

The Voices *of the* Prophets

*A look at the lives of the
Minor Prophets*

Rex Beck

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CONTENTS

Preface		9
1	Introduction	13
2	Hosea	27
3	Joel	43
4	Amos	54
5	Obadiah	69
6	Jonah	81
7	Micah	93
8	Nahum	111
9	Habakkuk	122
10	Zephaniah	133

11	Haggai	145
12	Zechariah	162
13	Malachi	180
	Acknowledgments	195
	Bibliography	196

PREFACE

This book is about God, the pathways He puts before His servants and, ultimately, the pathway He is giving you, the reader, right now. The Apostle Paul testified, “if only I may finish my course” (Acts 20:24). In saying this he revealed that God had laid out a specific course—a pathway—for him. This fact is true for every believer. Every Christian has a course laid out for him or her by God Himself. It is the job of every believer to apprehend that course and to follow it as God leads.

Along a believer’s unique course, God will work in special ways, taking pains to give that person certain experiences. He carefully prepares certain joys, understandings, challenges, sufferings, revelations, care and visions. Through each turn of the course, only a fresh experience of Christ can bring a person through. Each of these experiences shapes the believ-

er into who God desires. John Calvin is different from Jonathan Edwards because God gave each a different path. They both served God and struggled for His purpose, although they were shaped quite differently. God raises up all kinds of people like this who, together, can present His message to the world.

The trouble with believers is in their thinking; it is difficult to separate “our course” from “God’s course.” This is true even for the serious Christian. A Christian who earnestly endeavors to follow a worthwhile course with God may have no idea what kind of course God might set before them. The problem is that what we think is a worthwhile goal is not at all what God thinks is worthwhile. Along the pathway laid out by God, He is making us a part of His symphony orchestra, whereas we want to be a solo act of, what turns out to be, a side show. It is here that examples from the Bible are so valuable. Seeing examples of people who have walked with God will open our eyes to understand the kind of path God deems worthwhile. The prophets provide just such examples for us.

Not surprisingly, each prophet has been developed with great care by God Himself along the pathway He gave him. God works through a combination of the prophet’s character, history and, most importantly, his interaction with God. God shapes each prophet into a particular instrument as He leads him on his unique pathway. Along his journey, a prophet is by no means a passive conduit of God’s messages. The Apostle Peter describes the prophet’s dynamic, living interaction with God, portraying him as an active seeker of Christ as the Spirit of Christ makes things clear within him (1 Peter 1:10-12). Eventually, each Old Testament prophet realizes he is not serving his own generation but us, the New Testament believers.

The result is that each of the minor prophets speaks with a unique, distinct voice. While they all truly speak the words of God, each possesses his own sound. Hosea has a very different sound than Jonah, although both convey God's speaking. All their voices combine like a symphony, sounding out God's message. Different sections may resonate with different people. Some listeners may resonate with the "Micah" section. Others may particularly hear the fourth chair of the "Nahum" section. Together, the prophetic symphony projects God's word to all mankind. This book seeks to highlight the pathway of each prophet as God shapes him into His instrument perfectly fit for His glory. Hopefully, seeing these twelve pathways will encourage believers as God leads and shapes their own lives.

You may ask how one studies the lives of prophets who have so little biographical information. Some prophets are mentioned in the history books, in which case there are substantial facts that define their story. However, in most cases, the information on their lives comes from their writings. In trying to piece together a prophet's history and personality from his writings I held to three principles in this study. First, I considered their works to be chronological, assuming that that the prophecies at the beginning of their writing were uttered first and the ones at the end came last. Thus, their book can be viewed as a description of how the prophet matured from his first prophecy so that he might be equipped to give his last. Second, I paid special attention to any personal references the prophet made to his lifestyle, feelings or thoughts. Prayers, dialogue or instances where the prophet interacts with others are particularly enlightening. Finally, I paid attention to when the prophet portrayed God speaking in the first person as compared with when the prophet wrote in the third person. For instance, at one point a prophet might write, "God said,

“I will bless you,”” while at other times he writes, “God will bless you.” This one detail lends color to the prophet’s writing and provides insight into the man who is writing. Adhering to these principles provides some guide rails in trying to piece together a prophet’s personality and experience. It has yielded some surprising insights into who these men are.

The structure of each chapter of this book is simple. The first part of the chapter will paint a picture of the personality of the prophet and a description of his setting. The second half will detail the prophet’s interaction with God, especially how he came to know that he was not serving his own generation but us, the New Testament believers. Finally, each chapter ends by considering who among God’s people might listen to the distinct voice of that particular prophet.

As you read this book, you may find yourself wanting to know more about the writings of the Minor Prophets themselves. I hope it will inspire readers to study those books more. There are many wonderful reference books that can be of great help. I refer you to my *Notes on the Minor Prophets*. That work provides commentary on each of the Minor Prophet books, highlighting the flow of thought, the verses that reveal Christ and the experiences of the prophets themselves.

It is my overarching hope that the pathways of the prophets will be a help to readers as they seek God. Maybe some will realize, like Habakkuk, the importance of God’s inner work within them. Maybe others will realize, like Micah, how important vision is and the travail that goes with that vision. Still others might be like Jonah, not liking people and not obeying God, but will realize that even their pathway can become a testimony of God’s grace. There is a message in the Minor Prophet’s lives for everyone. May the Lord enlighten us all as we allow their lives to affect us!

INTRODUCTION

There is a back story behind every Old Testament prophet. Each one writes God's words. However, each one's message also has its own emphasis and flavor. This flavor does not just emerge from thin air. A prophet's flavor comes from a combination of his own character, his background, plus what develops through his particular relationship with God. A reader sees Amos' background as a shepherd through the many bucolic references he includes in his writings. Additionally, he presents himself as a servant of God who hungers and thirsts for righteousness. God responds to Amos in context of his thirst for righteousness. The combination of all these factors give Amos' writings his unique flavor—a quest for righteousness clothed in a farmer's words. Hosea's writings present a completely different flavor, even though he lives at the same time as Amos and speaks to the same group of people. God shapes Hosea with a completely different experience—

He tells him to marry a harlot in order to demonstrate God's marriage with Israel. Hosea's marriage defines his writings, as is evident from the many marriage references throughout his work. His words are passionate, intense and highlight a relationship with God in terms of a marriage commitment. Habakkuk's relationship with God is extremely personal, involving challenging questions, intense waiting and seeking. God answers each question instilling in Habakkuk an experience that shapes the praise he writes in his final chapter. Habakkuk's praise shows how the words of Israel's history become alive, applicable and fervent after God responds to all his questions. Jonah's life presents a totally different message. As a prophet he runs away from the presence of the Lord and becomes angry when the Gentile Ninevites repent. In spite of his recalcitrant behavior, God shapes his story in such a way that it paints a perfect picture of Christ's death and resurrection for the salvation to Gentiles.

Each of the prophets brings their background, personality and relationship with God into their writings, which, in turn, convey the true word of God. When all their writings are considered as a whole, they form a beautiful symphony. Their overall sound portrays a complete message from God. Additionally, different sections of the orchestra appeal to different people, just like some people like the french horns the best. Some sections will appeal to those who seek for righteousness. Others will appeal to the romantic type. Still others will appeal those who don't like people and who seek to run away from God's presence. Taken together, God, as the Great Conductor, orchestrates a harmonious symphony that conveys God's full message to the human race.

The New Testament acknowledges the distinction in the prophet's tones. It declares that there is something more to each prophet than merely a repetition of God's message.

There is even more to the prophets than a compounding or advancing of God's word. Each prophet adds his voice, plays his unique instrument, and presents God's words with his unique sound. All emit their voice in hopes that people over all the earth will hear God's true words. Paul calls this the "utterances of the prophets."

27 For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers,
because they did not recognize him nor understand
the utterances of the prophets, which are read every
Sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him.

—Acts 13:27

In describing how the residents of Jerusalem didn't understand what God was speaking, the Apostle Paul here uses an insightful phrase for what they heard every Sabbath. It was not that they didn't recognize "the prophets" week by week. Rather, they were not able to comprehend "the utterances of the prophets." "Utterances" are more than simply words read from a book. An utterance is a voice, the Greek word, *phone*. For the prophets to have "phones" implies that each prophet did not have the same sound as the others. Just like voices have distinction, the prophets possess distinct sounds. Clearly Paul wasn't referring to the literal voice of these prophets, because they were dead by the time their writings were read. However, even though they are dead, they still possess unique "utterances."

The Greek word for "utterance," *phone*, is used in fascinating places. It means more than compressions and rarefactions of air produced when vocal cords vibrate. *Phone* identifies the unique person and the particular message. John the baptizer is "The voice (*phone*) of one crying in the wilderness" (Matthew 3:3). Christ's sheep follow Him, because they know His voice (*phone*); they don't follow a stranger, because they don't

know the voice (phone) of strangers (John 10:4-5). Phone is used to denote the distinct sounds of instruments. A flute has a different sound (phone) from a harp (1 Corinthians 14:7). A trumpet is expected to give a distinct sound (phone) that should prepare people for battle (1 Corinthians 14:8). Phone is used for a certain tone of voice. When Paul was writing to the Galatians, he began with a certain tone (phone) and then sought to change it, so that he could try to convey his message in a different way, “I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone (phone), for I am perplexed about you” (Galatians 4:20).

In using the word phone to describe the prophet’s writings, Paul indicates that each prophet has developed a tone, a distinct sound and even a unique way to convey his message. One is harp, the other, a flute, and another, a trumpet. One is strong, the other is tender, and another is pensive. Habakkuk’s sound is different from Hosea’s. Jonah’s sound is different from Micah’s. Paul does not say, “utterance” of the prophets, but “utterances.” ““Every prophet has a manner and style peculiarly his own. Although God speaketh through them all, yet they lose not their individuality or originality of character. The breath which causes the music is the same, but no two of the instruments give forth precisely the same sound. It is true they all utter the words of God; but each voice has its own special cry, so that though God is pre-eminently seen, yet the man is not lost” (Spurgeon) (qtd. By Guzik). Their utterances are the result of God’s special work with them. As God interacts with each prophet, He develops certain experiences in the prophet’s life that shape the prophet’s person. Those experiences are like God designing and creating a unique instrument, which gives a unique sound that conveys yet another facet of the divine glory.

It is the purpose of this book to explore how those utteranc-

es were developed in each of the prophet's lives and to follow the pathways, as best we can, that they took in developing their life with God.

The prophets searched and inquired

The New Testament gives us more clues into just how the prophets developed each of their individual voices. The Apostle Peter reveals to us that the prophets were not merely passive lumps of clay as God worked them into certain shapes. Yes, God is the potter, shaping the vessel in a way that is pleasing to Him. Instead of mindlessly “yielding” to God, the prophets intensely and actively inquired throughout the entire process. They were not robots, mechanically writing or mouthing words that meant nothing to them. Rather, they were sentient, considerate human beings, who genuinely struggled to make clear what the Spirit of Christ was revealing within them. The combination of God's shaping and the prophet's seeking resulted in a unique voice emerging from each prophet. The Apostle Peter describes this for us.

- 10 Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully,
- 11 inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories.
- 12 It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.

—1 Peter 1:10-12

This verse describes the experience of the prophets from the prophet's side. They "searched." They "inquired carefully." They even were "inquiring" what the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating. The Greek verbs "searching" and "inquiring carefully" are both intensive forms of the Greek words, having a prefix "ek." This highlights the prophet's intense application to their seeking. "Inquiring" is in the present tense, indicating that their inquiry is constant, on-going, habitual and repetitive. They are constantly attempting to learn something by careful investigation. A prophet is an inquisitive person, seeking to learn, to know and to inquire about the marvelous workings of the Spirit within them.

While the prophets are seeking, the Spirit within them is "indicating." The Greek for "indicating" is *deloo*, which means "to make something known by making evident what was either unknown before or what may have been difficult to understand—'to make known, to make plain, to reveal'" (Louw, Vol. 1, p. 339). The description of what the Spirit does here is not the typical word for revelation, *apokalypto*. That word is used to describe grand unveilings, where God reveals great things to His saints, like when Paul testified how God was pleased to "reveal his Son to me" (Galatians 1:16). This word, *deloo*, is much more common, much plainer. *Deloo* is used in regards to making known information that is quite obvious, like the household of Chloe making known (*deloo*) the divisions in Corinth to the Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 1:11). It is used to describe how Epaphras made known (*deloo*) to Paul the love of the Colossians (Colossians 1:8). It is used to denote the plain implications of Scripture, like what the Spirit made clear (*deloo*) by the fact that the high priest only enters into the holiest place once a year (Hebrews 9:8). These plain-speaking instances are far different than grand unveilings where God gives great revelation to His saints. The Spirit

of Christ was making simple things known to the prophets. When we think of the Spirit speaking to the prophets, we should think about simple things, like the fact that God delights in steadfast love, a ruler will come from Bethlehem, the King will come on a donkey, the fallen tent will be rebuilt, Israel will be sifted, wickedness will be judged, the sacrifices are polluted, etc. These simple things are the realm of the majority of the Spirit's speaking to the prophets. Sometimes it is easy to overlook the plain things. However, the plain things were Spiritual to the prophets. The plain things were very important.

Peter also indicates what the prophets were inquiring about. They were looking into "what person or time" the Spirit of Christ in them was making clear. This phrase is interesting. The word "person" is not present in the Greek. The original language is simply "what." Literally, the phrase is, "what or which time." Barnes understands this to denote the details about the coming Christ. "They inquired in regard to him, who he would be, what would be his character, and what would be the nature of the work which he would perform. There can be no doubt that they understood that their predictions related to the Messiah; but still it is not improper to suppose that it was with them an interesting inquiry what sort of a person he would be, and what would be the nature of the work which he would perform" (p. 1391). In short, the prophets were intense seekers of Christ. They wanted to know, learn, apprehend, experience, explore and see everything that they could possibly access about Christ. They wanted to know who He is, what manner of work He will do, when He will appear and how He will be. If it was something of Christ, they want to learn it and know it. They want to know Him. It was as if the small taste of the Messiah—the broad outlines of His sufferings and glories—drove them to know more of Him and

His work. They punctuated their continual exploration with spurts of seeking with considerable effort and care. As the Spirit was disclosing facts and plain truths within them, they were carefully, intensely exploring.

This picture of a prophet highlights how three elements—the Spirit, the word, and the prophet’s seeking—work together to bring forth his ministry. The Spirit’s work is, by definition, spiritual, and, thus, mysterious, subjective and mystical. In contrast, the word is concrete, defining, limiting and substantial. The prophets experienced the mysterious Spirit of Christ within them and conveyed solid words of God. In between the Spirit and the word, we find the prophet’s inquiry.

No one knows exactly how this process might have worked. Was the prophet’s seeking focused on the words they spoke or on the Spirit who was working within them? One could imagine it happening in both ways. It could have begun with the Spirit within and resulted in words spoken. In that case the Spirit would have made something clear within the prophet. However, the prophet did not understand it immediately. Thus, the prophet sought, inquired and carefully considered just what the Spirit was doing in them. Then, after the inquiry, they received words, which made the Spirit’s work definite and clear. These words that they uttered were reflective of the Spirit’s mysterious work within them. This was the source of the power in their words. In contrast, the prophet’s seeking could have been directed to the words they spoke, as opposed to the Spirit who was working within them. This experience is described by Jameison et. al., “The prophets, as *private individuals*, had to reflect on the hidden and far-reaching sense of their own prophecies; because their words, as *prophets, in their public function*, were not so much their own as the Spirit’s, speaking by and in them: thus Caiaphas. A striking testimony to verbal inspiration; the *words* which the inspired

authors wrote are God's words expressing the mind of the Spirit, which the writers themselves searched into, to fathom the deep and precious meaning, even as the believing readers did" (Vol. 2, p. 500). We simply don't know what their inquiries were focused upon. Possibly, and most likely, they focused on both the words and the Spirit at different stages in their ministry. Whatever the case, we do know that the prophets were not passive, but active and even diligent seekers into what the Spirit of Christ was making clear in them and into the words that defined those experiences.

The idea is, that they perceived that in their communications there were some great and glorious truths which they did not fully comprehend, and that they diligently employed their natural faculties to understand that which they were appointed to impart to succeeding generations. They thus became students and interpreters for themselves of their own predictions. They were not only prophets, but men. They had souls to be saved in the same way as others. They had hearts to be sanctified by the truth; and it was needful, in order to this, that truth should be applied to their own hearts in the same way as to others. The mere fact that they were the channels or organs for imparting truth to others would not save them, any more than the fact that a man now preaches truth to others will save himself, or than the fact that a sutler delivers bread to an army will nourish and support his own body.

— Barnes, p. 1391

Peter describes that during this process—while the Spirit makes things clear and the prophets seek—the prophets received revelation—"It was revealed to them" (1 Peter 1:12). This word, "revealed," is *apokalypto*, which indicates a grand unveiling. What was revealed so magnificently to the proph-

ets was that, “they were serving not themselves but you” (1 Peter 1:12). This seemingly simple phrase implies a lot. In fact, it implies the entire New Testament! It was revealed to the prophets that they were not serving their own generation, the people of Israel who they could see with their eyes. In fact, they were serving, “you,” which is really us, the New Testament believers. Yes, the prophets saw the New Testament believers who would enjoy the glories and the sufferings of the Christ whom they so diligently sought.

The experiences of the prophets highlight a pathway to receiving a grand revelation from the Lord. They show how a series of “de-loos” eventually lead to a grand “apokalypto.” The prophet’s main occupation was seeing the plain, simple communications from the Spirit. Each one he received was a subject of diligently inquiry. Taken alone, an isolated fact that the Spirit made known might not seem that grand. However, as the prophet assembles more and more plain communications from the Spirit, he begins to receive a revelation. As the glorious picture emerges, he realizes that he is not serving his own generation. Rather, it becomes clear to him that there is a future, glorious New Testament generation. The prophet realizes that he is actually serving *them*. Through many De-loos, which the prophet constantly searches into and studies, he receives a revelation, an apokalypto, teaching him that the grand vision he is assembling is actually for us, the New Testament believers.

One could imagine an Old Testament prophet serving his own generation as the Spirit is revealing things within him. He is serving Israel, the people of God, and may be deeply invested in their reform, correction and edification. As he searches and inquires more and more into these things, while he is serving his generation, the grand, Spirit-inspired picture becomes clear to his understanding. He gets a revelation,

which gives him great hope. One day, he realizes that it isn't, in fact, his current generation that he is tasked to reform. Actually, only a small part of that generation may ever receive benefit from his ministry. However, the fact that his generation does not reform, does not mean that what the prophet sees or speaks is untrue. It does not mean that his words are fruitless or that God is, in fact, impotent. The words are true. The Spirit of Christ is real. God is able. It is simply that his service is for another generation, a New Testament generation. "Not only was the future revealed to them, but this also, that these revelations of the future were given them not for themselves, but for our good in Gospel times. This, so far from disheartening, only quickened them in unselfishly testifying in the Spirit for the partial good of their own generation (only of believers), and for the full benefit of posterity" (Jamieson, Vol. 2, p. 500). This must have been a great encouragement to the prophets, especially to those who did not see any positive change in Israel as they prophesied to them. The prophets remained faithful to their ministry, not because they saw their current generation reform. Rather, they remained faithful to their ministry for the sake of a future generation, for the sake of the New Testament believers who would come and receive great benefit from their words.

Prophetic words lay the foundation for the NT

The words the prophets received through this process are full of impact. If anyone inquires about the secret of the power of the prophet's words, they should examine the life of the prophets who spoke them. The words *thus* received form a foundation for the New Testament. They are words about Christ, just as Jesus testified, "everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be

fulfilled” (Luke 24:4). They are words that are a strong foundation, upon which the church, the house of God, can be built, “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Ephesians 2:20). They are words proclaiming the “days” of the New Testament, “And all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came after him, also proclaimed these days” (Acts 3:24). They are words that all New Testament believers should remember, “that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets” (2 Peter 3:2). Preeminently, they are words revealing the true gospel, which is the Son of God Himself, “the gospel of God, ² which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, ³ concerning his Son” (Romans 1:1-3).

Clearly, the words of these prophets form a foundation for the New Testament. When we look at the lives of the prophets, we see that their words did not come cheaply. Each of their words and voices developed through much diligent inquiry, experience of God and work of the Spirit. We live today because of the prophets went through their experiences with God and spoke words of the Spirit, which are so valuable to us.

The prophets are examples to us

The New Testament not only commends the words of the prophets to us, it also encourages us to take their lives as examples for our spiritual journey with Christ. “As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord” (James 5:10). Learning from the prophets and imitating them will make us more fit to inherit the promises given us by God, “so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (Hebrews 6:12).

Thus, the prophets' lives should be models for our life today. The same process they went through with God should be what we go through. Just like the Spirit of Christ was making things clear in them, so today the Spirit of Christ is making things clear in us. Just like they searched diligently we also need to have the same careful inquiry. Just as they suffered and exercised patience, we also must have that same patience in order to inherit the great promises of the New Testament. Just like they had glories revealed to them through the Spirit and their seeking, we can receive revelation through the Spirit and our seeking. Just like their revelation was fitting for their setting, our revelation must be fitting for our setting. Just like they remained faithful to their ministry even when the people around them didn't respond, we can aspire to have that same faithfulness in our lives. Finally, just as they developed certain "utterances" through their particular walk with God, we also will grow in our "utterance" as God gives each one of us unique experiences of Him. In contrast to the prophet's experience, we will never write more of the Bible. However, in principle we can follow much of their example.

As we consider the different lives of the prophets, we will realize that each has a different background, a unique personality and a distinct angle in his experience with God. Some may perfectly fit our personality, our experience and our background. In this case, some prophets may become particularly dear to us. They may speak to us on a deep level. Others may not fit our experience or our background at all. In that case, we can benefit from looking at their life as an example of how a person so different from us can interact with God. We will see how God meets them on their level. Most likely we will find shades of ourselves in each of the prophet's lives. All are profitable for our learning and instruction.

It is my hope that in exploring the lives of the prophets we also will develop a voice, an “utterance,” before God that is evident to men. As God develops each member of His body, the body becomes fuller, richer, and more able to reach people of all backgrounds, characters and walks. Thus, God’s glory will shine to the world through us.

HOSEA

Hosea is the most passionate, loving, romantic and relational prophet out of all twelve minor prophets. Theologically, Hosea is driven by one, simple grand theme: God, in His infinite wisdom, wishes that His people would be His bride and His sons. This truth consumes Hosea's thoughts and permeates every part of his writings. It is impossible to read Hosea's work and not be impressed that God wishes to have a loving, healthy relationship with His people as His bride. God wishes that His relationship with His people would be organic, dynamic and vital, just as a son's relationship is to his father. The good news of Hosea is that through God's great salvation, God will make His people His loving bride and His living sons.

God chose Hosea and developed him as a prophet who is particularly suited for this ministry. God fashioned Hosea into a fitting instrument who could invite God's people to re-

turn to their divine Husband and Father. Unlike other minor prophets, Hosea includes no prophecies addressed to other nations. He does not write about the restoration of sacrifices or the improvement of temple worship. He does not concern himself with future judgments, which the Lord will execute among the nations. Instead, like a laser, he focusses on God's people's relationship with God Himself. Thus, we find in Hosea a passionate person, who is concerned for an inward, true, vibrant, mutuality between God and His people. George Adam Smith sees in Hosea "an inwardness and spirituality of the highest kind—a love not only warm and mobile, but nobly jealous, and in its jealousy assisted by an extraordinary insight and expertness in character." (p. 318). John Nelson Darby writes, "In Hosea we see the anguish of heart produced by the Holy Ghost, in a man who could not endure evil in the people he loved as being the people of God" (p. 541).

It was no accident that Hosea's personality and character developed in a way that was fitting his ministry. God shaped the experience of Hosea like He shaped no other prophet. He commanded Hosea to marry a harlot and have children. In obedience, Hosea married Gomer with whom he bore three children. Eventually, Gomer abandoned Hosea to return to her former occupation as a harlot. God again intervened, asking Hosea to buy Gomer back and love her once more. He obediently bought her back to his household where she remained for a long time. God revealed to Hosea that his marriage to Gomer was like God's marriage to Israel. In this way, God developed feelings, passions, tenderness, forgiveness and love in the prophet Hosea. He would use all these virtues in his ministry to the nation.

Hosea's experience surely formed his character, affected his personality and informed his ministry. Smith remarks how Hosea's main observatory was not the wider politi-

cal events in the world. Rather, Hosea's observatory was the home, "there he had watched a human soul decay through every stage from innocence to corruption. It was a husband's study of a wife which made Hosea the most inward of all the prophets. This was *the beginning of God's word by him*" (p. 318). Charles Feinberg understands the connection between his household and his ministry, "The home life of no prophet is told more fully than in that of Hosea, because therein lay the message of God to His people....The message was real because the acts noted were actually lived out in the life of the prophet" (p. 13). J. Andrew Dearman sees Hosea's domestic life substantiating the larger focus of his ministry, "Whatever the details we can take about Gomer, Hosea, and the children from this portrayal, all are in service to the larger theme of depicting the transformed relationship YHWH will have with his household Israel" (p. 131).

Hosea's domestic perspective reveals itself across the entire book of Hosea. His experience begins with God telling him, "Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD" (Hosea 1:2). God then shows Hosea that He will restore His people, who will eventually be called, "children of the living God" (Hosea 1:10). He learns how God is romantically pining for a restored Israel, saying, "Therefore, behold, I will allure her (Hosea 2:14) and "in that day, declares the LORD, you will call me 'My Husband,' and no longer will you call me 'My Baal'" (Hosea 2:16). Such hope causes Hosea to passionately invite Israel to restore their relationship, exclaiming, "Come, let us return to the LORD" (Hosea 6:1). When their return is half-hearted and misaimed, Hosea learns about God's utter commitment to His people as His wife, asking, "How can I give you up, O Ephraim?" (Hosea 11:8). For the sake of the relationship God shows Hosea how

far His salvation will reach, even declaring, “I shall ransom them from the power of Sheol” (Hosea 13:14). At the end, Hosea passionately pleads, “Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God” (14:1), in response to the epic weight of God’s commitment to the relationship and His power to restore it.

If we were to ask what sound Hosea’s voice gives, it would be this: the sound of passionate pleas to return. Eventually, Hosea is heartened to firmly exhort Israel to return in a way that is fully acceptable to God. He sees God as a husband who will not give up, even in the face of death and Sheol. God as a Husband will eventually be richly rewarded when the future generations of His people come back to Him as His bride. At the time of return, God will love His people freely and bestow life upon them, just as the dew falls upon grass. Hosea is passionate, warm, emotional and romantic. He’s the perfect vessel through which God can display His divine passion for His people.

His setting

Hosea prophesies to the northern kingdom of Israel during the time of king Jeroboam II, who could be considered the most successful king of that northern kingdom. The book of Kings records that Jeroboam II did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, just as all the kings of that northern kingdom practiced. However, Jeroboam II presided over the kingdom during the greatest expansion of territory that the nation ever experienced. He might be considered the best of the worst kings. He restored the border of Israel from the far north, to the city of Damascus and to the Dead Sea. Jeroboam II also had some respect of the word of God preached through Jonah the prophet, who ministered in Jeroboam’s realm (2 Kings 14:25-28).

Hosea prophesied in the latter part of Jeroboam's forty-one-year reign and for many years after his death, during the reigns of four kings of Judah—Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah (Hosea 1:1). Uzziah began to reign in the 27th year of Jeroboam II's reign (2 Kings 15:1). Hosea prophesied in the same period as Isaiah, during and after the prophecies of Amos, before and during the prophesy of Micah and, most likely, after the words of Jonah. Hosea would have witnessed the nation of Israel shrink from occupying its largest borders to bowing under a fierce Assyrian onslaught. Depending on how many years Hosea prophesied into the reign of Hezekiah, he might have witnessed the end of the northern kingdom and the fierce Assyrian onslaught against the southern kingdom of Judah.

Hosea's message

The book of Hosea is structured into two broad sections, which demonstrate two different stages of Hosea's experience with God. In the first section, chapters one through three, Hosea is trained in the context of his domestic life and learns how God intends to restore His people to Himself. In the second section, chapters four through fourteen, Hosea learns how to speak to the nation, how to appeal to them to return to the Lord and how far God's salvation will reach in His quest to restore His people to be His bride and sons. As one follows Hosea's pathway through these experiences, specific items will appear showing how God shapes Hosea into a particular instrument with a unique voice for God's people.

Hosea's interaction with God

Hosea begins his ministry unlike any other prophet. Following God's command, Hosea marries a harlot, Gomer, has three children with her and names each child after a judgment God will enact on Israel due to the nation's adulterous apostasy from Him. One could imagine the domestic lessons learned, as Hosea observes Gomer in her new, unfamiliar role as wife and mother. As each child is named after a judgment, one could imagine the pain Hosea feels as he is reminded every time he sees his children of the bleak national situation. At this early stage of Hosea's ministry, God encourages him by revealing how He will restore His people. God says that eventually in the place where the nation will be judged, God will call people, "sons of the living God" (Hosea 1:10). In this short section, Hosea learns firsthand about Israel's apostasy, the coming judgment and God's promise of restoration.

Next, God spends a long time speaking with Hosea, telling him what is on His heart, His frustrations and His dreams. He begins with His commission to Hosea, "Plead with your mother, plead" (Hosea 2:2). Hosea's entire ministry could be summed up in these words. He was commissioned by God to plead with his mother, Israel, to restore her relationship with God. Hosea is just like a marriage counselor, pleading with the wife to restore her relationship with her Husband in purity and faithfulness. God tells Hosea His side. He realizes that His wife has been adulterous and has committed apostasy with many idols. Yet, He makes known clearly that He is still interested in restoring the relationship. He does not want a divorce. He still desires to "allure" Israel (Hosea 2:14) and dreams of the day when He will betroth her to Him in righteousness, justice, steadfast love, mercy and faithfulness (Hosea 2:19-20). After hearing God's long explanation, Hosea may be impressed that one of the parties of his marriage

counselling endeavor is fully committed to restoring the relationship. He also has more insight into the challenges facing the wife.

Chapter three describes the challenges facing Hosea's domestic life. Gomer left his house and went back to her former occupation as a harlot. Again, Hosea follows God's commands to buy his wife back, return her to his household and dwell with her again. His domestic life mirrors God's hope for His people. In this act, Hosea demonstrates through his own life God's patience, persistence and determination in restoring the marriage.

The next phase of Hosea's walk with God begins in chapter four, where, for the first time, he addresses the people of Israel. He has learned much from his domestic life and from the long talk God had with him. Now, he is ready to speak to the nation. Chapters four and five show us his first open ministry to the people—his first fulfillment of “Plead with your mother, plead” (Hosea 2:1). Hosea's main emphasis in this section is how much Israel has abandoned God by committing adultery according to the spirit of whoredom which was in them. They left their relationship with God, committing adultery with other gods. Eventually, God declares, “I will tear and go away” and “I will return again to my place” (Hosea 5:14-15). This is a clear picture of a severe marital problem, a real domestic dispute.

Chapter six is Hosea's first attempt at solving the dispute. He appeals to the people to return to God, who will heal them and give them life (Hosea 6:1-2). Hosea's plea demonstrates where Hosea is in his walk with God and what his expectations for his ministry are at this point. His appeal clearly shows that he has a deep understanding of God's mercy and the benefits of a return to Him. However, Hosea's words also demonstrate that he lacks something at this stage. His appeal

acknowledges no guilt, as God asked for in Hosea 5:15. Hosea pleads for the mother to mend the relationship without a thorough acknowledging of the factors that caused the rift in the first place. Hosea sees the result that God wants—restoration, yet still does not see the process that the mother must go through to get there.

The effects of this appeal are not encouraging. God does not accept the plea. Instead, He says, “What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?...your love is like a morning cloud...I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice” (Hosea 6:4-6). Apparently, Ephraim’s return was not true, nor sufficient, as God declares, “they return, but not upward; they are like a treacherous bow” (Hosea 7:16). Hosea then proceeds to speak about just how deeply the nation has fallen, how hypocritical they are and the severity of God’s judgment (Hosea 8:1-9:9). The nation is much worse than Hosea might have imagined.

I speculate that Hosea learned a lesson from his first attempt at solving the dispute. He learned that his current line of pleading doesn’t work, because the problem is much deeper than he thought. The plea in Hosea 6:1-3, while true and correct, was not effective in getting to the root of how to restore his mother. We will see that his final plea to God’s people in Hosea 14:1-3 will work. However, Hosea is not there yet. In order for his marriage counseling to be more effective, He must learn more, see more and know God on a much deeper level.

God’s subsequent speaking to Hosea will greatly deepen his understanding and prepare him for his final plea to the people. Beginning in Hosea 9:10 and continuing to the end of chapter thirteen, God reviews many different historical incidents that occurred between God and the nation. God allows the weight of this history to work on Hosea, deepening His understanding, broadening his scope and enriching the ministry of his words.

In His first history lesson, God tells Hosea how dear Israel was to Him when He led them out of Egypt, “Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel” (Hosea 9:10). Just like a thirsty dessert traveler who finds a ripe grape vine in a hidden crevice, God was overjoyed when He saw Israel in the wilderness. When this same nation turned on Him, God was deeply hurt. Hosea mirrors God’s feeling of pain in his prayers, asking for God’s judgment, “Give them a miscarrying womb and dry breasts,” (Hosea 9:14) and “My God will reject them” (Hosea 9:17). These words are far removed from his appeal to return in chapter six. It is as if now Hosea has touched God’s feeling of abandonment and is crying out for drastic reform of the profligate nation. While this feeling may be genuine, it is only one phase of the history lessons. Outrage is not the end of the story.

God further declares how precious Israel is to Him and how He has cared for her. He testifies how “Israel is a luxuriant vine” (Hosea 10:1) and “a trained calf that loves to thresh” (Hosea 10:11). Both show how much God cherished Israel in His care. Now, God shows Hosea that He will begin to take a different tone with the nation. Previously God spared the nation from the heavy yoke, allowing it the easier job of threshing grain. Now, Israel will have to work hard. God pleads with the nation to work hard, “sow for yourselves righteousness,” and “break up your fallow ground” (Hosea 10:12). God wishes that His people would realize that there is fallow ground in their hearts, work hard and break up that soil so that something can grow. From this plea, Hosea learns that God is not giving up on His people. However, He is not satisfied with them and is showing them where to apply their efforts.

God continues His history lesson by telling Hosea just how tender His feelings were toward Israel in the wilderness. “When Israel was a child, I loved him” (Hosea 11:1). Hosea

would surely be impressed with how this love inspired God to call, teach, lead, care, and feed His people. Even though His people fell away, God's heart is still ravished by His love. He declares "How can I give you up, o Ephraim?...My compassion grows warm and tender" (Hosea 11:8). Here, Hosea touches the conundrum God has been facing for years. God loves His people, yet His people deserve severe judgment. God's strong declaration that He cannot give them up shows Hosea that love will win. Now Hosea might wonder how this can be resolved?

Chapter twelve gives one possible solution based on Israel's ancestor Jacob. God reviews Jacob's life, which shows how he found favor with God because he sought God, even though he had many flaws. Here is an opening for Israel. In Hosea's mind, this may be a way to minister to them. It is not that Jacob became perfect and was thus pleasing to God. No, he just sought God and God blessed him in spite of the imperfections. At this time, Israel is a mess. They don't have to become perfect, they just have to return, just like Jacob. Therefore, Hosea pleads again, "So you, by the help of your God, return...wait continually for your God" (Hosea 12:6). However, even this "low-bar" expectation is difficult for Israel to accomplish. The different between the Israel of Hosea's day and Jacob was that Jacob sought for God while Israel is not seeking at all. In fact, they are complacent and self-satisfied.

Chapter thirteen contains the most important historical lesson that Hosea learns from God. It is a lesson that brings Hosea out of his own realm, his own generation, and lifts him up into a heavenly realm where God's true marriage to His people can take place. In this section Hosea sees the depths of Ephraim's fall and finally sees that the nation is transient and will eventually disappear, just like morning mist, dew, chaff and smoke (Hosea 13:3). God will even offer an opportunity

for a new birth, but Ephraim is so stubborn that he will not even present himself at the birth canal to receive the good of God's restorative judgement (Hosea 13:13). Instead, like a breech-birth Ephraim will be surrounded with death. But then, God's full solution to Israel's abject failure comes into view. God declares, "I shall ransom them from the power of Sheol; I shall redeem them from Death. O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your sting?" (Hosea 13:14). Hosea finally sees the pathway for restoration. It is not merely a return to the Lord. It involves God's utmost power, the power of defeating death and the might of Sheol. The marriage God desires will take place because God is resurrection and life. He will defeat death. Only in this realm—the realm of resurrection—will God have the betrothal He dreams about.

Hosea has learned his lesson. Not only does he see the ending for which God is aiming, he also sees the pathway. The pathway is that the marriage will not be restored with the nation that is before Hosea's eyes. That nation is merely what is "seen." It is temporary. It will blow away like smoke. The pathway God has in His mind involves the defeat of death. It involves resurrection. Hosea may now realize that he is not serving his own generation but us. He sees that with Christ there is defeat of death—resurrection. And he sees the New Testament believers who enjoy that resurrection.

Thus, Hosea's mature plea shines forth in chapter fourteen. In light of God defeating death and the power of Sheol, Hosea can plead with his mother, "Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God...take words with you...say...we will say no more, "Our God," to the work of our hands"" (Hosea 14:1-3). This is a return with a full heart, acknowledging guilt and relying on God who is resurrection to "heal their apostasy" (Hosea 14:4). Hosea, in his maturity, utters an appeal that God fully accepts. When God hears this appeal, He loves Israel freely,

heals them, and pours out His blessing like the dew. His final words are like the words of a loving Husband to His adoring wife, “It is I who answer and look after you. I am like an ever-green cypress; from me comes your fruit” (Hosea 14:8). Hosea has finally found the plea that is effective for both Israel and God. He has fulfilled his ministry.

It is interesting that when Hosea pleads in chapter six he joins himself to the nation. Here, he does not. It is as if he finally sees that he is serving us, the New Testament believers and even an Israel that is far in the future. All his interactions with God finally broadened his outlook. His marriage with Gomer taught him about God’s persistence and His desire to reach a restoration. His failed appeal to Israel made Hosea open to lessons from history. He realized that God’s love is His deepest motivation and that His powers even include resurrection. Combined, they can usher in true restoration of the marriage. God’s resurrection allows Israel to simply confess their sins to God and allow Him, in His supreme power, to heal them of their apostasy and pour out His life and love upon them. A minister who can work with God to this end is a person who has learned his ministry indeed. Hosea is a pattern, an example. He has learned to plead with his mother. The New Testament reveals that the Apostle Paul had a similar ministry to Hosea’s. Paul deeply involved himself in betrothing people to Christ, “For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:2). In this way Paul was touching the same feelings that stirred in Hosea’s heart and ministry.

Who might listen?

Hosea's voice appeals to a certain kind of person. It appeals to lovers much more than it appeals to theologians. It appeals to romantics more than to those concerned with social justice. Hosea compels his readers to simply love the Lord, approach Him and grow a relationship with Him. He compels people to be like Jacob, flawed yet seeking after God.

There are many people throughout Christian history, who expressed a testimony that they simply loved the Lord. Gene Guyon wrote about experiencing the depths of Jesus Christ. She was not concerned with writing a theological treatise to affect the world. She was no John Calvin. Her testimony was that she knew Christ inwardly. She testified how she lived in the presence of the Lord, confessed her sins according to the Lord's inner light and swallowed the nourishing, living word of God. Her relationship with God was vital. All this occurred while she was faithfully attending and participating in the worship of the Catholic church in 1600s France. Gene Guyon's message was Hosea's message—God wants a relationship with you.

Another person who exhibits this aspect of relationship is Brother Lawrence. He was a cook in a monastery in 1600s France. His book, *the Practice of the Presence of God*, is a model for living a life in constant fellowship with the Savior. He didn't write theology. He didn't embark on great missionary expeditions to dark parts of the earth. He didn't establish a new church structure, a new monastic order or a school for ministers. Rather, He demonstrated that a person could live a life in the precious presence of the Lord. Sometimes he even felt that he was closer to God while buying food for the monastery than he was when he was singing or engaged in deliberate attempt to find God's presence. He showed that relationship was vital, energizing, and real.

Gene Guyon and Brother Lawrence do not give anyone secrets for better church structure. They might even say “Purpose Driven What?” However, what they give to the body of Christ is that they show there is a pathway of walking in fellowship with God. That fellowship can go deeper, be inward and results in an inner vibrancy of spiritual life with the Lord. This may be more valuable than church structure, gospel efforts, and ministry programs. Their testimony is one of life.

I could imagine Hosea’s message appealing to a person to whom love is more than service and life is more than work. David Brainerd was a missionary to the Native Americans in the then colonies of New Jersey and Pennsylvania during the early eighteenth century. Through the hardships of the missionary field, he spent much time in prayer where he richly enjoyed God’s love and sought for increased intimacy with his Savior. He sought for light shining in his heart more than for grand missionary works. The fruit from the mission field that he bore was more the result of his intense experience of the well of life, than the methods that he might have pioneered. Morning after morning he would empty his soul in prayer and fill it with the presence and joy of the Lord. His life was not long. His ministry was not global, nor even “colony-wide.” However, his love was pure; his life was focused on enjoying that love. His diaries were published posthumously by Jonathan Edwards, who considered his life of love for the Lord to be an example worthy of learning. Lillias Trotter was a missionary in Algeria in the late nineteenth century. She labored in prayer and really loved the Lord. Her endeavors never resulted in large numbers of converts or a great work. She would travel from Arab village to Berber town through deserts and mountains. She prayed much and learned the value of touching the throne. She really loved God and deepened

her relationship with Him throughout all her life. Her life was a Hosea life, a life of returning to the Lord, being His loving bride and obedient son. Life was more than work. Love was more than accomplishment. Hosea's strong appeal for fellowship and satisfaction in God would truly appeal to people who love the Lord.

This is Hosea's voice and song. Don't read him to see how millennial sacrifices will be reformed. Don't look in his prophecies to find out the relation between Tyre and Babylon and how that world will crumble under God's judgment. Don't read him to even find many detailed mysteries of the Messiah's death. However, read him to learn how to live in a house with God. Listen to his message to understand how to return to God, bring words of repentance and enjoy what God has to give. Read Hosea to understand how our God can love us freely, be as the dew to us, and make us flourish with fragrance like Lebanon. Hosea describes how God can be a Husband to His people. He is a Husband in love and life. In this relationship we are God's joy, the object of His love, the recipient of His life, and the way that He makes the earth flourish.

Hosea's message won't resonate with everyone. Many theological warriors, justice police, social justice advocates, church engineers, get tough missionaries and end-times aficionados out there will hear it and ask, "What is the point?" However, these same critics will likely one day become so dry on the inside they will wither and wilt. At this point, there is that simple message of love, restoration, patience, and relationship, that Hosea learned as he observed his wife and saw his kids grow up. Hosea would declare, "God doesn't want a super hero. He wants a son who loves Him. He wants a wife who relies on Him. He wants a family who is close to Him." God's history with His people proclaims this message. God's

dealings with Jacob and Israel underline it. God's call to return to Him speaks this today. It is God's desire from the very beginning and the message that Hosea drives home.

JOEL

Joel presents himself as a profound person, whose insights lead him to penetrate beneath the surface of situations to see the real implications of things. He doesn't appear to be a person who would enjoy small talk. His book is full of his profound insights. When Joel sees a locust swarm, he perceives the present swarm as a harbinger of the future coming great day of the Lord. When Joel hears of God promises to restore the nation from the ravages of the swarm, he sees beyond the present restoration to a future restoration of the Spirit. When Joel sees how God will judge nations surrounding Israel for their present sins, Joel sees farther, to a future gathering of all the nations of the earth, ending with an earth-wide judgment and a world-wide restoration. Joel does not "bother" himself with any details of the Israelite's life. Unlike many other prophets, Joel never writes about the sins of the priests, idolatry of the people, diverse scales of the merchants, or the vain

dress of the women. Instead, he writes about grand, profound events. He thus presents a timeless book that defines the future of God's compassion, dealings, salvation, judgment and restoration. As a result, any student of Biblical end times, or of God's salvation must carefully study this book.

Joel's writings show us that he is a person who regularly interacts with God and leads others to do the same. It is almost like he is in continual conversation with God. In fact, one could read Joel's prophecy as a dialogue between Joel and God. At least, it could be considered a call and response. After the locusts and a drought devastate the land, Joel calls on God to remember the beasts of the field (1:19-20). God responds, indicating that the people should gather together and repent (2:1). God continues His response by describing the coming day as the true reason for repentance. When the people do gather, Joel teaches them how to pray, "Spare your people, O LORD, and make not your heritage a reproach" (Joel 2:17). Then God responds, promising restoration of crops and a further pouring out of His Spirit (Joel 2:18-32). Near the end of his prophecy, Joel prays that God would return along with His holy ones (Joel 3:11). God responds with promises to harvest, judge and restore the entire earth. We see Joel as a person who is so close to God, in constant communication with Him, and having an ear to hear His responses. His writings are simply by-products of his close, intimate interactions with God.

Joel's personality bleeds through his writings. Because we don't know anything about Joel's interactions with the people around him, we cannot gain any insight into his personality from his biography. We are thus left with his writings, and more specifically with his prayers. The first thing we notice is that none of his prayers are about his own circumstances or about himself. Rather, he demonstrates a deep interest in God's creation, God's inheritance and God's purpose. In

the first prayer he calls out to God, just like the beasts of the field call to Him. We don't see Joel calling out to God for his own need. Rather, he joins himself with God's creation as it groans to God. When Joel teaches the people how to pray, he teaches them to plead for God's inheritance, not simply their own needs. Finally, when Joel asks God to come down with His holy ones, Joel is echoing a desire that had been hidden in God for ages. He is praying for God's interest, not merely his own.

This selfless prophet, who is deeply interested in God carrying out His own purpose displays much clarity on many aspects of God. Joel demonstrates that when a person is for God and God's interests, the things of God become particularly clear to him. The locust swarm and drought might cause some to question God's compassion. However, Joel is clear that even in the midst of these things, God is still gracious, compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness (Joel 2:13). He can echo God's desire for the people to return to the Lord (Joel 2:12-13). He is clear that God has established the priesthood and thus endeavors to make the priesthood as good as it possibly can be (Joel 2:17). He is also clear concerning great acts of God, including the day of the Lord, the coming of the Holy Spirit, the effects of the Spirit, God's dwelling in Zion and God's overcomers. Joel demonstrates that if a person is for the Lord and for His interests, they will be clear concerning the person and work of God, even though the situation may look bleak at the moment.

People need a Joel. He is not a person who will point out inconsistencies in your life. He is not a person who might necessarily weep with you or rejoice with you. He might not even acknowledge your feelings at all. What he will do, though, is present a portrait of who God is and what God is doing. He's objective, grand, profound, clear and clarifying. He will

connect the events happening on the earth with the eternal workings of God. A person who is with Joel may not get small talk. They may not get sympathy. However, what they will get is a picture of the ever moving, constant, eternally advancing God who will accomplish His purpose and is pleading with us to join Him in that endeavor.

His setting

It is virtually impossible to determine when Joel wrote his work with any definiteness. He does not peg his words to the reign of a certain king or governor. People have placed him as one of the earliest written prophets and some make him the latest. Calvin simply says that knowing the setting is not important for understanding Joel's message (p. 20). To a certain extent, I agree. However, I also agree with Keil and others in placing Joel as one of the earliest written prophets, perhaps during the first part of the reign of Joash, when Jehoiada the priest was caring for the young king Joash (Keil, p. 170). At that time, the priests and Levites organized themselves to rid the nation of Athaliah, who had illegally usurped the throne and who had polluted it because she was the daughter of Omri (2 Chronicles 22:2, 10-12). They rightly placed Joash on the throne, who began reigning when he was seven years old and did right as long as Jehoida the priest was his counselor (2 Chronicles 24:1-2).

The reasons I agree with placing Joel at this time are simple. First, Joel seems to have an utmost faith in the priesthood and in their offerings. Jehoida and his fellow priests enjoy a time of prosperity and trust during Joash's reign, even the money required to repair the house was used well; everyone, "dealt faithfully" (2 Kings 12:15). Joel's trust in the priesthood stands in stark contrast to almost all the other prophets, who

list the priest's many sins. Second, Joel includes the Philistines in a list of enemies of the people (Joel 3:4), who took silver, gold, and rich treasures, and sold the people of Judah that they captured (Joel 3:5-6). If Joel wrote during the early years of Joash, he would have had experience with the Philistine menace. About ten or so years before Joash began reigning, the Philistines raided Judah and carried away the possessions in the king's house and his sons (2 Chronicles 21:16-17). After this raid, we read little about conflict with the Philistines, because other enemies, such as the Assyrians, begin to take a larger role. These events fit well with placing Joel here, as one of the earliest written prophets. Interestingly, he might have known Elijah and Elisha, who were prophesying to the northern kingdom around this time (1 Chronicles 21:12).

The other major event that is important to Joel's setting is a great plague of locusts. In our age, when we have insecticides, food storage and good transportation, we might not have the same kind of understanding that the people at that time had concerning a locust plague. In ancient times, a locust plague could mean famine and the destruction of entire nations. When Amos saw a locust plague, he cried out to God "How can Jacob stand? He is so small" (Amos 7:2), indicating that a locusts plague would entirely wipe out the nation. Plagues of locusts have been known to number in billions, travel thousands of miles, consume 100 tons of greenery a day, and extend for tens of miles. A swarm of locusts could mean starvation and demise for a nation.

Joel's message

The book of Joel can easily be divided into two sections. The first, Joel 1:1-2:17, describes a plague of locusts and the subsequent gathering of all Israel to cry out to God for deliverance.

It includes a transition from the locust plague and drought (1:2-19) to a description of the coming day of the Lord (2:1-11) and a plea for a great gathering in Jerusalem where the priests lead the cry “Spare Your people” (2:12-17). The second section, Joel 2:18-3:21, describes God’s restoration in response to the people’s prayer. It includes a description of the physical restoration of the land (2:18-27), the Spiritual restoration that results when God’s Spirit is poured out on all flesh (2:27-32), God’s judgment of all nations and the refuge He gives His people (3:1-16), and the restoration of the entire earth (3:17-21). The book has a clear progression, presents a clear response of the people and is straightforward in its message showing God’s work.

Joel’s interaction with God

When we first meet Joel, he is occupied with a colossal swarm of locusts and a punishing drought. He is fearful that these calamities will even affect the grain offering and the drink offering, signs of the nation’s fellowship with God. He sees this calamity as a reason to cry out to God and is intensely occupied with calling on God to deliver the nation. His first prayer, is a call out to God, even echoing the call of the beasts of the field for deliverance. “To you, O LORD, I call. For fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness, and flame has burned all the trees of the field. ²⁰ Even the beasts of the field pant for you because the water brooks are dried up, and fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness” (Joel 1:19-20) We see here a servant of the Lord who is praying for drought relief and for deliverance from a great calamity.

Joel’s last prayer is far higher than his first. In the end, Joel prays, “Bring down your warriors, O LORD” (Joel 3:11). The contrast between these two prayers is vast, and it shows the

results of Joel's growth in understanding of the Lord. At first, he prays for rain. At the end, he prays for warriors. At first, he prays so that the nation can be delivered from the drought. At the end, he prays for God to fulfill His purpose in returning to the earth. At first, he prays for the old creation to be made better. At the end, he prays that God's new creation—the warriors that have enjoyed His salvation—to be revealed to the broken earth. If God would answer the first prayer, then rain would fall, but the nation still might not be changed. If God would answer the last prayer, then His overcomers will have returned, and He will have established His kingdom on earth. The answer to the first prayer has nothing to do with the other prayer—it has nothing to do with warriors. However, the answer to the last prayer has everything to do with the first prayer. When the last prayer is answered, and the warriors come, the kingdom will be established and all the water courses will be full of water (Joel 3:18). The first is covered by the last, but the last is not covered by the first. The first prayer has been prayed by many people, including Samuel and Jeremiah. The last prayer, however, is an ascendant prayer, prayed by few. It is a prayer to fulfill Enoch's prophecy (Jude 14) of the Lord coming with His saints, which will end the age and bring God's kingdom to earth.

The question is, "How did Joel transition from praying for rain to praying for God's warriors to come?" The answer appears from what transpires between these two prayers in the book of Joel. And, a *lot* happens between these prayers. If we take what happens as a pathway of growth, we will see that it is actually quite enlightening. The first thing to notice is that Joel is not afraid to utter that first prayer. He does not say anything like "this is not profound or important enough. I'm only for "spiritual" things, not temporal things, so I won't pray this prayer for rain." No, he actually puts himself in, allows him-

self to join with creation in crying out to God. This is the first point, Joel puts himself in to what God places before him—if it is locusts and drought, then Joel prays for this. He interacts with God concerning what God puts before him.

Second, Joel has an ability and uses it to see beyond the events at hand to their true meaning. He perceives that the true message of the locusts and drought is the day of the Lord (Joel 1:15). He sees this in his own way and, also, hears God speak the same thing (Joel 2:1). Joel consciously exercises himself not to be common, routine or “on the surface,” but rather to see God’s work and message in his own environment.

Third, Joel understands God’s unchanging characteristics and does not let his environment sway him from that firm knowledge. Joel demonstrates this when he pleads for the people to return to the Lord based on the Lord’s compassion, mercy, and steadfast love (Joel 2:13). A person who isn’t rooted in knowing God, might look at the locusts and the drought and wonder if God is truly merciful and abounding in steadfast love. Joel sees beneath the surface and proclaims God’s good characteristics and virtues even when it does not look like He is exercising them.

Fourth, Joel sees that he is not the only person who loves God and who can interact with God. Joel tries to lead many others into an experience of God. Elijah thought he was the only person who sought God, but he turned out to be wrong. Joel never has that thought and thus he continually honors other members of the nation. Instead of leading the people himself in a prayer of repentance, Joel encourages the priests to do their job and pray for the people (Joel 2:17). Instead of thinking that just the rulers or the priests were important for the nation’s return to God, Joel pushes for all the nation to appear at the temple. He commands that the elders, chil-

dren, even nursing infants, bridegrooms and brides all appear before the Lord in the temple court (Joel 2:16). He sees the value in the whole nation, even nursing infants and old people, having an interaction with the Lord. Joel isn't fighting for the spiritual "marines," instead he fights for the entire nation, even the school children who are playing in the playground, to have spiritual experiences.

I wonder if Joel's instincts about God's compassion and about the value God places in His people were confirmed when God so positively responded to this corporate cry (Joel 2:18). When God becomes jealous again for His land and again has pity on His people, Joel might have thought, "Yes, God is truly abundant in steadfast love." When God uplifts His promised physical blessings to include the pouring out of the Spirit, He makes a special emphasis that this Spirit would be poured out on *all* flesh (Joel 2:28). Just like all the members of society were gathered in the temple calling out on God, the Spirit will be outpoured on all flesh, on sons, daughters, old men, young men, male servants and female servants. God includes all in His salvation and in His outpouring. When Joel sees how all are included, he might have thought, "Yes, God is truly concerned for all the people of His kingdom."

Fifth, Joel grows in his understanding of the great day of the Lord. When he is speaking about that day in context of the locusts, he describes it "as destruction from the Almighty" (Joel 1:15). However, as Joel hears more of God's words, he sees that in addition to destruction, that day also includes salvation for those who call on the Lord (Joel 2:31-32). He sees that the day will manifest those who have enjoyed the outpouring of the Spirit and the salvation that accompanies that outpouring. In short, Joel grows to see the work of the Holy Spirit. It is this work that produces the warriors that Joel prays will descend along with the Lord when the Lord returns. This re-

alization may give Joel confidence and hope to pray that final prayer, “Send down your warriors,” because he knows that the warriors are being worked upon and developed and grown in God’s salvation through the experience of the Holy Spirit.

All these steps are crucial stages in Joel’s growth from being a person who prays for rain to being a servant who prays for warriors. It is easy to see how it was revealed to Joel that he was not serving his own generation, but us, the New Testament believers. At first, he prays for rain to help his own generation continue their worship at the temple. At the end, it is revealed to him that there is much more. He isn’t praying for the betterment of the priesthood or people. He is praying Enoch’s prophecy, a prayer that God would return with His overcomers. He is ministering to us, the New Testament believers.

Who might listen?

The message of Joel would appeal to people who seek a complete, logical view of God’s salvation. He may not appeal to the very passionate person. Rather, a theologian or a person who calmly considers God’s overall plan, might greatly warm up to Joel. A person who wonders about the Son, the Father and the Holy Spirit in their interactions will like Joel. A person who wonders how God’s plan will unfold in the context of society, believers, Jews, and non-believers will be attracted to his message. A person who wonders about creation and how it fits into God’s plan would like this book.

I could imagine a servant of the Lord such as Jonathan Edwards being drawn by the message of Joel. Edwards didn’t write many works on how to love the Lord or feel the Lord’s presence. He wasn’t a marriage counsellor or that much of a “touchy-feely” person. He wasn’t a revolutionary church lead-

er, establishing new fellowship structures. Edwards sought to work within the structure of the established church. He attempted to define God's salvation in the broader context and to channel the blessings of the first Great Awakening to the benefit of the churches. He sought to highlight genuine receivers of faith and to lead God's people into salvation that was doctrinally solid and spiritually real. He was a strong teacher of the word and ministered to edify believers in the solid teachings of the Bible. He became somewhat of a Joel to his age. He was a person who could define the truth and put vast pictures of God's work into something people could understand. We need people like this in our lives. These servants of the Lord can vividly portray God's plan, without much feeling or appeal to emotion, and allow it to work in our hearts and minds.

AMOS

Amos is a no-nonsense, patient, calm, obedient shepherd taken by God from following the flock to become a prophet to the northern nation of Israel. If I were to choose his defining, outstanding characteristic, it would be that of a person who hungers and thirsts for righteousness. He poetically yearns, “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24). In almost every section of his writing Amos concerns himself with how righteousness is flowing out as he sees people going about their lives. In Amos’ mind, he expects righteousness to demonstrate itself especially in regards to relationships with one’s fellow men.

It is as if Amos has an internal gauge by which he assesses all mankind. His question is, “How are you treating the fellow members of the human race?” When he considers Judah and Israel, who have both received special care and oracles from

God, he asks them how they are treating the poor among them. When he considers Gentile nations, who do not have the advantage of any special revelation from God, he asks them how they are treating their fellow nations. He even is concerned with how they respect the dead of other countries. Amos sees all people, Jew or Gentile, as fellow members of the great human race. As members, each individual has responsibilities towards others. A human deserves certain respect simply because they are a human being. It is the hunger and thirst for that expression of righteousness which drives Amos.

Amos' laser focus on the righteousness that he seeks is especially evident when one considers other items he could have highlighted. He writes to Gentile nations who are steeped in worship to other gods. He writes to Israel at a time when she is festooned with idols, the worship of Baal and other gods. In his prophesy, however, he focusses very little on these issues, which in our mind, may be the most important. He doesn't rebuke the Tyrians for worshipping Astarte. Rather, he finds fault in the fact that they sold an entire group of people into slavery to another nation. He does not mention Baal worship to Israel, as Hosea does. Instead, he takes issue with the way Israelites trample the heads of the poor.

At first one may consider Amos' focus to be somewhat a side issue in the life of a God seeker. A person may think, "Shouldn't the first thing a God seeker concentrate on be God? If this is the case, then, isn't Amos aiming at the result and not the source? Maybe Amos should take some lessons from Hosea, who aims at restoring the relationship with God first, then righteousness will follow?" While it is true that there is merit in Hosea's way of returning to God, the value in there being *many* minor prophets is that each gives a unique perspective to God's great salvation. Hosea's perspective comes from the relationship aspect. Amos demonstrates that God's salvation

can be enjoyed by those who are hungering and thirsting for righteousness. Hosea may like “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8), which implies wonderful points concerning seeking God, loving Him and desiring Him. Amos may like “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” (Matthew 5:6). His prophesy shows us how such hunger will result in being drawn to God and appreciating God’s salvation. Eventually, Amos is satisfied as he witnesses God work out His salvation in His people so that righteousness will be lived out. Then, and only then, will real satisfaction come to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

In his prophecy, Amos presents himself as a guileless, obedient, humble servant of God. He is not complicated. Unlike many other prophets, there is no record of him arguing with the Lord concerning his calling. Ironsides notes, “We read of no unbelieving hesitation, no parleying with God, no bargaining or questioning as to temporal support; even as before there was no fleshly impatience or desire to be at the front attracting notice as a prophet or speaker” (p. 114). When the Lord calls Amos from following the flock, he simply obeys, moves north to Bethel, and begins speaking the words God gives him. Darby remarks on Amos’ contentment, “In Hosea we see the anguish of heart produced by the Holy Ghost, in a man who could not endure evil in the people he loved as being the people of God; while in Amos there is much more of calmness of God’s own Judgment” (p. 541). In his ministry he is in deep and deepening fellowship with God, testifying “the Lord GOD does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7). Surely it is from Amos’ intimacy with God, where God reveals His secret counsel to Amos, that the prophet gets his persistent yearning for righteousness with an attitude of calmness and contentment.

His setting

Amos ministered during the time Uzziah reigned over the southern kingdom of Judah and Jeroboam II reigned over the northern kingdom of Israel. Both these kings ruled effectively. Uzziah did what was right in the sight of the Lord. He loved the land, developed it so that it would be more fruitful, expanded the military and restored worship in Jerusalem. Jeroboam II did not depart from some of the sins of his fathers and, thus, was considered to have done evil in the sight of the Lord. However, out of all the kings of Israel who did evil, he might have been the best. He led well, expanded the borders of the kingdom to their largest extent of any northern king and led a wave of prosperity for the people.

Amos was from the southern kingdom but prophesied mainly to the northern kingdom. His beginnings were humble. He was a shepherd, a sheep breeder and a keeper of sycamore fig trees in the Judean city of Tekoa, which is about five miles south of Bethlehem. Some may think of Tekoa as a backwater town isolated from the rest of the world. However, a very important event took place in the town of Tekoa. It was in that little town where king Jehoshaphat assembled a great army to face the armies of three kings who were attacking the nation (2 Chronicles 20:20). For a moment at that time Tekoa was greatly aware of the surrounding nations of Edom, Ammon and Mt. Seir. Foreign policy was no longer a theoretical or far off thing for them. This may have been part of the history that Amos learned and recited as he spent long nights in the fields guarding sheep.

In his early years Amos never intended to be a prophet or anything other than a shepherd. He did not come from a prophet's family, nor was he associated in any way with the priestly line. As a young man, he did not learn especially about temple rites or the law. Rather, he was raised observing

the natural setting, realizing the advantages and challenges of weather, wild beasts, lands and waters. Ironsides speculates that the bucolic setting allowed Amos to slow down, learn the voice of God and absorb many lessons from his work that would be used later in his ministry. “Those hidden years had not been wasted. Not only were they years in which he listened to the voice of God speaking to his own soul, but in them he was acquiring experience, and an insight into men and things which would be invaluable to him later on. Again and again in his public utterances he uses figures, or illustrations, which show how closely and thoughtfully he had observed the many things, animate and inanimate, surrounding him in his early life” (p. 114).

There is no evidence that Amos felt that shepherding or tree care was boring or that he was above such work. He didn't seem to have any ambitions to “serve” or “make a difference” for God. One moment he was following the flock and the next he was speaking for God. “The added words from following the flock imply the element of surprise and suddenness, that is to say, while he was (contentedly) engaged in his daily concerns, he was arrested, apprehended, conscripted. An authoritative hand from outside gripped him and he became what he was not before and what he would never have made himself” (Motyer, p. 173).

Amos went from the calm fields of Tekoa to Bethel, a bustling beehive of activity which was the religious center of the northern kingdom of Israel. Bethel was a focus of the distorted worship established by Jeroboam after the northern ten tribes split from the southern two. Jeroboam feared that if the northern peoples would continue to sacrifice and attend the feasts in Jerusalem, he would eventually lose the kingdom. Thus, he established his own rites and feasts and centered them in the towns of Dan and Bethel. He made gold calves,

which he claimed were the gods who took Israel out of Egypt and placed one in each of the two cities. He made altars there, established a priesthood, sacrificed, burned incense and instituted a new calendar for feasts (1 Kings 12:32-33). In Amos' day, the nation of Israel regularly practiced the religion established by Jeroboam, assiduously attending to many ritualistic details. They brought sacrifices every morning, tithes every three days and proclaimed freewill offerings (Amos 3:4-5). They held solemn assemblies, offered burnt and grain offerings, sang songs and played harps (Amos 5:21-23). They would get an "A" for attendance and attention to detail, yet God gave them an "F" because they were practicing a false religion, derived from the whimsical fancies of men's hearts.

In addition to the thriving practice of false religion at Amos' time, the nation was also characterized by a profusion of wealth that enabled a luxury class to develop. Jeroboam II administered the kingdom well, effectively restoring the borders from the entrance of Hamath to the Dead Sea (2 Kings 14:25), the largest the kingdom would ever be under any king of Israel after Jeroboam I. The ensuing prosperity enabled the luxury class to live a lavish lifestyle in which they mistreated the poor as they drank wine, anointed themselves with fine oil, and reclined on ivory beds. None of these practices alarmed the conscience of the Israelites. The religion they practiced, because it was founded upon falsehood, shielded them from contact with the living God who could change them. Their scrupulous religious practice lulled them into complacency, insulating them from any challenge involving their falling short of the standards and grace of the living God.

Amos' message

The book of Amos could be divided into three different sections. The first section begins and ends with a lion's roar (Amos 1:2-3:8), which is God's chosen way of sounding out His voice to the nation and world. This section unveils the prophet's yearning for righteousness on earth based on his intimate fellowship with God. The second section begins with nations learning about the judgments coming upon Israel and ends with a nation gathering around Israel to execute that judgment (Amos 3:9-6:14). This section mainly contains God's speaking to the nation as it was at Amos' time. God warns of coming judgments, reviews past calamities that He allowed in order to turn the nation and sends out a call for the people to seek the living God. The last section contains five visions (Amos 7-9). This section reveals God's judgment on Israel, shows how God will save a faithful remnant, and portrays how that remnant will become a seed for God to bring His salvation to His people and to all the Gentiles of the earth. This section also shows Amos' commitment in his ministry to the way God revealed to him—gaining a gracious remnant.

Amos' interaction with God

Amos begins his ministry speaking about God's judgment on foreign nations because they violated basic human rights. Damascus threshed Gilead with iron implements (Amos 1:3). Gaza delivered a whole people up to Edom (Amos 1:6). Tyre sold Israelites to Edom (Amos 1:9). Edom was perpetually wrathful toward Israel (Amos 1:11). Ammon ripped open pregnant women in Gilead (Amos 1:13). Moab burned the bones dead enemy king (Amos 2:1). Amos displays a passion for righteousness, especially for righteous dealings between peoples. He also holds Judah and Israel to a high standard of

righteousness. He measures them according to how they handle God's law and how they respond to God's gracious dealings with them (Amos 2:4, 10). Amos accuses them that, in spite of God's gracious care for them, they grossly mistreat the poor (Amos 2:6). This offends Amos' sensitivities concerning proper, dignified human compassion, which he expects to be especially displayed among the people of God.

When we first meet Amos, he is like a fierce fighter who comes out swinging. We see a man hungering and thirsting for righteousness, who doesn't see that righteousness in the nations, Judah or Israel. We might imagine Amos to become more and more shrill in his excoriating of Israel as he observes even more of their transgressions. In the end, we could imagine him condemning the whole nation as a group of hopeless renegades.

At the end of his book, however, we see a different, more mature Amos. He still seeks righteousness, but he is much more focused on just how to get it. In his maturity, he cares for the remnant, and not reformation of the entire nation. He clearly sees devastation of the vast majority of Israel (Amos 9:1-8), the preservation of a remnant (Amos 9:9), and God's use of that remnant to bring forth the Messiah. Through the remnant, God will save the willing Gentiles and restore the entire earth (Amos 9:11-15). At the beginning of his ministry, Amos is concerned for righteous deeds of the nations and of God's people. The mature Amos at the end is restful, focused and trusting, because he sees the remnant. That remnant is how God will establish His righteousness on the earth. The mature Amos is focused on the remnant, hopeful for the remnant, and sees what a glorious result God will get from the remnant. When we ask how God leads Amos to maturity, a big question we need to answer is how does Amos become focused on fighting for the remnant.

The answer is found in the interactions Amos has with God and with the nation. We see how Amos tries his best to reform the entire nation of Israel (Amos 3-4). Next, he realizes that if the entire nation will not turn to God, a remnant may. God might be gracious to that remnant (Amos 5). Amos is tested in his commitment to the remnant by fighting so that the nation would not be completely destroyed even though it is utterly corrupt (Amos 6-8). Finally, Amos sees how God will bless the earth through the preserved remnant (Amos 9). This is the fruit of Amos' many years of ministry.

Amos begins by wholeheartedly trying to reform Israel. He boldly declares how God has chosen the nation, declaring His commitment to them, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth" (Amos 3:10). At the same time, there are many transgressions in Israel. Therefore, God has sent Amos to correct them. Amos testifies how God reveals His secrets to the prophets—to him—and how the very fact that Amos is speaking means that there is a problem God wishes to correct (Amos 3:7-8). Amos lists the many ways that God has been working in the nation, in hopes that they might return to Him. He sent partial calamities: no rain on one city and rain on others, partial famines, small wars. In spite of all these, God testifies, "you did not return to me" (Amos 4:6). Now Amos is declaring harsher judgment, "days are coming, when they shall take you away with hooks" (Amos 4:2). Amos truly hopes that his announcement will cause the nation to wake up and return, just as God expectantly declares, "prepare to meet your God, O Israel!" (Amos 4:12). At this point Amos is fully invested in ministering to the nation so that perhaps they might turn and be restored to fellowship with God.

Chapter five marks a turning point in Amos' focus. It is a woeful lamentation for the nation (Amos 5:1), characterized

by the dirge Amos sings, “Fallen, no more to rise, is the virgin Israel” (Amos 5:2). The only hope now comes from God’s call to any willing soul in Israel, “seek me that you may live” (Amos 5:4). Amos echoes this plea, commanding those who will to seek good so that they may live. Then, for the first time, Amos utters a promise to the remnant, “It may be that the Lord the God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph” (Amos 5:15). From this point forward, Amos stops aiming for the whole nation to repent. He internalizes the fact that God wishes to bestow grace to a part—a remnant. Amos’ focus and aim have changed.

When Amos returns to addressing the entire nation (Amos 5:18-6:14), he exposes their utter corruption and prophesies their complete destruction. The people are at ease on their ivory beds, drinking wine from bowls, singing idle songs, offering errant sacrifices and full of pride. They “turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood” (Amos 6:12). There is no more hope for the whole, as God promises, “I will send you into exile beyond Damascus” (Amos 5:27) and “if ten men remain in one house, they shall die” (Amos 6:9). There will be no escape; their suffering will be “as if a man fled from a lion and a bear met him” (Amos 5:19).

After such a scathing rebuke to the nation, who has so profligately corrupted themselves, it would be reasonable to expect Amos to wish for the nation’s complete eradication. He may think, “These drunk, idle, conceited, corrupting cows are worthy only for slaughtering. Not one is good!” The visions Amos sees in the next chapter (Amos 7), give Amos opportunity to agree with God’s plan for just such a complete destruction. However, these visions also give him a chance to fight in prayer for the hopeful remnant that he saw in Amos 5:14.

Through his first two visions, Amos understand God’s wish

to completely destroy the nation. The first portrays a locust swarm devouring the latter growth (Amos 7:1); the second portrays a fire devouring the great deep (Amos 7:4). Amos might have agreed whole heartedly with God's thought of complete destruction if he simply considered the proud, poisonous people of chapter six, who should by all rights receive a complete destruction. If this were the case, he might have responded to God with words like this, "Yes, Lord! Your will be done!" However, Amos does not respond in this way. Instead, he pleads for the nation. He prays, "O Lord God, please forgive!" (Amos 7:2) and "O Lord God, please cease!" (Amos 7:5). God listens to his prayers and relents from His intended calamities. By God's response, we know that Amos' prayer was actually in God's interest.

Amos' third vision, the vision of the plumb line, shows a much more measured judgment. A plumb line indicates discerning judgment—anything which agrees with the plumb line will stand; what disagrees will fall. Amos says nothing in response to this vision, thus indicating that God's measured judgment will come to pass. The entire nation will not be consumed. Rather, a remnant who passes the plumb line test will remain to receive grace. Even though Amos' life-long zeal to seek for righteousness might demand that the entire nation be eradicated, he pleads for mercy from God because he sees that God is after something higher. God wants the remnant and Amos is after that too. Amos' ministry here is to fight for that remnant in prayer.

Amos' next test comes immediately afterwards. This time it comes from a man, not from God directly. Amaziah, a priest of Bethel, twists Amos' words, threatens him, and charges him to leave the northern kingdom (Amos 7:10-11). Amaziah even describes to him another path, in which he can still serve God: "flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread

there, and prophesy there” (Amos 7:12). It is almost as if Amaziah is showing how hard Amos’ life will be if he stays in the northern kingdom and how wonderful his life will be “serving God” back in his home in the southern kingdom. What a temptation this might be! Amos might have thought, “If I go, I could still write my books down there and I will have plenty of food and will be received by my countrymen. If I stay here, I will be in danger and I will be ministering to a nation of hopeless God deniers who deserve to be wiped out.” However, at this point, his commitment to his ministry shines through. He simply says that he is a “nobody,” just a shepherd from the south who is following God. He will stay in the north and prophesy there. Amos is saying, “I could have left for a cushy prophesying job in the South. However, I will stay, because this is where I can minister to the remnant who will receive grace.” We see how firm and clear Amos’ direction has become.

Chapter eight and nine show that Amos is no longer looking for the whole nation to be saved. Like the basket of summer fruit that God shows him, the nation will soon come to an end (Amos 8:1-2). God will severely judge the nation, saying, “They will not have a fugitive who will flee, or a refugee who will escape” (Amos 9:1). However, the glimmer of hope, which Amos has been fighting for in prayer and resolution, reemerges at this point. Concerning the nation God says, “I will destroy it from the face of the earth; Nevertheless, I will not completely destroy the house of Jacob” (Amos 9:8). God then reveals how He will shake the nation like a sieve is shaken, “but not a kernel will fall to the ground” (Amos 9:9). Here, in the picture of the sieve, Amos’ ministry is vindicated. His prayer in response to God’s visions is answered. His commitment in the face of Amaziah’s threats is rewarded. Not a kernel will fall to the ground! The remnant will be separated by that sieve and will be the hope for the future.

In the end, Amos' ministry will result in something that may not look that glorious on the outside; it will just be "the fallen booth of David." (Amos 9:11). However, God will work with that booth to create something marvelous. God will raise up that booth, wall up its breaches, raise up its ruins. He will bring the Messiah in to heal that fallen booth. Then, the remnant that Amos fought for through ministry, prayer and perseverance in the midst of human opposition, will become glorious, "they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name" (Amos 9:12). The nations will believe in the gospel. The remnant of Israel and the nations will become fellow heirs of God's promises. They will both be "called by My name." Amos' hunger and thirst for righteousness will be satisfied as the entire earth benefits from the blessings of righteousness lived out. The fields will be so rich that the "plowman shall overtake the reaper...the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills flow with it" (Amos 9:13).

Amos is now a different person. Now he is no longer serving his own generation, hoping that Israel will reform and come back to God. As he was trying to serve to that end, God showed him the remnant. Amos allowed God to adjust his aim, hope and dreams. He even passed through tests challenging the aim of his ministry. He fought for that remnant in his prayer and stood for his ministry in Bethel. When he firmly stayed on this line, God graciously showed him what the end result would be—the fallen booth would be rebuilt, the remnant will possess Edom and the nations will call on God's name. We see how Amos sought and searched diligently concerning the remnant that God showed him. We see how it was revealed to him that he was not serving his own generation, but us, the New Testament believers. Today the New Testament believers stand on the verse Amos uttered

concerning the fallen hut being rebuilt and the nations being called by God's name (Acts 15:16-17). Amos understood that his fight for the remnant affected not just Israel, but the entire earth. It will affect all nations. He foresaw the gospel that we, New Testament believers, enjoy. This will eventually result in bountiful harvests and a restored earth—blessings God bestows upon His people when they are faithful to the covenant. This is glorious!

Who might listen

The message and experience of Amos may appeal to any servant of the Lord who realizes that the majority of God's people have fallen away from God and are not interested in actually following Him. His message would appeal to the person who has poured out his or her life for God's people and has seen little result. A pastor who sought the benefit of God's flock eventually might realize that only a few really care. At some point in their ministry, they might echo Amos' experience, when he saw that perhaps the remnant will receive grace. Just as this revelation directed Amos, it can also direct the servant of the Lord today.

Amos' message and experience might appeal to people who are seeking God's overcomers. Jessie Penn-Lewis never sought to establish church testimonies. Rather, she worked to feed and inspire overcomers from every Christian background and corner. She published a magazine called "The Overcomer," which did not seek to edify the broad base of Christians, but rather focused on those who are seriously seeking Christ. She aimed for "deep" and "high" instead of "broad." Amos' message might appeal to those who founded what would later become "The Keswick Convention." In the 1880s, a group of believers began a conference in Keswick England. Eventual-

ly they would gather yearly to minister to Christians seeking deeper spiritual life. T.D. Harford-Battersby and Robert Wilson established this gathering for the advancement of the spiritual life of those who were seeking something more. They realized the value of overcomers, and sought to call them out, build them up, and nourish them as they followed the Lord. Amos' ministry is not to the whole. Rather, Amos looked for the remnant, who would eventually become a seed that would bear fruit to God. Similarly, these saints did not look for great movements among believers. Rather, they looked to build up those who had extraordinary seeking, feed them, and edify them so that they might become the blessing of the Lord's body.

OBADIAH

Obadiah is a true visionary, who addressed a current catastrophic event in the nation's recent history—the violence committed against the nation by Edom—in terms of the grand unfolding of God's eternal plan. His name means “servant of the Lord” and as such he inserted himself into the national catastrophe of Edom's violence and caused people to see that God's kingdom will eventually be established through His people. If the job of the Lord's servant is to bring His people back to the central line of God's plan, then Obadiah does a fine job of that. He ministers God's hope, ways and plan into a situation where Jacob is reeling from the brutal treatment from the nation of Esau, his brother. As such a servant, Obadiah uplifted Israel, gave it hope and caused people to see God's purpose in their present setting.

If we would ask what means Obadiah used to uplift the nation, we would have to answer with one word: vision. Obadi-

ah begins his work with this one great word—vision—he says, “the vision of Obadiah” (Obadiah 1). Interestingly, not many prophets use “vision,” which is *ḥāzôn* in Hebrew, to describe their words. Prophets, like Amos and Micah, begin their works by pointing out transgressions of God’s people and then seemingly find inspiration as God works through their observations. However, these prophets don’t claim *ḥāzôn*. Obadiah, like Isaiah, presents a *ḥāzôn*, which one could describe as a great story or picture of God’s working. Obadiah never highlights any transgression of God’s people. Instead he approaches his message from the vantage of seeing a grand picture.

Obadiah’s *ḥāzôn* provides a great illustration confirming Solomon’s description of the function of vision. Solomon refers to *ḥāzôn*, saying, “where there is no prophetic vision [*ḥāzôn*], the people cast off restraint” (Proverbs 29:18). Obadiah’s book is an example of a person with *ḥāzôn*, prophetic vision, applying his vision to current events, so that the people do not cast off restraint and fall into despair. Because of Obadiah, the nation of Judah did not have to perish because of the maltreatment they suffered under Edom.

Because of Obadiah’s vision, he sees that the nation of Edom would receive justice and just recompense for the violent acts they committed, “As you have done, it shall be done to you” (Obadiah 15). Obadiah’s vision expands to even show Israel that *all* the nations would eventually pay for their sins, saying “the day of the LORD is near upon all the nations” (Obadiah 15). Furthermore, Obadiah’s vision shows him that God will eventually establish His kingdom through His people. “But in Mount Zion there shall be those who escape, and it shall be holy, and the house of Jacob shall possess their own possessions” (Obadiah 17). At the time of Obadiah’s speaking, the nation was decimated by a sack of Jerusalem and Edom had

furthered their destruction. Obadiah could look at the tattered fugitives who escaped and see in them a seed for God's future restoration. This would have been great comfort to his hearers.

“When therefore the Israelites saw the Idumeans living at ease and beyond the reach of danger, and when they also saw them in the enjoyment of every abundance, while they themselves were exposed as a prey to their enemies, and were continually expecting new calamities, it could not have been, but that their faith must have utterly failed, or at least become much weakened. For this reason the Prophet here shows, that though the Idumeans now lived happily, yet in a short time they would be destroyed, for they were hated by God; and he shows that this would be the case, as we shall see from the contents of this Book, for the sake of the chosen people.” (Calvin, p. 418)

In short, Obadiah gives a wonderful example of Solomon's insight, showing that people without vision cast off restraint, but people with vision will be upheld, restrained and directed to the future. “Our Prophet shows at the end that God would become the avenger of this cruelty, which the Idumeans had exercised; for though he chastised his own people, he did not yet forget his gratuitous covenant” (Calvin, p. 419).

His setting

The setting of Obadiah's prophecies is very clear. Jerusalem had been attacked and looted by a foreign power. Edom looked on as the attack proceeded, partook in the looting of the city, celebrated the defeat by holding a drinking party in Jerusalem and then harassed the fugitives fleeing from the carnage in the city. These features of the setting are indisputable.

Which Jerusalem invasion Obadiah refers to, however, is not clear at all. “The *time* of the prophet is so much a matter of dispute, that some regard him as the oldest of the twelve minor prophets, whilst others place him in the time of the captivity, and Hitzig even assigns him to the year 312 B.C., when prophecy had long been extinct” (Keil, p. 339). It makes the most sense to me, however, to agree with those commentators who place Obadiah at an earlier date. During the time of King Jehoram, the Philistines and Arabs attacked Jerusalem and “carried away all the possessions they found that belonged to the king’s house, and also his sons and his wives” (2 Chronicles 21:17). Earlier in Jehoram’s reign, Edom had revolted against the rule of Judah and established their own king (2 Chronicles 21:8). It makes sense to view Edom, freshly freed from the yoke of king Jehoram, taunting Judah and helping the Arabs and Philistines loot the city.

If one agrees that this is the time period of Obadiah prophecy, then he would be a contemporary of Jonah, Joel, and possibly Amos. Obadiah and Joel use similar language in referring to the judgment of Edom (compare Obadiah 19; Joel 3:19) and Mount Zion becoming holy (Obadiah 17; Joel 3:17).

Obadiah’s message

Obadiah announces his words in true visionary form, declaring, “The vision of Obadiah” (Obadiah 1:1). He doesn’t proceed to say exactly what his vision is. Instead, he applies the vision in terms of a series of pictures, beginning with the humbling of Edom due to its pride (Obadiah 2-9), Edom’s violence against his brother Jacob (Obadiah 10-14), Edom’s punishment in context of the day of the Lord (Obadiah 15-16), and the restoration and victory of the nation of Israel through the survivors (Obadiah 17-21).

Obadiah's interaction with God

Asking how Obadiah interacted with God and what story his relationship tells is not that easy of a question because his prophecy is so short. We are left with little to analyze and no dialogue that gives any hints. However, I don't think we are completely in the dark, because his prophecy traces a very clear arc. Thus, we can look at the whole and ask, "Where are the turning points?" and then consider what those turning points might mean for a person with vision.

We will start off by considering where Obadiah is at the beginning of his prophecy. We see that he is completely and utterly concerned with Edom, the nation who inhabits the rock clefts to the south-west of the land of Canaan and who had recently exacerbated the plight of Jerusalem when she was sacked by a foreign power. It is this very concrete event and very definite nation that comprises the content of Obadiah's relationship to the Lord at the beginning. In fact, he begins his prophecy with, "Thus says the Lord GOD concerning Edom" and with "We have heard a report from the LORD" (Obadiah 1). One could imagine that if Obadiah were praying in fellowship with the Lord at this time, God would speak a lot to him about that nation. Obadiah proceeds to detail where they live, the pride in their hearts, their treasures, their wisdom, the violence they did to their brother, their looting, their abuse of the fugitives, and their gloating, open mouthed mockery of Judah's plight (Obadiah 3, 10). Obadiah also sees the coming destruction of Edom in great detail. It will be thorough, not like grape gatherers or thieves who might leave some missed grapes or goods in their wake. Edom's destruction will be overwhelming, even involving broken alliances and loss of wisdom and discernment (Obadiah 5-7). Obadiah's prophecy describes a "day" (Obadiah 8) when Edom will be judged and all its inhabitants slaughtered. One could summarize the

book of Obadiah up to verse fourteen in terms of two days—the first is the day Jerusalem was sacked; the second is the day that Edom will be destroyed. On the first day Edom looted “his wealth in the day of his calamity” (Obadiah 13). On the second day, God will “destroy the wise men out of Edom...so that every man from mount Esau will be cut off by slaughter” (Obadiah 8-9).

A consideration of Obadiah at this phase of his prophecy shows that he is “all in” concerning Edom. His interaction with God brings out the history of Edom, its actions in detail and its eventual destruction. As Obadiah worshipped and served the Lord, the Lord led him to be very much concerned with his generation and with concrete events of his time. This phase is spiritual, inspired by God, under the speaking of God and with full revelation of the reports from God. Such a realization from God led Obadiah to develop a certain world view. He realizes that all the nations of the world, even though they are not God’s people per se will be held responsible by God for their actions. He realizes that God is sovereign over everything. If Edom, a nation not in the covenant of God, will receive judgment for their actions or inactions, then this shows that God’s measuring stick and sovereignty are applied to non-covenant nations. He deeply appreciates righteous acts anywhere in the world. He realizes that Edom was required in God’s eyes to live up to his responsibilities as a brother. If he didn’t do this, God would recompense him.

Verse fifteen marks a great growth in Obadiah’s vision, “For the day of the LORD is near upon all the nations” (Obadiah 15). Suddenly Edom’s day of Obadiah eight becomes a day that will come upon all nations. Right here, Obadiah’s vision expands from simply looking at his own situation to taking in the great vista showing how God will affect the entire earth—“all nations.” In the subsequent words of verse fifteen

and sixteen, Obadiah uses both singular and plural pronouns. “As you have done, it shall be done to you” uses the singular pronoun, indicating that Obadiah is talking about Edom in terms of the coming day that will fall upon all nations. Then Obadiah switches to the second person plural “as you have drunk on my holy mountain, so all the nations shall drink continually” (Obadiah 16). Here he expands again, considering the single drinking party event that happened at the sack of Jerusalem to represent universal guilt, meriting punishment upon all participants—all the nations.

This is a fine illustration of how God interacts with Obadiah. He is involved in the things of God concerning Edom. In his involvement God takes opportunity to open up Obadiah’s seeing. He might have begun the prophecy thinking that he would apply balm to Judah by telling them that a day would come when the violent nation of Edom would be judged. However, God uplifts Obadiah in the midst of his carrying out that commission. God unveils to him that He is not just concerned with the nation to the south-west of Canaan. Rather, He is concerned with all the nations, all over the world. God isn’t simply concerned with the nation of Edom, he is concerned with what Edom *represents*. Obadiah is directed from the physical to the deeper meaning. He is directed from the immediate to the future. He is directed from the particular to the universal. Maybe, if Obadiah had not been so concerned with the particular, he might never have seen the broader picture. The day of Edom’s destruction becomes the great day of the Lord that is near to all the nations. Obadiah interacts with God and transcends.

If the prophecy would end at verse 16, with Obadiah’s uplifted vision of God’s righteousness extending to the whole earth, it would display a pretty good picture of Obadiah’s experience. However, it doesn’t stop there. The second big tran-

sition comes in verse seventeen, when Obadiah says, “But in Mount Zion there shall be those who escape.” This is another turning point for the whole book. The rest of the book concerns all that will take place based on these escapees on Mount Zion. It is because of the escapees that Obadiah can eventually declare, “the kingdom shall be the LORD’S” (Obadiah 21). Imagine the awe that fills Obadiah as he sees these escapees—this tattered army of exiles moving through the ancient land of never-ending conflict, and then occupying the Negev, the land of the Philistines, the fields of Ephraim, Samaria, Gilead, Canaan, marching, advancing relentlessly towards Jerusalem, and then arriving, climbing God’s holy mountain to rule and reign over not just the bitter sons of Esau but all the earth!

It is interesting to think of how Obadiah arrives at this wonderful vision. It seems that nothing in his description of Edom’s character, actions or judgment, gives any hint about looking at those who escape. This is completely new to Obadiah’s prophecy. This further realization illustrates how Obadiah is open, seeking and inquiring before the Lord. It is almost as if Obadiah asks God, “What else is there concerning that day of the Lord?” When he sees the grandeur of the day including the judgment of all the nations, he still is not full and satisfied. Instead he asks God, “Is there anything more?” This kind of seeking, searching and diligent inquiry leads Obadiah to look at the escapees. The result of his inquiry is nothing short of marvelous.

Mount Zion, which formerly had been devastated by the attack and defiled by being a scene for a drinking party of the nations, is now holy (Obadiah 17). The house of Jacob is recovered and restored and will possess their own possessions, which formerly were taken away by the nations (Obadiah 17). It is unclear whether Obadiah ever thought that he would prophecy concerning this wonderful restoration when

he began his speaking. However, God reveals it to him. He is not only a prophet of destruction and judgment. Now he becomes a prophet of restoration, possession and holiness.

Obadiah continues to refer to Edom in the remainder of his prophesy. However, a close examination of how he references Edom shows that the meaning of these things have taken on a more universal character. The Edom of the beginning of his book will be destroyed by the nations surrounding it. In contrast to this, the second half of Obadiah has God's people destroying Edom and ruling over her. "The house of Jacob shall be a fire, and the house of Joseph a flame, and the house of Esau stubble; they shall burn them and consume them, and there shall be no survivor for the house of Esau" (Obadiah 18). "Saviors shall go up to Mount Zion to rule Mount Esau" (Obadiah 21).

Here Obadiah taps into the deeper meaning of Edom. Throughout the Bible, Edom is seen as a usurper of the place and position of the Lord's people. This began with Esau, seeking to kill Jacob because he received the birthright and blessing instead of him. It continued with a universal enmity that Esau felt towards Jacob. It was illustrated by Esau not being content with the land God gave him and seeking to possess the land of Jacob, his brother, which is clearly illustrated in Ezekiel 35. Darby summarizes Edom throughout scripture. "Edom is frequently spoken of in the prophets. This people, who, as well as Jacob, were descended from Isaac, had an inveterate hatred to the posterity of the younger son who were favoured as the people of Jehovah. Psalm 137 tells of this hatred in the seventh verse. In Psalm 83 Edom forms a part of the last confederacy against Jerusalem, the object of which was to cut off the name of Israel from the earth. Ezekiel 35 dwells upon this perpetual hatred, shewn from the first in the refusal to give them a passage through the land,

and upon the desire of Edom to possess the land of Israel. Our prophet enlarges upon the details of the manifestation of this hatred, which burst forth when Jerusalem was taken. It is possible that there was something of this sort when Jerusalem was taken by Nebuchadnezzar. Edom is united with Babylon in Psalm 137 as the inveterate enemy of Jerusalem.” (Darby, p. 551) “Obadiah regarded Edom as a type of the nations that had risen up in hostility to the Lord and His people, and were judged by the Lord in consequence” (Keil, p. 367).

When Obadiah sees the meaning of these escapees on Mount Zion and understands that they will possess Edom, he sees Edom in a whole new light. Now, Obadiah understands the nation as a type. He sees beyond his own situation and realizes that the Edom of his day, was merely a figure of something much grander, something that only the escapees could address. As Obadiah seeks more, it is revealed to him that by the instrumentality of that group God’s kingdom will be expanded. That group will include “saviors” who will ascend Mount Zion and rule Mount Esau, spreading God’s kingdom all over the earth. Imagine Obadiah’s increased amazement as he sees those tattered escapees who made it to Jerusalem now bringing salvation to the ends of the earth. That group has matured spiritually. They have grown in stature. They have become saviors. They can now bear the government and testimony along-side the Lord Himself. What a glory!

Obadiah’s final vision is that “the kingdom shall be the LORD’S” (Obadiah 21). At this point he is not serving his own generation, but us. In Obadiah’s future there will be saviors who ascend Mount Zion. He is now ministering to them, directing them, and offering them hope and a future. Obadiah began “in the trenches” speaking under God’s leading concerning Edom. He ends with a great view of how God will raise up saviors, His people, who will ascend Mount Zion,

rule Mount Esau and affect the expansion of God's kingdom. The end of his prophecy is something very worthy of the title "vision."

Obadiah's book shows us how he received this vision. First, he was faithful to God's speaking concerning Edom. Then he was flexible to having his understanding of the day of Edom's judgment expanded to encompass the judgment of all the nations in the great day of the Lord. Next, he inquired and sought more about that day. In response God showed him the escapees. These transfixed Obadiah and became the seeds in his vision for the restoration of God's kingdom. In concentrating on these seeds even the meaning of Edom changed in Obadiah's consideration. It became universal, representative of God's arch enemy, which if removed would establish God's kingdom in glory. Finally, Obadiah could see more about God's people. How they would bear responsibility, rulership, and cooperation with God as God expands His kingdom on earth.

Who might listen?

Obadiah's message might appeal to a person who is facing severe hardship, and who through the response to that hardship, is brought to a place where they see God's rich salvation spread upon the entire earth. God can turn a despairing situation into a learning moment and eventually into a blessing. Obadiah started with Edom, saw the whole earth, and then eventually proclaimed God's possession of all the nations for His glory.

Obadiah's experience and message provide a pattern for someone like Count Ludwig Zinzendorf, who lived in eighteenth-century Herrnhut, Saxony. After he himself came to know Christ, he saw the persecution many believers were fac-

ing from the established religious authorities. His initial efforts involved providing a protected place that believers could live in community on his estate. He established a safe town, which became a magnet for God seekers from all over the region, especially from Moravia. Eventually, God led Zinzendorf and those believers to look out to the entire world, especially to those areas where Christ had not been named, and to be concerned for their salvation. They prayed consistently for one hundred years for the gospel and they sent out many missionaries to remote parts of the earth. What started as a response to persecution became a cry for salvation to a large part of the earth. Just like God led Obadiah to first consider Edom and then look to God's salvation spreading to the earth, God led Zinzendorf to first respond to the persecution he saw and then exercise God's compassion and energies for the spread of salvation to the earth.

JONAH

If anyone thinks that the Bible sanitizes the lives of its subjects, they need to read the book of Jonah. No one who reads this book carefully comes away thinking that Jonah is a hero. At best he is a reluctant servant. At worst, he disappoints even more upon closer examination. Words like curmudgeon, self-absorbed, insular, arrogant and heartless provide a more fitting description for Jonah than the typical adjectives associated with a servant of the Lord. Faithful, patient, loving, profound, revelatory and obedient do not seem apt.

A short perusal of some key verses from the book serve to highlight an almost continual contrast between God and Jonah. When God tells Jonah to travel to Nineveh and speak against that city, instead of obeying, “Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD” (Jonah 1:3). He runs away because he knows God is “a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting

from disaster” (Jonah 4:2) and he doesn’t want the Gentiles to whom he was sent to taste God’s grace. In his flight to Tarshish on a ship, while the Gentile sailors are praying because of a great storm, Jonah seems to not care at all. Instead he “had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep” (Jonah 1:5). Jonah’s one shining moment emerges after he has been thrown in the sea. He later testified that while he was sinking down, he “called out to the LORD, out of my distress” (Jonah 2:2) and victoriously proclaimed, “yet you brought up my life from the pit” (Jonah 2:6) and resolves to give honor to the Lord, “what I have vowed I will pay” (Jonah 2:9). After returning to his land, he obeys God’s second call to preach to the city of Nineveh. When the great city repents because of his preaching, and God relents of the calamity that He was going to execute upon the city, “it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry” (Jonah 4:1). He is in such despair that he prays “O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live” (Jonah 4:3). He wishes so strongly that God would destroy the city that he makes a booth on a nearby hill so that he might witness the destruction, which God had already told him was averted. While he is waiting, God gives this self-absorbed prophet a plant to shield him from the sun, “So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant” (Jonah 4:6). When God causes a worm to eat the plant and a hot wind to blow upon Jonah, his gladness evaporates along with his comfort. God lovingly rebukes Jonah, saying, “You pity the plant...And should not I pity Nineveh” (Jonah 4:10-11). Here the record of Jonah ends. We never know if Jonah internalized God’s lesson and thereby aligned himself with God or became even angrier and more obstinate. All we realize is that God has a heart to pity the Gentile city and reach out to it with grace. Whether Jonah, the unwilling instrument in this endeavor, is won to embrace

this objective we will never know. Throughout this book, we see how God is the hero and Jonah, as a study in contrast, provides the backdrop. We don't appreciate Jonah, but we surely appreciate God.

However, all is not lost with the story of Jonah. In spite of the fact that he breaks the mold of what we might think of as a "normal" prophet, God still shines through the life of this self-absorbed man. In spite of his disobedience, Jonah portrays the death and resurrection of Christ through his time in the fish's belly and his prayer in the depths. In spite of his insular, heartless attitude toward a large Gentile city, Jonah's interaction with God shows us God's broad heart of love and grace toward all mankind. The hero of the story of Jonah is God, not Jonah. However, without Jonah interacting with God and God taking pains to teach Jonah, we would not see God's heart in such vivid colors. Jonah's story displays God, almost in spite of Jonah himself. This is truly a mystery of salvation and a wonder of God's working with mankind.

Because the book of Jonah is written as a narrative instead of a declarative prophesy, it differs from all the other minor prophets. In fact, the story of Jonah has more similarities to accounts of Elijah and Elisha than it does to the books of Amos and Hosea. It is difficult to find any direct prophecy in this book. However, the presentation lends itself to looking at Jonah from two angles. The first is to consider the prophet's attitude, and how that might have changed through his interaction with God. The second is to look at the picture of his life, which is symbolic of much greater things. While Jonah's attitude is almost a continual disappointment, the picture he portrays through the events of his life are more than encouraging.

Many commentators struggle with the contrast between God and Jonah. Keil sees this as a struggle between his old

man and his better part, “the old man, which rebels against the divine command, comes sharply out, whereas his better *I* hears the word of God, and is moved within” (p. 258). Coates sees how Jonah struggles with the old part of his being. “Jonah knew the character and disposition of God, but he did not appreciate it one bit—he dreaded it” (p. 27). “Though he knew Jehovah in a remarkable way, he was not at all in accord with Jehovah” (Coates, p. 25). Even his experience in the belly of the fish, could not win over the flesh he was dealing with. “Jonah is all right in the whale’s belly, in “the belly of Sheol,” for no one could be self-important there! But as soon as he comes out, it all rebounds again. No amount of experience will reduce the self-importance of the flesh” (Coates, p. 26). The end of the book shows that Jonah didn’t change in his experience. “If all that is of the flesh is brought to nothing in the death of Christ, if we come up out of that, it is to live in a life that has all its sources in God. Jonah reached that in prophecy, but he did not reach it personally in his own experience” (Coates, p. 26). Instead, “the thought of his own importance obscured everything” (Coates, p. 25). “There is nothing to indicate that Jonah is brought into line with God at all; he is still angry and self-important and the book closes with that” (Coates, p. 26).

However, Jonah does not only display his attitude in this book. He also paints a picture of the grace of God reaching the Gentiles. “This is the only case of a prophet being sent to the heathen” (Feinberg, p. 134). “This book is the great missionary book of the Old Testament” (Feinberg, p. 133). In this sense Jonah teaches all of us a lesson. “Prophets such as Jonah that have to do with the Gentile world are interesting, showing that though God has ever special regard to His own people, He does not overlook men in general. The thoughts of God’s heart come out wonderfully in this book, and the work-

ing of man's heart is exposed, even in a true saint and servant of God" (Coates, p. 25). Jonah shows that the Gentiles will eagerly receive the gospel. "The susceptibility of the Gentiles for the salvation revealed in Israel is clearly and visibly depicted in the behaviour of the Gentile sailors, viz., in the fact that they fear the God of heaven and earth, call upon Him, present sacrifice to Him, and make vows; and still more in the deep impression produced by the preaching of Jonah in Nineveh, and the fact that the whole population of the great city, with the king at their head, repent in sackcloth and ashes" (Keil, p. 258). The book of Jonah sets forth two reactions to the Gentiles receiving grace. One is a negative reaction from the Jews, who despise the fact that the Gentiles will share the mercies of God with them. "Jonah sets forth the state of the Jews, who could not bear that grace should go out to the publicans and sinners" (Coates, p. 25)." "The object of Jonah's mission to Nineveh was to combat in the most energetic manner, and practically to overthrow, a delusion which had a seeming support in the election of Israel to be the vehicle of salvation, and which stimulated the inclination to pharisaical reliance upon an outward connection with the chosen nation and a lineal descent from Abraham" (Keil, p. 258). The second lesson of Jonah's experience goes further. Positively, his life depicts the way Christ will eventually reach the Gentiles who are so receptive to the grace of God. "God also appointed the mortal anguish and the deliverance of Jonah as a type of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to be the Saviour of the whole world. As Jonah the servant of God is given up to death that he may successfully accomplish the work committed to him, namely, to proclaim to the Ninevites the judgment and mercy of the God of heaven and earth; so must the Son of God be buried in the earth like a grain of wheat, that He may bring forth fruit for the whole world" (Keil, p. 259-260).

Observing the wonderful message that God can produce out of an interaction with a prophet who is so disappointing is a real glory to God. It is a picture of His infinite wisdom. It shows how He can work all things together according to the counsel of His will. For this we must worship and praise Him. He alone is the only wise God and the only One who can employ even stubborn men to spread His salvation in the most marvelous way.

His setting

Jonah was living in the northern kingdom of Israel, where he was born, during the time of king Jeroboam II. His speaking greatly encouraged the king to wage war and expand the borders of the kingdom to the farthest extent since the reign of Jeroboam I, who broke from Rehoboam to establish the northern kingdom. “He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher” (2 Kings 14:25). The result was that Jeroboam II vanquished many enemies and brought great prosperity to the northern kingdom.

It is very possible that Jonah knew Elisha, who died in the reign of the previous Israelite king, Jehoash (2 Kings 13:25). He might also have known Hosea and Amos, who also prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (Amos 1:1; Hosea 1:1). He was one of the earliest prophets who have their own book. Only Joel, who prophesied to the southern kingdom, might have written his work earlier than Jonah.

Jonah’s setting might have greatly impacted his understanding of just how incredibly gracious and merciful God is. Through his speaking, he witnessed God blessing Jeroboam

II and the kingdom of Israel, in spite of the evil and wicked ways that they both continued to pursue. Jeroboam II's father, Jehoash, did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. He fought against Judah, tore down part of the wall of Jerusalem and sacked the very temple, which was in Jerusalem. "He seized all the gold and silver, and all the vessels that were found in the house of the LORD and in the treasuries of the king's house, also hostages, and he returned to Samaria" (2 Kings 14:14). Jeroboam II also "did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. He did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin" (2 Kings 14:24). He cared little for the prophets of the Lord, not moving a finger to protect Amos, when he was being accused before the king (Amos 7:9-11). Both Amos and Hosea detail the corruption in society from the false priests, to the rulers, the merchants and the common people. Even though there was little virtue in Jeroboam or in the people, God was merciful to them. "For the LORD saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel. But the LORD had not said that he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, so he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash" (2 Kings 14:26-27). Maybe Jonah's witnessing of God's mercy taught him experientially what Joel had already spoken concerning Yahweh, "he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster" (Joel 2:13, cf, Jonah 4:2).

Jonah was sent to Nineveh, which was the capital city of Assyria, located on the banks of the Tigris River, near today's Mosul, Iraq. Later Assyria would become a great enemy of Israel and Judah, carrying Israel away and attacking Judah to the point of besieging Jerusalem itself. However, at Jonah's time, Assyria was not yet considered an enemy of God's

people. Syria was considered a much greater threat (2 Kings 13:22). It was not till later, till the reign of Menahem, that Assyria was viewed as a threat (2 Kings 15:19). Ahaz, the king of Judah, even considered Assyria an ally in warding off the attacks of Aram and Israel (2 Kings 16:7). All this means that when God asked Jonah to preach against Nineveh, the Assyrians were not yet known enemies of the nation. They might have even been viewed as helpers to stem the Syrian threat from the east.

Jonah's Interaction with God

Jonah's story leaves the reader sadly disappointed. Throughout his journey, he surely interacts with God and is changed by those interactions. However, the amount Jonah is changed doesn't bring him into line with God by the end of his book. With Jonah we see advancement, but not victory.

At the beginning, Jonah is very opposed to what God is doing. He has no trouble hearing God's commission, no trouble knowing that God is gracious and no trouble vehemently disagreeing with God. Jonah even seeks to flee from the presence of the Lord, which, by the way, is in direct contradiction to a Psalm, which he probably knows, "Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?" (Psalm 139:7).

Throughout his story, Jonah's interaction with the Lord is many times the result of the Lord forcing his hand. It is only after the Lord sends the storm that Jonah acknowledges his guilt. It is only when he is sinking in the depths of the sea that he remembers God and calls to Him out of his distress. Furthermore, it is only after knowing that running away is useless, that Jonah becomes obedient to God's call to Nineveh.

Most of his advances with the Lord are forced by environment, not necessarily heart-felt or voluntary.

Jonah does exhibit a few virtues while he travels his “environmentally compelled” journey with God. First, he displays a trust or faith in the ultimate power of the Lord he serves. His attitude is not the greatest, but, somehow, he still has faith. He believed so much that he knew he was the cause of the storm and that he should be cast into the sea. His displayed that a proper attitude is not necessary for serving God; faith is. Second, he is a person who is rich in his familiarity with God’s word. When he was in the fish’s belly, he praised God using many quotes from the Psalms. These words lay dormant inside Jonah. As God arranged environments to teach Jonah lessons, the words came alive within him. The words allowed him to deeply enjoy God’s salvation in the depths of the sea.

At the end of his book, we see how far Jonah still had to grow. True, he was now obedient in regards to preaching to Nineveh, but his heart still did not agree with the God he knew. His knowledge was accurate, his actions were responsive, but his person still was not aligned with God. His anger that raged because God relented from punishing Nineveh serves to highlight the graciousness of God towards the world and the failure of the prophet to internalize that same heart.

Although we do not see a finished product in Jonah by the end of the book, Jonah’s experiences highlight a few prominent features applicable to any person who interacts with God. In Jonah we see God’s astounding respect for the free will of His servants. Jonah’s freedom to disobey God’s call and seek to run away from the presence of the Lord shows that God honors the free choices of His servants, and that He doesn’t use robots to fulfill His plan. Jonah’s disobedience, in fact, highlights the fact that whenever a prophet or servant of the Lord does obey, it is an act of free will, which is freely

offered to God. God honors man's free will more than we may imagine. Additionally, Jonah displays the old man, the natural self, in striking contrast to the new man. With Jonah we see a man with free will who can choose to stand with his old man or new man. In God's working with Jonah we see how God continually takes pains to lessen or neutralize the old man within Jonah and edify the new man.

Jonah's old man rears his ugly head in at least two instances—running from the presence of the Lord and becoming angry at God's grace. God's response in both cases shows us how God seeks to lessen and neutralize that old part within Jonah. In both cases, Jonah is not struck dead by a lightning bolt. In both cases God appoints events to bring Jonah to realize his shortage. The storm and the fish eventually bring Jonah to realize his guilt and to acknowledge that he is the cause for God's displeasure. The plant and the worm are intended to cause Jonah to realize the extreme power that his selfishness and self-interest hold over him. God intends that Jonah would realize these and overcome them.

God also uses these same events to try to stimulate Jonah's new man to come into alignment with Him. His sojourn in the fish becomes a time of praise and thankfulness for God rescuing his life from the pit. The new Jonah in the fishes' belly is a Jonah brought up from the dead, obedient to the Lord, and overflowing with thankfulness and victory. The entire environment God arranges feeds his new man experience, strengthens Jonah's experience of the word and gives him the true taste of victory. The storm and the sea seem to be for the worse, but they actually turn out for good. God also tries to show Jonah his heart for Nineveh by using the plant, the worm and the wind. Jarring Jonah out of his old thoughts, God seeks to energize Jonah's new man to love people and rejoice over God's salvation for all mankind. God does not kill

Jonah for disagreeing. Rather, He teaches him, seeking that he would exercise his free will to lay aside the old and take up the new. In a sense, Jonah is to put off the old man and put on the new. Even though Jonah never becomes mature, his interaction with God surely shows the process of maturity.

How did Jonah transcend his environment? How did he realize he wasn't serving his own generation but us? How did he inquire into what the Lord was speaking with him? While these questions may be obvious when studying Habakkuk or some other prophets, the answers are quite elusive in the case of Jonah. In the end, we are just not sure if Jonah did transcend, if he realized that he was serving the New Testament believers and not his own generation, or if he sought to understand what God was prophesying through him.

It is difficult to follow Jonah's growth by looking at his changed attitude, because his attitude does not change. However, his actions surely speak to a generation that is not his own; his actions speak to us. To the Jews of that time, Jonah is simply a prophet who was swallowed by a fish and eventually goes to a nearby heathen city to proclaim judgment. However, to us, Jonah's story is so different. His story speaks about Christ dying and resurrecting so that the gospel of God's salvation might be announced to all the nations of the earth according to God's graciousness, steadfast love, and mercy. Jonah might have never inquired into what God meant. However, his story speaks volumes to the current generation of New Testament believers. Jonah is serving us.

Who might listen?

In short—almost every human being. What kind of person might the message of Jonah appeal to? Well, I think his story may have the broadest appeal of all the prophets, because we

all have some Jonah in us. We have to admit that to a greater or lesser extent we are all fighting insularity, selfishness, stifling presumption and self-important narrowness. Jonah's story speaks to us how death and resurrection can deliver us from all that and how God's spreading gospel will conquer the earth. In this sense Jonah's story is the story of every great servant of the Lord. They all began as selfish, self-seeking, insular and arrogant people. However, like God worked in Jonah, He is able to work in many other servants to produce a testimony of His grace. Jonah's personality is ours. Jonah's interactions with God is a picture of ours. If we are able to learn from him, Jonah's testimony of death and resurrection can also be our testimony.

MICAH

Finding a prominent, defining characteristic for Micah is not as easy as it is with some of the other prophets. John Nelson Darby notes that Micah's prophecy exhibits "its own peculiar character" (p. 567). Kelly remarks that his prophecies possess "their distinctive properties" (p. 241). However, searching through commentaries to find exactly what the "peculiar character" or "distinctive properties" are is a difficult quest. Authors don't elaborate on the details. One common theme, highlighted by Kelly, along with many others, observes that the prophet Micah is most similar to Isaiah. The difference is simply that Micah is much shorter. Ironsides notes about Micah, "as compared with Isaiah, he was a simple countryman" (p. 149). David Guzik sums up the mystery of Micah's personality echoed by so many other commentators, "We really don't know anything about Micah's background or call, but we do know that he had a strong sense of his own

calling as a prophet.”

Not knowing historical details of Micah’s life does not completely prevent us from painting a picture of the prophet. These are some things we can draw from his writings. We know that Micah is a very passionate servant of the Lord. He doesn’t merely mechanically relate God’s message to the people. His message of judgment causes him to exclaim, “For this I will lament and wail; I will go stripped and naked; I will make lamentation like the jackals, and mourning like the ostriches” (Micah 1:8). We know that Micah is powerfully filled with God’s Spirit, which enables him to testify with might, “But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin” (Micah 3:8). We know that Micah is a visionary. The Spirit revealed to Micah many grand visions of God’s coming kingdom; the Messiah, “whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days” (Micah 5:3); and of the future sufferings and glories of God’s people. We know that Micah is a committed member of his nation who deeply yearns for his fellow countrymen to be faithful to God. When he finds no seeker of God among his fellows, he passionately cries out “Woe is me” (Micah 7:1). Finally, we know that Micah is spiritual pioneer. When others don’t go God’s way, he blazes a trail declaring, “But as for me, I will look to the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me” (Micah 7:8). In walking on lonely pathway with God, Micah apprehends the divine provisions of his Savior in richer and grander ways. He sees that God is the one who raises him up when he falls, is light to him when he sits in darkness, and eventually, is the one who casts all his sins into the depths of the sea. Micah never says the words “New Covenant.” However, at the end of his ministry it is almost as if he is living out a New Covenant relationship with the God he is serving.

In summary, then, we see that Micah is a passionate servant of God, who is powerfully filled with the Spirit. He's a visionary who yearns that his fellow countrymen could join in his grand vision of God's move. When he sees that his generation of Israelites won't join in, he becomes a spiritual pioneer, blazing a trail for God seekers to participate in the divine move and enjoy the realities of the New Covenant. In a sense, Micah defies simple characterization. Hosea and Amos both lend themselves to categories. The marriage God led Hosea into defined his prophecy as being one emphasizing relationship with God. The righteous yearning in Amos defined his prophecy in terms of justice and God's fulfillment of that. Micah, on the other hand, is a grand visionary, defined, in a sense, by the great vision he sees. If Micah could be categorized, his category would be a visionary of God's coming kingdom and the Messiah. Although Micah addresses other things, like the corruption of the nation, his focus is pinned on this high vision. His yearning is not that the nation would improve, but that people would be godly—that they might look at God and watch for God, so that they could participate in the divine future as Micah sees it.

His setting

Micah hails from a small town in the Judean countryside called Moresheth. His prophetic ministry takes place during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, which happens to be during the middle section of Isaiah's prophetic ministry. Micah addresses his words to both the southern kingdom of Judah and the northern kingdom of Israel. He is a contemporary of Hosea and he probably knew Isaiah who prophesied at the same time in the south. Whereas Isaiah speaks to kings, Micah never records speaking to royalty. Rather, Micah

stands out as one of the only prophets who directs his words to the small towns of the nation, mentioning ten of them in a charming section where he uses literary flair to describe the coming judgment that those small towns will face. Micah also uses many agricultural references, including shepherds and sheep, fruit pickers and pastures.

Anyone who lived through the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah would know what a rollercoaster the national conscience could traverse. Jotham was an upright king, who was good in the eyes of the Lord and who generally benefited the nation by continuing in the reforms of his father Uzziah. Ahaz, Jotham's son, was one of the most idolatrous kings Judah had ever witnessed. He set up idols on every hillside and on all the streets of Jerusalem, closed the temple for regular worship and built his own idolatrous altar right in the temple court. Hezekiah was a transformational leader who turned the national worship back to God. He cleansed the temple from idols, tore down the high places, and reestablished the Passover celebrations and the priesthood at the temple.

Meanwhile in the northern kingdom, Jeroboam II expanded that kingdom to its widest extent since the time of Solomon. He brought in prosperity and diligently continued the religious practices of worshipping the golden calf, as Jeroboam I had set up in Samria and Dan. After his rule the kingdom quickly descended into confusion. His son, Zechariah, only ruled for six months before he was killed by Shallom, who assumed the throne after him. Shallum reigned only one month and then was killed by Menahem, who reigned for ten years. Menahem continued to do evil in the sight of the Lord and was the first to witness a strong oppression from the Assyrian kingdom. His son Pekahiah, reigned two more years and was killed by his officer Pekah, who assumed the throne for two years. Under his rule, Assyria conquered many sections

of the kingdom of Israel, including Gilead, Galilee, Ijon and Naphtali. Hoshea, an unrelated strong man in Israel, rose up and killed Pekah and became the last king of Israel to rule before Assyria fully conquered the northern kingdom. The final demise of the northern kingdom occurred in the sixth year of Hezekiah, the king of Judah's reign.

Micah spoke throughout these tumultuous times to both the northern and the southern kingdoms. The culture and worship of that time were corrupt and hypocritical. He notes how the worship in both kingdoms is sinful and idolatrous, naming both capitals as seats of errant religion, "What is the transgression of Jacob? Is it not Samaria? And what is the high place of Judah? Is it not Jerusalem?" (Micah 1:5). These idolatrous practices were mixed with prostitution and uncleanness, causing Micah to announce, "All her carved images shall be beaten to pieces, all her wages shall be burned with fire, and all her idols I will lay waste, for from the fee of a prostitute she gathered them, and to the fee of a prostitute they shall return" (Micah 1:7). The leaders of the day, the princes, priests and prophets, were corrupted by wealth and influence to the point that they no longer cared about God's authority or voice. Additionally, they felt secure with God in their corrupt deeds. "Its heads give judgment for a bribe; its priests teach for a price; its prophets practice divination for money; yet they lean on the LORD and say, "Is not the LORD in the midst of us? No disaster shall come upon us"" (Micah 3:11). The rich classes had corrupted themselves to the point of unbridled greed and a flagrant disregard for the poor. "They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them away; they oppress a man and his house, a man and his inheritance" (Micah 2:2). They sought prophets for their spiritual entertainment, looking to them to affirmation of their profligate lifestyle. "If a man should go about and utter wind and

lies, saying, “I will preach to you of wine and strong drink,” he would be the preacher for this people!” (Micah 2:11). All the while in the north, the whole nation along with their rulers adhered assiduously to the errant worship established by Jeroboam to keep the people from going to God’s rightful house in Jerusalem. “For you have kept the statutes of Omri, and all the works of the house of Ahab” (Micah 6:16).

Micah’s message

In the midst of the political, cultural, economic, and spiritual confusion of the times, Micah spoke words that could give God seekers a future and a hope. His prophecy can easily be divided into three sections, each beginning with a word “hear.” There is a surprising uniformity of views among commentators in favor of this division. Each section declares some unrighteousness in God’s people and presents a prophecy of the Messiah or God’s kingdom. In Micah’s first section, (Micah 1:1-2:13), Micah wails and laments because God’s judgment upon Judah and Israel due to their idolatry, wickedness, greed, and debauchery. After the majority will be judged, Micah prophesies that the Messiah as “Breaker” will gather a remnant and lead them out as His flock. In the second section (Micah 3:1-5:15), Micah is full of the Spirit to declare the transgressions of Israel and thus reveals the corruption of the priests, prophets, and leaders. Then, the Spirit within Micah reveal so much more. Micah speaks his clearest picture of God’s restored kingdom, the coming of the Messiah, the future shepherding of the Messiah and the process which God will make His people pass through to ready them for the future. The third section (Micah 6:1-7:20), is an appeal by God for His people to join in the vision Micah unveiled. Micah describes the spiritual pathway he takes with God to participate in the grand vision he saw.

The three sections broadly convey Micah's overall message. Micah's first section says, "There is a problem, but Christ the Breaker will come and save some." The second section says, "Yes, there is a problem, but look at the grand vision of God's future move and His coming Messiah and kingdom." The third section says, "Here is how you may participate in that grand vision of God's move." This is Micah in a nutshell.

Micah's interaction with God

In this section we will follow Micah as he describes himself and his interaction with God. We will see how each section of the book exemplifies one attribute of the prophet. Put together, these attributes lay out Micah's path toward maturity.

His passion

In chapters one and two, the first section of his prophecy, Micah presents his passion for serving the Lord. He is pressed and desperate to convey his message to the nation. The message, it seems, lays so heavily upon him, that he wails and laments, as if he is at a funeral of a close friend. "For this I will lament and wail; I will go stripped and naked; I will make lamentation like the jackals, and mourning like the ostriches" (Micah 1:8). As he is wailing and lamenting like animals and dressed like a mourner and prisoner, he desperately tries to touch the conscience of all who are in Judah. He specifically mentions many small towns by name, that presumably are just like the one where he was born. He presents to us his passion, emotion, and feeling. Micah didn't merely speak God's message, he lived it and allowed it to affect him. We could imagine a person who wails and laments like this losing sleep over the message he is conveying. His words are because of God. His

feelings are tuned by God. His laments perfectly convey God's pain. His wails are because of God. Even his clothes and shoes add to the message God is speaking through him. We don't know how God called him. However, we do know that what God gave him, Micah took very seriously, and was "all in" in his ministry to convey that message. Anyone witnessing Micah prophesy would understand words, hear sounds and see sights that all add weight to the message he is delivering.

His vision

In chapters three through five, the second section of his prophecy, we see how Micah matured, especially in terms of vision and revelation. This section reveals the key to that kind of maturity, by showing us that the prophet who was so passionate and desperate in service to God in the first section, was actually filled with the Spirit. Micah testifies here, "But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin" (Micah 3:8). Here we learn that the desperation and passion that Micah displayed in declaring transgression and sin to Judah in the first section, was actually a product of the Spirit's filling him. He is not doing this out of his own strength or choice. No, Micah is spiritual, because He is filled with the Spirit.

He contrasts himself with the false prophets, whose speaking depends entirely on what the people offer them. If the people pay them, they prophesy peace. If there is no pay, they prophesy holy war. These prophets are sad reflections of their corrupt environment. As such it is impossible for God to use them to bring truth or righteousness to the situation. Micah, being filled with the Spirit, is a total contrast to them. Because Micah is filled from God, he can affect the situation for God.

He is not merely a product of his environment. Rather, he is a genuine source of revelation, truth, strength, power, justice and Spirit to the nation. He is filled, so he is able to dispense God's words to the people. This is Micah's secret. This is his power. This is how he could aim straight, in order to speak the truth and declare the truth to the power at that time.

Being filled with the Spirit is fresh, exciting, a bit unpredictable and surprising. As an example, consider Micah 3:12 and 4:1. There is a very important transition between these two verses that splendidly illustrates how the Spirit works. Micah 3:12 is exactly what one would expect from a servant of God who is "filled...with the Spirit...to declare to Jacob his transgression." As such, Micah delivers a prophecy concerning the destruction that will come because of the transgressions, "Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height" (Micah 3:12). Micah prophesies that the mountain of the house, referring to mount Zion will become a forest, because it will be so desolate. Then, the same Spirit that prophesied destruction utterly lifts up this same mountain in a great prophecy of restoration. "It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains" (Micah 4:1). Right here is a picture of how the Spirit works, just as Jesus says "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). In one moment, Micah is following the Spirit, declaring the sin and transgressions of the nation. Then, in the very next breath, the Spirit seizes upon the forested mountain of the house of the Lord and blows inspiration into that mountain. No longer is Micah stuck in the sins of Judah. The Spirit who fills him elevates him and showed him that the same mountain will be established as the highest of

the mountains. Any person trying to serve God without the Spirit will never taste this kind of elevation. They will never jump from judgment to glorious promise. Because Micah was faithful to carry out the ministry he was charged with by God and filled by the Spirit to do, then he was in the best position for him to see great revelation of God's move by the same Spirit which was filling him. Being filled with the Spirit is *the* crucial thing for any servant of the Lord.

Chapter four and five contain many wonderful revelations. These visions make up most of the content of Micah's prophecies. The Spirit brought this prophet so much farther than simply talking about unbalanced scales and false prophets of mixed alcoholic drinks. He sees that the wooded mountain of the house, will become a mountain of the house of the Lord that is higher than any other mountain. He sees that, one day, all the nations of the earth will stream up to the top of that mountain. He sees that God's marvelous salvation will cause His lame and outcast remnant to become a built-up tower to bear the authority of the Lord. He sees how the calamities and travail God's people will face will result in great spiritual birth, which will be worked out according to the untraceable, wonderful wisdom of God who can arrange all things.

Through the Spirit, Micah sees the birth of the Messiah, as true Shepherd and Ruler. "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days" (Micah 5:2). This is simply marvelous. Micah sees that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem Ephrathah, a small town in Judah, which name prophetically and poetically means "house of bread by the fruitful field." Messiah will be a fine, fitting Ruler for God's people (at last!). Micah sees His coming forth from "of old," meaning He will be a genuine man from the town of Bethle-

hem and from “ancient days,” which means that He will also be God, rooted in eternity.

Furthermore, the Spirit shows Micah a further birth and the travail among God’s people. That travail will establish the Messiah as the powerful Shepherd to God’s people. Once they have this Shepherd, Israel will be gathered together in security, the remnant will be spread throughout the nations to bless them, as dew and lions, and the nation will truly be purified before God. Finally, the entire earth will be blessed and will be under the rightful reign of the Messiah King.

After receiving all this revelation, it is evident that Micah is rich. He is rich in seeing the coming kingdom, the Messiah and the process of travail that the people of God will go through. It is as if the Spirit has now given him rich capital. He is full of spiritual riches, spiritual sight and spiritual knowledge. He is filled with a great scene in his mind. He is no stranger to God’s move and God’s goal. He is full of spiritual apprehension and has become very familiar with the great plan of God. The Spirit opened the way and gave him this heavenly vision.

His travail

The final section of Micah shows the prophet in a very different place than he was in the first two sections. In those sections he is passionately speaking about the sins of the nation and witnessing grand visions of God’s unfolding plan. In the final section Micah joins with God in pleading with the people for them to return to their Lord. When the plea falls on deaf ears, Micah himself stands for the Lord and shows the pathway forward for all who wish to follow.

Possibly the one word that best describes Micah in these final endeavors is the word “travail,” or “labor,” as Micah used

three different times in chapters four and five. He describes the Israelite's suffering as "pain" that "seized you like a woman in labor" (Micah 4:9). He commands the people that their trial will actually result in a hopeful birth, "Writhe and groan, O daughter of Zion, like a woman in labor" (Micah 4:10). Finally, he predicts more birth pangs for the nation, "Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth" (Micah 5:3). Micah sees travail or labor as a crucial element of the nation's journey with the Lord. He *sees* the importance of travail in chapters four and five. Then, he *lives* it out in chapters six and seven. It might be that the travail he saw inspired Micah. He might have realized that the road forward will not be easy. It will be full of birth pangs, but those pangs will be so worthwhile. It will be the most worthwhile endeavor ever. There could have been many other struggles that Micah attempted at the end of his prophecy. He could have tried to make the scales honest or to reform the behavior of the rich or to eliminate the idols of the time. However, those struggles are not like the travail of the nation as a whole to bring forth a child. The travail Micah is speaking of is deeper than reform. It is birth pangs for a birth that will make way for the ruler born in Bethlehem to be Shepherd over God's people and to affect the entire world.

Chapters six and seven, the last section of Micah's prophecy, can be considered a record of Micah's spiritual travail, as he undergoes "birth pangs" trying to bring the people of God into participation in God's move. If his travail is successful, the people's return would result in their inclusion in the great vision that he saw in chapters four and five. Christ will be brought forth in glory. What a worthy endeavor!

Micah's travail begins with God and Micah working together, pleading for the people to come to God. In his pleading we see God's pleading and in God's pleading we see Micah's

pleading. God and Micah are working together to turn the people back to their God. God's plea, delivered by Micah, is passionate and full of love. God lovingly asks, "O my people, what have I done to you?" (Micah 6:3). He then reviews many historical acts that demonstrate God's love for them. God brought them out of Egypt, gave them Moses and led them across the Jordan to Gilgal, bringing them into the land of their inheritance. After God did so many things for His people, they are acting as if God has wronged them and they are weary of worshipping Him

As the prophet speaks for the Lord and reasons with the people in the same way as the Lord reasons, it is as if Micah is the most touched by God's pleas. He himself is convicted and leads the people to consider coming before the Lord. As a sinner like his brothers in the nation, he asks the question for them, "With what shall I come before the LORD" (Micah 6:6). Eventually, Micah leads the people to see that returning to the Lord is not a matter of sacrifice. It is a matter of fellowship—of walking with God. That is what God truly is looking for. Micah charges them, according to God's true pleasure, for them "to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). Obviously, Micah is not merely preaching words of disinterested advice to the people. He is fully invested in the nation's return. It is as if he is convicted of his own sin and is expecting all the people to have been genuinely convicted as well. He also is relating his own experience to the nation. He tells them that God is not interested in sacrifice. Rather, He is looking for people to walk humbly with Him. This lesson is so real to Micah, so present in his experience. He can share it freely in his deep travail for the nation to return.

After such a glorious statement of return, Micah is hit with a drastic realization—no one cares. God's people have not re-

turned to Him and still harbor profound wickedness. Even though God's plea was so effectual in Micah, it fell on deaf ears for the rest of the nation. Micah looks for any fruit, any person who is willing to hear God's plea. He finds no one, nothing, and cries out, "Woe is me! For I have become as when the summer fruit has been gathered, as when the grapes have been gleaned: there is no cluster to eat, no first-ripe fig that my soul desires" (Micah 7:1). Micah realizes that the generation that he is speaking to is hopeless. It will not turn and will not produce fruit that will satisfy him. God can passionately plea and affect Micah. But He will not affect this generation.

Micah is at this lowest point, when something within him seemingly breaks. No longer will he expose the nation's false scales, corrupt priests, self-serving rulers and prophets of mixed drinks. He realizes he is not serving this generation. Rather, he is serving a future generation. A future, faithful, godly remnant becomes much more the focus of Micah's travail at this point. His true break comes when he testifies that he is different from the entire group that he has been speaking to. They will not produce any fruit. However, Micah resolutely declares, "But as for me, I will look to the LORD" (Micah 7:7). These words are words of a person who has broken, has given up hope of being a "big name" in God's current "move" with the generation. He has given up hope of fame, temporal respect and all thought of success in spiritual work. No, it will not come in his lifetime. But there is still God, still the vision of what God showed him and still the travail that he can participate in. "But as for me..." implies a world of internal change.

Micah changes and begins to blaze a trail for himself to follow God and for any God seeker to follow him in his following of God. Just as Micah prophesied about a breaker (Micah 2:13), breaking out and allowing others to break out to follow

God, Micah himself breaks out. His breaking out begins by a fresh, new, fervent, intense, focused gaze on the Lord Himself. God showed him the vision. God will make a way to participate. It is not a response to God's plea that will make the difference. It is a look at God himself. So, Micah says, "But as for me, I will look to the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me" (Micah 7:7).

When Micah's focus becomes the Lord and Him alone, then so many elements of God's salvation come into focus. Micah begins to see that it is not important that a person walking with God be perfect, but it is important for a person who walks with God would see God's rich provision of salvation and grace. Micah realizes "when I fall, I shall rise" (Micah 7:8). He realizes that when he sits in darkness God will be light to Him (Micah 7:8). He realizes that he has sin and that he will be under the discipline of his Lord. However, he trusts that the Lord is just and fair, will not discipline for too long and will eventually bring him to the light. In short, Micah realizes that his life and everything will be wrapped up in his Lord, who is sufficient to bring Micah all the way to the vision that He has seen. Sacrifice is not the answer. Looking at the Lord and experiencing all the riches of the Lord is the answer.

After this, Micah is confirmed in his vision. He sees the wall of God's kingdom built up and the boundary of God's testimony extended. Previously, Micah had seen the elevated mountain of the house of the Lord and the tower of God's authority established (Micah 4:1, 8). Here, Micah again sees God's kingdom established. This time, however, Micah sees the way to get there. It is through gazing at the Lord and through enjoying the Lord's rich provision for him. This is the pathway Micah is blazing.

In his maturity, Micah utters a most marvelous prayer. "Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock of your in-

heritance” (Micah 7:14). At first, this may seem like a routine prayer. One might think, “Of course, God should shepherd His people. What next?” However, two things are striking about it. First, this is the first prayer Micah records in his entire book. Only now, after he has firmly set himself to look to the Lord, does he record asking the Lord to fulfill what he has seen in his vision. Second, this prayer is along the line of the Lord’s interests. It is not a prayer asking for Micah’s selfish wishes. The Lord is a Shepherd. The Lord’s people need to be shepherded. This prayer is asking God to accomplish for His people what He is capable and happy to do for them. In Micah’s maturity, he prays for God to accomplish His interest for His inheritance. This is a high prayer. The only person who can utter it is one who is outside his gloomy situation and able to look and hope in the One who can accomplish all. God answers in the affirmative, confirming that He will indeed fulfill Micah’s prayer, shepherd His flock and work wonders to make His people a shining testimony.

After this, all Micah is left to do is praise. His praise is wonderful, encompassing all the acts and mercies and graces that God has revealed to him thus far. He sees God as the just, righteous and compassionate One who steadfastly loves His covenant people. He sees God who will eradicate sin absolutely and finally, just as if He had thrown all the sins into the depths of the sea. He sees how God’s fulfillment of Micah’s vision is in line with God’s steadfast love to Abraham and His faithfulness to Jacob. Micah sees how God’s history with His people and His future with them will be knit seamlessly together. God’s full work is orchestrated by the just, righteous, compassionate God who delights in steadfast love based on the commitments He made to Abraham and will fulfill with His New Testament believers.

This is the highest place. At the beginning of his prophe-

sy Micah was wailing and lamenting, naked and barefoot, sounding like jackals and ostriches. He has been filled with the Spirit and shown wonderful visions. The visions inspired him to enter into travail alongside God, so that the nation would bring forth Christ in some higher way. God showed him the futility of the current generation, so Micah set himself to look for the Lord and wait for His salvation. Eventually, he praises God because he sees the reality of God's salvation and how it fits into God's great historic and future work. Micah is truly serving us, the New Testament believers. He has diligently inquired into the riches the Lord showed him. The Lord brought him higher and higher into what the Spirit of Christ within him was making clear. Micah has transcended. His voice is serving us today.

Who might listen?

Micah's message appeals to a person who is looking for a pathway of following Christ that is comprehensive enough that they would be able to follow for their whole life. It is not a message for a "single issue" servant of God. It is a deep message that would resonate with someone who says, "I want to follow the Lord through the challenges my current culture presents, through the visions I see, through developing my ministry and through making a personal stand for the Lord." Micah saw the degradation of the majority of the nation. He saw profound visions of Christ and His coming kingdom. He also travailed as he realized few people care and that he himself has to be the pioneer. Micah's is a message for those in God's work who have a particular sense that they are in a spiritual travail, as they struggle to make the vision they have received become reality for God's people and themselves.

I think the message of Micah might resonate with a ser-

vant of God such as J. N. Darby, and others who were with him. Darby surely saw something of the degradation of the vast majority of Christian endeavors. He saw profound realizations of Christ and the church. His ministry about the ascendancy and glories of Christ was revolutionary. His view of the purity and spiritual standing of the church was liberating. He traveled to bring these into experience and reality in the lives of believers. At the end of his life, after his ministry was almost complete, he might not have been satisfied with the general situation he saw among Christians. However, he himself still pioneered. Just as Micah said, "As for me, I will wait on the Lord," Darby also waited for Him. One story highlights Darby's experience near the end of his life. As an old man, he was traveling for his ministry and he stopped at an inn for the night. As he lay down, exhausted from the trip, a companion heard him utter a simple prayer, "Jesus, I my cross have taken, All to leave and follow Thee." What a prayer from an elderly brother who had seen so much, traveled so long and sought the Lord with all his might! This is the message of Micah lived out in God's saints.

NAHUM

Nahum is a true visionary. He calls his work “The book of the vision” (Nahum 1:1), showing that his writings will tell a spiritual story that he receives from God. Nahum’s uniqueness as a visionary becomes apparent when the reader notices the pattern to his writing. The repeating pattern in Nahum is that first God speaks, then Nahum portrays. And Nahum portrays in vivid colors and powerful language like no other! For instance, God declares freedom to Judah from her enemy, saying, “now I will break his yoke from off you and will burst your bonds apart” (Nahum 1:13). Nahum takes this message and “works it,” making it so vivid so that the reader feels he has a front row seat for the fulfillment. Nahum zooms his readers attention to the image of a tiny man bringing news through terrible and awesome mountains, “Behold, upon the mountains, the feet of him who brings good news” (Nahum 1:15). He also portrays the chaos of destruction in the ene-

my's city, "The chariots race madly through the streets; they rush to and fro through the squares; they gleam like torches, they dart like lightning" (Nahum 2:4). The reader emerges from studying Nahum with visions of out-of-breath messengers cresting peaks and chariots careening into crowded alleyways.

This pattern in Nahum's work demonstrates a fiercely original, creative aspect of his personality. His is literary, metaphorical and poetic. "None of the minor prophets ... seem to equal Nahum in boldness, ardor, and sublimity. His prophecy, too, forms a regular and perfect poem: the exordium is not merely magnificent, it is truly majestic" (Barker, p. 144). It seems that God simply joins in with the prophet's creative juices to highlight in many colorful scenes who God is and how He works. It is through this cooperation between God and the prophet that the message of Nahum sounds out to comfort Israel. They work together, performing a beautiful duet of God's message, which comforts and reassures Judah. The meaning of Nahum is "comfort," which is surely fitting for this book.

Nahum's writings offer almost no other hints into his personality. They include none of the prophet's own words that he speaks to God, none of his tears and none of his prayers. Unlike Amos, he never says "How can Jacob stand?" (Amos 7:2). Unlike Hosea, we never see any act of obedience Nahum performs (Hosea 1). God never tells him to do something, so people would look at him and learn. Instead Nahum is somewhat transparent to us. In his simplicity he sees God and conveys the vision he sees.

If any personality traits could be assigned to Nahum, he might be described as jealous and good, just as he describes God as One who is both jealous and good. He starts out with a view of God's harsh, judgmental side, "The LORD is a jeal-

ous and avenging God” (Nahum 1:2)...now that’s an attention-getting opener for today’s soft Christianity. However, at the same time Nahum also presents God’s comforting side, “The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble” (Nahum 1:7). It is these two seemingly contradictory characteristics of God that Nahum so ably juxtaposes to his readers. Maybe it takes a “non-politically-correct” person like Nahum to explain how a jealous and avenging God can be such a good, welcome refuge. Jealousy and vengeance can easily become errant and hurtful. However, God’s jealousy and vengeance are just, edifying, and restorative. Nahum makes his readers realize that the Lord is jealous over His people, just as a husband is rightly jealous over his wife. God’s jealousy causes Him to act on behalf of Judah and even for the benefit of the all the world’s people. His jealousy causes Him to restore the glory of His people after their suffering, “For the LORD is restoring the majesty of Jacob for plunderers have plundered them” (Nahum 2:2). God’s jealousy compels Him to free many oppressed peoples from tyranny and terror. Once the nations’ oppressor falls, the earth will rejoice, “All who hear the news about you clap their hands over you. For upon whom has not come your unceasing evil?” (Nahum 3:19).

Just like the God Nahum describes, Nahum himself is jealous over God’s people to the point of being zealous for their comfort and restoration. Nahum’s jealous zealousness causes him to extend himself to show how God will comfort them. Nahum’s overarching endeavor is to show how God in the abstract who is jealous, wrathful and good will concretely work in real life situations according to His true character. The arc of the story begins with Nahum’s grand appreciation of God in His abstract, true character—jealous and good. It continues through pictures and speaking to explain God’s motive—the restoration of His people through the destruction of their

enemy, Nineveh. It concludes with a lively, concrete picture of how God will work on the earth. Nahum begins with an abstract, yet true, concept of God applicable at all times, on earth and in the heavens, and ends with a vivid portrayal of how God will move in a specific time in regards to a definite people. He is a prime example of abstract theology working itself out in a practical, real-world situation. Nahum's jealous zealousness thus accomplishes what many intellectual theologians fail to do—he shows how his theological God will actually make a difference in his reader's world.

His setting

The setting of Nahum is most likely after the siege of Jerusalem by the Assyrians under their king Sennacherib described in 2 Kings 18-19 and Isaiah 36-37. By the time of that siege the Assyrians had destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel, conquered most of the towns of Judea surrounding Jerusalem and were now violently besieging Jerusalem. God worked a marvelous deliverance to Judah by breaking the siege and destroying the Assyrian army. Nahum speaks his prophesy after this siege, when the people of Jerusalem might have had it strongly in their mind that the Assyrians may come back any time and oppress them again. Nahum's comfort to the people is that God will totally cut off the Assyrians, so that they will never oppress Judah again. Nahum's prophesy would be fulfilled when the Babylonians and Medes destroy Nineveh, ending the Assyrian empire and ensuring that the wicked empire directed from the city of Nineveh will never again demand tribute from or attack the nation of Judah.

Most commentators agree with this setting for the book of Nahum. Barker summarizes how two historical events could more precisely date the prophesy of Nahum to be between 663 BC and 612 BC.

The few historical references in the Book of Nahum give us a *terminus post quem* and a *terminus ad quem* for the book, that is the earliest possible and latest possible dates. The “book” of Nahum (1:1) must have been composed after the fall of Thebes (No-Amon) to the Assyrian army in 663 B.C., since that event is placed in the recent past in 3:8–10. The conquest of Thebes, the capital of Egypt, constituted one of the great feats in ancient times. Located deep in Egypt, protected by the Nile River and hazardous terrain, it seemed impregnable. The fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C. to a coalition of Medes and Babylonians serves as the latest possible date of the book, since Nahum speaks of Nineveh’s fall as a future event.

—Barker, p. 137-8

Nahum’s message

I find it easiest to visualize the book by sectioning it into four different parts. The first section (after his introductory verse) is Nahum’s vision of God, who is jealous and good, and his application of that vision (Nahum 1:2-11). Sections two through four each begin with God’s direct, first-person speaking and end with Nahum’s development of God’s message. The second section begins with God announcing how He will free Judah from Assyria and ends with Nahum’s vivid detail of Israel’s freedom (Nahum 1:12-2:12). The third section begins with God cutting off Nineveh’s messengers and concludes with Nahum’s description of Nineveh’s destruction (Nahum 2:13-3:4). The final section relates how God will judge Nineveh as a harlot and ends with Nahum describing how the earth will rejoice over that judgment (Nahum 3:5-19). Put together, the sections convey a glorious vision of a jealous God (section one), the freedom God will give Israel (section two), the destruction of Nineveh (section three) and the earth’s rejoicing over Nineveh’s judgment (section four).

Nahum's Interaction with God

Nahum begins his prophesy with a grand vision of God. He sees God as “jealous,” “avenging,” “wrathful,” “slow to anger,” “great in power,” “good,” “a refuge in the day of trouble” (Nahum 1:2,3,7). God can go anywhere. Not one thing can stop Him. “His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebukes the sea and makes it dry; he dries up all the rivers” (Nahum 3-4). He doles out harsh punishment to all adversaries. He “will by no means clear the guilty” (Nahum 1:3). He “takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies” (Nahum 1:2). He is so good to those who seek Him; He “knows those who take refuge in him” (Nahum 1:7). Nahum uses all these characteristics to describe God. He sees God in the abstract, with characteristics that are independent of time and not pegged to one certain event. What Nahum sees is the true God—unchanging, immovable and eternal. At this beginning stage, Nahum applies God’s attributes in a rather theoretical way. He lets Judah know generally that God “will make a complete end of adversaries” (Nahum 1:8) and that “trouble will not rise up a second time” (Nahum 1:9). He lets Nineveh know that they are on the wrong side, because they tried to plot against the Lord, “From you came one who plotted evil against the LORD” (Nahum 1:11). Nahum is a man whose vision is full of God in His eternal attributes and who can set his environment—Judah and Nineveh—in context of that.

At the end of his prophecy we see a very different Nahum. No longer is he gazing at God in His eternal, unchanging attributes. At the end, Nahum sees only God’s work, specifically, he sees God’s destruction of Nineveh and the effect that it has on the entire world. Whereas before his vision was full of God’s characteristics, now his eyes are full of the destruction of the city. He writes revelations like, “All your fortresses are

like fig trees with first-ripe figs—if shaken they fall into the mouth of the eater” (Nahum 3:12), “Your troops are women in your midst” (Nahum 3:13), “Your princes are like grasshoppers” (Nahum 3:17), “Your shepherds are asleep” (Nahum 3:18) and “There is no easing your hurt; your wound is grievous” (Nahum 1:19). He also sees the joyous effect on all the peoples of the world when they hear the news of Nineveh’s downfall, “All who hear the news about you clap their hands over you” (Nahum 3:19). Nahum concludes his prophesy by vividly portraying the concrete effects upon the earth of the theological God he saw at the beginning. He clearly portrays to his readers a picture of how God will change their life.

Nahum’s starting and ending points are so different from other prophets. Obadiah starts by looking at the pride and judgment of Edom and ends with seeing God’s kingdom spreading on earth. Micah begins by speaking about Judah’s sins and ends with a heavenly view of God’s eternal redemption and salvation. In contrast, Nahum starts with seeing a glorious vision of God and concludes with seeing sleeping shepherds, insect-like princes and the fatal wounds of Nineveh. One may think that Nahum “grew” in the wrong direction, surmising, “He should have started with the physical and been uplifted to see “only God” at the end.” This direction is true for many other minor prophets. However, Nahum exists to let the world know that the other direction of growth is also important. It is important to see God and then see how He works on earth.

How did Nahum grow from his first stage to his last? His writings show that between these two ends, Nahum receives two main lessons from God. First, Nahum sees that God is seeking to restore a people for Himself on the earth. Second, Nahum sees that God is seeking to eradicate evil and thus benefit all the peoples of all the nations. Both these lessons

are necessary to realize how God who is seen in glory will be realized in experience.

Nahum's first lesson arrives when he hears the Lord promising Judah, "And now I will break his yoke from off you and will burst your bonds apart" (Nahum 1:12). These words might have sent shivers through Nahum's bones. He had just seen the Lord in terrible array, vengeful, wrathful and walking on the clouds of the sky. Now, he realizes that same God will move to free His people. Nahum sees here that God is interested in using his power, capability and might in the interest of His people. God wants to care for the nation who represents Him. Nahum internalizes that lesson, works it and presents God's words in living color. He portrays how the messenger will bring the news from far off, "Behold, upon the mountains, the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace" (Nahum 1:15). He encourages Judah to enjoy the salvation that God is offering, "Keep your feasts, O Judah; fulfill your vows" (Nahum 1:15). Nahum understands how good God is as a refuge for those who seek Him. He encourages the people to press forward to enjoy the Lord, partake of His salvation and offer freely to Him. He also explains God's motives, "For the LORD is restoring the majesty of Jacob" (Nahum 2:2). Nahum fully apprehends God's wish to see His people with majesty and glory. Nahum has advanced in his apprehension of God. He now understands how many resources God will invest in gaining a glorious, majestic people on the earth. This is the first step in making the theological, theoretical God of his vision practical and relevant.

Nahum's second lesson involves God's desire to eradicate evil from the earth. The fact that unrighteousness, ungodliness and wickedness are ubiquitous means that when God eradicates them, He will be "relevant" to every society and all levels of each society. God shows Nahum that He will

“take His gloves off” and actually limit the evil kingdom of Nineveh, “I will burn your chariots in smoke, and the sword shall devour your young lions. I will cut off your prey from the earth, and the voice of your messengers shall no longer be heard” (Nahum 2:13). When Nahum internalizes this, he sees how God will intervene to make right the oppression that has been plaguing mankind. He says, “Woe to the bloody city” (Nahum 3:1) and provides vivid detail of its destruction, “The crack of the whip, and rumble of the wheel, galloping horses and bounding chariot!... heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end—they stumble over the bodies” (Nahum 3:2-3). This is just judgment for the evil committed by this terrible nation, “all for the countless whorings of the prostitute” (Nahum 3:4). Nahum deeply internalizes how God will eradicate evil. Think of Hitler’s gas chambers finally shuttered by allied liberators. Nahum sees the practical out-workings of God. Wherever there is oppression, wherever torment touches God’s created and loved race, wherever tyranny preys upon the weak God will make that right. Now that is not mere theological speculation. That is practical and relevant.

In the end, Nahum sees how down-to-earth God will be. He is not interested in lifting people from the earth to live in a heavenly mansion with Him in heaven. Rather, He is interested in having a nation *on* the earth who is majestic and pure. He is interested in the earth being purified, so that all His created men and women will live as He intends them to live. In the end, all the people of the world will clap their hands when they hear of their liberation, “All who hear the news about you clap their hands over you. For upon whom has not come your unceasing evil?” (Nahum 3:19).

Nahum’s declaration concerning Nineveh might be a harbinger of a far larger celebration that will come when God eliminates a far more terrible oppressor from the earth. At the

end, God will finally destroy Babylon the great, the ultimate “harlot” who corrupts and oppresses the earth. After her destruction, there will be great joy in heaven, crying out

1 “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God,
2 for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants.”
—Revelation 19:1-2

In Nahum’s time the enemy was Assyria. When Assyria was destroyed, the majesty of God’s people was restored and the nations were joyful and free. Nahum speaks of a foretaste of the final great destruction of God’s enemy Babylon. When Babylon is finally destroyed as recorded in Revelation 18, then the heavens will truly rejoice. God’s people will be fully liberated from her influence and all the nations will be able to live in peace in the future. In presenting this picture to us, Nahum is serving us, the New Testament believers, giving a picture of how God will one day clean up the entire earth for His glorious people.

Who might listen?

It is interesting to think of what kind of person might resonate with the message of Nahum. The progression of his prophecy seems to go in the opposite direction from so many other minor prophets. Many prophets begin by looking at concrete situations, like Edom in Obadiah’s case, or the surrounding nations in Amos’ case, and then end by looking at the far-off fulfillment of God’s promises. Nahum, however, is opposite. He begins with God’s eternal characteristics and

ends with God's practical work on the earth—the real destruction of Assyria.

This progression fits a certain group of God seekers who just want to get things done and see God move. It fits evangelists like William Carey, who didn't settle for sitting back and thinking that God would spread the gospel around the world Himself, if He wanted to. Instead William Carey packed up his family and moved to Bengal. Nahum's message fits C. T. Studd, who seemed to tire of endless theological debate. He liquidated his fortune, gave it to the poor, and moved to China, and then to Africa to preach the gospel. He wasn't a man of theology only. He was a man of action, who wanted to see God's promises make a difference on the earth in his day. It fits Robert Chapman who acted out the teachings of J.N. Darby. Darby even said of this man, "We talk of the heavenlies, but Robert Chapman lives in them" This is what Nahum saw also. God's comfort would come to God's people when the jealous, vengeful, and good God would act on the earth. We need Nahum's to get us off our couches and out of our ivory towers and theological debates. How about God working now? This is the pathway, maturity, and message of Nahum.

HABAKKUK

Habakkuk is an intensely passionate prophet who has many inward, struggles. His writings are truly unique among all the prophets because they record only his personal interactions with God. He begins in one state of soul at the start of his writings and, through his conversation with God, concludes with his soul in a very different state. His book records no outward action that the prophet performs. It is more of a novel chronicling the evolution of his internal state than an action movie; more “Hamlet” than “Macbeth.” Habakkuk doesn’t speak to kings or the common Judean. Rather, he speaks to God, receives answers from God and gains new realizations from the word of God. In this sense the book is so simple that the entire drama could have unfolded in one Judean afternoon, as Habakkuk questioned, considered, prayed and sang at his desk in his study.

What such exercise requires is a man who is finely attuned to his inner feelings and to the still small voice of the Lord. This passionate sensitivity is what we find in the prophet Habakkuk. He not only speaks things, he deeply feels things. When what he sees among God's people does not agree with what he understands God to be, then he challenges God rather than the people about that. When God speaks to him, he demonstrates the ability to listen, internalize and adjust to what he hears. He can process things, synthesize new ideas, and find new relevance to well-known Bible truths. We see in him a man who goes through a process with God. His growth in that process becomes a life lesson for us.

Maybe it is fitting in the demonstration of such a fine, internal process, that Habakkuk would be a musician. He's an artist—a singer and stringed instrument player. We know this because he concludes his prophecy with a note indicating that he is a musician in the temple courts. "To the choirmaster: with stringed [Literally, 'my stringed'] instruments" (Habakkuk 3:19). Keil understands that this note places Habakkuk in the musician family and from the tribe of Levi, just like Jeremiah and Ezekiel were. "From the conclusion to the psalm in Hab. 3, "To the leader in the accompaniment to my playing upon stringed instruments" (v. 19), we learn that he was officially qualified to take part in the liturgical singing of the temple, and therefore belonged to one of the Levitical families, who were charged with the maintenance of the temple music, and, like the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, who sprang from priestly households, belonged to the tribe of Levi" (p. 387).

A good way to read Habakkuk is to read it with the question, "How does this musician arrive at his song, as it is recorded in chapter three." Asking this question illuminates Habakkuk's pathway. He begins almost in a state of depression, looking at the unrestrained violence among God's people and saying,

“O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save?” (Habakkuk 1:2). He concludes, not by asking, “How long?” but by trustfully resting in God, saying, “Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble” (Habakkuk 3:16). In the meantime, he is full of joy, “I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation” (Habakkuk 3:18) and empowered in God, “GOD, the Lord, is my strength” (Habakkuk 3:19). His final song takes on the grandeur of Charles Wesley’s famous hymn, “And Can it Be.” In that song Wesley uses the very fact that he cannot understand the intricacies of God’s work to praise Him even more joyfully and with great overflowing zeal, “’Tis myst’ry all: th’ Immortal dies: Who can explore His strange design?” G. Campbell-Morgan states that we should look at how Habakkuk got to this song. “The whole value of this prophecy of Habakkuk on the side of human experience is its revelation of the process that led to this song” (p. 91).

Habakkuk’s detailed prayer record is a great help in enlightening us as to the process. “Habakkuk, a contemporary of Jeremiah, directs his passion and despair at God himself, rather than at the king. In this sense he is an unusual if not unique prophet in the Old Testament. We are given profound insight into the prayer life of a prophet and, in the process, his whole relationship with God becomes public. It is a moving and challenging experience” (Prior, p. 204). A few elements about Habakkuk’s prayer life emerge as we consider his personality. First, he is very sensitive to any contradiction he might feel between his environment and God’s character as he understands it. When he compares the holy God he knows with the violent nation of Israel, he complains to God about it. “O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save?” (Habakkuk 1:2). When God answers him and tells him that

the Chaldeans will come to discipline His people, Habakkuk cannot understand how a righteous God can use the unrighteous Chaldeans to carry out His purpose, saying, “why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?” (Habakkuk 1:13). Honest inquiry is a real key to Habakkuk’s journey. Like the British “loyal opposition,” Habakkuk could question God honestly, without rebelling against Him. He could live before God with his sensitivities and, in that, earnestly seek insight from the Lord.

Habakkuk then does something marvelous: he waits for God’s answer, “I will take my stand at my watchpost and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint” (Habakkuk 2:1). This shows that he is attuned inwardly to God’s speaking. In fact, it is more accurate to translate his expectation as “look out to see what he will say *in me*” rather than “to me.” Habakkuk was attuned, sensitive, and perceptive in his inner life. “After the opening inquiries, revealing depression, we follow the process until we reach the song. There are three things noticeable, the first being that he reached a song of confidence through a doubt which was perfectly honest. Next, he reached the song through trials in the midst of which he waited upon his watch tower. Finally, he reached the song because, as the result of his statement of honest doubt, and of his waiting and watching, he received from God a declaration revealing the deepest secrets of life” (Morgan, p. 92).

God can then reveal His most wondrous secrets to Habakkuk. God tells him, “the righteous shall live by his faith.” (Habakkuk 2:4), which Habakkuk internalizes. From that saying, he can boldly pray a prayer, “O LORD, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O LORD, do I fear. In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known”

(Habakkuk 3:2). He prays that the Lord's work would come to life and sings a passionate song involving the Lord's future appearing in profound context of many of God's past works. The word that was deposited in Habakkuk finds new life and new relevance and gives great encouragement to the prophet.

He ends with a deep realization of the current terrible plight of God's people and the fear of the necessary coming judgment. "I hear, and my body [lit. belly] trembles; my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones; my legs tremble beneath me" (Habakkuk 3:16). From this we see his passion and sensitivity to the plight of God's people. "For Jeremiah, as for Habakkuk, declaring the message of the LORD to his compatriots was costly and traumatic. They both experienced—not just once or twice, but continually over long periods of time—the personal anguish of being spokesmen for God in days of deep darkness for the nation" (Prior, p. 208). On the other hand, we see his ebullience and buoyancy, as he finds that God is more than he had ever imagined. Who God is becomes much more for Habakkuk than what God can do for him or the nation. In the end, Habakkuk declares God is his strength, and that that is good for Habakkuk's soul, "he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places" (Habakkuk 3:19). We see that he feels everything. We see that his tender nature, that of a musician, brings him through a process with the Lord that eventually leads him to a song.

Lastly, Habakkuk portrays this using beautiful words. "His language," to use the words of Keil, "is classical throughout, full of rare and select words and turns, which are to some extent exclusively his own, whilst his view and mode of presentation bear the seal of independent force and finished beauty" (p. 389). For instance, he portrays God's powerful ability by directing the reader to look at His hand, "rays flashed from

his hand; and there he veiled his power” (Habakkuk 3:4). He describes how everything held sway to Him, “The mountains saw you and writhed; the raging waters swept on; the deep gave forth its voice; it lifted its hands on high” (Habakkuk 3:10). He poetically describes His purpose, “You went out for the salvation of your people, for the salvation of your anointed” (Habakkuk 3:13). “Notwithstanding the violent rush and lofty soaring of the thoughts, his prophecy forms a finely organized and artistically rounded whole. Like Isaiah, he is, comparatively speaking, much more independent of his predecessors, both in contents and form, than any other of the prophets. Everything reflects the time when prophecy was in its greatest glory, when the place of the sacred lyrics, in which the religious life of the church had hitherto expressed itself, was occupied, through a still mightier interposition on the part of God, by prophetic poetry with its trumpet voice, to reawaken in the church, now spiritually dead, the consciousness of God which had so utterly disappeared” (Keil, p. 389)

His setting

Habakkuk was a prophet in Judah before the advent of the Babylonian threat to the nation. He does not mention the name of a king who was reigning during the time of his prophesy. The only clear time marker in the book is his prediction of the arrival of the Chaldeans into the land of Judah. This is described by God as something so surprising that those who hear it will not even believe it (Habakkuk 1:5-6). This sets Habakkuk’s prophecy before the great battle at Carchemish (Jeremiah 46:2), at which point the foreign influence upon Judah switched from the Egyptians to the Babylonians. This happened in the fourth year of king Jehioakim. Some commentators (Barker, Prior, Feinberg) place Habakkuk during

those first four years of Jehoiakim, when the land was full of violence and the Babylonian threat was not yet clear. Others see him as ministering earlier, in the years of Josiah or even his father Manasseh. They say this because Jeremiah and Zephaniah, both of whom prophesied during Josiah's reign seem to quote Habakkuk. "Zephaniah and Jeremiah both appeared with the announcement of the same judgment in the reign of Josiah, and both took notice of Habakkuk in their threatenings" (Keil, p. 389). It is always difficult to determine who quotes who. Therefore, I think the best guess is that Habakkuk wrote during the early years of Jehoiakim, who was an evil king, who promoted violence and who did not yet know that the Babylonians were to emerge to conquer the land.

Habakkuk's message

The structure of Habakkuk's prophesy is straightforward. The prophet asks God a question concerning the violence he sees in God's people (Habakkuk 1:2-4). God answers, saying that he will raise up the Chaldeans, a godless people, to discipline the Judeans (Habakkuk 1:5-11). Habakkuk appreciates God's care, realizes that God is his "Rock" but wonders how God can use such unrighteous people to discipline His nation, which is at least a little more righteous than the Chaldeans (Habakkuk 1:12-2:1). God answers by stating what will become the most famous phrase of this book, "the righteous shall live by his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4), thus giving Habakkuk the true solution to his question of righteousness, which will be fulfilled in a future covenant God makes with his people. God also tells Habakkuk that Chaldeans he is concerned about will indeed be punished (Habakkuk 2:2-20). Habakkuk ends with a prayer, asking God to revive His work, praising Him for His future appearing in context of many great works

He's accomplished with His people in the past, and declaring how elevated he himself has become because he found his strength in God (Habakkuk 3).

Habakkuk's interaction with God

The entire book demonstrates the process Habakkuk goes through as he interacts with his Lord. At the beginning of the prophesy we see Habakkuk in his depression and near to despair. He is lamenting that God will not hear and accusing God of not being able to save. He is lamenting about the fact that he has to look at the iniquity before him and that the law and justice are perverted among God's people. He is like a frog in a well, only able to see a small patch of sky above him. He can only see the problems of the people and can't see the potential within God to save. Even though at this point, Habakkuk might have known God's word and God's acts from the past, they don't serve to bring him out of the despair he is in. Habakkuk was like so many people today who are knowledgeable about God's word, but critical of the believers they see around them. The word inside them can't overcome the despair they feel from what they see around them.

It's tempting to see Habakkuk as the angry old man, shouting at the TV newsperson, living in impotent fury at the world that is falling apart before his eyes. But Habakkuk is not that man because that man only sees the woe but does not go to God with an open mind and honest heart. Habakkuk's virtue is his complete honesty with God and his ability to hear what God is saying in response. Some people are honest with God but can't hear Him when He responds. Or, they do hear, but will not let themselves understand. Some people can hear, but don't have the courage or inner sensitivity to be honest. Habakkuk has both. He honestly tells the Lord his concern about

the condition of God's people. When God answers, Habakkuk can understand concerning the Chaldeans. He allows his faith to grow because he realizes that God is not destroying His people, merely disciplining. To Habakkuk, then, God is still his "Rock" and the faithful covenant keeping God. However, Habakkuk is still honest about the contradiction he sees. He wonders how the Holy God can use the less righteous to discipline those more righteous than they. He exercises his other virtue and sets himself to wait for the Lord's speaking within. When God's speaking comes, it is a great relief to Habakkuk. He can listen, take it in, and understand it. In this way, God's speaking is an encouragement to the prophet.

Especially encouraging is God's word that "the righteous shall live by his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4). This small phrase, once internalized, has the power to completely recalibrate Habakkuk's judgment of righteousness. Previously, he was worried about the Judeans being unrighteous. Then he became worried about the Chaldeans, who are less righteous than the Judeans, being used to correct the Judeans. Now, God says that Habakkuk should look to faith for the answer to his qualms. In the New Testament, faith will apply to Judean or Chaldean. It will bring them both into righteousness and, in turn, into life—the divine, incorruptible life of God. This phrase will pull Habakkuk from looking at the present to looking expectantly for the future promises of God. It pulls him to realize he is not serving his own generation, but us. This greatly affects Habakkuk and leads him along the path to singing his final, praising song.

At the end Habakkuk is a very different person. No longer is he wondering if God could save. Rather he is praying for Him to revive His work. No longer does he fear that God's people will be completely destroyed. Instead, he is prayerfully reminding God to remember mercy, the creative element, in

all His wrath. The word and the stories of God's work in history become so living to Habakkuk. He surely knew about David, Moses, Deborah and Joshua in his early years. In spite of knowing these accounts, he still found himself in despair. At the end, those exact same words and those exact same works in history become alive and active to Habakkuk. So, maybe it is not what God said, but the very fact that God answered that is so important to Habakkuk. Maybe the fresh presence and response of the Lord is enough to make the entire Bible alive and real to Habakkuk. The words of the Bible become his encouragement, his hope and the source for his buoyancy. In the end he is waiting quietly for the Lord's work, trusting in Him. He is rejoicing in the Lord and has strength in the Lord. He can boldly testify, "GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places" (Habakkuk 3:19).

The keys to his transcending are his honesty with God, his ability to hear God, his resolution to set himself to listen, his ability to pray according to what he heard, his realization that the words from God's history can become alive in him and his determination to rejoice. Finally, he allows God to make his feet like hinds and make him stand on high places. In his process of doing all these things, Habakkuk realized that he wasn't serving his own generation but us. He realized this mainly because he heard from God that the just shall live by his faith. He realized that this was the future. Habakkuk lived by those words and pioneered a pathway for us to follow—a pathway to singing a song.

Who might listen?

I think Habakkuk's message would appeal to a contemplative person, who is seeking a fresh, inner spring of grace

from the Lord. It might not resonate with a doer, an activist Christian who is seeking to make the world a different place through their own muscle. Rather, Habakkuk speaks to a person who needs all the feelings on their insides to line up. He speaks to a person who is seeking an inner song with the Lord and is edified to the point where they can discern the gentle voice of the Lord within them. If a person is waiting for God to speak *in* them, they will resonate with Habakkuk's testimony of how God spoke *in* him.

Gene Guyon was not satisfied with a dry, distant experience of the Lord. She questioned, sought and endeavored that her inner life would be vibrant with Christ. Like Habakkuk, she eventually ended up with a song that she could sing, a fresh love for the word, and a new impact of the Holy Scriptures on her inner experience. Just like Habakkuk's entire experience could take place within one afternoon in a back room as a he prayed, Gene Guyon sought experiences of Christ that could take place entirely on the inside. She learned to confess sins, have fellowship, draw spiritual water, live from the Word of God and receive spiritual light. As such, her song was pure, inward, and resulted in a vibrant, responsive inner life with Christ.

ZEPHANIAH

Zephaniah introduces himself as the great-great-grandson of Hezekiah, a past king of Judah. As such, he was a relative and, in all likelihood, was acquainted with Josiah, the current king. He had royalty in his blood and probably walked in the circles of leadership, influence and power. His privileged background may have had a great influence on Zephaniah's outlook, which permeates his prophecy and even influences his relationship with the Lord. Like a good ruler should, Zephaniah approaches subjects from a global, universal, far-reaching perspective. He is extremely perceptive in regards to consequences, ramifications and processes. He seems to always have a view of how present actions and arrangements will shape the future disposition of nations, God's people, the world and God's interest.

Like a perceptive ruler who can visualize the unseen, Zephaniah sees God's judgment that will fall upon His people due

to their sins as affecting the whole earth, proclaiming, “in the fire of his jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed” (Zephaniah 1:18). Like a decisive ruler, Zephaniah can propose bold solutions, commanding God’s people to “gather together” and “seek the Lord” (Zephaniah 2:1, 3). Like a reasoning ruler, Zephaniah joins in with God in a back and forth presentation designed to show the group gathered in Jerusalem why they should repent, because God is arranging for them to possess the nations (Zephaniah 2:7). Like an able administrator who appreciates complex processes, Zephaniah is inspired when he sees God’s process in His working with His people. When God says, “I said, ‘Surely you will fear me....But all the more they were eager to make all their deeds corrupt’” (Zephaniah 3:7), Zephaniah realized the processes God was executing in order to move His people toward Him. Like a flexible ruler who can grasp the best path forward and leave the ways that didn’t work, Zephaniah eventually sees how God is the only one who can enact true change. In the end, Zephaniah’s exhortations change from “be silent” (Zephaniah 1:7) to “sing aloud” and “rejoice” (Zephaniah 3:14). He moves from silence to singing by looking at the world-wide impact of God’s move and the way God will eventually carry out His grand purpose for His people and all the earth.

Zephaniah is unique in his background. There are not many royal prophets, who broad-brush epic events, leave the details for others and interact with God on that level. Amos’ shepherding background bled through in his many pastoral references and even in the specific pastoral visions that God gave him. In the same way, Zephaniah approaches the Lord and the Lord’s interest in context of his royal, leadership history. Many commentators note how Zephaniah is not a truly original prophet, like and Isaiah or Habakkuk. “Walker notes that the Book of Zephaniah has been viewed as a “compendium of

the oracles of the prophets.... In repeating and summarizing much of the judgment and salvation material common to all the prophets, he did not hesitate to use distinctive expressions found in his predecessors” (Barker, p. 386). Keil calls him “less original.” “In this respect Zephaniah opens the series of the less original prophets of the Chaldaean age of judgment, who rest more upon the earlier types; whilst in more material respects his predecessor Habakkuk acted as pioneer to the prophets of this period” (Keil, p. 124). Zephaniah is more of a synthesizer, combining many thoughts found in the other prophets. This is often a characteristic of a ruler. He sees himself as an executive, taking the best his nation produces, packaging it and using it as a base for progress.

His setting

Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of Josiah, a king who began his reign when the nation was at one of its lowest moral, spiritual, and political points. Previous kings had filled the nation, city, and even the temple with idols. In Josiah’s twelfth year he began to seek the Lord and then commenced a great reform program. He cleansed the temple of idols and waged war against idolatry in the entire kingdom. In his eighteenth year, the book of the Law was found in the temple. When Josiah had it read to him, he endeavored for reform even more earnestly. He truly sought the Lord. The problem is that, even though Josiah earnestly sought the Lord, the people influenced by his reforms did not turn to their hearts to seek the Lord. “Unquestionably there were reforms wrought under Josiah, but they were all on the surface. There was no heart repentance, and even then the people were saying: God will not do us good, and He will not harm us. He is passive” (Morgan, p. 85). Jeremiah, who prophesied at the same time as Zepha-

niah, also railed against this lack of heart seeking towards the Lord. “When Jeremiah said, “Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense, says the Lord” (Jer 3:10), he may have been referring to the fact that the people were more anxious about Josiah’s political accomplishments than they were in genuine experience of real religion” (Barker, p. 381).

It was into this setting that Zephaniah, the distant relative of the king who might have known him well and walked in the same circles entered into the life of the nation. “The superscription, then, “hints that Zephaniah’s apparent support of religious reform in his own day has an origin in his family history. He was not a newcomer to the reform movement and was, perhaps, among those urging it even before Josiah instituted it”” (Barker, p. 409). His prophecy is powerful, wide-ranging, passionate in declaring God’s judgments and in portraying God’s tender kindness in His love. Morgan notes that “Zephaniah brings before us the terror and tenderness of love” (p. 81). While the prophet Jeremiah wept before the people with great cries about their barren inward condition and their deserved coming judgment, Zephaniah shows almost no emotion. He simply presents what will take place, the terror and the tenderness, and opens up a window for people to see the broad picture of the working of God with them and with the nations.

Zephaniah’s message

Most commentators divide the book into three sections after the introduction. The first speaks of God’s coming judgment (Zephaniah 1:2-18). The second contains Zephaniah’s command for the people to gather together and then lists the coming judgments upon the nations and Jerusalem (Zephaniah 2:1-3:8). The third portrays God’s future salvation and

kindness towards the Gentiles and Israel (Zephaniah 3:9-20).

To grasp the arc of the thought in this book, I think it is especially helpful to consider the two exhortations Zephaniah writes to the nation. In the first exhortation, he commands the people to “gather together” (Zephaniah 2:1). In the second, he writes how God commands the people to “wait” until His work is furthered (Zephaniah 3:8). These exhortations form “hinges,” called “hortatory hinges” by R.B. Chisholm, that punctuate the book. In this view the sections connected by the hinges either prepare, connect, or explain the exhortations. Barker summarizes this view “A study that likewise recognizes a threefold structure but places emphasis on the hortatory sections is that of R. B. Chisholm, Jr. Chisholm considers the three main sections to be 1:2–18; 2:4–3:7; and 3:10–20. These are linked, however, by two “hortatory hinges” that connect their respective larger sections together. The first two sections are hinged by the exhortation to seek the Lord in 2:1–3, which both concludes the section on the day of the Lord and introduces the woe oracles against the nations in 2:4–15 (note that 2:4 begins with *kî*, “for” in Hb.) and the woe oracle against Judah in 3:1–7. Then the exhortation to wait for the Lord in 3:8–9 both concludes the woe oracle against Judah (note the initial word “therefore”) and also introduces the final restoration section” (Barker, p. 393)

Zephaniah’s Interactions with God

It is hard to find a more drastic contrast between Bible sections as there exists between Zephaniah chapter one and the last part of chapter three. Chapter one is one of the Bible’s strongest descriptions of an approaching judgment that will engulf Judah and spread the world over. In it we see God who is full of wrath, anger, and fiery jealousy preparing for a bit-

ter day, full of distress, anguish, ruin, devastation, darkness and gloom. Chapter three, verses nine through twenty, are a complete contrast. That section is one of the most powerful Old Testament sections describing God's far-reaching salvation and His tender love for His people. God will change the speech of the nations to a pure speech, which means that Gentiles in all lands will call upon the name of the Lord. God will purify His people, so they seek Him alone. He will be in their midst, as a strong warrior who is mighty in His salvation. He promises to gather the lame and outcasts in order to restore their fortunes so that they would be praised in all the earth.

The arc of the story of the prophecies of Zephaniah is the arc of the story of Zephaniah's interaction with and realization of God. In the beginning, as Zephaniah was conveying God's judgment, he exhorted the people to strongly consider their ways. He told them to "be silent" (Zephaniah 1:7) in an attempt to quiet every excuse, so that they would not seek to justify their actions and could deeply consider the coming day. He told them to "wail" (Zephaniah 1:11) because this would be the only appropriate response to the ruin that was coming from the wrathful and angry God. Finally, Zephaniah realized that they needed to gather together in order to seek the Lord, seek righteousness, and seek humility. His exhortation to gather was not for a celebration of the Lord's goodness or blessing, but solely because the day of wrath was coming—"perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the LORD" (Zephaniah 2:3). We see from all these exhortations, that Zephaniah counseled, cajoled, exhorted and implored God's people all based on the coming judgment due to the wrath and jealousy of the Lord. If someone were to ask, "What was Zephaniah like at the beginning?" I would answer that he was a man who saw God's coming judgments and the

sins of God's people and who ministered and exhorted based on those.

Zephaniah's experience, however, does not end here. In fact, he continues to interact with God and work with God. His interaction develops exactly in context of the situation that he found himself in chapter one. At the conclusion of chapter one, Zephaniah counsels all of Israel to gather together. Then in Zephaniah 2:4-3:5 Zephaniah and God work together to try to turn the gathered group so that they might seek the Lord. Zephaniah tells them how the land of the Philistines will become pasture land for them to restfully inherit under the loving eyes of the Lord (Zephaniah 2:4-7). God then jumps in to tell them how Moab will be judged so that the remnant may possess them (Zephaniah 2:8-9). Zephaniah then tells them how the judgment of the nations will result in many from the nations bowing down to the true God (Zephaniah 2:10-11). God takes over and declares how He will judge Cush (Zephaniah 2:12). Zephaniah then relates the judgment that will fall on Assyria and upon Jerusalem because of her obstinate rejection of the righteous Lord (Zephaniah 2:13-3:5). Maybe after these back-and-forth pleas, Zephaniah felt as if he were on a basketball team with God. They were passing the ball back and forth, avoiding defenders, looking for a crease, a seam, some kind of opening to get an easy layup. He might have felt that he was really co-working with God, as they both were trying to bring a remnant out of this gathered group of stubble.

In the last phase of the drive, Zephaniah "passes the ball" back to God, and God shows how desperate He is to make a basket. Here, God reviews what He has done, "I have cut off nations; their battlements are in ruins" (Zephaniah 3:6). God then, shows His utter passion and expectation for His people. "I said, 'Surely you will fear me; you will accept cor-

rection' Then your dwelling would not be cut off according to all that I have appointed against you.” (Zephaniah 3:7). Here Zephaniah must have seen the passion and drive of the Lord. In spite of all the hard-heartedness that God has seen among His people in the past, He still expects them to turn. In spite of all the preparations for judgment that God made, He is still willing to throw away all the judgments that He has prepared, if the people would only turn. Here Zephaniah sees a window into God. He sees just how much God seeks after His people and how much God is consumed with zeal for His house. Then God spots Israel wide open just beyond the three-point line and He fires the ball at them. They are clear, no defenders are around. They are in a great position and the pass was perfect.....but they shoot and....air ball. “But all the more they were eager to make all their deeds corrupt” (Zephaniah 3:7).

After this drive, Zephaniah learned a lesson. Previously he was a prophet of judgment. He sought to organize the people that they could avoid the pain of the coming day of wrath. He had gathered them, told them what they should do (seek), then he and God worked together to give them carrots and sticks. God was fully on board and showed Zephaniah just what passion He had for the enterprise. However, when the ball was passed to Israel, they missed. Or maybe they didn't even catch the pass, it nicked off their fingertips and disappeared out of bounds as the buzzer sounded. But here's the good news: it was just the end of the first half. Zephaniah and God were both left with the ball after the half was over.

Just at that time, when Zephaniah is most ready to learn, God grabs the ball and says, “wait for me” (Zephaniah 3:8). Then Zephaniah has to take a new look at God. Just at that time, when Zephaniah senses disappointment most, God winks at him. “Don't worry about it,” He seems to say. And Zephaniah looks afresh at his beloved teammate. In God he

sees every hope for the future. In God he sees every possibility out of this mess. In God he sees every pinch of grace, hope, love, and goodness. From now on, it all rests on God. There will be no more calls from Zephaniah to gather together. There will be no more pleas from Zephaniah that maybe they might be hidden on the day of the Lord's wrath. There will be no more exhortations to "be silent" or "wail." Now, it all rests upon the One. "Wait for me," say the One who is mighty to save. In the end, there will still be a gathering, but that gathering will be organized by God, who declares, "I will gather..." (Zephaniah 3:18). No more is it Zephaniah barking a command to gather. From hence forth, it will be God. He has the ball. He will score. He is the One who says, "wait for me."

As God lists what he will do, I can just picture Zephaniah in awe of the divine working. He will purify the lips of the corrupt nations (Zephaniah 3:9). The name of the Lord will be confessed in all the nations. Furthermore, God will remove the proud ones from the midst of Israel. Those who are left will genuinely seek refuge in the name of the Lord (Zephaniah 3:12). Glorious! After God steps in and does His work, literally the entire earth will be filled with those calling on or seeking refuge in the name of the Lord. This is so much better than Zephaniah's puny gathering in Jerusalem.

After Zephaniah sees this, he becomes different in his exhortations and counsels and descriptions. His exhortations are now, "Sing aloud" and "shout" and "rejoice and exult with all your heart" (Zephaniah 3:14). These are words from a man who sees God can save and God will save. Zephaniah describes God as One who is in their midst, as a mighty One who will save, as being full of love and full of rejoicing.

What caused this transition? What caused Zephaniah to go from prophet of doom to prophet of salvation? We can only

speculate. It might have been that when Zephaniah tried to change things, he saw that his efforts did not work, but God works. When he counseled the nation to gather and tried to turn them, even with God's help, this did not turn out to the better. This might have taught Zephaniah to look to God. It might have taught him a deeper trust, and a deeper level of seeking.

Surely his turning was influenced by his observance of God's heart and passion. In 3:8, when God said he expected the nation to turn, maybe Zephaniah got that same passion into his own heart. It's kind of like at this point, Zephaniah finally saw the passion, energy, and drive that was within God. God's drive was not to judge the world. His drive was to correct His people that they might fear Him. Maybe when Zephaniah saw this, he attached Himself to God's desire. As such, he discovered what moves God also moves him.

His turning also might have come when he saw just what God would do in working out His salvation. Maybe, as he spent time allowing the saving work of God to work in him, not merely the judging work, he realized more and more what he could trust. He saw God's work would save the nations, save Israel and bring restoration to the whole world. Who could but praise after that?

These experiences show how Zephaniah might have "searched diligently" (1 Peter 1:12). He searched out God's work in His judgment. This led him to realize that he couldn't turn the people. Then he searched out God in His passion. This led him to realize how much was within God for His people. Then he searched out God in His salvation work. This led him to realize God's love and His power for salvation to both Gentiles and Jews. He was observing, adjusting, and seeking. That led him from ministering the God of judgment to ministering the God of salvation and love.

Through such a seeing, Zephaniah, like so many prophets we have already studied, came to realize that he was not serving his own generation but us (1 Peter 1:12). If he were serving his own generation, maybe the group gathered like stubble in Jerusalem would have repented and changed. However, all of Zephaniah's experiences showed him that God was after much more than that. Zephaniah, then, became a person who also was after much more than simple reform. God was after world-wide salvation. Zephaniah became a person also after world-wide salvation. Zephaniah's standards were lifted far above a gathering in the dusty city of Jerusalem. He became a person looking for more, more from God, more concerning salvation and more concerning God's love. God, in His wonderful grace, was richly willing to oblige such seeking. Now Zephaniah serves us, the New Testament believers, because God taught him so many things.

Who might listen?

Zephaniah's message might not appeal to a person who is passionate, emotional, or looking for deep inner life experiences. Rather, his message might strongly appeal to one of the great administrators and communicators who established settings amongst the believers based on the revelations they received. His message appeals to a servant who sees God is good—His salvation is rich—and at the same time is jealous—He wants to move and get things done for the benefit of His people.

Martin Luther realized the truths of the New Testament, incorporated much of what Augustine and others taught and established a setting where large numbers of believers could follow the truths he brought to them. John Wesley realized the value of community to contain the fresh springs of salva-

tion and gospel that he so strongly proclaimed. He was not a deeply original Bible scholar. However, the circuit preachers and the fellowships that congregated through their help allowed for a great spread of the gospel and the edification of many. Both saw that God was jealous and good. In His goodness, He proclaimed riches of His salvation. In His jealousy, He established works of life that could move and contain the blessings of His goodness.

HAGGAI

Haggai is the only prophet out of all the Old Testament prophets who calls himself “messenger”—“Then Haggai, the messenger of the LORD, spoke to the people with the LORD’s message” (Haggai 1:13). “Messenger” is not a more glorious or esteemed title than “prophet.” In fact, it is a broader title encompassing more common themes than the rarefied realms of “prophet.” The writer of 2 Chronicles, considers the prophets to be messengers (2 Chronicles 36:15-16). However, many people who are not prophets are also called messengers, such as the priests (Malachi 2:7). “The expression is not to be confined to prophets in the narrower sense of the word, for it embraces all the men of God who, by word and deed, censured and punished the godless conduct of the idolaters” (Keil, p. 722). Messenger is used to describe any person sent from a king or a person in authority in order to accomplish a specific task. However, don’t mistake being a messenger as

some mere carrier pigeon. Jesus Himself was sent by a king – God the Father – to accomplish a specific and cosmos-changing task: to provide redemption for humankind and to begin building his church. God may have sent many messengers to His people. Many may have been sent to address small discrepancies, specific situations, passing needs of the hour. We may never know the names, never know the acts, and never study great historical effects that came about because of their faithfulness. However, they were there. In their fameless faithfulness they carried out the task given them by God.

Haggai was truly a prophet, but he was also a messenger!

As a messenger, Haggai's ministry was extremely short. The time of his entire written ministry encompasses three months and twenty-four days. This is a mere drop in the bucket compared with the long ministries of Isaiah or Jeremiah. Isaiah spent twelve times this amount of time walking around naked just so he could pronounce a judgment on Egypt, a small part of his grand prophetic vision. In contrast, Haggai, "might have been a devoted servant for years — of this we know nothing; but his work which stands out for special remembrance is that found in this book. And how simple it was; and in Haggai's eyes it might have appeared very insignificant. It consisted of a few short messages — all of which might be delivered in a few minutes! But it is this simple service which God selected to stand out in the light for the instruction of His people in all future ages. Surely it is not the quantity, but the quality of work; and not success, but fidelity, which commends the servant to the Lord." (Dennett, *A Christian's Friend*, Vol. 11, p. 231).

As a messenger, Haggai proclaims no grand visions of God on His throne. He does not report on the all-consuming God,

as Zephaniah does. He does not see the coming birth and reign of the Messiah as Micah does. He does not see the grand visions of horsemen, lampstands and stones as Zechariah. He never calls himself a visionary and never refers to his writings as a vision. Rather, he is a messenger and, as such, he concerns himself with very intricate details of the people's daily lives and thought.

As a messenger, Haggai is completely down to earth. When people listen to him they never have to wonder "how does that apply to me?" He knows what the people are doing day in and day out. "You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes" (Haggai 1:6). He knows what they are expecting and their disappointments, "You looked for much, and behold, it came to little" (Haggai 1:9). He knows what they think about the building of God's house, "These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD" (Haggai 1:2). He knows how they feel about the temple after they start building it, "How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes?" (Haggai 2:3). Haggai the messenger is very much with the people, close to the people, and cognizant of all the details of the people's lives. He may not describe heavenly visions. However, as a messenger, he knows how to connect with people in all their dreams, fears, expectations and disappointments.

As such a "man in the trenches," a "shepherd who smells like sheep," Haggai could connect with his audience and inspire them to act. When he sees them busying themselves with their own houses while God's house lay in waste, he charges them to consider their ways and directly commands them to "go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house" (Hag-

gai 1:7-8). When he reads the discouragement they felt at the hut-like nature of the temple they were working on reconstructing, he encourages them to “Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the LORD. Work, for I am with you, declares the LORD of hosts” (Haggai 2:4).

In spite of his earthiness, intimate acquaintance with the people and his direct commands for action, one should not be lulled into thinking that Haggai is not profound in his realizations. In fact, he might have been the first to profoundly realize how important a rebuilt temple is as a basis of God’s people’s worship now that they have returned from exile. It is Haggai who sees this clearly, even though the temple they build might not look that grand. At that time, the people might have lost faith in the temple. The nation had just lived through a great deportation and a great destruction of the temple, which was the center and beating heart of the national worship. Ezekiel likens the destruction of that temple to the loss of a wife (Ezekiel 25:15-27). Now, after the people have returned, they might be looking back on their history, on the hollowness that temple worship had become, and on the inability of the temple in itself to deliver them from the Chaldeans. They might be wondering how they should go on now. When a small opposition arises to challenge their temple rebuilding work, they do not have the boldness to say that the temple is indeed the way for the nation to worship. Maybe they are thinking about how Jeremiah said that one day they would not even remember the ark of the Lord any more (Jeremiah 3:16). Even Isaiah had railed against the noise of the feasts and the dull repetition of worship at the temple (Isaiah 66:3).

Here Haggai, the messenger who is so much with the people, sees something profound. He sees that the temple is not the end in itself. However, the temple is the way for the im-

perfect system of worship to continue for the nation until a true, brighter day would come. Haggai sees the temple, this center of the Jewish religion, as a foreshadow and not the reality that is to come ... but a foreshadow that they must give themselves to. “The temple was necessarily the centre of this imperfect and intermediate state of the people. It was there, if God allowed the re-establishment of their worship, that the hearts of the people should centre. That was the outward form in which their piety as a people should be expressed. It was thus that the return of their heart to God should be manifested. Whatever deficiencies there might be in the restored Levitical service, still, it was the house of God, to which was attached all that could be re-established, and was the centre of its exercise” (Darby, p. 598). Haggai is saying that they merely have a shadow in the temple they are rebuilding, but it is theirs to develop and uphold until the reality comes. It is to this rebuilt temple that Haggai so strongly and clearly directs the people.

And Haggai went farther. While he didn't unveil heavenly visions, he did look into the future. Based on his description of the clear purpose for his time—that the temple should be rebuilt to center the people on God for the upcoming intermediate period—he saw further that God would not stop there. In fact, God would “shake all nations,” make “The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former” (Haggai 2:7-9), that is, the latter glory of the temple will be greater than even the glory of Solomon's temple. Finally, Haggai sees Zerubbabel the governor as a harbinger of the coming Messiah, who will be chosen by God and made a signet ring, “I will take you, O Zerubbabel my servant, the son of Shealtiel, declares the LORD, and make you like a signet ring, for I have chosen you, declares the LORD of hosts” (Haggai 2:23). In seeing the Messiah as God's “signet ring,” a symbol of the

exercise of God's authority, Haggai is unveiling how God's authority through Christ will be exercised on the earth. At the end of his prophecy, Haggai sees this authoritative picture of Christ as he looks at Zerubbabel.

Some scholars look at Haggai and see an aged prophet who exercises his ministry for three months and twenty-four days in the waning parts of his life. Pusey elaborates, "He speaks as one who had seen the first house in its glory, and so was probably among the very aged men, who were the links between the first and the last, and who laid the foundation of the house in tears" (Barnes, p. 293). He sees in the writings of Haggai the sunset of Haggai's ministry and the sunrise of Zechariah's. "After the first two months of his office, Zechariah, in early youth, was raised up to carry on his message; yet after one brief prophecy was silent, until the aged prophet had ended the words which God gave him" (Barnes, p. 263). While there is no airtight proof for this understanding, it would explain the short time period for his prophesy. Maybe the Lord took pains to develop the person of Haggai through many years of waiting, watching and quiet rejoicing. Then, when duty calls, Haggai exercises all he has, all he has learned, to minister what is written in this book. The aged Haggai intimately knows the people. He clearly sees the place of the temple when even the rulers and priests might not see it so clearly. He sees the value that God ascribes to the temple they are building. He sees the Messiah in a unique way, as a signet ring in God's move. These are the mature understandings and speakings of a messenger God equipped and sent to meet the needs of this particular time.

Before we cover the setting and content of Haggai's ministry, there is one last, joyful point—the meaning of the name Haggai is "festal" or "pertaining to feasts." It may be that he was named in anticipation of the coming feasts that would

be recovered in the nation once the temple was rebuilt. Or, it may be that Haggai, even in his old age was joyful, exuberant, ebullient and transcendent in his joy of the Lord. When Haggai gives his exhortations, he is not rueful and mournful. Rather, he is positive, “the Lord is with you,” encouraging “be strong” and hopeful, “you will be a signet ring.”

Interestingly, different ancient Bible translations ascribe certain Psalms to Haggai. “In the Septuagint the superscriptions of Psalms 145–148 make mention of Haggai, along with Zechariah, as authors of this hymnic material. In the Latin Vulgate, Psalms 111 and 145–46 are associated with Haggai and Zechariah, and in the Syriac Peshitta the same is true of Psalms 125–126 and 145–148” (Taylor, p. 39). While these attestations do not appear in the Masoretic Text and have little alternative historical support, if true, they paint a joyful picture of the person of Haggai. Psalms 111, 145-148 all begin with, “Praise the Lord!” All are Psalms of praise and blessing to the Lord.

And so a picture emerges of this prophet of three months and twenty-four days: he is an aged and seasoned man, a down-to-earth messenger, a psalm-writer, a festive, joyful person who knows the people to whom his message is sent. Oh, what a great life, a life well-lived! What a marvelous aim! We should all aspire to Haggai’s standard.

His setting

Haggai begins his prophecy at a particularly low point in the life of those who returned from Babylonian captivity to Judea to rebuild the temple. They had had a marvelous start in the rebuilding work. However, a short time after they had begun to rebuild the temple, they stopped working because they became afraid of the threats from their neighbors. About

fifteen long, confusing and frustrating years later, they still have not resumed work on the temple and still think that the time for building has not yet come.

They had not started out with any degree of discouragement. In fact, their return to Jerusalem from many quarters of the great Persian Empire was nothing less than a powerful move of God. God had moved in the most powerful man on earth at the time, Cyrus, the ruler of Persia. “the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia” (Ezra 1:1). Cyrus acknowledged that God Himself had given all the kingdoms of the earth into his hand and thus declared, “Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD” (Ezra 1:3). Forty-two thousand three-hundred and sixty Israelites responded to the king’s call and returned to Jerusalem carrying with them 5,400 vessels from Solomon’s temple that had been carried away by the Babylonians. The first thing they did after they settled in the towns around Jerusalem was to build the altar of the Lord. “Then arose Jeshua the son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel with his kinsmen, and they built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it” (Ezra 3:2). They began regular offerings and a regular celebration of feasts at that lonely altar that was standing exposed on the mount, as if it were waiting for the temple to be built around it. Joyously, the people “kept the Feast of Booths” (Ezra 3:4). A short number of months later, they began to build the temple, “the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD” (Ezra 3:10), after which, the Levites, the priests, and all the people gathered round the foundation expressing their deepest emotions with open mouths and loud voice. Some praise in joy. Others, who had seen Solomon’s temple in all its glory, wept with loud voices. There was such a cacophony, “that the

people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping" (Ezra 3:13).

The building work, however, did not continue. The Jews had many enemies in the land, some who were fearful of the resurgence of the kingdom of Israel. They rose up to frustrate the building, through threats and imperial lobbyists. "Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build and bribed counselors against them to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia" (Ezra 4:4-5). Eventually, these people "by force and power made them cease. Then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia" (Ezra 4:23-24). From the dates of the Persian kings, we know that the building was stopped for about fifteen years when Haggai began speaking to the people (Ryrie, p. 1403).

It is interesting to speculate what was going on in the minds of the nation during this period. We know from Haggai's preaching that they reasoned that the time for building the temple had not come. Why? We know that they had become distracted with their own affairs like making money, building up their farms and improving their houses. It may also have been that they were uncertain about just how important the temple was. Ezekiel and Jeremiah had preached harsh words, condemning the nation for thinking that just because the temple existed that God had to be pleased with them. Jeremiah even said that there would come a day that the people of Israel, "shall no more say, "The ark of the covenant of the LORD." It shall not come to mind or be remembered or missed; it shall not be made again" (Jeremiah 3:16). Ezekiel prophesied of a grand, glorious, huge temple that would be erected after Solomon's. The foundation that they people laid for this tem-

ple clearly wasn't in the same class as that. The people might have been confused as to how much they should treasure the temple. Maybe, after hearing the people who had seen the first temple lament, the people might have thought that the temple they were building was not that important after all. Something that caused old-timers to cry, the predecessor of which had not been a protection for the nation from the Babylonian captivity and was a far cry from the glories Ezekiel described, might be easy to procrastinate in re-building.

This is the setting into which Haggai enters. His words are clear. His thought for what is important is simple. He is able to verbalize a consistent, clear, direct plan of action that is in accord with the specific age of the people's relationship with God. The Jewish people and leaders were all guilty of procrastination—no doubt because of distraction, but also because they just were not clear about what was important. Haggai, the prophet and messenger, points the way.

Haggai's message

Haggai's words are refreshing in their simplicity. He uses straightforward, simple terms and has few visionary utterances. His prophecy can easily be divided into four distinct prophetic burdens. In the first (Haggai 1:1-15), Haggai encourages Zerubbabel, Joshua and the people that it is indeed time to build the temple of the Lord, even though they do not think the time has come. All who hear begin to fear the Lord, are stirred up, and eventually begin the rebuilding work. In the second prophesy (Haggai 2:1-9), which he utters one month and twenty-one days after the first, Haggai encourages the people to be strong and continue to build, even though some of the builders think that the temple they are building is nothing in comparison to Solomon's. His third prophecy, (Haggai

2:10-19), which he utters two months and three days after the second, announces to the people that God will now greatly bless them due to their obedience and fear of Him. The final prophesy (Haggai 2:20-23) is addressed only to Zerubbabel and contains the most visionary words offered by Haggai. He tells Zerubbabel that God is about to shake the entire earth and that He has chosen Zerubbabel and will make him like a signet ring on His finger. This is a clear prophecy of the Messiah, the grand vision with which Haggai ends his message.

Haggai's interaction with God

It is not that easy to say anything with definiteness concerning how Haggai's relationship with God might have developed. We have no recorded prayers of Haggai and no written record of any of his conversations with God nor any indication of his call or any instances of his obedience or struggle. The only thing we have is the record of his words to the people, which, fortunately, Haggai has taken pains to arrange in a clear, undisputable chronology.

Because of his clear chronological record, we can understand how Haggai's words progressed over the course of about four months. The beginnings of his words show us a man who is intimately acquainted with the daily lives and thoughts of the people of God and who, as a messenger, exhorts them to re-start temple construction. At the end of the four months, Haggai's words are involved with grander, more transcendent, more profound things. He ends with a description of the Messiah who is chosen by God and who is like a signet ring, exercising God's authority as God's kingdom is established on the earth. The only thing we can tell about Haggai's experience with God is to see how his prophesy connects these two states together. We could ask, "How did he interact with

God?” “How did he transcend his earthly situation?” “How did Haggai realize that he was not serving his own generation, but us?” “How did Haggai, as a seeker after God, inquire and search diligently?” We will try our best to fill in the blanks.

The first and most striking trend that emerges from Haggai’s journey is how he travels from the mundane to the transcendent. As a messenger, he begins by deeply involving himself in the daily affairs of the people, even commenting on where they store their money and how full their bellies are. After being so consumed with these affairs, as he rightly should have been, he eventually is brought to see higher things. In this trend is the first lesson for us: in order to see the transcendent things, we must put our hands on the mundane. This is exactly the path Paul and Peter took. They did not sit in a tower and compose theology. They wrote letters to actual people in actual churches or dispersions. It may sound mundane to help the messy church in Corinth. However, out of that came very transcendent visions of Christ.

When we first see Haggai, we see a person very concerned with the actions and lives of the people of God. He sees the people busying themselves for the sake of their own houses, seeking much gain from their lands, afraid of the neighboring nations, unclean because of their contact with neighbors, and thinking that this was by no means the time to finish rebuilding the temple of the Lord. Haggai jumps right into this setting and begins to address problem after problem. He tells people that the reason they are toiling so much for so little return is that they are not paying attention to God’s house. He tells them that God’s house is in fact important. He tells them that the time for building God’s house is now. Haggai, at the beginning of his journey, sees all the problems of the people of God and strongly encourages them to correct their actions in order to meet the demand God is placing upon them to build His house.

Haggai's interaction with God is entirely within the course of his endeavor to help the people. After Haggai tells the people to "go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house" (Haggai 1:8), the people respond positively. Then the Lord and Haggai work together. Haggai encourages them by conveying God's words "I am with you" (Haggai 1:13) and the Lord works with Haggai by stirring up the spirit of Zerubbabel, Joshua and all the people (Haggai 1:14). We see Haggai and God, God and Haggai working together to bring the people to begin building.

Haggai's further interaction with God comes when Haggai encouraged the people in spite of the old men's feeling that their work is "as nothing" (Haggai 2:3). Haggai explains the desire of God to the people. Haggai is clear himself that the Lord will eventually shake the heavens and the earth, bring glory to the house they were building, and that the latter glory should be greater than even Solomon's (Haggai 2:9). Haggai encourages them to invest fully in the temple they are building, even if it is only a passing form, a demand that requires great humility. Here Haggai is seeing something of God's purpose, internalizing that purpose, and applying it to meet the current, up-to-date needs of the people at that time. We see how Haggai and God, God and Haggai are working together to help the leaders and the people grow.

Such cooperation continues as Haggai says in his third word that now God will bless them (Haggai 2:19). It is here, in the conveying of God's promise to bless them with abundance of their land, that Haggai's words elevate to touch something transcendent, something about the Messiah.

By the end of his writings, in his fourth word, Haggai sees things differently. Previously, Haggai's words were to the people. Now, his words are only addressed to Zerubbabel (Haggai 2:20). Previously when Haggai included Zerubbabel in

his address (Haggai 1:1-2), he talked to him about the errant people. Now, when he sees Zerubbabel, he sees the Messiah in His kingdom. Previously, he had to uphold and encourage Zerubbabel, because he might have been weak as a leader, not knowing how to inspire the people to build. Now, in Zerubbabel, he sees his far-off descendant, the Messiah Himself.

As Haggai gave the word from God concerning the blessing of the people (Haggai 2:19), it is as if those words of blessing triggered him to consider future, less tangible blessings. Haggai advanced by considering more and more what that blessing really meant. His words, his prophesy itself, as with all the prophets, changed him. The more he mused on his own message the more the Spirit of Christ in him made clear that there was something more. This made him look at Zerubbabel differently and caused him to consider the future differently. He is not only glad that the people are now building the temple. Much more he sees the coming Messiah and God's kingdom on earth in authority and glory. He now considers Zerubbabel in a much more profound light. Haggai had been working with God addressing Israel's temporal situation and now is given a vision of the eternal, lasting, transcendent and divine work of God. Haggai's last words (Haggai 2:20-23) are no longer about the house or the temple. They are not about crops that will soon be in abundance. Now they are just about Zerubbabel and his place. It is almost as if at the end of his ministry, Haggai sees Christ alone—Christ and only Christ.

We can see clearly from this how the tone of Haggai's prophesy changed. At the beginning he was concerned with the problems of the people and the ruins of the temple. At the beginning he was concerned with the deficiencies in Zerubbabel. At the end, he is concerned with the glories of Zerubbabel, how he would be a signet ring and how God has chosen the Messiah. We see how Haggai began by diligently serving

his own generation. As he was serving his own generation, considering the blessing God would give them, he realized that he was not in fact serving his own generation. The blessing wasn't merely abundant crops and award for labor. The blessing was that God would have His kingdom on earth with the New Testament believers and that in that kingdom Christ would be a signet ring on God's hand. It was revealed to Haggai that he is serving us.

Haggai's pattern here shows similarities to the Apostle John's pathway. The first book John wrote was Revelation, where, among other things, he wrote about seven churches and gave messages from Christ to each. The last book John wrote was the gospel of John. In that gospel he doesn't use the word "church," mention messengers of the church or any problems in the church that need to be fixed. He only has Christ in view, even testifying, "We beheld his glory" (John 1:14). It is almost as if John's final word is "Christ, only Christ." In Haggai's early writings he was very much concerned with the temple and the people's appreciation of that. In the end, he only speaks to Zerubbabel (Haggai 2:21) and he only sees the glory of the coming Messiah, who would be made by God "like a signet ring" (Haggai 2:23). Just as John begins with churches and ends with Christ, Haggai begins with the temple and ends with the Messiah. He is truly not serving his own generation, but us.

One might think, "I would simply like to skip to the last step." However, it is impossible to skip to the final step without going through the first steps. The way to the fourth word is not to pray in a closet and ask for the fourth word. The way to the fourth word is through the first, second and third words. This means Haggai had to endeavor to know that the people thought it wasn't yet time to build. He had to know how they busied themselves. He had to know that some thought what

they were doing was nothing. Then he had to know God in a practical way. He had to know that at this interim time God still wanted the temple. He had to know how God was speaking to His people through the abundance or lack thereof of the harvests. He had to know how to encourage the people with the strength God supplies. He had to know God's future plan of shaking the nations and glorifying Himself in the house. He had to know and apply all these things. Then he was ready for the Spirit to spark within him. When it sparked, He saw the Messiah as the signet ring. He saw the One God chose. He saw God's kingdom on earth centered around Christ. By serving his own generation he saw that he was not in fact serving his own generation, but us, to whom the ends of the ages have come.

Who might listen?

Haggai's message would surely appeal to a person who has been serving the church his whole life and sees a hollowness in all the Christian "things." In the end, after he has worked so hard to get people to fight for the right things, get people directed to see God's purpose, he realizes that only Christ is the answer. He might have spent years helping God's people, seeking to build up something vital and living, and attempting to direct God's people on the right path. Some things may have worked a little, others, seemingly not at all. In the end, he will see that only Christ matters. Only Christ is the hope. Only Christ is the way. Focus on Him. Look to Him for the future. He is the signet ring and the true working of God.

When I think of who the message of Haggai might appeal to I think of the life of Andrew Murray. He poured out his soul to minister to congregations in inland South Africa, then to help people in the larger cities around the Cape. He earnestly

and spiritually dealt with many conflicts within his denomination. He wrote books helping people appreciate the Lord's Table, the gatherings of the church, and the gospel life. In the end he realized a deeper need for a life focused on Christ and Christ alone. His later writings include titles like "The Spirit of Christ," "Abide in Christ" and "With Christ in the School of Prayer," where he tried to minister a deeper view of Christ and lead people into deeper experiences of Him. He started out trying to get the temple built and ended up appreciating Zerubbabel as God's signet ring.

ZECHARIAH

Zechariah might be one of the most important prophets in the Old Testament. His importance stems not merely from the content of his message, which is high, glorious, hopeful and Messianic in its revelation. Zechariah's importance also emerges from the time-period in which he ministered. He was the most profound prophet to speak after the return of the exiles from their seventy-year Babylonian captivity. Many former prophets, including Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah and Habakkuk, spoke of the depravity of Israel and of God's well-deserved judgment. For most of the prophets, this judgment took the form of the forced Assyrian exile or the Babylonian captivity, after which a small remnant would return who would be faithful, glorious and true to their God. Looking through the lens of these prophetic writings, one would be forgiven if he expected the remnant who returned from Babylon to be shepherded by the Messiah Himself,

faithful to God and glorious in its expression of God's divine workmanship.

The situation that Zechariah faced was very different from that picture. The remnant was truly returned from Babylon but sadly was not yet returned to God. Their leadership was far from a perfect, Messianic shepherd. Their faithfulness was still in question. Their purity was mixed at best.

Zechariah arises as a prophet at this crucial juncture in the nation's history. It falls on him to define God's work after their glorious return, which was so often prophesied by so many great prophets. The writings of Zechariah define God's interest in Jerusalem, the importance in the temple being rebuilt and the continued demands of justice and truth in the people's conduct. They define the expectation of the coming Messiah and show that the nation will still suffer more, because they will reject the shepherding of that Messiah. Zechariah's writings show the coming work of the Spirit, details about how the Messiah will build the real temple of the Lord, and how He will be King and Priest. Zechariah shows that the nations will be judged again by God and that their remnant will be saved and worship the one, true God inwardly and outwardly.

If it were not for Zechariah, the returned remnant might be very confused about what they should expect, now that *they* were the returned remnant. With Zechariah, they see that even though they have returned from Babylon, they must still return to God. The nation must still build the current temple. The nation must still expect the coming Messiah and still expect much suffering to take place. They have returned from Babylon, but still need to be refined as silver is refined. In that way, by the work of the Spirit and shepherding of the Messiah, they will become a lampstand that shines to the entire earth. Eventually, Zechariah describes that all nations will worship God and the entire earth will be restored. Zechariah shows

the remnant that they still have more to do, more to experience, more to know and more to learn.

We must now ask the question: what kind of person did God use to accomplish such great work? What was Zechariah like? What kind of vessel was he before the Lord? How did he interact with God? How did he mature? We must start with looking at what we know about him. Then we will consider how this fascinating person matured as he interacted with his God.

To start, we have a few outside references to Zechariah in the Old Testament. We know that his prophesying encouraged the Israelites to rebuild the temple (Ezra 5:1; 6:14) and that he and his grandfather, Iddo, are included on a list of priests who returned during the first wave of exiles returning from Babylon (Nehemiah 12:16). Other than these references, the only evidence we have that gives us more insight into his personality is the internal evidence from his own writings.

Zechariah introduces himself to us as a young man (if Zechariah 2:4 does, indeed, refer to him), probably raised by his grandfather, because his father is not mentioned in the list of priests returning from Babylon (Nehemiah 12:16). Because he traveled with the first wave of exiles, he was most likely born in Babylon, where he probably witnessed, as a young man, the learning and refined culture of that highly developed city. After his return to Judea with the other exiles, he might have needed time to adjust from seeing the broad streets and grand buildings of Babylon to living in the ruined and mostly desolate cities in Judea. He presents himself to us in his writings as inquisitive, bold, sharp and quick-witted. He asks a lot of questions. He also makes suggestions to God. He is quick to learn, quick to speak, and quick to apply what he has internalized. He is a priest and is also the son of a priest. In his writings he shows us his familiarity with

the temple and feasts. However, unlike some, he doesn't get bogged down in insular matters of Torah law or sidetracked into thinking that the nation of Israel contains the only ones who will ever be God's people. It seems that he doesn't possess a colloquial bone in his body. Instead, his interest is broad, world-wide, and supra-national. His view includes Jews *and* Gentiles. Additionally, at the end of his writings we will see that he is a person who can transcend the temporal matters of his own generation and show concern with timeless, grand-scale matters concerning the Messiah and the coming, comprehensive kingdom of God. As we look at the ministry of this man, we will see how the inquisitive, earnest young-man, Zechariah, will mature, will learn heavenly visions from God, will be able to apply the heavenly visions to people on earth and will eventually grow to know God, feel what God is feeling, and see the grand, glorious purpose God has.

His Setting

Zechariah's setting is the same as that of Haggai's, which is Jerusalem after the exiles return from captivity as they are in process of rebuilding the temple. According to Nehemiah 12:16 Zechariah and his grandfather, Iddo, were among those who returned from Babylon along with Zerubbabel. Thus, Zechariah must have seen through his young eyes many events the nation passed through. He must have seen the altar built, the sacrifices and feasts restarted, and the foundation of the temple laid. He must have witnessed the frustrations that the builders faced, when "the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build and bribed counselors against them to frustrate their purpose" (Ezra 4:4-5). He might have been very concerned as he witnessed the building work stop through the remainder of Cyrus' reign

all the way to the second year of Darius' reign (about fifteen years).

During the time the building work was stalled, he, like Haggai, saw the people become distracted with their own affairs, lose interest in rebuilding the temple and continually say, "the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD" (Haggai 1:2). He saw the priesthood, which was a far cry from the moral and spiritual standard that he might have expected from the priests in times past. Later, when Ezra arrived, "there were found some of the sons of the priests who had married foreign women" (Ezra 10:18), showing just how degraded and mixed the priesthood had become.

He, like Haggai, saw all these challenges as a mountain of difficulties standing before Zerubbabel, the governor of the people, and hindering his rebuilding work. Zerubbabel had to face Judah's neighbors who were discouraging them, the counselors that they had bribed to lobby the Persian king against the building, the people who had become distracted with their own affairs and the priesthood, which was supposed to be a strength to the people, that had become degraded and weak.

In addition, there might have been little clarity of purpose in the minds of the people of that time. In a rush of zeal they had been stirred up to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. However, after facing so many headwinds, they might have wondered if the temple was, in fact, important. They might have thought of the warnings of Jeremiah and Ezekiel about the futility of trust in physical temple, merely a wood and stone structure. Their fathers trusted in that and were conquered by the Babylonians. They might have thought, "Maybe now is a different age, a different direction. Maybe the temple is not so important." Additionally, many of the former prophets warned about the coming Babylonian captivity,

promised a return of a remnant, and wrote about the glory of that remnant. Now the return was here, but where was the promised glory? What were they supposed to fight for? They might have wondered, what is the place of the temple now? What is the future of the nation now? We are back from Babylon, but are we now in a place that is pleasing to God?

All these things had to be going through the minds of the returned remnant. Zechariah would have seen that his companion prophet, Haggai, who was very much his senior, began to speak in the midst of this confusion. In the second year of Darius, during the fourth month, Zechariah must have heard the preaching of Haggai and seen the result: the temple rebuilding began again. It began simply because Haggai had connected these people with the Lord. They had stopped building because of the pressures from the neighbors and from the Persian king who had been influenced by their hired counsellors. When they restarted the building, they did not wait for permission from neighbor or king. They just followed the Lord.

Much of Zechariah's speaking takes place during the time that the temple rebuilding work is actively taking place. After Haggai's initial message, the builders started building in the sixth month of that year. About two months later, Zechariah speaks his first message to the people. A half year later, in the eleventh month of that same year, Zechariah receives his night visions, which served to educate him and ground him in spiritual things. Zechariah speaks once again two years later, when some people from Bethel ask him a question about fasting. The temple was completed two years from that speaking, in the sixth year of Darius. It is remarkable that Zechariah has no recorded prophesy at the completion of the temple. In fact, he doesn't even mention what might have been the greatest event in the lives of the returned remnant. Instead,

he ends his prophesy with oracles about the nations and the future Israel. He concludes his prophecy displaying an overall desire that God has to shepherd His people. We know that Ezra and Nehemiah worked to purify, educate, and strengthen the remnant after the completion of the temple. However, Zechariah seems to have moved on to other, maybe higher and more heavenly things. Ezra and Nehemiah are concerned with the foreign wives of the Israelites, impurity, their knowing the Bible, celebrating feasts and building walls. Zechariah has no words for this. Instead, he is concerned at the end of his ministry with the genuine shepherding of the nation, with the coming Messiah, the glorious kingdom, and the restoration of the nations of the entire earth. Zechariah has seen past the externalities of God's move into the essence of God Himself.

Zechariah's message

The book of Zechariah divides itself more easily than most prophetic books into simple sections. The first is Zechariah's initial charge to the people to return to the Lord so the Lord might return to them (Zechariah 1:1-6). The second contains the eight visions that Zechariah received in one night (Zechariah 1:7-6:9). The third displays Zechariah's speaking to the people of his generation, including his crowning of Joshua and his response to the men from Bethel who ask about fasts (Zechariah 6:10-8:23). The fourth section contains two oracles, one concerning the Gentiles nations and the other concerning Israel interspersed with a prophetic sign concerning God's shepherding of the nation (Zechariah 9-14).

Zechariah's Interactions with God

Anyone who reads the book of Zechariah must admit that there is a big difference between Zechariah's first message for the Jews to "return" (Zechariah 1:1-6) and his last messages—the oracles of the Gentiles and Israel (Zechariah 9-14). It is the central theme of this study to explore how these two messages might be different because the messenger, Zechariah, has changed. We want to try to piece together the story of how Zechariah grew so that we might explore what his growth can tell us about the man and his interaction with God. We'll look at his first prophecy. Then, we'll examine his last. Finally, we will look at the material in between to see what Zechariah experienced to grow from chapter one to chapter fourteen.

When we first see Zechariah, in his first words found in 1:1-6, we see a man with a simple a straightforward statement. Unlike some other prophets, like Zephaniah or Ezekiel, Zechariah doesn't begin his prophecy with grandiose words and heavenly visions. Instead, he begins simply, in a straightforward manner, and in a way that is very easy to understand. Here, he introduces himself to us as man who is deeply concerned that the nation he is serving would return to God and would not repeat the tragedy of their ancestors who rejected God's speaking and felt God's just anger. He conveys to them God's plea, "Return to me, says the LORD of hosts, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts" (Zechariah 1:3). At this early stage, we could say that Zechariah's main concern is for the people who have returned from Jerusalem not to repeat their fathers' intransigence.

It is by no means necessary for prophets to start out like this, in a simple way. Nahum starts with a grand view of God emphasizing His eternal attributes. Joel begins by depicting a coming locust swarm. Hosea starts out with an act of marrying a prostitute. Compared with these prophets, Zechariah's

opening is a bit dull, understated and plain in his exhortations and expectations.

But what was in Zechariah's heart in this early stage? No doubt the temple was there, being restored. And surely the Jewish people were there, in his heart, living under the shadow of the temple in a godly way. We don't know if at this point Zechariah really knew what was involved in the word, "return" for the people. We also don't know if at this point, Zechariah grasped all the profound, wonderful, mysterious, glorious, items involved in that same word "return" applied to God. All we know is that Zechariah's first plea here, is simple, short, not very descriptive of the future and mostly concerned with avoiding a repetition of the past.

However, Zechariah doesn't remain where he began. His last words are profound, Messianic, timeless and grand. The first thing to notice about these last words is how profound they are in regards to the Messiah. The second thing to notice is the way that Zechariah delivers them. He speaks these profound words as he demonstrates an unusual unity with the God who he is speaking for. We'll first review the content, then the way Zechariah delivered it.

Zechariah's revelation of the Messiah in chapters nine through fourteen is absolutely marvelous. His high revelation is a sign that he is clear, bold, precise, and mature. In just this section Zechariah announces so many details about the Messiah. He relates how He will come "your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9). He details how Messiah was sold, "they weighed out as my wages thirty pieces of silver" (Zechariah 11:12) and how the money was disposed—"throw it to the potter" (Zechariah 11:13). He describes how Messiah will appear to the Jews accompanied by the outpoured Spirit, "I will pour out...a

spirit of grace and pleas of mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him” (Zechariah 12:10). He describes the subsequent free offer of this salvation, “there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David...[for] sin and uncleanness” (Zechariah 13:1). Many commentators consider that Zechariah is referring to Messiah in his description of the persecuted prophet, who declares “a man sold me in my youth” (Zechariah 13:5) and that he now bears “the wounds I received in the house of my friends” (Zechariah 13:6). Zechariah describes how the wounds Christ received were actually from God who declared “Awake, O sword, against my shepherd” and “Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered” (Zechariah 13:7). After the Jews call upon the name of the Lord, the Messiah will descend to earth, “his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem” (Zechariah 14:4). In this way “the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him” (Zechariah 14:5). These marvelous descriptions of the Messiah are surely precious, wonderful, and the result of Zechariah’s mature ministry. They are way beyond the simple plea for “return” found in chapter one.

The way Zechariah delivers his message also demonstrates his unity with God. We can especially appreciate Zechariah’s mature manner if we notice the transitions between first person addresses by God and third person addresses by Zechariah in the chapters 9-10 oracle to the nations. At times Zechariah will declare in the third person things like, “Your king is coming to you...humble and mounted on a donkey” (Zechariah 9:9). Other times, Zechariah conveys God’s direct words, such as, “I will encamp at my house as a guard so that none march to and fro” (Zechariah 9:8). These different addresses display a kind of “back and forth” between Zechariah and God. They both are telling this story, interrupting each other as they eagerly add details and further the scene.

Here is the flow of dialogue through chapters nine and ten. Zechariah begins by describing God's judgment on Hadrach, a region that includes the cities of Damascus, Tyre and Sidon (9:1-4). God then declares how His judgment will also affect the Philistines to the point that they will no longer perform their pagan rituals (9:5-7a). Zechariah realizes in awe, that this means that even the Philistines will become a remnant for God (9:7b), indicating his understanding of the Gentile inclusion in God's salvation. God then moves on to talk about His people, saying that He will guard His house by encamping around it (9:8). Zechariah sees the coming Messiah in this promise and thus charges the people to "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9). In response to the coming king, God declares that He will render all the war implements of Judah useless, for the coming king just described by Zechariah will speak peace to all the nations (9:10). God then proceeds to describe how He will bring in that peace—by making Judah strong to deal with all the nations—he will make Judah His bow and Ephraim His arrow to fight in this final war (9:11-13). Zechariah interjects here to describe the scene: God will appear over them, make them victorious, and save them. Based on this grand vision of blessing, Zechariah implores the people to ask for rain, a blessing, from the Lord, who, unlike all the false household gods, will truly bestow blessing upon them. Zechariah then perceptively sees that the nation is now afflicted in its troubles because it lacks a shepherd (9:14-10:2). God jumps in here to exclaim how His anger is indeed turned against the bad shepherds who are now ruling the nation (10:3a). Zechariah then describes how God Himself will shepherd; He will bring out the strong ones

(the cornerstone, the tent peg etc.) from the flock who will trample the foe (10:3b-5). God confirms Zechariah's words, declaring how He will strengthen His people and bring them back (10:6). Zechariah affirms how strong and glad this nation will be (10:6). God concludes by promising a joyous return for all the people who will finally walk in the name of the Lord (10:7-12).

If we look at the alternating first and third person, it is almost as if this entire oracle is a story told by two people who have seen the same event, the same result, and even feel the same way about what they saw. We see Zechariah here, so in harmony with God, that his words are not merely "The Lord says," nor, merely "I say." Rather, they are the product of the prophet knowing God, being able to speak in line with God, and even being able to, in a sense, finish God's sentences. Zechariah, like the Psalmist in Psalm 22, has entered into the holiest place of God, where the human spirit is mingled with the Holy Spirit.

The second example of such cooperation appears when we look at Zechariah's chapter eleven "sign-act." The manner in which Zechariah handles himself in his shepherding sign-act reveals a good deal about how much he understands God's provision, compassion, and even frustration for His flock. We can see what it reveals about Zechariah by noting the parts of his actions that God commands and the parts Zechariah initiates. God commands Zechariah to shepherd the flock and tells him that this flock is actually on its way to being slaughtered—it is "doomed to slaughter" (Zechariah 11:4). In spite of the bleak outlook for the flock, Zechariah gives his best attempt at shepherding. On his own initiative, he takes two shepherding staves—"favor" and "union"—and then begins to feed the lowly ones, the "afflicted" of the flock (Zechariah 11:7). His effort shows his understanding of God's provi-

sion and His compassion. First, he knows the people could be greatly cared for if they enjoy the Lord's favor, hence the first staff. Second, he knows the power of unity and the comfort of community, hence the second staff. Finally, he reaches out to the lowest, the afflicted, which God as a shepherd also takes special care to reach (see, for example, Ezekiel 34). Next, we see how Zechariah understands God's frustration with the flock. After seeing that the flock is unreceptive, even after he tries to improve the leadership, Zechariah, on his own initiative, breaks the staff "beauty" and tells them "I will not be your shepherd" (Zechariah 11:9). In saying this, Zechariah shows he understands God's feeling towards His people. God, as a shepherd, tasted the rejection and un-thankfulness of the flock. Now, Zechariah understands that same feeling and breaks off his shepherding when he sees they rejected him. As a proof of their low opinion of God's sent shepherd, Zechariah takes his own initiative to ask them to pay him his wages (Zechariah 11:12). When they pay him a low wage, showing their low appreciation, God sarcastically intervenes, referring to the "lordly price" given for him and tells Zechariah to throw it away to the potter (Zechariah 11:13). Zechariah then breaks the second staff on his own initiative (Zechariah 11:14). From all these interactions, we see how Zechariah can truly convey the intention of God to shepherd the afflicted, the provision God would have for His people, and the frustration God faced in light of His people's rejection. Zechariah is not merely telling a story. His actions convey God's thoughts, feelings, and frustrations. They show a person who is so familiar with God, so well versed in God's character, and so accustomed to God's presence. Because Zechariah knows God so well, God does not have to direct every detail of the sign-act. He, as the director can give the broad outlines. Zechariah, as the invested actor, can fill in the rest in accord with the director's wishes.

We now see Zechariah at the end of his ministry as a person who is rich in content and realization, able to speak in a way that is united with the Lord and able to present God's feelings and attitudes through his actions and words. How did Zechariah mature from the simple words of chapter one to the profound unveilings and mature delivery of those revelations described in chapters nine through fourteen? In his writings we see that his eight night visions and his speaking to Joshua and the exiles connect the two. It is interesting to think that these experiences may have been key steps for Zechariah's maturity.

The first phase of his interaction with God appears in the form of his night visions (Zechariah 1:7-6:8). The eight night visions that he saw educated the prophet in many aspects of what a full, mutual return of God and His people would involve. In the end he became a man educated in God's desire for Jerusalem, His intention to have Jews and Gentiles live there with Him, His way of restoring the priesthood, His Messiah, His way of making the people shine as a lampstand and His intention to eradicate sin and judge all the errant nations of the earth.

Zechariah's second main interaction with God appears in God's requests for Zechariah to speak to the people (Zechariah 6:9-8:23). What these scenes show us about Zechariah is very important. He had just seen eight heavenly visions. His challenge at this point might have been whether or not he could bring those heavenly visions down to earth to make them applicable to the people he sees. This scene shows that Zechariah was able to make just that transition. Formerly he had seen Joshua in a vision; now, God leads him to see Joshua in the flesh. Formerly, he had heard about the Branch (the Messiah) in a vision; now God tells him to speak about the Branch to real people (Compare Zechariah 3:1-10 with 6:9-15). Formerly, he had seen Jerusalem as a glorious city in a

vision; now he was laying that vision before the men from Bethel who had asked about fasts (Compare Zechariah 2 with 7-8). Here, he can work with God to help the people see the glory of the coming city and God's grand intention for what a mutual return might look like. These revelations advance way beyond his initial encouragements to the people to "return." We can see that he has grown, advanced and developed.

It is as if the richness of the night visions and the experience of speaking these wonderful things to God's people stewed, baked and steeped in Zechariah. As these things worked in him, the grand oracles that he unveiled at the end of his writings came into focus. He also clearly displayed that he has grown to know God in a deeper way. Zechariah could speak about Christ, the Spirit, the nations, the kingdom, and sin in clear and accurate utterances. At this stage, when God asked him to demonstrate His desire to shepherd the nation, Zechariah could seamlessly display God's thought for shepherding. Now Zechariah was a mature, seasoned, learned and experienced servant of God.

Zechariah's attitude during his training process might provide one of the best examples of what Peter meant by the prophets who "made careful searches and inquiries" (1 Peter 1:10). Simply, Zechariah made inquiries by asking questions. Ten different times during the visions he asks about what he is seeing. This shows he is not merely a passive observer, but possesses an active, heavenly curiosity. It seems he wants to get the most out of what he is seeing. Furthermore, we do not just see him asking questions; he also answers questions posed to him, like he is participating in a class discussion led by the teacher. Three times in the visions he is asked a question; two of these times he describes what he sees and one time he admits he doesn't know the answer. This shows a simplicity, genuineness and guilelessness, just like child learning

in simplicity. Finally, we also see him making active suggestions, that are in line with the thought of what he sees. When he sees that Joshua will get clean robes, he asks that he also be given a clean turban—and the turban is given (Zechariah 3:5). The vision actually changes because of his request. Zechariah could pick up the thought of the vision and suggest further action based on that thought. This shows that he was not a distracted student. Rather, he had a passion and an interest in what he was seeing, in God's interest, and in God's people. Such an attitude, where he was carefully searching and seeking, might have helped him fully understand the visions God showed him. Thus, he matured in his knowing of God throughout his ministry. When God asked him to apply these visions to Joshua and to the people, we see that Zechariah was supple, pliable, and flexible enough to make the heavenly things applicable to people.

The clear result of all these experiences was that by the end of his ministry Zechariah is not serving his own generation, but the New Testament believers—us (1 Peter 1:12). In his last visions, he seemed to forget about Joshua, Zerubbabel and the temple project. Even when the temple was finished, two years after he spoke to the men about the fasts, he did not utter one word of acknowledgement, even though the temple completion was prominent in his visions. When Ezra and Nehemiah were reforming the priesthood and seeking to purify the nation, Zechariah's words were absent. He no longer spoke about the temple, the priesthood, or his own generation. He allowed himself to rise above the people at hand. He spoke the final oracles for us, the New Testament believers who enjoy the grace of the Messiah who he described so clearly. This is where his visions, his experience speaking them to the people, combined with his diligent search brought him. May we also follow his example to be elevated by the Lord as Zechariah was.

Who might listen?

This prophet would appeal to a young person who happens to be particularly inquisitive in things concerning God and His salvation. Just as Zechariah asked questions and deepened his understanding, this person may also ask many questions, inquiring into the mysteries of Christ and His kingdom. He would appeal to a person who is also not boxed in to his current setting or particular group. Unlike the prophet Jonah, Zechariah had no problems recording how God would include the Gentiles, even making them His people. Just as this prophet was not hemmed in by his insular comfortabilities, the person who connects with Zechariah's message might be similarly broad and inclusive. He might like to keep up with the news from around the world, just to see what might happen. Furthermore, the person who Zechariah might connect best with is a person who has a developed taste for learning Christ, even if it might not affect that person in his immediate circumstance. Just as Zechariah in his maturity unveiled Christ in the future, seemingly just for the joy of knowing more of Him, the person who connects with Zechariah's message must be a pure person who simply wants to know Christ. For instance, no one has yet experienced Christ descending upon the Mount of Olives; however, isn't it so good to know He will come? No one has yet witnessed Him returning with his saints; however, isn't it awesome worshipping Him for what He will do? This is the kind of person who will really be attracted to the message of Zechariah. Finally, the person who is frustrated by the superficial understanding of things and events would be a prime candidate to love Zechariah. Jack London, a secular writer, once described a man who was "quick and alert in the things in life, but only in the things, and not in the significances." Such a character would not be interested much in Zechariah's prophecies ... but his oppo-

site, perhaps Jack London himself would be.

I think of a young T. Austin-Sparks, sitting in G. Campbell-Morgan's congregation while inquiring about Christ. I think of the young Watchman Nee, devouring books by spiritual men, learning and seeking things that may not apply to him immediately. I think of the young John Calvin, learning who Christ is, delving into the works of the church fathers, and eventually being more and more profound in his ministry of Christ. It is these kinds of young inquirers, seeking spiritual things, trying to minister to the people at hand, learning from God and looking for the riches of Christ who might genuinely respond to the message of this young, inquisitive, quick, broad, and, eventually, extremely profound prophet.

MALACHI

When we meet Malachi, we meet a prophet who is absolutely passionate about God's family. Malachi is like that "oldest brother" who sees the value and values of the family and fights to preserve them. Just like that oldest brother would make sure the family gatherings happen, Malachi makes sure that people realize they are part of the family. Just like that brother would intervene if he saw a sibling not respecting the father, Malachi will point out when a sibling's action dishonors their father. Just like that brother appreciates the father's love, Malachi appreciates God's sure commitment to the sons He loves. Malachi is just like that oldest brother, who, after you sit down and talk with him and listen, you are inspired to be a better brother, to take care of your father a bit more and to bear the responsibility that would make your family proud.

Malachi's writings show just how concerned he is for the unity and proper functioning of God's family. His many mentions of father, fathers, son, sons, children and love attest to his concern. He begins by preaching God's unwavering love for Jacob, making the very first words of his prophesy God's declaration to his sons, "I have loved you" (Malachi 1:2). Then he conveys God's expectation for His people to respond to this fatherly love, saying, "If then I am a father, where is my honor" (Malachi 1:6). Later, Malachi picks up the family plea, saying, "Have we not all one Father?" (Malachi 2:10), and then asks his siblings why they marry foreign wives, outside their family line. At times, Malachi, reassures God's family—the children of Jacob—by relating God's comforting words, "For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed" (Malachi 3:6). When the family members do respond to Malachi's speaking, he conveys how God will treat them as profitable sons, declaring how He will "spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him" (Malachi 3:17). Finally, Malachi prepares his people for the future "day", before which the family will be strengthened—when Elijah will "turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers" (Malachi 4:6). When we look at all these references, we see a man who is utterly concerned with the health, well-being, and joy of God's family—God's sons—and, in turn, God's own joy in His offspring.

If we were to piece together Malachi's personality from his writings, we might make a few observations. First, we notice that Malachi is very concerned with the day to day, ins and outs of the priests and people. One doesn't see him presenting great visions, uttering prophetic dictates to foreign nations or portraying God's glorified nation in mysterious ways. Instead, he talks about nuts and bolts—about the quality of offerings, about home and family life, about attitudes and expectations.

His emphasis on these details make his writings much closer to Haggai's than to Zechariah's. Zechariah sees visions of horsemen traveling the earth, nations dwelling with the glorious God in Jerusalem and an ephah filled with wickedness being flown to its temple in Shinar. Haggai, on the other hand, talks about the people's crops, expectations and disappointments. Similarly, Malachi concerns himself with daily life. He sees a blemish on a sacrifice, an attitude that says, "I'm tired of this" and destroyed marriages. He is much closer to Haggai in this respect. Interestingly, both of these "practical prophets," Haggai and Malachi share the description "messenger." Haggai calls himself a messenger and Malachi's name means "messenger." It is as if the messenger prophet is concerned for the Israelite's common living, and not so much for grand portrayals of God or of His salvation.

As such, Malachi would be a very good life coach. Whereas, Zechariah might talk about the philosophical implications of car companies or banks, Malachi would ask you, "Who is your boss in your company?" and "Are you doing what is expected of you?" This practical concern is shown in Malachi's interest in covenants, and, in particular, how the people are carrying out their responsibilities in those covenants. He mentions the priests and the "covenant with Levi" (Malachi 2:4), husbands and their honoring of their "wife by covenant" (Malachi 2:14) and even bestows hope for the Lord's return by calling Him the "Messenger of the covenant" (Malachi 3:1). Malachi's place would be to ask his brother, who is also a member of God's family, what his responsibilities are, and then sit down with him and talk about how those things are going.

He is so much in these day to day things, that he mentions nothing about the Spirit, little about salvation and not a word about the Messiah in His first coming, grace or faith. He makes no mention of the name of any other nations, even

though many historical events were transpiring between Persia, Greece and Egypt at the time of his writing. His only reference to the nations is to assert that God's name will one day be great among the them (Malachi 1:5, 11, 14; 3:12). His main purpose in these references, however, is to encourage the Israelites to increase their honoring of God in their day to day lives—"if God will be honored among the nations, shouldn't you honor Him with proper sacrifices?"

Malachi, with this personality that is hyper-focused on the people's actions and responsibilities has a sure effect on his generation. After hearing all the words from Malachi, a profound separation occurs in the nation. Those who fear the Lord separate themselves from those who don't care. They begin to talk among themselves, and, as such, become so pleasing to the Lord (Malachi 3:16-17). Malachi, then prophesies to them concerning the blessings they will receive at the coming day of the Lord. Even as he predicts the future, he doesn't focus on grand things, like the place of Jerusalem on earth or the foreign nations' reactions to Jerusalem. Instead, he looks at the group who fears the Lord and serves Him and prophesies that they will be healed and will, one day, leap like calves who have just been released from their stall.

As noted in this survey of Old Testament prophets, we are mainly asking the question how did a particular prophet transcend his own environment to arrive at the point where he realized he was not serving his own generation but us, the New Testament believers. When a prophet is profound, broad, grandiose in his vision, and far-reaching in his insight, it is sometimes easier to see how he would make this transition. Zechariah, Micah, Hosea or Habakkuk all display this rather easily. However, Malachi is a different sort. He is so focused on the individual, the attitude, the action. Even when he prophesies things in the future, he focuses on how the people

will act (leaping), not the world-wide setting they will be in. In this chapter, we will ask how God would bring a prophet with this kind of narrow view into the same experience of eventually realizing that even he is serving us. We will note how Malachi will come to understand that his ministry is for something beyond the generation that he sees in front of his eyes, even though he is filled with concern for them.

His setting

Malachi gives no date for his writings, although it is universally agreed among commentators that he prophesied in the post-exile period. This groups him with the two other post-exilic prophets, Haggai and Zechariah. Apparently, he prophesied after them, because they encouraged the people to build the temple and Malachi addresses priests who are serving in the temple which is already built. It would make the most sense to place Malachi's ministry near the second term of Nehemiah's leadership of the people. This is because the topics addressed by Nehemiah during his latter term as governor (as recorded in Nehemiah 13) are very similar to the topics addressed by Malachi. Both speak about problems with tithes (Malachi 3:8-12, Nehemiah 13:10-14) and the people and priests marrying foreign wives (Malachi 1:6-2:9, Nehemiah 13:23-29). If this indeed is a correct placement of Malachi's ministry, it would place his time-period as either before or during the second term of Nehemiah's governorship (Nehemiah 13:6).

Malachi's time-period, then, is after the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes (Nehemiah 5:14, 13:6). The history goes something like this using the dates referenced by Ryrie (p. 1424). In the first year of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1), the first group of exiles, including Joshua and Zerubbabel, returned to Jerusalem. This

would be 536 BC. In the second year, they began rebuilding the temple, but stopped due to frustrations from the neighbors. The work did not resume until the second year of Darius, which would be 520 BC, sixteen years after the work was stopped. The temple was then completed in the sixth year of Darius (Ezra 6:15), or 515 BC. In the seventh year of Artaxerxes, year 458, Ezra led another group of exiles back to Jerusalem. Ezra greatly encouraged the exiles through the teaching and reading of the law. During Ezra's stay the temple had been completed for many years, but the wall of the city was still in ruins. Nehemiah returned to rebuild the wall and was governor over the people from the twentieth to the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes, which is 445-433 BC. At 433, Nehemiah went back to Susa to be with the Persian king and he returned some time later (Nehemiah 13:6) to find that the nation had slid again into laxness and dissipation.

Many of the themes dealt with by Malachi were recurring problems with the exiles. He addresses the matter of marriages to foreign wives. This was addressed two times by others: first by Ezra when he returned to Jerusalem in the seventh year of Artaxerxes (Ezra 9), and again by Nehemiah, when he returned to Jerusalem the second time, after the thirty second year of Artaxerxes (Nehemiah 13:23-29). Tithes were also a recurring problem. Nehemiah set up a way for tithes to be given during his first term as governor (Nehemiah 12:44-47). However, when he returned, he noticed that the Levites who should have been supported from ample tithes had to return to farming, because their support was so limited. Thus, he had to restore the practice of tithing, again (Nehemiah 13:10-14).

God's people, by Malachi's time, had witnessed many exciting things as far as the recovery of God's house and city was concerned, but had become bored of their life with God. They had a completed temple, an established worship and a

wall around the city. However, they might have wondered, “What next?” They were tired and bored of the offerings, wondered if God would really reward them for their faithfulness and questioned if this life was really as glorious as they had imagined. It might not be so surprising that, in this state, they became attracted to foreign women. Those women were exciting, new and scintillating. On the other hand, the regular offerings at the temple and the consistent tithes were a continual drain on their resources. They began to consider how to simply get by—simply offer the minimum and fulfill the basic requirements.

They might also have been facing some theological problems, because they had heard the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah, had responded, but still didn’t see all their promises fulfilled. For instance, both prophets encouraged them to finish building the temple, which they wonderfully accomplished. However, Zechariah promised a Jerusalem where “Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets” (Zechariah 8:4). However, at this time Jerusalem was a desolate place to live. They even had to cast lots to decide who would endure the hardships of living in Jerusalem in contrast to the better living in the other cities of Judah (Nehemiah 11:1). They were returned from Babylon, living with a completed temple, safe behind the Jerusalem wall. However, things were still not that glorious. They might have wondered what they were waiting for? Where is the God who brought them back? What is their role? Where are they going?

This is the snapshot of God’s people at Malachi’s time. It was over one-hundred years after the first exiles had returned, over eighty years after the temple had been completed, at least twenty-five years after the foreign wives had been expunged

from the community and at least twelve years after the wall had been finished. This was time enough to settle and to droop. Zeal was largely gone. Worship was mostly routine. Interest in God was generally low. Expectations for what God could do with His people was for the most part empty.

Malachi's message

Malachi's writing lends itself to a simple division into four basic sections. The first covers God's love for them as demonstrated in His love for Jacob (Malachi 1:2-6). The second contains a series of complaints that God levels against the people (Malachi 2:7-3:15). This section covers major topics such as polluted sacrifices, marriage to foreign wives, tithing, as well as minor topics such as bad attitudes that lead people to believe serving God is vain. The third section describes a wonderful result of Malachi's speaking—the people who fear the Lord gather together, something that God distinctly notices (Malachi 3:16-18). The fourth section covers encouragements and promises God gives to those who fear Him to ready them for the coming day of the Lord (Malachi 4:1-6).

Malachi's interactions with God

At the beginning of his prophecy Malachi presents himself to us as a person who is deeply rooted in God's love. He opens his writing with this basic thought from God, "I have loved you" (Malachi 1:2). He then details how God has loved Jacob in contrast to Esau. Malachi begins with this simple, yet profound thought—God loves us, even, God loves me. Based on that wonderful thought Malachi derives his concept of God and his expectations for God's people. Seeing God's love is clearly a motivation that would make Malachi so passionate

about God's family. He becomes a person concerned for God's family, for the people's proper response to God's love and for the purification of sons, so that they might be fitting recipients of God's love.

As we see in Malachi 1:6-3:13 Malachi's main venue for measuring the people's response to God's love is the temple and the altar. How the people handle their offerings at the altar are signs for Malachi of how much they honor God their Father (Malachi 1:6-2:9). How the priests treat their wives greatly affects the altar of God their Father (Malachi 2:10-16). When Malachi observes that the people are not bringing full tithes to God's house, he takes it as a sign that Judah had not returned to God their Father (Malachi 3:6-12). At the beginning of Malachi's ministry, we see the prophet impressed by God's love, passionate about God's family, and looking for proper temple behavior as the people's due honor to God for His great love.

At the end of his ministry, Malachi has quite a different focus. He is focused on Christ and on the day of His coming. He writes about a coming day, when the Lord will appear (Malachi 4:1). That day will reveal judgment upon the evildoers and will be a glorious day for those who esteem the name of the Lord (Malachi 4:2). At the end, Malachi focuses on Christ as the Sun of Righteousness, who will shine upon those who esteem the Lord's name offering them healing and revival (Malachi 4:2-3). It is striking that, at the end, Malachi doesn't speak at all about the altar, the temple, offerings or attitudes. He sees everything as coming from Christ the Sun, who shines to clear up the evildoers and to bring healing and vitality to those who fear God's name.

If we ask how Malachi interacts with the Lord between his first realizations of God's love and his last realization of the Sun of Righteousness, we will notice two things. First, when

Malachi hears about the Lord's love, he allows that word of love to take root in him and grow. Second, when his ministry causes a wonderful meeting among people who fear the Lord, Malachi notices that God's attention is arrested by that meeting. The Lord's response to that gathering has a profound effect on Malachi, leading to Malachi's growth and maturity.

Malachi's first interaction is to genuinely imbibe God's word of love. Malachi sees God as a loving Father and applies that repetitively and increasingly personally. In his first application, Malachi conveys God's words to the nation, "If then I am a father, where is my honor?" (Malachi 1:6). In his next application, he puts himself into the family with them, saying, "Have we not all one Father?" (Malachi 2:10). Malachi is declaring that he is one with the nation, and that they are all enjoying the love of God, as members of God's family. We see Malachi's serious digestion of the words God supplies to him.

Malachi's second interaction with the Lord comes when he notices what the Lord pays attention to. When the group of people who feared the Lord gather together and speak to one another, "The LORD paid attention and heard them" (Malachi 3:16). It is interesting to think of the effect the Lord's attention to this gathering might have on Malachi. Malachi had invested so many words speaking to the people about polluted sacrifices, tears on the altar due to divorces and lack of tithes. Many of his complaints centered around their behavior in the temple and around the altar. One might think that when the Lord paid attention to something in response to Malachi's message, it would involve proper behavior at the temple. Maybe God would finally pay attention to an unblemished sacrifice, a tear-free altar or a whole tithe presented at the temple? However, none of these arrest the Lord's attention. Instead, the Lord's attention is arrested by this little group of God-fearing people speaking to one another. This interaction

educates Malachi to what is genuinely in God's interest. It shows him what God's family truly is. God's family does not center around a proper sacrifice or a whole tithe, although these things are surely good. Rather, God's family begins with those who fear Him and those who gather together. When God says that He will spare them "as a man spares his son" (Malachi 3:17), it clarifies the thought of God's true family even more for Malachi. It is right, then, in this instance, for Malachi to mention a book of remembrance for these people (Malachi 3:16). That book means that God remembers these people in particular. It is a book implying that they will receive a particular reward.

These experiences genuinely uplift Malachi. When God pays attention to this probably small group of God-fearing people who are simply speaking to one another, Malachi has many of his preconceptions uprooted. Previously Malachi might have dreamed that God would pay attention to a well running temple, where the sacrifices were from the heart and whole, where the priests' families were healthy and where tithes were full. This would indeed be good. However, God pays attention and lifts His ear to none of these things. What God is interested in is this little group of people who actually fear Him. When they gather and speak, it is as if that gathering is better than all the noisy, grand sacrifices at the temple. When Malachi hears how God will treasure *them* and treat *them* as sons (Malachi 3:17), Malachi must have been amazed. I could imagine the group being a motley crew, maybe composed of an old lady from Issachar, a young boy from Judah, a limping young woman from Benjamin, an overweight, middle-aged man from Naphtali. Maybe even a Levite or two were there. Amongst the whole group there wasn't one sacrifice, not one tithe to show off. However, the names of the people in that group are written in the book of remembrance. Furthermore,

God declares that that group will be His treasure and will be treated as His sons.

In the end, Malachi declares what will happen on the day that the Lord, the Sun of Righteousness will come. On that day, the evildoers will be judged, but those who fear God's name will receive healing from the Sun of righteousness. When Malachi speaks about that day, he doesn't bestow the blessing upon "those who offer whole sacrifices" or "those who bring full tithes." Malachi has internalized the value of that little group who feared the Lord and gathered to speak to one another. They will be God's overcomers, those who, after being healed by the Sun of Righteousness, will "tread down the wicked" under their feet (Malachi 4:3). Thus, we see a Malachi who is matured in his vision and understanding of God.

The way Malachi got to this point was by seeking and searching diligently whatever God put before Him. As we have seen, God spoke His love for Jacob to Malachi. How did Malachi search this out and seek this? He remained in this "line of love" till it became richer and richer to him. First, he heard it, "I have loved Jacob" (Malachi 1:2), then he preached it, "If then I am a father, where is my honor?" (Malachi 1:6). Then, he imbibed it, preaching as he himself is living it, "Have we not all one Father?" (Malachi 2:10). In his ministry, he relies on this, resting on it as his surety, "For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed" (Malachi 3:6). Because he is so attuned to God's love and family, he is influenced when God displays how He will support His family, "I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him" (Malachi 3:17). Thus, Malachi realizes that his ministry is not to the priests of his own generation. Rather it to the God fearers, including us, the New Testament believers.

It was revealed to him that he wasn't serving the priests at the temple or the children of Judah who were recreant in tithes and family matters. Instead, as he witnessed God's attention, he was adjusted to serving those who fear the Lord. Malachi desires that those God-fearers would serve and be faithful to the covenants of the fathers. Thus, they would be brought back to the rich enjoyment of God's family. He transcends at the end of his writings, recommending people to look for Elijah. Elijah will not restore temple worship. Rather, Elijah will reconcile the family, "he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers" (Malachi 4:6). Here Malachi understands that Elijah will restore the hearts of God's people (the children) to the same purpose that Abraham, Isaac, etc. (the fathers) had. Furthermore, Elijah will restore the interests of Abraham, Isaac, etc. (the fathers) in God's people (the children) who are now faithfully following the covenant. This profound reunion among God's family is what Malachi is now fighting for.

Malachi thus demonstrates that growth comes by seeking the rich parts that God gives to him—in this case God's love and family. Eventually, those truths become experience, riches and spiritual wealth. Then, when God does notice something, God's attention can adjust the prophet so that he aims for the family that will be realized in the future. Malachi has transcended. He has grown. He has seen what God is after and can give everything for that.

Who might listen?

Just like the book of remembrance placed before those God-fearing people was outside of the temple complex, Malachi's message will appeal to those outside the institutionalized church. Throughout the history of the church, there have been

people outside mainstream Christianity. E. H. Broadbent in his history, "The Pilgrim Church," traces a "silver line" of God seekers who faithfully minister to God's people outside the institutions and standards that so many times imprison the move of the Holy Spirit.

The Pietists of late 16th century Germany, the Moravian Brethren of 18th century Saxony, the British Brethren of 19th century England all fit this category. They gathered outside the stale institutional church of their day, because they feared the Lord and sought Him together. Many servants of the Lord set themselves to minister to these groups. Names like Watchman Nee, Stephen Kuang, T. Austin-Sparks, Bakht Singh and others saw the degradation of the vast majority of Christians and sought to minister to a small number outside the mainstream. They poured out their lives in ministry to these people. Most never had seminary degrees, but their ministries were rich, profound, and greatly effective towards seekers of Christ. The Message of Malachi would surely resonate with them.

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