed marriages, second was their failure to honor the wife of their youth, and third was the Lord's condemnation of divorce. We will look at each in the order in which the prophet addressed them.

### **Mixed Marriages – First Offence**

Prior to Israel's conquest of the promised land, the Lord laid down the law through Moses. Israel was instructed:

When the LORD thy God shall bring thee into the land whither thou goest to possess it, and hath cast out many nations before thee, the Hittites, and the Girgashites, and the Amorites, and the Canaanites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than thou; And when the LORD thy God shall

deliver them before thee; thou shalt smite them, and utterly destroy them; thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor show mercy unto them: Neither shalt thou make marriages with them; thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son. For they will turn away thy son from following me, that they may serve other gods: so will the anger of the LORD be kindled against you, and destroy thee suddenly. But thus shall ye deal with them; ye shall destroy their altars, and break down their images, and cut down their groves, and burn their graven images with fire. For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth. The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: But because the LORD loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the LORD brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the LORD thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations; And repayeth them that hate him to their face, to destroy them: he will not be slack to him that hateth him, he will repay him to his face. Thou shalt therefore keep the commandments, and the statutes, and the judgments, which I command thee this day, to do them. (Deut. 7:1-11)

Marriages to the inhabitants of Canaan were specifically prohibited. They were banned because they would inevitably lead the nation into idolatry and away from the Lord.

A similar warning is found in the book of Exodus.

And he said, Behold, I make a covenant: before all thy people I will do marvels, such as have not been done in all

the earth, nor in any nation: and all the people among which thou art shall see the work of the LORD: for it is a terrible thing that I will do with thee. Observe thou that which I command thee this day: behold, I drive out before thee the Amorite, and the Canaanite, and the Hittite, and the Perizzite, and the Hivite, and the Jebusite. Take heed to thyself, lest thou make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land whither thou goest, lest it be for a snare in the midst of thee: But ye shall destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down their groves: For thou shalt worship no other god: for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God: Lest thou make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and they go a whoring after their gods, and do sacrifice unto their gods, and one call thee, and thou eat of his sacrifice; And thou take of their daughters unto thy sons, and their daughters go a whoring after their gods, and make thy sons go a whoring after their gods. Thou shalt make thee no molten gods. (Ex. 34:10-17)

Again, the law clearly prohibited “mixed marriages.” Disobedience would have disastrous consequences. Such entanglements would lead the children of Israel into idolatry (Josh. 23:12-13).

Sadly, Israel, including the priesthood, did not heed God’s law regarding this matter. Both Ezra and Nehemiah, contemporaries of the prophet, had to deal with the sin of mixed marriages. Ezra described his consternation upon finding that the Jews were intermarrying with local non-Jewish people. He put a stop to it, and led the people in a solemn reaffirmation of the covenant.

When Ezra discovered what was taking place, “For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost” (Ezra 9:2, ESV), he tore his garments, pulled hair out of his head and beard and sat appalled until the evening sacrifice. He then arose, fell on his knees, and spread out his hands before the Lord, saying: “O my God, I am

ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens” (Ezra 9:6). As Ezra prayed and made confession, casting himself down before the house of God, a great assembly of the men, women, and children gathered and wept bitterly (Ezra 10:1). Then Shecaniah spoke:

We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. Therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God, and let it be done according to the Law. Arise, for it is your task, and we are with you; be strong and do it.” Then Ezra arose and made the leading priests and Levites and all Israel take an oath that they would do as had been said. So they took the oath. (Ezra 10:2-5, ESV)

The assembly, answered with a loud voice,

It is so; we must do as you have said. But the people are many, and it is a time of heavy rain; we cannot stand in the open. Nor is this a task for one day or for two, for we have greatly transgressed in this matter. Let our officials stand for the whole assembly. Let all in our cities who have taken foreign wives come at the appointed times, and with them the elders and judges of every city, until the fierce wrath of our God over this matter is turned away from us. (Ezra 10:12-14 ESV)

Ezra concurred, and beginning on the first day of the tenth month and continuing until the first day of the first month, they examined the matter “until they had come to the end of all the men who had married foreign women” (Ezra 10:17). Those who contracted marriages with foreign women pledged themselves to put away their wives, and to make the necessary guilt offering (Ezra 10:19).

Nehemiah dealt with the same sin, and responded in similar fashion (Neh. 13:23-31).

Although Christians find no parallel in the New Covenant to the Old Covenant prohibition against mixed marriages, there is at least one relevant text we must briefly consider.

Paul wrote to the church at Corinth:

Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty. (2 Cor. 6:14-18)

The preceding text does not specifically address the subject of marriage, but rather speaks in a general sense to any relationship in which the child of God places himself in a compromising position. We must not entangle ourselves in any business relationship, fraternal organization, or marriage which would negatively impact our relationship to our Savior. Bad company ruins good morals (1 Cor. 15:33).

### **The Wife of thy Youth – Second Offence**

Not only did they marry foreign women, they did not honor the wives of their youth. As previously note, it was God's intention from the beginning for one man and one woman to unite their lives in the bonds of holy wedlock for life (Gen. 2:18-24). Marriage was an honorable and holy state (Heb. 13:4).

Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. . . . Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them. (Ps. 127:1, 3-4)

The home is the heart of society. Solid marriages and solid families make for a stable society, but when the home crumbles society suffers. Nearly every societal problem has at its core, a breakdown of the home. Drugs, alcohol, crime, violence, and sexual promiscuity, are all directly tied to the disintegration of the home. That is not to say children from solid homes do not sometimes go astray, but in the majority of cases, troubled children come from troubled homes and grow up to be troubled adults. There are steps we can take to correct the problem, but they require commitment, sacrifice, and unconditional love.

We must begin with commitment. First, we need a commitment to God. Nothing lasts if God is left out. "Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build it" (Ps. 127:1). Secondly, there must be a commitment to marriage. God intended marriage to be a lifelong bond. It truly ought to be an "as long as you both shall live" proposition (Rom. 7:2). What God joins together must not be put asunder (Matt. 19:6). Third, we must develop a commitment to children. After all, they ". . . are a heritage from the Lord" (Ps. 127:3). A child is a blessing, not a burden!

Building a solid home and family requires sacrifice. Love, the cement of marriage, home, and family, is an unselfish love. It does not insist on its own way all the time (1 Cor. 13:5). When family comes first, we make the personal sacrifices which are in the best interest of our mate and children. When we put ourselves first, the home begins to crumble. When we put others first, the home is strengthened.

A Christian home will be a place of unconditional love. God loves His children with an unconditional love, and we must make our homes a place of unconditional love, too! When life is about to

end it will not matter what kind of car we drove, what kind of house we owned, what kind of vacation we took, or what kind of job we had. What will matter are kith and kin. May God help us to value our families more!

Clearly Israel had lost her way. Wives and families were being neglected, and the neglect of marriage and the home is a sure sign of spiritual neglect!

### **HE Hateth Putting Away (Divorce) – Third Offence**

As we have already noted, from the beginning marriage was intended as a life long commitment, but Moses did make allowance for divorce.

When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house. And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife. And if the latter husband hate her, and write her a bill of divorcement, and giveth it in her hand, and sendeth her out of his house; or if the latter husband die, which took her to be his wife; Her former husband, which sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after that she is defiled; for that is abomination before the LORD: and thou shalt not cause the land to sin, which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance. (Deut. 24:1-4)

During the course of His ministry, Jesus was questioned regarding Moses' allowance for divorce.

The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave

to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. They say unto him, Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away? He saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so. And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery. His disciples say unto him, If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry. But he said unto them, All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given. For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it. (Matt. 19:3-12, KJV)

In the Sermon on the Mount He said:

It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery. (Matt. 5:31-32 KJV)

Both texts simply confirm the pronouncement of the prophet, "For I hate divorce, says the LORD, the God of Israel" (Mal. 2:16, NRSV). Divorce was something God allowed, but never something He desired. At a time when hard-hearted men refused to honor the covenant of marriage to the wife of their youth, God, for the sake of the woman, permitted divorce and remarriage.

The Pharisees came to Jesus to test Him (Matt.19:3). They knew the arguments. Some allowed divorce for any reason; others argued that sexual immorality was the only cause for divorce. What would Jesus say? Whatever His response, He would alienate a segment of society.

Jesus did not mince words. He took them back to the beginning, recounted the historical background for the institution of marriage, and said, “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (Matt. 19:6). They then asked why Moses had commanded a writing of divorcement, and He replied that it was because of the hardness of their hearts (Matt. 19:8). From the beginning it was not so (Matt. 19:8).

Jesus offered only one reason for divorce, and that reason was fornication. He freed the innocent party to remarry (Matt. 19:9). The guilty party was not granted the right of remarriage. When the guilty remarry, the outcome is an adulterous relationship (Matt. 19:9). God still hates DIVORCE!

What should we learn from Mal. 2:10-16? First, marriage is a very serious matter. Who we marry is important. The union of Israelites with foreign women was specifically forbidden, and their rebellion came with disastrous consequences for the nation. The selection of a mate is a matter of the greatest importance. The right choice is richly rewarded, and the wrong choice can be fraught with much heartache both here and hereafter.

Second, we must respect the wife of our youth. Marriage is a serious commitment. We must not enter into it lightly, and once we marry, we must honor our mate with faithfulness to our vows. There are few heartaches in life more difficult to deal with than a broken marriage. If you are the innocent party you should not be made to feel like a second class citizen in Christ’s kingdom. The church needs to stand by those who find themselves in a broken marriage. Loosing a mate because of divorce may be even more difficult than losing one to death. For the latter, we generally offer comfort, support, and encouragement. For the former, we often distance ourselves at a time when broken hearts desperately need our love, compassion, and encouragement. May God help us to do better.

Third, marriage is important, and meant to be permanent—an “until death do us part” proposition. Yes, God allowed divorce under the Mosaic system (Deut. 24:1-4), but Jesus made it abundantly clear from the beginning it had been God’s intention that a man and a woman marry for life. It was only because of the hardness of their hearts that God permitted divorce (Matt. 19:8). Jesus said, “And I say to you; whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery” (Matt. 19:9). Only one offense makes divorce lawful, and that is adultery. And then, only the innocent party is freed. All marriages which take place after divorce, where adultery is not the cause of the divorce, are adulterous. That is God’s law! Men cannot change it! Therefore, when one puts away (divorces) a mate for any other cause than adultery, and then marries another, by God’s law, such marriages are adulterous!

With God’s help, let us return to a biblical framework for marriage, divorce, and remarriage. The world’s position on this matter is in direct opposition to the Lord’s. Christians are not of this world (John 17:16). We must continue to uphold the truth regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage, even though the world long ago rejected it!

### **Biographical Sketch**

Roger Rush is a native of Fairmont, WV. He has worked with the Sixth and Washington Streets Church of Christ in Marietta, OH, since October of 1985.

He married the former Diane Bond of Senecaville, OH, on January 8, 1972. They have two children, Angela (31) and Adam (28). Both reside in Columbus, OH. Angela and her husband (Mike) have 3 year old twins (Abby and Andy). Angela, a CPA, is presently a full time mother. Adam is a Resident at Riverside Methodist Hospital in Columbus, OH.

# *The Book Of Remembrance*

*Frank Higginbotham*

The last book of the Old Testament brings to a close the history of God's chosen people and is the bridge that brings us to the revelation of God's new way for men in the birth, life, and death of His own Son. For a period of about 400 years there was no further



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revelation of God's will until the forerunner of Christ appeared on the scene. John the Baptist opened the way for Christ to make known God's plan for the human family. Malachi bridged the gap between the Old and New Testament by a prophetic statement about the forerunner of Christ. "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD" (Mal. 4:5). Much can be learned by observing God's dealings with His people in time past. "For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope" (Rom. 15:4). The text that has been chosen for this lesson is as follows:

Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, saith the LORD of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him. Then shall ye return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not. (Mal. 3:16-18)

In this passage the Lord speaks in very tender terms about His love for those who are His children. He refers to them as His jewels. He assures them He is totally aware of their past rejection of Him and His will but He also knows of their constant need of Him. He has what is described as a book of remembrance before Him and is always ready and able to respond to their needs. God keeps a book recording the activities of men. This is further referred to in numerous Old Testament statements. The kind of book that God uses is not revealed. Moses was speaking with God about the people and their transgressions and he expressed his great frustration at the impending judgment they were about to face when he made this statement. "Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written" (Ex. 32:32). Further reference to God's book is found in Psalm 56:8. Daniel also spoke of God's books. "A fiery stream issued and came forth from before him: thousand thousands ministered unto him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him: the judgment was set, and the books were opened" (Dan. 7:10). In the New Testament the book of God is held forth as the book by which God's people will be judged. "And I entreat thee also, true yokefellow, help those women which laboured with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellowlabourers, whose names are in the book of life" (Philip. 4:3). In picturing the judgment scene, John refers to this book of God's remembrance. "And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works" (Rev. 20:12). Commenting on this book, the late great Bible scholar, Homer Hailey made this comment. "'A book of remembrance was written before Him,' that it could lie open before Him at all times and that at all times He could recall their pious words and faithful disposition toward Him. This indicates that the words, deeds, and disposition of Jehovah's own are ever before Him" (423).

He further makes this comment about the content of the book before God referred to as His book of remembrance. "The

remembrance is of the life, deeds and needs of “them that feared Jehovah, and that thought upon His name” (423). In this study we would like to make note of the three points mentioned: the life, deeds, and the needs of God’s children. In discussion of the life we would like to deal with the kind of lives the children of Israel had lived. When we speak of their deeds we intend to look at the things they needed to do to be right with God. Then we plan to look at the needs the people had and how God, who loved them greatly, provided for them. It needs to be remembered that God is aware of everything that occurs in this life. “The eyes of the LORD are in every place, beholding the evil and the good” (Prov. 15:3). No action of man’s life can be hidden from the eyes of God. It would be extreme folly for anyone to try to hide anything from God’s eyes.

O LORD, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off. Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O LORD, thou knowest it altogether. Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it. Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me. (Ps. 139:1-10)

A great and assuring passage is found in 1 Peter 3:12 where the apostle Peter quotes from Psalm 34:15. “For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil.” Not only is God aware of the wrongs we commit, but He watches over us to give us the help we need. His ears are open to our prayers. Keeping

this thought in mind, let us now look at some of the things written in God’s book.

First, we believe God has an entry recording the past history of His chosen people. The kingdom of God developed and grew to great stature under the leadership of three great kings, Saul, David and Solomon. With the death of Solomon there was a division in the kingdom that resulted in two separate kingdoms. The northern kingdom became known as Israel while the southern kingdom was known as Judah. Despite stern warnings from the prophets of God the northern kingdom became so corrupt that God warned and carried out His judgment against them by using the nation of Assyria to conquer them and carry them away in about 721 BC. The southern nation was able to hold off this judgment against themselves until about 586 BC when they were captured and taken into captivity to Babylon. During this period of time God raised up numerous great prophets to bear a message of repentance to them. They were spokesmen of God who laid bare the sins of the people but also spoke boldly of the great love God had for them based on their return to Him. The basic message of the prophets was “repent or perish.” In spite of all this, they turned a deaf ear to God’s plea. The book of God’s remembrance would reflect the fact they did not listen to their God. God’s love for His people caused Him to remember a remnant. They were permitted to return to their homeland and were urged by the prophets to rebuild their land and the place of worship. The book of Malachi falls into this latter period of time after a remnant had returned.

Their life had reflected a turn to idols. God had specifically forbid that they have part in idol worship. An important part of the Ten Commandment Law was instruction concerning the place God demanded in their lives and also the fact He would not tolerate idolatry.

I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in

the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments. (Ex. 20:2-6)

When the children of Israel entered the land of Canaan they were instructed to drive out the idolatrous inhabitants of the land. The reason for this instruction is clear. God's people did not need to be in the presence of idol worshippers. Their lack of keeping the instruction God gave was a source of constant problem to them in the years that were to come. Idolatry plagued the kings of both Israel and Judah. Some tried to reform by tearing down the places of idol worship only to encounter more idolatry. God would not forget their rebellion.

A second problem God's people faced was their lives reflected a bad attitude toward God and His worship. God has always demanded the best of our service. This was true of the people of that day. Instead of giving God their best, they offered to Him polluted sacrifices.

Ye offer polluted bread upon mine altar; and ye say, Wherein have we polluted thee? In that ye say, The table of the LORD is contemptible. And if ye offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? and if ye offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? offer it now unto thy governor; will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person? saith the LORD of hosts. (Mal. 1:7-8)

To offer to God a sacrifice which meant nothing to the person who offered it was in no way an acceptable sacrifice. God wanted their best. An animal that was diseased or lame only showed contempt for God. God certainly had a right to reject their offering. Thus, their lives reflected a bad attitude toward their Maker.

A third problem in their past that would be a part of their record in God's book of remembrance would be the fact they had supported corrupt leadership. In chapter two of his book, Malachi addressed this problem.

And now, O ye priests, this commandment is for you. . . . For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. But ye are departed out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble at the law; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith the LORD of hosts. Therefore have I also made you contemptible and base before all the people, according as ye have not kept my ways, but have been partial in the law. (Mal. 2:1, 7-9)

The priests had spoken corruption and led the people in a way that God did not approve. They needed to require better standards for their leaders.

A fourth problem they faced had to do with marriage. "Judah hath dealt treacherously, and an abomination is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah hath profaned the holiness of the LORD which he loved, and hath married the daughter of a strange god" (Mal. 2:11).

They were putting away the wives of their youth and were marrying the women of a strange nation. This would further corrupt their religious stature and draw them away from God. God renounced their divorce. He gave marriage in the very beginning as an arrangement to be respected and held sacred. He intended one man and one woman to continue their commitment to each other as long as they lived. He did not intend this relationship to be broken. Their willful disregard for His will would be remembered by God. "For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away: for one covereth violence with his garment, saith the LORD of hosts: therefore take heed to your spirit, that ye deal not treacherously" (Mal. 2:16). They had ignored the fact that God hated putting away and had disrespected Him by this intermarriage with the pagan nations.

The fifth thing we note about their lives is the fact they were not honest with God and were robbing Him.

Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation. Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD 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. And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field, saith the LORD of hosts. And all nations shall call you blessed: for ye shall be a delightsome land, saith the LORD of hosts. (Mal. 3:8-12)

To take that which belongs to God and to use it for your own purpose is robbing Him. Some things are God's and we need to learn to respect Him. On one occasion in the ministry of Christ there was an attempt to entrap the Lord as He was questioned about the relationship of His disciples with the government. When asked if it was lawful to pay tribute to Caesar the Lord perceived their wickedness and replied this way.

Tell us therefore, What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not? But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, Why tempt ye me, ye hypocrites? Show me the tribute money. And they brought unto him a penny. And he saith unto them, Whose is this image and superscription? They say unto him, Caesar's. Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's. When they had heard these words, they marvelled, and left him, and went their way. (Matt. 22:17-22)

There are certain things that belong to the government but we still have in our possession things that are God's. To use it for ourselves is nothing short of embezzlement. Israel was robbing God and this did not go unnoticed by God.

After taking a look at the life of God's people and what might be recorded in His book of remembrance, we now look at the second point about this great book. It is the record of the deeds God requires that they do to make things right with Him.

They first needed to remember what God had done for them. The history of the children of Israel showed the many things that God had done as He showered them with blessings. Great events in their history would remind them of the fact God had always been mindful of them and did not ever forsake them. It was extremely unfortunate they did not seem to remember the times God had saved them from terrible circumstances. If they recalled these things they would be aware of the great debt they owed to God. We are reminded in the writings of Peter of the necessity of our remembrance of what God has done for us in the past.

And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall. (2 Peter 1:5-10)

To forget what God has done for us is indeed terrible. He is the source of all physical blessings. "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning" (James 1:17). He sends the sunshine and the rain on the just and on the

unjust (Matt. 5:45). He is the One in whom we live. “For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring” (Acts 17:28). We could not even exist without the blessings of God. Also we are dependent on God for the spiritual blessings that enrich our lives. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3). The forgiveness of sins is dependent on Christ. “In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace” (Eph. 1:7). What could we remember that would be of any greater value? We were lost in sin. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). It is impossible for us to work out a way of redemption for ourselves. God’s plan includes Christ and His work. We should remember with gratitude what has been done for us.

The deeds done by Israel would require that they repent of their failures. God had been so good to them even though they failed greatly. He also held forth His hand of forgiveness to them if they were willing to repent.

“If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land” (2 Chron. 7:14). If only the nations of Israel and Judah had heeded this warning, the result would have been greatly different. This same plea is being sounded today and is receiving about the same response. Repentance and a return to God do not seem to be the path we have taken. God’s book of remembrance will show just how many times we have used our own wisdom and have refused to submit to our Father. The message of the prophets was that we must repent or perish and that same message is needed today (Luke 13:3, 5). We seem to forget there is a day of accounting ahead for each of us. Each of us will answer to God for the things we have done or left undone in our time here.

The third thing we want to consider is that God is aware of their needs. Our great God does not leave us without help. He remembers His promises of help for us as we attempt to live for

Him. He knew the children of Israel needed His help in facing the battles that were ahead. When they tried to move on their own, they faced sudden and sure defeat. God’s people experienced a great victory when they came up against Jericho but were soundly defeated when they did not have God’s blessings at Ai. Paul makes this fact clear as he wrote to the church at Rome. “What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31). Is there anyone more powerful than God? Could anyone overcome Him in battle? The answer is obvious. The children of Israel saw the evidence of His power many times as they overcame their enemies. They could declare victory through God. “Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us” (Rom. 8:37). We can proclaim that we will experience great victory in the battles we face by having God with us. “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” (Philip. 4:13). Whether it is a battle against false ways or a personal battle in our lives as we strive to serve God, we can rest with confidence that God remembers His promise to be with us. Jesus taught that we avoid failure in any activity when we rely on prayer. “And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint” (Luke 18:1). With God’s help, we will not fail. A great passage that reminds us God is ever aware of our needs is in this statement of Peter. “For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil” (1 Peter 3:12). God has promised and will ever remember His commitment to us that He will listen to and answer our prayers. Our Father who controls all things wants us to rely on His help if we will only ask for it. Rather than worrying about the problems of life, He expects us to ask for His help in dealing with our problems.

“Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Philip. 4:6-7). We can trust in God to remember His promise to help us through the hardships of life. We cannot make it on our own.

Another need we have that God will remember is our need for companions who will help us on our way to Heaven. “Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners” (1 Cor. 15:33). The need for good friends is evident. The reliance on friends who are not Christians is a mistake. “Be not deceived” It is evident that we live in this world and associate with many people who have not committed their lives to doing right. Their influence can be detrimental in our attempt to put the Lord first in our lives. It is much easier to do right when we are surrounded by good people. “Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised:) And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching” (Heb. 10:24-25). All of us could worship God in a private setting, but God knew we needed the encouragement that comes from other good people. Thus we are exhorted to assemble.

We also need the help God gives as we pass from this life and step over into eternity. This is the reason the twenty third Psalm is so precious to many. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me” (Ps. 23:4).

God has promised a day ahead in which He will hold us responsible for our conduct while we lived on earth. After Paul observed the idolatry of the people of Athens, he sounded this warning. “And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead” (Acts 17:30-31). The book of God’s remembrance will be present and open on that day. “And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books” (Rev. 20:12). This will be a great and rewarding day for the people of God but it will also be a day of sadness for those who did not

recognize and follow the King of Glory. In that day the love God has for His children and the contempt He has for those in rebellion will be clearly seen even as it was seen in the prediction of Malachi concerning the future of Israel. Malachi stated God was keeping record and both the good and the bad had their deeds recorded. “And they shall be mine, saith the LORD of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him. Then shall ye return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not” (Mal. 3:17-18).

Malachi closes his book with a prophecy concerning the coming forerunner of Christ. “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD” (Mal. 4:5). Thus the prophet bridges the gap between the history of God’s people of the Old Testament and opens the way to accept the Christ of the New Testament. Holding forth the fact that God has a book of remembrance should help us to be committed to being a part of the accepted of God in that day.

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#### **Biographical Sketch**

Frank Higginbotham was born in New Martinsville, WV. He is the son of A. G. (Bus) and Garnet Higginbotham. He was graduated from Magnolia High School and Florida Christian College. He is married to Rose Marie King Higginbotham. They were married on June 7, 1954. They had three children, Donna who passed away in 1965, Janie who is married to Brent Gallagher (preacher for the church on Oakwood Road in Fairmont, WV), and Steve who is preacher for the South Green church in Glasgow, KY. Frank is currently in his 44<sup>th</sup> year of work with the Virginia Avenue Church of Christ in Chester, WV.

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