



RALPH EARLE

**Meet
the
MINOR
PROPHETS**

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• CHRISTIAN SERVICE TRAINING •

MEET THE MINOR PROPHETS

by

Ralph Earle, Th.D.

Professor of New Testament
Nazarene Theological Seminary

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TO MY MOTHER

Faithful prayer partner for over a quarter of a century, who first made the Bible live for me.

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PREFACE

The twelve Minor Prophets are not labeled thus because their message is minor, but because they are shorter in length than the Major Prophets. Amos, Hosea, and Micah stand right alongside their great contemporary, Isaiah, in emphasizing the highest truths of the Hebrew religion: that Jehovah is the only true God and is alone to be worshiped; that ultimately God always punishes sin; that real religion consists of righteousness rather than ritualism, so that God desires justice and mercy more than sacrifices and offerings; that salvation is to be found through faith in and obedience to the word of the Lord through His prophets.

The eighth century B.C. forms the high-water mark of Hebrew prophecy. Here we find Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah, who probably ministered in that order. Perhaps the books of Joel, Jonah, and Obadiah also belong to this period. If so, six of the twelve Minor Prophets wrote in this century.

In the seventh century three more prophets appeared: Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk. They were contemporaries of the great Jeremiah.

The sixth century heard the voices of Haggai and Zechariah, calling on the returned captives to rebuild the Temple. Earlier in the same century Ezekiel had ministered to the exiles in Babylonia.

Finally, the fifth century gave us the last prophet of the Old Testament, Malachi. He pointed his finger across four centuries to the coming of Christ and His forerunner, John the Baptist.

Someone may ask why we have not presented these prophets in their chronological order. The answer is that the requirements of the course call for six chapters. So it seemed best to follow the order in our English Bibles.

It should be noted that the first verse of each of the prophets usually gives the heading of the book and often furnishes the chronological setting.

The title of this book suggests the method of study. In the case of each prophet we have taken the human interest approach. Our desire has been to make these ancient seers come alive for our day. Teachers will probably find it wise, especially with younger age groups, to call attention to this phase at the very beginning. It is the hope of the author that this study will make an appeal to young people which they complain is too often lacking in textbooks.

The Minor Prophets have a modern message which is very much needed in this hour of confusion and crisis. May our ears be opened and our hearts attuned to listen to the Word of the Lord through these men of old.

RALPH EARLE

5546 Crestwood Drive
Kansas City, Missouri

CONTENTS

	PAGE
I. <i>Hosea and Joel</i>	
A. Hosea—The Triumph of Love	11
1. The Man	
2. The Message	
3. The Style	
B. Joel—God's Judgment on Sin	20
1. The Plague of Locusts	
2. The Invading Armies	
3. The Day of the Lord	
4. Repentance and Promise	
II. <i>Amos and Obadiah</i>	
A. Amos—The Battle of Righteousness vs. Ritual	28
1. The Prophet's Call	
2. The Prophet's Preaching	
3. The Prophet of Justice	
4. Righteousness Rather than Ritual	
5. The Sin of Samaria	
6. Five Visions	
B. Obadiah—The Tragedy of Brotherly Hate	38
1. Jacob Versus Esau	
2. Israel Versus Edom	
3. The Pride of Edom	
4. Edom's Cruelty to Israel	
5. The Message for Our Day	
III. <i>Jonah and Micah</i>	
A. Jonah—Salvation for All Nations	45
1. The City of Nineveh	
2. The Protesting Prophet	
3. The Praying Prophet	
4. The Preaching Prophet	
5. The Pouting Prophet	
6. The Interpretation of the Book	
7. The Miracles in Jonah	
8. The Value of the Book	

B.	Micah—The Defender of the Poor	53
1.	The Call of the Prophet	
2.	Oppression of the Poor	
3.	Pronouncement of Doom	
4.	Promise of Restoration	
5.	The Lord's Controversy	
6.	True Religion	
7.	The Outlook	
8.	The Uplook	
IV.	<i>Nahum and Habakkuk</i>	
A.	Nahum—God's Curse on Cruelty	62
1.	The Cruelty of Nineveh	
2.	Date of the Book	
3.	A Description of the City	
4.	The Capture of Nineveh	
5.	The Prophet's Home	
6.	The Anger of God	
7.	Nahum's Message for Our Day	
B.	Habakkuk—The Battle with Doubt	69
1.	The Prophet's Problem	
2.	God's Answer	
3.	Date of the Book	
4.	The Prophet's Perplexity	
5.	The Prophet's Patience	
6.	The Lord's Answer	
7.	The Prophet's Prayer	
V.	<i>Zephaniah and Haggai</i>	
A.	Zephaniah—When God Invades the Human Scene....	78
1.	Baal Worship	
2.	Other Idolatry	
3.	The Punishment of Jerusalem	
4.	The Day of the Lord	
5.	A Plea for Repentance	
6.	Date of the Book	
7.	God's Joy in His People	
B.	Haggai—Man of Inspired Action	85
1.	The First Message	
2.	The People's Response	
3.	The Second Message	

4. The Third Message
5. The Fourth Message
6. The Nature of Haggai

VI. *Zechariah and Malachi*

- A. Zechariah—Final Triumph of Holiness 94
 1. The Prophet's First Appeal
 2. Eight Visions
 3. The Question of Fasting
 4. The Unity of Zechariah
 5. The Messianic Hope
- B. Malachi—When People Play Cheap with God103
 1. Malachi's Method
 2. The Sin of the Priests
 3. The Sin of Divorce
 4. "My Messenger"
 5. The Tithe
 6. The Coming Messiah

I

HOSEA and JOEL

A. Hosea—The Triumph of Love

Name: means "salvation," "deliverance"

Date of ministry: about 750-736 B.C.

Place of ministry: northern Kingdom of Israel

Outline of book: I. Hosea's Home Life (cc. 1—3)
II. God's Message to Israel (cc. 4—14)

Outstanding verses to memorize: 10:12; 14:4

1. THE MAN

It was late evening in a humble home in north Israel. A lonely figure sat sobbing, his head buried in his hands. A loved one had left the home, and the bereaved husband was holding funeral in his heart.

Why had it all happened? That was the question that haunted the mind and harrowed the soul of the young prophet Hosea.

a. Honeymoon Turns to Heartbreak. Memory took him by the hand and led him back across the trail of the years. How vividly he recalled the time when first he met the beautiful girl named Gomer! The scene shaped itself again before his eyes. The charm of youth, her entrancing loveliness—the recollections of that hour stirred and stabbed his heart tonight.

Conscious of his calling, the young prophet had prayed earnestly about the matter. Clear as the notes of a bell the divine directive had come: "Marry Gomer." And so they had been joined in wedlock. In spite of all the tragedy that had followed, Hosea could not doubt that God had instructed him to marry the one who became his wife. But why—oh, why? Like a wail it resounded through his soul.

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Those first years had been such happy ones. Hosea and his young bride were deeply in love with each other. Like the fragrance from lilacs in May, the breezes of memory carried across the intervening years a scent of the sweetness of those early days. The still ardent lover broke out in fresh sobs.

Well did he remember the first child he had held in his arms. The proud father of a son, it seemed that his cup of joy was full. Praying about the matter, he was instructed to call the boy's name Jezreel. The little lad was to be a sign to the nation that God would avenge the blood of Jezreel upon the house of Jehu.

But now a little rift seemed to be entering their happy marriage. Hosea noted with growing concern the increasing attention shown his young wife by other men. Quick looks and coy glances exchanged messages that his eyes sometimes intercepted. It was not difficult to decode them. Gomer's very beauty was proving a snare to her.

After a while a second child was born into the home—this time a daughter. But it was not the fact that it was a girl rather than a boy that cooled Hosea's enthusiasm. Over the scene there lay the dark shadow of an awful uncertainty. Was this child really his own? Hosea's horizon was filled with a haunting question mark.

There was little comfort in the name assigned this child by the divine voice. "Call her name Lo-ruhamah: for I will no more have mercy upon the house of Israel" (1:6). Lo-ruhamah—"Unloved," "Unpitied." Slowly but surely the cross was being laid upon his shoulders—the hidden cross of a harrowing fear. The prophet's pathway was becoming a Way of Sorrows.

Finally a third child was born. This time there was no question mark—only a horrible certainty. God said: "Call his name Loammi: for ye are not my people, and I will not be your God" (1:9). Loammi—"Not my people," "No kin of mine." Stunned and dazed, Hosea walked

about like one in a dream. But gradually, as in one recovering consciousness, the stabbing pain returned. The sensitive soul of the prophet was bombarded with all the stark reality of terrible truth. The child was not his own. His wife, Gomer, had been untrue to him.

b. *Sin Brings Separation.* Finally one day Gomer left. As the sound of her footsteps faded out down the road an awful sense of empty loneliness crept over the prophet's spirit. It seemed that the light of love had gone out in his soul. And then the pent-up feeling burst and Hosea found relief in a rushing torrent of tears.

It seemed like hours. But only some minutes had passed before the children came hurrying in. "Where is Mamma going? She didn't answer us when we called to her. Why did she leave?" Yes—why? Hosea had no answer.

That evening a strange silence pervaded the supper hour. Everyone was conscious of the empty place in the family circle. Suddenly little Lo-ruhamah looked up into his face. "Where's Mamma tonight?" Like the quick stab of a cruel knife the question struck home. Vainly Hosea tried to choke back the tears. Lo-ruhamah moved up close to him and started to cry. Over and over she wailed, "I want my mamma." The prophet leaned his head down close to hers and they wept together.

But he must not give way before the children. Quietly he gathered them around for evening prayer. With faltering lips he uttered the cry which welled up within him: "Take care of Mamma tonight—and bring her home safe, and soon."

With the children all tucked in safely for the night, Hosea turned his attention to putting the house in order. Now the little ones were all sleeping soundly. In the opposite corner of the one-room house Hosea threw himself on his face and gave way to his grief. With only

God to listen he sobbed out the sorrow of his soul. It seemed that the cross of suffering he had carried was now lifted up and cruel nails fastened him tightly to it. Anguish passed into the bitterest agony. Out of the darkness of despair he cried: "O God, why?"

The answer came in an unexpected way. Worn out with weeping, the prophet became quiet for a moment. In that silent pause he heard a sound. Startled, he lifted his head. No, the children were all breathing regularly in deep sleep. What could that sound have been?

c. *The Tears of God.* Once more he buried his head in his arms. Then he heard it again. Someone was sobbing—someone besides himself. Who could it be?

Breathlessly he waited in perfect silence. Then it came once more. This time he caught some words. Listen! "How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? . . . O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee?" (11:8; 6:4.) It was the sob of a brokenhearted God.

That night Hosea learned that he did not suffer alone. At the heart of the universe was a God of love who was sorrowing over the sins of His people. As Gomer had been untrue to her husband, so Israel had been untrue to her God. In the fellowship of suffering Hosea had found not only the solution of his personal problem but also a new message for the nation. Israel's greatest sin was that of rejecting God's love. But God's love, though unrequited, was still unabated.

But Calvary is only the beginning of redemption. The awful price of suffering must not go unrewarded. Love must find, will find, a way.

d. *Forgiveness Knows No Bounds.* And so one night while the prophet was praying, the Voice spoke clearly again in his soul. "Go yet, love a woman beloved of her friend, yet an adulteress, according to the love of the Lord toward the children of Israel" (3:1).

The next morning Hosea sent the children out to play with their neighbors. Then he walked down that same road which Gomer had followed some months before. It led from their quiet, country home toward the big city a few miles away.

As Hosea entered the streets of Bethel, he noticed the same sights and sounds which had shocked Amos only a few years before. While the thin veneer of prosperity was breaking off in some spots, many people still lived in luxury and ease.

Down through the better part of the city Hosea went, until he came to the slum section. All that he saw now was new to him, for he had never visited the place before. Inquiring, he found his way to the slave market.

As he came near, his attention was drawn to one slave especially. She was dressed in filthy rags, and yet something about her looked strangely familiar. Just then she turned her face his way. Their eyes met—just for a moment. Then she looked quickly the other way. But in that brief glance Hosea had caught a glimmer of recognition. It hardly seemed possible; but it was true. The slave was Gomer.

With his heart beating fast, Hosea bargained with the owner. "So I bought her to me for fifteen pieces of silver, and for an homer of barley, and an half homer of barley" (3:2).

As the prophet stepped forward to take his purchase, the once beautiful young woman hung her head in shame. She had sold herself as a slave to sin, and now she found herself helpless in literal slavery. But her husband was redeeming her.

Lovingly Hosea took her hand and they walked back past the slums and through the better section and finally out into the clean, open country on the road toward home.

e. Love Conquers All. Not a word had yet been spoken. Then tenderly, gently, came words that started

earthquake tremors in Gomer's soul. Softly the one beside her said: "Gomer—I love you. My heart has never lost its love. Every day I have longed for you and prayed for you. Not once have I given you up. Now I have bought you back to be my own forever. All the past is forgiven. You must stay with me and never be untrue to me again. We will set up a happy home once more and be true to each other as long as we live."

Blinded by tears, Gomer stumbled along beside her husband. Soon they were approaching the little home that had been and was to be theirs. How good it looked now, compared with the miserable hovels of sin and the awful slave market! Hosea opened the door and gently ushered her in.

When Gomer found herself in her own home with her husband again, an overpowering sense of the awfulness of sin swept over her. She saw herself as she really was, and hated her sinful self with a passionate abhorrence. Falling on her knees, she poured out her heart in confession and contrition. With sobs and groans she pleaded for forgiveness. It didn't seem possible that God could forgive. But Hosea had. Perhaps God would.

Suddenly the light of heaven broke into her sin-darkened heart. She looked up with a radiant smile shining through her tears. Hosea clasped her in his arms. Once more she was really his bride. Love had found a way. The prodigal wife had come home—to stay.

Out of this domestic tragedy in Hosea's life there came the greatest message of Old Testament times, the story of God's redeeming love. Amos had thundered in tones of stern justice. Hosea pleaded in tones of tender love. Why the difference? Part of the answer lies in the heartache and heartbreak that came to the latter.

What an awful price he paid for his ministry! But no one can really preach the message of Calvary until he has learned the meaning of Calvary. Hosea discovered that

there is no real love without suffering and that the more one loves the more one suffers. In the deep tragedy of his own suffering he found the secret of atoning love. Only thus could he understand the rejected yet redeeming love of God. The passionate pleading of Hosea's ministry was an echo of the sob he heard that night in the dark.

2. THE MESSAGE

The Book of Hosea divides itself very naturally into two sections. In the first three chapters we have the story of a broken heart and a broken home. In chapters four to fourteen, inclusive, we have God's message to Israel, based on this experience.

God had a great message to give to His people, a message of redeeming love. But where could He find a messenger equal to the task? There was none available. So God prepared His own prophet for this momentous mission.

a. Redemption Demands Suffering. Love in the abstract means exactly nothing. One cannot learn love by hearing about it or reading of it. He must actually experience it. And so God plunged His prophet into the abyss of a terrible tragedy. Blow after blow was showered upon his sensitive spirit. With his heart torn and tortured until it seemed that he could stand no more, Hosea went through his Gethsemane and Calvary. At the place of vicarious suffering he found the secret of redeeming love.

Only a suffering love can be a saving love. When Hosea looked upon his wayward wife in all her sin and shame, her degradation and disgrace, and then felt within himself a great love welling up in his heart and flowing out to her, and sensed a deep desire to loose her from the shackles of her slavery; when he paid the price in money as he had already paid it in passionate suffering; when

he took his wife in all her filth and rags back into his heart and home—then the prophet understood the redeeming love of God. Then he could preach to the people with tears in his voice and tell them that God still loved them and wanted them to come back home.

b. *Real Love Is Tender Love.* Only a prophet of tender love could proclaim the message we find in 2:14-15—“Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her. And I will give her her vineyards from thence, and the valley of Achor for a door of hope: and she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt.”

It was an echo of what took place on that walk back home from the slave market, as Hosea once again wooed and won the heart of Gomer. The happy days that followed, as Hosea heard his wife singing at her work around the house, saw her tender care of the children, and frequently was thrilled with the radiant smiles of grateful love she gave him—all this atoned for those hours of anguish. It had been worth it all. Hosea was learning that love is the most precious possession of mankind.

c. *The Great Sin.* Israel's great sin was the sin against love. It is true that the people were guilty of “swearing, and lying, and killing, and stealing, and committing adultery” (4:2). But in the last analysis all these sins against other human personalities were the result of their sin against God. Their basic sin, from which all these others stemmed, was rejection of God's love.

Because they had turned away from Him, God said He would turn away from them. “I will go and return to my place, till they acknowledge their offence, and seek my face: in their affliction they will seek me early” (5:15).

Hosea agrees with Amos in emphasizing righteousness rather than ritual. "For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings" (6:6).

3. THE STYLE

The Book of Hosea abounds in homely, yet striking, figures of speech. Most of them are taken from the country and would seem to indicate that the prophet lived outside the city. For instance in 4:16 (A.R.V.) we find a picture that is vivid to the mind of every boy brought up on the farm: "Israel hath behaved himself stubbornly, like a stubborn heifer." Again, God says of the nation: "Your goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the dew that goeth early away" (6:4, A.R.V.).

A pitiful picture is given in 7:9—"Yea, gray hairs are here and there upon him, yet he knoweth not." It is a graphic symbol of unconscious decadence.

In urging the people to return to God, the prophet uses a familiar figure from the farm: "Break up your fallow ground: for it is time to seek the Lord, till he come and rain righteousness upon you" (10:12).

A beautiful, yet pathetic, picture is drawn for us in 11:3—"I taught Ephraim also to go [walk], taking them by their arms; but they knew not that I healed them." And then God adds: "I drew them with cords of a man, with bands of love."

The climax of the book comes in the last chapter. Here is God's call of love: "O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity. Take with you words, and turn to the Lord: say unto him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously: so will we render the calves of our lips."

And God does receive them graciously. Listen to His response: "I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely" (14:4).

The final message of the book is the triumph of love. There are funeral dirges and plaintive songs in the minor key. But the music ends in a burst of volume and note of victory. Love had conquered sin.

B. Joel—God's Judgment on Sin

Name: means "Jehovah is God"

Date of ministry: uncertain; perhaps eighth century or fourth century B.C.

Place of ministry: probably southern Kingdom of Judah

Outline of book: I. Joel Speaks (1:2—2:17)

II. Jehovah Speaks (2:18—3:21)

Outstanding verses to memorize: 2:21; 2:25; 2:32a

1. THE PLAGUE OF LOCUSTS

It was a hot summer afternoon. As Joel stood outside his home in the shimmering heat, he feared the results of the drought which was already beginning. Everything now looked green and beautiful. How long would it stay that way?

Turning toward the northeast, he suddenly noticed a cloud on the horizon. Nearer and nearer it came. Faintly in the distance he heard a whirring sound. Then the whir became a rumbling roar, like the sound of surf on a nearby beach. Quickly Joel turned and shouted the ominous news: "The locusts are coming."

In a matter of minutes the air was filled with myriads of insects. The ground, the trees, the bushes, the walls, the houses—everything was covered with a crawling mass of life.

As Joel listened to their teeth sawing noisily through blade and stalk, through leaf and bark, a feeling of helpless terror came over him. Here was destruction, incessant, inevitable. No matter how many one killed, there were always thousands more crowding into every vacant

place. Joel watched them climb the wall of his home and enter through the open windows. Everywhere there was just one ceaseless swarm of death and destruction.

Only when everything green was gone did the moving millions take to their wings. With a roaring sound they swept on toward the field of some hapless neighbor.

As Joel surveyed the landscape he felt a sickening sensation. Every tree was stripped bare, not only of leaves, but of bark. His garden was as barren as if it had been plowed and harrowed. In the fields there was not even a thin blade of dry grass for a hungry goat. Around him stretched an endless expanse of destruction and desolation.

These locust plagues commonly last from two to five months. It was at the end of the one in Joel's day that he wrote (1:4): "That which the palmerworm hath left hath the locust eaten; and that which the locust hath left hath the cankerworm eaten; and that which the cankerworm hath left hath the caterpillar eaten."

Some have thought that the reference is to four successive stages of the same swarm. But George Adam Smith holds that it rather refers to successive swarms of invaders. The four Hebrew words were different names given to locusts to describe their various destructive activities. He translates the passage thus:

*What the Searer left the Swarmer ate,
What the Swarmer left the Lapper ate,
What the Lapper left ate the Devourer.*

2. THE INVADING ARMIES

As Joel observed the appearance and activity of the locusts, and the terrible desolation they left behind, God gave him a message for His people. The devastating plague was a warning to Judah of the enemy armies that would soon be invading her borders, a symbol of the coming judgments of God upon the land.

And so Joel has given us a vivid description that would apply equally well to the plague of locusts and to the invading armies. Notice the apt phrasings, as found in 2:3-10:

The land is as the garden of Eden before them, and behind them a desolate wilderness; yea, and nothing shall escape them. The appearance of them is as the appearance of horses; and as horsemen, so shall they run. Like the noise of chariots on the tops of mountains shall they leap, like the noise of a flame of fire that devoureth the stubble, as a strong people set in battle array. . . . They shall run like mighty men; they shall climb the wall like men of war; and they shall march every one on his ways, and they shall not break their ranks: . . . they shall run upon the wall, they shall climb up upon the houses; they shall enter in at the windows like a thief. The earth shall quake before them; the heavens shall tremble: the sun and the moon shall be dark, and the stars shall withdraw their shining.

There are three stages in Joel's prophecy. In the first he describes a recent plague of locusts and declares it to be a judgment from God for the sins of the people. In the second he warns the unrepentant nation of the enemy armies that will come sweeping down from the north like a great plague of locusts, leaving death and desolation behind them. In the third stage he puts the telescope of prophecy to his eyes and looks down across the centuries to the final great day of God's judgment on the nations of the earth.

3. THE DAY OF THE LORD

The key phrase of Joel is "the day of the Lord." It occurs five times in the three chapters of this brief book (1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14).

a. *Day of Judgment.* Just what is meant by "the day of the Lord"? Joel pictures it as the day of God's judg-

ment. He writes: "Alas for the day! for the day of the Lord is at hand, and as a destruction from the Almighty shall it come" (1:15).

The prophet's most vivid portrayal is to be found in the first two verses of the second chapter. Here he cries: "Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in my holy mountain: let all the inhabitants of the land tremble: for the day of the Lord cometh, for it is nigh at hand; a day of darkness and of gloominess, and a day of clouds and of thick darkness."

Still stronger is the language he uses in the eleventh verse: "For the day of the Lord is great and very terrible; and who can abide it?" This is echoed in the thirty-first verse, where he speaks of "the great and terrible day of the Lord." The day of the Lord is a day of judgment, a day of darkness and destruction.

b. *The Day Is Imminent.* The imminence of the day of the Lord is emphasized by the prophet. He writes: "For the day of the Lord cometh, for it is nigh at hand" (2:1). Again he declares: "For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision" (3:14).

Just when will this day come? To answer that question we have to recognize the truth of what is sometimes called the telescopic principle of prophecy. Many predictions in the Old Testament have a nearer partial fulfillment and a distant complete fulfillment. The prophet speaks to his own generation; but he also speaks to the centuries yet unborn.

Joel gives us an excellent example of this. The occasion of his prophecy was a recent plague of locusts. That was "the day of the Lord," a day of God's judgment upon the nation.

But the day of the Lord is still coming. Soon alien armies will be invading Judah. God will visit His people and punish them for their sins.

c. *Day of Final Culmination.* Then the prophet lifts the telescope of prophetic inspiration to his eyes and looks down across the centuries to the final great and terrible day of the Lord. It will be the day when God takes over the reins of government, puts down all enemies, and rules supreme. Man's day of running and ruining the world will be exchanged for God's day.

This sense of contemporaneousness and yet contemplation of the future is well expressed by G. Campbell Morgan in his book *Voices of Twelve Hebrew Prophets*. He comments:¹ "The Day of the Lord is always present, and is always coming." Every day is a day of God's judgment. But there are special crises of divine visitation in human history. These may most aptly be labeled "the day of the Lord."

Since the principal teaching of Joel is concerned with judgment, it is only natural that the language of the book should be heavy. This is more apparent in the Hebrew than can be brought out in the English translation. George Adam Smith, the outstanding exegete of the Minor Prophets, describes this characteristic of Joel's style. He says:

Joel loads his clauses with the most leaden letters he can find, and drops them in quick succession, repeating the same heavy word again and again, as if to stun the careless people into some sense of the bare weight of the calamity befallen them.

4. REPENTANCE AND PROMISE

a. *Call to Repentance.* But the prophet does not stop with the announcement of judgment. He issues a call to repentance. In 2:12-17 he calls upon the people to seek God's mercy.

If they will do this, then God's blessing will be poured out (2:18-27). He will pity His people (v. 18).

"I will send you corn, and wine, and oil, and ye shall be satisfied therewith" (v. 19). The trees will bear their fruit in abundance (v. 22). God will give them plenty of rain for their crops (v. 23). "And the floors shall be full of wheat, and the fats shall overflow with wine and oil" (v. 24).

b. *Bright Are the Promises.* Then follows one of those beautiful passages of promise so often found in the prophetic books. Joel writes (2:25-27):

And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten, the cankerworm, and the caterpillar, and the palmerworm, my great army which I sent among you. And ye shall eat in plenty, and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, that hath dealt wondrously with you: and my people shall never be ashamed. And ye shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the Lord your God, and none else: and my people shall never be ashamed.

Just as God had delivered them from the recent plague of locusts, so also He would rid them of the enemy armies which were soon to invade their borders. The language which Joel uses here (2:20) is reminiscent of the stench which arose from the dead bodies of millions of locusts.

But I will remove far off from you the northern army, and will drive him into a land barren and desolate . . . and his stink shall come up, and his ill savour shall come up, because he hath done great things.

This beautiful passage in the second chapter finds its climax in Joel's greatest prophecy, the prediction of Pentecost (vv. 28-29):

And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions: and also

upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my spirit.

In unequivocal terms Peter identified this with what took place on the Day of Pentecost, as described in the second chapter of Acts. "This is that," he declared. The prophecy made back there waited long centuries for its fulfillment. But the day finally came. So it will be with all the promises of God which yet remain unfulfilled. Christ is going to return and establish His rule of righteousness and peace. One of the greatest lessons we human beings have to learn is that of patient waiting for the working out of God's plans and purposes. "In the fulness of time" God always appears on the scene.

c. *Doom for Jerusalem.* But this description of the gracious outpouring of the Spirit is followed immediately (vv. 30-31) by a forecast of darkness and doom. What is the connection?

George L. Robinson has well expressed it: "Grace and judgment always move side by side. The fall of Jerusalem was the sequel of the Day of Pentecost" (see "References"²). The city of Jerusalem witnessed God's visitation in special blessing at Pentecost, in A.D. 30. Because the city as a whole rejected the coming of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit, judgment came in A.D. 70 with terrible vengeance. God's wrath always comes after the rejection of God's love.

As with others of the Minor Prophets, the Book of Joel ends with a promise of future blessing for God's people (3:18-21). So also the Bible ends with "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev. 21:1). That is the ultimate outcome of all history.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the relation between suffering and service?
2. What is God's attitude towards the backslider?

3. What does "the day of the Lord" mean for us?
4. What does man have to do to receive God's blessings?
5. What especially strikes you in Joel's prophecy of Pentecost?

II

AMOS and OBADIAH

A. Amos—The Battle of Righteousness vs. Ritual

Name: means “burden” or “burden-bearer”

Home: Tekoa, a village of shepherds, twelve miles south of Jerusalem

Date: about 760 B.C. (perhaps earliest of writing prophets)

Place of ministry: North Israel, especially Bethel, twelve miles north of Jerusalem

Outline: I. Eight Judgments on Surrounding Nations (cc. 1—2)

II. Three Messages Against Israel (cc. 3—6)

III. Five Visions of Judgment (cc. 7—9)

Outstanding verses to memorize: 4:12b; 5:15; 8:11

1. THE PROPHET'S CALL

It was midnight in the wilderness of Judah. By the dim light of the twinkling stars a lone figure could be seen, huddled on a hillside. Amos, the herdsman, was wrapped deep in thought.

As he pulled his cloak more closely about his shoulders to shield himself from the chill air of the night, Amos saw one picture after another parade across the screen of his memory. Scenes indelible, unforgettable, clamored for attention.

a. Journey to Bethel. It was a few weeks ago now that Amos had left his native village of Tekoa, perched high on a hilltop overlooking the Dead Sea to the eastward. On the backs of his donkeys he had packed large

bales of wool, clipped from desert sheep, small and ugly, but noted for the excellent quality of their soft coats.

When the last bundle was tied on, Amos had waved farewell to his family. Then turning westward, he took the trail that led to the highway between Hebron and the north. An hour later he and his donkeys turned onto the main road and trudged toward the Holy City. At midmorning they passed through David's city, Bethlehem, six miles north of home. By noontime they were in the streets of Jerusalem, twelve miles from Tekoa. Now they were halfway to their journey's end.

Late in the afternoon they drew near to Bethel, "house of God," so called because there Jacob had sensed the Divine Presence when running away from his brother, Esau. Now it had been turned by King Jeroboam into a shrine for the worship of a golden calf. But the idolatrous city still clung to its sacred name.

After a night spent close by the shelter of the city walls, Amos was up with the sun. Early morning found him bargaining with buyers in the market place of the town. Straightforward and honest, he soon had his wares sold at a good price. Then he turned his attention to looking the town over.

b. *Sin in the City.* The scenes that filled his eyes shocked deeply the sensibilities of his soul. Brought up close to nature and accustomed as he was to the clear air of the desert, the herdsman from Tekoa was appalled by the sights and sounds of a degenerate city civilization. Keen of eye and quick of perception, he took in the whole picture. Idolatry and her twin sister, immorality, ruled the society of Bethel. Luxury and licentiousness were the order of the day. All about him Amos saw injustice and oppression of the poor, iniquity and drunkenness. His soul recoiled at the sight of it all and then rebounded with a terrific reaction. Surely the soul of a righteous God must be filled with loathing and anger as

He beheld the sins of this wicked city. Justice demanded judgment. The steps of the man from the wilderness dragged heavily as he turned towards home.

c. *A Call from the Lord.* All these scenes passed in swift review before the mind of the shepherd, as he relived the hours of that journey to Bethel. Indignation and fear played a game of tag in his consciousness. He had watched a few hours before as God drew the curtain of night across the sky and then hung out a thousand lanterns to let His people know He was watching over them. But now even their glitter was gone. An ominous hush brooded over the lonely wilderness. A sense of awe of the infinite swept over the spirit of Amos. Something deep in his soul shuddered and shook. It seemed that God was about to speak.

Suddenly—without warning—the silence of the night was shattered by a terrifying roar. A lion was lurking close to the sheep that Amos guarded. Probably he was already seizing a helpless lamb, paralyzed with fear. For “will a lion roar in the forest, when he hath no prey?” (3:4.)

As the shepherd quickly stirred the fading embers of the campfire to drive away the marauder, he shivered in spite of the growing heat. The roar of a lion in the middle of the night is something to strike terror to the strongest heart. But it was not the lion alone who was stalking his prey that night. The God of Israel was moving near in judgment. Within his heart Amos had heard a roar from heaven. The divine warning had sounded in his soul.

Here is the prophet's own probable description of his call, as it came to him that night on the hillside, while he sat brooding over the sins of Israel and the inevitable judgments that must follow: “The lion hath roared, who will not fear? the Lord God hath spoken, who can but

prophesy?" (3:8.) It was a dramatic moment in the history of the Hebrews.

The next morning, as the sun rose over the hills of Moab, Amos gave the care of his sheep to others and tracked the lion to his lair. But all that he found of the unfortunate lamb was a few bones and fragments of skin. Again he heard the voice of divine revelation, giving him a message from God to His people: "Thus saith the Lord; As the shepherd taketh out of the mouth of the lion two legs, or a piece of an ear; so shall the children of Israel be taken out that dwell in Samaria in the corner of a bed, and in Damascus in a couch" (3:12).

2. THE PROPHET'S PREACHING

Some weeks more had passed—weeks of listening, weeks of learning—in the life of the new prophet. One day we find him back in Bethel. Few people recognized the merchant of recent days. This time he was not here to sell wool but to sound a warning.

Climbing up on something solid, so that he could be seen and heard, Amos watched the people a few moments as they brought their offerings to the golden calf in the king's sanctuary. Suddenly he shouted at the top of his voice: "The Lord will roar from Zion, and utter his voice from Jerusalem" (1:2).

A hundred startled eyes turned to look at him; a hundred shocked ears gave attention. Voices were hushed into silence. Who was this fool and fanatic, this rustic from the wild wilderness, this alarmist with his war cry?

a. Woe to Israel's Neighbors. Having captured his audience, Amos proceeded quickly and cleverly to follow up his advantage. Tactfully—with that divine wisdom which accompanies divine revelation—the prophet took his hearers on a circuit of their foreign neighbors before driving in home. "Thus saith the Lord; For three trans-

gressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof . . . ” (1:3-5). We can hear someone in the crowd call out: “That’s right! That’s what they deserve.”

The prophet goes on: “For three transgressions of Gaza, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof . . . ” (1:6-8). The crowd applauds this attack on their sworn enemies, the Philistines.

Back up the coast the prophet swings northward to Tyre, the ancient Phoenician stronghold (1:9-10). Again, “Amen. Give it to them.”

Having looked northeastward, southwestward, and northwestward, the prophet now turns southeastward and pronounces judgment on Edom (1:11-12). Still staying east of the Jordan valley, he takes in Ammon (1:13-15) and Moab (2:1-3). The crowd is warming up enthusiastically to this man’s preaching.

But now he comes closer home. “For three transgressions of Judah . . . ” (2:4-5). Some applaud again; but others remain silent, feeling a little uneasy. Where will the prophet turn next?

b. *Woe on Israel’s Sins*. He does not leave them long in doubt. “Thus saith the Lord; For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof . . . ” (2:6-8). The crowd listens in sullen silence as Amos paints a black picture of Israel’s sins. The prophet is God’s prosecuting attorney. Here are the charges: oppression of the poor, slavery, injustice, immorality, idolatry, drunkenness.

Relentlessly the preacher drives on. God destroyed the Amorites and gave you their land. But now you are following in their footsteps. “Behold, I will press you in your place, as a cart presseth that is full of sheaves” (2:13, A.R.V.). The judgments of God are about to ride over His disobedient people. And there will be no escape (2:14-15).

3. THE PROPHET OF JUSTICE

a. *The Blight of Injustice.* Amos is the great prophet of justice. His soul rebels against the selfishness and greed of the wealthy. While they live in luxury in their winter houses, summer houses, ivory houses, and great houses (3:15), they "oppress the poor" and "crush the needy" (4:1). Their extreme avarice is described very graphically by Amos. He says, in one of the striking hyperboles of all literature, that they "pant after the dust of the earth on the head of the poor" (2:7).

As indignation stirs the prophet's soul he becomes a bit ironical. "Come to Bethel, and transgress; to Gilgal, and multiply transgression; and bring your sacrifices every morning, and your tithes every three days . . . for this pleaseth you, O ye children of Israel, saith the Lord Jehovah" (4:4-5, A.R.V.). Like many since their time, they seemed to think that religious observances could take the place of righteous living.

The pathetic plaint, "Yet have ye not returned unto me," occurs no less than five times in chapter four (vv. 6, 8, 9, 10, 11). In each case it is preceded by a reminder of God's judgments. Famine, thirst, destruction of crops, pestilence, war—all these were warnings from God. But they had been treated with stupidity and contempt. So God issues His final word of solemn warning: "Prepare to meet thy God, O Israel" (4:12).

b. *God's Mercy Spurned.* But mercy seasons justice, and again God's tone turns to one of pleading. "Seek ye me, and ye shall live" (5:4). It is not yet too late to repent.

But the people resent any warning. "They hate him that rebuketh in the gate" (5:10). So God issues another reminder. "For I know your manifold transgressions and your mighty sins" (5:12).

Misled by complacent conceptions of national victory, people are asking for the day of the Lord. "Woe unto

you that desire the day of the Lord! to what end is it for you? the day of the Lord is darkness, and not light. As if a man did flee from a lion, and a bear met him; or went into the house, and leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him. Shall not the day of the Lord be darkness, and not light? even very dark, and no brightness in it?" (5:18-20.) The language here reminds us of the modern saying about jumping from the frying pan into the fire. Little did they realize what they were asking for.

The picture which Amos paints of the day of the Lord agrees with that found elsewhere in the Minor Prophets. It is a day of darkness and destruction. It is God's day of judgment.

4. RIGHTEOUSNESS RATHER THAN RITUAL

The heart of the message of Amos is found in 5:21-24. "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I will take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Yea, though ye offer me your burnt-offerings and meal-offerings, I will not accept them; neither will I regard the peace-offerings of your fat beasts. Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols. But let justice roll down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream" (A.R.V.). What God wants is not religiousness but righteousness. No amount of the former can substitute for the latter. Amos saw clearly that true religion consists of righteousness rather than ritual.

a. Captivity Predicted. The prophet winds up this part of his message with a definite warning of captivity: "Therefore will I cause you to go into captivity beyond Damascus, saith the Lord, whose name is The God of hosts" (5:27). His hearers could hardly fail to catch the reference to Assyria, the nation which had already weakened Syria and constituted a threat to the security of Israel.

But the people were lounging in a languor of careless indifference. And so the prophet turned his attention to

the capital city. "Woe to them that are at ease in Zion, and trust in the mountain of Samaria" (6:1). Omri, the father of Ahab, had chosen the site of Samaria on an easily fortified hill. He and his successors had built strong defenses, so that it later took the Assyrians three years to capture the city. But the people were lulling themselves to sleep in a false sense of security. Their sins would yet bring about the destruction of the capital.

5. THE SIN OF SAMARIA

On one of his annual trips north to sell wool, Amos had visited Samaria. There he had witnessed the luxury and love of ease that characterized the upper strata of its society. Under the rule of Jeroboam II (787-747) the northern kingdom of Israel had reached its greatest period of power, prosperity, and peace. This "ease era" helps us to date the Book of Amos at about 760 or 750, in the middle of the eighth century B.C.

What he had seen in Samaria now stirred the prophet to speak out in stern denunciation: "Ye that put far away the evil day, and cause the seat of violence to come near; that lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches, and eat the lambs out of the flock, and the calves out of the midst of the stall; that chant to the sound of the viol, . . . that drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the chief ointments: but they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph" (6:3-6). Reclining with soft cushions on expensive couches, they dined and drank to the sound of music. It is a typical description of pleasure-loving society in all ages.

6. FIVE VISIONS

a. A Swarm of Locusts. In the first vision Amos saw a swarm of locusts devouring everything green (7:1-3). This would mean famine, one of the most feared disasters in a country living largely from hand to mouth. The prophet pleaded for mercy and God withdrew His threat of judgment.

b. *A Devouring Fire.* In the second vision Amos beheld a destroying fire threatening the land (7:4-6). Again God heard his prayer and withheld His hand.

c. *A Plumb Line.* The third vision revealed God standing with a plumb line in His hand (7:7-9). This time no plea could turn Him aside. As God set His plumb line of justice up against the religious, moral, social, and economic life in Israel, the prophet could be only too painfully aware of the result. The nation was seen to be sadly out of line, sagging over so far that it must soon topple to its ruin.

Interlude: Amos and Amaziah

At this juncture the prophet's preaching was suddenly interrupted. Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, had been listening with growing anger to this rude rustic from the wilderness of Judah. Now he heard words that demanded action. The prophet had cried: "I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword" (7:9).

As the king's representative, Amaziah could not let such treasonable words go unchallenged. Dispatching a messenger with all haste to tell Jeroboam, the priest now confronted the prophet. "O thou seer, go, flee thee away into the land of Judah, and there eat bread, and prophesy there: but prophesy not again any more at Beth-el: for it is the king's chapel, and it is the king's court" (7:12-13).

Quickly Amos denied the charge that he was a hireling prophet, preaching only for bread. Said he to Amaziah: "I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son; but I was an herdman, and a gatherer of sycomore fruit: and the Lord took me as I followed the flock, and the Lord said unto me, Go, prophesy unto my people Israel" (7:14-15). Here was a man divinely called and divinely commissioned. His new role was due to no sudden notion. God "took" him, laid hold of him, impressed him into service. He could say with Paul: "Woe is unto me, if I preach not!"

The prophet's regular occupation was that of a "dresser of sycomore-trees" (A.R.V.). It was his task to pinch or slit the figs to make them ripen more quickly. An inferior species of fig, eaten only by the poor, was the kind referred to here.

d. A Basket of Summer Fruit. A fourth vision is seen by Amos—a basket of summer fruit (8:1-3). There is a play on words in the Hebrew which the English obscures. The word for summer fruit is closely akin to the word for end. And so God declares: "The end is come upon my people of Israel; I will not again pass by them any more." Just as the summer fruit in the basket will soon perish in the heat, so the nation is to perish.

Once more the prophet launches forth on a denunciation of the injustice of the rich. "Hear this, O ye that swallow up the needy, even to make the poor of the land to fail, saying, When will the new moon be gone, that we may sell corn? and the sabbath, that we may set forth wheat, making the ephah small, and the shekel great, and falsifying the balances by deceit? That we may buy the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes; yea, and sell the refuse of the wheat?" (8:4-6.) Here are men, already with abundance, grasping greedily for more. They even begrudge the sacred days set apart for worship, so eager are they to make every dishonest penny they possibly can.

Because they are consumed with an insatiable passion for material gain, God declares that they will forfeit their spiritual heritage. "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord" (8:11).

e. The Lord Beside the Altar. The last vision the prophet sees is the Lord standing upon or beside the altar (9:1). That place, desecrated by idolatry, becomes the place of judgment. God warns that not one sinner shall

be able to escape His wrath. No matter where one flees, God will search him out.

Then comes a graphic figure of God's judgment. It is not only for the destruction of the wicked, but also for the salvation of the righteous. "For, lo, I will command, and I will sift the house of Israel among all nations, like as corn is sifted in a sieve, yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth" (9:9). The sifting process is one of separation. But only the chaff will be thrown away. All the good grain will be carefully garnered.

The Book of Amos ends on a note of hope and promise. The closing verses give us a beautiful picture of peace and prosperity. God will restore His people from captivity and bless them in their land. The closing promise that they shall be planted there and no more plucked up is just now being fulfilled. In the midst of our present chaos and confusion we can take refuge in the assurance that God's purposes never fail. No matter how black the night of sin, there will be a glorious sunrise tomorrow.

B. Obadiah—The Tragedy of Brotherly Hate

Name: means "worshiper of Jehovah"

Date: probably eighth or sixth century B.C.

Place: Judah

Outline: I. Destruction of Edom (vv. 1-16)

II. Restoration of Israel (vv. 17-21)

Outstanding verse to memorize: v. 17

1. JACOB VERSUS ESAU

It was a family feud of long standing—like that of the Hatfields and the McCoys. But this began deeper and went farther.

A mother was about to give birth to her first child. As she felt the movement of life within, gradually she

sensed the struggle of two lives. When she went to prayer about the matter, she was informed that within her were "two nations"—even more, "two manner of people" (Gen. 25:23).

And so it was. Rebekah became the mother of twins. The two boys, Esau and Jacob, grew up together. But from the beginning it was evident that here were two very different personalities.

It was not only that Jacob was a man of the tents and Esau a hunter who roamed the fields. The fundamental difference was in their attitudes towards their ancestral heritage. Esau flippantly sold his birthright for a mess of pottage. Despising the birthright, he lost the blessing.

But this event brought to a head the jealousies and rivalries of childhood and youth. It was bad enough for Jacob to take advantage of his hungry brother; it was far worse for him to deceive his blind father. Things had gone too far. Murder in his heart, Esau bided his hour of revenge.

Only the mother's quick-witted action averted a murder in the family. But the quarrel between two brothers became a malicious hatred between two nations—Israel and Edom. Jacob's descendants paid a high price for Jacob's deception.

2. ISRAEL VERSUS EDMOM

Centuries passed, and the new nation of Israel was headed for the Promised Land. At the borders of Edom a courteous request was sent ahead from "thy brother Israel" for a safe passage through this mountainous country. The reply was a flat refusal, backed up by a nasty threat: "Thou shalt not pass by me, lest I come out against thee with the sword" (Num. 20:18). So the Israelites had to take a long, circuitous route around Edom.

In the time of the kingdom Saul fought against the Edomites and David conquered them. From that time on, the strife was bitter and prolonged.

But it was probably in connection with the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. that Edom took unholy delight in his sweet morsel of revenge. When Nebuchadnezzar's armies invaded Judah, dethroned its king, and destroyed its capital, they found a willing ally in neighboring Edom. In that awful hour of Judah's downfall, his brother stood aloof and laughed aloud.

It was probably this, or an earlier invasion, which provoked the outburst of prophetic denunciation we find in Obadiah. The twenty-one verses of this shortest book of the Old Testament are full of protest and pronouncements of judgment. Paterson has called it "a hymn of hate." But that is unfair. It is rather a declaration of God's eternal opposition to the lack of brotherly love. The outstanding characteristics of Edom were those which Divine Love abhors.

3. THE PRIDE OF EDMON

a. *Petra, the Impregnable.* Edom's pride was due mainly to two facts. The first was the almost impregnable position of its capital city, Petra. It was well named, for Petra is the Greek word for rock. The city was situated at the end of a long, narrow valley, so that it was almost impossible for an enemy to capture it.

George L. Robinson, in *The Sarcophagus of an Ancient Civilization*, has given us an extensive and vivid picture of the city of Petra, as it appears today. One chapter is devoted to "The Sik," or narrow gorge leading into the city. He declares that in ancient times a dozen men could have defended the pass against a whole army of Arab invaders. It was this, together with the rugged mountains that practically encompassed the stronghold, which gave its inhabitants a proud feeling of security.

The narrow gorge twists and turns like a serpent's trail. On either side the massive walls rise to a height of some two hundred feet, shutting out the light of the sun even in the middle of the day. At some places the pass is only a dozen or twenty feet wide. This cleft in the cliffs continues for about a mile and a half, when it suddenly opens into a tiny, transverse valley. There, right in front of the traveler, is the Khazneh, or Temple of Isis, ninety feet high and sixty feet wide, carved in the beautiful, rose-tinted sandstone of that region. Those who have seen it describe it as a breath-taking sight. Of course, this temple comes from Roman times.

After following the gorge for another quarter of a mile one comes to the site of Edomite Petra. Here are walls with hundreds of tombs and dwellings carved in the face of them. This is the city that dwelt secure in its mountain fastness and looked down with condescension, if not contempt, on the world about.

With this picture of the city and its surroundings we are better able to understand and appreciate the words of the ancient prophet. In the third and fourth verses of his brief book he cries:

*The pride of thine heart hath deceived thee,
Thou that dwellest in the clefts of the rock,
Whose habitation is high;
That saith in his heart,
Who shall bring me down to the ground?*

*Though thou exalt thyself as the eagle,
And though thou set thy nest among the stars,
Thence will I bring thee down,
Saith the Lord.*

One day we stood on the observation platform at Inspiration Point in the Canyon of the Yellowstone. As

we gazed enrapt at the indescribably beautiful colors of the gorge below us, suddenly we spied an eagle's nest sitting securely on a lonely crag. Four little eaglets, we could see through our binoculars, were stirring in the nest. But they were perfectly safe, for no foot of man or beast could reach their "nest among the stars."

Thus it was with ancient Petra. But God declares through His prophet: "Thence will I bring thee down." And today, Petra, like Babylon and Nineveh, lies in ruins.

Even Edom's allies would forsake her and deal treacherously with her (v. 7). The expression "they that eat thy bread" evidently refers to the custom of that section of the world. It is still an unwritten law among the Arabs that if you eat with anyone you cannot afterwards harm him. Eating together is a symbol and pledge of peace. To break this custom is one of the most serious crimes among the dwellers in the desert.

b. *Edom's Wise Men.* We have said that there were two causes of Edom's pride. The second was the great reputation for wisdom enjoyed by the descendants of Esau. "Shall I not in that day, saith the Lord, even destroy the wise men out of Edom?" (v. 8.) Specific reference is made to "thy mighty men, O Teman." The city of Teman was considered to be one of the great centers of wisdom in ancient times. One of Job's three would-be comforters is called "Eliphaz the Temanite." He was evidently one of the outstanding wise men of that day.

4. EDMON'S CRUELTY TO ISRAEL

Edom's pride led to cruelty toward the brother nation of Israel. And so we come to the heart of Obadiah's complaint, in verses 10-14. "For thy violence against thy brother Jacob shame shall cover thee, and thou shalt be cut off for ever."

a. *Greedy Spoilers.* What, specifically, did Edom do? "In the day that thou stoodest on the other side, in the

day that strangers carried away captive his forces, and foreigners entered into his gates, and cast lots upon Jerusalem, even thou wast as one of them." This attitude is expressed even more clearly in the next verse: "Neither shouldest thou have rejoiced over the children of Judah in the day of their destruction; neither shouldest thou have spoken proudly in the day of distress." But it was not only a matter of negative attitude. Edom was guilty of positive action: "Thou shouldest not have entered into the gate of my people in the day of their calamity; . . . nor have laid hands on their substance in the day of their calamity."

Archaeology has discovered to us the fact that when the Jewish captives returned from Babylonia they found the Edomites had taken over a considerable portion of southern Judah. Under pressure from the Nabatean Arabs from the eastern desert, the Edomites had pushed on up the Negeb, the southern part of Palestine. In fact, there is clear evidence that they had taken possession as far north as Hebron, only twenty miles south of Jerusalem. In the time of Christ this region was known as Idumea, and it was from here that the much-feared and much-hated Herod came.

b. *Traitors in Time of Need.* A still more vivid touch is given (v. 14) regarding the activities of Edom. "Neither shouldest thou have stood in the crossway [or mountain passes], to cut off those of his that did escape; neither shouldest thou have delivered up those of his that did remain in the day of distress." When the besieged people of Judah tried to escape across the Jordan, they were apprehended by the watchful Edomites and turned over to the enemy. Apparently Edom wanted to be on the good side of these invaders from the east, but her action against Israel was inexcusable.

So the prophet pours out upon this heathen nation the divine pronouncements of doom and destruction

(vv. 15-20). God will give deliverance to His people. As with most of the prophets, Obadiah ends with a note of triumph: "The kingdom shall be the Lord's."

5. THE MESSAGE FOR OUR DAY

Just what is the lesson of this book for our day? Part of the answer may be found in the description of Esau given in Heb. 12:16. There he is called a "profane person." G. Campbell Morgan writes: "The profane person is one who has no spiritual conception, whose life is that of pure materialism."¹

This characteristic evidently marked Esau's descendants. It is significant that the Old Testament nowhere makes reference to the gods of Edom, although archaeology has discovered remains of Edomite idolatry.

Obadiah is speaking for God, asserting that the right will triumph ultimately, that God will put down the proud and exalt His humble ones. It is a message fresh for every age.

Questions for Discussion

1. How did the background of Amos affect his outlook on life?
2. What are the usual effects of living in luxury?
3. What is God's "passing grade" in the test of life (cf. "plumbline").
4. How do our relations with men affect our relations with God?
5. What is God's attitude towards national cruelty?

III

JONAH and MICAH

A. Jonah—Salvation for All Nations

Name: means "a dove"

Home: Gath-hepher (II Kings 14:25), in Galilee, four miles north of Nazareth

Date: in reign of Jeroboam II, king of Israel (787-747 B.C.)

Place: Nineveh

Outline: I. Jonah disobeying: running from God (c. 1)

II. Jonah praying: running to God (c. 2)

III. Jonah preaching: running with God (c. 3)

IV. Jonah complaining: running ahead of God
(c. 4)

Outstanding verse to memorize: 2:9

1. THE CITY OF NINEVEH

There it lay spread before him in all its sprawling greatness. Nineveh! Jonah gazed upon the city with mingled awe and anger. Here was his divinely appointed destination.

Diodorus, a Greek historian of the first century before Christ, tells us that the circumference of Nineveh was about sixty miles. That agrees strikingly with the statement in Jonah (3:3) that Nineveh was "an exceeding great city of three days' journey," for twenty miles was an average day's walk.

Archaeologists have traced the ruins of the walls of ancient Nineveh, extending some three miles in length and less than a mile and a half in width. But the term Nineveh in both Diodorus and the Book of Jonah refers

obviously to the city and its suburbs. This great metropolis contained a population of well over half a million souls.

2. THE PROTESTING PROPHET (c. 1)

It was to this heathen people that Jonah had been sent. But the prophet balked at his assignment. He knew God's love well enough to guess that Nineveh's repentance might result in Jehovah's forgiveness. And he did not want this heathen city spared; he wanted it destroyed.

After all, was not Nineveh the great enemy of mankind, the cruel oppressor of God's people? Why should she be permitted to continue longer her cruel conquests?

And so, instead of taking the long trek northward and eastward to Nineveh, the rebellious prophet headed westward. Going down to Joppa, Israel's leading seaport of that day, he boarded a ship for Tarshish. This is evidently Tartessus, in Spain, near the Straits of Gibraltar. He was going to the very western end of the Mediterranean, as far away "from the presence of the Lord" (1:3) as he could get.

Everything seemed to be moving along smoothly. The prophet paid his fare and went to his stateroom (?) down in the sides of the ship (1:5). Soon he was "fast asleep"—and snoring, as the Greek version adds. Evidently he was snoring so loudly that he did not hear the rising roar of the storm outside, nor the creaking of the ship's planks as it was battered by the waves.

But soon he wakened out of his "deep sleep" (the same Hebrew word as in Gen. 2:21) to find the captain shaking him roughly and shouting in his ear: "Get up and pray!" But poor Jonah was trying to hide from God and was in no mood for praying.

The situation became so desperate that the sailors finally decided there must be a "Jonah on board," as we would now say. In keeping with the times, they cast lots

to see who was the cause of their troubles. So Jonah changed from surface ship to submarine. Cast into the raging sea, he found God's prepared fish awaiting him.

3. THE PRAYING PROPHET (c. 2)

We do not read that Jonah prayed on shipboard, even when commanded to do so by the captain. But now, with the waves closed over him and seaweed wrapped around his head, he cried desperately for help. When he had prayed through and was ready to mind God, the fish deposited him safely on land.

Again God spoke, and this time the prophet obeyed. The Hebrews were poor sailors at best, and Jonah had no desire for any repetition of his marine adventures. Although he went grudgingly toward Nineveh, nevertheless he went.

And so we find him standing on the banks of the Tigris River. He didn't want to go forward, but he didn't dare to go back. What would be the effect of his preaching? Well, there was no alternate for him.

4. THE PREACHING PROPHET (c. 3)

Jonah pushed on into the suburbs of the city, crying at the top of his voice: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (3:4). For three days he walked its streets and warned its people.

And then it happened—just what he had feared. The people repented, from the king on his throne to the least slave in his hovel. And so God also repented, in conformity with their change, and the doomed city was saved.

5. THE POUTING PROPHET (c. 4)

But that upset Jonah terribly. He had once prayed for God to save him from a watery grave. Now he prays

to die. After finding fault with God for being merciful, he groans out his grief: "Therefore now, O Lord, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live" (4:3).

The fourth chapter is a strange mixture of humor and pathos. Someone has said that God must have a sense of humor, or He would not have made some of the queer animals we see. Certainly God is not bereft of one of the most salutary qualities in the human personality.

Jonah was acting, not like a mature man of God, but like a spoiled child. Here we see him complaining and pouting, peevish and perverse. What a preacher! Angry because people repented at his preaching!

God dealt with him as a wise parent would with a peevish child. He said: "Doest thou well to be angry?" (4:4); or, as the Septuagint (Greek) has it: "Art thou very angry?" Perhaps we should not say that God was teasing the poor, peeved prophet. But at least He was trying to shame him into seeing how silly his actions and attitudes were.

All the answer God received was sullen silence. Jonah was running true to form. He was all out of sorts, and he showed it plainly. Instead of replying, he walked out of the city and built himself a little booth. In its shade he sat down to see what would happen to the city.

There God taught him a lesson. He gave him a gourd for added protection and then took it away again. To add to the prophet's discomfort, God sent a hot east wind from the arid desert. Soon Jonah was again in a funeral frame of mind: "It is better for me to die than to live" (4:8).

Then God took the perverse prophet in hand. Jonah had rejoiced at the appearance of the gourd for his own comfort. Then he had pitied himself and the poor dying gourd. Now God says: "Should I not have pity on Nineveh?" (4:11.)

That is the great text of the Book of Jonah. The word for "pity" in verse 10 is the same as the word for "spare" in verse 11. It may be rendered "care for." The pathetic thing was that Jonah cared more for an insignificant plant than he did for the hundreds of thousands of souls in Nineveh. But that sin is being repeated every day by professing Christians.

6. THE INTERPRETATION OF THE BOOK

How are we to interpret this book? "Just another big fish story," say some. But such a remark is not only a denial of the divine inspiration of the Bible; it is also an insult to the intelligence of both Jews and Christians, who have accepted this as a part of their sacred Scriptures. In fact, the Jews held it in high esteem, and chose it as the special scripture to be read on the Day of Atonement.

There are three main interpretations that have been held by Biblical scholars: the mythical, the allegorical, and the historical. Which are we to choose?

a. *The Mythical View.* The mythical view holds that the Book of Jonah is pure fiction, the figment of someone's imagination. But Raymond Calkins (*The Modern Message of the Minor Prophets*, p. 168) has well pointed out that a short story writer would have given the narrative a different ending. Neither can it be treated as the reflection of pagan myths, as held by some.

b. *The Allegorical View.* The allegorical interpretation finds adherence among the bulk of modern scholars, such as George Adam Smith. According to this theory, Jonah represents the nation of Israel, and the fish represents the Babylonian captivity. Two outstanding recent writers on the prophets, Raymond Calkins and John Paterson, give a good presentation of this view. Obviously, it has much to commend it. But George L. Robinson (*The Twelve Minor Prophets*, pp. 86 f.) has pointed out two objections to this interpretation. The

first is that no other allegory in the Old Testament has a historical person as its hero. The second is the presence of miracle, which Robinson avers is never found in parables and allegories.

c. *The Historical View.* The third view is the historical interpretation, which was held almost universally by both Jews and Christians until the last century. Robinson cites in favor of this the narrative form of the book; the testimony of *Tobit*, *Third Maccabees*, and the *Antiquities* of Josephus; and the changed attitude toward the Book of Hosea, once widely held as allegorical but now commonly interpreted as actual history.

(1) Jonah, Placed in History

One of the main arguments for the historicity of Jonah is, of course, the historical reference to the prophet in II Kings 14:25. Critics admit that such a man lived. He prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II, king of Israel (787-747 B.C.). He came from Gath-hepher in Galilee, about four miles north of Nazareth. It has been well suggested that a later writer would hardly wish to use the prophet Jonah as an example of narrow-minded bigotry if there were no historical foundation for the portrayal given.

(2) Jonah, Mentioned by Christ

Jesus' use of Jonah will bulk large in the thinking of conservatives. He referred to Jonah's experience in the fish as a symbol of His own death and resurrection. He also mentioned Jonah's preaching at Nineveh in the same connection with the Queen of Sheba's visit to Solomon. Certainly the latter was not simply an allegory.

d. *For Us: a Combination.* What view, then, are we to accept? Probably a combination of the last two: the story of Jonah as history, and also as an allegory of what was to happen to the nation in the dark days of the Babylonian captivity.

One reason for including the allegorical interpretation is the striking coincidence between the language of Jonah's experience and that of Jer. 51:34, 44—"Nebuchadrezzar the king of Babylon hath devoured me . . . he hath swallowed me up like a dragon, he hath filled his belly." God answers: "I will punish Bel in Babylon, and I will bring forth out of his mouth that which he hath swallowed up." The same Hebrew word for "swallowed" (*bala*) is used in both books.

7. THE MIRACLES IN JONAH

a. A Great Fish. Two miracles in the book have given the critics a great deal of difficulty. The first is that of the great fish. Someone has said that "the sea-monster has swallowed the commentators as well as the prophet." G. Campbell Morgan observes: "Men have been so busy with the tape measure endeavoring to find the dimensions of the fish's belly that they seem to have had no time to plumb the depths of the divine revelation."¹

The first thing that should be said is that there is no mention of a whale in the Book of Jonah. There we read that "the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah" (1:17). This "great fish" is referred to in popular language as a "whale" in Matt. 12:40. It has often been claimed that sharks, which are fish, have swallowed men whole. It could be that the sea monster that swallowed Jonah was specially created for the event. But the more natural way to take the language of this passage is that God arranged the coming of a large sea monster at the right time.

The more difficult problem is the survival of Jonah inside the fish. And one cannot tear the miraculous out of the Bible without pulling the whole fabric of divine revelation to pieces. It is a part of the warp and woof of Scripture. As believers in the Bible, we do not hesitate to accept this miracle.

b. *A Great Revival.* The second miracle that has been criticized is that of the conversion of Nineveh. Many Occidental scholars have failed to take into account the volatile nature of Orientals. Mass hysteria is easily induced among more primitive peoples. It is not without significance, also, that ancient records describe a 100-day fast ordered by the rulers of Nineveh shortly before its collapse in 612 B.C. Of course, this cannot be identified with the fast mentioned in Jonah, but it furnishes a striking parallel from a later time.

It has been common to poke fun at the inclusion of animals in the king's proclamation of a fast. But again we are closing our eyes to Oriental habits. Herodotus, the great Greek historian, describes how the Persians clipped the hair of their horses and beasts of burden as a part of national mourning for a noted general.

How foreign to the facetious way that Jonah is often treated are these words from C. H. Cornill, the great German scholar:²

I have read the book of Jonah at least a hundred times, and I will publicly avow, for I am not ashamed of my weakness, that I cannot even now take up this marvelous book, nay, nor even speak of it, without tears rising to my eyes, and my heart beating higher. This apparently trivial book is one of the deepest and grandest that was ever written, and I should like to say to every one who approaches it, Take off thy shoes, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.

8. THE VALUE OF THE BOOK

a. *Salvation Is International.* Above and beyond the much disputing about the book we find obvious lessons. The greatest message of this prophetic story is God's desire to save all men. Jonah is an example of the bigoted attitude of many Jews toward the Gentiles. Ac-

according to the Talmud the Gentiles were "as the spittle that falleth from a man's mouth." This contemptuous attitude has had terrific repercussions in modern times.

Salvation was for the Jews. The Gentiles were not included in God's covenant with His people. For them there was no hope. The Book of Jonah was a trumpet blast against this narrow, nationalistic outlook.

George Adam Smith tells how he once asked a cultured layman of the Greek Orthodox church why God created so many Mohammedans. The quick and fervent reply was: "To fill up hell!" That comes too close to the attitude exhibited by the prophet toward the thousands of people in Nineveh. He would have rejoiced to see the city and its inhabitants buried in ruins.

The Book of Jonah is thus seen to be one of the great foreign missionary books of all time. In common with the little Book of Ruth it shows that Gentiles may be brought within God's covenant. Salvation depends on repentance, not on race.

b. Other Lessons. Other clear lessons in the book could be mentioned. One cannot run away from God's presence. Disobedience is expensive. God's threats are conditional; if we change, He will change. The path of disobedience always leads downward.

In this day of racial, religious, and economic prejudice, when the need of foreign missions is so exceedingly crucial we might well weigh again the message of the Book of Jonah. God has "other sheep."

B. Micah—The Defender of the Poor

Name: "Who is like Jehovah?"

Home: Moresheth-gath, about twenty miles southwest of Jerusalem

Date: about 740-700 B.C. (same as Isaiah)

Place: southern kingdom of Judah

Outline: I. Judgment (cc. 1—3)

II. Comfort (cc. 4—5)

III. Reproof and Promise (cc. 6—7)

Outstanding verses to memorize: 4: 1-2; 5: 2; 6: 8

1. THE CALL OF THE PROPHET

a. Twilight on the Land. The sun was setting over the Mediterranean. From his vantage point on a hillside some thousand feet above the sea and twenty miles distant, Micah watched its silver sheen turn to mellow gold and then to fiery red. In the hush of the evening a few birds twittered and chirped. It was the prophet's hour of meditation, his sunset tryst with God.

Below him lay a broad plain between the Shephelah and the sea, dotted with the cities of Israel's ancient enemy, the Philistines. Nearby was his home village of Moresbeth-gath, which gave him his identification as "Micah the Morasthite." Back of him, higher up in the hills, was the cave of Adullam, where David had hidden from Saul. It seemed tonight that the hillsides echoed with the cries of the yesteryears.

Still farther up the slopes his mind carried him, to the village of Bethlehem, perched high on the Judean plateau three thousand feet above the sea. The city of David! Would that God would send another deliverer to His people, another king to rule over them in righteousness! In the king's palace at Jerusalem, just north of Bethlehem, the weak and wicked Jotham held court. An unworthy successor to his father, Uzziah, he had led the nation astray into sin and idolatry. How long would it be until God's wrath would be poured out on a disobedient nation? Sadly the prophet turned his eyes back toward the setting sun.

Just before the ball of fire took its plunge into the watery depths, there to be extinguished for another night,

a dark cloud rose out of the sea and drew a curtain across the sun's face. As the cloud mounted higher and higher, a cold shudder swept over the landscape. Darkness came stalking across the hills and valleys, with night following hard on his heels. Day had dropped his instruments of noise and slipped away.

b. *Twilight for a Nation.* Seated there in the gathering gloom, the prophet shivered with foreboding fear. It seemed that in the stillness of the night he could hear footsteps approaching. Loudly in his soul they sounded with prophetic significance. "For, behold, the Lord cometh forth out of his place, and will come down, and tread upon the high places of the earth. And the mountains shall be molten under him, and the valleys shall be cleft, as wax before the fire, and as the waters that are poured down a steep place (1:3-4).

But why such a visitation from God? "For the transgression of Jacob is all this, and for the sins of the house of Israel" (1:5).

Where would God strike first? The prophet did not have to listen long for the answer. "Therefore I will make Samaria as an heap of the field, and as plantings of a vineyard: and I will pour down the stones thereof into the valley, and I will discover the foundations thereof" (1:6).

Micah belonged to the southern kingdom of Judah. It was bad enough to know that judgment was soon to strike Samaria, the capital of northern Israel; but how about Jerusalem? The answer came: "Not yet." The prophet saw the flood of God's wrath approach the walls of Zion. "It reacheth unto the gate of my people, even to Jerusalem" (1:9, A.R.V.). But there it stopped. Judgment was stayed for the time being.

And then, as Micah thought of the cities and villages around him, his inspired mind found expression in a

series of puns. Moffatt has attempted to reproduce in English the play on words connected with the names of these towns (1:10-14):

*Weep tears at Teartown (Bochim),
grovel in the dust at Dustown (Beth-ophrah)
fare forth stripped, to Fairtown (Saphir)!*
Stirtown (Zaanan) dare not stir,

.
*Harness your steeds and away, O Horsetown (Lakhish)
O source of Sion's sin!
where the crimes of Israel centre!
O maiden Sion, you must part with
Moresbeth of Gath;
and Israel's kings are ever balked at Balktown (Achzib).*

2. OPPRESSION OF THE POOR

Back in his home, the prophet's pen was dipped in hot lava. "Woe to them that devise iniquity, and work evil upon their beds! when the morning is light, they practise it, because it is in the power of their hand. And they covet fields, and take them by violence; and houses, and take them away: so they oppress a man and his house, even a man and his heritage" (2:1-2).

Micah's main concern was for the plain men of the country, who were being oppressed by the rich. Brought up in humble surroundings, isolated from the capital city by the mountains between, Micah saw what was happening to the common people. He became "the prophet of the poor." When the wealthy were assessed high taxes by the luxury-loving Jotham at Jerusalem, they paid them by seizing the land of the poor farmers. The next king, Ahaz, had to pay tribute to Assyria, besides carrying on an expensive war with Syria and Ephraim (734 B.C.). Avaricious landlords saw to it that the poor bore the brunt of these burdens.

The prophet's heart was stirred to wrath at all this. It seemed that the greedy land owners stopped at nothing. "The women of my people have ye cast out from their pleasant houses; from their children have ye taken away my glory for ever" (2:9).

a. *The Sin of the Princes.* Reports had come from Jerusalem that fanned the flame in Micah's soul. The source of much of the prevalent evil was to be found in the sacred city itself. "And I said, Hear, I pray you, O heads of Jacob, and ye princes of the house of Israel; Is it not for you to know judgment? Who hate the good and love the evil; who pluck off their skin from off them, and their flesh from off their bones; who also eat the flesh of my people, and flay their skin from off them; and they break their bones, and chop them in pieces, as for the pot, and as flesh within the caldron" (3:1-3).

Strong language, that! Micah saw the greedy, selfish, cruel rulers as cannibals. They were plucking off the skin of the poor people, tearing their flesh from their bones, and breaking up their bones to put them into the kettle. It was a scorching accusation, delivered in words that burned with fire. In the prophet's soul there was an echo of God's holy justice.

What was to be the consequence? "Then shall they cry unto the Lord, but he will not hear them: he will even hide his face from them at that time, as they have behaved themselves ill in their doings" (3:4). They had turned a deaf ear to the plaintive pleas of the poor. Now God would refuse to listen to their cries.

b. *The Sin of the Prophets.* From the princes, God's messenger turned his attention to the prophets. "Thus saith the Lord concerning the prophets that make my people err, that bite with their teeth, and cry, Peace; and he that putteth not into their mouths, they even prepare war against him" (3:5). Even the prophets had become

greedy and grasping. Preaching only for hire, they turned savagely on those who failed to put food into their mouths. The nation was in a bad way when those who were supposed to speak for God were concerned only for self.

What was God's verdict? No vision, no light, no answer from God (3:6-7). The false prophets would be covered with shame and confusion.

Not so was it with Micah. "But truly I am full of power by the spirit of the Lord, and of judgment, and of might, to declare unto Jacob his transgression, and to Israel his sin" (3:8). This was the source of his prophetic ministry: power from the Spirit of God.

c. *The Sin of the Priests.* The princes and prophets were joined by the priests in this cavalcade of crime. "The heads thereof judge for reward, and the priests thereof teach for hire, and the prophets thereof divine for money: yet will they lean upon the Lord, and say, Is not the Lord among us? none evil can come upon us" (3:11).

This was their worst crime, the sin of presumption. They committed the common error of supposing that because they were God's chosen people nothing ill could happen to them. It is the same kind of attitude that many church members have today.

3. PRONOUNCEMENT OF DOOM

They were muddy in their thinking. Micah saw clearly that a just God must inevitably punish sin. Jerusalem was not inviolate, any more than Samaria. Because Judah had gone on stubbornly in her defiance and disobedience, the same fate would overtake her as her northern sister. Jerusalem's sentence was strikingly similar to Samaria's. "Therefore shall Zion for your sake be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps, and the mountain of the house as the high places of the forest" (3:12). Micah made this prediction over one

hundred years before its fulfillment in 586 B.C. when Jerusalem was destroyed.

4. PROMISE OF RESTORATION

This pronouncement of doom is followed immediately by a promise of restoration. In the first verses of the fourth chapter, Micah paints one of the brightest pictures of Israel's future glory to be found in the Old Testament. Here it is that we find the oft-quoted passage: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (4:3).

Not only does Micah foretell the destruction of Jerusalem, but he also designates the place of captivity. To Babylon will Judah go, and from Babylon she will be redeemed (4:10).

Then comes one of the great Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament, one that was quoted by the scribes to Herod when Jesus was born. "But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting" (5:2). The Messiah was to come from the family and village of David.

5. THE LORD'S CONTROVERSY

The sixth chapter is labeled "the Lord's controversy" (6:2). Pathetically God asks: "O my people, what have I done unto thee? and wherein have I wearied thee? testify against me" (6:3). He reminds them of His love and care in the past.

Micah was one with Amos and Hosea in his attitude toward ritual. "Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the high God? shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? shall I give my firstborn for my

transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" (6:6-7.)

6. TRUE RELIGION

The answer comes in one of the greatest passages in the entire Old Testament. It summarizes God's demands of men. "He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (6:8.) No one can fulfill these requirements and fail to please God. For one must make his peace with God before he can walk humbly with Him.

The Talmud says that David reduced the 613 requirements of the Mosaic law to 11, in the fifteenth psalm. Micah here reduces them to 3. Jesus summed up the law in 2 commandments. There is a unity of emphasis in all of these. Religion means a right relationship to God and a right relationship to one's fellow men. Justice is the basis of all moral living. But one must love kindness to be Christian. And there is no true religion apart from fellowship with God.

7. THE OUTLOOK

As we come to the last chapter we can imagine Micah back on the hillside near Moresheth-gath, watching another sunset. He has been faithful in delivering God's message to the people. What is the result?

"Woe is me!" he cries (7:1). "The good man is perished out of the earth" (7:2). Instead of seeking to do right, the people "do evil with both hands earnestly" (7:3). The prophet feels decidedly pessimistic: "The best of them is as a brier: and the most upright is sharper than a thorn hedge" (7:4). No one, not even a closest friend or loved one, can be trusted (7:5). It is a gloomy picture indeed, and one that fits well with the blackness of the night. All around is dark. Which way shall the prophet look?

8. THE UPLOOK

Then comes the assertion of faith. "Therefore I will look unto the Lord . . . when I sit in darkness, the Lord shall be a light unto me" (7:7-8).

God's presence brings comfort and assurance. Because Micah looked up until he saw a light, his book closes with a new vision of God's faithfulness and mercy. Out of the blackness of surrounding sin he saw a Saviour. "Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity? . . . thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea" (7:18-19).

It is on this evangelical note that Micah closes his prophecy. It remained for the Babe of Bethlehem to fulfill this picture of salvation.

Questions for Discussion

1. What happens to those who refuse God's call to preach?
2. What is the basis for our believing in miracles?
3. What is the message of Jonah for us today?
4. How may Micah's message on justice in human relationships be applied to our day?
5. What definition would you give of true religion?

IV

NAHUM and HABAKKUK

A. Nahum—God's Curse on Cruelty

Name: "Comforter"

Home: Elkosh, perhaps twenty miles southwest of Jerusalem

Date: between 663 and 612 B.C.

Place: Judah

Outline: I. The Destruction of Nineveh Declared (c. 1)

II. The Destruction of Nineveh Described (c. 2)

III. The Destruction of Nineveh Defended
(c. 3)

Outstanding verses to memorize: 1:3; 1:7

*Hark! the swish of the whip,
hark! the thunder of wheels,
horses a-gallop, chariots hurtling along,
cavalry charging—the flash of the sword,
the gleam of the lance,
the slain in heaps, dead bodies piled,
no end to the corpses—men tripping over the dead!*
(Moffatt, 3:2-3)

Hold on! What's happening here? Happening? Why, Nineveh is falling.

Nineveh? No!

Yes, Nineveh! Nineveh, the great. Nineveh, the impregnable. Nineveh, the powerful. The cruel monster is gasping for breath, lying in the death throes of an awful struggle, defeated, done for, dead.

How? Why? "Behold, I am against thee, saith the Lord of hosts" (2:13; 3:5). That is the answer. The Lord of hosts is attacking her. Her doom is decreed.

But why? Because "thou art vile" (1:14). The inhuman atrocities, the unspeakable cruelties, of ancient Nineveh had made her utterly vile in the sight of heaven. "Woe to the bloody city! it is all full of lies and robbery" (3:1). Such a city must be destroyed.

1. THE CRUELTY OF NINEVEH

Over a century had passed since the prophesying of Jonah. Nineveh had turned back again to its ceaseless course of cruel conquest. The northern kingdom of Israel, where Jonah lived, had been trodden under the heel of the oppressor. In 732 B.C. the prophet's native territory of Galilee had been captured. With the fall of the capital city of Samaria, in 721, the kingdom of Israel came to an end.

But still the bloody conquests went on. Sennacherib invaded the southern kingdom of Judah in 701. His successor, Esarhaddon, conquered Egypt, thus extending the boundaries of the Assyrian Empire beyond the borders of Asia.

The next king, Ashurbanipal, reigned over Assyria when it was at the zenith of its glory. He was a queer combination. On the one hand, he was perhaps the greatest patron of literature in olden times. Everywhere he went he collected ancient manuscripts. The unearthing of his royal library in Nineveh, containing many thousands of clay tablets, is one of the great discoveries of modern times.

But Ashurbanipal's culture was more than matched by his cruelty. He boasts of how he tore off the limbs of kings, compelled three captured rulers to pull his chariot through the streets, forced a prince to wear around his neck the bloody head of his king, and feasted with the head of a Chaldean monarch hanging above him. The Assyrians were noted for their wanton cruelty, but Ashurbanipal seems to have exceeded them all.

It is against this background that the Book of Nahum must be viewed. The occasion of the prophecy is the extreme cruelty of Assyria.

2. DATE OF THE BOOK

Nahum may have actually prophesied during the reign of Ashurbanipal. We know that his prophecy came after 663 B.C., for it was in that year that Ashurbanipal captured Thebes, in Upper Egypt. The prophet warns Nineveh: "Art thou better than populous No [Thebes], that was situate among the rivers? . . . Yet was she carried away, she went into captivity" (3:8-10). The Assyrian capital was to suffer the same fate as the Egyptian city.

On the other hand, the latest date for Nahum would be 612 B.C., when Nineveh was taken by the combined armies of Medes, Babylonians, and Scythians. The Ninevites proclaimed a fast of one hundred days in the effort to placate their gods (cf. Jonah 3:15). But this could not atone for their diabolical cruelties, and the city fell to the invaders.

Some would place the writing of Nahum soon after the fall of Thebes in 663 B.C. But recent scholarship tends to assign it to the period immediately preceding Nineveh's downfall. After Ashurbanipal's death in 626 B.C., the Assyrian Empire went rapidly into eclipse. Its foreign territories were lost and soon Nineveh itself was taken.

3. A DESCRIPTION OF THE CITY

George Adam Smith has given us a rather comprehensive description of ancient Nineveh and its surroundings. The city formed a hub, from which roads ran out in every direction. Along these roads were numerous forts, towers, and posts. But the prophet predicted the quick downfall of these outposts of defense. He declares: "All thy strong holds shall be like fig trees with the first-

ripe figs: if they be shaken, they shall even fall into the mouth of the eater" (3:12). Anyone who has shaken a tree loaded with dead-ripe fruit can appreciate the vividness of this figure.

The city itself was protected by a high wall, seven and a half miles long and thick enough to allow three chariots to ride abreast on its top. Some distance out from the walls there was a moat about one hundred and fifty feet wide. Tradition has it that it was sixty feet deep. Water for the moat was supplied by a canal and by the Khusur River, a tributary of the Tigris. The ruins of dams and sluice gates can still be seen. The massiveness of the walls can also be appreciated from the remains, which still rise as high as sixty feet above the natural surface, with the ruins of an occasional tower rising even higher. In its day ancient Nineveh was the greatest stronghold of western Asia.

But all these tremendous fortifications would avail nothing. "Behold, thy people in the midst of thee are women: the gates of thy land shall be set wide open unto thine enemies: the fire shall devour thy bars" (3:13).

And so the city is warned to prepare for siege. The proud besieger of one great city after another was now about to drink her own bitter brew. "Draw thee waters for the siege, fortify thy strong holds: go into clay, and tread the mortar, make strong the brickkiln" (3:14). In other words, prepare for the worst.

4. THE CAPTURE OF NINEVEH

Two of the most vivid verses in the book describe the first onslaught into the suburbs of the city (2:4; 3:2):

The chariots shall rage in the streets, they shall justle one against another in the broad ways: they shall seem like torches, they shall run like the lightnings.

The noise of a whip, and the noise of the rattling of the wheels, and of the pransing horses, and of the jumping chariots.

The charge of the chariots is accompanied by that of the cavalry: "The horseman lifteth up both the bright sword and the glittering spear" (3:3). The dead corpses pile up in the streets until both defenders and invaders stumble over them.

When the Assyrians had retreated to the protection of the walls, the besiegers would prepare for the final task of battering their way in. The first step would be the building of crude dams across the ditches. Archaeologists have found the eastern moat filled with rubbish right in front of a great breach in the wall.

Tradition claims that the capture of the city was facilitated by the flood waters of the Tigris, or its tributary. These evidently were channeled against the walls or through the sluice gates, thus helping to break a way into the city. Nahum foresaw this when he wrote: "The gates of the rivers shall be opened, and the palace shall be dissolved" (2:6).

The result was the complete collapse of Nineveh. The prophet sees the city as a water reservoir, whose walls have been breached, so that all the water flows out. Thus it happened to the people of Nineveh. Though some cried, "Stand, stand" (2:8), the masses fled in terror. They left the city "desolate, dreary, drained" (2:10, Moffatt).

Proud Nineveh, once destroyed, has been lying desolate ever since. Two mounds, identified in 1842, are all that remain to mark the site. In 331 B.C., Alexander the Great passed the place on his way to conquer the world. Though he failed to recognize the ruins of Nineveh, so completely were they covered, they might have whispered to him a word of warning: "Whatever man builds without God will certainly fall."

5. THE PROPHET'S HOME

Most of the passages noted thus far have been taken from the second and third chapters of Nahum. Now we turn our attention to chapter one.

The first verse gives the heading of the book, indicating the subject and the author. "The burden [or oracle] of Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite."

Nahum's home town, Elkosh, has not been identified. Some find it opposite the site of Nineveh, where the inhabitants still point out his supposed tomb. Another traditional tomb of Nahum was pointed out south of Babylon. Jerome said it was a town in northern Galilee, while others have identified it with Capernaum, the Arabic name of which means "City of Nahum." But the most probable site, it is felt, is in southern Judea, some twenty miles southwest of Jerusalem. It seems most likely that Nahum would have come from Judah, as northern Israel had already gone into captivity.

6. THE ANGER OF GOD

G. Campbell Morgan has made the interesting observation that in the first eight verses of Nahum's prophecy one may find all the words suggesting anger which are in the Hebrew Old Testament. They are translated as "jealous," "revengeth," "wrath," "anger," "indignation," "fierceness," "fury."

He goes on to show, in his typical, thorough, expository manner, that "jealousy" is the result of wrong done to love. "Vengeance" means retribution, not retaliation. "Wrath" means a changed attitude, due to sin. "Anger and indignation" express the activity of wrath. "Fierceness" indicates burning, and "fury" suggests heat.

But what is the source of God's anger? It is His love for His oppressed people. His very wrath is an

expression of His love. We cannot believe in the love of God without also believing in the wrath of God, for love must be angry against wrong. Moral love is more than mere sentiment.

7. NAHUM'S MESSAGE FOR OUR DAY

The message of Nahum is very definitely a message for our day. In the light of the recent atrocities committed by the Nazis in Europe, it is easier to appreciate the strong feelings of the prophet. The unspeakable cruelties of the ancient Assyrians are evidenced in their recently discovered lawbook. Prescribed penalties included gouging out eyes, hacking off hands, slitting noses, cutting off ears, and pouring boiled tar on the head. When helpless captives were the innocent victims of such cruel practices, one can realize the justification for Nahum's indignation.

George A. Gordon once said that there are three tests of a great character: the capacity for a great love, the capacity for a great enthusiasm, and the capacity for a great indignation. Without a sense of indignation against sin and wrong there is no true love.

We need, then, to listen to the message that God would speak to our day through Nahum of old. Raymond Calkins has pointed out its importance. He writes this comment:²

Surely there is a place for a book like Nahum even in the revelation of Grace. Instead of taking the Book of Nahum out of the Bible, we had better leave it there. We need it. It reminds us that love degenerates into a vague diffusion of kindly feeling unless it is balanced by the capacity of a righteous indignation. A man who is deeply and truly religious is always a man of wrath. Because he loves God and his fellow men, he hates and despises inhumanity, cruelty and wickedness. Every good man sometimes prophesies like Nahum.

We close our study of Nahum with a choice memory verse, found in 1:7: "The Lord is good, a strong hold in the day of trouble; and he knoweth them that trust in him." That is a beautiful gem, whose luster shines all the more brightly against the background of the velvety blackness of Nahum's prophecy. Always, everywhere, God is love.

B. Habakkuk—The Battle with Doubt

Name: "Embrace"

Date: about 603 B.C.

Place: Judah

Outline: I. The Punishment of Judah (c. 1)

II. The Punishment of Babylon (c. 2)

III. The Prophet's Prayer (c. 3)

Outstanding verses to memorize: 2:2; 2:4; 2:20; 3:2

*O Lord, how long shall I cry,
And thou wilt not hear!
Even cry out unto thee of violence,
And thou wilt not save!*

Tired of praying? Sounds like it. What's the use of praying when God pays no attention? Why cry out for help when God doesn't save?

But the prophet was persistent. He was convinced that there was a God who did hear prayer, and he determined to keep on praying until he received some kind of answer. So he continued his complaint:

*Why dost thou shew me iniquity,
And cause me to behold grievance?
For spoiling and violence are before me:
And there are that raise up strife and contention.*

1. THE PROPHET'S PROBLEM

Wherever the prophet looked around him in Judah he saw iniquity and grievance, spoiling and violence, strife and contention. Over and over again he had reported to heaven on this bad situation, but heaven did not seem interested. God didn't seem to care if His people went right on sinning. He appeared to have turned a blind eye to the vice of His people and a deaf ear to the voice of His prophet. It just wasn't right!

And the silence of God only made matters worse. Because He did nothing, the people did as they pleased. If this kept on, the morale of the whole nation would be ruined. Anybody could see that. Why couldn't God see it?

Well, the prophet would tell Him.

*Therefore the law is slacked,
And judgment doth never go forth:
For the wicked doth compass about the righteous;
Therefore wrong judgment proceedeth.*

Because God failed to enforce His law with proper penalties, therefore the law was "benumbed" (Moffatt), "paralyzed" (Smith-Goodspeed). Justice was a thing of the past. In fact, it had disappeared: it "doth never go forth." Instead, "perverted judgment proceedeth." Things were all upside down morally. Right was on the scaffold, wrong on the throne.

2. GOD'S ANSWER

"How long?" That was the prophet's question. As Robinson has pointed out, he didn't complain *against* God; he complained *to* God. That was the fair thing and also the wise thing. For God, and only He, had the answer.

a. *The Silent Working of God.* And the answer came. God said that He was getting ready to do something tre-

mendous, something terrible. "Behold ye among the heathen, and regard, and wonder marvellously: for I will work a work in your days, which ye will not believe, though it be told you" (1:5). God *was* busy, though the prophet couldn't see Him working. Here was one of the most important lessons which the prophet had to learn. Some of God's greatest work is done behind the scenes, out of sight. We have to believe even though we cannot see.

b. *The Strange Method God Uses.* But what was this wonderful work which God was about to do? "Lo, I raise up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, which shall march through the breadth of the land" (1:6).

The Chaldeans were coming. That was God's answer to the prophet's cry. The people of Judah *were* to be punished for their sins. The Chaldeans were to be the instrument in God's hand for accomplishing this. "From them shall proceed the judgment of these, and the captivity of these" (1:7, margin).

The punishment would not be pleasant. "They are terrible and dreadful" (1:7). God's people had felt no dread of Him. Now they were to feel the dreadful scourge of invasion by cruel enemies.

The alien armies would sweep in like the rush of wild animals. "Their horses also are swifter than the leopards, and are more fierce than the evening wolves: and their horsemen shall spread themselves . . . ; they shall fly as the eagle that hasteth to eat" (1:8). There would be no escape from the fierce fury of this enemy onslaught.

The people of Judah had reveled in violence. Now the invading hosts "shall come all for violence" (1:9). Justice would have her day at last.

3. DATE OF THE BOOK

The reference to the Chaldeans gives us our main clue for dating the book. Unlike most of the prophets,

Habakkuk tells us nothing as to who he was and whence he came. He furnishes no chronological data at the beginning of his prophecy. But the prediction of a coming Babylonian invasion points to a rather definite period in the history of Israel.

Apparently the people of Judah had begun to feel a false sense of security after the fall of Nineveh, in 612 B.C. Their great enemy, Assyria, was now broken and beaten. They did not grasp the significance of the rising power of Babylonia.

When the Egyptian armies were defeated by the Babylonians at Carchemish, in 605 B.C., the dominant position of the new empire was assured. Babylon became, under Nebuchadnezzar, the great center of world power.

Most scholars, then, would date the writing of Habakkuk between 605 B.C. and Nebuchadnezzar's invasion of Judah in 598 B.C. The new power was looming large on the northeastern horizon. But the people of Judah had not yet awakened to its threat to their peace and safety. And so they were going on serenely in their sins. But the thunderclouds were forming, and already an alert ear might hear a rumbling sound in the distance.

4. THE PROPHET'S PERPLEXITY

a. *Why Use the Chaldeans?* The prophet had listened eagerly to God's answer. But now he was more perplexed than ever. He recognized the purpose of the coming of the Chaldeans. "O Lord, thou hast ordained them for judgment; and, O mighty God, thou hast established them for correction" (1:12). That much is clear enough. But why use the Babylonians? They were worse than the Israelites!

Perplexed still more deeply by the increasing difficulty of the problem, Habakkuk made a new complaint: "Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity: wherefore lookest thou upon them

that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?" (1:13.) The people of Judah were bad enough, to be sure. But they were more righteous than the Chaldeans. Why should the more wicked be used to punish the less wicked? That didn't seem right.

b. *Why Should the Righteous Suffer?* This second problem perplexed the prophet even more than the first one had. Why should the unrighteous prosper at the expense of the righteous? That is a perennial problem of all ages. It seems that the universe is not founded on principles of justice. But what we need to do is what Habakkuk did: wait on the Lord until the light comes.

The Book of Habakkuk is divided into three chapters. The first states the problem—actually a dual one—which perplexed the prophet. The second offers the solution, God's answer to the problem. The third gives the prophet's prayer, one which is filled with praise.

5. THE PROPHET'S PATIENCE

The answer to the prophet's second question (1:13) did not come as readily as the one to his first (1:2-4). But Habakkuk refused to be satisfied with silence. He was determined to tarry until God answered. And so he assumed an attitude of watchful waiting.

*I will take my stand upon my watch-tower,
And station myself upon the rampart;
And watch to see what he will say to me,
And what answer he will make to my complaint.*

(2:1, Smith-Goodspeed)

If we would learn, we must listen. Because we listen so seldom, we learn so little. In this age of literally thousands of voices crashing on our consciousness, clamoring for our time and attention, it seems that we can never find a quiet spot for moments of meditation. Few people do enough real thinking to raise intelligent ques-

tions in their minds. Fewer still take the time to ponder and pray until those doubts are changed from stumbling blocks to steppingstones, by which they climb to higher heights of faith and confidence in God.

6. THE LORD'S ANSWER

Because the prophet waited patiently and persistently, he received the answer to his problem. He is told: "Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it" (2:2). This last clause is often misquoted "that he that runneth may read." But that is not what it says. It is to be plain, so that those who read may have a clear directive to speed them on their way and also plain directions to keep them in the way.

Then the Lord's answer continued: "For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry" (2:3). God's plans were all made; His purposes would inevitably be worked out. But it would take time. Meanwhile the divine counsel was, "Patience."

What was to be the attitude of the prophet while he waited for the fulfillment of the vision? He was to be true and faithful: "The just shall live by his faith" (2:4).

It seems that the primary emphasis of faith here is faithfulness. But the New Testament lifts this text and makes it one of the cornerstones of Christian revelation. We find it quoted there three times (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38). It was Luther's vision of this truth which helped to bring about the great Protestant Reformation. It has ever been a beacon light in the darkness of this world's sin to guide the lost mariner into the harbor of God's love.

This great pillar passage is preceded by a significant statement for Habakkuk: "Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him."

The obvious reference is to Babylonia. On account of her pride she is to be destroyed. "Because thou hast spoiled many nations, all the remnant of the people shall spoil thee" (2:8). God's Word declares: "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18).

George Adam Smith has highlighted this truth in the epigram which he uses as the title for a chapter, "Tyranny Is Suicide." History has confirmed this fact at a thousand points. One only needs to recall such names as Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, and Napoleon Bonaparte. Our generation has furnished more than its share with Mussolini, Hitler, and Stalin. But the righteous, God-fearing ones still live on after haughty tyrants are dead and gone. The future is always with God's faithful, trusting ones.

This, then, is the answer to the prophet's second problem. After God has used the Babylonians to punish the wicked people of Judah, He will in turn punish them for their pride and cruelty. Thus His justice will eventually be vindicated completely. In 586 B.C. the armies of Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem. But within fifty years, in 539 B.C., the great empire which he had founded came to an end with the capture of Babylon by Cyrus the Persian. Thus both the predictions of 1:6 and 2:8 were fulfilled completely.

God had His answer to the prophet's problems. He always has an answer. And He is ready to share the solution with us, if we will only take time to pause and listen. Too many are not willing to wait.

In a beautiful passage in his recent book (*The Modern Message of the Minor Prophets*), Raymond Calkins points out the lesson of the second chapter of Habakkuk:³

The Bible, let us remember, never ends in an interrogation point. Always it ends in a period. Bible writers ask questions, but always also they get answers.

Modern writers ask many questions, raise many doubts, project all kinds of difficulties. But they present no answers, offer no solutions. We are left in mental and moral confusion. Not so the Bible. It also asks many questions, asks every question that tortures the mind of man. But always it ends by giving answers and pointing the way out of doubt and despair. That is one reason why people love their Bibles.

Chapter two concludes with a series of five woes (vv. 6, 9, 12, 15, 19) pronounced upon the cruel despot who is about to oppress the nations of earth. This tyrant, "who enlargeth his desire as hell, and is as death" (2:5), will come to a swift and certain end. In this passage Habakkuk pronounces the doom of all who greedily grasp after everything for their own selfish interest.

The chapter ends with the oft-quoted words: "The Lord is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him." Habakkuk has made an outstanding contribution to both Christian theology and Christian worship.

7. THE PROPHET'S PRAYER

The third chapter is a beautiful prayer of thanksgiving, bursting forth spontaneously from the prophet's satisfied heart. But it begins with a petition for the preservation of God's people: "O Lord, revive thy work in the midst of the years" (v. 2). This prayer has been echoed by concerned and consecrated hearts in all ages.

Then the prophet goes on to praise God for His greatness and goodness. One can feel the relief that has come to his burdened heart. God has finally heard and answered his prayer, and he gladly breathes out his gratitude. Habakkuk is like "one whom his mother comforteth." He leans back in the arms of God with a new and greater sense of restful trust and complete confidence.

The closing verses of the book reveal how unre-served was this faith. In words that constitute a challenge to all of us the prophet declares:

Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.

Sublime faith! But it had been purchased at a price—the agony of doubt. Persistent prayer and patient waiting had brought the prophet into a new experience with God. He was now enjoying the gracious fellowship of faith. It is for all those who press up close to the heart of God.

And so Habakkuk calls us to follow him to the heights. "The Lord God is my strength," he declares, "and he will make my feet like hinds' feet, and he will make me to walk upon mine high places." Alpine views are waiting for those who are willing to climb Alpine peaks. Too many are content to live in the swampy lowlands of unbelief, when the crystal-clear air of the mountains beckons to higher ground.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the lesson for us in the destruction of Nineveh?
2. Does your answer have any bearing on the nearness of Christ's coming?
3. What is the relation between sincere questioning and mature faith?
4. What lesson did you learn from Habakkuk?

V

ZEPHANIAH and HAGGAI

A. Zephaniah—When God Invades the Human Scene

Name: "He whom Jehovah has hidden or protected"

Home: probably Jerusalem

Date: about 625 B.C.

Place: Judah

Outline: I. Judgment on Judah (c. 1)

II. Judgment on Foreign Nations (2:1—3:7)

III. Salvation of the Remnant (3:8-20)

Outstanding verses to memorize: 2:3; 3:17

Silence!—"Hold thy peace at the presence of the Lord God." Listen!—"For the day of the Lord is at hand."

With these words, in the seventh verse of his book, the prophet announces the heart of his message. Zephaniah has one theme: the day of the Lord.

The trumpet tones of his opening utterance are like the blast of a bugle. "I will utterly consume all things from off the land, saith the Lord."

What? Do You really mean that?

Yes, just that! "I will consume man and beast; I will consume the fowls of the heaven, and the fishes of the sea, and the stumblingblocks with the wicked; and I will cut off man from off the land, saith the Lord."

Surely You are talking about the heathen and the lands of the Gentiles!

No, I mean the land of My people. "I will also stretch out mine hand upon Judah, and upon all the inhabitants of Jerusalem."

But why? What's the matter?

1. BAAL WORSHIP

Just this: My people have turned heathen. They are worshiping heathen images and the heavenly bodies. They have forsaken Me and embraced idolatry. Take a look at the record:

I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this place, and the name of the Chemarims with the priests; and them that worship the host of heaven upon the house tops; and them that worship and that swear by the Lord, and that swear by Malcham; and them that are turned back from the Lord; and those that have not sought the Lord, nor enquired for him.

What a picture. God's people! Right in the holy city! Their bodies close to the sacred sanctuary, their hearts full of sordid sin! No wonder that God reacted.

Baal—what memories the name conjured! The Israelites had come into contact with Baal worship when they entered Canaan. The wicked Jezebel had introduced the worship of Baal into northern Israel. Her daughter Athaliah had sought to impose it on the southern kingdom of Judah. Elijah had challenged Baal on Mount Carmel, in one of the great scenes of sacred history. Jehu had destroyed Jezebel and the worshipers of Baal. But still the cult persisted in both kingdoms. It was one of the causes of the Captivity.

One of the most unfortunate features of Baal worship was its immoral rites. Baal was considered to be the god of fertility. Connected with its temples and high places were sacred prostitutes, who were used for the religious rites of reproduction. Morally, Baalism was utterly base and degrading. It is no wonder that the prophets of God spoke out against it with such severity. It threatened to destroy the very moral fiber of the nation.

The Chemarim were evidently the idolatrous priests of Baal. Moffatt calls them "idol-priestlings."

2. OTHER IDOLATRY

Some of the inhabitants of Jerusalem were prostrating themselves on their housetops, worshiping the sun, moon, and stars. Though a higher type of religion in many ways than Baal worship, yet it was still denying the Creator His due.

Others were swearing by Milcom, or Molech, the god of the Ammonites. The shocking feature in the worship of Molech was the burning of children. The law of Moses strictly forbade any Israelite to cause his child to "pass through the fire to Molech" (Lev. 18:21). Yet here were people in Judah still worshiping this hideous heathen god.

God has an answer to all of this. Through His prophet He announces that "the day of the Lord is at hand." He is going to punish the princes and those who have led in this rebellion against Him. The mention of the princes is especially significant in view of the fact that Zephaniah was himself the great-great-grandson of Hezekiah, probably the famous king of Judah (1:1).

3. THE PUNISHMENT OF JERUSALEM

Then comes a graphic description of what will happen in Jerusalem when the divine invasion takes place. Moffatt has produced very well the feel of the original Hebrew of verses 10 and 11:

*Hark! a scream from the Fishgate,
a wail from the New Town!
Havoc on the Heights,
a wail from the Hollow!
For all the traders are undone,
the merchants are wiped out.*

The glimpse we get here of Jerusalem is very vivid. New Town was evidently an extension of the residential area, peopled by the rich, as was also the Heights. Be-

tween them was the low Hollow, with its markets and merchantry. The prophet portrays the sudden howls of anguish from these various groups when struck by the rod of God's anger.

But the divine visitation is not to be a superficial affair. In one of the striking figures of all prophetic writings Zephaniah pictures God going up and down through the streets of Jerusalem with lamps, searching out sin. One is reminded of Diogenes walking the streets of Athens in the daytime with a lighted lantern in his hand. But the object of the search is different. Diogenes said that he was looking for an honest man. God was searching Jerusalem to discover and punish the wicked.

The ones in Jerusalem against whom God had a special grievance were those who were "settled on their lees." The figure is that of wine left too long upon its lees, until its quality is spoiled. The people referred to thus were the careless, indifferent ones, those who said: "It doesn't make any difference how we act; God won't do anything about it."

But God wastes no time in telling them that He is going to do something about it, something drastic. Their goods will be seized as the booty of war and their houses plundered. Their homes will be left uninhabited and their vineyards untended.

4. THE DAY OF THE LORD

Then comes Zephaniah's very striking description of the day of the Lord (1:14-18). He first emphasizes its imminence: "The great day of the Lord is near, it is near, and hasteth greatly."

a. *The Day Is Imminent.* The day of the Lord is always imminent. Whenever man forgets God—which happens in every generation—judgment can be expected. It does not always strike right away, but divine justice is inescapable.

What is the day of the Lord like? We are not left in any doubt. In language freighted with doom and fringed with thunderclouds the prophet proclaims "the day of the Lord."

*That day is a day of wrath,
a day of trouble and distress,
a day of wasteness and desolation,
a day of darkness and gloominess,
a day of clouds and thick darkness.*

It is of interest to note that the last two clauses occur in Joel 2:2. Also Joel, as Zephaniah, precedes this with a warning that "the day of the Lord cometh, for it is nigh at hand." Both prophets are imbued deeply with a sense of the imminence of the day of the Lord. Both declare that it is a day of doom and destruction, of death and desolation, of darkness and despair. It is no bright picture that these prophets paint of the day of the Lord.

How is this day to appear? In the case of Judah it would come in the form of an enemy invasion. Moffatt translates the first part of verse 16: "a day of trumpet-blast and battle-cry."

b. A Day of Judgment. So terrible will be the times that men "shall walk like blind men," fumbling and stumbling in the darkness created by their own disobedience. Death will overtake them in the wholesale slaughter, until "their blood shall be poured out as dust."

The wealthy will not be able to buy their way out of their predicament: "Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the Lord's wrath." God does not take bribes.

The day of the Lord, as pictured here and throughout the prophets, is the day of divine judgment. It is the day when God takes over, when man's day is set aside, when the eternal invades the temporal, when the infinite arrests the finite. It is "the day of the Lord's wrath" against sin.

c. More than One "Day of the Lord." That day has come many times and is still coming. It often seems distant and yet it is always near at hand. Every generation has seen some "day of the Lord," when God visited in judgment. The destruction of Jerusalem in Jeremiah's day and again in A.D. 70 could be identified with the day of the Lord. So could the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the burial of Pompeii. The cause was the same in all cases—man's sin. God is long-suffering, beyond human comprehension. But if He were to ignore sin, the justice of the universe would be shattered. Because God is holy and just and upright, His very nature demands that He deal with sin. Silly, soft, sentimental thinking about sin will leave us bogged down in the mud and mire, the muck and morass, of a godless world. We need to recapture the prophets' keen sense of the awfulness of sin. It was their stern denunciations of unrighteousness that paved the way to higher things for the human spirit. Our religion will be no stronger than our attitude against sin.

5. A PLEA FOR REPENTANCE

The second chapter of Zephaniah begins with a plea for repentance. The third verse is one of the most beautiful passages in the book: "Seek ye the Lord, all ye meek of the earth, which have wrought his judgment; seek righteousness, seek meekness: it may be ye shall be hid in the day of the Lord's anger."

The name Zephaniah means "he whom Jehovah has hidden." It may reflect the fact that his godly parents were threatened with danger during the long reign of wicked Manasseh. It was during this king's reign that Zephaniah was born.

Beginning with verse four, and throughout the rest of chapter two, the prophet reaches out to address foreign nations. He first pronounces the doom of the great Philistine cities. They are to be left desolate.

6. DATE OF THE BOOK

This brings up the question as to the time of Zephaniah's prophecy. We are told in the first verse, which forms the heading of the book, that the word of the Lord came to him in the days of Josiah, king of Judah. Josiah reigned 639-609 B.C.

It would appear that the Scythians invaded the coastal regions of Palestine, including Philistia, between 630 and 624. Most scholars place the writing of Zephaniah at about 625 B.C., shortly before the beginning of Josiah's reform in 621 B.C. So it is likely that Zephaniah is predicting the Scythian invasion of the land of the Philistines. If not, his reference is to the soon-coming Babylonian invasion.

The first seven verses of chapter three continue the messages concerning the nations. Verses 8-13 promise that a remnant of Israel shall be saved. "They shall feed and lie down, and none shall make them afraid" (v. 13).

7. GOD'S JOY IN HIS PEOPLE

Verses 14-20 have a different tune from the rest of the book. Zion is bidden to sing, to be glad and rejoice. God, her true King, is in the midst of her and will protect her.

The most beautiful verse in the entire book is 3:17—
"The Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing."

This verse portrays what Alexander Maclaren has very aptly called "the gladness of God." Fellowship between God and His children means mutual joy. What a privilege to bring joy to the heart of God! How we ought to seek those times of quiet aloneness with God when our own spirits will be inspired and uplifted and God himself will find pleasure in fellowship with us!

The closing three verses speak especially of the restoration of Judah from captivity. Obviously, the first application is to the return from Babylon. But the language looks beyond the postexilic period: "I will make you a name and a praise among all people of the earth."

Only in Christ does this gracious promise find its fulfillment. That is true of many of the Old Testament prophecies. Partial, imperfect fulfillments may be seen at various points in history. But Christ alone is the fulfillment of human hope and prophetic prediction. What a privilege to have Him in our hearts, fulfilling in us "the exceeding great and precious promises" of God's Word! We can never exaggerate how much Christ means to us.

B. Haggai—Man of Inspired Action

Name: "Festal" (perhaps because born on a feast day)

Date: 520 B.C. (September—December)

Place: Jerusalem

Outline: I. Exhortation to Resume Building (1:1-11)

II. Beginning of the Work (1:12-15)

III. Encouragement to the Builders (2:1-9)

IV. Contagion of the Unclean (2:10-19)

V. Exaltation of Zerubbabel (2:20-23)

Outstanding verses to memorize: 1:7; 2:7

It was September, 520 B.C. Already the streets of Jerusalem were thronged with the crowds that had gathered for the feast of the new moon.

Mixed feelings filled the hearts of the people. It had been a bad year for the crops. Drought and lack of dew had left the ground dry and parched. In high hopes they had worked the land that spring and sowed heavily for a bumper year.

But the spring rains had not fallen. Crops had dried up and withered. Olive orchards and vineyards were almost destitute of fruit. With light purses and heavy hearts the people had come to Jerusalem to worship. Disappointment and discouragement were written large over their faces.

But what was there here to draw them? Only partly had the wrecked city been restored. The walls still lay largely in ruins. The Temple? Its ancient splendors were only a haunting memory in the minds of the oldest men. It seemed that the Jerusalem that had been was to be no more.

Near the rude altar, with no roof over it, stood three men looking at the milling throngs. One was Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah. Another was Joshua, the high priest. The third was Haggai, the prophet.

Suddenly Haggai turned toward his two companions. "Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, saying, This people say, The time is not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built."

Some sixteen years before, the first group of captives had returned from Babylonia as a result of the decree of Cyrus. That edict, recorded at the end of Second Chronicles and the beginning of Ezra, stipulated that the Temple was to be rebuilt. Three times, in the longer form given in Ezra, the building of the house of the Lord at Jerusalem is mentioned as the main purpose of the decree.

But what happened? The few returnees had cleared away the rubbish and set about the task of rebuilding the Temple. First they had cleared off enough of the debris so that they could set up the altar of sacrifice and celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles (Ezra 3:1-4). This was in the fall. The next spring they had gone to work with a will to build the house of the Lord.

But it had been a discouraging task. With the foundations completed they had held a great celebration

(Ezra 3:10-13). While some shouted for joy, others wept as they realized that this second Temple could be only a feeble successor to Solomon's glorious edifice.

Months had gone by and added up to years. Weariness and inertia had combined with unfriendly warning and opposition to stay effectively the hands of the workmen. In 520 the Temple was still unbuilt. Suddenly, above the sound of shuffling feet a voice rang out: "Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your ceiled houses, and this house lie waste?"

Startled, the people turned to see standing by the altar a prophet, his face aflame with a burning message from God. All was quiet as his lips parted again: "Now therefore thus saith the Lord of hosts; Consider your ways."

1. THE FIRST MESSAGE (1:1-11)

Dollars for Self and Pennies for God

"Consider your ways." That was the call and cry of the prophet. "Ye have sown much, and bring in little, . . . [and] put it into a bag with holes."

How well they knew that! But what were they to do about it?

"Thus saith the Lord of hosts: Consider your ways. Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house; and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified, saith the Lord."

Why was it that they were suffering adversity instead of enjoying prosperity? The answer was simple: "Ye looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it. Why? saith the Lord of hosts. Because of mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house."

So that was the reason? That was the explanation for drought and dewless mornings, for grainless fields and fruitless orchards? Well, then let's do something

about it! "Amen," said Zerubbabel and Joshua and all the remnant of the people. They had had enough of God's curse. They were ready now to do something to bring His blessing.

As the prophet noted their willingness and obedience, he brought them a new message of comfort and encouragement. "Then spake Haggai the Lord's messenger in the Lord's message unto the people, saying, I am with you, saith the Lord." What a model for preachers—the Lord's messenger speaking the Lord's message!

2. THE PEOPLE'S RESPONSE (1:12-15)

Back to Work

What was it that brought about action in place of inertia? "The Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel . . . and the spirit of Joshua . . . and the spirit of all the remnant of the people." When people are stirred, they move.

And so the people went to work with a will. Within about three weeks from the time that Haggai began his prophesying (1:15), the reconstruction job was in full swing.

As the walls began to rise, the workers' hearts were filled with mingled emotions of pride and disappointment. It would be wonderful to have a house of worship again. But how poor it would look in comparison with Solomon's great Temple!

3. THE SECOND MESSAGE (2:1-9)

Glory Depends on Spirit, Not Size

So the Lord sent the people another message through His prophet. It was October, 520 B.C., when this second oracle was delivered. The people were gathered together for the Feast of Tabernacles.

Some were present who had seen Solomon's Temple (2:3), which was destroyed just sixty-six years before.

They were old men now, but they had vivid recollections of the ancient splendor. How pitiful this would look in comparison!

But they were not to weaken the hands of the workers. "Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, saith the Lord; and be strong, O Joshua, son of Josedech, the high priest; and be strong, all ye people of the land, saith the Lord, and work: for I am with you, saith the Lord of hosts" (2:4). In partnership with God in the work of building His temple—that is the privilege of God's people in all ages.

Then comes a daring prediction (2:9), in view of the actual prospects for this new Temple: "The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former"; or, as some modern translators render it: "The future glory of this house shall be greater than its former." The alternative rendering is not quite so astounding as the other. But even it would require a leap of faith on the part of the prophet, so few and poor were the people.

How is this greater glory to come? The seventh verse gives the answer: "I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the Lord of hosts."

The greater glory will come when "a greater than Solomon" has appeared. Christ was the fulfillment of this prophecy. That has been the interpretation of the Christian Church from the beginning. Jerome made this evident in his translation of the Vulgate. What is more, he learned this from his Jewish tutors, for some of the Jewish rabbis referred this passage to the Messiah.

Modern scholars have called attention to the fact that the word here rendered "desire" has with it a plural verb. The nations, shaken by God's judgments, will bring their "treasures" to beautify the house of the Lord. The American Revised Version reads "precious things," which is an accurate translation of the Hebrew original.

It is difficult to arrive at a dogmatic interpretation of this passage. Adam Clarke discusses the problem and concludes that the reference to silver and gold in the following verse is in line with the most reasonable view, that the nations will bring their "desirable things" to glorify God's house. He says: "I cannot see how the words can apply to Jesus Christ."

As over against this blunt assertion it is interesting to note that Raymond Calkins, a very prominent preacher of our day, says that even in the new translation this passage "loses little of its Messianic meaning."¹ We would agree. It is certainly true that the deepest desires and highest aspirations of all nations are fulfilled in Christ, and only in Him.

The third and fourth messages were delivered on the same day in December, 520 B.C. Exactly three months had gone by since the people in obedience to God's command through the prophet had set to work restoring the Temple. Why hadn't God rewarded them for their labor?

4. THE THIRD MESSAGE (2:10-19)

The Contagion of Evil

In answer to their inner questionings God sent another message to them. Its subject was the contagion of the unclean. The prophet pointed out that while a clean thing or person is rendered unclean by contact with uncleanness, the opposite does not hold true. It is one of the obvious lessons of life. One good apple will not make even a small box of rotten apples good; but one rotten apple, if left long enough, will spoil a whole barrel of good apples. A diseased person is not made well by contact with a healthy person, but a well person can easily contract a disease by contact with an infected person.

The people had expected that the restored ritual would make them holy. The prophet wanted them to

see that their sin was of long standing and required more drastic treatment for its cleansing. Their worst sin was their refusal to repent (2:17).

Twice in the eighteenth verse the prophet tells them again to "consider." The literal meaning is: "Set your heart on it." Every true revival has begun when people have stopped and considered their ways.

The returned captives wondered why God had not already begun to prosper them for their obedience in building His house. The prophet has an encouraging word from the Lord: "From this day will I bless you" (2:19). Their changed attitude has not gone unnoticed.

5. THE FOURTH MESSAGE (2:20-23)

After Turmoil—Peace

On the same day God spoke again through His messenger. This oracle was especially addressed to Zerubbabel, the governor. It is Messianic in outlook and apocalyptic in form. God says that He will shake the nations and destroy their power. Then He will take Zerubbabel and set him up as His chosen one. Here we find another definite foregleam of the Messiah.

Haggai's times were marked by a shaking of the nations, to which he refers no less than four times (2:6, 7, 21, 22). The assassination in 522 B.C. of Cambyses, the successor of Cyrus, was followed by a time of turmoil. A usurper tried to hold the throne, but was himself assassinated within a few months. When Darius took the throne, in that same year, he had to fight one battle after another to establish his power over the various nations that comprised the Persian Empire.

One sees a parallel in our day in the shaking of nations and national governments. At such times we do well to look up with renewed Messianic expectation. The Prince of Peace may not come as soon as we hope or

expect, but someday, as sure as God's Word is true, He shall reign as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Ours is still the privilege of singing the great "Hallelujah Chorus."

6. THE NATURE OF HAGGAI

The name Haggai seems to mean "the festive one." Though living in troublous times and facing a discouraged and disheartened people, the prophet was marked by a fervent and exuberant spirit. He was able to inspire others to enthusiasm and action. He has been referred to as "Haggai who said it with bricks." He believed not only in talking but in getting something done. The phrase "a steam engine in trousers" might be applied to him.

Haggai has sometimes been accused of having a one-track mind. The truth is that he saw something that drastically needed to be done, and he gave his whole attention to seeing that that one thing got done.

Again, Haggai has been criticized for concentrating on earthly things. But he realized that the religious life of Judah needed to be focused in a central sanctuary at Jerusalem. Otherwise the nation faced the danger of being assimilated into its heathen environment and losing God. Part of our religious heritage from the Jews, which includes the human ancestry of Christ himself, we owe to the faithful ministry of Haggai, the prophet.

Unlike most of the Minor Prophets, the Book of Haggai is not poetry but prose. But, as Raymond Calkins well points out, we need more plain speaking about everyday duties, about "the prosaic performance of neglected tasks."²

The entire Book of Haggai is an extended commentary on the text of Jesus: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33). Haggai teaches us to put first things first.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the relation between warning and promise?
2. What characteristics of "the day of the Lord" does Zephaniah emphasize?
3. What lessons did you learn from Haggai?
4. How can we tell when people look after their own comforts and neglect the work of the Lord?
5. How does Haggai reveal the value of concentration?

VI

ZECHARIAH and MALACHI

A. Zechariah—Final Triumph of Holiness

Name: "He whom Jehovah remembers"

Date: November, 520—December, 518 B.C.

Place: Jerusalem

Outline: I. Three Messages (cc. 1—8)

1. A Call to Repentance (1:1-6)

2. Eight Visions (1:7—6:15)

3. Feasts Instead of Fasts (cc. 7—8)

II. Two Oracles (cc. 9—14)

1. The Restoration of Israel (cc. 9—11)

2. The Cleansing and Blessing of Israel
(cc. 12—14)

Outstanding verses to memorize: 14:9; 14:20

It is still the same year, 520 B.C. Only two months have passed since Haggai began his public ministry. Now another prophet appears on the scene, likewise encouraging the rebuilding of the Temple. The two are linked together in Ezra 6:14, where we read: "And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo."

Who was this Zechariah? Neh. 12:16 indicates that he was a priest as well as a prophet. In this he was like Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

1. THE PROPHET'S FIRST APPEAL

What was Zechariah's main message? He sounds the keynote of his ministry in his opening utterance: "Turn ye unto me, saith the Lord of hosts, and I will turn

unto you, saith the Lord of hosts" (1:3). The prophet's first cry was a call to repentance.

But turning to God involves turning from evil (1:4). One cannot cling to God unless he is separated from sin. Repentance means more than being sorry. It means forsaking one's sins and turning to God with his whole heart. The introduction to the book (1:1-6) closes with the testimony that God has kept His word. The new generation does not need to test that point. It can accept the witness of its fathers that the truth has already been amply demonstrated.

2. EIGHT VISIONS

This opening appeal delivered in November of 520 B.C. was soon followed by a second message in February, 519 B.C. This oracle highlights one of the outstanding characteristics of Zechariah, namely, apocalypticism, or revelations from God. Apparently all the material in 1:7—6:15 was delivered on the same day. It consists of a series of symbolical visions, written in highly figurative language.

Zechariah saw these visions "in the night" (1:8). Calkins has made a beautiful comment on this. He says: "The inspiration of apocalyptic prophecy lies in this: that when it is night and others can see only clouds and darkness, these seers of God can discover divine powers at work for man's redemption."¹

a. God's Scouts. There are eight of these visions. The first (1:7-17) might be titled "God's Scouts." The prophet saw among the myrtle trees of a glen near Jerusalem what looked like a group of Persian cavalry scouts on reconnaissance. But soon he discovered that they were angels, God's scouts, checking up on earthly affairs. What was their report to their leader? "We have walked to and fro through the earth, and, behold, all the earth sitteth still, and is at rest" (1:11).

(1) Quiet Before the Storm

There are two ways of interpreting this. Actually the period was a rather tumultuous one. When Darius took the throne in 522 B.C., after the death of Cambyses, he had to put down one revolt after another. Apparently there had come a lull in the storm. But the stillness may have been ominous with forebodings for the future.

(2) Full Speed Ahead

Another interpretation would relate this to the task of rebuilding the Temple. The opposition was stilled, and now the work could go on apace: "My house shall be built" (1:16). The cities of Judah would overflow with prosperity.

b. *God's Workmen.* The second vision (1:18-21) might be called "God's Workmen." The prophet saw four horns and four smiths. The four horns represent the totality of Israel's foes, her enemies from all directions. But God's smiths are busy breaking these horns. Those who had scattered God's people are now shattered by God's power.

These two visions are supplementary to each other. The first teaches us that God's watchful care over us is constant. The second tells us that God's workmen are always on the job and that the power of evil will inevitably be broken.

c. *The Man with a Measuring Line.* The third vision (c. 2) is that of "The Unwalled City." Zechariah saw a man with a measuring line in his hand, about to measure the length and breadth of Jerusalem. But an angel was sent to tell him that the ancient boundaries would not be able to confine the large population the city was to have in the future. Jerusalem would be like unwalled villages, spreading out over the hills.

The account of the vision proper (2:1-5) ends with the beautiful declaration: "For I, saith the Lord, will be

unto her a wall of fire round about, and will be the glory in the midst of her." Our best defense is not walls of stone or steel, but the glory of God's presence.

The vision is followed by a lyric poem (2:6-13), in which God assures Israel of His care. The brief passage is replete with precious promises. The Lord says to His people: "He that toucheth you toucheth the apple of his eye" (v. 8). What a picture of tender care! The poem closes with the word of mingled warning and comfort: "Be silent, O all flesh, before the Lord: for he is raised up out of his holy habitation."

d. *Joshua and Satan.* The fourth vision (c. 3) is that of "Joshua and Satan." The prophet saw Joshua, the high priest, standing before the angel of the Lord; that is, in God's presence. The second part of the verse is most accurately translated: "and Satan standing at his right hand to be his adversary." The word Satan means "adversary."

The picture is that of a judgment scene. The Jews believed that those who were overtaken by misfortune had been accused by the adversary, as in the case of Job. The many misfortunes of exilic and postexilic days had caused the people of Judah to wonder if Satan was accusing them before God. But through this vision the prophet assured the people that God had rebuked their adversary and had defended His own, "a brand plucked out of the fire" (v. 2).

But another problem remained. Joshua was covered with filthy garments. Cleansing, as well as forgiveness, was needed. So the change was made to clean clothes. Then the prophet interjected, "Let them set a fair mitre upon his head," and that was done. Now the high priest stood clothed with clean garments and crowned, a type of the coming Messiah. The connection is suggested in verse eight: "Behold, I will bring forth my servant the BRANCH."

The stone of verse nine perhaps symbolizes the finished Temple. The "seven eyes" in the stone typify God's complete care of His people. He is watching over them with tender love.

The closing picture of chapter three is one of peace and prosperity: "In that day, saith the Lord of hosts, shall ye call every man his neighbour under the vine and under the fig tree." It is the day of Messiah's kingdom.

The main lesson of the fourth vision is that *peace and prosperity must be preceded by moral cleansing; God cannot pour His blessings on an unclean people.* How sorely is that message needed today!

e. *The Temple Candlestick and the Two Olive Trees.* The fifth vision (c. 4) is of "The Temple Candlestick and the Two Olive Trees." The prophet was roused by the angel, so that he would be wide awake to apprehend this new vision. Before him was the Temple, lighted by the golden candlestick, or lampstand. The seven lamps were supplied with oil by seven pipes, which conveyed the oil from two olive trees. The two olive trees—which particularly perplexed the prophet (vv. 11-13)—are the two anointed ones, or "sons of oil," Joshua and Zerubbabel.

Just as the previous vision was especially for Joshua's consolation, so this one is intended to encourage Zerubbabel. God's message to him is one which has been both a correction and a comfort to all generations since. Verse six is one of the greatest texts in the Old Testament: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord." The strongest force in the world is not military might nor boasted power, ancient or atomic, but God's Spirit. One of the greatest travesties of religion has been the Church's substitution of carnal weapons for spiritual power.

Another passage often quoted from this chapter is in verse ten: "Who hath despised the day of small things?" Though the beginnings of the second Temple looked

pitiful, yet God would enable Zerubbabel to finish the task.

This vision pictures the nation as deriving its light from both the civil and religious heads. Both governor and high priest were to minister to the welfare of the people.

f. *The Flying Roll.* The sixth vision (5:1-4) is that of "The Flying Roll." The scroll was a large one, some thirty by fifteen feet. On it were written the crimes of the people, especially stealing and perjury. It would bring a curse into the house of every thief and false swearer. Every sinner must be cut off. As in the fourth vision, the truth is emphasized that the nation must be cleansed of its sins.

g. *The Ephah.* The seventh vision (5:5-11) pictures what Paterson calls "Madame Wickedness." The prophet saw an ephah, or seven-gallon measure. Suddenly the leaden lid was lifted and he saw a woman sitting in the barrel. She was pushed back inside, the cover clamped on again, and two women flew the burden far away to Babylonia.

The meaning is that sin will be purged from the land. George Adam Smith points out the fact that, whereas the previous vision dealt with actual transgressions, this one typifies the removal of the principle of sin. It is not enough to have one's sins forgiven. There must be a purging of the heart from the very principle of sin.

h. *The Four Chariots.* The eighth vision (6:1-8) is that of "The Four Chariots." These represent "the four spirits of the heavens" (v. 5). Probably a better translation would be "the four winds," as the same Hebrew and Greek words mean "wind" and "spirit." The four winds are thought of as protecting God's people in all directions. The chariot with black horses went north. That with white horses followed the first; or, as some translate, went west. The fourth chariot, with dappled

horses, went south. It is not clear just what is meant by "the bay" of verse seven; the Hebrew reads "strong."

The vision closes with the statement that conditions in the north have been quieted. The main threat to Judah's safety lay in that direction, for the center of world power was in the north. Egypt, in the south, was not to be feared much at this time.

The series of eight visions is followed by a sort of epilogue (6:9-15), portraying a coronation scene. The high priest, Joshua, is to be crowned. (Some scholars hold that the reference should be to Zerubbabel.) The passage is Messianic in its implications. We find reference again to "The BRANCH" (v. 12). The Temple will be rebuilt. The language of verse fifteen seems to look forward to the Christian age for its spiritual application.

3. THE QUESTION OF FASTING

The seventh chapter opens with another definite dating in Zechariah's ministry. The message here was given in December, 518 B.C. So we know that Zechariah's prophesying covered two years, as his first oracle is dated November, 520 B.C. Probably his ministry continued much longer.

A deputation had arrived in Jerusalem to ask advice of the priests and prophets: "Should I weep in the fifth month, separating myself, as I have done these so many years?" (7:3.) The fact that they arrived in the ninth month rather suggests that these questions may have come from Babylonia, the journey taking several months. In answering them the prophet mentions the fast of the seventh month, as well as that of the fifth.

a. Captivity Is Over. These fasts had been observed for seventy years (7:5). The seventy years of the Babylonian captivity are generally dated 606-536 B.C. But the only reference to 606 B.C.—"the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah"—is in Dan. 1:1. No mention

of this invasion by Nebuchadnezzar is made in Kings, Chronicles, or Jeremiah, the three books that record the close of Judah's history. It is clear that the seventy years mentioned here refer to the period when the Temple was in ruins, following its destruction in 587 B.C. If we prefer the better known figure, 586 B.C., it would perhaps be best to date the Babylonian captivity as 586-516 B.C. (The date of 516 B.C. for the completion of the second Temple is accepted by almost all scholars.) If we wish to be precise, we could say that the seventy years of Zech. 7:5 would be 587-518 B.C.

b. Religion Must Be Ethical. More important than chronology, however, is the timeless, though timely, truth contained in the Lord's answer through His prophet. It was not fasting from food which God desired. It was rather abstinence from unrighteousness. "Execute true judgment, and shew mercy and compassions every man to his brother: and oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor; and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart" (vv. 9-10). This is the kind of fast that would be pleasing to God. One is reminded of the very similar words in the fifty-eighth chapter of Isaiah. People are always prone to offer religious acting in place of righteous doing. One of the greatest emphases in the prophets of Israel, as in the preaching of Jesus, was that religion means righteousness. An unethical religion is worse than useless.

The eighth chapter is one of the most beautiful in all the Old Testament. It describes the glories of the Messianic reign. But these blessings cannot be enjoyed without truth and justice (vv. 16-17). Then fasts are to be turned into festivals (v. 19).

The fast of the fourth month commemorated the fall of Jerusalem in 587 or 586 B.C. (Jer. 52:6); that of the fifth month, the burning of the Temple (Jer. 52:12); that of the seventh month, the murder of Gedaliah (Jer.

41:1-2), who was appointed governor over Judah by the Babylonians; that of the tenth month, the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem (II Kings 25:1). All of these, it will be noted, were connected with that great catastrophe, the destruction of Jerusalem by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar.

4. THE UNITY OF ZECHARIAH

For the past three hundred years the unity of the Book of Zechariah has been called in question. The first eight chapters are carefully dated and the subject matter relates to the events of 520-518 B.C. But the remainder of the book, chapters 9-14, appears to have been written in a different period. Scholars have disagreed as to whether it was written earlier or later than the first part. Liberals have held that these chapters do not come from the pen of Zechariah, but conservatives have sometimes suggested that this section may have been written by Zechariah in his old age.

As the prophet's name does not occur in chapters 9-14, one's belief in divine inspiration does not bind him to any theory of authorship. But it seems best to hold to the unity of this book.

5. THE MESSIANIC HOPE

This section has an unusually large number of Messianic passages. The so-called Triumphant Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem is prefigured in 9:9, which is quoted in Matt. 21:5. "They shall look upon me whom they have pierced" (12:10) is quoted in John 19:37.

The thirteenth chapter contains at least two striking Messianic references. The first verse declares: "In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness." The sixth verse has a pathetic tone: "And one shall say unto him, What are these wounds in

thine hands? Then he shall answer, Those with which I was wounded in the house of my friends."

The book closes with a picture of holiness triumphant: "In that day there shall be upon the bells of the horses, HOLINESS UNTO THE LORD; and the pots in the Lord's house shall be like the bowls before the altar. Yea, every pot in Jerusalem and in Judah shall be holiness unto the Lord of hosts."

B. Malachi—When People Play Cheap with God

Name: "My messenger"

Date: around 450 B.C.

Place: Jerusalem

Outline: I. Sins of the Priests and People (cc. 1—2)

II. Judgment and Blessing (cc. 3—4)

Outstanding verses to memorize: 3: 8; 3: 16, 17

I have loved you, saith the Lord.

Yet ye say, Wherein hast thou loved us?

With this divine declaration and human response the Book of Malachi opens. God asserts His love; Israel challenges the claim. What is wrong?

The answer is probably to be found in recalling some of the utterances of the two prophets just studied. They had predicted that God's blessings were about to be poured out on a people redeemed and cleansed. But several decades had passed and these prophecies of hope were still unfulfilled. The days had become increasingly drab and dreary. It was a period of disappointment, disillusionment, and discouragement, of blasted hopes and broken hearts.

The answering question of the people seems bitter. It sounds sarcastic, almost flippant.

Perhaps the kindest thing to say would be that we have here an outburst of bitter disappointment due to

shattered dreams. The margin between tears and anger is often very narrow. One verges on the other. Disappointment often expresses itself in reproach. Probably long days of weary waiting had left the people dull and doubting.

The prophet has an answer, a proof of God's love. Exhibit A is Edom. God had chosen Jacob and rejected Esau. Just see what had happened to the Edomites, the descendants of Esau. Soon after the beginning of the Babylonian captivity the Nabatean Arabs had pushed them out of their heritage and laid it waste. Nor would they be allowed to return to their own land, as Israel had. No, Israel's misfortunes were nothing compared to Edom's. God still loved His own chosen nation.

After this introductory round with the people (1:2-5), the prophet turns his attention to the priests (1:6-14). He criticizes them for low views of God's majesty. They do not even show their God the respect that a son would his father or a servant would his master. Then he charges them directly with despising the Lord's name.

Immediately the atmosphere gets tense. One can almost see the priests bristling with anger and stiffening with resentment. "Wherein have we despised thy name?"

Whatever cloak of kindness we may spread over the people's "Wherein?" of verse two, it seems that here we can offer no apology. The tone is clearly petulant, peevish, sarcastic, saucy. We almost hear the undertones of a "Whadda ya mean?" attitude. Here is a flippancy amounting almost to blasphemy.

That this is the reaction of the priests is shown rather clearly by the continued conversation. When God answers their first rejoinder with, "Ye offer polluted bread upon mine altar," they come right back at Him: "Wherein have we polluted thee?" When people talk back to God that way, sin has made them "tough."

How had they polluted God and His house? "In that ye say, The table of the Lord is contemptible." A contempt for sacred things is about the lowest thing in religion.

1. MALACHI'S METHOD

The phrase "ye say" is a keynote of this book. The author uses the didactic-dialectic method. He makes an affirmation and then he presents a supposed objection, in the form of a question introduced by "ye say." This is followed by a refutation of the objection, proving the original proposition. Some seven distinct examples of this occur in his brief book (1:2-3, 6-7; 2:10-16, 17; 3:7, 8, 13-14). A reading of these passages will reveal the force of this argumentative method.

Not that the prophet invented these objections. Doubtless he had heard them uttered aloud or at least had seen ample evidence of the attitude expressed by them.

2. THE SIN OF THE PRIESTS

How did the priests show their contempt for God and His house? By offering blind, lame, and sick animals for sacrifice. Would they offer these to the governor, and would he accept them? Why then should they offer them to God?

While the Gentiles have been praising God's name (v. 11), the Jews have been profaning it. How? "In that ye say, The table of the Lord is polluted." But that is not the worst. "Ye said also, Behold, what a weariness is it! and ye have snuffed at it," or "sniffed at it." What an attitude of contempt!

In 2:1-9 the prophet brings a further charge against the priests. It is their duty to instruct the people in the law (v. 7). Instead they have failed to keep the law themselves and have thus caused the people to err (v. 8).

3. THE SIN OF DIVORCE

Then the prophet turns again to the laity (2:10-16) and rebukes the people for their sin of divorce. God declares that He will not any more regard their offerings (v. 13). "Yet ye say, Wherefore? Because the Lord hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant." This prophet had high ideals of marriage and so he hated divorce, as did Jesus. With both marriage was a proposition for life. The message of Malachi is sorely needed in this day of easy divorce.

Because of their sins, God warns of coming judgment (2:17—3:6). They had been rendering lip service. But that did not atone for their sins. "Ye have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet ye say, Wherein have we wearied him? When ye say, Every one that doeth evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delighteth in them; or, Where is the God of judgment?"

4. "MY MESSENGER"

This last question finds a quick answer in the opening verses of chapter three. A part of the first verse is quoted in all three Synoptic Gospels and applied to John the Baptist. It should be noted that the expression "my messenger" is *Malachi* in the Hebrew. It is exactly the same form as in 1:1. There is no way of telling whether it is there intended to be taken as a proper name, or as a common noun, as here. If the latter is correct, then this book is anonymous. That is the way the Septuagint translates 1:1, which constitutes the heading for the book. But the author may have adopted the name Malachi at the beginning of his prophetic ministry.

The first verse of the third chapter goes on to say that the Lord will "suddenly come to his temple." Lest any should think lightly of this, the prophet portrays the

character of God and the purpose of His coming. "But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap: and he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver." When the Lord comes He will test and purify His people; against the wicked, He will come near in swift judgment (v. 5).

This warning is followed by a plea for repentance and a rebuke for failure to tithe (3:7-12). "Ye say" occurs twice again in close succession. "Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the Lord of hosts. But ye said, Wherein shall we return?"

5. THE TITHE

In answer, God shows the people another sin that is preventing Him from blessing them. To return to Him they must turn away from this transgression of the law. "Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings."

Some people's backs begin to bristle at the very mention of this forbidden subject. But one of the surest tests of Christian consecration is one's attitude toward money. It is utterly inconsistent for one to declare his love for Christ and then object to paying his tithe. The tithe is simply an acknowledgment of God's ownership of us and all we possess. To refuse to pay the tithe is to deny that ownership.

But evidently the people had objected vociferously. For God continues: "Your words have been stout against me, saith the Lord. Yet ye say, What have we spoken so much against thee? Ye have said, It is vain to serve God."

The people go on to declare that the wicked fare better than the righteous (v. 15). It is another echo of the question: "Where is the God of judgment?" (2:17.)

Some people expect God to settle His accounts every Saturday night.

The answer of the Lord is that He knows who are His (vv. 16-17), and eventually all will be able to "discern between the righteous and the wicked" (v. 18). The promises of verses 16 and 17 have been a great comfort to God's people in time of test and trial. A true record is being kept in heaven of all those who put their trust in the Lord. ("Feared" in the Old Testament is close to "believed" in the New.)

6. THE COMING MESSIAH

The last chapter of Malachi is very brief. It opens with a declaration of coming judgment, which will burn like a hot oven. But that is followed immediately with the assurance that to those who "fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings." The coming of Christ will be like the rising of the sun with life-giving light and warmth. Every sunrise proclaims the glories of our Christ. We ought to start every new day with a fresh consciousness of His presence lighting our pathway, warming and cheering our hearts, flooding our souls with a sense of the greatness of the Divine.

The book closes with a prediction that Elijah will appear "before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord." Thus we find again at the very end this phrase which is so prominent in the Minor Prophets. We are not left in doubt as to the certainty of the day of the Lord. But at the same time we are assured that God will do His best to warn men of it and to seek to turn them to himself.

So we come to the end of our study of the twelve Minor Prophets. They were men whose messages were both timely and timeless. They preached to their own

times and yet to all times. The sins they rebuked in their day are with us today. It is still true that the essence of sin is selfishness and self-will. Men are still prone to forsake God and follow their own distorted desires. And still God's unchanging love calls to repentance and offers salvation.

The differences between the Old Testament and the New often appear in sharp outlines on the surface. But closer study inevitably reveals the fact that God's nature is the same and human nature the same, in both cases. Sin is the same in essence, and salvation is and always has been a divine work. The central theme of the Old Testament as well as the New is redemption.

In the light of the religious, moral, social, and economic conditions of our day, we cannot help affirming again our conviction that the Minor Prophets have a truly modern message for these times in which we live. We need to echo their words in the ears of our contemporaries. May the prophetic ministry carry on!

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the Christian attitude towards fasting?
2. What are the prerequisites of world peace?
3. Why is Malachi called "the Hebrew Socrates"?
4. Why should Christians tithe?
5. What is the earliest mention of tithing in the Bible?
6. What was Jesus' attitude towards tithing? (Cf. Luke 11:42.)

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