MINOR PROPHETS: MAJOR ISSUES!

BRIAN JOHNSTON

MINOR PROPHETS, MAJOR ISSUES
BY BRIAN JOHNSTON

Copyright © 2014 Brian Johnston

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, without the written permission of Search for Truth UK.

Published by:
SEARCH FOR TRUTH
Church of God
Leicester LE5 6LN
United Kingdom

under license from:
HAYES PRESS Publisher, Resources & Media,
The Barn, Flaxlands
Royal Wootton Bassett
Swindon, SN4 8DY
United Kingdom

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the HOLY BIBLE, the New King James Version® (NKJV®). Copyright © 1982 Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved." Scriptures marked NIV are from New International Version®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Scriptures marked NASBB are from the New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman

Foundation
Used by permission." (www.Lockman.org)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. WHERE'S THE SENSE OF JUSTICE?
2. THE NEED FOR COMPASSION, NOT PREJUDICE
3. CORRUPTION IN HIGH PLACES
4. LIVING IRRESPONSIBLY: CHEATING GOD & CHEATING ON OUR FAMILIES
5. WHY DOES GOD ALLOW DISASTERS?
6. GETTING OUR PRIORITIES WRONG
7. "YOU GOTTA SERVE SOMEBODY…"
8. VISIONS OF HOPE
9. GOD IS STILL TO BE FEARED…
10. OUR STRENGTH CAN ALSO BE OUR WEAKNESS
11. IF YOU THOUGHT GOD COULDN'T CARE LESS
12. INHUMANITY AND INJUSTICE WILL NOT GO UNPUNISHED

FURTHER TITLES IN THIS SERIES
SEARCH FOR TRUTH RADIO PROGRAMMES
CONTACT SEARCH FOR TRUTH
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CHAPTER 1 - WHERE'S THE SENSE OF JUSTICE?

Life's just not fair! That was the conclusion the Bible prophet was struggling to avoid. His struggle is recorded in our Bibles because every generation without exception faces this selfsame challenge.

Haven't you been angered by examples of corruption or injustice in society? Anyone who thinks of himself or herself as law-abiding tends to get indignant at those who break the law to gain advantage - especially when they seem to get away with it. It's just not fair! Where's the sense of justice?

It was six hundred years before Christ, when the Bible prophet Habakkuk was facing up to this same kind of challenge. He spoke to God out of frustration. This is what the Bible book that bears his name records him as saying:

"How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralysed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted."
(Habakkuk 1:2-4)

He complained about a lot of things, didn't he? Violence, injustice, wrong, destruction, strife and conflict. He sums it up by saying *"justice never prevails… justice is perverted."* His own people, the people of Judah in the south of the land of Israel, persisted in their wickedness despite his preaching, and it seemed to Habakkuk that God was letting them get away with it. But God did answer his prophet, the trouble was, it wasn't the answer Habakkuk was expecting! God

replied:

"Look at the nations and watch - and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told. I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling-places not their own. They are a feared and dreaded people; they are a law to themselves and promote their own honour…they all come bent on violence. Their hordes advance like a desert wind and gather prisoners like sand." (Habakkuk 1:5-9)

Talk about out of the frying-pan and into the fire! This wasn't the kind of judgement Habakkuk wanted! Surely the armies of the Babylonians weren't going to be God's instruments in dealing with his own people! That was even more of a problem for Habakkuk since he considered the Babylonians to be pagans, worse than even the most wicked among his own people who he'd just been complaining about!

How could wickedness among his own people be dealt with by people who were even more wicked? The unfair situation he'd been complaining about seemed to have got even more unfair! Habakkuk's reply back to God is right on this point:

"Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?" (Habakkuk 1:13)

Habakkuk had been crying out for justice; but is this justice – he wonders – to use a more wicked nation to judge a less wicked one? The Babylonians were famous for their ruthlessness. Was God really going to let them enhance their reputation at the expense of the Jews?

Habakkuk now waits for God's answer. He describes it as, 'standing upon his watch' to see what answer God would give him. In this way the prophets were represented as being like watchmen, like those positioned high on the city walls or on a tower so that they could see farther than others and bring warning to the people in the city.
When God's answer comes it brings with it the assurance that God's in overall control of history. When we look at things up close with tunnel vision, we lose sight of God's perspective. The first reassurance that God gives his prophet is that his judgement is selective. The Bible demonstrates time and time again that God knows how to deliver the godly out of trouble. The proud Babylonians would come against Judah, but God would spare some.

"See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright - but the righteous will live by his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4)

This is the quotation of the Old Testament which Martin Luther made famous at the time of the Reformation. In the New Testament the words, “the righteous – or the just – will live by…faith” are applied to the salvation which believers on the Lord Jesus Christ possess (Romans 1:17).

In its original setting here it probably described how the one who believed what God had said about the Babylonian oppressors would make his escape from the place, and as a result would save his life. But the believing Jew then is typical of all who wait for God's promises with patient faith, and so 'live' - or stand accepted - before God as a result.

The Babylonian attacker, by contrast, though for a time executing God's judgments, at last becomes 'puffed up' so as to attribute to his own power what's really the work of God - and by doing that he provokes God's displeasure. God's displeasure means that he too is going to be judged in his turn. The following

verses expand on that:

"…he gathers to himself all the nations and takes captive all the peoples. Will not all of them taunt him with ridicule and scorn, saying, "'Woe to him who piles up stolen goods and makes himself wealthy by extortion! How long must this go on?' Will not your debtors suddenly arise?...Then you will become their victim. Because you have plundered many nations, the peoples who are left will plunder you…Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed and establishes a town by crime! ...

"You will be filled with shame instead of glory. Now it is your turn! … The cup from the LORD's right hand is coming round to you." (Habakkuk 2:5-16).

So here was Habakkuk's answer. God was going to use the Babylonians to teach his own people a lesson, but in doing so believing ones would be spared. And what's more, afterwards the cruel and wicked Babylonians would be dealt with themselves. Their turn was coming! The cup of God's anger and judgement would soon be passed to them to drink! Ultimately, justice would be seen to be done. God would first use a more wicked nation to judge a less wicked one - remember even that less wicked nation was still deserving - as we all are - of God's judgement. But then later on the wicked oppressors would be held accountable for their deeds. When Habakkuk gets the point that God is in overall control, and that all wrongs are going to be dealt with in the broader sweep of history, he recalls how this has happened before in the history of God's dealings with his people:

“He stood, and shook the earth; he looked, and made the nations tremble. The ancient mountains crumbled and the age-old hills collapsed. His ways are eternal. I saw the tents of Cushan in distress, the dwellings of Midian in anguish…In wrath you strode through the earth and in anger you threshed the

nations.

You came out to deliver your people, to save your anointed one. You crushed the leader of the land of wickedness, you stripped him from head to foot…I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us."

And while he waits for God's judgements to catch up with the wicked, Habakkuk himself models the faith of the righteous man when he declares:

"Though the fig-tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Saviour." (Habakkuk 3:6-18)

Isn't it amazing how his conversation with God has dealt with all his frustration and left him trusting and joyful in God! In the modern day we too need to catch up with the true perspective the Bible gives us!

CHAPTER 2 - THE NEED FOR COMPASSION, NOT PREJUDICE

He was a very successful preacher, but he's not famous so much for the great messages he delivered as he is for his personal story. The story of Jonah is one of the best known in the Bible. It's a popular subject for children's books. Unfortunately, that may encourage some people to regard it as a fascinating tale of adventure but one so incredible that few take it seriously – but fairy tale it most certainly isn't.

God doesn't ask us to believe that Jonah swallowed the whale (or 'great fish') – that certainly would be nonsense! But he asks us to believe a whale swallowed Jonah. There's nothing impossible about that. For in 1927 a man called John Ambrose Wilson wrote an entry in the Princeton University Journal. It was the account of how a sperm whale had overturned a whaling boat near the Falklands and one of the whalers ended up being swallowed by the whale. The whale was then captured and cut open, and the whaler was found alive inside the whale after surviving for three days.

The Lord Jesus Christ – the Creator, Saviour and Judge of the world – accepted the entire record of Jonah as absolutely real and profoundly important. The only prophecy the book of Jonah contains concerns the doom of the city of Nineveh which was postponed because its citizens turned from their wicked ways upon hearing Jonah's preaching. However, the story of Jonah was itself a kind of illustrative prophecy concerning the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Generally, Old Testament stories serve to illustrate the Bible's teaching at three levels: at the highest level they often illustrate something of God's overall plan of dealing with this world; at the next level, they may illustrate God's dealings

with Israel; and thirdly, they can illustrate God’s dealings with individuals.

If we apply this to the case of the story of Jonah, we find at the top level an amazing illustration of God's plan for world redemption! For the Lord Jesus spoke of 'the sign of Jonah' in Matthew’s Gospel chapter 12(v.40) when he said:

“As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” (Matthew 12:40)

As regards Israel – now looking at the next level down – Matthew 12(:41) goes on to condemn Israel's cities and citizens for not repenting at the Lord's preaching; whereas the Ninevites repented at the preaching of Jonah. The Israelites were more greatly privileged in knowing God better, but that brings greater responsibility and in turn greater judgement.

I suppose you could also compare the reaction of the sailors too. Their reluctance to lay hands on Jonah - even when his casting into the sea would bring them deliverance - surely also condemns the readiness of Jews to have Jesus handed over to Pilate – and that at a time when Jesus’ entrance into the floods of death was that he might become their – and our – great Deliverer.

But the individual level is where I want to put the focus. The story of Jonah captures for us the pitiless state the heart of any one of us, even the heart of a preacher like Jonah, can get into - his heart was harder than those of the pagan Ninevites! According to the prophet Hosea, who was a younger contemporary of Jonah, Israel tried to gain help from the Assyrians (Hos.5:13; 7:11; 8:8; 12:1). But instead of receiving help they were told that Israel would ‘be carried (captive) to Assyria’. So maybe Jonah had learnt that an Assyrian invasion was a real threat, and so he didn't want to go there, to Nineveh its capital - knowing it

was likely to be a dangerous mission.

For the cruel Assyrians would hardly be expected to welcome an Israelite prophet who had come to forecast their destruction! But from the actual story of Jonah you don't get the impression he was afraid for himself; but only that the Ninevites might actually repent, and God would spare them. For Jonah knew at first hand just how gracious and merciful God was. Despite the fact a wicked king was on the throne of Israel, we read that:

"He [this king, Jeroboam] was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, in accordance with the word of the…God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hepher. The LORD had seen how bitterly everyone in Israel, whether slave or free, was suffering." (2 Kings 14:25-26)

God had spared Israel, and Jonah, it seems, was afraid God would spare Israel's enemy! What's more, God had never sent an Israelite prophet to warn a Gentile nation before, and his own people might treat his mission as an act of treason. After all, why warn your enemy? Whatever the reason, Jonah decided to run away and not go to preach God's message, which was: 'forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown'.

We hardly need to retell the story. Jonah jumped on board a ship heading in the opposite direction to the one God had commanded him to go in. But God caused a storm at sea. Jonah at once realized that it was his disobedience which was the cause of the storm and volunteered to sacrifice himself to end the storm. The ship's crew tried everything else, and then as a last resort threw Jonah overboard.

"But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights." (Jonah 1:17)

From inside the sea-monster, Jonah pleaded with God. Now he was ready to obey:
“And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.” (Jonah 2:10)

So finally Jonah went and preached his message of judgement in Assyria’s proud capital: *“On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned."* (Jonah 3:4)

The citizens of Nineveh heard God’s word, repented of their sins and were spared the promised judgement. The very thing happened that Jonah seemed to have been fearing, and he was angry that God would show grace to Nineveh – a proud and wicked city of pagan Assyrians whose military strategy in those days was pure terrorism.
I wonder, do we look out on a society which hardly makes any pretence any longer of living by the Bible and do we “tut-tut” and then run away - Jonah-like - running away from the Great Commission? Could it be that there are elements of society today that we wouldn’t care to go out of our way to reach out to with the good news of saving faith in Christ?

Do we think – wrongly of course – that some people are more deserving of grace than others? This was where God had to teach Jonah a second lesson. This time he used a plant not a fish. It was a plant – some versions call it a vine – which Jonah had become grateful for, because it gave him shade from the sun, while he, in a disgruntled frame of mind, sat down under its shade to check out what would happen to the pagan city he’d preached against:

“Jonah was very happy about the vine. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. When the sun rose, God

provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live."

But God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?" "I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die." But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight.

But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" (Jonah 4:6-11)

This is the great lesson of the book of Jonah. It's an up-to-date challenge to each of our hearts as to whether we, too, have grown cold – whether we, like Jonah, have exhausted our compassion for those around us in society, especially any sector of society that we might not easily or naturally relate to. 'O for a passionate passion for souls', Amy Carmichael once wrote. That's a reflection of the apostle Paul's burden for souls - his passion for the Gospel that oozes out of every verse of Philippians chapter 1. Our reputations, our convenience, our comfort, our prejudices need to become secondary to our obedience and compassion.

Mosul, one of the chief cities of present-day Iraq, is just across the Tigris River from the ruins of Nineveh. One of the mounds covering the ruins of ancient Nineveh today is called 'Nebi Yunis' meaning 'Prophet Jonah'. Of course, there's no certainty that Jonah is actually buried there, but the persistence of his name at the place where proud Nineveh once thrived is testimony to this very day that repentance and faith once blanketed what was arguably the greatest and most wicked city in the world of the eighth century BC. Once again God calls us

to compassion for the people of its surrounding region.

CHAPTER 3 - CORRUPTION IN HIGH PLACES

Democratic countries elect their leaders. In other parts of the world where democracy hasn't taken a strong hold, international observers go to check if elections are more or less free and fair.

We've seen that happen, and still there are squabbles in the aftermath. Often the losers cry 'foul'. The suspicion of corruption leaves a bad taste in the mouth. Non-elected leaders are removed by local military takeovers or in extreme cases by international efforts. Then comes the tricky business of handing back power to people who hold the respect of all factions – something that's far from easy. They say people get the leaders they deserve, but sadly, corruption seems inevitable.

Although the prophet Micah's message was directed at corrupt and oppressive leaders in Judah and Samaria in the eighth century BC, its principles are surely timeless and of broad application. It addresses the issue of the abuse of power. No abuse of power goes unobserved by the eye of God, and everyone – even to the greatest in the land – is accountable to God. So what did Micah have to say about it? In chapter three of his prophecy, he says:

"Listen, you leaders of Jacob, you rulers of the house of Israel. Should you not know justice, you who hate good and love evil; who tear the skin from my people and the flesh from their bones; who eat my people's flesh, strip off their skin and break their bones in pieces; who chop them up like meat for the pan, like flesh for the pot." (Micah 3:1-3)

What a terrible indictment of leadership! The very ones who should have been

protecting the people are described as cannibalizing them! Not feeding them, but fleecing them! Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth president of the United States, said that it's not so much adversity that's a test of man's character as what he does when he's in a position of power.

Here then were people in power who'd failed the test of character. Trouble was that it wasn't only the political leaders but the religious leaders as well. For Micah's condemnation continues:

"This is what the LORD says: "As for the prophets who lead my people astray, if one feeds them, they proclaim 'peace'; if he does not, they prepare to wage war against him. Therefore night will come over you, without visions, and darkness, without divination. The sun will set for the prophets…" (Micah 3:5,6)

The sooner the sun set on those prophets the better! They were in it for the money! It wasn't a divine vocation, simply a human profession. If someone fed them then they'd prophesy a peaceful or pleasant message for them; but if no generosity was shown, then that meant the message would be a hostile one! And sadly, even the priests were every bit as bad as the princes and prophets. Listen out for mention of them as Micah sums up all the corruption in high places at the end of his third chapter:

"Hear this, you leaders of the house of Jacob, you rulers of the house of Israel, who despise justice and distort all that is right … Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price …Yet they lean upon the LORD and say, "Is not the LORD among us? No disaster will come upon us."
Therefore because of you, Zion will be ploughed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets."
(Micah 3:9-12)

Even the priests taught ‘for a price’. God had designed their office to include the provision of instruction for his people (Malachi 2:7). But for these priests money was more important than God's truth – how tragic!

Micah's message was not all gloom and despondency however. By the Spirit of God he was able to look far ahead and prophesy about a leader of true greatness who was coming. In the intervening time since Micah’s prophecy in the eighth century BC that leader has come, but he will also come again.

For it’s Micah who gives us one of the great verses of Bible prophecy concerning 'the Christmas story' – and it’s in this context of answering the need for a leader of stature. It’s Micah who tells us that Jesus Christ was to be born in Bethlehem…

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

Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labour gives birth and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace.” (Micah 5:1-7)

This was the verse that wicked Herod was told about when he was looking to kill the child whose star had been seen by the wise men from the east. But it was to be thirty years later that Jesus Christ was killed, and it was no accident. The Bible tells us that:

“*It was fitting for [God] … in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect[ly equip]*

the author [or chief leader] of their salvation through sufferings." (Hebrews 2:10 NASB)

That's a reference to Jesus, the child who was born for the very purpose of dying. He died so as to become the great leader of our salvation. Sadly, two thousand years ago, the Jewish and Roman authorities didn't understand this when they put him to death. The Bible preacher charges them with the fact that they had:

"… disowned the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer …but put to death the Prince [or chief leader] of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses." (Acts 3:14-15 NASB)

To have Jesus described as the chief leader of life is a wonderful description. His life here on earth was the best ever. He's the leading exponent of the art of living: the kindest and truest of men. And he has become, through his death on the cross, the source of new life: eternal life to each and every one of us who repents of our sins and fully trusts in him. Life in all its fullness which God wants us to enjoy is found in Jesus Christ – that's why God his Father raised up Jesus:

"He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince [or chief leader] and a Savior, to grant repentance … and forgiveness of sins. [and the Bible preacher continues]… we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him." (Acts 5:30-32 NASB)

Jesus Christ says to us: *'I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life'* (John 14:6). If we're looking for purpose and direction in life, we need to follow the great leader whom God has appointed for us. This is what the Bible encourages his disciples to do - to:

"… run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author [or chief leader] and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Heb 12:1-2 NASB)

That's what we mean when we say that Jesus Christ has come, but that he will also come again. He was born at Bethlehem, died at Jerusalem, is right now in heaven, and he's waiting to come back and take his rightful power and reign - just as Micah predicted to a world needing to see true and great leadership. Jesus' first coming was revealed to the shepherds, but when he comes next time he'll be the great shepherd of all his people, for Micah (5:4,5) says:

'He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace'.

He's the 'chief leader' – the greatest ever leader - who'll succeed in bringing peace and justice to this tired old world because he himself died to deal with its corruption. Let him lead you in life.

CHAPTER 4 - LIVING IRRESPONSIBLY: CHEATING GOD & CHEATING ON OUR FAMILIES

We complain when people today refuse to take responsibility for their children or their environment. But long ago, at the close of the Old Testament one of God's basic charges against his people amounted to one of behaving irresponsibly.

This end-time message, when Israel was still awaiting the First Advent of Christ as the Messiah, seems powerfully relevant to our place in history as we now await the Second Advent of Christ - for being irresponsible is an age-long human problem. Some of the areas the Bible prophet Malachi deals with are very relevant to what we face today.

Malachi was carrying out the duties of a prophet - speaking God's message to the people. The name Malachi means 'My messenger' and that's exactly what the prophet was: he was God's messenger. In Malachi's case, this was taking place around about 450 BC – and with his message the Old Testament drew to a close.

In Malachi's time people were not living up to their responsibility to reverence God's Name. What do we mean by that? Well, reverencing God's Name begins with acknowledging that God the Creator exists, and continues by showing respect for his greatness, power, authority and love.

The people in Malachi's day had begun to take God for granted, they tended not to think of him any longer as being important, and it seems they thought little of his authority. God's message to them was:

"A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am the Father, where is My honor? And if I am a Master, where is My reverence? Says the LORD of hosts to you priests who despise My name…? And when you offer the blind as a sacrifice, is it not evil? And when you offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? Offer it then to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you favorably?" (Malachi 1:6,8)

These were still days when people brought animal sacrifices to God's altar at Jerusalem because Jesus had not yet come to die on the cross for our sins. And God called the man who offered an unworthy sacrifice a cheat or a swindler (1:14) - because it showed disrespect for God. In that way they despised his name.

Seven times in this section (1:6 – 2:9) God makes mention of his name. But nowadays reference to God is fast decreasing in much of our society. His name is a swear word. Society is no longer God-fearing. News reports drew attention to the fact that the new European constitution when first drafted no longer made any mention of God or his name. God is increasingly side-lined. Certainly it's true that, in western lands, laws of the country which once were in fairly close agreement with God's law, are now rapidly beginning to diverge.

Where's this trend leading us to? The more society refuses to recognize God's ultimate authority, the more all forms of appropriate authority become devalued. There's less respect for the great institutions, government, law and order, teachers, and even parents – especially parents. History's repeating itself.

For that's another area Malachi focused his message on – the family unit. And it's no coincidence, because the traditional family unit was designed by God to be the building block of a healthy, functional society. Because, generally speaking, there's less and less said openly in society about the fact that we're

accountable to God our Maker, it follows that there's less commitment to making the traditional family unit work.

This – as in Malachi's day – is another area we're becoming increasingly irresponsible in - that of upholding the family unit – the very thing that lies at the heart of civilized society. The society that cheats God of his proper place, inevitably tends to cheat on itself in terms of marriage partners and family members. The high incidence of family break-up and divorce is sadly no longer news.

I was saddened to read recently a report which claimed the rate of divorce is now as high among church-going families as in society generally. Marriage itself is increasingly treated as obsolete, old-fashioned, out-moded, at least any marriage the Bible would recognize - being the union of one man and one woman. The whole thing is under attack today – and it's the very fabric of our society. But what does God think of it all? Just listen to Malachi, God's end-time messenger as he continues. Plain, direct, and straight to the point as usual, he says:

"Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously with one another by profaning the covenant of the fathers? Judah has dealt treacherously…for Judah has profaned the LORD'S holy institution which He loves: he has married the daughter of a foreign god… And this is the second thing you do: you cover the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping and crying…

Yet you say, "For what reason?" Because the LORD has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, with whom you have dealt treacherously; yet she is your companion and your wife by covenant.

But did He not make them one, having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He

seeks godly offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth. For the LORD God of Israel says that He hates divorce, for it covers one's garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. Therefore take heed… that you do not deal treacherously." (Malachi 2:10-16 NKJV)

Treachery, yes treachery is the word. Treachery against their marriage partners and treachery against God – all stemming from an irresponsible lack of respect for God and for the family unit.

God expresses his hatred of divorce in particular with all the hurt that often comes with it. But the prophet is denouncing the people for two wrongs. Not only were they divorcing their wives but they were remarrying outside of the people of God. They were remarrying women from the nations who were committed to idolatry. Marrying people like that broke the agreement God made with his people right at the beginning which Malachi refers to as 'the covenant of the fathers'. In doing this Malachi charges them with profaning God's holy institution of marriage. Today people find other ways of profaning God's holy institution of marriage. How bitter and sad are the consequences of disregarding God's instructions which are for our own good!

The Lord Jesus repeated God's ideal in marriage by referring back to Genesis chapter 2 where God set the pattern for all time. There God officiated at the first ever marriage and effectively defined marriage as being something to be publicly acknowledged, permanently sealed and physically consummated.

This is the only setting God has ordained for the nurture of families – within the stability of one man and one woman totally committed to each other for life. Of course, sometimes this can't be sustained through no fault of either partner – say one partner dies – and God surely then gives added grace to help in such circumstances.

And after any occasion when we've failed, we can turn to ask God for forgiveness. Perhaps, as we hear this word from the LORD, our hearts begin to be burdened by an awareness of areas of failure in our own marriage, for no marriage is perfect.

God's desire could not be clearer: family life should be sacred after the original pattern he gave – and where the people of God marry the people of God. It's God's design that such married life together should be the nursery for godly families for the generations to come. As Malachi told the people *'He seeks godly offspring'*. God's plans for family life are more fully spelt out earlier in the Bible in Deuteronomy chapter 6:5-7:

"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house." (NKJV)

That describes parents whose lives are permeated with love for God; parents with hearts captivated by God's truth; actively passing on these same values to their children. God still has those same plans for family life. But even with our best efforts it doesn't always turn out as well as we might hope for. But in Malachi's time, the people were giving it much less than their best shot. And instead the pain of broken families covered God's altar with tears.

Maybe Malachi's message will come to our hearts as a wake-up call, a reality check. Perhaps, we'll call on God's help to resolve to set an example of being more responsible in acknowledging God in all our ways (Prov. 3:5) and valuing our families more. Let's begin afresh looking to the God who delights to wipe away our tears.

CHAPTER 5 - WHY DOES GOD ALLOW DISASTERS?

In the days of the prophet Joel something quite extraordinary took place. The modern media would have called it a ‘natural disaster’. And insurance companies nowadays would have written it off in their ‘act of God’ category – and in fact as it turns out they’d be nearer the mark. Here’s what happened:

“The word of the LORD that came to Joel… Hear this, you elders; listen, all who live in the land. Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your forefathers?

Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation. What the locust swarm has left the great locusts have eaten; what the great locusts have left the young locusts have eaten; what the young locusts have left other locusts have eaten…

A nation has invaded my land, powerful and without number It has laid waste my vines and ruined my fig-trees. It has stripped off their bark and thrown it away, leaving their branches white…The fields are ruined, the ground is dried up; the grain is destroyed, the new wine is dried up, the oil fails.

Despair, you farmers, wail, you vine growers; grieve for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field is destroyed. The vine is dried up and the fig-tree is withered; the pomegranate, the palm and the apple tree - all the trees of the field - are dried up. Surely the joy of mankind is withered away…Alas for that day! For the day of the LORD is near.” (Joel 1:1-15).

So the calamity we’re talking about was a plague of locusts. Locusts were

simply devastating the crops and everything green. But there's a hint at the end of what we read – confirmed later by Joel – that this locust invasion was something God took full responsibility for. Joel comes back to that important point as we listen to him describing the disaster further:

"Before them fire devours, behind them a flame blazes. Before them the land is like the garden of Eden, behind them, a desert waste - nothing escapes them. They have the appearance of horses; they gallop along like cavalry. With a noise like that of chariots they leap over the mountaintops, like a crackling fire consuming stubble, like a mighty army drawn up for battle. At the sight of them, nations are in anguish; every face turns pale. They charge like warriors; they scale walls like soldiers. They all march in line, not swerving from their course.

They do not jostle each other; each marches straight ahead. They plunge through defences without breaking ranks. They rush upon the city; they run along the wall. They climb into the houses; like thieves they enter through the windows.
Before them the earth shakes, the sky trembles, the sun and moon are darkened, and the stars no longer shine.

The LORD thunders at the head of his army; his forces are beyond number, and mighty are those who obey his command. The day of the LORD is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it?" (Joel 2:3-11)

This army that's very graphically described is still the army of locusts. But did you notice it was described as the Lord's army? The locust invasion was something God took full responsibility for.

But, of course, this isn't always the case when things go wrong, especially in a major way. Jesus Christ himself made this clear when discussing a tower at

Jerusalem which had collapsed killing eighteen people (Luke 13:4). Jesus told his listeners then that it would be wrong for them to jump to the conclusion that this tragic event had been a summary judgement by God on people who'd been living lives that were more wicked than anyone else's. Plainly, God was not involved in that calamity in the same way as he'd been in the locust plague of Joel's day.

Calamities and disasters occur with varying degrees of human blame attached. Of course, it has to be accepted that God allows them to happen. From the very beginning we humans have expressed a tendency to want to do things our own way, independently of God.
The Bible tells us that God gave us that choice – as part of our human dignity. This 'freewill', as people sometimes call it, can at times prove very costly. But it's illogical to demand the right to freewill and at the same time complain about God not intervening just when it suits us.

When calamities happen which are just part and parcel of our living in a now ungodly and corrupt world – when things happen as part of the common lot of humanity – when bad things happen to those we consider as good people – it will always be safe for us to treat them like a kind of 'wake-up call' or 'reality check'.

It can still be helpful to apply in a general way the sort of lessons that the prophet Joel drew out from the natural plague which was revealed by the prophet as being something quite intentional on God's part. What were some of the main things the people then were intended to learn from this calamity?

First of all, the calamity would bring home to them lessons concerning **God's provision.** Joel's language implies that lesson when he says:

“How the cattle moan! The herds mill about because they have no pasture; even the flocks of sheep are suffering. To you, O LORD, I call, for fire has devoured the open pastures and flames have burned up all the trees of the field. Even the wild animals pant for you; the streams of water have dried up and fire has devoured the open pastures.” (Joel 1:18-20)

Crops might well have been taken for granted but now they’re suddenly denied them. What a pity if we too have to wait until our enjoyment of supplies is cut off before we express our gratitude to God. Calamities also teach us something about **God’s power** as well as his provision. Joel puts it this way:

“The LORD thunders at the head of his army; his forces are beyond number, and mighty are those who obey his command. The day of the LORD is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it?” (Joel 2:11)

Our discomfort or pain has been famously described as ‘God’s megaphone’. God whispers to us in our pleasures when days are carefree, but God shouts to gain our attention through things that go wrong. We could certainly think of it as a wake-up call. God was very plainly calling to his people in the time of Joel:

"Even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.” (Joel 2:12-13)

God is best known for compassion, not calamity. Beyond wanting to remind us of his provision for us, and power over us, he wants to assure us of **his promise** to us: a promise of salvation. This is how he expressed it through Joel:

“Then you will know that … I am the LORD your God, and that there is no

other…? And afterwards, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days…And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved." (Joel 2:27-32)

There was a partial fulfilment of these words in the days following the death of Jesus on the cross. The relevant events are recorded in the book of Acts of the Apostles, chapter 2. God is reminding us that through the death of his son he wishes to save us from the greatest calamity of all: which is dying without knowing our sins forgiven and so having to face the judgement to come.

God's provision, power and promised salvation are seen in the cross of Christ which was no calamity but the greatest demonstration of God's compassion for this fallen world of men and women.

CHAPTER 6 - GETTING OUR PRIORITIES WRONG

You've probably heard of the man who found himself in deep financial trouble. He'd lost his job, and all his savings were used up. 'We've moved out of our house into a tent', he told his friend. 'My son's had to leave college, and my wife's been forced to stop the private medical treatments she needs, even my young daughter is now walking to school to save the bus fare.' Then he added: 'if the situation gets any worse, I'll even be forced to sell my new luxury car!'

Priorities – we can all be guilty of being misguided at times, and end up putting second things first. In the time of Haggai the prophet, God's Old Testament people had straggled back from years of captivity in Babylon. By this time maybe they've been back in their homeland for something like sixteen years.

At this point in time they were putting all their energies into rebuilding their homes and restoring their farms, orchards and vineyards. Yet despite their backbreaking efforts, their larders were empty.

"Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your panelled houses, while this house [God's house] remains a ruin?" Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways.

You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it." This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house [of God, the Jerusalem

temple], so that I may take pleasure in it and be honoured," says the LORD.

"You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the LORD Almighty. "Because of my house which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house."' (Haggai 1:3-9)

So the first main point of the prophet Haggai's message was: **put God's work first before you can expect to be blessed.** To be fair to them they'd tried to do that when they first came back home from Babylon, but there'd been opposition and they'd abandoned the project of rebuilding God's temple, leaving it at the stage of having only just rebuilt the altar and laid the foundation for the temple building. For they'd jumped to the conclusion: 'The time has not yet come for the LORD's house to be built.' But God's message was right to the point:

"Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your panelled houses, while this house [God'?s house] remains a ruin?"

Notice that God describes the homes they were building for themselves as 'panelled houses' to make it obvious that what they were building for themselves was more than just modest accommodation. The comfort and elegance of their own homes was in stark contrast to the ruins of God's house! Far from denying us what we need, the Lord says to us as his disciples:

"Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." (Matthew 6:33 NKJV)

So Haggai's message is a helpful check on our own priorities in reviewing how we're investing our time and money. As well as urging the people to put God's work first, the prophet Haggai had a second message. It was this: **'there's more to God's work than meets the eye'.** This was another necessary encouragement

to the people then. After being told to put God's work first, they'd responded straight away and started to get on with the Temple rebuilding once again. But God understood how they'd be feeling and so, about a month after the restart, he send another message:

'Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing? But now be strong … Be strong, all you people of the land,' declares the LORD, 'and work. For I am with you,' declares the LORD Almighty. … And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.' This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the LORD Almighty. 'The silver is mine and the gold is mine,' declares the LORD Almighty. 'The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house."' (Hag 2:3-9)

Some of the older ones among them could remember the magnificence of the temple that'd previously stood there - the temple Solomon had built. It was only natural that the work they were doing, the temple they were building, would seem poor by comparison. Today, in places where spiritual interest among the general population is less than it once was, we may look back on times when our churches were larger and when Sunday Schools were full of children eager to learn – and we may almost be ready to apologize for our smaller efforts and smaller visible results today.

If that's the case, we can take the Lord's encouragement here to heart again if we're in something we know from our Bible that he's honouring with his presence. Even when it seems like nothing to us; it doesn't seem like nothing to him – and that's what counts.

And what an encouraging promise to the people in Haggai's day! The temple they were building was not as grand as its predecessor, but God said its glory would be even greater than the glory of Solomon's temple! We usually take that as being fulfilled when it was to this temple – modified a bit by Herod, yes – but basically it was to this temple, the temple they were then building, that the Lord Jesus came as a baby, and again as a boy, and later still as a man to teach God's Word.

Even Solomon in all his glory couldn't compete with that wonder! God reminded them that the silver and gold belongs to him, it was in his power to adorn that temple too if he wanted to, but that house they were building would be graced with the presence of one whom to know is greater riches by far than mountains of silver and gold – and he's the Lord Jesus Christ!

These people were few in number, but they were re-energised to do something for God. God was with them and they were following his plan. But they still looked anxiously at the mightier nations around them: the greater military and political powers in the lands surrounding them. But God promised there would be a big shake-up. Beyond immediate events in the fifth and sixth centuries BC, and paving the way for Christ's first coming, these words still carry future significance.

For other Bible passages all agree that God has told us there's a time lying ahead when Jesus Christ will come to this earth a second time, not as a baby, but as a warrior, as a mighty king to reign for a thousand years. And, yes, at that time there'll be a splendid temple again in Jerusalem, and all the wealth of the nations will be brought into it, there'll be no shortage of silver and gold there in that day.

Many regard the prophet Haggai's words: 'the desired of all nations' to be a reference to the Lord Jesus – he's the only one who can for ever satisfy the

deepest longings of the hearts and souls of people all over this world – though so many are tragically oblivious to it – in a true sense Jesus Christ is every heart's desire. But perhaps there's also another meaning to the prophets words: 'the desired of all nations'.

For we've already thought of how the Bible tells us that Jesus is yet to be revealed in power - one day he'll sit both as king and priest upon his throne, and he'll build the most magnificent temple at Jerusalem (Zech. 5:12,13) - and then it will also be true that the 'desirable things of the nations' – the wealth they desire – will be brought as tribute to him there.

These things lie ahead. How far ahead we don't know, not very far ahead now perhaps. And God lifts our sights toward them – as he did theirs. But three months after they'd started to rebuild God said:

"Now give careful thought to this from this day on-- consider how things were before one stone was laid on another in the LORD's temple. When anyone came to a heap of twenty measures, there were only ten. When anyone went to a wine vat to draw fifty measures, there were only twenty…Is there yet any seed left in the barn? Until now, the vine and the fig-tree, the pomegranate and the olive tree have not borne fruit. From this day on I will bless you."(Haggai 2:15-19 NIV)

Interesting isn't it? There was a three month delay in receiving the blessing even after they'd obeyed God in the time of Haggai. So here's our third and last point. As well as putting God's work first in our lives; as well as understanding there's more to it than meets the eye; there's also this: **we can't always expect immediate returns in the work of the Lord.** God tests our faith at times, but his promised blessings are well worth waiting for!

CHAPTER 7 - 'YOU GOTTA SERVE SOMEBODY…'

Some people say they're not the religious type. But isn't there a sense in which everyone's religious? Bob Dylan sang: 'You gotta serve somebody'. Hasn't he got a point?

In each of our lives there's something – or behind it, someone – that's a major influence on us. Just listen to people talk and take notice what their main topic of conversation is. Check out the titles on their bookshelves, and then watch what they spend their time and money on. Whatever it is could be a candidate for being the thing they idolize: the thing they worship. It might be success, it could be money, sex, power or possessions.

A philosopher once said: 'There's a God-shaped hole inside every one of us' but isn't it the case that we often try to fill that God-shaped hole with other things – things that don't fit properly…that don't fully satisfy?

Back in the 8th century BC, the people of the northern part of Israel had turned their backs on God. When this happened, what God did was simply amazing! If anyone ever tells you that the God of the Old Testament seems different from the God of the New Testament, tell them to read the little book of Hosea the prophet. It's full of the tenderness of God.

It graphically demonstrates the extraordinary lengths God went to in order to try to win back the affections of his unfaithful people. Hosea's task was not only to speak God's message of forgiveness, but also to live it out! This is what God asked him to do:

"Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD." So he married Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son… Gomer conceived again and gave birth to a daughter.

Then the LORD said to Hosea, "Call her Lo-ruhamah [meaning 'Not my loved one'], for I will no longer show love to the house of Israel, that I should at all forgive them.… After she had weaned Lo-ruhamah, Gomer had another son. Then the LORD said, "Call him Lo-ammi [meaning 'Not my people'], for you are not my people, and I am not your God. (Hosea 1:2-9)

For the purpose of graphically demonstrating before the eyes of the sinful people the judgement to which Israel had exposed herself as a result of her apostasy from the Lord God, Hosea was instructed to marry a prostitute – one who time and again had defiled herself most likely in rituals that were connected to the nation's idolatry in serving false gods.

The marriage Hosea was commanded to contract with Gomer represented the covenant relationship between Israel – viewed as a wife – and God – viewed as her husband. Like an erring wife who turns to other men; Israel had turned away to false gods and debased herself with idolatry. The love of the true God is patient and longsuffering - even amazingly so! Despite Israel behaving like an unfaithful wife towards God, God's designs were aimed at regaining her affections:

"Therefore I will block her path with thorn bushes; I will wall her in so that she cannot find her way. She will chase after her lovers but not catch them; she will look for them but not find them. Then she will say, 'I will go back to my husband as at first, for then I was better off than now.""(Hosea 2:4-8)

God’s treatment of the people - whom he still loved despite their waywardness - was aimed at bringing them to the point of return, to the point of saying: *‘I will go back … for then I was better off than now.’* It reminds us of the same point made in Jesus’ story of the prodigal son when having squandered his inheritance he returns to his senses while reduced to feeding pigs, and realizes that even his father’s servants back home are better off than he is at that point!

The language of God speaking through Hosea reminds us that judgement will be necessary, but amazingly there’s still the desire on God’s part to forgive a humble and repentant people who return to him. No matter what we’ve done, there’s forgiveness with God. He says:

“I will punish her for the days she burned incense to the Baals; she decked herself with rings and jewellery, and went after her lovers, but me she forgot," declares the LORD. "Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her… I will show my love to the one I called 'Not my loved one'. I will say to those called 'Not my people', 'You are my people'; and they will say, 'You are my God.'" (Hosea 2:13,14,28)

So God’s forgiving love would triumph in the end. After dealing with them to bring them back from the error of their ways, he’d recognize them again as his people - even those whom he’d once disowned – a fact signalled through the names Hosea had been told to give to his children.

Remember ‘Not my loved one’ and ‘Not my people’ were two of the names of Hosea’s children. That brings us back to Hosea’s own marriage struggles. This was a so-called ‘love triangle’ with a difference. God called upon Hosea to renew his love for his unfaithful wife who’d returned to her old ways, and to restore their marriage. It appears she’d degraded herself this time to the extent of becoming enslaved by her paramour.

At least we're told Hosea 'bought' her – and that the price given basically amounted to the price paid for a slave (Exodus 21:32), allowing for the fact that part of it was in kind, not cash (Ezekiel 45:11; 2 Kings 7:1). Here's what we read in Hosea chapter 3:

"The LORD said to me, "Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods..." So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and about a homer and a lethek of barley. (Hosea 3:1,2)

(According to Ezekiel 45:11, the homer contained ten ephahs, and a lethech was a half homer. It is a very natural supposition, especially if we refer to 2 Kings 7:1 and 2 Kings16:18, that at that time an ephah of barley was worth a shekel, so whole price according to Exodus 21:32, was the purchase price of a slave.)

To many people today that degree of love is embarrassing, maybe even pathetic. Sadly, when a marriage breaks down – not even necessarily to the extent this one did – the attitude often seems to be 'they're not worth it'; 'they don't deserve a second chance!' If anyone deserved to be destitute surely it was Gomer! But that's the whole point of the gracious mercy of God – we don't deserve it and we're not worth it! The tenderness of God is such that he still pursues us.

The romance of redemption is told out in three related words in the New Testament of our Bibles. We find an example of the first in First Corinthians chapter 6 verse 20: *'You have been bought with a price'*. The full meaning is to be bought in the marketplace.

The Lord Jesus, the Son of God, came to find and buy us in the marketplace of sin into which we'd sold ourselves. God's passion and devotion was more than a

match for our pathos and degradation. *‘Christ redeemed us’* (Gal.3:13), the apostle Paul explains – the word this time properly meaning ‘to buy someone out of the slave market for one’s self’.

If you’re a believer, you can say: ‘the Lord Jesus bought me for himself!’ We’re his possession and we’ll never be put up for sale in any slave market again. Writing to Titus, Paul says the Lord *‘gave Himself for us to redeem us’* (2:14). The Lord gave his own blood as the ransom price to set us free. The word means: ‘to liberate by the payment of a ransom’.

The blood of Christ paid for the sins of the human slaves of sin in the sense that it satisfied the just demands of God’s holy law which decreed that ‘the wages of sin is death’ (Rom.6:23). His redemption of us means the forgiveness of our sins (Eph.1:7).

“[Hosea next] told [Gomer], "You are to live with me for many days; you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man, and I will live with you." For the Israelites will live for many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred stones, without ephod or idol. Afterwards the Israelites will return and seek the LORD their God and David their king. They will come trembling to the LORD and to his blessings in the last days. (Hosea 2:13-3:5)

So Hosea informs Gomer that her adulterous lifestyle is over. She’s to remain at home with him, isolated from all potential lovers, both devoting themselves entirely and exclusively to each other.

Paul, too, appeals to believers that the fact that we’ve been bought with a price ought to mean we glorify God with our bodies (1 Cor. 6:20) – we’re to be separated to God away from the sinful ways of our past. God’s bought us through the death of his Son on the cross, bought us in order to possess us, that

we should be a people for his possession.

Peter addressed New Testament believers in churches of God and said to them: *‘you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy* '(1 Pet. 2:10). This reflection of Hosea’s words should encourage us to apply the lessons of Hosea to ourselves, lessons which major on our being faithful to the God who loves us to an amazing degree!

CHAPTER 8 - VISIONS OF HOPE

The central neurosis of our time is related to despair. Suicide rates are climbing. Why do so many turn to drugs or extreme sports? Perhaps the reason is escapism.
Zechariah's prophecy is also set in a time of despair. Jewish settlers had once again resettled in their ancient land, but they were experiencing opposition. During the time when they'd been deported away from their homeland in the sixth century BC, other peoples had been imported into their land to take their place.

These immigrants were now the focus of opposition to the Jews who were trying to resettle there, and they were attempting to frustrate Jewish plans to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple. This is what'd produced a mood of despondency among the Jews at Jerusalem.

That then is the background to 8 visions of hope which the prophet Zechariah receives and which he describes in the Bible book that bears his name. These visions dealt with the contemporary situation at Jerusalem, but also addressed the long-term future of Jerusalem and Israel, making special mention of Christ.

The message of the Bible, taken as a whole, is that God's plan is for Israel to become a blessing to people of all nations (see Zech. 2:11) - and the only sure hope for all the peoples of this world is to be found in Jesus Christ. He's the only lasting antidote to the despair that continues to gnaw away at the very heart of all human society. Let's read from the prophet Zechariah:

"The word of the LORD came to me: "Take [silver and gold] from the exiles … who have arrived from Babylon.…Take the silver and gold and make a crown,

and set it on the head of the high priest, Joshua son of Jehozadak.

Tell him this is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Here is the man whose name is the Branch, and he will branch out from his place and build the temple of the LORD. It is he who will build the temple of the LORD, and he will be clothed with majesty and will sit and rule on his throne. And he will be a priest on his throne. And there will be harmony between the two.
The crown will be given … as a memorial in the temple of the LORD. Those who are far away will come and help to build the temple of the LORD." (Zech 6:9-15)

When it says 'take the silver and gold and make a crown', the word is really 'crowns', in the plural. So it might make sense to think of it as a double crown. The dramatic act of setting this crown on the head of the high priest was intended to be understood as a symbolic act of prophecy. It was an act that pointed forward to the coming of Christ.

In fact it's still pointing ahead to the second coming of Jesus Christ, for he's still to bear the offices of both priest and king on this earth – that's what's being predicted here. It's the Jewish Messiah, or Christ, now revealed as Jesus Christ, who's described as 'the man whose name is the Branch', the one who'll build the temple.

Now regarding the double crown of silver and gold, I like to think of the Lord Jesus here as being 'the man of the double crown'. In another place the Bible says: *'But we see Jesus … crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone'* (Heb 2:5-9 NKJV).

Did you notice the double crown there too? Jesus crowned with the glory and honour of his perfect manhood. It's describing Jesus as a man here on earth during his First Advent. Remember how he made water into wine (John 2). He

also calmed the wind and waves (Lk. 8:24). He walked on the sea, putting it under his feet (John 6:19). He did things no other man could do. He compelled a fish to bring him a coin (Mat.17:23). He multiplied fish and bread to feed a crowd (Jn.6). He withered a barren fig tree with a word (Mark 11:13). He healed leprosy, paralysis, blindness and deafness. He commanded demons and they obeyed him. He raised the dead. When he was born a star appeared, when he died the sun disappeared.

In all these ways, and more, he was crowned with glory and honour during his life here, and he was crowned with glory and honour so that he might taste death for everyone, and by that death recover the dominion which our first parents had lost by their sin in the garden of Eden. Someone has said: “Only by the death of One so crowned with the glory and honour of such a manhood could the dominion be recovered to man” (Jim Flanigan).

At the cross, where Jesus was crucified outside the city of Jerusalem 2,000 years ago, the Bible tells us Jesus was crucified wearing a crown of thorns. Thorns are the symbol of the curse sin brought on this world. After Adam sinned by disobeying God’s command in the garden, Adam was told that the ground would bear thorns and thistles, making his work of cultivating it difficult. It was part of the judgement on him for sinning.

On the cross Jesus took all the curse that was ours due to sin and bore it for us. He bore the thorns and the curse. It’s almost as though in some sense Jesus was again bearing a double crown – the actual crown of thorns he was wearing, as well as the curse we can view them as representing.

But in the future, Jesus who wore in life the double crown of glory and honour - the same Jesus will one day fulfil the prophecy pictured in Zechariah’s double crown of silver and gold: meaning he will reign on this earth, in fact, in double

honour, for he'll be a priest upon his throne! He's the only hope for peace on this earth, and it's a sure hope!

But you say, the talk here in Zechariah is so much focused on Jerusalem and Israel. What about London and Paris or Moscow or Manila or Melbourne? What about Gentile people: people outside of the Jewish nation? Certainly the same need of God exists for Jew and Gentile alike – but also the same possibilities.

Let me remind you, the 'double crown' of silver and gold Zechariah spoke about, was made from silver and gold which had been brought from far away in Babylon - brought to Jerusalem by returning Jewish exiles. Maybe there's a hint in that not only of Jews returning to God but also of Gentiles coming to God, as we think of this double crown of silver and gold being brought from far away.

The Bible tends to describe the Jews as near and the Gentile nations as *'afar off'?* (Ephesians 2:13,17). Zechariah's message was: *'those who are far away will come and help to build the temple of the LORD'.* So in the future there'll be a temple built in the land of Israel which not only scattered ones of Israel will build, but there'll be Gentile involvement too. Distant nations will help to build the temple of the Lord with their possessions and treasures (Haggai 2:7) – all under the control of the Lord Jesus Christ who'll fill His temple with the treasures of all nations.

We're back to this basic biblical message that it's always been God's plan for Israel to become a blessing to people of all nations – and to bring it about through Jesus Christ, his Son.

So Zechariah's message was not just offering hope for the completion of the Second Temple in the sixth century, but he was offering extensive and sure hope for a time that's still ahead when yet another temple will be built – and this he

assures us is a message from God. What comes through in these visions of hope given through the prophet Zechariah is the fact that they not only had a relevance to Jews of the 6th century BC but still have a relevance to everyone in the 21st century AD! For the only sure hope for all the peoples of this world is to be found in Jesus Christ.

So that challenges Gentiles as well as Jews with the question: How have you treated Jesus? In a way you helped to crucify him, and so did I. We pierced him with our sin, our rejection, our insults. Now we need to turn to him for forgiveness, and we can. We need to turn away from the despair that's so prevalent in our society to embrace by faith the great visions of hope Zechariah brought to the world of the 6th century BC.

We can be part of what still remains of those visions for the future! We, too, can be blessed for ever as part of God's plan to bring blessing to all nations in the world through Israel's Messiah – Jesus Christ, the one sure hope for all who turn to him in personal faith!

CHAPTER 9 - GOD IS TO BE FEARED – HE'S STILL ANGRY WITH HUMAN WICKEDNESS

"The noise of the whip, the noise of the rattling of the wheel, Galloping horses And bounding chariots! Horsemen charging, swords flashing, spears gleaming, many slain, a mass of corpses, and countless dead bodies-- They stumble over the dead bodies!" (Nahum 3:2,3)

This is pretty graphic stuff. It has the feel of modern on-the-spot reporting as we go live by satellite to some atrocity unfolding in a war zone somewhere in the world. The chariots and swords are a bit of giveaway, I guess. They tell us we're way back in time 600 years before Christ. What's being described is the doom the prophet Nahum saw lying ahead for the world's ruthless superpower of that time.

The prophecy of Nahum is really focused on a single issue, on just one idea: the destruction of Nineveh, the capital of the mighty Assyrian Empire. She sent her troops marching every spring. From the Persian mountains to the delta of the Nile, they marched. From the hills of Armenia to the coasts of the Mediterranean, they marched.

And wherever they marched, they destroyed. No treasure was safe, no crop was left standing, no family was secure when the Assyrians passed through. They built an empire on greed and blood. Their power was great, and they ruled much of the world.

Nahum's message has been described as 'the cry of an outraged conscience'. That's because he sees only the evil-doing of Nineveh, and her doom, along with

the deliverance that'll bring to his own people. Apparently there was once a Roman senator (Cato) who concluded his every speech with the words 'Carthago delenda est' – Carthage must be destroyed! Nahum had a similar fixation, except it was the destruction of Nineveh as a result of the death-blow God was going to deal it.

Nahum singles out two of Nineveh's sins in particular: the first is ruthless military power (2:11-12). Assyrian conquerors left a trail of impaled victims or pyramids formed out of human heads, and other barbarous acts too horrible to mention. The other mentioned sin is that of unscrupulous commerce (3:4,16).

Morality and honesty were sacrificed on the altar of greed. There was no fear of God before their eyes. Nahum launches straight into his prophecy with a passionate (alphabetical) poem about human wickedness provoking divine wrath. The wrath of God is terrible. He who divides the storm-darkened sky with spears of lightning and cracks the rocks is an awful adversary. Just listen to the full force of Nahum's message:

"A jealous and avenging God is the LORD; The LORD is avenging and wrathful. The LORD takes vengeance on His adversaries, And He reserves wrath for His enemies.
The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, And the LORD will by no means leave the guilty unpunished. In whirlwind and storm is His way, And clouds are the dust beneath His feet.

He rebukes the sea and makes it dry; He dries up all the rivers…Mountains quake because of Him and the hills dissolve; Indeed the earth is upheaved by His presence, The world and all the inhabitants in it. Who can stand before His indignation? Who can endure the burning of His anger? His wrath is poured out like fire and the rocks are broken up by Him. (Nahum 1:3-6)

The fear of an avenging God who holds us all accountable: we've lost sight of this in our society too. Nahum's reminder is necessary and timely, for even Christians have been known to squirm with embarrassment at the thought of an angry God. Such a thought has been put down to some sort of primitive pre-Christian view of God.

But not so! God hasn't changed. The God of our Old Testament is the same God we meet in our New Testament, so we need to learn what it means. God's anger is not at all like our own, sometimes unrighteous, and all too often uncontrollable human anger. God does not lose his temper, nor fly into a rage, nor is he spiteful or vindictive. God's anger is his holy hostility to evil; his refusal to come to terms with it – his zero tolerance of it. His anger or wrath is his totally justified judgement on sin, on all human wrong-doing.
God is slow to anger, but our sins do provoke him and there's no chance of cheap forgiveness. God had been 'slow to anger' with Nineveh. Had he not sent Jonah to them about a hundred years earlier (c.720 BC)? At that time there had been a great revival, and God had spared the city. But now, a mere two or three generations later, it's as if that revival had never happened. Unusually, there's not any mention of the sins of Nahum's own people – which might suggest he was writing at the time (say c. 620 BC) when the great reformation under king Josiah was still freshly influencing the southern part of Israel.

Nahum's message would seem to be dated about then, for he looked back on the Assyrian capture of Thebes around 663BC (3:8) as well as prophesying the events of 612 BC when Nineveh did in fact fall to the Babylonians.

As law and order breaks down in our society, even politicians have been known to advocate old-fashioned preaching that puts the fear of God in folks. It's only one dimension of God's character, but we ignore it at our peril, and it's totally

right to be reminded of Nahum's message which has been called 'the prophecy of one idea' – the fearful idea that God is angry against sin. If Nahum's message is limited – and his message isn't the whole story of what we need to know about God – but the idea of divine retribution is still an essential part - and it's one Nahum presents very effectively.

We said that idea's also found in the New Testament of our Bibles - and so let's check that out from the Bible letter to the Romans, chapter 1, where Paul says:

"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse." (Romans 1:16-20 NASB)

We're exposed to God's wrath - in other words to his anger. He's angry when we suppress the truth about God - in the case of those who deny the very existence of God, they're suppressing the evidence that this marvellous universe bears all the hallmarks of having been designed by a supernatural designer. So we learn here about a Creator, someone who's our Maker - but who's also our Judge, and as such he's angry, and human society is experiencing some forms of his judgements already, as Paul goes on to tell us:

"For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving

in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful." (Romans 1:26-31 NASB)

Does that not read like a modern list of the ills in our society? The Bible is up to date. Even enlightened and reformed societies slide back into decadence and paganism. God in his sovereignty took issue with Nineveh because of her idolatry and inhumanity. And he'll take issue with us too.

Whenever any nation – or anyone of us - displaces God from his true place; we cheapen human life too – for in turning things into gods, we end up treating people as things. So when three fierce nations – the Babylonians, the Medes, and the Scythians – came from the south, east, and north in 612 BC and brought an end to Nineveh's reign, it was done under the judging hand of an almighty, sovereign God.

The judgement of others may seem delayed and overdue to us, but Nahum's reminder to all of us is that the judgement of God for each of us is well-deserved. But, amazingly, it's escapable! God offers each of us a way of salvation - just one way – and it's through faith in Jesus Christ his Son. For the apostle Paul said in the same place we read from earlier in Romans 1:16-17:

"… the gospel … is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes…in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "But the righteous man shall live by faith."

Or as Nahum himself put it: *The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble, And He knows those who take refuge in Him.* (Nahum 1:7 NASB) . Before the storm of judgement breaks, make sure you've found the only refuge which is in Jesus Christ, God's Son.

CHAPTER 10 - OUR STRENGTH CAN ALSO BE OUR WEAKNESS

Is national pride a good thing? Up to a point maybe, but too much of it can most definitely be a bad thing. It's a shame we don't hear about national humility. Have you ever heard it said of some people that their strengths are also their weaknesses? I think there's a bit of truth in that for many of us. Take determination, for example; it can quite easily turn into stubbornness, and so on.

In this chapter we learn about a proud nation whose celebrated fortress became its prison, just as its wisdom became its foolishness. Obadiah is one of the shortest books in the Bible. Written in the 6th or 5th centuries before Christ, its entire message is directed toward a foreign country – Edom. Edom was a southern neighbour to Israel. In a sense Edom was more than a neighbour, its people were related to Israel. The 12 tribes of Israel were descended from the 12 sons of Jacob. The people of Edom were descended from Esau, Jacob's twin brother. They had that much in common, but war was a way of life between them. Edom had a chronic problem – an overblown national pride.

"The vision of Obadiah. This is what the Sovereign LORD says about Edom - We have heard a message from the LORD: An envoy was sent to the nations to say, "Rise, and let us go against her for battle" - "See, I will make you small among the nations; you will be utterly despised.

The pride of your heart has deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rocks and make your home on the heights, you who say to yourself, 'Who can bring me down to the ground?' Though you soar like the eagle and make your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down," declares the LORD.… Esau will be ransacked, his hidden treasures pillaged!" (Obadiah 1:1-6)

Did you pick up the reasons given for Edom's national pride? They were secure in their geography and supremely confident in their wisdom. You might think they'd good reason to be confident. They lived in a rocky, mountainous land that offered them a large measure of protection. To this day, one of the world's fascinating places is Petra, a city of Edom that was hewn out of red rock, accessible only through a narrow passageway walled in by sheer cliffs that defy climbing.

A handful of men could hold off an army in that terrain. The Edomites took pride in their geography. And their wisdom was legendary. In a culture where men argued their points by telling parables and taught their children by using proverbs, the Edomites excelled. Riddles, word games, clever sayings and puzzles were their pride and joy. God spoke directly against this pride they took in their wisdom:

"All your allies will force you to the border; your friends will deceive and overpower you; those who eat your bread will set a trap for you, but you will not detect it.
"In that day," declares the LORD, "will I not destroy the wise men of Edom, men of understanding in the mountains of Esau?" (Obadiah 1:21-23)

In the New Testament of the Bible God says something similar through the apostle Paul:

"For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate. Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (1 Corinthians 1:19-31)

So maybe we too need to hear a message like the one directed to the Edomites. Isn't it possible that modern generations have become over-confident in their abilities – just like the Edomites of long ago? Not that our achievements haven't been impressive: splitting the atom, walking on the moon, the miniaturization of computers, the marvels of modern medicine – to name but a few!

But this secular knowledge cannot bring us to the knowledge of God as our Saviour. It can't even help us solve our social evils - not even the merest improvement of human character! Once again we'll have to let Paul continue so that he might share with us God's radical solution to the problem of the human condition:

"… since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe…we preach Christ crucified…Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1 Corinthians 1:21-23)

When Paul writes of 'the foolishness of the preaching' he's describing it in the way the world views it, of course. How can a man who died a criminal's death 2,000 years ago have anything to do with our spiritual needs in the 21st century? The answer is that God has to reveal his wisdom to our heart – that the one who died really was 'the Lord of glory', much more than a mere man.

In our foolish pride we resist that message – we argue that we've advanced so far, we can do so much – why can we not save ourselves? God has first to humble us and show us our sins – like how he spelt them out to Edom:

"Because of the violence against your brother Jacob, you will be covered with shame; you will be destroyed for ever. On the day you stood aloof while strangers carried off his wealth and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for

Jerusalem, you were like one of them.

You should not look down on your brother in the day of his misfortune, nor rejoice over the people of Judah in the day of their destruction, nor boast so much in the day of their trouble.

You should not march through the gates of my people in the day of their disaster, nor look down on them in their calamity in the day of their disaster, nor seize their wealth in the day of their disaster. You should not wait at the crossroads to cut down their fugitives, nor hand over their survivors in the day of their trouble." (Obadiah 1:10-14)

Edom was being judged by God for the pride and cruelty he demonstrated while Jerusalem was being destroyed in 587 BC. Not only had Edom refused to come to his brother's aid, he'd actually gloated in their misfortune: worse still the Edomites had cut off the fugitives to sell them as slaves and so profit from their brother's disaster. It's a dog-eat-dog world out there after all. We rationalize that even if we don't help ourselves, someone else will. But God's judgement falls on them and us:

"The day of the LORD is near for all nations. As you have done, it will be done to you; your deeds will return upon your own head." (v.15)

Edom failed to show brotherly kindness, and God ensured that he'd be betrayed by those who should have been his own friends too. Edom never saw it coming. His wisdom was robbed of understanding, God saw to that. His rocky fortress became his prison, and concerning the mountain of Israel, the scene of the crime, God said:

"Deliverers will go up on Mount Zion to govern the mountains of Esau. And the

kingdom will be the LORD's." (v.21)

God is over all. God, the Judge, is in control. He's sovereign over all individuals and nations, and he's the one to whom we're each accountable. Let's close this chapter with more of Paul's words which declare God's sovereignty, his wisdom, and his plan of salvation for each of us who believes in his Son, Jesus Christ:

"[God] chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things - and the things that are not - to nullify the things that are, so that no-one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God-- that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord." (1 Corinthians 1:28-31)

Let's not boast in our own strength or in our own intelligence, as Edom did. Let's learn from Obadiah and let's not indulge in pride – whether national or personal – but let's boast in the Lord! I do hope Christ is your wisdom and the strength of your life, for he's the very power and wisdom of God!

CHAPTER 11 - IF YOU THOUGHT GOD COULDN'T CARE LESS...

The modern generation has its own descriptions of people who choose to be inactive – one term being 'couch potato'. Perhaps an inactive body – if it's a matter of choice – is a sign of an inactive or lazy mind. Long ago the Bible prophet used different vocabulary for what seems to be much the same thing:

"At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps and punish those who are complacent, who are like wine left on its dregs, who think, 'The LORD will do nothing, either good or bad." (Zeph 1:12)

These people were idle in their complacency; they were set in their ways – and in particular they were totally unresponsive to the claims of God. This was the message of the Bible prophet Zephaniah which he delivered in the 7th century before Christ, at a time just before the reformation which took place under good King Josiah in the southern part of Israel. Zephaniah described them as men who sit drawn together (coagulating) like wine upon its dregs (lees).

It's a picture borrowed from experience with old wine, which has been left upon its dregs and not drawn off, and which, when poured into other vessels, retains its flavour, and doesn't alter its odour (Jer. 48:11). This is said to be like people who stubbornly persevere in moral and religious indifference. Good wine, when it remains for a long time upon its dregs, becomes stronger; but bad wine becomes harsher and thicker. These people were stagnating like bad wine. Not only couldn't they care less about God; they wrongly thought God couldn't care less about them. But that idea could not have been further from the truth!

God is certainly not inactive! What's more he's about to conduct a very diligent

search! He promises to search Jerusalem with lamps which would indicate a universal and thorough search. In that search he'd be looking out for those very people who are careless, satisfied with the goods of this life; who trust in their riches, and who profess to be completely irreligious. It's not that they deny that there's a God, it's just they think he's indifferent to their behaviour.
Perhaps like the followers of Aristotle they considered God to be so supremely happy in the contemplation of his own excellences, that he feels it beneath his dignity to concern himself with the affairs of mortals.

How wrong could they be! Everyone who thinks like that, in any age, is going to be in for a shock! Here the response was: God will search Jerusalem with lamps, to bring them out of their hiding-places in their houses, and punish them. This kind of operation would, in effect, be carried out on the ground by the enemies who were to conquer Jerusalem.

A Jewish historian (Josephus) described how, in a later attack, "princes and priests, and mighty men, were dragged even out of the sewers, and caves, and pits, and tombs, in which they had hidden themselves from fear of death." The same type of thing that happened when the Romans conquered Jerusalem would've happened when the Babylonians conquered it.

All the same, it's very graphic imagery – this picture of God searching Jerusalem with lamps. It suggests the most careful search of all the hiding-places of those who despise God. The language is bound to make us think of the story Jesus told when he said:

"… suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in

the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15:8-10)

That's interesting! When we bring both these Bible verses together, we get not only the idea of God being diligent to root out and punish those who're stubbornly resistant to his claims; but he uses the same diligence to seek and to save those who're being saved because of their faith in him, and in his Son, Jesus Christ.

I want us to focus on this double-edged theme: God's active concern to punish the indifferent who think he couldn't care less, as well as his extravagant enjoyment of those who find time for him. About the latter he promised:

"… I will leave within you the meek and humble, who trust in the name of the LORD. The remnant of Israel will do no wrong; they will speak no lies, nor will deceit be found in their mouths. They will eat and lie down and no-one will make them afraid."

Sing … Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem!
The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy.
The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm…

The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing."
(Zephaniah 3:12-17)

This is so different from the supposed idea of a God who couldn't care less! Just as God will be thorough in holding people responsible for their wilful indifference; he'll also take great pleasure – he'll actively delight - in those who seek him humbly and trust him for salvation. The wonderful message is 'he's mighty to save'! God has shown himself 'mighty to save' through Jesus Christ.

The same word is used of Jesus when he's described (Is.9:6) as 'the mighty God'. It's the idea of the all-conquering Hero. Have you thought of Jesus Christ in this way? His cross is gone, his tomb is empty, but the value of his sacrifice for our sins remains, he's now in heaven as a prince and a saviour to all who call upon him regardless of nationality.

We've all sinned the Bible says (Romans 3:23) and we can be sure that our sin will find us out for the Bible tells us this (Numbers 32:23). God may be searching your heart with his lamp as we speak. The Bible proverb says …

"The spirit of man is the lamp of the LORD, searching all the innermost parts of his being." (Proverbs 20:27 NASB)

Our human conscience is one lamp God uses to show us our sinfulness. But the prophet Zephaniah spoke of how those who humbled themselves and trusted in the Lord were saved. Jesus has conquered death. He's prevailed against sin. He's the Hero who can bring us to a sure knowledge of forgiveness. Forgiveness for our sins is found in his name when we turn to him.

Come to him, he longs to take great delight in you too. He will be silent because of his love, for he'll never charge you again with sins after you've believed with all your heart that Jesus paid for them on the cross. Once you've come to Christ in simple faith, you belong to him and the verse illustrates the Lord's calm, silent joy in the possession of the object of his love, too great for words to express.

Remember how the Bible tells us that God, after the six days of creation, rested with silent satisfaction in His work – isn't it the same picture here? – God resting in silent satisfaction with the results of the great work of the cross?

“The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing."

Surely it shows how delighted he is with those who have embraced the salvation he freely offers - his chosen, redeemed, and called ones. God rests in his love – and we can too – for nothing *‘will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord’?* (Romans 8:39). This brings us back to the sequel of the story Jesus told in Luke 15! Remember, he said:

"a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15:8-10)

According to Zephaniah, the conversion of the Jews - when the Jews return to God through Christ - will bring God great pleasure. But the Bible says:

"In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

May I ask? How is it with you? Are you still settled in your sin or have you humbled yourself to trust in the Mighty Saviour? Are you conscious of God searching you out or conscious of God singing over you with joy?

CHAPTER 12 - INHUMANITY AND INJUSTICE WILL NOT GO UNPUNISHED

We're shocked when we hear examples of man's inhumanity to man. News reports bring grim bulletins of hostages being beheaded; of women and children being used as human shields; of modern tyrants using chemical weapons against their own people, and the list could go on …

Amos was a shepherd whom God thrust into the role of a prophet to the north of Israel in the eighth century BC. In the messages he delivered to Israel's neighbours he makes clear God's attitude to the same kind of atrocities which were even happening back in those days. He spoke against:

"Damascus … Because she threshed Gilead with sledges having iron teeth… [against] Gaza … Because she took captive whole communities and sold them to Edom…[and against] Tyre … Because she sold whole communities of captives to Edom, disregarding a treaty of brotherhood…[and also against] Edom …

Because he pursued his brother with a sword, stifling all compassion, because his anger raged continually and his fury flamed unchecked…[against] Ammon … Because he ripped open the pregnant women of Gilead in order to extend his borders… [and against] Moab … Because he burned, as if to lime, the bones of Edom's king…" (Amos 1:1-15; 2:1)

All these peoples knew a lot less about God than God's own people, Israel, knew about him. But that didn't mean they could get away with inhumane crimes that went against human conscience. The Bible declares God to be the Judge of all the earth, and insists he'll do what's right.

It was to Israel God gave His Law written on stone tablets - which we know famously as the Ten Commandments - but the Bible says all other nations have the work of the law written on their hearts (Rom. 2:15), and God will hold all men accountable the apostle Paul says ‘on the day when … God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus’ (Rom. 2:16). It’s then their conscience and their thoughts will either accuse or defend them.
But then Amos turned his sights on the southern part of Israel, and uttered God’s verdict on *“Judah … Because they have rejected the law of the LORD and have not kept his decrees…”* (v.4)

Here were the people who’d been privileged to receive God’s Law through Moses. Greater privilege brought greater responsibility. Judah might not be convicted of gross inhumanity, but God treated their rejection of his Law with extreme seriousness as Amos 3:1-2 again makes clear:

“Hear this word the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel - against the whole family I brought up out of Egypt: "You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins."

And those sins included sins of social injustice. God’s Law among his people had demonstrated God’s special concern for the poor. Listen to how he went on to condemn Israel:

“…They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed.” (Amos 2:6-7)

“Hear this word … on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, "Bring us some drinks!" (Amos 4:1).

To people like that God sounded a wake-up call: *“prepare to meet your God, O Israel."* (Amos 4:12) and later he adds *"Seek me and live.”* (Amos 5:4)

In this message by Amos, there’s a similarity with the theme of the apostle James in the New Testament when he speaks out against social injustice which oppressed the poor in the early community of Christians. Compare these words of James:

“Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you.
Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten. Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure!

Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabbath. You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. (James 5:1-5 NASB)

and like Amos he too adds: “… *the coming of the Lord is at hand”* (James 5:8 NASB). He reminds them *‘the Judge is standing right at the door’* (v.9).

But if God is against inhumanity and injustice, he also declares himself to be against the religious hypocrisy of those who’re smug in their self-righteousness. In language like the Lord Jesus used against the religious leaders of his day - and which professing Christianity always needs to take to heart - God says:

"I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies…Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" (Amos 5:21-24)

In his longsuffering, God delayed judgement against his people, but then Amos tells us: *"And the LORD asked me, "What do you see, Amos?" "A plumb-line," I replied. Then the Lord said, "Look, I am setting a plumb-line among my people Israel; I will spare them no longer."* (Amos 7:8).

A plumb-line shows how far from true – how far from the vertical – the building is. But God doesn't only show us how far away we are from his ideal, but in grace and mercy he speaks of restoration for through Amos he promised:

"In that day I will restore David's fallen tent. I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be …"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when the reaper will be overtaken by the ploughman and the planter by the one treading grapes. New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills." (Amos 9:10-15)

James in the New Testament, in Acts 15, understands this as referring to the times of the Messiah, beginning with the introduction of the gospel to the Gentiles. For this is how James summed up the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 (:13-17):

"James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me. "Simeon [that's Peter] has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. "With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written,
"After these things, I will return, and I will rebuild the tabernacle of David

which has fallen, and I will rebuild its ruins and I will restore it, so that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name."

In other words, the New Testament, when defending the taking of God's Good News to the Gentiles - to all the nations of the world in fact – appeals to the book of the prophet Amos. For, the dark sentences of Amos end with a wonderful prediction. A glorious time of abundance lies ahead when one harvest will hardly be over before the next is being prepared.

This will be when the Lord Jesus at his Second Advent restores the fortunes of King David's ancient and royal house. Believers now on the Lord Jesus - and of all nationalities - can look forward to this too. And where Christ is King – of this we can be sure - there'll be no more inhumanity and injustice.

FURTHER TITLES IN THIS SERIES

The following titles, and many others in the series, can be found by searching for the specific title, or "Search For Truth Series" on Amazon. Alternatively, you can visit the e-store here: **http://astore.amazon.com/hayespress-20**

Esther: A Date With Destiny

The story of Esther is one of the most remarkable in the Bible. It has all the intrigue and as many twists as a modern thriller. Dark forces of evil, in opposition to the good, swirl around the lead character – who's a girl some Jewish sources have claimed as being one of the four most beautiful women in the Bible. The drama has been styled as a rags-to-riches or even a peasant-to-princess type of adventure. One thing's for sure: the Jewish girl Hadassah (Esther) has more than a date with the king: it's a date with destiny - the stakes are high - the future of an entire nation hangs in the balance!

But it gets even more exciting than that...this booklet guides you to sense the hand of God in your own life - for Esther inspires us to discover the purpose God is working towards in our own lives – right now!

A Legacy of Kings…Israel's Chequered History

Apart from the most famous kings, such as David and Solomon, many of the rest of the kings of the Old Testament have faded into obscurity - the life-lessons that can be applied to the lives of Christians are often over-looked as a result.

This e-book rectifies this by bringing twelve of these kings back into the spotlight. You'll encounter good kings, bad kings, good kings that went bad and bad kings that came good! All of them, though, have something important to teach and challenge us as we look to serve the great and faultless King Himself - Jesus Christ.

If Jotham, Rehoboam, Hezekiah, Manasseh and the rest have become strangers to you - why not get reacquainted?

Tomorrow's Headlines – Bible Prophecy

This e-booklet provides some key principles for unlocking the meaning of Bible

prophecy and surveys what the Bible says about the future, primarily from the books of Daniel and Revelation. Topics and questions include:

- Will there ever be a United States of Europe?
- Will there be a single world currency?
- What is the critical position of Israel in God's purposes?
- Will the temple be rebuilt in Jerusalem?
- What can we know about the Antichrist?
- Will Jesus Christ return once, or twice?
- What is the role of Babylon in the end times?
- What is the significance of the spread of Islam?

Overcoming Objections to Christian Faith

This e-booklet provides a concise introduction to answering 10 key objections to the Christian faith by giving number of insightful illustrations and Biblical references which all Christians can use to help them give "a reason for the hope that is within us" and whet the appetite for further research on each question in greater depth:

• Why do the innocent suffer?
• Don’t all religions lead to God?
• What about the heathen?
• Isn’t the Christian experience only psychological?
• Are the miracles possible?
• Isn’t the Bible full of errors?
• Won’t a good life get me to heaven?
• How can you believe in hell and a God of love?
• Hasn’t science done away with the need for faith?
• What about all the bloodshed in the name of religion?

Life, the Universe…and Ultimate Answers

This booklet grapples with some of the big questions of life from a Christian perspective, with the following chapter headings:
1. Can We Really Experience God?
2. Is Life Accidental Or Purposeful?
3. Does Life Have Real Value?
4. What’s The Meaning of Life?
5. A Personal Hope
6. Is There Any Evidence for God?

7. Is There Evidence For Jesus And The Resurrection?
8. Reasons To Believe: Creation
9. Reasons To Believe: Conscience
10. Reasons To Believe: Communication
11. Reasons To Believe: Christ

Brian's trademark down to earth and conversational style makes this booklet ideal for those who are searching, and for those who want to help those that are.

Power Outage: Christianity Unplugged

This book pinpoints 11 key ways in which a Christian can experience a lack of God's power in their discipleship experience. The first six chapters deal with actions and character traits that quench the Holy Spirit, and the final five chapters focuses on different ways that we can misuse God's Word, with the same effect - loss of power. As usual, Brian brings a number of Bible illustrations to make his point as well as reflecting on the experience of a number of well-known Christians, including the Wesley brothers.

1. Don’t Pray
2. Compromise Your Separation to God
3. Let Sin Enter Your Life
4. Be Proud
5. Be Self-indulgent
6. Be Greedy
7. Invalidate God’s Word
8. Neglect God’s Word
9. Peddle God’s Word
10. Adulterate God’s Word
11. Wrongly Divide God’s Word

Who is Jesus? The Bible’s Answer…

Who is Jesus? This is life’s most important question! Everything God could wish for us will depend on us getting to know Jesus. The whole of the Bible - every part of it - has many things to say about Jesus. The Jews divided the Old Testament into three sections. Jesus referred to them (in Luke 24) as the Law, the Prophets and the Writings (the Psalms). The New Testament can also be divided up in a similar way. This concise e-book takes us through the Bible to answer this question: ‘Who is Jesus?
- Jesus: Predicted in the Law

- Jesus: Predicted in the Prophets
- Jesus: Predicted in the Writings
- Matthew's Gospel: Teacher
- Mark's Gospel: Suffering Servant
- Luke's Gospel: Saviour
- John's Gospel: God's Son
- The Acts - Jesus Preached
- The Epistles - Jesus Explained
- Revelation - Jesus Expected

Once Saved, Always Saved…

The issue of whether a Christian can lose their salvation is an absolutely critical one and has been a controversial topic amongst Christians for centuries. This e-booklet provides a number of insightful illustrations and Biblical references which all Christians can use to reassure themselves that there is no basis in the Bible for the so-called "Falling Away Doctrine" and that, once saved, a believer can never be lost under any circumstances. The titles of the first 7 chapters of this book indicate the basis on which its conclusion is reached:

1 Whose is the Primary Salvation Decision?
2 The Outcome is Already Finalized
3 With God, There is No Going Back on His Word
4 God’s Grace is Emphasised Without Qualification
5 The Biblical Imagery is of Irreversible Processes
6 We May Lose Our Reward, But Not the Gift
7 Christ’s Body Can Never Be Dismembered

Double Vision – The Insights of Isaiah

The Old Testament book of Isaiah can be difficult to understand. This book provides the key to open up Isaiah's message by explaining the "double vision" model that God used in speaking through the prophet.

While what much of what Isaiah said had a current application to the people he was speaking to, there was usually a double meaning which either spoke of the coming of Jesus Christ hundreds of years later, or of events which are still yet in our future.

This short e-booklet is bound to leave you more aware of, and appreciating more fully, the sovereignty of God and his gracious dealings with both Israel and

followers of Jesus Christ.

An Unchanging God?

Many would object to the idea of the existence of the God of the Bible on the grounds that he appears to have a very different character when presented in the Old Testament compared to the New Testament. Can this really be the same God? How can we reconcile what appear to be so different characteristics?

This booklet seeks to address these very important questions, which have also troubled many believers as well as being a barrier to faith for some unbelievers. The objective of this book is that the reader will go away with a fuller understanding and appreciation of the character and nature of God and be confident that the Bible record of Him can be fully relied upon.

In addition, www.hayespress.org carries a large selection of recommended titles as well as over 100 attractive gospel tracts and posters, a range of daily Bible reading calendars, Eagles Wings children's magazines and more!

Other Titles

The Kingdom of God – Past, Present or Future?

Unlocking Hebrews

Seeds – A Potted Bible History

AWOL! Bible Deserters and Defectors

The Way – New Testament Discipleship

5 Sacred Solos – The Truths That The Reformation Recovered

Salt & The Sacrifice of Christ

Turning The World Upside Down – Seven Revolutionary Ideas That Changed The World

Windows To Faith

Praying with Paul

The Visions of Zechariah

The Last Words of Jesus

SEARCH FOR TRUTH RADIO BROADCASTS

Search for Truth Radio has been a ministry of the Churches of God (see www.churchesofgod.info) since 1978. Free Search for Truth podcasts can be listened to online or downloaded at www.searchfortruth.podbean.com, with related pdf study documents, at www.searchfortruth.org.uk Alternatively, see below for details of digital and analogue radio timings.

Europe

Sunday, 08.00 British Time on TWR

41m band SW (7400 kHz.); 49m band SW (6105 kHz.)

Listen online at www.twr.org.uk/live.htm

SKY Digital Channel 0138 (11.390 GHz, ID 53555) and Freesat channel 790 in the **UK** Saturday at 15.45 and Sunday at 08.15.

Malawi

Sunday on TWR Malawi FM Network at 06.45 UTC+2 (89.1 - 106.5 FM)

South East Asia

On Reach Beyond – Australia on Mondays 13.15 UTC, 25m band SW (15540 kHz.)

India

Tuesday and Friday on TWR Guam at 14.07, 31m band SW (15200 kHz.)

Thailand

Wednesday on TWR Guam at 08.50, 19m band SW (15170kHz.)

Jamaica

Sunday on MegaJamz at 09.00, 98.7 FM

CONTACTING SEARCH FOR TRUTH

If you have enjoyed reading one of our books or listening to a radio broadcast, we would love to know about that, or answer any questions that you might have.

Contact us at:

Church of God, Leicester, LE5 6LN England

P.O. Box 748, Ringwood, Victoria 3134, Australia

P.O.Box 70115, Chilomoni, Blantyre, Malawi

Web site: www.searchfortruth.org.uk

Email: sft@churchesofgod.info

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Responding to God's call in his life Brian Johnston left his post as a UK government scientist in 1987 to become a fulltime Bible teacher and evangelist on behalf of the Churches of God (www.churchesofgod.info)

For many years, he has been spending much of his time in missionary church-planting activity in Belgium and the Philippines. He also anchors Search for Truth Radio and is an editor of Needed Truth magazine (see www.neededtruth.info).

He has authored the book Exploring Issues of Life. He is married to Rosemary, and they have two children, Michael and Anna.