



A Bible Reading Plan for the Minor Prophets

August 20-December 2

Mountain Brook Baptist Church
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The Minor Prophets

ABOUT PROJECT 119

Project 119 is a Bible reading initiative of Mountain Brook Baptist Church. Our hope is that every member of our church family would be encouraged in his or her relationship with Jesus Christ through the regular reading of God's Word.

This reading plan will guide you through the minor prophets. The plan provides you a devotional thought and Scripture reading for each day of the week. On the weekends, we suggest that you catch up on any missed reading from that week or reread the Scripture passages that you have been working through during the past week.

To receive email updates when devotionals are added to the blog, go to www.mbbc.org/blog, click on "Subscribe to Mountain Brook Blog by Email" and follow the instructions. To learn more about Project 119 and to access previous plans, visit www.mbbc.org/project119.

INTRODUCTION

Who are the minor prophets, and why are they called minor? Although the word "minor" might have a derogatory connotation to us, as if the title means to insinuate that they are insignificant, they are actually called the minor prophets simply because they aren't quite as lengthy as some of the longer prophetic works like Isaiah and Jeremiah. So, the term "minor" speaks simply of their length; certainly we'll see as we read through these prophets that they focus on major themes found throughout Scripture!

In the Hebrew Bible, these prophets all appear in one work (in the same order we have in our English Bibles) called "The Book of the Twelve" (because there are twelve minor prophets). Rather than reading each book on its own, there's a lot of merit in reading them side by side with the other prophet works, because they tell the story of Israel. The minor prophets cover over three hundred years of Israelite history, beginning with Hosea (767-687 B.C.) and ending with Malachi (around 450 B.C.). During these three hundred years, we see both Israel (the northern tribes) and Judah (the southern tribes) defeated and exiled by foreign nations because of their unfaithfulness to the Lord. In the latter prophets, we read about God intervening into history through the person of Cyrus, King of Persia, to bring His people home.

The prophets do sometimes foretell the future (and there are many beautiful eschatological visions in the minor prophets), but often, their primary calling is to remind the people of their covenant with God. They declare God's word boldly, warning the people that, if they stray from Him, they will face consequences for their disobedience. Yet even in the depths of despair, the prophets also proclaim the faithful love of God; because of His steadfast kindness, He will not abandon His people. The minor prophets remind us of the character of God, call us to repentance in our sin, and point us forward to a day of hope when God will dwell with His people again, when iniquity will be no more.



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WEEK ONE: AUGUST 20-26

HOSEA 1-4

Monday, August 20 | Hosea 1 | Doug Dortch

"An Imperfect Family"

The Bible teaches that "God is love." It is one of the simplest, yet most profound of Bible teachings concerning God. But what does that teaching mean? While we may never fully understand or exhaust the significance of God's love for His fallen creation, we do get a vivid picture of the extent of such love in the book of Hosea.

Hosea's prophecy is a part of the Old Testament we call the minor prophets. The entirety of Hosea's ministry points to God's full commitment to reclaim a stubborn and rebellious people. Central to Hosea's preaching is the doctrine of God's steadfast love, which parallels the New Testament word *agape*. God's unconditional loyalty to His covenant promises assures us that He will keep faithfulness with us even when we are less than faithful to Him.

Before we can hear Hosea's message we must appreciate how vividly his personal life reflected his preaching life. Hosea, whose name means "Salvation," preached during the reign of Jeroboam II in the northern kingdom of Israel which would have placed his ministry during the middle part of the eighth century B.C.

Other details of Hosea's background are sketchy with the exception of his marriage to a harlot named Gomer. God's command to take Gomer as his wife (Hosea 1:2) mirrors the faithlessness of Israel and the nation's persistent interest in the Canaanite fertility god Baal, whom Israel's neighbors believed was responsible for making sure that both family and farm life flourished. By the time Hosea answered God's call, the people of Israel had come to take their participation in Canaanite fertility festivals as normal and accepted. Clearly, God needed to get their attention and awaken them to the error of their ways. Thus God called Hosea to marry "an adulterous wife" and have "children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD" (Hosea 1:2, NIV).

The names of Hosea's children are clearly symbolic of Israel's sordid past. "Jezreel," the name of the firstborn, reminded the people of the place where the house of Jehu, one of Israel's earlier kings, had been established by means of excessive bloodshed (2 Kings 9-10). "Lo-Ruhamah," the second child, means "not loved or pitied," symbolizing for the people how nothing could turn away God's impending judgment for their sins and transgressions. "Lo-Ammi," the last child, means "not loved or not my people," pointing to how the people's rejection of God could only end in God's rejection of them, an inconceivable thought to those who had grown accustomed to presuming upon God's steadfast love. Nonetheless, God cannot go against His promises so Hosea held out the hope that once God's people had been subjected to a time of



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judgment, God would surely restore them, through a leader “who will come up out of the land” (Hosea 1:11, NIV) to reunite the people into a nation that shows deep devotion to God.

At first thought, the sin against which Hosea preached may seem foreign from where we live today. Though sexual immorality is rampant in our prevailing culture, you may not find it to be a compelling temptation. Nonetheless, there are other loves and loyalties that compete with our love and loyalty to God.

But that is precisely the point at which Hosea’s message speaks to us today. It challenges us to consider how those loves and loyalties tend to move us away from God. Since every sort of sin carries a consequence, we would do well to confess our faithlessness and turn from it, and respond instead to the love of God in Jesus Christ, the leader who “came up out of the land,” which is truly a steadfast love that will never let us go.

Tuesday, August 21 | Hosea 2:1-13 | Doug Dortch

“A Season of Separation”

There is a difference between punishment and discipline. While the former is intended only to create pain in retaliation for some offense, discipline is a tough action intended to encourage reconciliation and reform. It is that type of “tough love” that Hosea was called to show his faithless wife in the most gripping way of all—by asking their children to drive their mother away from the home!

The language in this text is graphic because the sin described was egregious. Hosea’s wife’s persistent and willful rebellion points to the hardness of her heart and the worthlessness of her character. However, her wayward life will run its course and she will recognize the error of her ways, returning to Hosea whose provisions were always steady and predictable.

Clearly, this section is symbolic of how the nation had turned from God in similar ways. Hosea’s prophecy regarding his actions toward his wife would convey to the people how God would put a plague of infertility upon them because of how they had attributed to Baal the good life and blessing they had known (Hosea 2:6). By removing her false securities, God was hopeful that His people be drawn to Him again as they once were during the time of the exodus, totally dependent upon God for all their provisions (Hosea 2:7-13).

In the same way that Gomer returned to Hosea after the going got tough for her, so we tend to come back to God when we have exhausted all other options. However, from God’s standpoint doing so is better than remaining separated from Him in our sin.

Where, then, do you locate the favor that has come to you? Too many today give credit to everyone and everything but God. Don’t make that mistake. “Every good and perfect gift comes from above, from the



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Father of lights" (James 1:17, NIV). It is always better to turn to God out of gratitude than out of desperation, and we can rest assured that God knows the difference.

Wednesday, August 22 | Hosea 2:14-23 | Doug Dortch

"God's Undying Love"

Wilderness times, for all their difficulty, can also be times of revelation. In the desert, made aware of our own emptiness and ineptitude, we become able to see more clearly how good it is to lean upon God for our everyday needs.

God's steadfast love never gives up. Here, God promises to take the people at their point of need and transform their "Valley of Trouble" (Joshua 7) into an opportunity to have a new experience of God's blessing.

On the coming day of salvation ("Hoshea"), God would draw them near to His side as a husband tenderly courts his wife. It will be a time of peace and safety (Hosea 2:18-19) as God replaces their former love with one that cannot be overcome. The result will be a time of transformation for the nation. They will become loved and reclaimed as His people. The old will have passed away and all things will have become new in God's new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17).

This part of Hosea's prophecy teaches us that God can use even our negative experiences to bring about possibilities of restoration. While we all go through "Valleys of Trouble," God is never far away. God is committed to binding us unto Himself in perfect love and righteousness through Jesus Christ. In the relationship that faith in Jesus makes possible, we enjoy intimate communion with God and a new start at knowing the abundant life God created us to know.

Thursday, August 23 | Hosea 3 | Doug Dortch

"A Relationship Restored"

Hosea's prophecy bounces back and forth between the prophet's personal situation and how it symbolizes where the nation is with respect to God. In this chapter God commands Hosea "go, love a woman who has a lover and is an adulteress, just as the LORD loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love raisin cakes" (Hosea 3:1, NRSV).

Commentators are divided on the identity of this "other woman." Some contend that God was instructing Hosea to go and marry yet another woman of harlotry after his first wife Gomer had abandoned him for another man. However, most take the identity of this woman to be Hosea's first wife, explaining that this chapter reflects Hosea's personal account of his original calling in the first chapter. Regardless of those



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differences, this part of the prophecy points to how the fulfillment of God's call required Hosea to dig deep into his pockets for her redemption (Hosea 3:2), working hard to pull together the necessary resources for the purchase.

After this account, Gomer is no longer mentioned in the prophecy. Her story is a model for how God would allow the nation to be on her own for a while, only to receive her back "in the last days" (Hosea 3:5, NIV).

Every time I read this story, I ask myself, "Will Gomer remain faithful?" Hosea doesn't seem to offer an answer. Perhaps the lack of one is intended to cause us to reflect upon our own faithfulness to God so that His redemptive love for us in Jesus Christ, who paid the price for our sins upon the cross, might work for the best both in us and through us.

Friday, August 24 | Hosea 4 | Doug Dortch

"Israel on Trial"

This fourth chapter marks the second part of Hosea's prophecy, which is marked by the details of Israel's dalliances with Canaanite religion. The image is a courtroom scene, where God brings charges against His people that are designed to confront them with their guilt and rebellion.

God's indictment against Israel is that there is no knowledge in the land (Hosea 4:1). In the Bible, knowledge is always a relational matter more than an intellectual one so that the actual indictment speaks to the people's unwillingness to live into God's covenant expectations.

Just as every charge in a lawsuit requires evidence, so God lays out His case against the people. They have violated God's covenant expectations in virtually every way, particularly those expectations that deal with their relationships with one another. They have engaged in "cursing, lying, murder, stealing, and adultery," each of which violates one of the commandments that deal with the horizontal aspects of covenant faithfulness. Consequently, the whole land "mourns and all who live in it waste away" (Hosea 4:3, NIV). Behind this charge may be allusions to the numbers of royal assassinations that took place during Hosea's ministry (2 Kings 15:8-16). Regardless of the details, the entire creation, not just humankind, suffers from the transgressions of the people. Once again we are reminded of the universal implications of sin. The entire creation groans for its redemption (Romans 8:22).

So, who is responsible for this tragic turn of events? It is the priests, who have had charge over the people's covenant loyalties but have exercised their leadership for personal gain (Hosea 4:6). God will hold these religious leaders accountable for their faithlessness and the consequences of their actions will bring ruin to the land.



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What if God were to bring charges against us today? What might they look like, and more importantly, how might we answer them? If we discover that we have in fact transgressed God's expectations, which, as this text reminds us, doesn't always appear self-evident, we would do well to change our ways before God holds us accountable for our wrongdoings and allows us to suffer the consequences.

As a pastor, I'm most sensitive to where God places the blame for this intolerable situation. Leaders are to point people to God, not themselves. If people see leaders saying one thing but doing another, it becomes hard for them to know the right path to take. Those in leadership positions should understand the weight of the responsibility that falls to them and always look for ways to promote faithfulness to God so that God's favor would abound in the lives of those they lead.



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WEEK TWO: AUGUST 27-SEPTEMBER 2 HOSEA 5-9

Monday, August 27 | Hosea 5 | Doug Dortch

"The Consequences of Failed Leadership"

Hosea has already chastised the priests for their faithless leadership. Now he extends his indictment to members of the royal family. The political alliances struck by their rulers will not protect them against the doom that is to come.

In order to understand this part of Hosea's charge we need to be reminded of how the northern kingdom was established in the first place. After the death of Solomon, one of his commanders, Jeroboam, led ten of the twelve tribes to break away and form another kingdom, the kingdom of Israel. Because Jeroboam knew that the temple was in Jerusalem, which was in the southern kingdom, people would gravitate there in order to engage in sacrificial worship. So to keep his subjects at home, Jeroboam erected golden calves in Bethel, the southernmost part, and Dan, the northernmost part, and encouraged the people to go there instead of Jerusalem (1 Kings 12:25-33). Because calves were associated with Baal worship, it wasn't long before aspects of Baal worship became assimilated into the worship of God, which diluted covenant worship and laid the groundwork for other alliances that were intended to protect the nation.

But as this section of the prophecy shows, it would not do so. "Israel's arrogance testifies against them" (Hosea 5:5, NIV). On cross-examination the people have not a leg to stand upon. Even worse, their sin influences those in Judah, the southern kingdom, to do the same thing (Hosea 5:6). Too often do faithless people drag down others around them instead of uplifting them and inspiring them to do the right thing. Little wonder Jesus warned His disciples about causing "little ones" to fall in this way (Matthew 18:6).

The decision of Israel's rulers to find protection in a political alliance instead of God is spelled out in verse 13. The nation of Assyria was the dominant world power in its day. During the reigns of the kings Menahem and Hoshea, Israel turned in that direction for help (2 Kings 15:19-20, 17:3-4). But even that great world power was of no help in protecting Israel from God's wrath. In a short period of time, the Assyrians would invade and conquer Israel, and the northern kingdom would be no more.

Persistent sin hardens hearts. Turning from God to other sources makes further transgressions seem perfectly normal. It is always better to trust our fears and anxieties to God, who has promised to meet our needs in ways that neither we nor anyone else could ever do.



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Tuesday, August 28 | Hosea 6:1-10 | Doug Dortch

"Honest Repentance"

Repentance is one of the most misunderstood concepts in the Bible. Most people associate it purely with remorse. We realize we have sinned against God and we are saddened by it. While sadness certainly ought to accompany any realization of sin, God's desire is that once we recognize the error of our ways, we reverse course and begin to go in His direction. That reversal from a way opposed to God to one turned toward Him is what true repentance always entails.

Notice how Hosea calls for such reversal in the opening verse (Hosea 6:1). Hosea's confidence is in God's mercy to heal sinners who desire a better way than the one their sins have given them. In the Old Testament there is a close connection between "healing" and "salvation." The Hebrew word pictures an enlarged space in one's life where God's purposes hold sway. Such openness to God's way results in a new knowledge of God, which is always a more experiential knowledge than an intellectual one. Only then will God's people enjoy a stronger relationship with God—one that ensures lasting blessing.

Hosea's concern, however, was that Israel's repentance was a fleeting one (Hosea 6:4). Their sacrificial practices, which were many, only muddled the matter of the heart religion that God desired. The people had assumed that once they had offered sacrifice for their sins they could then do as they pleased. God, on the other hand, was looking for something more—a life that gave expression to His expectations of justice and righteousness. Anything less would only add to Israel's guilt.

Hosea's words remind us of the importance of giving tangible evidence to our verbal commitment. We must never substitute religious practice for heart change. Once we realize where our faith has veered off course, we do well to turn from that way of living to one that honors God in both word and deed so that His favor may abide with us forever.

Wednesday, August 29 | Hosea 6:11-7:16 | Doug Dortch

"Everywhere But Heaven"

We humans are famous for turning to God after we have exhausted all other options. Clearly, that is not what God desires to see from us. When we treat God as an afterthought, we show how little we value His presence in our lives. What we fail to understand is that our reluctance to make God a priority keeps us from experiencing the salvation we yearn to know.

This section of Hosea's prophecy lists the many ways in which Israel's actions show her inability to make covenant faith the priority it should have been. Oblivious to God's presence, Hosea assures the people that God sees them, and He is not pleased with the results. Indeed, their lack of attention to the things of God



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puts them in a place where they set themselves up for “a harvest of punishment” (Hosea 6:11, NLT). This divine retribution was not God’s original intention but was instead the natural consequence of the nation’s desire to take matters into her own hands.

Life in Israel during this time was chaotic and unsettling. Hosea makes references to the king making a fool of himself and bringing disrespect upon the throne. The fact of the matter is that during Hosea’s ministry there were three assassinations of Israelite kings (2 Kings 5:8-26) that led to political instability. Instead of turning to God, these kings had turned to foreign powers instead of God, a show of faithlessness that opened the door to idolatrous worship (Hosea 6:8-10).

The irony of the situation was that all along God had been providing for their needs, in spite of the fact that they had assumed it was Baal who had been blessing them (Hosea 6:11-14). The people were guilty of looking everywhere but to God (Hosea 6:15), never realizing that such transgression would bring them to the point of ruin.

God is an all-knowing God. Nothing takes God by surprise and He misses nothing. Sometimes we forget this fact. But we shouldn’t. When we find ourselves facing a difficult situation, remembering that our distress doesn’t escape God can lead us to make Him our first priority so that we might be delivered from our calamities and be made strong in His grace.

Thursday, August 30 | Hosea 8 | Doug Dortch

“Reaping the Whirlwind”

God has structured creation so that every cause has its effect and every action its consequences. We never pay that truth much attention until we find ourselves on the receiving end of challenges and difficulties, which inevitably cause us to look hard at ourselves to see if by chance we have brought any of the tribulations upon us.

Hosea’s prophecy raised that reality for the people. His sounding the alarm (Hosea 8:1) was for the purpose of letting the nation know that it was too late for her to call upon God for deliverance. God had given ample time and opportunity for His people to do so, but they had squandered each chance so that divine judgment was inevitable.

The people’s rebellion was systemic sin. Jeroboam I’s golden calf (1 Kings 12:25-33), which he erected as a way of preventing his subjects from offering sacrifice at the Jerusalem temple, set the nation up for continual sin. Instead of worshiping the living God, they had violated the second commandment (Exodus 20:4) by bowing down and paying homage to a work of human creation (Hosea 8:5). Israel’s efforts at securing their own future through political alliances with Assyria, the dominant world power of the time, would backfire, leaving the people dependent upon sources of support that would not come through. In



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Hosea's words, "they have planted the wind and will harvest the whirlwind" (Hosea 8:7, NLT). In other words, in seeking self-preservation apart from God, the people had brought about their own destruction.

Of course, by all appearances Israel's worship life was intact. Sacrifices were being offered regularly. However, the fact that these sacrifices were not accompanied by heart change made them "meaningless" in God's sight (Hosea 8:11). Instead of turning to God, the nation turned to Assyria, which would only lead to a second slavery, such as the one the nation had known in Egypt.

How often do we call on God to help us in our distress without opening our hearts to Him for the transformations only He can bring about? How often do we try to address our challenges in our own power instead of inviting God to do what only God can do? What we must understand is that there are consequences to such neglect, consequences we would always do well to avoid by turning to God in fullness of heart before the time to turn is no more.

Friday, August 31 | Hosea 9 | Doug Dortch

"Punishment Is Coming"

Have you ever had regrets for past actions that brought tough (and even tragic) consequences? Have you ever thought how different life might have gone if only you had taken a different course, one that was marked by faithfulness to God? Such reflection is crucial for coming to the penitent spirit God desires from us.

As Hosea looked back upon the people's past, he saw how their covenant relationship had gone bad, like bad fruit. They had engaged in idolatrous worship (Hosea 9:1-3). They had participated in sacrifices that were empty of heartfelt praise toward God (Hosea 9:4). They had observed festivals out of routine than deep thanksgiving (Hosea 9:5-6). Such acts of faithlessness would lead to the nation's downfall at the hands of the Assyrians, the very people with whom their leaders had made political alliances to stave off destruction.

At one time, God had looked upon the people as choice fruit, as "fresh grapes in the desert" (Hosea 9:10). Now, the situation had soured as the people had turned away from God and refused to make Him a priority in life.

This situation was a recurring one for the nation, going all the way back to their days at Gilgal, where they embraced Canaanite worship at Baal-Peor (Numbers 22). Just as those who had engaged in such sin were unable to make it into the promised land under Joshua's direction, so would those who had turned away from God in Hosea's day be unable to remain in the land God had given them.



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Hosea hoped that his message would lead the people to turn back to God. He predicted that the coming day of destruction would be a most terrible day, even to the point that he asked God not to grant families any more offspring so that they might not have to bear the pain and agony of God's judgment.

These words are difficult ones. Their difficulty lies in how they challenge us to consider the implications of our actions, both faithful and faithless. They call us to listen to the "whole counsel of God" and not just to what we desire to hear. Most of all, they invite us to identify ways that are contrary to the ways of God and then to change them before we too find ourselves on the receiving end of despair that we have brought upon ourselves.

Listening to such prophetic words as the ones Hosea proclaimed to his people are hard because they afflict us in our comfort. But when we consider the alternative of not hearing them and remaining stuck in our ignorance and obliviousness, what else can we do? Our reflection upon what we deserve makes us more grateful for God's mercy and grace in Jesus Christ and for a love that accepts us not just as we are, but accepts us ultimately in spite of who we are.



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WEEK THREE: SEPTEMBER 3-9

HOSEA 10-14

Monday, September 3 | Hosea 10 | Hayden Walker

In this chapter, Israel is presented through the lenses of two metaphors: a vine (Hosea 10:1) and a calf (Hosea 10:11). Both are agrarian images which we can easily understand today. However, there is a puzzle in the first verse that will help us to grasp the theme of this chapter more fully.

Depending on the translation of the Bible you use, you might see different words describing the vine in 10:1. The ESV translates it “a luxuriant vine,” the NIV says “a spreading vine,” the KJV translates it “an empty vine,” while the CEB says “a growing vine.” Why all the variation in translations? Some of the translations even seem to contradict each other. However, as we look back at the Hebrew in which the original text was written, we learn that each of these words are helpful translations that fit the text. In fact, the word used here to describe the vine is elsewhere carries the connotation of emptiness and destruction. So it might seem at first pass that this vine is fruitless. But we are sure from the second half of verse one that the vine does indeed produce fruit. What would an empty, yet fruit-bearing vine produce? Worthless fruit. The vine may be growing, spreading and luxuriant, but the fruit which it produces is useless, empty, and vile.

It is with this framework in mind that the rest of Hosea 10 makes sense. Israel appeared to be flourishing as the nation. The people built new altars and pillars as they prospered economically (Hosea 10:1). These altars and pillars were used in the worship of idols, not the worship of God. It is clear that Israel’s affluence grew in direct proportion to her wickedness and idolatry. God declares that He will destroy these places of false worship (Hosea 10:2, 8). In a poetic turn of phrase, God announces that another kind of “vine” will grow in Israel. This growth will be thorns and thistles covering their altars of idolatry (Hosea 10:8).

The Israelites had stored up their treasure in earthly things and false worship, which led to destruction. The text thus begs the question of us: does materialism lure us away from devotion to God? When everything is going our way and we seem to be prospering, are our hearts still worshipping God completely? Jesus reminded His followers to avoid the temptation to store up treasures on this earth (Matthew 6:19-20). Let us repent of our own false worship and turn again to heavenly treasure.

Tuesday, September 4 | Hosea 11 | Hayden Walker

When I was in the eighth grade, my best friend and I were in the school library browsing the shelves. As we approached a section of history texts, a librarian appeared and softly declared, “Those who do not know their history are doomed to repeat it.” The moment has stuck with me over the years and seems to prove true. Understanding the past can encourage us to make choices which will bear better outcomes for our future. For the nation of Israel, no historical event defined their past quite like the exodus from Egypt. It was the defining redemptive activity of the Old Testament. The nation of Israel certainly knew about this event, but perhaps the knowledge was rote memory, not an understanding which impacted their lives with thankfulness toward the God who delivered them.



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The imagery of the exodus shapes Hosea 11. God reminded the people of their past deliverance from Egypt, calling Israel His beloved son (Hosea 11:1). This usage of the word “son” in verse one also ties back to the plague which immediately preceded the exodus. While the firstborn sons of Egypt were killed on the night of the Passover, God spared His “son” (Israel) through the exodus from their land of slavery (Exodus 11-12). Yet the people of Israel were ungrateful children; they began their idolatry at the foot of Mount Sinai (Exodus 32). Their false worship continued and escalated into Hosea’s day (Hosea 11:2). Indeed, their wickedness deserved judgment. Would God send them to return to their bonds of slavery in Egypt?

In verse 5, we read that God will not send them into Egyptian bondage again, but they will be exiled to Assyria for their unfaithfulness. This punishment of exile may seem harsh, but it is in fact merciful compared to what the people deserved. For their idolatry, the Israelites should be destroyed like the cities of Admah and Zeboiim, cities completely destroyed by God along with Sodom and Gomorrah (Deuteronomy 29:23). However, God’s compassion warmed toward Israel (11:8-9). He could not destroy Israel as He destroyed other wicked peoples. Instead of giving the people what their sin deserved, God promised that He would preserve a remnant in the impending Assyrian exile (Hosea 11:10-11). He would not allow His children to be totally obliterated, though they had forgotten God’s miraculous salvific power towards them in the exodus.

From this chapter, we see the character of God on display. He will not tolerate sin; wickedness deserves punishment. However, He is a God of great mercy, His compassion is “warm and tender” (Hosea 11:8, ESV). It is only in the cross that we see this judgment and mercy meet. Because of his great love, Christ bore upon Himself the destruction we deserve (Ephesians 2:3-5). Hallelujah, what a savior!

Wednesday, September 5 | Hosea 12 | Hayden Walker

As we have seen throughout our study of Hosea, his primary audience was the nation of Israel. This wicked northern kingdom split away from Judah after the death of King Solomon. Perhaps until this point in Hosea’s prophecy, it would seem that the southern kingdom, the people of Judah, were off the hook of judgment. In chapter 12, however, the tide shifts to include the southern kingdom as well. The people of Judah were still walking with God at the time of Hosea’s prophecy (Hosea 11:12), but there would come a time in the next 150 years in which Judah would face the same impending doom as Israel. Thus, Hosea warned Judah that God had an indictment against them (Hosea 12:2). Judah would be held accountable for her sin and apostasy as well.

Why is this an important realization for us? Have you ever walked out into your yard and been appalled at the condition of the turf? Maybe you’ve seen a few dead spots or the weeds appear to be quickly multiplying. Then, let’s say you look over into your neighbor’s yard and it is a wasteland, grown up with weeds, dandelions, and clover. After observing the condition of their yard, perhaps you don’t feel so badly about your own anymore. Instead of pulling the weeds and watering your own thirsty grass, you become disillusioned that your yard is fine since it doesn’t look nearly as rough as your neighbor’s lot.



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I believe this same sort of evaluation and apathy is rampant in our human condition regarding our sin. We observe other people and begin to have a warped view of ourselves. We believe that we really aren't that bad when we hear about or see the sins of other people. The lesson for us today from Hosea 12 is that we must tend to the soil of our own hearts. Judah was blinded by the rampant sin of Israel in a way that prevented the people from acknowledging their own unrighteousness and idolatry. Although the proclamation and judgment against Israel should have served as a stern warning to the southern kingdom, the people of Israel would continue to ignore her own sin and meet the same fate of exile 150 years later. Instead of comparing ourselves to others, let's take the time today to confess our own sin and "by the help of your God, return, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God" (Hosea 12:6, ESV).

Thursday, September 6 | Hosea 13 | Hayden Walker

"You shall have no other gods before me." This was the first commandment God gave to Moses (Exodus 20:2). Perhaps God listed this commandment as the first of the ten because he was so well acquainted with the human heart. We are "prone to wander," as the old hymn says. We have learned through our study of Hosea that the Israelites' hearts wandered after idols (Hosea 13:2-3).

Unlike the fleeting fate of idols and their worshippers (Hosea 13:3), God is eternal. He reminds Israel of His authority, saying, "besides me there is no savior" (Hosea 13:4, ESV). Perhaps the people did not always like God's rules and ways, but there was (and is) no other path to salvation apart from Him. Forgetting God is tantamount to death. Thus, we could all use the reminder of the first commandment on a daily basis as we allow other things, agendas, and people to usurp God's throne.

As the text continues, it appears that the nation of Israel will be annihilated because of God's wrath (Hosea 13:7-13). However, like other passages in Hosea, God's mercy shines through just when things look the darkest. The poetic declaration of verse 14 in God's taunt against destruction. Though the nation may appear to be dead as the people are carried into exile, God will redeem them from this national death (Hosea 13:14). He will bring a remnant back from exile and His people shall not be destroyed. This post-exilic flourishing will be a resurrection of the nation.

In 1 Corinthians 15, the apostle Paul draws upon this imagery of death and life in the culmination to his argument about the hope of the resurrection. Paul quotes Hosea 13:14 as the victory cry which will be for all believers on the day of our resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:55). Just as exile felt permanent and desolate for the people of Israel, death feels grim to us. But like the nation of Israel would be "resurrected" as they returned from exile, we who put our hope in Christ will be resurrected upon His return from heaven. If you have a bit of extra time today, flip over to 1 Corinthians 15 and be encouraged by Paul's joyous application of Hosea 13 to the bodily resurrection.



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Friday, September 7 | Hosea 14 | Hayden Walker

One of the first songs many of us learned as children was “Jesus Loves Me.” The simple words capture the heart of our Christian faith. Beginning with our early years, it is not hard for us to grasp Jesus’ love for us, especially when we look to His sacrifice upon the cross. Unfortunately, people do not always have such warm feelings about God as he presents Himself in the Old Testament. Images of judgment, gloom, and doom may come to mind when picturing God before Christ’s birth. However, this dichotomy is not only false, it is dangerous. Pitting God against Himself may make His character more palatable, but only because we have begun to craft a god in our own image, rather than embracing Him as He has revealed Himself to us.

Our journey through the book of Hosea has covered plenty of chapters and passages about God’s impending judgment upon the wicked nation of Israel. You may have even recoiled a bit as God’s fierce anger was displayed. God’s intolerance for sin is undeniable. However, I do hope that you have been quick to notice God’s benevolent mercy within this book as well. Hosea ended his prophetic work with a plea for the nation to repent. He beseeched his people to return to God, to abandon their idolatry and obstinate attitudes (Hosea 14:1-2). Hosea even provided a scripted prayer of repentance (14:2b-3). Beginning in verse 4, God spoke again. His magnanimous character was presented once again. We see clearly that God Himself is the committed loving husband which Hosea mimicked in his own marriage to the harlot. Just as Hosea took Gomer back, God was ready and willing to accept His people again, following their repentance. God promised to cause the contrite remnant a future of flourishing (Hosea 14:5-7). A benevolent, healing, restoring, protecting, sustaining, and truly loving God is on display in this final chapter. It is this God who wants to heal us when we repent and turn to Him. It is this God of whom we can say, “He loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so,” not only upon the cross, but also in His loving Old Testament promises.



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WEEK FOUR: SEPTEMBER 10-16

JOEL 1-4

Monday, September 10 | Joel 1:1-12 | Kely Hatley

“Locust Plague or Sin Plague? There Are Many Similarities!”

We begin this week’s devotionals by delving into the book of Joel. Not much is known about Joel, the author. Verse 1 of the first chapter tells us that he is the son of Pethuel, but nothing is known about his father either. We may draw conclusions from his writings that he was mostly likely from Judah and did his prophesying in the city of Jerusalem. It is believed that Joel was one of the earliest of the minor prophets for some of the prophecies of both Amos and Isaiah echo themes or verses from the book of Joel.

In today’s reading, verses 1-12 deal with the invasion of the army of locusts which plague Judah in swarms. Great destruction is described in these twelve verses. It describes the power of the locusts in verses 6 and 7 saying, “...it has the teeth of a lion, the fangs of a lioness. It has laid waste my vines and ruined my fig trees. It has stripped off their bark and thrown it away, leaving their branches white” (Joel 1:6-7, NIV).

Today it is hard to grasp the great devastation of a locust outbreak. The last great outbreak of locusts in the U.S. was during 1875. The Rocky Mountain Locust formed a swarm that was 1,800 miles long and 110 miles wide—the largest recorded swarm in the history of the world. Such a mass of insects is almost inconceivable to me, yet we know it happened. The devastation that ensued caused many farmers to give up and move elsewhere.

How may we apply this locust plague story to our lives today? Think of your life as the ground, the crops, and the vegetation. Then see the locusts as sin in our lives. Sometimes sin swarms over us and when it does, it consumes. What is left is desolation and destruction. Verse 12 ends with the sentence, “Surely the joy of mankind is withered away” (Joel 1:12, NIV). That’s the result of sin in our life...a withered joy in our spiritual lives. If you are in the midst of this kind of “sin plague” in your life today, then join in prayer to God with the psalmist who prayed, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me” (Psalm 51:12, NIV). The Lord is with you...the Lord hears, as we are reminded later in the same Psalm “a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise” (Psalm 51:17, NIV).

Tuesday, September 11 | Joel 1:13-20 | Kely Hatley

“Repentance—What Is Needed”

Today’s reading picks up with a call to action as a result of the invasion of the plague of locusts from yesterday’s reading. Verses 13-20 are a call to the priests, elders of the people, and the nation of Judah to come together for repentance before God. Three things stand out to me when reading this passage about



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preparing to repent before God: 1) the use of putting on “sackcloth,” 2) declaring a “holy fast,” and 3) calling for a “sacred assembly” among the people.

Why wear sackcloth? Sackcloth was a woven material usually made from goat’s hair which resulted in it being rather uncomfortable to wear. A garment was made from such cloth, which was chiefly a symbol worn as a token of mourning by the Israelites. Therefore, putting on sackcloth was an effort to outwardly show the inner state of mourning over sins in a person’s life.

What does a holy fast represent? Fasts were used for a variety of purposes, but one prominent purpose was to show repentance. A good example of this is in the book of Jonah. After Jonah pronounced judgment against the city of Nineveh, the king covered himself with sackcloth and sat in the dust. He then ordered the people to fast and pray. Jonah 3:10 says, “When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, He relented and did not bring on them the destruction He had threatened” (Jonah 3:10, NIV).

What is a sacred assembly? In the Old Testament, sacred (or solemn) assemblies were occasions for God’s people to repent of personal and corporate sins, to renew their covenant relationship with the Lord, and to return to the Lord in faithful love and obedience.

All three of these things demonstrate an outward showing of what was felt inside the people. Ever wondered why we don’t do things like this today? Is it perhaps that we are too proud and that we are afraid of what people may think of us should we show that we are sorry for our sins? I don’t know myself. I do think that it is worth contemplating. Think for yourself about what action you may take that would show yourself just how deep your repentance for something may be before the Lord. Be assured that God does not set conditions on His forgiveness for us when we sin. It is the blood of Jesus shed for us that allows us to be forgiven. Yet, the action (whether only known to you or outwardly known to others) we take is more for our benefit in helping us to recognize that we are serious about our asking for repentance and renewal. Consider an area in your life where you need to repent, and then ask God to show you some action you may take as a first step toward true repentance before God. You may be amazed at what the His Spirit may bring to your mind.

Wednesday, September 12 | Joel 2:1-17 | Kely Hatley

“The Great Army of Locusts”

Today’s reading passage is one which I find both jarring and meaningful. The second chapter of Joel is traditionally used to begin the service on Ash Wednesday as Christians open the doorway to the season of Lent. Lent is one of the most meaningful seasons of the church year to me as a Baptist because I believe it to be a season of revival/renewal/repentance.



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While chapter 1 of Joel describes the invasion of the locust swarm and issues the public call for repentance, chapter 2 echoes similar themes. The heading in my Bible for this chapter is the “Army of Locusts.” The chapter begins by urging those in authority over the people to sound the alarm that the “day of the Lord” is coming. The phrase “day of the Lord” in Scripture is used to denote God’s judgement and impending punishment on those whose sin is standing against His ways. The day of the Lord in Joel 2 reiterates the army of locusts and what it will be like for the people when they come. Many scholars also believe that this is not only a description of locusts, but also of an impending invasion of a foreign army of soldiers which the Lord will use to inflict punishment upon them.

This prophecy is not without hope, however. Verse 12 begins a new section of the chapter dealing with God’s mercy which is still available to the people. “Even now” the Lord says, “Return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” (Joel 2:12, NIV). This indicates to us that even in the middle of great sin and chaos in our lives, God is still there, ever calling “return to Me.” It is never too late for us until we draw our final breath. The sobering thought regarding God’s judgement and His call for our repentance is that while we may yet turn from our sins and God will forgive us, He does not guarantee us that we will not suffer the consequences of our choices or actions. As Matthew Henry puts it in his commentary on these verses, “There is no question but that if we truly repent of our sins, God will forgive them; but whether He will remove affliction is not promised, yet the probability of it should encourage us to repent” (Matthew Henry, Matthew Henry’s Commentary).

Ponder on these thoughts today and allow God to reveal the areas in which you need to repent from and start afresh. Repentance is a daily discipline and should not only be reserved for the season of Lent!

Thursday, September 13 | Joel 2:8-32 | Kely Hatley

“The Lord’s Answer”

Today’s reading passage is demonstration of the gracious and compassionate God we serve. Upon seeing the devastation that His people had endured by the locust swarm God was said to have had pity on His people. The Hebrew word for “pity” in this verse denotes a “softness” to God. God was moved by the repentance of His people to remove the locust swarm and to restore the bounty of His people and their land.

The remaining verses of 19-27 list all of the wonderful things God will do for the people to restore their land and produce from the destruction that was caused by the locusts. He does this to demonstrate both his power and love to His people. Verse 27 states, “Then you will know that I am in Israel, that I am the Lord your God, and that there is no other; never again will My people be shamed” (Joel 2:27, NIV).

The final verses (28-32) are a foretelling of what is to come regarding the day of the Lord, which is most always associated with God’s judgment. Many people see this passage as a prophecy of God’s final



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judgement. This prophecy began its fulfillment with the day of Pentecost with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and continues still today. Until the day of judgement appointed (which no one knows) we should heed the lessons of repentance the locust swarm taught the people of Israel and remember that true repentance before God over past sins and transgressions evokes the love and softness of the Lord for His people. Psalm 145:8 states, "The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love" (Psalm 145:8, NIV). Additionally, 1 John 1:9 reminds us, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9, NIV). Take heart as you read about God's compassion to His people this day, and remember that as a believer, YOU are part of His people too! Praise to the Lord for His compassionate and loving ways toward us.

Friday, September 14 | Joel 3 | Kely Hatley

"God's Final Judgement Is Certain"

We finish the book of Joel with the last chapter which mostly contains the judgements upon the nations that have treated Israel badly throughout the years. God has noticed the way the nations around Israel have treated them with contempt and scorn. Their destruction is inevitable, and God will deliver His people from their tyranny. Verses 1-16 deal with the foretelling of what will happen to the nations.

Verses 17-21 then shift focus to the blessings God will give to His people. I love to watch movies and stories of fantasy, such as *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, are my favorite. In the third movie of this trilogy, *The Return of the King*, there is a point where the city of Minas Tirith (the good guys) is under heavy siege from the forces of Sauron (the really bad guy). It looks hopeless for the people of the city, and their forces are being routed right and left. Just when it seems that the city will be totally overrun and will fall, the watcher hears a low horn blow off in the distance. The scene shifts to the east where the sun illuminates thousands of troops on horseback from the nearby kingdom of Rohan who have come to the aid of the city of Minas Tirith. In that moment of the movie (if you are a movie nerd like me) when the army of Rohan sounds forth their horns for the advance, I too want to stand up and shout for victory as they do because they have come to the aid of their friends who have endured great suffering. I envision this same type of scene with God's army coming to the aid of His people because of the great suffering they have endured at the hand of their neighboring nations. He has not abandoned them and will not leave them alone and desolate.

I love the commentary on this section of verses by Matthew Henry. He states, "...there is a day coming, when everything amiss shall be amended. The fountain of this plenty is in the house of God, whence the streams take rise. Christ is this Fountain; His sufferings, merit, and grace, cleanse, refresh, and make fruitful. Gospel grace, flowing from Christ, shall reach to the Gentile world, to the most remote regions, and make them abound in fruits of righteousness; and from the house of the Lord above, from his heavenly temple, flows all the good we daily taste, and hope to enjoy eternally" (Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's*



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Commentary). Praise God for His faithfulness! Keep up your heads...for the day of the Lord is near and all will be set right.



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WEEK FIVE: SEPTEMBER 17-23

AMOS 1:1-5:17

Monday, September 17 | Amos 1:1-2:3 | Mary Splawn

Amos was a shepherd from Tekoa who was entrusted with the task of prophesying to the people of the northern kingdom (Israel) about the impending judgement on their neighboring nations and also on them! The date of his prophecy is not precisely known, but we can know that it was during the reigns of Uzziah of Judah and Jeroboam of Israel (sometime between 793 and 739 B.C.) as is mentioned in the first verse of the book.

Amos 1:3-2:3 deals with judgment for the neighboring nations around Israel for their sins of cruelty and oppression. The Scripture follows a pattern. Each section of judgment starts with "Thus says the Lord" and it is followed by the reason for judgment. Four of the six sections also end with "says the Lord." The point is clear. God is bringing divine judgment.

These oracles would have been easy on the ears of the Israelites. They firmly believed that God was going to judge the enemies of the covenant people for their godless behavior. And, I bet they are excited about this judgment. They want an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

I have a trivial modern-day example of this same kind of thinking. When one of my kids are acting up, my husband will jokingly ask the other child what the punishment should be. Without fail, the suggestion is harsh punishment. Yet, when the tide is turned, my children want abundant grace.

Judgment for others and grace for ourselves? Is that what this Scripture is about? No, we must remember that all Scripture is profitable for reproof and correction; therefore we should read this passage with eyes to see how we share in the sins of Israel's neighbors. I will admit that this is sometimes a stretch to make the connect because I have never "ripped open pregnant women in Gilead" (Amos 1:4, ESV) to enlarge my border. But, I have taken advantage of others, thought more highly of myself than I ought, and left much undone to aid my neighbors.

Take a few minutes to open yourself to the Holy Spirit's correction in your life. Ask the Lord to reveal areas of your character that need to change. Then, take time to repent and to praise our Lord Jesus for taking on our ultimate judgment so that we could be saved!

Tuesday, September 18 | Amos 2:4-16 | Mary Splawn

Recently at the Ark Adventure in Kentucky, I watched an evangelistic movie that depicted a young cross-wearing woman who was antagonistic toward the faith! When asked about the necklace she wore, she explained that it was a gift from her grandmother. Later in the film, it was revealed that the grandmother was a faithful follower of Christ who desired the same for her family yet somewhere along the way, her granddaughter had walked away from the truth.



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This film is reminiscent of what has happened with the Israelites. They have walked away from the God who had so graciously delivered them from their enemies in past days. As verses nine and ten say, God brought their nation up out of the land of Egypt and God defeated the Amorites on their behalf. But, somewhere along the way, they have forgotten God's provision and have abandoned God's law. Even worse, they have given themselves over to worship false gods. And because of their disobedience, they will suffer judgment.

This passage warns us of the dangers of forgetting, because if we forget all that God has done on our behalf, we too will be in danger of walking away from the One who has delivered us from the wages of sin and death. Let us take some time to thank the Lord for His work on the cross and recount to God the many ways He has been faithful to deliver us!

Wednesday, September 19 | Amos 3 | Mary Splawn

Amos wasn't a man of the cloth as Jerry Reed's country song "Amos Moses" insists. Instead, he was a country farmer and shepherd from Judah whom God entrusted with a message to the family of God. His message rings with authenticity because he wasn't a professional prophet. Rather, he was a regular man who was tasked with the unenviable task of bringing woe on his fellow kinsmen.

His message is one of doom because the Israelites have allowed social injustice to run rampant in the land. And while the Israelites thought they were safe from destruction because they were the chosen "family" (see vs. 1-2) of God, they were wrong! They have misinterpreted their status as God's children as a privilege instead of a responsibility. As another popular song states, they "should have known better" than to mistreat the poor and to violate God's law.

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus says, "Everyone to whom much is given, of him much will be required" (see Luke 12:48). This is true for the Israelites and it is true for us. As God's children, we are given the privilege of salvation, but the relationship also comes with responsibility. We are called to be messengers of God to the people around us, bringing peace and justice and help for those who cannot help themselves.

As Jesus says, "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me ... truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:35-36, 40, ESV).

Let us not misuse our privilege as followers of Christ; rather, let us pray that God would open our eyes to the injustices around us and use us as His hands and feet in the world.

Thursday, September 20 | Amos 4 | Mary Splawn

How many times have I said as a parent, "If you do that one more time, you're going to time-out!"? Yet, more often than not, this warning isn't enough.



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In this chapter, Amos recounts the warnings God has given the people of Israel over the years to return to Him and to stop sinning (verses 6-11). Yet, they will not listen. Their hearts are hardened and because of their disobedience they will endure judgment.

Ironically, it seems that the people are still engaging in the rituals of worship (see verse 4). Yet God is not pleased with their outward expressions of worship: He desires their obedience.

Two wonderful truths about God are found in these verses. First, we learn that God is not quick to give up on us. Again and again He will encourage us to return to Him as He encouraged the Israelites. And, as verse thirteen reveals, our God who is the Creator of all things knows the thoughts of men.

As we reflect on God's omniscience and His relentless love, let's take some time to reflect on the following questions: Are there parts of God's commands that we just don't want to take seriously? Does our worship of the Lord reveal a heart of gratitude and obedience or is it just a pretentious act? Is God warning you of His displeasure in some way?

In His grace, the Lord corrects us. May we heed His warnings before we endure difficult consequences of our sin.

Friday, September 21 | Amos 5:1-17 | Colton Taylor

"Seek Me and Live"

We live in a world that is constantly pushing and testing the boundaries of morality. Instead of seeing things as right or wrong, today's society has created a gray area in which individuals try to justify wrong by deciding on their own terms what is the standard for right and wrong. As we watch around us, it's as if people have no regard for holiness. It's as if no one takes sin seriously. The problem, we know here as Christians, is that we have a holy God who has given us His standard of right and wrong through His Word and we have a God who takes sin very seriously.

Amos is writing in a society very similar to our own. The people of Israel had been chosen by God and given the law to set them apart from the other nations. God entered a covenant relationship with the people and promised them blessings for keeping the covenant and curses for breaking it. God had blessed the Israelites with the promised land and had blessed that land with protection. In spite of God's constant faithfulness, the people of Israel were unfaithful. They chased after other gods, they made idols, and they continually lived as if sin were not a serious thing. As a result, God's judgment was imminent. His curses would fall on the Israelites. God had warned the people time and time again to repent from their sin and to return to Him, but they refused to do so.



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Amos's lament here in 5:1-17 offers three pleas for the people to repent and turn to God so that God might relent of His judgment. The first, in Amos 5:1, is a plea to return to the Word of the Lord and to hear His commandment. The second, in Amos 5:4-13, is a plea for the people to seek the Lord. The people of Israel had put their trust in things and places other than the Lord Himself. They had put their trust in created things rather than the Creator. The Lord singles out their sins one by one. He knows their guilt and how great their sins are. The third, in Amos 5:14-15, is a plea to seek good and not evil. Even though the Lord has seen the unrighteousness of the people his grace abounds as he patiently offers them another chance to repent and return to him.

As Christians we must take sin seriously, because we have a God who takes sin seriously. Sin is so serious because it breaks our relationship with God and separates us from Him. But there is hope. We have a God who is patient and whose grace abounds to cover all sin. Remain in the Word of the Lord, seek the Lord alone, and seek good that you may live.

(Colton Taylor is a staff member in our Christian Life Center. He is a student at Beeson Divinity School.)



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WEEK SIX: SEPTEMBER 24-30
AMOS 5:18-9:15

Monday, September 24 | Amos 5:18-27 | Colton Taylor

"The Day of the Lord"

The following phrases from these beloved songs may sound familiar: "Lord haste the day when my faith shall be sight, the clouds rolled away as a scroll, the trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend even so it is well with my soul." "I'll fly away oh glory, I'll fly away, to my home where glory will never end." "In the sweet by and by we shall meet on that beautiful shore." As Christians, we hold tight to the hope we have in spending eternity with Christ. It is the hope of heaven that helps us persevere through this world.

In Scripture the phrase "the day of the Lord" is a reference for the day of judgment and the day that Christ will return. The Israelites in the time that Amos prophesied were waiting for the day of judgment on their enemies. Judgment was coming for the enemies of God, but little did the Israelites realize that their constant wandering from the Lord and His law caused them to be enemies of the Lord. Amos cries out a woe to the enemies of God. The day of judgement will be nothing but darkness for those who do not belong to God. The sad part is, the Israelites still claimed to be God's people even though their lives did not show it. Their worship and their sacrifices were for show. The people were not loving God with all their hearts, souls, and minds and God's judgment would soon fall as he would give the land into the hand of the Assyrians. Many people we know today label themselves as "Christians" with their mouths, but their actions never show it. Rather their actions show they have other gods whom they serve. Sadly, but justly, the day of the Lord will be very dark for them.

On the day of the Lord, God's justice will roll down like waters and His righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Even the Christian will stand before God in judgment. Thankfully, as a child of God, the judgment for our sins has fallen on Christ and in exchange His righteousness has been placed on us. As believers, we can boldly look forward to the day of the Lord because it is the Lord in whom our hope is secure.

(Colton Taylor is a staff member in our Christian Life Center. He is a student at Beeson Divinity School.)

Tuesday, September 25 | Amos 6 | Mary Splawn

While admittedly confusing at times, this passage is very clear in one way. It condemns those who sit in luxury but are not grieved by the "ruin of Joseph!" (Amos 6:6, ESV). As the ESV Study Bible states, "They cared extravagantly for their own bodies but cared nothing for the needs of others."

This got me thinking about luxury and how we can process with the Lord about the goodness and necessity of material things. When I am in a quandary about a theological question, I often look online on the



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Desiring God website in the section called “Ask Pastor John.” As I had suspected, John Piper has given deep thought to the considerations of luxury. He asks himself a series of questions about how to decide what to buy if some non-essentials are okay to purchase. You can follow this link to the full article: <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-luxuries-in-my-life-are-sinful>

The fourth question is most intriguing: He asks, “Is it affordable without replacing or hindering good deeds?” In other words, can I buy this item and still be as faithful in giving as I would be if I hadn’t purchased it? He is quick to recognize that “Every ice cream cone you buy you could have sent to somewhere else. But I am thinking of would you have? Has it gotten in the way of heartfelt calling to do a good thing? But I am not going to do a good thing. I am going to bless me and not them. Then you don’t want to do that.”

This is where the Israelites have found themselves. They are basking in their perceived material blessings while not taking into consideration the needs of others around them.

This text is a warning to us. Are we materialistic and concerned more for our comfort than for the needs of others? Have we strayed from the way of Christ by allowing our desire for comfort and conformity to the surrounding culture to guide our finances?

Let’s take some time to figuratively lay our finances before the Lord.

Father, help us to see places in us that are wasteful or extravagant in the worst kinds of ways. Give us a heart that desires to share and a core being that recognizes that this world is not our home. And, conform us to the image of Christ who though rich became poor on our behalf. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Wednesday, September 26 | Amos 7 | Tyler Kerley

“Then Amos answered and said to Amaziah, ‘I was no prophet, nor a prophet’s son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. But the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, “Go, prophesy to my people Israel.”’” –Amos 7:14-15, ESV

I am mediocre. I grew up in the middle of rural southern Illinois. I graduated 25th in my below-average public high school class of 125. I got a 23 on my ACT. I finished my junior college and NAIA tennis career with a .500 winning percentage. I am mediocre.

Amos was mediocre. Amos grew up on the farm. Amos bred livestock. Amos worked long days in the field. Had he gone to my high school, Amos would have grown up in 4H and joined the FFA. Amos was a shepherd from Tekoa in the northern kingdom of Israel and a dresser of sycamore figs (Amos 1:1; 7:14-15). Amos—like Moses (Exodus 4:10), Gideon (Judges 6), and David (1 Samuel 16) before him, and like Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:4-7) and Paul (2 Corinthians 10:10) after him—was mediocre.



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But Amos was also a man without a home. Imagine if I had made a visit to Washington, D.C. when I had lived up north. A country boy from southern Illinois arrives at the Oval Office. He says that the local factory workers labor in dangerous conditions for inadequate wages. He says that the farmers receive insufficient government aid. But he goes one step further: the President or King must change his ways, or else God is going to judge him (Amos 7:9).

In many ways, this was Amos's message (Amos 2:6-16). And, just as I would understandably be thrown out of the White House for saying these sort of things, Amos was run out his own country in the northern kingdom. Amaziah, King Jeroboam II's heretical pastor, tells him to leave the country and go to the southern kingdom of Judah (Amos 7:12-13).

Amos was a mediocre man without a home. I can relate so much to Amos. Like Amos, I moved from Illinois in the north to Birmingham in the south three years ago to begin divinity school. So much of this time has been spent trying to do distinguished scholarly and pastoral work, so that I can be a strong candidate for either PhD programs or ministry positions.

And the same is true for all of us, but especially in Mountain Brook. Youth and college students feel the pressure of the highest academic and athletic standards. Young professionals know the stress of seeking corporate advancement. Middle-aged adults feel the need to work more and more in order to earn enough money for not only their children, but also for their newborn grandchildren and aging parents. Elderly people reflect on their lives and wonder if they have achieved anything significant. Pastors worry about the size and upward trajectory of their congregations. We all despair of our mediocrity and do not feel quite at home in the world.

Although he was never at home in the world, and although he was from a mediocre upbringing, Amos's ministry shows us a truth that Paul would later express: God chooses the weak things of the world like you, like me, and like a simple shepherd such as Amos to show His wisdom (1 Cor. 1:26-29). Amos was a simple shepherd from Tekoa, who continued faithfully to preach both the judgment (Amos 7:6, 17) and the mercy (Amos 9:11-15) of God, even though it brought him great personal discomfort and injury.

Like Amos, consider today how God loves you and can use you despite your background, despite your personal talents, and despite whatever personal failings you may have committed. Consider today how God loves you not for any good that you can do for Him—or because of any iniquity you may have abstained from—your mediocrity included (Deuteronomy 7:6-8; Romans 9:16).

(Tyler Kerley is a staff member in our Christian Life Center. He is a student at Beeson Divinity School.)



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Thursday, September 27 | Amos 8 | Mary Splawn

In this chapter, God gives a visual picture of a physical and spiritual reality. Just as summer fruit is ripened by the summer's sun, so Israel is ripe for judgment. Just like ripe fruit would need to be soon discarded if not eaten, Israel will also soon be destroyed because of her continual disregard for God's commands.

God is "slow to anger" but there is a time when He will bring punishment on those who are not living according to His word. This Old Testament vision of imminent destruction is meant to be a warning for us even today.

Eugene Peterson's modern paraphrase of the Bible may help us a bit here. This is his take on Amos 8:4-6: "Listen to this, you who walk all over the weak, you who treat poor people as less than nothing, Who say, 'When's my next paycheck coming so I can go out and live it up? How long till the weekend when I can go out and have a good time?' Who give little and take much, and never do an honest day's work. You exploit the poor, using them—and then, when they're used up, you discard them" (Amos 8:4-6, *The Message*).

Take a minute to examine your heart and ask God to reveal any sin within. Then, ask the Lord to give you a heart like that of Jesus who though He was rich became poor for our salvation!

Friday, September 28 | Amos 9 | Tyler Kerley

"I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel..." –Amos 9:14, ESV

"It was the best of times. It was the worst of times." These famous opening words from Charles Dickens' novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, portray the complicated setting of Amos' ministry and the climax of Amos' prophecy. Amos 9 is a tale of two cities.

The first city is described in verses 1-10. It is a city of human self-security. Its motto is, "Disaster shall not overtake or meet us" (Amos 9:10, ESV). Jeroboam II in the north and Uzziah in the south, the kings during Amos' ministry (see Amos 1:1), were used by God to save Israel from its enemies (see 2 Kings 14:25-28; 2 Chronicles 26:6-15). On the surface, the city was secure. It was the best of times.

But despite their worldly success, kings Jeroboam and Uzziah both, in the end, worshiped false gods (2 Kings 14:24, 2 Chronicles 26:16) and oppressed their nations' poorest members (Amos 2:4-8, 8:4-6). Ungodly, selfish worship leads to ungodly, selfish living. It was the worst of times.

And we, too, often take security in our perceived worldly success. We—like Jeroboam, Uzziah, and Israel—think that our worldly success is proof that God is blessing us. "If we are doing okay in the world," we think, "then we must be doing okay with God."



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But we should never take our perceived worldly success as proof that God is blessing us. The first city should not feel secure, Amos says—they should not say, “Disaster shall not overtake or meet us”—because they will be destroyed for their idolatry, hypocrisy, and false sense of security (Amos 9:8, 10). Far from being a sign of God’s blessing, worldly security can sometimes sadly be a sign of God’s judgment.

But simply because we should never find security in our perceived worldly success does not mean that we have no security in this life. The second city, described in verses 11-14, points us to the place where and to the One in whom we can find our security.

God says that he will rebuild the cities (Amos 9:11) and restore the fortunes of Israel (Amos 9:14). The true security of Amos 9:11-14 began in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the “booth of David” that had fallen, and he is the “booth of David” that was raised (Amos 9:11). Jesus lived Amos’ “Tale of Two Cities.”

But while you are secure in Christ in this life, you still have a greater security ahead. There is another time, a greater time when God will again restore the fortunes of his people (Amos 9:14). There is another city to come, a New Jerusalem, in which God will restore not only His people, but His whole creation. And not even death will be able to remove you from the land and the life that God has given you (Revelation 21:1-5).

If you are in Christ, then you are secure. If you are in Christ, then your security is not found—as Jeroboam, Uzziah, and Israel believed—in your perceived worldly success, but your security is found in your heavenly Savior and eternal destination. There will be a day when there will no longer be any worst of times, but it will forever only be the best of times.

(Tyler Kerley is a staff member in our Christian Life Center. He is a student at Beeson Divinity School.)



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WEEK SEVEN: OCTOBER 1-6 OBADIAH & JONAH

Monday, October 1 | Obadiah | Joel Burks

Obadiah just happens to be the shortest book of the Old Testament, BUT just because it is short, does not mean it has any less importance. The origin of Obadiah has been disputed by commentators over the years. Some think he may have been associated with Ahab's court in some way, and others think he might have been a contemporary of Amos, Hosea and others. In his book, Obadiah describes to us a vision he has seen. You might be thinking to yourself, surely this guy had more to say in his lifetime than the little bit that made it into the Bible. It is true that Obadiah likely prophesied many other things. This book, however, made it into the canon of Scripture, so even though we only have twenty-one verses, we know they are inspired by God and important for us to study!

Obadiah is a name that means "one who serves and worships Yahweh." We see in Obadiah's book that he describes the destruction of Edom. The people of Edom were descended from Esau, Jacob's twin. They always seem to have felt a real kinship with the people of Israel. However, this often showed itself in ways that were less than neighborly. The two neighboring peoples—Israel and Edom—had a long history of war and rivalry.

In Edom's case, pride just happened to be their downfall. Obadiah suggests that when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonian army, the Edomites did nothing to help and they may have even taken advantage of Judah's fate. He writes, "You shouldn't have gloated over your brother when he was down and out" (Obadiah 12, The Message). He goes on to say, "As you have done, it will be done to you; your deeds will return upon your own head" (Obadiah 15, NIV). This highlights one of the basic principles of Christianity that we should love each other. If I am constantly waiting on the failure of the person who wronged me, I could be waiting a long time. In the case of Edom, we should never feel joy when an enemy falls. Rather, we should extend the same grace and compassion that God extends to us.

The good news for Israel is that Obadiah speaks of the great deliverance that is to come (verses 17, 21); this of course will take place on the day of the Lord (verse 8, 15). He writes, "The day of the Lord is near" (Obadiah 15, NIV). On that day the great deliverance will take place: "The remnant of the Saved in Mount Zion will go into the mountains of Esau and rule justly and fairly, a rule that honors God's kingdom" (Obadiah 21, The Message).

Lord I pray that You will give us all the ability to serve and to treat everyone we meet with the grace and compassion that You have given to us.

Tuesday, October 2 | Jonah 1 | Joel Burks

The story of Jonah is one of the most widely known stories in the Bible, in comparison to some of the lesser known accounts. Whether in Sunday school, in a sermon, or simply as a part of your daily Bible reading, the



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story of Jonah captivates us by telling us of a giant fish that swallowed a man who was running from the Lord. But what if I told you that this story holds an even deeper truth than the obvious lesson of “don’t run from the Lord when He speaks to us”? What if I told you that it teaches us about how deep God’s grace is, not only for us, but for those around us?

To give us some historical context for the book of Jonah, Jeroboam II was the king of Israel at this time. 2 Kings 14:26 tells us, “He restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke through his servant Jonah, the son of Amittai the prophet, who was of Gath-hepher” (2 Kings 14:26, NIV). Since Jonah 1:1 identifies the prophet as Jonah, son of Amittai, we can safely infer that this is the same man and that he lived in the northern kingdom of Israel in the early to middle 700s B.C. (see sermon from John Piper, The Education of a Prophet, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-education-of-a-prophet-jonah>).

Jonah, right off the bat, does the one thing we as believers should never do: judge others based on our knowledge of the situation. My wife Sara was quick to point me to Romans 2. In the first couple of verses Paul talks about how we have been forgiven for our sin, so we should never feel okay with passing judgment on others. Verses 2 and 3 say, “Now we know that God’s judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God’s judgment?” (Romans 2:2-3, NIV). Ouch, kind of stings a little right?

Are there times you have looked at other people’s lives and justified your judgment with something that sounds like “Well at least I’m going to church”...or...“at least I’m not out doing what they’re doing every night?” If so, I encourage you to seek Christ even more diligently in your life. Our role, especially among other believers, is to be encouragers.

Father I pray that You will give us the courage to love those with whom we disagree and to encourage our brothers and sisters more faithfully.

Wednesday, October 3 | Jonah 2 | Joel Burks

Before we begin talking about this chapter of Jonah I want to begin with saying that I believe that this story found in the Bible is a historically accurate event that actually happened. We find evidence for this in the form of seeing Jonah mentioned in two other places in the Bible. First Jonah is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25 NIV: “He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher” (2 Kings 14:25, NIV). Second, in Matthew, Jesus references Jonah’s story: “For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:40, NIV). All that I am saying is that, if Jesus believes in the account of Jonah, then I think we should consider it true as well. And if you have doubts about how it happened, John Piper says “If you ask how a man can survive in the belly of a fish three days,



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the answer is, he probably can't—any more than a person can stay three days in the grave and live again. That's why Jesus called it a 'sign'" (see sermon from John Piper, The Education of a Prophet, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-education-of-a-prophet-jonah>).

When I read this passage of Jonah, I can't help but put myself into his shoes. Pitch-black darkness around me, the fish breathing beneath me, and the smell...Jonah has just been cast into the sea, and swallowed by a big fish and he begins to do the only thing he can think of: pray. We must remember as we take a look at this passage that the sea is what Jonah is fearful of, not the big fish. The fish is Jonah's salvation in a time of need. God took this selfish prophet and decided to teach him about His mercy. God proves through this chapter of Jonah that He does hear our cries of distress. Moreover, He has the power to respond and intervene in our physical reality. This is just one of the few times in Jonah's life that God chooses not to condemn Jonah, but instead chooses to be merciful towards him. Are you in distress today? I pray that God will reach into your situation and shift the tide in your favor. He has the power to do that; do you believe it?

Thursday, October 4 | Jonah 3 | Joel Burks

In Jonah 3, we see the evidence of reconciliation between the Lord and Jonah. Whether Jonah repented of his disobedience is not very clear, but what is clear is that he was chosen yet again to deliver the Lord's message. Jonah was tried, convicted, locked up, and then released onto dry land via God's will. We see one of my favorite attributes about God all throughout this story: His willingness to forgive all of the misdeeds committed by someone and to embrace them as His own. In other words, we see the Lord's grace.

All throughout Scripture, we see evidence pointing towards the fact that we serve a God of second chances. It is true in the Old Testament, as well as the New. At the beginning of this chapter, we see the word of the Lord again return to Jonah sending him towards Nineveh. Not wanting to see what might happen if he disobeyed the Lord a second time, Jonah promptly heads towards the city. Think about what Jonah does in this chapter in the context of our current society. What if God came to me and said "Joel, I want you to go proclaim my good news to the people of New York City!" I mean... where to begin right!? Jonah approaches this city and it takes him three days to walk through the entire city proclaiming the message of the Lord! Three days? Most of us would probably get tired within the first couple hours and maybe even give up. Jonah, though, had a task to complete, and was devoted to finishing up the work at hand.

Earlier, we talked about the Lord's grace in our life. Jonah knew that the Lord is abounding in grace and that is what caused Jonah to ultimately question God's plan for Nineveh. Let me ask you something though. Have you found God's overflowing grace for your life? Have you made some mistake like Jonah that landed you in a place that you don't even recognize? Jonah's story helps us to see clearly the God that we serve: the God who is rich in love, slow to anger, and so very gracious.



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Thank You Lord for giving me grace, especially when I don't deserve it. If I have done anything to sin against You, I pray that You show me the depths of Your mercy and kindness. I pray that You reveal my Nineveh and give me a heart to do Your will. In your name I pray. Amen.

Friday, October 5 | Jonah 4 | Joel Burks

"Resentment is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die."

This statement, often attributed to St. Augustine, relates to so many situations I've had in my life. I would need more than two hands to count the number of times that I've been wronged, and then wished for some sort of retribution. The problem with this kind of thinking is that at the end of the day, we are only harming ourselves. Don't get me wrong, it feels good to be angry. It feels even better to see the person who has wronged you put into their place...but I do not think that those feelings are what believers are supposed to put stock in. What kind of people would we be to accept God's grace, but then to turn around and examine a person or group of people and determine that the same grace we accepted does not extend to them?

In the chapter we read today, I think this is the problem that Jonah finds himself in. He has traveled all the way to a group of people, who, by all perceived intents and purposes, are destined to be destroyed by God. Jonah, however, knows that God will have mercy on them and that He will relent if they turn from their sin to worship Him. This is why Jonah runs from God. Is that not the silliest reason? Because Jonah knew that God would forgive Nineveh, he fled. However, God has a very important lesson still for Jonah about how He cares for His children.

Jonah exits the city to await what he hopes will be Nineveh's demise. He sits atop a hill in the sun, and the Lord springs forth from the ground a plant to provide shade for Jonah. The plant dies overnight and the next day Jonah wallows around in his own self-pity because the plant no longer provides him with very needed shade. What the Lord says to Jonah at the end of this chapter is highlighted in my Bible because it speaks to me on so many levels. He says "You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?" (Jonah 4:10-11, NIV).

To me, God is saying to all of us that He is going to bring into our lives certain situations or people who are there specifically to tend to us in our hour of need. Sometimes we don't even know that we are in need. I am sure that the people of Nineveh were totally unaware that they needed a "Jonah." But God was concerned about Nineveh, so He sent Jonah. I also think on the other side of the coin that we could be the Jonah that someone else needs. Who are we walking past every day that we have felt God pulling us towards? Are we paying attention to God's calling, desiring to tend to His creation? Or are we running and hoping that God doesn't send us to that person who wronged us in some way?



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The message of Jonah is not one of discouragement but one of hope. God does not want the harm and retribution that we deserve because of our sin to befall us. Take a second to thank God today for the grace He has shown us.

Lord I pray that You will open our eyes, that we will be attentive to Your spirit, and that we will not let Your directives be ignored. Thank You for Your son and His grace that surpasses our understanding.



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WEEK EIGHT: OCTOBER 8-14

MICAH 1-4

Monday, October 8 | Micah 1 | Wayne Splawn

Two important themes that dominate Micah's prophetic message are the importance of right worship and right living. Micah's prophecy opens with an indictment of the false worship the people were offering to the Lord. The first thing that seems to have characterized the people's worship in Micah's day was a false understanding of Lord's character. It seems their view of God was rather small and inconsequential. If that was indeed the case, the picture of God we find in the opening verses of Micah is quite different. The Lord reveals Himself as high and lifted up and the mountains melt and the valleys split open at His coming. The Lord is holy and not someone with whom God's people should trifle. The other thing that marred the people's worship was idolatry. The language of verse 7 is jarring. Through their idolatrous worship, the people had been unfaithful to the Lord and Micah likens their unfaithfulness to someone joining themselves with a prostitute. Micah's opening words were meant to correct the people's inadequate view of the holiness of God and to reveal the serious nature of their idolatry.

We are prone to both of the things that characterized the people of Micah's day. Rather than allowing our understanding of God to be shaped by the picture of God we see on display in the Bible, we are sometimes guilty of fashioning God in our own image. We are also prone to worship people and things other than the Lord. We may not possess metal images to which we bow down, but if we look to other people or to created things rather than to God to fulfill the desires our heart, we are guilty of idolatry. Ask God to help you see Him as He really is and to offer Him the exclusive worship He deserves.

Tuesday, October 9 | Micah 2 | Wayne Splawn

As we saw yesterday, Micah 1 focuses on the importance of right worship. Here in Micah 2, the prophet highlights the importance of right living. The people of Micah's day were engaged in works of injustice. They were so consumed with taking advantage of the poor and oppressed, in fact, that Micah states that all night long they dreamed of ways to take advantage of others and acted on those plans as soon as the sun came up (Micah 2:1). In the moment, the rich and privileged of Micah's day were in the seat of power and were able to do whatever they pleased at the expense of the disadvantaged among them. I would guess that very few of us are as actively engaged in oppressing others as were the people of Micah's day, but it is possible that we have some things in common with them. For example, in Micah 2:3, Micah says that when God brings justice to the poor and oppressed at the expense of the rich and mighty, those who experience God's judgement will no longer be haughty. To be haughty is to be proud, arrogant, and conceited. These are attributes that often characterize the rich and powerful in every age.

You may not be the richest or most powerful person in the world, but when compared with most of the world, chances are you are indeed quite wealthy and influential. And, if this is the case, then you must be on guard against any feelings of superiority that might lead you to be haughty. Ask God to reveal to you if there are ways in which you feel proud, arrogant, or conceited when you look at those who are poor and



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oppressed by the world's standards. Ask the Lord to help you see the money and influence God has entrusted to you as tools you can use to lift others up rather than as things you can leverage to obtain and enjoy more material possessions in this life.

Wednesday, October 10 | Micah 3 | Wayne Splawn

Who was to blame for the false worship and unjust living that characterized God's people during the time of Micah's prophetic ministry? According to Micah 3, God's prophets had an important role to play in the spiritual and ethical demise of God's people. Rather than being honest and sincere in their proclamation of God's word, the prophets in Micah's day catered to the desires of the people. To those who met the prophets' material needs, the prophets would deliver a message of peace, but to those who opposed the prophets, the prophets would deliver a message of judgement (Micah 3:5). They were nothing more than preachers for hire who were more than ready to tell their benefactors exactly what they wanted to hear.

This passage is a good word of warning for someone like me who regularly teaches Bible studies and preaches sermons. If I am not careful, I will be tempted to craft messages to meet the desires of other people. But, if I am to be a faithful messenger of God's word, I must be prepared to speak the truth, even when it is an unpopular word of rebuke. You may not preach and teach the Bible on a regular basis, but you will often find yourself in a place where speaking the truth of God's word will be unpopular and threaten to put you at odds with others. In those moments, pray that the Lord would help you to remain faithful amidst pressure to say what others want to hear. We never want to be unnecessarily offensive, but we also must be faithful and trust that God will meet our every need.

Thursday, October 11 | Micah 4:1-5 | Wayne Splawn

Micah's prophecy takes a dramatic turn in chapter 4. Rather than focusing on the present condition of God's people, Micah casts an eye toward a day in the future on which the false worship, unjust living, and poor spiritual leadership will be a thing of the past. On the day Micah foresees here in chapter 4, the people will once again worship the Lord rightly and the result of this renewed worship will be that God's people will live in right relationship with Him and one another and that other nations will be drawn to the temple of the Lord to learn to walk in God's ways.

This is a beautiful picture of what it looks like when God's people worship him rightly and live in right relationship with one another. When this happens, unbelievers are often drawn to the Lord through the witness of God's people. I recently heard a pastor say that the church ought to be a model home of the kingdom God will one day establish fully on this earth. Pray that God would increasingly conform you and others at MBBC more into the image of Jesus Christ so that we would bear witness to God's kingdom in a way that would draw others to the Lord.

Friday, October 12 | Micah 4:6-13 | Wayne Splawn

One of the reasons I love to read the prophets is that I am always reminded of God's steadfast love when I read the words of hope and restoration found in each prophetic book. There is certainly a fair amount of



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indictment and words of impending judgement throughout the prophets, but each of the prophets also speaks of a work of redemption God will do in the lives of His people if they will repent and return to Him with their whole hearts. Here in Micah 4:6-13, Micah continues the message of redemption and restoration that we read about yesterday. In verse 10, Micah acknowledges the painful judgement God's people will endure because of their unfaithfulness, but he also tells the people that God will one day rescue and redeem them. Punishment and destruction will not have the last word.

I am so grateful that the Lord has been kind enough to rescue and redeem me through Jesus Christ. In addition to the work of salvation I have experienced in Christ, I have also seen how God has continued to pursue me during seasons of disobedience. God has not and will not give up on me. Thank the Lord today for the work of redemption and rescue He has accomplished in your life. Additionally, ask the Lord to give you a heart that longs for others to experience this same work of rescue and redemption. God is able to save and redeem anyone. May we always have a heart that longs to see all people experience the salvation of God.



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WEEK NINE: OCTOBER 15-21

MICAH 5-7

Monday, October 15 | Micah 5:1-6 | Wayne Splawn

God delights to work in ways we would not expect. Here in Micah 5, Micah states that God will raise up a ruler from His people from the most unexpected city of Bethlehem. Jerusalem was the city everyone associated with the worship of God. It was an important place of worship where the temple was located and the most logical city from which God might raise up a ruler. Bethlehem, in comparison, was a tiny city that Micah says was too little to be among the clans of Judah. How could anyone important come from Bethlehem? But, according to Micah, God would raise up a ruler to lead his people whose coming was from ancient days.

We know this prophecy was ultimately fulfilled in the true Messiah, Jesus Christ. In his telling of the birth of Jesus, Matthew draws on this prophetic word in Micah 5:2 to show that Jesus was the one through whom God would bring Micah's word to pass. Jesus is the ruler from Bethlehem who would deliver God's people from their greatest enemies, namely sin and death. Today, give God thanks for the gift of salvation made possible through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Also, ask the Lord to give you eyes to see the often surprising ways God brings His kingdom purposes to pass in this world.

Tuesday, October 16 | Micah 5:7-15 | Wayne Splawn

In whom or in what do we ultimately place our trust? Most of us would initially respond that our hope is placed in the Lord. However, if we examine our hearts and lives we would probably have to admit that we are often tempted to place our trust in other people or things. For example, money promises to ensure that we will be secure and that our needs will be met in this life so we are tempted to place our hope in financial resources rather than in God.

Here in Micah 5:7-15, Micah again offers a word of hope regarding God's work of redemption on behalf of the remnant of Jacob. Interestingly this word of hope includes the promise that God will cut off horses from among his people and destroy their chariots (Micah 5:10). In a section about hope and restoration, this seems like a strange thing for the Lord to say through Micah. But, what Micah is pointing out here is that the people will most assuredly know the Lord is the source of their hope because they will not be able to rely on the security of horses and chariots. This verse is reminiscent of Psalm 20:7, which reads, "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God" (Psalm 20:7, ESV).

Where do you place your hope for security? Do you trust in your own strength or wisdom or the resources at your disposal? In our more sane moments, we know that all such things will ultimately fail us. The Lord alone is our true source of hope and security.



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Wednesday, October 17 | Micah 6 | Wayne Splawn

Micah 6:8 is certainly the most well-known verse in the book of Micah. It reads, “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8, ESV). What does God require of His people? First, that we do justice. We must not be content with experiencing the pleasure that comes from experiencing justice. Instead, God desires for us to be people who pursue justice for the oppressed. Second, we are to love kindness. Other versions translate the part of the verse as “love mercy.” The point is the same. God’s people are to be people who extend kindness and mercy to those who are disadvantaged in this life. Third, God requires His people to walk humbly with Him. In contrast with the haughty spirit Micah rebuked in chapter 2, God’s people are to be people who acknowledge that every good thing they experience in this life is a result of God’s unmerited grace and a reason to walk humbly with Him.

Examine your own life in light of the threefold command Micah gives the people here in Micah 6:8. Do you pursue justice for others? Do you love to extend mercy and kindness to others? Do you walk humbly with the Lord, always open to the Lord’s correction in your life? May we be people who worship the Lord through lives characterized by pursuing justice, extending mercy, and walking in humility.

Thursday, October 18 | Micah 7:1-17 | Wayne Splawn

One of the things I find so refreshing about reading through the book of Psalms is that the psalmists are honest about how they feel. They do not sugarcoat their emotions. If they feel God is distant, they say it. If they feel God does not hear their prayers, they make that known as well. In contrast, it seems we are usually scared to express these same feelings in our own prayer lives.

I also take great comfort when I read expressions of confident faith in the Scriptures. Here in Micah 7:7, we find one such expression of faith. In verses 1-6, Micah acknowledges that he can not find anyone in this life in whom he can place his trust. He feels totally isolated and alone. However, he is confident that God will hear and respond to his cries for deliverance. Micah states, “I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me” (Micah 7:7, ESV). Perhaps today you need to be reminded that God hears your prayers. You may feel as if God is indifferent to your struggles. You may feel isolated and alone. If that is your situation today, feel the freedom to honestly cry out to the Lord. But, also be reminded that just as God heard Micah’s cries, so too God hears your prayers. Look to the Lord, wait for Him, and be confident that He hears you.

Friday, October 19 | Micah 7:18-20 | Wayne Splawn

Micah 7:18-20 is a beautiful passage of Scripture. In these verses, Micah contemplates the incomparable character of the Lord. Micah asks the rhetorical question, “Who is a God like you?” to which Micah knew the answer was “No one!” What makes God unique? First, God pardons iniquity and passes over sin. Second, God does not retain His anger forever, but instead delights to show steadfast love. Third, God is compassionate. Finally, God is faithful to keep His covenant promises.



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You and I have the blessing of knowing the full extent of God's character on display in the person and work of Jesus Christ. How can God forgive us and pass over our sins? Because Jesus Christ humbled Himself and paid the price for our sins on the cross. When we look to the cross, you and I see the fullest expression of God's compassion, kindness, faithfulness, and steadfast love. Spend some time today meditating on the character of God and praise Him for the ways you have seen His character on display in His Son and our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.



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WEEK TEN: OCTOBER 22-28 NAHUM & HABAKKUK

Monday, October 22 | Nahum 1 | Allison McSwain

Wayne and Mary Splawn once taught a student ministry series entitled “NaWHOM? And HabakHUH?” I feel like this attitude toward these small prophetic works is incredibly common even among us adults. I don’t often find myself flipping to Nahum during my quiet time, but perhaps I should start. Over this next week, we’ll look into what these two books have to say knowing that they are the divinely inspired Word of God. Nahum contains a prophecy that announces the downfall of an enemy of God’s people—Assyria, identified here by its capital city, Nineveh. Assyria is just one party in a long line of wicked empires that oppressed Israel. This prophetic book is an encouragement to those who are hurting, overwhelmed by the evil in the world and unsure if God hears their cries.

This first chapter contains a beautiful poem reminding the reader that God always wins. Nahum says a lot about God’s character, and several aspects seem like they may be contradictory. We first see that God is jealous and avenging—He is active in rescuing His people and punishing their oppressors. He pours out His wrath on His enemies like a storm, like fire. Yet, Nahum writes, God is slow to anger. Yes, He is vengeful and powerful enough to crush all evil, but in His kindness He always gives the wicked the chance to repent. Perhaps the groans of the persecuted, “How long, oh Lord?,” ring out longer than we would like because our God is slow to anger—He is allowing the oppressors the time to choose rightly.

However, God never abandons His beloved. “Though I have afflicted you, I will afflict you no more,” He says (Nahum 1:12, ESV). In His timing, He frees the suffering, for, as verse seven tells us, He is GOOD. We can take refuge in our God, friends, because He is a stronghold that cannot be overcome. Plotting against our God is futile—He always gets the final say. I don’t know what Nineveh is for you at this point in your life, what wickedness you feel is crushing you under its feet, but today let us thank God that He always wins. Thank Him because He will take vengeance on the enemies of His people. Thank Him that He is good and powerful. May these aspects of God’s character encourage you today and every day as you remember that God never leaves evil unpunished.

Tuesday, October 23 | Nahum 2-3 | Allison McSwain

Nahum 2-3 are not exactly what I would call “feel good” texts. In fact, they make us pretty uncomfortable. We see the destruction of Nineveh: desolation, trembling knees and plundered treasure, lamenting moans, and like a lion’s den. The Assyrian capital is called a prostitute and a bloody city with princes like grasshoppers. This horrendous judgment on Nineveh does not come about for no reason, however. It is all for “restoring the majesty of Jacob as the majesty of Israel,” a people who had themselves been plundered and subjected to all sorts of evil.

To me, the most chilling line of these two chapters comes in verses 2:13 and 3:5—“Behold I am against you, declares the Lord of hosts...” (Nahum 2:13 and 3:5, ESV) Wow! There is no worse place to be than on



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the team opposing God. Those words are something I never ever want to hear, and I'm thankful that because of Christ's blood I'll never have to hear them. What is it the Lord is against, exactly? We see that the Lord is against the "bloody city" because of its lying and betrayal, its murderousness, and its general wickedness. These two chapters are a reminder that the Lord despises evil in all its forms. Wickedness is not God's invention nor His intention, and He will ultimately rid the earth of it.

"Your shepherds are asleep, O king of Assyria," the prophet announces (Nahum 3:18, ESV). I am immediately reminded of Psalm 23, the beautiful poem about our Shepherd—the Lord Almighty. Unlike Assyria's shepherds, our Shepherd never sleeps. The Shepherd of God's people provides all our needs so that we are without want. He leads us, comforts us even in the valley of the shadow of death, and makes it so that evil is nothing to fear. Psalm 23 states that the Lord prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies, something He did for Israel in Nineveh and continues to do for His people today. Take time this day to read Psalm 23 and reflect on what it means to have the Lord as your shepherd. Ask Him to help you fear no evil, as He has already triumphed over it.

Wednesday, October 24 | Habakkuk 1 | Allison McSwain

The book of Habakkuk opens with a complaint by the prophet it's named after. Habakkuk asks God why He is not responding to the injustices present in Israel. How long will there be violence, destruction, strife, and lawlessness? One may be shocked by Habakkuk's forwardness with God. He seems quite angry. Is it really okay to speak that way to Almighty God?

Yes! We often forget that there are more psalms of lament than any other type. Look at Lamentations and Job; both include raw, unfiltered complaints directed to the Lord. God can handle your heartaches and your frustrations. Perhaps you need to lay your heart bare before Him today. Be honest so that you can be healed!

Verse 5 contains the Lord's response to Habakkuk's complaint, and this verse is often taken out of context. "Look at the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told" (Habakkuk 1:5, ESV). I've seen this verse made into graphic art and shared on social media; I've seen it as Instagram bios and decorative plaques. I believe readers stop at Habakkuk 1:5 and misinterpret it out of its context. They take this verse to mean that God is going to do something great in their generation today, something so good that it will astound everyone. Read in context, however, the verse needs to be followed with verse 6 where God announces that He is raising up the Babylonians (the Chaldeans) for the purpose of keeping Israel in check. This "work in your days" was certainly not a "great" thing by Israel's standards.

So God responds to Habakkuk's cry, but Habakkuk doesn't like God's response. That sounds an awful lot like you and I, doesn't it? When we finally get our answer, we tell God we'd rather have it answered our way. Habakkuk complains again in verses 12-17, asking why God would remain silent while the wicked (Babylon) inevitably swallow up Israel. Yet, God had a plan. The use of the oppressive, wicked Babylon may



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not have been Habakkuk's desire, but God's ways and thoughts are higher than our own. Let us remember this when we present our requests to the Lord. He may not solve our problems in the manner we plan, but He is the God Most High who sees and knows all. Trust that God has your best interest at heart today, even when the enemy convinces you otherwise.

Thursday, October 25 | Habakkuk 2 | Allison McSwain

I love the image of Habakkuk standing like a watchman awaiting the Lord's response to his prayer. All too often I throw a request at God, say "amen," and carry on with my day without pausing to listen. I need to take up the practice of looking out to see what He will say to me, and perhaps you do, too. Let us not treat God like a silent Santa who grants our wishes. Let us have true relationship with Him in the form of prayers that await answers.

Answer He does, indeed. The Lord instructs Habakkuk to write down what He will show him. The promise that will be unveiled in this vision may come slowly, but it will be fulfilled. The righteous will live by faith in this promise, He says. Look at this, the gospel in Habakkuk! Verse 4 does not say that the righteous shall live by their good works, but by faith in what God says and does. This is the true gospel—justification by faith—and it is present in the Old Testament even before Jesus Christ sets foot on the earth.

God shows Habakkuk that He is using this corrupt nation of Babylon for His own good purpose. He will not let them rule over His people forever. God pronounces woes over the wicked nation, calling out and condemning their unjust economic practices, use of slave labor, drunkenness, and idolatry. Because of their wickedness toward Israel and others, the destroyers themselves will be destroyed. "Utter shame" will come upon their glory. This is God's answer to institutions like Babylon. There are many "Babylons" in the world today—corrupt governments, hateful and oppressive leaders, and businesses built on injustice. As long as sin is in the world, there will always be "Babylons." However, we can rejoice knowing that God has pronounced woe on all who oppose Him and His ways. We as His people do not have to suffer forever.

Even so come, Lord, and rescue us from those who seek to do us harm. We thank you for the promise that the vengeance is Yours.

Friday, October 26 | Habakkuk 3 | Allison McSwain

This chapter contains a beautiful message of hopeful praise and the vindication of God's people. Habakkuk sees an awesome vision of God coming from Teman and Mount Paran—two places the Israelites would have seen as they left slavery in Egypt. He's coming to save them. He's covered in splendor, bright and beautiful. He's unmatched in power—mountains scatter before him, the nations shake. God leaves plague and pestilence in His wake, avenging His beloved and punishing those who have wronged them.

This vision reminds me of the song "Do It Again" by Elevation Worship:



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"Walking around these walls
I thought by now they'd fall
But You have never failed me yet
Waiting for change to come
Knowing the battle's won
For You have never failed me yet

I've seen You move, You move the mountains
And I believe I'll see You do it again
You made a way where there was no way
And I believe I'll see You do it again"

Israel has seen the Lord move mountains for them. He's brought them out of Egypt. He's blessed them with land, family, and His very presence. Won't He do it again when it comes to Babylon?

It's this faithfulness of God in the past that allows Habakkuk to rejoice in the midst of a dark, hopeless season:

"Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines,
The produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food,
The flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls,
Yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation" (Habakkuk 3:17-18, ESV).

Brothers and sisters, I so hope that this can be our prayer when we face trials of our own. May we look back at all the times the Lord has redeemed us. May we take note of the fact that He's never failed us yet. If you have time today, worship along to the song "Do It Again." Then pray Habakkuk 3:17-19, asking God to let that hopefulness reign in your heart.



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WEEK ELEVEN: OCTOBER 29-NOVEMBER 4 ZEPHANIAH & HAGGAI

Monday, October 29 | Zephaniah 1 | Allison McSwain

Reading Zephaniah 1, I am reminded of a passage in Hebrews that doesn't always sit well with us.

"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by Him. For the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and chastises every son whom He receives. It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons." (Hebrews 12:5-7, ESV)

The Israelites in Judah were definitely in need of some discipline during the time of Zephaniah's ministry. He prophesied during the reign of the southern king, Josiah (640-609 B.C.). While Josiah is considered one of the "good" Judean kings and issued many spiritual reforms, his people were just too devoted to the worship of other gods. It was because of Judah's sin that judgment was coming to Jerusalem, and the prophecy of this judgment is recorded in Zephaniah.

Many of these verses are difficult for our hearts to read—

"I will bring distress on mankind,
so that they shall walk like the blind,
because they have sinned against the Lord;
their blood shall be poured out like dust,
and their flesh like dung." (Zephaniah 1:17, ESV)

Yet we must remember that God disciplines those He loves. As the author of Hebrews writes, God disciplines His children for a good purpose. Like a loving father who wants the best for his son, our Heavenly Father steers us in the right direction with His sovereign justice.

No one gets excited about discipline. Tell any toddler to go into time out and you'll see what I mean. However, the author of Hebrews makes a profound point: "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it." (Hebrews 12:11, ESV) Our perfect and holy God cannot look on sin, and when the Israelites sinned, discipline came for the purpose of producing righteousness.

Oh Lord, refine us in Your fire. May we endure hardship and discipline remembering that it is because You love us You allow us to undergo such trials. Make us holy as You are holy, Oh God. We thank you for grace, as we cannot be holy on our own.



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Tuesday, October 30 | Zephaniah 2 | Allison McSwain

The content of Zephaniah 2 is a little unexpected to me. After reading chapter 1, I am anticipating the Lord's great and terrible judgment to fall on Judah. However, this next chapter opens with an appeal for Judah to repent:

"Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land,
who do His just commands;
seek righteousness; seek humility;
perhaps you may be hidden
on the day of the anger of the Lord" (Zephaniah 2:3, ESV).

How great the grace of our Lord is! It meets us when we least expect it. Too many people mistakenly believe in a false dichotomy between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. To them, the Old Testament God is wrathful and concerned only with justice. The New Testament God, on the other hand, is forgiving and loving. How incorrect this thought is! We see here the Lord's great, undeserved love for His people even in the midst of their sin. Not only does God offer Judah a chance to avoid the judgment coming its way, He also pronounces woe and judgment on Judah's enemies! The Lord promises that a remnant of His people will survive the oncoming judgment, and not only survive, but thrive—possessing and plundering the lands of their enemies. That sounds like a very loving, forgiving God to me.

Today it is my prayer that you and I will not become like Nineveh, an enemy of God and the "exultant city" mentioned in verse 15: "that said in her heart, 'I am, and there is no one else'" (Zephaniah 2:15, ESV). Nineveh's pride led to her downfall. She boasted of her wealth and grandeur, neglecting what really mattered: relationship with and service to Yahweh. Examine your heart today and ask the Lord to reveal any areas of pride. Let us not boast in ephemeral things that do not matter, but let us instead boast in our gracious God who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Wednesday, October 31 | Zephaniah 3 | Allison McSwain

The closing chapter of Zephaniah artfully juxtaposes the themes of the justice of God and the love of God—something we see frequently in the minor prophets. How encouraging it is that "He does no injustice; every morning He shows forth His justice" (Zephaniah 3:5, ESV). Yet we don't always recognize that justice. Each morning we turn on the news to see another shooting, another kidnapping, another robbery. Where is justice, we ask? Verse 5 tells us that the unjust know no shame, and we certainly see that when we look around our world. However, the same verse tells us that each dawn He does not fail. When God seems to be silent toward the pain and suffering in our world, we must encourage ourselves with the truths of Scripture. He is truly just, and He will bring judgment on all wickedness in due time. "'Therefore wait for me,' declares the Lord, 'for the day when I rise up to seize the prey'" (Zephaniah 3:8, ESV).

Yes, God is a just God who cannot look on sin and requires righteousness. But He is also a loving God who restores those who are most undeserving of His grace. The last several verses of Zephaniah are some of my favorites in all of Scripture. My heart swells with hope and joy reading these words of our Lord: "The Lord



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your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness; He will quiet you by His love; He will exult over you with loud singing" (Zephaniah 3:17, ESV). What a beautiful picture! The God of all creation...rejoicing and singing over me. The same God who promises to deal with the oppressors of His people, who restores the fortunes of those who have become so deserving of His wrath. Thanks be to God for these promises!

Pray with me:

God, today I thank You for being just and loving—for bringing the darkness to light and for forgiving those who have sinned against You. Help me to remember the promise of restoration that is one day coming to this fallen creation. Fill me with hope when I begin to despair. I look forward to the day when You bring all nations of the earth under Your renown.

Thursday, November 1 | Haggai 1 | Allison McSwain

In Zephaniah 3 we read of a promised restoration the Lord will bring to His people. In Haggai, we see that promise is fulfilled. At this point in history, the Babylonian empire has collapsed and been replaced by a different powerhouse, Persia. King Cyrus of Persia allows the Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem in 538 B.C., and Haggai is the first writing prophet to address these returnees.

I'm sure these former exiles were overjoyed to finally return home to the land the Lord gave them, to the place where His presence once dwelled in the temple. However, the temple lay in ruins just as the Babylonians had left it. The message the Lord sends through Haggai is a convicting one. The returnees have their priorities vastly out of order. The Jews live comfortably in paneled houses while the house of God, the temple, is still a pile of rubble. The people say it's not yet time to rebuild the Lord's house, but the Lord says multiple times—"Consider your ways."

You and I are not immune from having misplaced priorities, are we? It's easy to get so wrapped up in the "self"—my time, my schedule, my desires—that we neglect the Lord our God, the reason for our existence. Ask yourself today, where are you prioritizing your walk with Christ in the midst of your day to day life? Consider your ways. Prayer, Bible reading, gathering with the Lord's faithful in corporate worship...where do they fall on your list? In all reality, we should place our time with the Lord above all other things on our schedules, but this is often easier said than done. We are too busy and too tired to give God the time He is due.

Ask God to order your priorities in the way that most glorifies Him. Let us stray from being too comfortable in our own homes on days when we need to be in the Lord's home.

Lord, help me avoid the mistake of the Israelites and put You first in all I do!



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Friday, November 2 | Haggai 2 | Allison McSwain

Are you familiar with disappointment? I sure am. The Israelite audience of Haggai 2 was, as well. It appears that temple construction was not living up to the expectations of the Jewish remnant. “Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory?” the Lord asks. “How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes?” (Haggai 2:3, ESV). This new temple of Yahweh was shaping up to be nothing like the grand temple King Solomon built, and the people of God were discouraged. I suppose you’ve been at that place, too. Something you had so much hope in and waited so long for did not meet your expectations.

My spiritual mentor in Mississippi has a saying that will always stick with me, and I feel like it’s applicable in discussion of this topic. She says that disappointment can become HIS (God’s) appointment when you change the “d” to an “h” and put a little space in. That space is time. “For thus says the Lord of hosts: Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake heavens and the earth and the sea the dry land. And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord of hosts” (Haggai 2:6-7, ESV).

“In a little while...” these are words we don’t like to hear. We are an impatient people wanting our way in our own time, but that is not how God operates. His way and His timing is best. God promised that the glory of the new temple would exceed that of the old one—a divine promise breaking through a disappointing situation.

Brothers and sisters, let’s agree to wait a little while and give God time to work in our disappointments. Trust Him with your failures, your inadequacies, and your uncertainty. Let us eagerly await God’s divine appointment even in the midst of a dark time.



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WEEK TWELVE: NOVEMBER 5-11 ZECHARIAH 1-4

Monday, November 5 | Zechariah 1:1-6 | Amy Hirsch

Have you ever had that feeling of seeing someone you know, someone you've met several times, come up to you...and you just can't quite remember who they are? I have to admit that this has happened to me several times. One of the helpful things about the prophets is that they often give themselves a helpful introduction (even if you've read them before and can't quite remember who they are) - and Zechariah follows the trend here in the first verse of his prophetic work. We learn that Zechariah writes in the second year of Darius, the Persian King, which would have been 520 B.C. You'll remember from reading the minor prophets that the people had been exiled to Assyria and Babylon because of their sin; they had broken God's covenant and He allowed foreign nations to judge them. But in 538 B.C., after Persia had overtaken Babylon, the Persian king at the time, Cyrus, allowed the Israelites to travel back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. 50,000 Israelites made their way to their homeland. They had been longing for this day for years while in exile - for the day when they would see the sites of Jerusalem again, for the day when they would rebuild the temple and worship the Lord there, for the day when they would be back home among their people.

But things aren't as bright as they first seemed. The Israelites arrive back in Jerusalem to find it plundered. The destruction of the temple probably brought back painful memories of how God had brought judgment on His children through Babylon. The prophets had pointed forward to a day when God would dwell with His people, when they would no longer be under the thumb of foreign oppression, when they would want no more. But times were hard as they tried to rebuild an economy while still serving under the Persians. I can imagine that their enthusiasm quickly faded as the reality of the task before them began to weigh on them.

Zechariah spoke into such a situation, bringing encouragement and hope to God's people while calling them to choose faithfulness. Zechariah's first words from the Lord sounds like messages heard in the other minor prophets, don't they? The message is simple: repent. In the Hebrew, the word for repent means to turn—to turn from our wicked ways (and not just the evil deeds of our hands, but also the twisted intentions of our hearts), and to return to the Lord.

But God's people had not repented. They chose to put their trust in idols, in foreign nations, in the strength of their own hands. And because they did not turn to the Lord, He had allowed them to be exiled. But in His mercy, God had brought His people back home. They had returned to their homeland. And now, through His servant Zechariah, God gave the people an exhortation: "Your forefathers did not listen. They chose disobedience. But the story can be different for you. Turn to Me."

There's no doubt that Zechariah understood the significance of this exhortation. He was born in exile, in a land far from home. Zechariah was from the tribe of Levi, a prophet and a priest, so he knew God's law, and he had seen the pain and suffering caused when God's people chose to turn away from Him. And so I



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imagine his voice as he delivered this message from the Lord was kind and sincere, full of longing and hope. “Things don’t have to be the way they were anymore. We can start fresh. Trust in the Lord and hold to His promises. Turn away from anything that distracts you from His purposes. His words are eternal.”

And this call to repentance is the same call Jesus gave in the gospels—and it’s the call that He gives us today. Repent and believe in the gospel, for the kingdom of God is at hand (Mark 1:15). The choice set before the Israelites post-exile is the same choice set before you and me today: will you repent and believe?

Tuesday, November 6 | Zechariah 1:7-21 | Amy Hirsch

After Zechariah heard a word from the Lord calling the people to repent, he experienced eight visions all happening on a single night (talk about a night of crazy dreams...except these weren’t just dreams - they were visions from the Lord!). Each vision uses apocalyptic imagery and the symbolic language can be confusing! We could spend all of our time trying to figure out exactly what each symbol means (for example, who exactly are the horns in verses 18-21!?!), but when we approach the prophets this way, we miss what is at the core of their message—and often, that’s a declaration of God’s character.

The horsemen in the first vision, “whom the LORD has sent to patrol the earth” (Zechariah 2:10, ESV), bring a report that everything is at rest and peace. This might seem like good news, but it’s a frustrating word for the Israelites, who are expecting God to overthrow their enemies. Certainly the Lord has used Babylon and Assyria as His instruments, to bring judgment on His people, but Isaiah and Jeremiah tell us that these foreign oppressors heaped evil upon evil on God’s people. They went beyond what He commanded in their punishment and “furthered the disaster” (Zechariah 1:15, ESV). The seventy years of exile Jeremiah predicted were hard and cruel, and the Israelites longed to experience the mercy of God.

The vision that Zechariah receives is full of “gracious and comforting words” (Zechariah 1:13, ESV). God reminds His people that He has chosen them. Despite their sin, they are still His people. He is committed to them and loves them with an all-consuming love, a love that jealously demands their attention, a love that requires that nothing else be put before Him (Exodus 20:3). He promises that the temple will be completed, that the city will overflow with prosperity, that He will be their God and they will be His people. And in Zechariah’s second vision of the four horns and craftsmen, the Lord reminds the Israelites that He is a God who does not allow sin to go unpunished. Those who brought destruction upon Israel and showed no mercy will face the judgment of God.

It’s encouraging how these words are true for us today, aren’t they? As we walk through suffering and look at the brokenness of the world, it can be hard to see God at work. Like the saints in Revelation 6:10, we also cry out, asking God “How long?” How long will You let war and destruction continue? How long will You allow evil to continue unanswered? And like the saints, we are told to wait a little longer. In these two visions, God reminds us that He is a God who is committed to His people and who loves us fiercely. He has not given up on us, and He promises that a day is coming when we will be able to see the renewal in our



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land, the New Jerusalem, with our own eyes. He also declares that He is a God who punishes evil—He will not allow Satan to have the last word.

Wednesday, November 7 | Zechariah 2 | Amy Hirsch

When I was little, my grandfather worked as a carpenter. To this day, when I see a measuring tape, I can picture the one he would keep in his tool belt. I can't imagine him cutting wood without first measuring it; without a measuring tape, he would be prone to inaccuracy, which would be wasteful and costly!

But we see that the measuring line used in Zechariah's third vision ends up being obsolete and unnecessary, doesn't it? At first, Zechariah witnesses a man going out to measure the city of Jerusalem. As the vision continues, we see God declare that one day, Jerusalem will be a city "filled to the brim" with people—she will have so many inhabitants that walls will be unnecessary! This probably sounded crazy to post-exilic audience, as they attempted to put the pieces of their lives back together in a ransacked town, but the vision God gives Zechariah is one where multitudes flock to Jerusalem.

There seems to be a spiritual and a physical reality at work here, doesn't there? When we look to the New Testament, we see the good news of the gospel preached to the nations, who respond in faith. Through the work of the Holy Spirit empowering the early church, many come to "join themselves to the LORD" (Zechariah 2:11, ESV). Jews and Gentiles, those who trust in the name of Jesus, are known as God's people, spiritual Jerusalem.

But I think that Zechariah is also pointing forward to something physical in the future: to the day when God's people will dwell in the New Jerusalem...and when He will dwell with them there. Certainly this passage points us forward to the incarnation of Christ, when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). And we are also reminded that, at Pentecost, God gave the gift of the Holy Spirit, who dwells in believers, encouraging us, advocating for us, and pointing us to the Father. But the man with the measuring line is unknowingly pointing us forward to a day when we will dwell in a new heaven and a new earth, in a place that cannot be measured: the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God (Revelation 21:10). On that day, God's promise to Abraham, to make Him a great nation, will be finally and fully realized, where God be with His people as their God—not in the tabernacle or in the temple, but as "a wall of fire all around...[and] the glory in her midst" (Zechariah 2:5, ESV).

The next time I see a tape measure, I'm sure I will think of my grandfather. But I hope I will also think of that new city, the one God is preparing for His people—the place where we will behold Him face to face.

Thursday, November 8 | Zechariah 3 | Amy Hirsch

As a kid, I can remember playing out in the mud puddles once in my whole life. I was probably in second grade and my friend Marla Grier had come over to play. I can just imagine the look of horror on my mom's face when she looked outside and realized what we were doing!



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Zechariah's fourth vision is also a vision of horror and mess, but it's not because anyone has been playing in mud puddles (at least, not physical ones). Zechariah has a vision of Joshua, the current high priest, standing in a heavenly courtroom, wearing his priestly garments. The only problem is that Joshua, the defendant, is clothed in filthy garments. The word "filthy" is probably a tame term here; the Hebrew words used here describe Joshua's robes being covered with human vomit and excrement. His accuser roars before the angel of the Lord; certainly this man isn't fit to stand in the presence of God! We might expect God to agree with the accuser, after all; Joshua is the high priest, a man who ought to carry himself in a holy manner, and here he is, in heaven of all places, wearing soiled garments. But God shows grace. He rebukes the accuser and gives Joshua clean clothes, declaring He has removed his iniquity from him.

This vision probably encouraged the Israelites, who felt as if they stood before God in their own sin and shame following the exile. For so many years, their forefathers had neglected to hear God's voice. They had chosen to give their love and loyalty to other gods, gods they fashioned with their own hands. This vision wasn't just for Joshua; it was for all of Israel to be encouraged that God had chosen them, that he had plucked them out of exile like a brand plucked out of the fire (Zechariah 3:3). God's grace was greater than their guilt.

Zechariah's vision continues with the reinstatement of the priesthood, along with the promise of a greater priest—God's servant, the Branch. On the Day of Atonement, God would remove the sins of the people, but Zechariah looked forward to the day when, on the cross, the Lamb of God, the Righteous Branch from the dynasty of David, would bear the sins of the people once and for all.

Zechariah's vision also comforts and encourages us when hear the roar of Satan, our Accuser. We too come to God in the excrement of our sin and shame, and like Joshua, we can't remove the stain on our own. And Satan would like nothing more than for us to feel the full weight of our sins and to despair without hope. But there is hope, because we too are plucked like brands from the fire, justified by the blood of Christ, and clothed in new garments, the very righteousness of God.

Friday, November 9 | Zechariah 4 | Amy Hirsch

One of my favorite verses of encouragement comes from Zechariah's fifth vision in the night: "For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice, and shall see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel" (Zechariah 4:10, ESV). Zechariah's fifth vision features a pretty fancy lampstand (in fact, it's a lampstand with seven different lamps coming off of it, each with seven lips, or places for wicks—could you imagine the light emanating from this contraption if all 49 wicks were lit!?), flanked by two olive trees. As we read on, we see that the lamp reminds God's people of His promise to them: He is empowering them, through His Spirit, to complete a task He has specifically called them—the rebuilding of the temple—and will use Zerubbabel, the Persian-elected governor of the Israelites, and Joshua, their high priest, to help guide the people.



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I bet these days seemed like small days to the Israelites. They had arrived back in Israel and everything had been destroyed. They had probably heard tales of the beauty of Solomon's temple, but the grandeur of that house of worship has long faded into a pile of rubble. How could any temple they build even compare with their ancestor's house of worship? And with such a small task force, how could they ever finish the task assigned to them? I can easily imagine the days of monotony and construction, the days of weariness, the days of wishing this part of the process was already over.

But God tells them not to despise these days. He reminds them that His Spirit is the one who equips them, that His eyes see all the inhabitants of the earth, and that quiet faithfulness doesn't go unanswered—even if it seems like these days will never end, like the glory they've been waiting to see is so far out of view, like they'll never see the temple completed. He reminds them that they will, and on that day, they will give Him all of the praise.

We are all caught up in the milestone moments of life, often waiting for that next big thing, but life is made up of more days of small things than milestones, isn't it? And God is working in the days of small things—in the mornings of never-ending laundry, in the afternoons at a unfulfilling job, in the evenings when the dishes never seem to finish—even when we can't see it. And this ought to make sense to us, after all, because He is a God who "delights in small beginnings" (Andrew Hill, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*). He is the same God who created the world not with flashes and explosions but through simply speaking, the same God who came to live among us, not as a king raised in a palace, but as a baby born in a manger. He uses these moments to remind us that He's called us to be faithful where He has placed us today, even in the days of small things. And so often, we find that these days of small things are far more formative for our souls than the milestone moments. Praise God that He promises the tiny seeds He has planted will come to fruition, in due season—in His timing.



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WEEK THIRTEEN: NOVEMBER 12-18
ZECHARIAH 5-9

Monday, November 12 | Zechariah 5 | Amy Hirsch

I recently heard a friend tell the story of a time when she was disobedient as a child, and her mother's response was to take her to her father's office for what we would call back in North Carolina a "firm talking to." My friend recalled feeling nervous because she knew that her father was gracious, but that he also took disobedience seriously. In some ways, the story, to me, is a picture of the character of God. God's self-revelation in Exodus 34:6-7 echoes throughout Scripture, and we hold the truth that He is merciful and gracious in tension with the truth that He "will by no means clear the guilty."

In Zechariah's sixth and seventh visions, we see God's justice against not only those who do evil, but against wickedness itself. In his sixth vision, Zechariah beholds a large scroll (probably 15 by 30 feet!) flying in the air. What is written on the scroll? It's likely the curses for those who make an oath to follow God's law but refuse to keep it (see Deuteronomy 28-29). The sins of theft and perjury, the first a sin against humanity and the second a sin against God, represent the gambit of iniquity. The message here is clear: God will not tolerate evildoers. God's judgment will come against those who refuse to heed Him—and there's nowhere they can hide! Their homes could be made of the strongest stones or the sturdiest bricks or the tallest trees, but nonetheless, God will find them and make His justice known.

The seventh vision is one that is a bit bizarre, I have to admit. Zechariah receives a vision of the personification of Wickedness—a woman in a basket, being sent off to Shinar, a foreign land. Now, at first, I got a little agitated that the picture of Wickedness was a woman—I mean, really? But it turns out that the Hebrew word for wickedness is a feminine noun. It's also helpful to remember that so many of the Israelites' problems came from false worship tainted with sexual immorality, and that false worship was allowed to enter the Promised Land because men chose to marry foreign women who did not follow the Lord. So, the image of Wickedness as a woman is actually really helpful because of how it reminds us of Israel's history—it's not because Zechariah was saying that there's something inherently wicked about women because of their gender.

Notice that the basket is flown off by women who are portrayed like storks—off to a land called Shinar, a place otherwise known as Babylon. God sends Wickedness back to where she came from. You see, this is good news, because God takes disobedience seriously, but His goal isn't just to punish those who do evil. Scripture points us forward to a day when God will have His just desserts against Wickedness herself, to a day when evil will no longer reign. And we hold this truth of God's justice in tension with the truth of His mercy—that for those who are repent and believe the gospel, who choose to look "on Him whom they have pierced" (Zechariah 12:10, ESV), who chose to trust in Christ for salvation—there is now therefore no condemnation. Their sins are removed as far as the east is from the west! Praise God—His mercy and justice will triumph over even evil in the end.



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Tuesday, November 13 | Zechariah 6 | Amy Hirsch

In Zechariah 6, we see Zechariah's last vision, and isn't it interesting how it bookends his first vision? Zechariah sees four chariots with horses who are going to the four winds of the earth, patrolling all of the land. His message here echoes the first vision's message: we are reminded that God is reigning and that nothing escapes His watchful eye. We are also reminded that His plans are perfect and His purposes will come to pass. We can trust in His word.

I was especially intrigued by the second part of Zechariah 6, where we witness a coronation ceremony happen. Zechariah calls for several exiles to bring their silver and gold, and a crown is fashioned for Joshua, the high priest. These days, any images of crowns make think of the popular Netflix show *The Crown*, which focuses on the rule of Queen Elizabeth II. Anytime they say "The Crown" in the show, I've noticed that they aren't typically just talking about the beautiful headpiece the queen wears. Rather, "The Crown" refers to the authority of the monarch, who is the head of the state. The fashionable headwear is just a physical symbol of her power and rule.

In the same way, there's a lot of symbolism happening here in Zechariah. A crown isn't being fashioned just for the sake of making a crown—rather, the crown is a symbol of God's plan to rule over His people. Joshua, the high priest, wears the crown for now, and Joshua will help lead the endeavor to rebuild the temple, but Zechariah's vision is also futuristic. He pictures a day when Israel will be ruled by a king who is also the high priest, when these two offices will be united under one leader, "the Branch." Another prophet told us that this Branch from the lineage of David would "reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land" (Jeremiah 23:5, ESV). In Zechariah, we learn that he will sit on the throne not only as a king, but also as a priest.

When we look to the New Testament, we see the hopes of this priest-king fulfilled in Christ. Isn't it good news that Christ is reigning, that nothing is left outside of His control (Hebrews 2:8)? And, isn't it also good news that this same sovereign Lord who reigns over the cosmos is intimately acquainted with the details of your life, and is a king who graciously intercedes for His people as a merciful and faithful high priest (Hebrews 2:17)?

Wednesday, November 14 | Zechariah 7 | Amy Hirsch

My husband Matt really enjoys studying history; he reads historical books for fun, loves to visit historical sites, and can even tell you the numerical order of the U.S. presidents (you should fact-check him sometime and ask him to tell you who the thirty-third, or twenty-sixth, or seventh president was!). History is important to Matt—to know where you are going, you need to know where you came from. Otherwise, you're likely to repeat mistakes of the past.

We begin Zechariah 7 and two years have passed since Zechariah has received the nighttime visions. The temple is nearing its completion, and some of the delegates have an important question to ask the prophet: must they continue all of this fasting? Ever since the exile, there were fasts during several months



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of the year to mourn the loss of the temple, land, and even their elected officials. On the one hand, we can sympathize with the delegation. They were probably tired of fasting and ready to start a new season, and why not begin an era of celebration with the dedication of the new temple? But Zechariah saw things differently. The word of the Lord came to him, questioning the authenticity of their mourning. Were they fasting for show, for their own selfish gain, for themselves? Or were they fasting with sincere hearts?

The rest of Zechariah 7 is a bit of a history lesson about their ancestors. The earlier prophets had preached against this kind of showy fasting, against rending their garments rather than their hearts. But the people didn't listen. Their focus was on outward obedience rather than inwardly conforming to the will of the Father. Had they truly fasted for the right purposes, had their hearts been aligned with God's, then it would have been evident in their actions (Zechariah 7:8-10). But they starved themselves for the appearance of obedience, beating their breasts and voicing loud prayers in the temple so others might consider them holy—yet meanwhile, their hearts were far from God. Notice the four-fold description given for the people's defiance: they refused to pay attention, turned their stubborn shoulders, stopped their ears, and made their hearts diamond-hard.

Zechariah wants the people to realize that this is how they ended up in their current predicament. They've been observing these fast days because of the disobedience of their forefathers, who strayed from God. God allowed them to face exile because of their sins. And now, He has given the Israelites an opportunity to come home, to rebuild the temple, to live in this land promised to Abraham as His people. Will they learn from history, or will they be doomed to repeat it? We find ourselves being forced to answer the same question, don't we?

As I read the story of God's people unfold, of their past unfaithfulness and rejection, I see myself in this story, sometimes caring more about my appearance than about my heart. I find myself in desperate need of forgiveness and mercy. *Oh Lord, let all of our observances be about You— when we worship, when we fast, when we serve, when we share—and let these acts of obedience come from hearts that have been sincerely changed through the work of Christ!*

Thursday, November 15 | Zechariah 8 | Amy Hirsch

I come from a long line of women who love fixer-upper shows. When I call my mother or my granny, if they are watching TV when the phone rings, chances are good that the TV is turned to HGTV and they're watching the latest renovation show. And, I have to admit, there's something alluring to me about these shows as well; after all, it's incredible to see a run-down bungalow transformed in merely thirty minutes!

Zechariah 8 feels a little bit like a "fixer-upper" show to me, but one on cosmic proportions. This isn't the Lord declaring that He is going to fix up a house, but rather a city and a people. And the transformation won't happen because God picked new paint colors for the kitchen cabinet; rather, the transformation pictured in Zechariah 8 will come to pass because God promises His faithfulness to His people. His love is



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all-consuming and will not forever abandon Israel. He declares He will return to Zion and will dwell in Jerusalem. The city which was once adulterous will be called faithful again.

There are so many contrasts here, aren't there? The land once seemed forsaken even by God, but now His presence abides there with His people. It felt like God's promises to Abraham, to make Him a great nation, had been put on pause in the exile as Abraham's descendants were imprisoned and taken to serve foreign countries—but here, the land is filled with young and old, living in peace. The people were fasting (remember Zechariah 7?), but the Lord declares that a day will come for feasting and celebration! Jerusalem was once made a laughing-stock among the nations, but Zechariah goes so far as to prophesy that one day, foreigners will long to come to Jerusalem because they have heard that God dwells there!

When I watch one of those fixer-upper shows, I always doubt their abilities. "There's no way they can fix up that dump!" I think to myself. And I'm continually proven wrong by their skill and prowess. God speaks to the same doubts in verse 6. Is this all marvelous and wondrous? Absolutely! Is it outside of the hand of God to make such a reversal happen? Absolutely not. After all, He is the God who spoke and formed the cosmos. He is the God who continually sustains the world. And He is the God who, in Christ, came to be with His people and was obedient to death, even death on the cross. He is the God who is high and lifted up, who all will one day confess as Lord (Philippians 2:8-11). And He is the God who is rich in mercy, who calls us His own, who loved us and made us alive in Christ (Ephesians 2:4-5). Nothing is impossible for Him.

Friday, November 16 | Zechariah 9 | Amy Hirsch

If you have been in worship on Palm Sunday, it's likely that a few of these verses in Zechariah 9 are quite familiar to you! On Palm Sunday, we remember Jesus' triumphant entry into the city of Jerusalem, entering the city on a donkey as people waved palm branches and shouted "Hosanna!" But, did you know that Christ was fulfilling prophecy as He entered the city that day? In the gospels, we see the words of Zechariah 9:9 come to life.

This prophecy must have been such a comfort to post-exilic Israel. In the beginning of Zechariah 9, we see the promise that God would judge Israel's enemies—that a day is coming when God Himself would encamp the nation and no oppressor would ever march over them again. These must have been words of great hope for a people who had survived war and foreign exile. What's more, they learn that a king is coming to them. The kings of David had long passed. The only king the people knew was the governor, Zerubbabel, or the great kings of their enemies. But God promises that a day is coming when a righteous and humble king would come to rule over them, whose reign would be sovereign and never-ending. There's no more need for chariots, war horses, or battle bows, for this king will speak peace to the nations—a peace that is everlasting, eternal, and never-ending.

Zechariah tells the people, "This is your king." I can imagine the hope in these words, followed by the years of waiting for this king to enter into the story and to bring victory for God's people. They waited, and they waited, and they waited. We find saints like Anna and Simeon faithfully waiting in the New Testament, and



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when they meet Christ, they declare that they have seen salvation from the Lord and the redemption of Jerusalem.

But the crowd worshipped Christ as He entered on a donkey, and scorned Him several days later, shouting "Crucify Him!" They had waited and hoped so long for a king who would bring political victory, who would overcome Roman oppression through revolt, who would crush their physical enemies. They rejected Him, as if to say to Zechariah, "This isn't our king."

The king described in Zechariah 9 is a king who certainly is coming to crush His enemies. He's a king who loves His people fiercely and who leads them like a shepherd, a king who will usher in a period of eternal peace. He's a king who reigns sovereignly over all dominions, from sea to sea. And He's a king who comes in humility, who had the riches of God's kingdom and yet became poor for our sakes, putting on flesh so that, by His poverty, we might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9). In other words, He is a king who is a paradox, a king whose ways can be mysterious, and a king who is certainly ruling over all—even those who reject Him, who say "This isn't our king." Do you recognize Him as Your king?



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WEEK FOURTEEN: NOVEMBER 19-25 ZECHARIAH 10-14

Monday, November 19 | Zechariah 10 | Amy Hirsch

One of the things I love about Scripture is that these words are written by God for His people. Sometimes we can get caught up in the stories and narratives, perhaps forgetting that all of Scripture is God-breathed. Well, here in Zechariah 10, I doubt you'd have that problem. The author of Zechariah 10 is clear from the onset: it is God Himself speaking to His people about their restoration. And make no mistake, God Himself is also the one who bring this restoration. Count how many times you see "I" as the subject in this chapter!

I think the beginning of Zechariah 10 helps give us a really helpful framework to understand God's action in this chapter. The Lord encourages them to seek Him and ask Him for the rain they need to bring agricultural growth, rather than seeking after Baal or other false gods. This problem plagued Israel since the beginning of her existence, but Zechariah 10 is a clear reminder to God's people that their redemption comes from Him. He is the author and the enactor. No false god will save them, no household god will deliver them, no diviner will come to their aid. God is the one who will strengthen them and save them. He is the one who will have compassion on them—not because they deserve His pity, but because they are His people and He is their God. He shows kindness to them because of the covenant He made with them. This favor and mercy they receive is unmerited and unearned. And God is the one who will bring them home! Notice that He isn't just addressing Judah here, but the northern kingdom, Israel, is also mentioned. Zechariah pictures a day when the kingdoms are united again. And like a shepherd calling his sheep, God will whistle and His children will come home.

Perhaps we aren't praying to golden calves for rain, or worshipping household gods hoping for better crops this year, but I think it's certainly also the tendency of our sinful hearts to look to other things for meaning and value, to trust in our own set of false gods for salvation, validation, and affirmation. The Lord's message here is clear: He is God. He is the one who saves us, who sustains us, who carries us through, who makes us strong. *Oh Father, let our hearts rejoice in You when we see all the ways You have shown us Your kindness. Turn our eyes away from ourselves, away from our idols, away from the works of our hands, and teach us what it means to walk in Your name.*

Tuesday, November 20 | Zechariah 11 | Amy Hirsch

Sometimes God asked the prophets to do some wild things. For instance, earlier this year we read about God commanding Hosea to marry an unfaithful woman. He once told Isaiah to walk around "naked and barefoot for three years" (Isaiah 20:3, ESV) as a warning to Egypt of how Assyria would overtake them, leading them "naked and barefoot" into exile. And in Zechariah 11, Zechariah "enacts" a prophecy of the Lord by taking up a shepherd's staff.

Scholars all agree that this is a weirdly bizarre passage. While there are different interpretations, many wise theologians would say this passage is an indictment against the shepherds and sheep of Israel. Often, the



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Old Testament speaks of the religious leaders—the priests and teachers—as shepherds. These shepherds in Zechariah 11 care more about the loss of their glory (Zechariah 11:3) than the loss of their sheep. For a season, Zechariah acts out the role of shepherd in their place, caring for the afflicted and the oppressed. But he grows weary with them, and apparently they detest him (Zechariah 11:8).

In our second scene, after Zechariah breaks his covenant with the sheep, he plays the role of the worthless shepherd, the one the Lord will hand the people over to after they refuse to listen to the faithful shepherd he has provided. Scholars tell us that these words point forward to the first century, when Rome invaded Palestine in 70 A.D. under Titus.

This story is complicated, of course, but I think there's also great truth that can be gathered from even this obscure prophecy. We see the responsibility that shepherds have to lead God's people well. And the truth is that, in a way, we are all shepherds—in our relationships as parents, teachers, spouses, friends. We all have opportunities to care for the afflicted and oppressed, to point them to gospel truth. We want to be good and faithful shepherds who are seeking out God's glory and not our own.

But there's also something messianic going on here. In John 10, Jesus so much as told us that He was the good shepherd, the one who would lay down His life for His sheep. And if these words point forward to 70 A.D., that's about forty years after God's people had rejected the ultimate good shepherd, Jesus Christ. Zechariah's wages as a shepherd were thirty pieces of silver; Christ was betrayed for the same amount (Matthew 27:9-10). Many of the Jews of Christ's time, including the religious leaders, chose to reject Him. Zechariah's enacting prophecy, which points us forward to Christ, forces us to ask ourselves the question, "Is He my shepherd, and am I one of His sheep? Have I submitted to His leadership in my life, or have I put myself under the staff of a less worthy leader?"

Wednesday, November 21 | Zechariah 12 | Amy Hirsch

I love foods that are both sweet and savory. Currently, I've been making these smoky sweet potatoes. They're cubed and roasted in the oven with bacon and all kinds of spices, and the savory spices and bacon bring out the sweetness in the potatoes in a way that's surprising and delicious!

At first, it seems like these two passages are disconnected, doesn't it? We have a passage of salvation and hope (Zechariah 12:1-9), followed by a passage of mourning and repentance (Zechariah 12:10-14). But really, if you think about it, the two complement each other well (kind of like those smoky sweet potatoes!), because it's only through mourning and repentance that we find salvation and hope.

Physical salvation is promised for God's people in Zechariah 12:1-9. God declares that He will establish Jerusalem, giving her inhabitants strength through Him. They will be like blazing pots, like immovable rocks, like flaming torches. Bullying and exile will no longer be a part of their story, for the Lord "will protect the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the feeblest among them on that day shall be like David" (Zechariah 12:8, ESV). The strength depicted in Zechariah 12 doesn't come from a surge in population or an increase



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in economic prosperity; rather, it's clearly a gift from the Lord Himself, the same God who "stretched out the heavens and founded the earth and formed the spirit of man within him" (Zechariah 12:1, ESV). Zechariah depicts God as one who is strong and mighty, who created the earth and continues to sustain it, and who is sovereign over all.

But there's something that will come before this day of physical salvation; it's a day of spiritual salvation, a day when God's people see their sin clearly, seek Him, and repent. Zechariah tells us that, on this day, God will give His people "a spirit of grace and please for mercy" (Zechariah 12:10, ESV). And the next verse is startling and beautiful and sad all at the same time. They'll receive this spirit when they look on the one whom they pierced. The text is emphatic. The people aren't just looking upon the earthly leaders they have rejected (although that's certainly part of their call to repentance). They are gazing upon God Himself. Zechariah makes a theological point about sin in this passage, reminding us that our God is one who is mighty, but also a God who suffers and mourns over our sin. Our rebellion breaks His heart and causes Him grief.

The apostle John, who knew the Old Testament so well, tells us this verse is fulfilled in Christ, who bore the sins of humanity and the weight of our grief and shame through His death on the cross. John declares that Christ's side was pierced to fulfill this very prophecy (John 19:34-37), and that one day, when He comes again, all people will look upon Him, the one whom they pierced (Revelation 1:7). Some will look upon Him in repentance now, but others will look upon Him in regret upon His return because they refused to repent.

Thursday, November 22 | Zechariah 13 | Amy Hirsch

As I've been reading Zechariah 13, I've been listening to the hymn "There Is a Fountain." I must admit that I have a sweet spot for hymns. Styles of music may change over time, but the words of so many hymns are timeless! I found this to be the case with Zechariah 13.

In the first verse, Zechariah looks forward to a day when a fountain will be opened for the children of Israel. Why is there a fountain? Its purpose is made clear at the end of verse 1: it functions as a cleansing agent, to remove their sin and uncleanness. Verses 2-6 elaborate on what kind of sin and uncleanness Zechariah is referencing: the sin of idolatry. But the Lord decrees that a day is coming when all idolatry will be removed from the land! In fact, the removal of sin will be so complete that the people will not even be able to remember the names of the idols they once worshipped. The false prophets who led them astray will be no more. Instead, Zechariah hints at the day Jeremiah prophesied, a day when all people will know God, when His law will be written on their hearts (Jeremiah 31:33-34).

As Zechariah continues, we begin to understand the source of this fountain is God Himself, and His shepherd. This shepherd seems to be a close ally with the Father, and yet God strikes Him with His own sword. This striking scatters the shepherd's sheep temporarily, but a remnant is preserved and purified through the cleansing power of fire.



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Was the shepherd someone who lived during the time of Zechariah? While scholars aren't sure of the immediate fulfillment of this prophecy, Jesus attributed Zechariah's words to Himself on the night He was betrayed, referencing the fact that, in just a few short hours, the disciples who pledged their undying allegiance to Him would scatter and desert Him (Matthew 26:30-35).

Like the Israelites, Zechariah's immediate audience, we find ourselves in need of cleansing from our sin, a cleansing that only God can provide. We find ourselves guilty of forsaking Jesus. We find ourselves putting our hope and trust in idols, led astray by the voice of false prophets. But the good news is that the shepherd who was struck bleed for you and for me, and we are invited to experience the cleansing power of Christ's redemptive work on the cross, to plunge beneath the flood and lose all of our guilty stains!

And there's hope in the struggle, as we deal with sin's continual presence in this decaying world, because we trust that sin no longer has power over us, that God surely is refining us by fire, that these trials and temptations perfect the impurities of our hearts, and that a day is coming when we will dwell with Him in perfect unity, when "all the ransomed church of God are safe, to sin no more!" As you close in prayer today, I would encourage you to look up the lyrics to William Cowper's "There Is A Fountain" and to pray or sing these words of Scriptural truth. May His redeeming love indeed be your theme, now and always.

Friday, November 23 | Zechariah 14 | Amy Hirsch

At last we come to the end of Zechariah. But it seems like, as we come to the end of Zechariah, we've also come to the end of the story of Scripture, to the very book of Revelation. (Although, in *The Last Battle*, C.S. Lewis would argue that, when we reach that day, we really haven't come to the end, but rather to the beginning of the real story that never ends, where every chapter is better than the one before.)

What Zechariah pictures in Zechariah 14 is nothing short of cosmic in nature; after a period of war, the Lord Himself will intervene for His people. He won't send an emissary or a messenger, though. Rather, God Himself will break into time and space and history again—not as a baby born in a manger, but as a conquering king (Zechariah 14:3-5, 12-15). Zechariah pictures the Lord standing on the Mount of Olives, the very power of His stance causing earthquakes under His feet. Like in Revelation, when that day comes, there will be no more need for light (Zechariah 14:6), because God Himself will be all the light His people need (Revelation 21:23-24). The river that flowed through the garden of Eden (Genesis 2:10) will flow again through this city, the New Jerusalem (Zechariah 14:8), the river of the water of life (Revelation 22:1). The day Zechariah pictures is the day that brings us back to what life was like in the garden, when man walked with God before sin entered the picture. Once again, the dwelling place of God will be with man. We will be His people, and He will be our God, and He will wipe away every tear (Revelation 21:3-4). And on that day, God will be recognized by all as king (Zechariah 14:9).

There are so many comforting images in Zechariah 14, but the most beautiful word in this passage to me is the word "then" in verse 3. You see, Zechariah wrote to people who were well-acquainted with sorrow. They had been exiled from home and forced to grow up in a foreign land, to serve a foreign king, to



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observe foreign customs. They had walked through all kinds of suffering, partially because of their own sin, but also partially because of the brokenness of this world. Sure, they had been allowed to come back home, but they were facing an enormous task while still under Persian rule, with fears that other nations might threaten fledgling Israel.

But the words of Zechariah 14 promise the Israelites—and all believers—that a day is coming when God will return and when all things will be made right. A day is coming when sin will be eradicated forever, when everything and everyone existing in the presence of God will be holy, simply because they are in the presence of the Lord (Zechariah 14:20-21). A day is coming when God will intervene, when He will rise up against injustice of all kinds and will say, “No more!” And on that day, we will certainly celebrate that we serve a God who is faithful to deliver His people (Zechariah 14:16).



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WEEK FIFTEEN: NOVEMBER 26-DECEMBER 2 MALACHI

Monday, November 26 | Malachi 1:1-5 | Tim Sanderlin

"How Have You Loved Us?"

When we look into the book of 1 John we see the statement that God is love. Without Him, His love for us, and this love of His being poured out on the cross for us, we would not begin to understand this notion of love and what it calls us to do. Furthermore, love, being a key element to the human condition and to our purpose here on earth, is not just something that is known by us as Christ-followers! Look around and it is plain to see that the world has adopted the idea of "love being the answer." We do not need to be convinced of love's influence and power in our lives, but at times we need to be reminded of the love the Lord offers to us.

Malachi was a prophet who spoke to Israel after their return from exile in Babylon. His book is the last of the minor prophets, composed sometime in the fifth century B.C. The grand prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah have faded in the eyes of the people; sure, they've returned home and rebuilt the temple, but all of the visions the former prophets spoke of have faded into view. Physical poverty and drought plague the nation, but there's a spiritual drought as well. The people are spiritually impoverished and far from God. Malachi writes to remind God's people of His love for them, and to challenge them to allow that love to transform their behavior.

In this short dialogue we see in Malachi 1:1-5, we are reminded that God "has loved us." As believers, that is something very hard to refute when we look at the cross. But Malachi reminds Israel, and us, that we still question the love of God! That sounds preposterous, I know, but we do this more often than we ought.

The Lord has shown us His love by the ones who surround us every day. He has shown us His love by allowing us to suffer at times, but also leading us through the "valley of the shadow of death" (Psalm 23:4, ESV). He has shown us love through His Son standing in our place, promising us the same resurrection that Christ had, and even by giving us this day to awake and read of this goodness! The reason we look into the book of Malachi, or any book for that matter, is to be reminded of His love for us.

When we come to Him and ask, "But how have you loved me?" I pray that we would be quick to count our blessings and respond with a song of thanksgiving. May we be reminded that He is good by nature and cannot deviate from that which defines Him—love.



The Minor Prophets

Tuesday, November 27 | Malachi 1:6-14 | Tim Sanderlin

"Blemished Sacrifices"

Praise the Lord Almighty that we no longer have to sacrifice animals, am I right? I mean the inconvenience alone is enough to be thankful for, but also it would get pretty expensive after a while. Not to mention how unsanitary it is! First, let's thank the Lord this morning that He has given us an atoning sacrifice that He found worthy, once and for all. But, by no means did the Lord say that we were done with sacrificing! We are now to live our lives as living sacrifices by serving the Lord and humbling ourselves to those around us.

This morning we see through Malachi 1 that God is not fooled by our languid sacrifices. He even says He would rather someone close the gates to the temple than have His people continue to give Him "defiled sacrifices!" While we are apathetic about our gifts to the Lord of Lords, He Himself is not ambivalent—He is hurt and insulted by our lack of giving our utmost for His Highest. As we worship indifferently, as we choose ourselves over the poor and needy, and as we seek Him half-heartedly, we show Him that He is not the cry of our hearts. Our second-rate gift giving does nothing but insist that we think lowly of Him.

If you've ever been to a Dirty Santa party (one where only gag-gifts are exchanged), you know that it is humorous to try and feel honored or respected by the gifts you receive. One year, I was so lovingly given a hard-boiled egg as a gift. Now image us trying to pawn something so ridiculous off on the Lord Almighty! In Malachi 1:8 the Lord asks us to imagine giving an unwanted gift like this to the governor. We would do no such thing! Let this be a gut-check for us in our giving to the Lord Most High! One day "in every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to [His] name, because [His] name will be great among the nations" (Malachi 1:11 NIV). As Christians, we believe that we are to exalt that Name above all other names as long we shall live.

Lord, we pray our lifting of Your Name would begin with our gifts and offerings to You.

Wednesday, November 28 | Malachi 2:10-16 | Tim Sanderlin

"Where Are You?"

Here we go again—Israel is doing exactly what God has asked them not to do. But what's new? All throughout the Old Testament, God commanded them not to marry people from other countries who worship false gods, and what do we see here? They do just that. We see the wrath of God often in these minor prophetic books because the Israelites seem to almost try to make themselves enemies of God.

The main portion we will focus on today is found in verse 13. The Israelites continue to push the Lord away; they insist they do not need Him. They believe God is one who withholds goodness and does not want them to be living their "best life" (as the kids say these days). Does this lie sound familiar? In the garden,



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the serpent plants this very deception in our heads. “He does not want you to have everything because He likes to hide things from you.” The Israelites buy into this falsehood, closing the door of their hearts to the Spirit of the Lord.

We see that they live their lives far from Him, yet we find them flooding the Lord’s altar with tears, because He no longer recognizes their offerings. What a senseless thought for them to have, right? They run from Him, but ask for Him to bend His ear towards them when they cry out.

When I look back in my life and realize the times I have felt far from Him—the times I called for Him and He seemed to send me to voicemail—it is evident to me (through this passage) that it was not God who was hard of hearing. The Lord didn’t deafen Himself to me; I become so out of touch with Him that I could not hear His voice when He was speaking.

But we find hope through another Old Testament prophet! When we truly desire God, the Giver and not just the gifts, we will find Him:

“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:13, NIV).

Thursday, November 29 | Malachi 2:17-3:18 | Tim Sanderlin

“Robbing God”

I’m sure that when someone who is not familiar with church comes through the doors on a Sunday morning they are perplexed when it is time for the “tithes and offerings” portion of worship. Some probably assume that the church is a greedy oppressor that guilts people into giving their hard-earned money to them, while others might think it is unbecoming to “beg” for money. The Lord is not reserved in telling us what He requires of us, nor does He stand for any kind of oppression of His people. Read James. The life we are called to live as children of God is one that needs guidance. Read Malachi 3:5. Those who defraud the ones toiling in labor and oppress the widows and fatherless—they are the ones who will be judged first when Christ comes again. So if neither of these ideas are the intentions of the Lord, then why does He ask us to give our tithes? Why does He give us the opportunity to present Him with gifts?

In Malachi 3:10, the Lord says exactly what He plans to do with these small offerings...do you see it? He wants to “throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it” (Malachi 3:10, NIV). No need to paraphrase that, folks. God promised that, if the people were faithful in giving, God would meet their needs by ending the drought that had caused such economic despair.

This is not the prosperity gospel, which says that if you give to God, He will give you all of your heart’s earthly desires; rather, this is the Word of the Lord! Give Him “the whole tithe” and He will do more with it



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than we could ever imagine. We are called to give Him all of ourselves, and He will turn the little we have to offer into something so remarkable that we will not be able to keep it to ourselves, providing us with what He knows we need. We do not give so we can be blessed; we give so His kingdom may be blessed, in turn bringing us joy unexplainable and uncontainable.

Friday, November 30 | Malachi 4 | Tim Sanderlin

“The Day of the Lord”

The first Sunday teaching I have any recollection of was a classic “turn or burn” sermon. For those unfamiliar, it is a lesson that focuses on the end times—“Either align yourself with Christ or burn in the fiery lakes.” It may not be very gentle, but it is definitely effective! The late Billy Graham claims to have been saved through a message just like this! And while there is truth to that fire-and-brimstone statement, the Bible tends to focus more on choosing to follow Christ out of gratitude rather than out of fear. But here we are, in Malachi, looking at a passage that sets a perfect scene for a “pick-your-side” sermon series.

As believers, we see in the Bible not only what we have been saved to—a calling to live out the love of Jesus Christ—but we also see what we have been saved from—an eternity apart from God. Both are cause for celebration and lead us to thanksgiving! Let’s keep in mind that this passage of Malachi 4 is that last thing that the Lord says to Israel for roughly 400 years. I think it is safe to say He would consider it noteworthy.

If these are His parting thoughts for a while, why focus on something that is so divisive? Something so hostile? I find this passage to be an urgent reminder to the children of God, almost a plea, to not forget the severity of the gospel. Although Christ has not come yet, the Lord knows the plan—to seek and save the lost, both Jews and Gentiles. We, as Christians, are counted worthy of heaven only by what Christ has done, and it can be all too easy for us to focus only on our salvation and forget the harsh reality awaiting those who are apart from Him. This passage should cause us to shudder and go make disciples with everyone that we meet! The Lord has said that we are to “feed His sheep.” He is pleading with us to tell of His great love for us! While the gift of God was first offered to the Israelites through God’s covenant with Abraham, it is now freely offered to all. May this passage give us a sense of urgency when it comes to evangelism and sharing Christ.