

Chapter One
“Profile of a Prophet”

MINI BIBLE COLLEGE

**Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations,
Ezekiel and Daniel**

STUDY BOOKLET #8

The prophetic books are considered the essence of the Old Testament, especially from the perspective of the New Testament. In the New Testament, Jesus refers to the Old Testament as “The Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 7:12; 22:40) The Law is the first five books of the Bible — Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Prophets, the books we are now about to study, begin with Isaiah and end with Malachi.

There is a perspective on the prophets expressed by the Apostle Paul when he was having an audience with a king. The apostle was in chains and he proclaimed the Gospel so forcefully that the king remarked that Paul had almost persuaded him to become a Christian. The most dramatic part of the apostle’s witness was when he asked the question, “King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you believe the prophets!” Paul’s question was frequently asked about the prophets. Their preaching and their writings were so anointed and supernatural, one way of discovering if a person was a man or woman of faith was to ask, “Do you believe the prophets?”

When the New Testament refers to the prophets, it is usually referring to the prophets who wrote books, or the prophetic literature. There are seventeen prophetic books written by sixteen prophets. (Jeremiah wrote two of these prophetic books — Jeremiah and Lamentations.)

Before we begin our survey of the prophetic books, I want to answer the question, “Precisely who were the prophets?” I begin my answer to that question by comparing the prophet to the priest. When the Law books were written, the important spiritual leader was the priest. The priests had a very important role because they interceded for the people when they sinned. They also explained the Scriptures to God’s people. The priests were the teachers of the people of God. They answered questions about the Scripture, and about the sacrifices and sacraments in The Tabernacle in the Wilderness, and later in The Temple of Solomon.

The priest was born a priest because he was a descendant of Aaron or Levi. Unfortunately, priests very often became corrupt and sinful men. Hosea coined the expression “like priests, like people.” Very often, when the people became apostate and sinful, the priests led the way in sinful practices. When the priests became corrupt and sinful, God sent the prophets.

Prophets were not born prophets. These men were called to be prophets from every walk of life. Two or three of the prophets were priests when they were called to be prophets, but they were exceptions. Some prophets were a part of the Jewish nobility when they were called. Some of them were called from common careers, such as Amos, who was a fig picker and a shepherd. Essentially, the priest was the man who went into the presence of God and interceded with God for the people. The prophet was the man who came from

the presence of God to the people with a message from God for the people.

All the prophets who wrote books lived in a period of about four hundred years, from approximately 800 B.C. to about 400 B.C. During this time the people were sinful, especially guilty of the sin of idolatry. Because they worshiped other gods, the judgment of God was about to come upon them in the form of the Assyrian invasion and captivity of the Northern Kingdom. This was followed about a hundred years later by the Babylonian invasion and captivity of the Southern Kingdom. The prophets who wrote books either preceded these captivities, they ministered and preached in these captivities, or they lived and preached during the restoration after these tragic events.

Of the sixteen writing prophets, three ministered and preached after these captivities and their preaching addressed the restoration and rebuilding that followed the return of God’s people from the Babylonian captivity. Most, however, either preceded the conquests and captivities, or they ministered during these events.

The prophets who preceded the Assyrian captivity of the Northern Kingdom and the Babylonian captivity of the Southern Kingdom essentially preached this message: “If you will have a spiritual revival, if you will sincerely repent of your sin of idolatry, this Assyrian invasion and captivity, or this Babylonian invasion and captivity, will not happen.” These prophets called for repentance and a spiritual revival. For the most part, however, their message was

ignored. The prophets were ridiculed, mocked, and often persecuted and martyred. Many of them died because they preached a message no one wanted to hear.

When the prophets realized that the people were not responding to their message, they then preached, “Captivity is coming, and when it comes, it will be the judgment of Almighty God upon you because you will not repent of your idolatry.” And they were right. When the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom, the Northern Kingdom was taken into captivity and never heard from again. One hundred years later, the Babylonians invaded the Southern Kingdom.

The prophets preached a message of hope in connection with the Babylonian invasion and captivity. They received a prophetic revelation and preached: “Seventy years from now you are going to come back from this captivity.” They saw that return from the Babylonian captivity as an expression of the mercy and grace of God. Most of these prophets did not live to see that miracle take place.

Messianic Prophecies

Another interesting theme in the message of the prophets is their preaching of a scattering of the people of God to the ends of the earth. When they preached that dispersion, they often prophesied a return from that dispersion. When they preached a return from the Babylonian captivity, they mixed Messianic prophecies in with their prophecies of a return from that captivity.

The prophets presented the coming of Christ in two advents, or two comings. He will come the first time as the suffering Savior to die for the sins of the world, but when He comes again - we call that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ - He will come the second time as King of kings and Lord of lords to decisively conquer the powers of evil and establish a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness will reign.

It is often difficult to separate the Messianic prophecies from their prophecies of the literal return from the Babylonian captivity. It is also difficult to separate their prophecies of the first coming of the Messiah from their prophecies that reach beyond our own day, to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Their Messianic prophecies about the two advents or comings of Jesus Christ are the most exciting prophecies in these prophetic books.

Speakers for God

When we hear the word “prophet”, we think of the role of a prophet as being like that of a “spiritual weatherman”, who can tell us how the weather will be tomorrow. The word “prophet” actually means “one who speaks for God”. Therefore, a prophet was a human being through whom God spoke. These prophets spoke for God in two ways. First, they “told forth” the Word of God, which means they were the great preachers of the Bible. Secondly, they also “foretold,” or predicted events that had not yet happened. Some of the events they foretold are yet to happen.

We are intrigued with the foretelling dimension of the ministry of a prophet. It was a very dynamic part of his ministry, but it was a relatively small part. Prophets were primarily preachers. They exhorted the people to obey the Word of God and apply it to their lives. The prophets did often receive prophetic revelations of new truths, but for the most part, beginning with the time of Joshua, they preached the written Word of God that had already been given through Moses. That is why I say Moses is the giant among the prophets because he received the Word from God, which the prophets preached.

The word “prophet” is made up of two words, which mean “to stand before” and “to illuminate”. The prophet stood before the written Word of God and illuminated the Word of God, or made it shine. He also exhorted the people of God to obey and apply God’s Word to their lives. When he received revelations of future events, the prophet always exhorted the people of God to live holy lives in the light of the revelation God gave him to share with His people about future events.

No Problem, No Prophet

The prophets appeared on the scene because there were problems. There is a sense in which you can say “no problem, no prophet.” As you study the life and message of each prophet, you should ask questions like, “What problem was blocking the work of God when this particular person was called as a prophet, and How

did his ministry bring about the removal of the obstacle that was blocking the work of God in his day?”

For example, in the day of the prophet Haggai, which was during the return from the Babylonian captivity, the work of God concerned the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. When the people of God began to rebuild the temple, they had to cope with severe persecution. Although a Persian king had given them permission to return from their captivity and materials to rebuild their temple, they were opposed when they started the work.

When the persecution started, they stopped working on the temple. Then they became distracted and preoccupied with building their own houses. That went on for fifteen years until God called the prophet Haggai. Haggai literally preached up that temple. He said to the people, “Is it then the right time for you to live in luxurious homes, when the Temple lies in ruins?” (Haggai 1:4) Haggai exhorted them to get back on the job and rebuild the temple of God.

Because of Haggai’s preaching, the people of God stopped building their own houses. They got their priorities focused, they put God and God’s house first, and their own houses second. Then the work of God was back on track and Haggai walked off the scene.

The New Testament epistles, or letters from the apostles (and others), parallel this pattern. In the New Testament, the work of God was building Christ’s Church. When problems came up that blocked that work of God, He raised up an apostle who wrote an epistle. What was the purpose of that apostle’s letter? To cry out against the

obstacles blocking the building of the Church of the risen Christ until those problems were removed and the work of the Lord could continue.

The problem-obstacles addressed by the prophets are not the same obstacles addressed by the epistles of the New Testament. When you combine the messages of the prophets and the books of the New Testament, you have approximately forty books of the Bible that contain prescriptions for how to remove problem-obstacles that are blocking the work of God today.

God wants to do His work through His people. That is as true today as it was in the day of the prophets and the apostles. When you realize that the work of God in the part of the world where God has strategically placed you is being blocked by a problem-obstacle, if you have the conviction that God is not working as He wants to work, pray until you focus the obstacle that is blocking the work of God. When you know what that obstacle is, go to the writings of the prophets or apostles, and then ask God for the wisdom, the grace, and the courage to apply their messages to the problems that are confronting the work of God where you are.

Through the prophets and apostles, God will show you how to remove the obstacles that are blocking the work of God. If the prophets and apostles do not address the obstacles blocking the work of God in your part of the world, it may be that, in the spirit of the prophets and apostles, God wants you to cry out about those problem obstacles until they are removed and His work can continue.

Chapter Two

“The Coming and Going of Isaiah”

The prophets are divided into two classifications, “major prophets” and “minor prophets”. These designations do not imply that the “major prophets” are superior to the “minor prophets”. These distinctions are based on how much they wrote. As we think of “major” and “minor” prophets, the “major” prophet is Isaiah because his book is the longest of all the prophetic books.

Isaiah was from the Jewish nobility. Rabbinical tradition tells us that he was related to King Uzziah and King Joash through his father. Since Isaiah ministered to several kings, his royal heritage was good preparation for the ministry to which God called him.

Some Vital Historical Perspective

While this is a devotional and practical survey of the Bible, there is some historical perspective you must have to understand the messages of the prophets. During the historical period in which the prophets lived, preached, wrote, and had their ministries, (from about 800 to 400 B.C.) there were three great world powers: the Great Assyrian Empire, which conquered the Northern kingdom of Israel; the Babylonian Empire, which conquered and exiled the Southern Kingdom of Israel after they conquered the Assyrian Empire, and the Medes and Persians who conquered Babylon.

Isaiah lived during the time that Assyria was the ruling world power, before Assyria invaded the Northern Kingdom and conquered its capital, Samaria. The ten northern tribes, called “Israel,” were taken into captivity and never heard from again. Much of Isaiah’s preaching was a warning to the Northern Kingdom that the Assyrian invasion was coming as a judgment of God for their sin of idolatry.

After the Assyrians invaded the Northern Kingdom, conquered, and exiled the ten northern tribes, the Assyrians turned south and invaded the Southern Kingdom. They conquered forty-six walled cities in Judah. The Assyrian armies reached as far as the gates of Jerusalem and took two hundred thousand people as captives back to Assyria. However, when the Assyrian army got to the gates of Jerusalem, Isaiah had his shining hour as a prophet.

The king of the Southern Kingdom of Judah during that time was Hezekiah, a spiritual man and a great prayer warrior, who wrote ten of the psalms. When the Assyrians reached the gates of Jerusalem, their general shouted insults at the men who were guarding the city, challenging the people of Judah to surrender.

While King Hezekiah was in the Temple pleading with God for the lives of His people, Isaiah had a revelation. So the prophet went to the Temple and told Hezekiah that deliverance was going to come because God had heard his prayer. Isaiah told the king that the Assyrian army was going to get a message saying they were wanted back home. When they arrived in Assyria, the general would be killed.

That night, 185,000 Assyrian soldiers died of a plague in their camp. The next morning when the corpses were discovered, the army left for home. When they arrived back in Assyria, Isaiah’s prophecy was fulfilled when the general’s two sons assassinated him. Humanly speaking, you could say that if it were not for the influence and ministry of Isaiah, the Assyrians would have exiled both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms into extinction.

Isaiah gives us one of the greatest examples in the Bible of the foretelling ministry of a prophet. He predicted the fact that Persia would conquer Babylon and then that Cyrus the Great would give the captives permission to return and rebuild the Temple. He names Cyrus twice and foretells this great event in Hebrew history.

Tradition says that the elders of the Jewish captives showed this passage from Isaiah to Cyrus and the miraculous prophecy of Isaiah moved Cyrus to issue his extraordinary decree. He not only granted them permission to return, but he contributed building materials to this rebuilding of the Temple. In a precise fulfillment of Isaiah’s foretelling prophecy, when Persia conquered Babylon, the first thing Cyrus the Great did was to issue his decree stating that the Jewish captives could return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple. (Isaiah 44:28-45:7; Ezra 1:2-4)

A Great Preacher

Isaiah must have been a magnificent preacher. According to Jesus, John the Baptist was the greatest prophet ever born of woman.

(Luke 7:28) However, we are told that when John came preaching in the wilderness, he preached the sermons of Isaiah. (Luke 3:4) Since the “greatest prophet born of woman” preached Isaiah’s sermons, that makes Isaiah “the prophet’s prophet”.

Isaiah preached for at least fifty, possibly sixty years. He lived during the time of five kings in Judah and six kings in Israel. Even though he had a lot to say about what was coming upon the Northern Kingdom from Assyria, his primary ministry and concern was for the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

If you want a historical perspective on Isaiah, carefully read the opening verses of his prophecy. The prophetic books often date a prophet by telling us that he lived and ministered during the reigns of certain kings. Some of the kings who reigned during Isaiah’s lifetime were good kings and some were wicked. One of the wicked kings was Manasseh, who, tradition tells us, had Isaiah put to death by sawing him in two. Many scholars believe the martyrdom of Isaiah is being described when the faith chapter of the Bible records the fact that some of the Old Testament heroes of faith were “sawed in two”. (Hebrews 11:37)

Dividing the Book

There is a right way to divide the Book of Isaiah. The first thirty-nine chapters are the message of Isaiah warning the people of God about the invasion and captivity by the Assyrians. The last twenty-seven chapters are a message of healing and comfort. It is

almost as if the first thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah are like “spiritual surgery”, and the last twenty-seven chapters are the healing that follows the “surgery”.

The way these sixty-six chapters of the Book of Isaiah are divided has convinced some to draw parallels between this book of the Bible and the Bible itself. Think of these intriguing similarities: There are sixty-six chapters in the Book of Isaiah; there are sixty-six books in the Bible. Isaiah divides into two sections, with thirty-nine chapters and twenty-seven chapters. The Bible divides into two sections, with the Old Testament having thirty-nine books and the New Testament having twenty-seven books. The first section of Isaiah reads like the Old Testament, with many solemn warnings and a message of chastisement, revealing the true condition of man and the solution man can find in God.

The second section of Isaiah is like a “New Testament,” which offers comfort and hope to the people who have been made aware of their need of a Savior because they read the “Old Testament” section of Isaiah that pointed the way to the Savior. The Old Testament begins with the question, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9) The New Testament begins with the question, “Where is He?” (Matthew 2:2) The two sections of Isaiah make us aware of our need of a Savior and then introduce us to the suffering Servant in chapter fifty-three.

The Call of Isaiah

Two passages from Isaiah help us to get acquainted with the man himself, as well as his ministry and his message. One such passage is chapter six, which is a description of the call, or commission, of Isaiah. It might even be a description of the conversion of Isaiah. In Scripture, all the people of God have a coming to God that is meaningful so that they can have a going for God that is meaningful. The sixth chapter of Isaiah contains a description of the coming experience of Isaiah and his commission to go for God.

As Isaiah experiences his coming to God, he hears the Lord say, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” (8) In response, Isaiah expresses his commitment: “Here am I, Lord, send me!” This pattern is very pronounced in the Scripture. All the people of God who come to God hear a commission and go for God.

God explained to him, “Isaiah, the people are not going to listen to you. Your purpose in going is not that the people might be converted. They have chosen to turn away from Me. But I want you to go anyway, because I want them to hear My message.” It is tough enough to be a preacher. Imagine being a preacher for fifty or sixty years and not having anyone respond to your preaching!

Isaiah’s commitment to his commission is amazing. He simply asked, “How long will it be until they are ready to listen?” And God essentially replied, “Until they are all dead or carried off as slaves, and their country is absolutely devastated and deserted.”

(6:11,12) The commitment of Isaiah should be a model for all of us. In fact, the commitment of all these prophets was the greatest sermon they preached. They entered into a contract with God. God told them to go, and they went. As they went, the important thing was that they were faithful to God and did what God commissioned them to do.

Our responsibility is to do what God calls us and commissions us to do. The result of our obedience is God’s business. Only God, the Holy Spirit, can produce results. Our responsibility is faithfulness. Fruitfulness is God’s responsibility. Our responsibility is to do what God calls us to do.

Chapter Three

“Messianic Messages”

There is more Messianic prophecy in the Prophecy of Isaiah than in any other book of prophetic literature. Isaiah is quoted more in the New Testament than any other Old Testament prophet. As you read the Book of Isaiah, look for the Messianic prophecies in his preaching. In Isaiah you will find this prophecy concerning the names by which the Messiah is to be called when He comes: “His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:6) Isaiah made it

clear that the Messiah would be God in human flesh, or “Immanuel”, meaning, “God with us”. (Matthew 1:23)

Isaiah also tells us the essence of the Spirit that will be expressed through the Messiah when He comes: “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from His roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him — the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD — and He will delight in the fear of the LORD.” (Isaiah 11:1–3) This is referred to in The Book of Revelation as, “the seven Spirits of God.” (Revelation 3:1; 4:5; 5:6)

Since the number seven represents perfection in the Bible, as Isaiah tells us about the coming Messiah, what he’s really saying is, “The Messiah will be the perfect expression of the Spirit of God.” The Messiah will express the spiritual essence of God in these seven ways. Out of His life will come the Spirit of knowledge, the Spirit of understanding, the Spirit of wisdom, the Spirit of counsel, the Spirit of might, the Spirit of worship, and the Spirit of the Lord.”

As you read the four Gospels, what kind of memorial portrait of Jesus forms in your mind? According to Isaiah, this is what the Messiah will be (was) like: His life will express the Spirit of knowledge and the Spirit of understanding. He will know and understand the Word of God perfectly. The Spirit of wisdom means the application of knowledge, so Jesus will also demonstrate the Spirit of wisdom as He applies the Word of God to His own life and the lives of others. This means He will demonstrate the Spirit of

counsel. When He does, there will be a life-changing dynamic in His life and ministry, demonstrating the Spirit of might and of power.

Finally, Isaiah prophesies that the Messiah will express and demonstrate the Spirit of worship, or of the fear of the Lord. He adds the commentary that He will delight in this last expression of the Spirit of worship. When you read the Gospels, you will find, that when Jesus is not ministering to people, He is praying and worshipping in solitude. Read the four Gospels looking for this seven-fold, perfect expression of the Spirit of God fulfilled in the life of Jesus.

In the last half of the twentieth century, there has been a revival of interest in the Holy Spirit. As we interpret our experiences of the Holy Spirit, we create a lot of division and confusion because we make some mistakes in the way we label our experiences with the Holy Spirit. For example, have you ever heard people refer to a Spirit-filled believer, pastor or church? The implication is that there are two kinds of believers, pastors or churches. There are Spirit-filled believers, pastors and churches and then there are all those other believers, pastors and churches - who are never Spirit-filled.

Is that what the Bible means when it describes believers being filled with the Spirit? All believers are commanded to: “Be filled with the Spirit.” (Ephesians 5:18) The original language literally commands us to “Be, being filled with the Spirit.” This instruction in the Greek language is structured in a way that it is clearly a

commandment and not an option for an authentic disciple of Jesus Christ.

What does it mean to be filled with the Spirit? We are told in the Book of Acts that Peter, “filled with the Spirit,” preached that great sermon on the Day of Pentecost. Later we read, “Peter, filled with the Spirit,” preached again and thousands were saved. Still later we read, “Peter, filled with the Spirit,” did this or did that. Now, in between those times the Scripture tells us Peter was filled with the Spirit, was he filled with the Spirit?

The Holy Spirit is not a liquid. The Holy Spirit is a Person, and we either have the Person of the Holy Spirit in our lives or we do not. The real question is not, “How much of the Spirit do we have?” but “How much of us does the Spirit have?” When He has all of us, then we are filled with the Spirit.

A Spirit-filled believer is a Spirit-controlled believer. Before Paul commanded us to be, being filled with the Holy Spirit, he wrote: “Be not drunk with wine, which is excessive, but be, being filled with the Holy Spirit.” (Ephesians 5:18) Just as a person who is drunk is under the influence, or control of alcohol, we are to be under the influence, or control of the Holy Spirit.

This beautiful prophecy of Isaiah should teach us that none of us should fear being Spirit-filled. Because, if we are Spirit-filled, if we are absolutely controlled by the Spirit of God, if we are expressing the essence of what God is in His Spirit, then we will be

like Jesus Christ when He exhibited and expressed these seven dimensions of the Spirit of God.

Isaiah is telling us here that Jesus Christ was the perfect expression of the Spirit of God. Jesus Christ was one hundred percent controlled by the Spirit all the time, or He was Spirit-filled all the time. The Spirit of God was perfectly expressed in the life of Jesus Christ. And what was He like? Read the four Gospels and see. Can anyone read the Gospels and not want to be like Jesus? Obviously, His life is the model by which all of us should live our lives as we express the spiritual essence of our God - Who is a Spirit.

God’s Highway

In Isaiah 40 we find another beautiful Messianic prophecy: “A voice of one calling: ‘In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it.’” (3–5)

When John the Baptist came preaching the sermons of Isaiah, this is the sermon he preached (Luke 3:4–6). This is one of Isaiah’s greatest sermons. He preaches that God is coming into this world in the Person of His Son, the Messiah. Isaiah compares this to a king going on a journey. If a king were going on a journey to a distant village, his subjects would build him a highway on which to travel.

They called it “the King’s Highway”. When you build a highway you do four things: you level mountains, fill in valleys, straighten out crooked places, and smooth out rough places.

Isaiah uses this everyday illustration and says, in essence, “God wants to travel into this world, but He needs a highway on which to travel. The highway on which God will come into this world is going to be the life of His Son. The life of God’s Son will be a life of which it can be said, that the mountains of pride will be leveled, the valleys, or the empty places, will be filled, the crooked places of sin will be straightened, and the response of God’s Son to the rough spots will be such that the rough spots will be made smooth. Then there will be a Highway on which God can travel into this world, and all flesh will see salvation and the glory of God through that Highway.”

Since Jesus was showing us how to live, this means that our lives are to be highways for God. Let me challenge you to pray this prayer, “God, make my life a highway on which You can travel into this world.” Once you have prayed that prayer, do not be surprised if God’s “spiritual bulldozers” show up and start leveling your mountains of pride, filling your valleys and empty places, straightening out your crooked ways of sin, and smoothing your rough spots. When you and I pray that prayer, God will hang a sign on our lives: “Caution: God at work!”

The Nazareth Manifesto

Another wonderful sermon of Isaiah is found in chapter sixty-one. This is a Messianic prophecy of the public ministry of Jesus. When Jesus began His three years of public ministry, He began with a manifesto, which scholars call “The Nazareth Manifesto”. Jesus went into His hometown synagogue and asked for the scroll of Isaiah the prophet. He rolled out the scroll almost to the end and read these words: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” He then announced that the words He had read were being fulfilled that very day. (Isaiah 61:1,2; Luke 4:18)

If you compare the prophecy of Isaiah in chapter sixty-one to the Lord’s quote of it in Luke, chapter four, you will notice that He stopped His quotation of Isaiah in the middle of a sentence. Isaiah continues, “and the day of vengeance of our God.” Jesus did not read that part of the verse because it is describing His Second Coming. The Messiah will come back and take vengeance on all the enemies of God. Jesus stopped in the middle of that verse and handed the scroll back to the Rabbi because He was announcing His Manifesto for the three years of His ministry that began that day. Then He said, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” (Isaiah 61:1,2; Luke 4:18-21)

Jesus was saying, “The Spirit of God is upon Me. He has

anointed Me to preach a message to poor people.” These poor people were poor in the sense that they were blind. Their blindness meant that they did not know their right hand from their left. They were also poor in the sense that they were bound, which means they were not free. And they were poor in the sense that they were broken and bruised.

That day in His hometown synagogue, Jesus essentially announced: “My ministry is directed to blind, bound, broken, and bruised people. When I proclaim My Gospel to these poor people, the blind will see, the bound will be set free, and the broken and bruised will be healed.” Having declared that great Nazareth Manifesto, Jesus began His three years of public ministry.

The Nazareth Manifesto is a beautiful framework through which you can view the ministry of Jesus Christ in any of the four Gospels, but especially in the Gospel of Luke. When Jesus, Who was God with us, wanted to announce a manifesto that would describe Who He was, what He was, and what He was doing here, He, like John the Baptist, preached one of the sermons of Isaiah.

As you read the four Gospels, observe what Jesus did for three years after He announced His manifesto. He gave sight to the blind. Although He literally healed blind people, through His ministry of teaching, He also gave spiritual sight to those who were spiritually blind. He had great compassion for the multitudes because they were like sheep that did not know their right from their

left. Giving sight to the spiritually blind was obviously a metaphor that profiled His ministry of teaching.

In His counseling ministry, He set the prisoners free. He promised the bound people He would lead them to the Truth that would set them free if they would follow Him. (John 8:30-35)

If you are spiritually blind, if you are confused, if you do not know your right from your left, the ministry of the Messiah is directed to you. His mission is to meet your need, to see that you receive sight in your blindness. If you are not free, if you are addicted, if you are controlled by habits and appetites and lusts, the Messiah’s ministry is directed to you. He came for people just like you. He wants to set you free. If you are bruised and broken because your life is difficult, remember that Jesus came for people like you. He wants you to be healed. He wants to make you whole.

If you have already experienced the miraculous salvation Jesus and Isaiah profiled in the Manifesto of the Messiah, then, as you go out into the world and interact with people, remember that the ministry of Jesus is also directed to them. Ask yourself, “Are they blind? Are they bound? Are they broken?” The Christ Who is in you wants to have a ministry in their lives like the ministry He has had in your life. He now wants to have that ministry through you.

When He spent His last hours with the apostles before He died on His cross, Jesus told them that He would send them the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, Who would be in them. That is what the New Testament means when it tells us that we, the followers of Jesus

Christ, His Church, are “the Body of Christ”. He lives in us. We are His hands, His feet, the very body through which He expresses Himself today, giving sight to the blind, freedom to the bound, and healing to the broken and bruised people of this world.

The Suffering Savior

Another dimension of the Messianic preaching of Isaiah focuses on the death of Jesus Christ. The fifty-third chapter of Isaiah is the greatest chapter in the Bible on the meaning of the death of Jesus Christ. In this beautiful chapter Isaiah begins with the question, “Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?” Remember, Isaiah was commissioned to preach to people who would not believe him. He was clearly aware of the fact that when the Word of God is preached, unless the Holy Spirit reveals the meaning of that Word to people, they will not understand or believe it.

What Isaiah was really asking was, “Who really understands the meaning of the death of Jesus?” The heart of Isaiah’s teaching in this chapter is found in verse six: “All we like sheep, have gone astray. We have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” How did the God lay our iniquity on the Messiah? “He was wounded for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed.” (5)

Verse six begins and ends with the word “all”. The first time Isaiah uses the word all he says we are all like sheep. Does that include you? Recall that in Psalm 23 it is written, “The LORD is my shepherd. He makes me lie down in green pastures.” (1–2) When we confess that the Lord is our Shepherd, we are also confessing that we are sheep. Now, here in this profound verse in Isaiah we find another place where the Scripture exhorts us to confess that we are sheep. We are all sheep who have gone astray. In other words, we are all sinners; we have all turned to our own ways.

The second time Isaiah uses the word “all” he gives us the Good News. “The LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” Do you believe that you are included in that last “all” of Isaiah? If you will confess that the first “all” includes you, and if you will confess that the last “all” includes you, then you are confessing what you need to confess to apply the meaning of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross to your life. You can then experience the salvation that was revealed when God used the life of His Son as a Highway on which He traveled into this world.

Chapter Four

The Prophecy of Jeremiah

“A Series of Sobs”

The next major prophet in the Old Testament is the prophet Jeremiah. He is called “the weeping prophet” because he was weeping so much of the time. In fact, Jeremiah’s prophecy is really “A Series of Sobs”. His book is almost impossible to outline because people do not cry in outline form. After he cried for fifty-two chapters, Jeremiah wrote an amazing poem that is an appendix to his prophecy and is called “Lamentations”, which means, “cryings”. In this beautiful elegy, which is a literary masterpiece, Jeremiah sobs some more.

Some Historical Perspective

What was Jeremiah crying about? Why was he so upset? What was the agony of his heart? To answer those questions, you must understand the historical context in which this prophet lived his extraordinary life, preached and wrote this prophecy we call “The Book of Jeremiah.”

In the opening verses, we read that this prophet began his ministry in the thirteenth year of King Josiah and ministered through the reign of Zedekiah, or about forty-one years. He began his ministry when the good king, Josiah, was ruling Judah. During Josiah’s reign some workmen who were rebuilding the temple

discovered several scrolls of the Word of God. The people of God were so far from Him spiritually they had forgotten that the Scriptures, or Law of God, existed. The other kings mentioned in the opening verses of Jeremiah are kings who followed Josiah’s reign and are associated with the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity.

The fall of Jerusalem was a catastrophe that stretched over a period of nearly twenty years. The first time Jerusalem fell, Jehoiakim was the king. He surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar’s armies, and he served Nebuchadnezzar in Jerusalem for three years. When Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem, the Babylonian armies moved in. The Jews were forced to serve the Babylonians and pay tribute to them. However, after three years, Jehoiakim rebelled, and so Nebuchadnezzar’s armies conquered Jerusalem a second time. When Jerusalem was conquered the second time, Jehoiachin, Jehoiakim’s son, who was only a child, formally surrendered the city again. This time the Babylonians took a lot of the people of Judah to Babylon as captives.

When Jehoiachin surrendered the city the second time, his brother Zedekiah was appointed a “puppet king”, or one who ruled in name only, over Jerusalem. He ruled for eleven years, and then he also rebelled against the Babylonians. This time the Babylonian army totally destroyed the city of Jerusalem to the ground. There was not one stone left on top of another. When the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem for the third time, they took all the people to

Babylon except the very old, the sick, the feeble, and the weeping prophet, Jeremiah.

During the reign of Josiah, God gave Jeremiah a prophetic revelation of the impending catastrophe. He began to preach that the Babylonian invasion was coming, and the captivity and the conquest that would result were coming because of the sin of the people. This was primarily because of their idolatry, but also because of all the other sins that grew out of their apostasy and disregard of the Word of God.

At first, the message of Jeremiah and the other prophets was essentially this: “If My people, who are called by My name, will humble themselves and pray and turn from their wicked ways, and seek My face, then I will hear from heaven, I will forgive their sin, and I will heal their land.” (II Chronicles 7:14) But when the people did not heed their preaching, the prophetic message changed. Then the prophets like Jeremiah preached, “The judgment of God is coming. There is no way you can avoid it!”

A Hated Man

When the sieges of Jerusalem began, Jeremiah preached a message that was so unpopular he became the most hated of all the prophets. He had a double message. The first part of his message was that conquest and captivity were now unavoidable. But the other part of Jeremiah’s message was one of hope. Unlike the captivity of the Northern Kingdom, the prophets who prophesied the Babylonian

invasion and captivity of the Southern Kingdom had a message of hope to preach: “Seventy years after you go as captives into Babylon you will return.”

Jeremiah believed and preached that message of hope so emphatically, that when the Babylonian armies started the siege of Jerusalem, he preached, “This is the plan of God and it is irrevocable. You might as well go out there and surrender to Nebuchadnezzar. Go to Babylon, because the sooner you go the sooner you will come back.”

Because Jeremiah preached that the people of Judah should surrender, they hated him. They said that Jeremiah’s message was treason, and in a sense it was. They threw him in a dungeon and put him in a cistern filled with slime. They left him down there to starve and live with the rats.

The Potter and the Clay

Jeremiah and some of the other prophets would do anything to make their point. They vividly described what they were trying to communicate, sometimes through what is called “symbolic act preaching”. For example, Jeremiah had a great symbolic act sermon in the eighteenth chapter called “The Recycled Vessel.” Jeremiah preached that God told him to go down to the house of the potter. While he was there he watched the potter make a vessel. The potter was trying to make a beautiful vessel, but the vessel was not turning out the way the potter wanted. Disgusted with the vessel, the potter

threw it down on the floor and smashed it. He recycled the clay and made it into another vessel.

When Jeremiah preached this sermon, he was saying to the people, “You were like a vessel of pottery that the divine Potter, God, was forming. You were not turning out the way God wanted you to turn out, so He is chastising you. God is going to take you to Babylon, recycle you, and then bring you back from Babylon an entirely new vessel.”

The personal application for you and me is obvious. Sometimes our lives do not turn out according to God’s design. So, God has to recycle us. Do you ever feel like that? All of a sudden your life collapses. You feel as if you have been thrown on the clay heap and are being made into a new vessel. The transition from the old vessel to the new vessel can be agonizing, but after that new vessel has been shaped, then it is glorious! As the apostle Paul wrote, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.” (II Corinthians 5:17)

Throughout the Book of Jeremiah we should look for the personal applications to the profound sermons of this great prophet. There are times when God needs to chastise and recycle us into new vessels. When the consequences of our sins are irrevocable and the scars are irreversible, we need to be made into a new vessel as in this great pottery sermon Jeremiah preached. Sadly, most of us do not seek and ask God to transform our lives, like the people who rejected the preaching of Jeremiah.

The Smashed Vessel

One day God told Jeremiah to buy a large, valuable vase, take along some of the elders and priests, and go near the entrance to the Potsherd Gate. When he got the attention of the people, he took this vase and smashed it to pieces on the pavement! Then Jeremiah essentially preached: “You who fight Nebuchadnezzar, rebel against the Babylonians, and refuse to surrender to them are going to be smashed like this vase. There will be no recycling, no coming back. You will be finished! You are going to be annihilated!” (Jeremiah 19:10,11)

Messianic Prophecies

When Jeremiah spells out his messages of captivity and then of hope, like Isaiah, he mixes his prophecies regarding the return from captivity with prophecies about the coming of the Messiah. The coming of the Messiah was the ultimate hope, not only for Judah, but also for the whole world.

One such message is in chapter twenty-nine. The people were about to begin their captivity in Babylon. Through a letter from Jeremiah, God said to them: “I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then (in your captivity) you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and will bring you back from your

captivity.” (11–14)

This is a summary/paraphrase of that magnificent sermon Jeremiah shared with the people of Judah as they began their experience of captivity and slave labor in Babylon: “Your loving Father God is chastising you, but that is for your good, not for your harm. God wants to give you hope and a future. While you are in Babylon, call upon God. Come and pray to God. If you seek God with all your heart, God will hear you and listen to you. You will be found by God and He will bring you back from your captivity.”

When Jeremiah prophesied their captivity, he was willing to suffer all kinds of hardship and persecution for his message. Yet, he believed in his message because he knew God gave him that message and it was the truth. And it was! The important observation to make regarding the prophecies of Jeremiah is that all of Jeremiah’s prophecies were fulfilled.

As you read the prophecy of Jeremiah, look for his message of the chastisement and judgment of God upon the people of Judah. However, do not miss the message of hope. Apply both messages to your own life, and remember this: When God is chastising you He knows the plans He has for you — plans to prosper you spiritually, plans to give you hope and a future. The important thing is for you to respond to God’s chastisement in the right way, so that ultimately God can bring you back from your personal experience of prodigal captivity as a new vessel.

Chapter Five

“The Captivity Cantor”

Just as the people were about to be taken off in chains to Babylon, Jeremiah gave them some words of hope to cope with their captivity. Those who had survived the massacre when Jerusalem fell were stunned with grief, terror, and horror. These anointed words from Jeremiah would help them survive seventy years of captivity: “This is what the LORD says: ‘Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD, Who exercises steadfast love, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight.’” (Jeremiah 9:23–24)

Another word used for boast in some translations is the word “glory”. Jeremiah was essentially saying, “If you are rich, do not glory in your riches. If you are strong, do not glory in your strength. If you are wise or well educated, do not glory in your wisdom or your education.” The word “glory” means, “to bring out all the potential that any particular situation has, to express the full essence of Who and what God is and can be in your life.”

In this situation, Jeremiah is applying the word not so much to God but to these captives. For example, Jeremiah is saying to the man who is rich, “You can no longer trust in riches to express the full potential of your life. You will not find your fulfillment in riches.”

The rich people among the captives had been stripped of their riches. They might have gloried in their riches before Jerusalem fell, but not now. Likewise, Jeremiah was saying to the educated and strong, “Wise man, you do not feel very smart now, do you, being led away in chains? Strong man, you can no longer glory in your strength. You are going to be fed starvation rations in Babylon and experience great physical weakness.”

So far this sounds only like a negative message. But here is the positive part of Jeremiah’s message. God says to the captives through Jeremiah, “If you really want to understand the meaning and purpose of life and fulfill your own potential, then you come to Me by relating to the essence of Who and what I am.” Jeremiah is preaching, “You will discover your full potential when you know the essence on earth of what God is in heaven. You can understand the essence of His being and then the essence of your being if you understand that God reveals Himself on earth through His attributes.” The attributes of God are what make up God’s personality.

In this magnificent sermon of Jeremiah, he is preaching that, “This is how you can know God. God can be known through what He is. Through His steadfast love, through His righteousness, and through His absolute justice.” Now, that must have given these people something to think about as they were doing slave labor in Babylon! They knew they were not going to find fulfillment and meaning in riches or education or their physical strength. They knew they had to find their meaning and fulfillment somewhere else.

According to the prophet, this was a good time to find their meaning and fulfillment in knowing God. And that was something their slave masters would not be able to take away from them.

Proof of Their Return

In Jeremiah 32–33, we read about one of the finest things Jeremiah did. This is at the height of the siege, toward the end of King Zedekiah’s reign. The city was falling. While Jeremiah was in prison for what he was preaching, he received a revelation from God. God revealed to Jeremiah that his cousin Hanamel would arrive and ask him to buy a farm he owned out in Anathoth. With Jerusalem under siege, it was not the best time to buy a farm near Jerusalem! But God told Jeremiah to buy the farm. Sure enough, Hanamel comes and says, “I have this farm out there in Anathoth. God has laid it on my heart to offer this farm to you.”

Jeremiah agreed to buy the land and made a big production of his purchase. He got witnesses, lawyers, and scribes, and made his purchase official and very well known. He then signed the deed, sealed and put it in a piece of pottery. Then he preached another great symbolic act sermon. In effect, he preached: “I have been telling you that you are coming back from this Babylonian captivity. Well, let me show you that I really believe it. I recently bought some real estate about three miles from Jerusalem. Do you think I would do that if I did not believe you were coming back? God will restore the fortunes of Israel!” Be sure to read the eloquent, powerful

sermon Jeremiah preaches to amplify and explain this magnificent act of faith. (Chapter 32)

This beautiful sermon of hope Jeremiah begins in chapter thirty-two was the historical context in which he preached these very familiar words: “This is what the LORD says ... ‘Call unto Me and I will tell you some remarkable secrets about what is going to happen here.’” (Jeremiah 33:3) Have you ever called on God? He wants all of us to call on Him because He wants to show us great and mighty things we have never seen before.

You see, Jeremiah’s preaching was not all doom and gloom. There was a whole lot of hope for the people of God in his sermons. That was the only hope the people of Judah had when Jerusalem fell and they went into captivity in Babylon.

Matters of the Heart

As we take a brief look at some of the other sermons of Jeremiah, remember that we are not studying them in chronological order. He and his scribe, Baruch, did not record the sermons as he preached them but as he recalled them years later when he was in prison.

Another of Jeremiah’s great sermon summaries is found early in the book. The Lord said through Jeremiah, “My people have committed two sins: they have forsaken Me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.” (Jeremiah 2:13)

The people had turned away from God and from the wisdom that comes through His Word. They believed the scribes who had made the law of the Lord into a lie, according to Jeremiah. The great prophet writes: “the false pen of the scribes has made the Law of the Lord into a lie.” (8:8) Now when people succeed in convincing you the Word of God is not trustworthy, then what do you believe? All you have is only human wisdom and philosophy. And Jeremiah asked what wisdom is in them compared with the wisdom found in the Word of God?

Can People Change?

Are you aware of the fact that the Bible never tells you to change or to try harder to do better? I am amazed at the number of people who think that is what the Bible is all about: do the best you can and try harder to do better. The Scripture does not tell us to do that. In fact, Jeremiah pokes fun at us for trying to change ourselves. He preaches, “Why do you go about so much, trying to change your ways? When the leopard can change her spots, and when the Ethiopian can change the color of his skin, then you who are accustomed to doing evil will start doing good.” (Jeremiah 2:36)

We cannot change ourselves. We are exhorted to “Be transformed by renewing our minds.” (Romans 12:2) Jesus tells us that we must be born again. When we are being transformed or born again, for us that is a passive experience. That is not the same thing as being told to change, or try harder to do better.

Who Knows Our Hearts?

Jeremiah also had this to say about the human heart: “The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9) The answer, of course, is that only God knows our hearts. “I the Lord know the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve.” (10)

God knows your heart. You may have deceived your family and friends and even yourself, but you cannot deceive God. He knows your heart and wants to make it new. Pray as the wise king David prayed: “Search me, Oh God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” (Psalm 139:23–24)

Throughout the Book of Jeremiah we should look for the personal applications to the profound sermons of this great prophet. There are times when God needs to chastise and recycle us into new vessels. When the consequences of our sins are irrevocable and the scars are irreversible, we need to be made into a new vessel as in the sermon Jeremiah preached when God sent him to the potter’s house.

Chapter Six “God’s Sad News”

Jeremiah had a vision of two baskets of figs. (Chapter 24) Some of the figs were fresh and ripened, and some were spoiled and moldy, too rotten to eat. The Lord said to Jeremiah, “The good figs represent the exiles sent to Babylon. I have exiled them for their good. I will see that they are well treated and will bring them back here again. I will help them and not hurt them. I will plant them and not pull them up. I will give them hearts that respond to Me. They shall be My people and I will be their God. For they shall return to Me with great joy.

“But the rotten figs represent Zedekiah, king of Judah, his officials, and all the others of Jerusalem left here in this land. Those, too, who live in Egypt. I will treat them like spoiled figs, too bad to use. I will send massacre and famine and disease among them until they are destroyed.”

Jeremiah preached this message continuously. There were two kinds of people in Jerusalem as the city was falling to the Babylonian Empire — those who realized the Babylonian captivity was the chastisement of God, went to Babylon, accepted God’s discipline and repented. Those who, like Zedekiah, refused to recognize this as the will of God, rejected the preaching of Jeremiah, and rebelled against the Babylonians. They became like the rotten figs or that smashed vase in that earlier sermon of Jeremiah.

Arguments Against Humanism

Some of Jeremiah's sermons opposed what today is called "humanism". Some ideologies spring up and become popular in our day, and we think they are current and contemporary, but they are really not new at all. They are simply old heresies resurfacing. Like humanism, these ideologies, which teach that all man needs is man, are found in ancient history. "I am the master of my fate and the captain of my soul," is the mantra of the humanist. But, as we study the lives of men like Moses, we find the opposite ideology. We find spiritual absolutes emerging in their lives, such as, "I am not, but God is, and God is with me. I cannot, but He can, and He is with me."

Do We Need God?

Jeremiah argues against humanistic thinking when he preaches sermons like this one in chapter ten: "I know, O LORD, that a man's life is not his own; it is not for man to direct his steps." (10:23) And consider this one: "Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD." (17:5) Then Jeremiah gives us the positive result of that truth: "Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in Him." (17:7)

Many people believe they do not need a Shepherd. They have never had a problem they could not solve. They believe that

man's ingenuity, man's intellect, and man's talents are all they need. But the Scripture consistently says, "No, that is not all you need. You need a Shepherd. You need wisdom from God, and you need a dynamic power (grace) from God to apply the wisdom you receive from God. (James 1:5; 2 Corinthians 9:8) That is the consistent philosophy and teaching of all the prophets, and of the Old and New Testaments.

Ready for the Word

Jeremiah's cure for Judah's apostasy, the sin that brought on the Babylonian captivity, is expressed in another great sermon, found in chapter four: "This is what the LORD says to the men of Judah and to Jerusalem, 'Break up your unplowed ground and do not sow among thorns. Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, circumcise your hearts, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem, or My wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you have done — burn with no one to quench it.'" (3,4)

This beautiful sermon of Jeremiah's is similar to a sermon of our Lord found in the Gospels, which is called, "The Parable of the Sower." Jesus said that when the Word of God is preached, it is like a farmer sowing seed. When a farmer plants seeds, the seeds fall on four kinds of soil.

The four soils picture four different responses to the Word of God when it is taught or preached: sometimes the Word does not penetrate the hearer's mind; sometimes it does not penetrate the

hearer's will; sometimes it penetrates the mind and will but when it grows, it is choked off by weeds, which represent the cares of this world, riches and other distractions; and sometimes it grows and produces various degrees of fruit.

In His wonderful parable, Jesus could have been building on this sermon of Jeremiah. The prophet told the people, "Your life is like unplowed ground. No seed has been planted there for a long time." They had forgotten about the Word of God. All the problems of the people and the circumstances of their lives, were preparing the soil of their lives to receive the seed of the Word of Word of God again. God was preparing the soil of their lives to hear the Word of God.

Jeremiah spoke of being circumcised in the heart. The apostle Paul, who also used that expression, could have learned that expression from Jeremiah. Paul wrote that circumcision was to the people of God in the Old Testament as baptism is to people of God in the New Testament and in our day. Circumcision was the ordinance, the sacrament, by which the Jewish people professed their faith. Baptism is the way Jesus taught us to profess our faith in Jesus Christ today.

Any ordinance can become an empty form. Any ceremony without the reality it represents can be empty and totally without meaning. Jesus, the apostles, and the prophets emphasized the difference between performance and profession. Your performance, the way you live, is always more important than your profession, or

what you say. Living out in your daily life what the ordinance represents is what Jeremiah and Paul called "circumcision of the heart".

Do you profess to believe? If so, do not only profess what you believe; live out in your life what you profess to believe.

God's Sad News

In chapter twenty-three, Jeremiah displayed both humor and satire in his preaching, as this paraphrase of the passage shows: "When one of their people, or one of their prophets or priests asks you, 'Well, what is Jeremiah's sad news from the Lord today?' you shall reply, 'What sad news? You are the sad news, for the Lord has cast you away.' As for the false prophets and priests and people who joke about today's sad news from God, I will punish them and their families for saying this."

The people were mocking Jeremiah because he never had anything good to say. His message, as we have seen, was negative because calamity was coming. And everything he said came true, the gloom and the doom, but also the hope. The preaching of Jeremiah was the only hope of the Jews who heard his sermons and, the Messianic prophecies mixed with his promise of their return from captivity, represent our ultimate and blessed hope today.

Jeremiah's Burden

His message was a very emotional one: "Oh, my heart, my

heart! I writhe in pain. Oh, the agony of my heart!” ... For I have heard the sound of the trumpet, I have heard the battle cry. Disaster follows disaster; the whole land lies in ruins.” (Jeremiah 4:19–20) In his prophetic revelations of the conquest of Babylon, Jeremiah could actually hear the sounds of the Babylonian armies and the screams of the people of Judah. Because he continues to experience the horror of these events, he asks, “How long must I see the battle standard and hear the sound of the trumpet?” (21) And the Lord replies, “Until My people leave their foolishness, for they refuse to listen to Me.” They are dull, retarded children who have no understanding. They are skilled at doing evil, but for doing right they have no talent, none at all.” (22)

This sermon of Jeremiah’s could be addressed to our generation. We are experts in building weapons of mass destruction today, but do we even know what is right? Violence and crime are epidemic in our world. We have an absolute genius for inventing thermonuclear, chemical, and biological weapons of mass destruction, but we do not seem to have much talent at all for doing what is right. We do not even know what is right.

The Perseverance of Jeremiah

Jeremiah dictated his original version of this book to his faithful scribe Baruch from a dungeon. Having completed the scroll of his sermons as he remembered preaching them, he asked that the entire scroll be read to the people on the Holy Day of Fasting. This

greatly impacted the people and the entire scroll was eventually read to the king. As the scroll was read to the king, there was a great fire in the fireplace. As each segment was read to the king, with a razor sharp knife, the king cut that section from the scroll and threw it on the fire until the entire scroll was destroyed.

When Jeremiah was told of this, he sent for Baruch and told his faithful scribe to get a larger scroll because he was going to write his book again, and he had remembered many sermons that were not included in the first scroll. He then dictated the fifty-two chapters of the book we have now surveyed. We would not have the Book of Jeremiah if it were not for the perseverance of this great prophet. (Chapter 36)

Chapter Seven

The Book of Lamentations

“God Loves You Anyway”

The Book of Lamentations is a sequel to the Book of Jeremiah. For fifty-two chapters Jeremiah weeps because of the prophetic revelations God is giving him of the impending Babylonian conquest. The Book of Jeremiah ends with the prophet still in the land of Judah after most of the people had been taken away as captives. He then apparently migrated to Egypt, and according to

tradition, was martyred there. Other scholars tell us Jeremiah eventually went to Babylon to preach to the people of Judah he loved so much, while some think he spent his last days in the land of Judah.

The Book of Lamentations is well named. The “weeping prophet” is still crying because the land has been conquered and the people he loves so much who were not massacred have been taken away as captives and slaves to a distant land.

One of the problems he addresses in Lamentations, which was also addressed by other prophets like Ezekiel and Daniel, was the fact that they could not be near the temple. The Jews believed the temple of God was where the presence of God lived. His divine presence actually dwelt in the Holy of Holies of the temple in Jerusalem. There is a sense in which the Temple was God’s address for these devout prophets. This is why the prophet Daniel faced Jerusalem when he prayed. Where was God now for His people who were living in Babylon? Jerusalem was literally the city of God to them, and they felt separated from their holy city and their Holy God.

Jeremiah’s Grotto

Jeremiah wrote the Book of Lamentations while sitting in a grotto on a hill. There is a place there today called the “Grotto of Jeremiah”, which is on a hill called “Golgotha”. In the divine providence of God, Jeremiah’s grotto, or cave, was on the hill of Calvary, where Jesus Christ died for the sins of the world. We will

see the significance of that providence as we get into the message of Lamentations.

The Literary Form of Lamentations

As literature, Lamentations is a masterpiece of poetry, containing five poems, or elegies, in its five chapters. Each chapter is a separate poem, and four of these are acrostic poems. In an acrostic poem, the first verse begins with the first letter of the alphabet; the second verse begins with the second letter of the alphabet; and so on. But as beautiful as the literary form of this book is, the inspired message of the book is what earns it a place in God’s Word.

That inspired message centers around the tragedy of the Babylonian conquest and captivity. The message is described graphically and with great emotion: “What can I say for you? With what can I compare you, Oh Daughter of Jerusalem? To what can I liken you, that I may comfort you, Oh Virgin Daughter of Zion? Your wound is as deep as the sea. Who can heal you?” (Lamentations 2:13) Jeremiah’s vivid description of Jerusalem after the Babylonian conquest graphically profiles the horror of what it was like when a city was conquered by an empire like the Babylonian Empire.

About the time we think this book is all sadness and despair, as he did in his prophecy, Jeremiah surprises us with a beautiful Messianic prophecy of hope. You may remember that Job did the

very same thing at the peak of his suffering. (Job 19:25,26) In the third chapter of his Lamentations, in the depth of his despair, Jeremiah receives a marvelous prophetic revelation: “It is only because of the LORD’s great love that we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. I say to myself, ‘The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for Him. The LORD is good to those whose hope is in Him, to the one who seeks Him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.’” (22–26)

The message of hope revealed to Jeremiah was this: God never stops loving us! When we sin, He loves us anyway. Our hope is in the love of God. Jeremiah told the captives as they were led away to Babylon, “Do not glory in your riches, your strength, your wisdom, or your education. Glory in God. You must come to know God and find your fulfillment in Him. You can know God by trusting in His unconditional and never failing love and mercy. God now makes Jeremiah know that we cannot win His love by a positive performance and we cannot lose His love by a negative performance. God never, never, never, stops loving us.

Proof of God’s Love

In the third chapter of Lamentations, we also read, “Who can speak and have it happen if the LORD has not decreed it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come? Why should any living man complain when punished

for his sins? Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD. (37–40)

As Jeremiah expresses this great hope, he shares a truth we discovered in the Book of Job, that good times and hard times both come from God. (Job 2:10) This truth is also taught by Solomon, who preached that we should be glad when we are living in a time of prosperity. But, in the day of adversity, we should recognize that God has made the one as well as the other. He precedes this teaching by telling us that that it is better to go to a funeral than to a festival, because at a funeral you think about eternal values. You think about the fact that you are going to die. You think about God, life, the purposes and the meaning of life. (Ecclesiastes 7:2,14)

Remember that the people of God were incurable idolaters. Their sin of idolatry knew no bounds, and this included the corrupt priests and false prophets. But the message of Jeremiah and the captivity prophets also contained this hope: God loves you too much to watch you waste away, day after day after day living in sin. God is not going to let that happen to you because you are His people.

The devotional application for us is that when God chastises us for our sins, that chastisement is a confirmation of our identity as the children of God. As parents, we would discipline our children if we saw them doing wrong, precisely because they are our children. We would not discipline other children in the neighborhood because they are not our children. The author of the Book of Hebrews writes,

that this kind of chastisement is a proof that the Lord is our Heavenly Father and He loves us. (Hebrews 12)

Chapter Eight

The Prophecy of Ezekiel

“All Things Weird and Wonderful”

While the people of God were being marched off to Babylon, the psalmist says their tormentors mocked them. “You people love to sing praises to your God. Well, let us hear some of your songs now!” But the psalmist writes, “How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137:4)

That was the historical context in which the prophets Ezekiel and Daniel lived out their extraordinary lives and ministries as prophets. Ezekiel and Daniel were about the same age. Daniel was taken into Babylon as a captive when he was about fourteen. Ezekiel was taken about nine years later when he was twenty-five. He preached in the slave labor camps, the only prophet who ministered directly to the captives.

God did not want His people, even when they were in captivity, to be without a prophet. Therefore, He commissioned young Ezekiel to go into captivity and minister to the exiles. A key verse in the book is: “I looked for a man among them who would

build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none.” (Ezekiel 22:30) God wanted a man among the captives who would “stand in the gap” between God and His people. He commissioned Ezekiel to be that man.

Apocalyptic literature

“All Things Weird and Wonderful” is a good title for the Book of Ezekiel because it is filled with some weird and wonderful prophecies. There is a sense in which Ezekiel, himself, was a weird and wonderful prophet. As you compare the prophets, you see that Daniel, Ezekiel, and the apostle John were exiles when they wrote the Books of Daniel, Ezekiel, and The Revelation. Daniel and Ezekiel were exiles in Babylon and John was exiled by the Romans to the island of Patmos. All three men wrote what scholars call “apocalyptic literature”. The word “apocalypse” means, “to pull back the veil” so that people can see things they otherwise would not be able to see.

This apocalyptic literature, also called eschatological literature, not only takes us behind the veil, but it takes us into the future. Eschatology (eschat = “last things”) means “the study of the last things”. An eschatological prophet shows us what will happen when God brings to an end human history according to His plan. Scholars refer to the plan of God for ending human history as the doctrine of the last things, or eschatology.

An Outline of the Book of Ezekiel

Ezekiel's prophecy, which is very well organized, can be outlined this way: Ezekiel prophesies the destruction of Jerusalem. As a captivity prophet, part of his mission objective was to counteract the message of many of the false prophets, who preached that there would be an early return from captivity because that was what the captives wanted to hear.

Jeremiah mentions a false prophet named Hananiah, who contradicted Jeremiah and said that the captivity was not going to last seventy years but only two years. Jeremiah confronted him and predicted that he would be dead before that year had ended. The prophecy of Jeremiah was literally fulfilled. (Jeremiah 28:11-17) Apparently, there were a lot of false prophets preaching that message.

In the first twenty-four chapters of his book, Ezekiel refuted this false prophecy and emphasized the fact that Jerusalem would be destroyed. Like Jeremiah, Ezekiel preached that there was no way to avoid the Babylonian conquest and destruction of Jerusalem.

In chapters twenty-five through thirty-two, Ezekiel prophesied against Babylon, the nation that would destroy Jerusalem. He followed this with a hope - filled prophecy that Jerusalem would rise again. (chapters 33 – 40) The final eight chapters of Ezekiel contain an eschatological prophecy. He prophesied that on the same

spot where Solomon's temple stood, there would be another temple built, which is referred to as the millennial temple.

Ezekiel's Commission

Most of Ezekiel's sermons came to him in the form of visions, many of which also can be found in The Book of Revelation. Ezekiel's first revelation begins, "I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north — an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was that of a man, but each of them had four faces and four wings. ... Each of the four had the face of a man, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle. ... I saw a wheel on the ground beside each creature with its four faces. ... The spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels." (Ezekiel 1:4–6, 10, 15, 21)

The four creatures are the important part of the vision. The Apostle John also mentioned these creatures in the Book of Revelation, when a door opened into heaven in his vision of heaven. Around a throne he saw in heaven were these same four living creatures. The first was like a lion, the second like an ox, the third like a man, and the fourth was like an eagle. (Revelation 4:6,7)

Some scholars believe this shared vision of Ezekiel and John is a summary of the revelation of God in the Scriptures. When God

first revealed Himself to man at Mount Sinai, He roared like a lion. The next way God revealed Himself to man was through the great sacrificial system described in Exodus and Leviticus. The ox represented the animals that were sacrificed for the sins of the people.

The man among these four living creatures takes us to the Gospels, where God becomes a Man. God lived among us for thirty-three years. Some say the eagle represents deity. This Man, Who lived among us, was “very Man of very Man and very God of very God,” as the creeds say. The incarnation of Jesus Christ was the pinnacle of God’s revelation of Himself to this world.

The wheels could represent the ongoing, continuous revelation of God, which perhaps even included the prophets who proclaimed the revelation, since the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels. Those are some possible interpretations of this first vision of Ezekiel.

When Ezekiel received his commission from God (chapter 2), it was after he had seen this vision. This could be called “the coming experience” of Ezekiel. Do you recall the coming experience of Isaiah? All the great prophets and men of God in the Old Testament had coming and going experiences. Certain experiences brought them to God, and then they had experiences as they “went for” God.

The prophets and men of God in the Old Testament had a coming experience that sometimes lasted many years, as in the case of Moses. He had eighty years of coming experiences and forty

years of going experiences. That is why his forty years of going were so dynamic; those forty years of going were preceded by eighty years of coming.

In chapter one, the great vision of the four living creatures and the wheels was Ezekiel’s coming experience. At the time of Ezekiel’s commission, the people of Judah had lost their vision of God. They did not have Jerusalem, they did not have the temple, they did not have the Word of God, and they did not have any worship helps. So, the spiritual leader in that period — Ezekiel — needed to have a supernatural vision of God.

God gave Ezekiel a vision of Himself in several ways. First, Ezekiel said again and again, “The word of God came to me.” That is true of all the prophets. Ezekiel also said, “The hand of God was upon me.” Ezekiel is known as the prophet of the Holy Spirit because he makes reference to the Holy Spirit more than any other prophet. But, what made Ezekiel unique among the prophets was that the heavens opened for him and he actually saw the glory of the Lord.

God gave this vision of Himself in order to keep His people from perishing. It is also the vision that God gave to Ezekiel so he could minister as a prophet in those very difficult times and in a very difficult place - those slave labor camps in Babylon.

Spiritual Watchman

A great sermon of Ezekiel's is recorded in chapter three. This sermon is called "The Watchman of the House of Israel." The metaphor is based on the culture of walled cities that were often besieged by ruthless conquerors. Solomon uses this same metaphor when he writes that unless the Lord keeps the city the watchman stays awake in vain. (Psalm 127:1) There were always watchmen stationed in watchtowers at night watching and listening for signs and sounds of an enemy. Ezekiel's metaphor is also rooted in the solemn responsibility of watchman to warn their citizens when an enemy appeared. Ezekiel's watchman sermon begins: "At the end of seven days the Word of the LORD came to me: 'Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the Word I speak and give them warning from me. ... If you do warn the wicked man and he does not turn from his wickedness, or from his evil ways, he will die for his sin; but you will have saved yourself.'" (16–17, 19)

When Jeremiah rebuked the false prophets of his day, he said, in effect, "You never did warn the people about their sins and try to deliver them from all this calamity." Ezekiel goes further and says, "As a prophet, if you warn the people and they persist in their wickedness, they will die in their wickedness. But you will deliver yourself. But if you fail to warn them, God will hold you responsible."

The apostle Paul believed that in his day. He wrote: "We are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?" (2 Corinthians 2:15–16)

The devotional application for us is: If you share the Gospel with someone and they believe, then you have been a fragrance of life to that person. But if you share the Gospel with someone and they reject it, then you are a fragrance of death to them because you have made it impossible for them to say, "I did not know. I never heard." If we believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God, we should join Ezekiel in believing that we are "watchmen" over the souls of those whose lives intersect our lives.

That is why Ezekiel emphasized the Holy Spirit in his preaching. Ezekiel, like Paul, found his sufficiency for his awesome task in the Holy Spirit. Paul wrote: "Our sufficiency comes from God." Paul believed that when he shared the Gospel with people like the Corinthians, it was nothing coming from him, and everything coming from the Holy Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:5; 1 Corinthians 2:3-5) Only God can make us competent enough to be spiritual watchmen.

Chapter Nine

“Dry Bones”

Many pastors, who have preached the Word of God for a lifetime, love a sermon Ezekiel preached in a graveyard, which could have been killing fields where many people were massacred. We read that Ezekiel was led out to a valley covered with dry bones. (Chapter 37) Ezekiel’s commission from God was to preach to these bones.

Figuratively speaking, this is the challenge a pastor often confronts when he stands in front of his congregation on Sunday. One pastor said that when Jesus Christ returns, his congregation will be the first to be resurrected because the Apostle Paul wrote that the “dead in Christ will rise first”. (1 Thessalonians 4:16) He sometimes wonders, can these dead bones live? Can I preach in such a way that I and my message will be energized by the Holy Spirit, and spiritual life transfused into the lives of these people?

When Ezekiel obeys the commission of his Lord to preach to the dry bones: “He (the Lord) asked me, ‘Son of man, can these bones live?’ I said, ‘Oh Sovereign LORD, you alone know.’ Then He said to me, ‘Prophesy to these bones and say to them, “Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life.”’ (37:3–5)

The people of Judah were like dry bones. The challenge God placed before the prophet Ezekiel was, “Do you think these dry bones can live?” In the Scriptures, God consistently challenged prophets about their vision. Observe that Ezekiel did not say, “Yes, I have the faith to believe they can live.” Instead, he said, “Lord, You alone know.” The prophet did not commit himself to God because he did not really believe the bones could live. Then God said to him, “Preach to the bones!”

So Ezekiel starts preaching to the bones. After some preaching, Ezekiel says there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones started coming together. After the dry bones came together, Ezekiel had a congregation of skeletons, with no sinew or flesh on them. Ezekiel was commanded again, “Preach!” As he preached, sinew and flesh were added to the skeletons.

When Ezekiel got that army of skeletons with flesh and muscle, he still had not answered God’s question, “Can these bones live again?” These corpses were still not alive. There was no breath in them. So the commission came from God, “Preach to the Breath!” In the Bible, the words for air, breath and spirit are the same words. The Breath here is the Holy Spirit. This is a great principle you will find throughout the Bible: apart from the Holy Spirit, the preacher is attempting the impossible.

Any true prophet knows that if the Spirit does not come to him and lift him up and put the hand of energizing unction, or anointing upon him, what he is attempting to do is impossible. When

Ezekiel preached to the Spirit, the Breath came into those corpses and they became a mighty army.

The primary application to the Jews of what Ezekiel was commissioned to preach was essentially this: “I can and will restore you from your captivity experience. I can and will lead you back from Babylon, back to your homeland. I will restore the fortunes of Israel.”

The second application of this great message gives us a picture of what is involved in the great ministry of building the Church today. The preaching of the Gospel builds the Church. The dry bones represent the lost. Of the more than six billion people on earth today, how many of them know about Jesus Christ? How many of them are alive with Jesus Christ? How many of them know what it is to be indwelt with the Holy Spirit, and to be converted by the Spirit of God? Very few. This is the challenge facing the Church today. The devotional application of Ezekiel’s dry bones sermon is this challenge: can the church of Jesus Christ be energized by the Holy Spirit to implement the Great Commission and take the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the lost people of this world?

Are you one of the dry bones? Are you lost because you have never heard or believed the Gospel of salvation? Does this message apply to you because you only look alive but lack “real life”? Do you have the Breath of God’s Spirit in your life and ministry? No matter what your circumstances may be, they are probably not as difficult as the circumstances Ezekiel woke up to every morning. If

God could make the dead bones live for Ezekiel, He can do that for you and me.

If the Spirit does live in you, what are you doing to build the Church? You do not have to be a preacher to share the Gospel with others. You must believe that the Spirit of God will anoint the Word of God as you share it with another person. It has been said that an evangelist is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. If you are one of those beggars telling another beggar where the bread is, spiritually speaking, you must understand the powerful combination of prayer and the sharing of the Word.

In chapter two of the Book of Acts, we read that the disciples lived together in a great spiritual community. They shared their possessions and ate their meals together — they practiced a pure socialism. The apostles were waiting tables, or managing a food-services program, which was taking them away from their pastoral ministry. We read that they made a very important decision. They elected the first deacons and said to them, “You tend to this business, and we will give ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word.” God mightily blessed their decision as the apostles prayed and preached the Word.

This is the same powerful combination Ezekiel used in his ministry. Someone has said that when we meet together, if nobody is changed, then nothing happened. When we preach the Word, if we are simply giving out information, nothing will really happen to those who hear. However, if we will follow the example of Ezekiel

and the apostles, we will discover that when prayer precedes our preaching, something will happen. The lives of people who hear the Word will be changed forever.

When you proclaim the Good News God gives you to proclaim, when you “preach to the bones,” also preach to the Breath, the Spirit. You must look to God the whole time you are preaching or sharing the Gospel with another person for the energizing unction of the Spirit to energize every word you speak. When His power energies you and your words, those “bones” will come to life.

Chapter Ten

The Prophecy of Daniel

“Believers Versus Babylonians”

Daniel is the fourth of the so-called “major prophets” and the third of the so-called captivity prophets. When we meet Daniel — as Jerusalem falls the first time — he is about fourteen years old. There was not a great deportation of people to Babylon at this time, but a few select people, including Daniel and three of his teenage friends, who were carried off together into captivity. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had apparently commanded, “I want the nobles and the princes and the really intelligent young men to be educated in my universities.” God was using the decree of a pagan world ruler to

strategically place a ministry in Babylon for the good of His people, so that by the time most of the captives arrived, they would have some influence in the palace of Nebuchadnezzar.

Examples and Warnings

The twelve chapters of the Book of Daniel fall into two equal divisions. The first six chapters are an historical narrative. Chapters seven through twelve are prophetic revelations. The key verse to all the historical narrative of the Bible and that which is found in Daniel Chapters 1–6 is a New Testament verse, which says, “All these things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.” (1 Corinthians 10:11)

In the Old Testament you see that the spiritual lives of most of God’s people had high points and low points. However, that is not true of Joseph and Daniel. They both lived their entire adult lives in the hostile culture of the political arenas of world empires. These men are two of the purest people you will meet in the Word of God. While Joseph lived at the right hand of an Egyptian Pharaoh, Daniel lived his entire adult life in the hostile culture of Babylonian and Persian politics.

He outlived Nebuchadnezzar and his son, Belshazzar. He lived to see the Babylonian Empire fall to the Persian Empire. He survived and functioned as a prophet through the entire seventy-year

period of the Babylonian captivity. He was too old and feeble to return with the captives, but he did see their return from captivity.

It was Daniel's role to show the people of Judah how to cope with captivity, an assignment that began when he was only fourteen years old. Daniel coped with captivity in a magnificent way, and thus was a superb example for the people of Judah — and for us today.

The Resolve of Daniel

The Apostle Paul wrote: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” (Romans 12:2) This verse has been paraphrased: “Do not let the world squeeze you into its own mold but let God re-mould your mind from within.” This was an exhortation to believers in the New Testament, but the very same truth applied to Daniel when he arrived in Babylon.

It did not take Daniel long to realize that the pressure was on him to conform to the Babylonian culture. He was chosen and forced into the university in Babylon and trained by the wise men of Nebuchadnezzar to one day be a good Babylonian leader for them. The first issue to confront Daniel was the rich Babylonian food. That food probably included pork and all kinds of things that were unclean for a Jewish young man to eat. We read that, “Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine.” (Daniel 1:8)

Daniel's name meant, “God is my judge.” Daniel was walking before God, asking God to judge his every move. His three friends also had names with spiritually significant meanings. Mishael meant, “Who is like God?” Hananiah meant “Jehovah was favored,” and Azariah meant “helped by Jehovah.”

The first thing the Babylonians did was to change the names of these Hebrew teenagers. Daniel's name was changed to Belteshazzar, which meant “Bel protect his life.” Bel was a Babylonian god. The Babylonians were trying to make Daniel believe that he would be under the protection of a pagan god. Mishael's name was changed to Meshach, which is Mardock in Babylonian. Mardock was also a Babylonian god. Hananiah's name was changed to Shadrach, which is the name of the moon god of Babylon. And Azariah's name was changed to Abednego, which meant “servant of the Babylonian god of wisdom.” (Daniel 1:7)

Nebuchadnezzar was saying to these four young men, “We are going to make Babylonians out of you.” But Daniel and these three teenagers stood up to Nebuchadnezzar and the whole Babylonian Empire when they said, in essence, “You are not going to make Babylonians out of us. We are going to make believers out of you!”

The fourth chapter of Daniel tells us that Nebuchadnezzar, the genius who put together the great Babylonian Empire, professed faith in God. This is one of the most magnificent chapters in the Bible. What brought Nebuchadnezzar to that profession of faith? It all

started when Daniel refused to defile himself with the rich, but impure, unclean foods of Babylon.

Interpreting Dreams

Very early in the captivity, Daniel and his friends had another confrontation. Nebuchadnezzar had a dream, and his dream greatly troubled him. He called in his wise men and said to them, “Tell me what I dreamed and then interpret my dream for me.”

As you might imagine, this was a tremendous problem for the wise men of Babylon. It is not really difficult to interpret dreams, but how does anyone know your interpretation is the right one? That is what Nebuchadnezzar was thinking. When Nebuchadnezzar put that challenge before his wise men, they were distraught and filled with panic. When a ruler like Nebuchadnezzar asked you to do something, you did what they asked or you were in big trouble.

They said to the king, “There is not a man on earth who can do what the king asks! ... No one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among men.” (Daniel 2:10, 11) This answer so infuriated Nebuchadnezzar that he ordered the execution of all the wise men. That included Daniel and his friends because they were students of those wise men.

When the executioner arrived to put them to death, Daniel spoke up with great wisdom and tact. He asked, “Why is the decree of the king so severe?” The executioner in effect replied, “The king and his wise men had a disagreement. The wise men said that the

gods do not live in men, and therefore they cannot tell the king what he dreamed.”

A paraphrase and summary of Daniel’s response would be: “Ah, but that is where they are wrong, because God does live in men. Daniel went to see the king and asked the king to give him some time so that he might tell the king what he dreamed and the interpretation of his dream. Daniel then told his three friends what he had done and they began to pray. That night in a vision, God supernaturally revealed Nebuchadnezzar’s dream — and its interpretation — to Daniel.

Daniel had his audience with Nebuchadnezzar, and the essence of their conversation was: “Young man, I understand you can tell me what I dreamed and interpret my dream for me.” Daniel replied, “Only God can do what you have asked your wise men to do, Oh king. Your wise men are wrong. God does dwell with men and He has told me what you dreamed and the interpretation of your dream.” When Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar what he dreamed and interpreted the dream for him, the king fell on his face, and from that day forward he always referred to Daniel as “the man in whom the Spirit of God lives.” (Chapter 2)

Daniel’s interpretation of the king’s dream is only one of five miracles recorded in the Book of Daniel that demonstrate the fact that there is such a thing as the supernatural. The other four miracles are: the rescue of Daniel’s three friends from the fiery furnace (chapter three), Nebuchadnezzar’s profession of faith (chapter four),

the handwriting on the wall (chapter five), and the rescue of Daniel from the lions in the lions' den (chapter six).

Through these miracles, Daniel and his friends demonstrated the kind of faith that can cope with the worst of times. They had a faith that believed in the supernatural power of God, absolutely. They believed in the power of prayer, absolutely, and they believed absolutely in the providence of God that had placed them in Babylon.

Have you ever had crises in your life that were inescapable, unavoidable, intolerable, and confronted you with the impossible? The crises faced by Daniel and his friends in Babylon were inescapable, unavoidable, intolerable, and confronted them with the impossible. They showed us how to live with that kind of crisis, by the way, they lived through their own crises in Babylon.

As you think about these miracles in the Book of Daniel, ask yourself these questions: Do you believe in the supernatural power of God? Do you believe in the supernatural power of prayer? And do you believe in the providences and purposes of God for placing you where you are for the glory of God? Do you believe these things absolutely?

Chapter 11

“The Glory that was Babylon”

While this is not a scholarly study, but a devotional survey of the entire Bible, there is some historical perspective you must have to appreciate and understand the message of the Book of Daniel. The Bible frequently uses the reign of kings or Caesars to date biblical events, as in the opening verses of the Christmas story as told in the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke.

During the events covered in the first four chapters of the Book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar was the king of the Babylonian World Empire. In the fifth chapter of Daniel we are told that Nebuchadnezzar's son, Belshazzar is king. In the closing verses of chapter five and the first verses of the sixth chapter of Daniel, we read that the Persians have conquered Babylon and Darius the Mede is king. In this way, we are being told that the first six chapters of Daniel cover seventy years of Babylonian history.

The historical context of the events covered in the content of the Bible spans world empires like Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome. Two world empires overlap in the Book of Daniel - the Babylonian Empire, which lasted seventy years, and the Persian Empire, with its 127 provinces of Media-Persia, which is also the historical context of the Book of Esther. In one of the prophecies of Daniel, he makes reference to four of these world powers: Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome.

It will help you to understand the historical setting of the Book of Daniel, and to appreciate the pomp and glory of King Nebuchadnezzar, if you learn something about the city of Babylon. Read this description of the city which was written by an Old Testament history scholar: “It was home to more than two million people and the hanging gardens of Babylon were one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Historians tell us that the wall around the city was almost 100 kilometers long, about 25 kilometers on each side. This wall was 110 meters high and almost 30 meters thick. It extended some 13 meters below the ground so that enemies could not tunnel under it. There were 400 meters of clear space between the city and the wall all the way around. The wall was protected on the outside by wide and deep moats filled with water. There were 250 guard towers on the wall.

“The city was divided by the Euphrates River into two almost equal parts. Both banks were guarded by the brick wall, which had twenty-five gates connecting streets and ferryboats. There was one bridge on stone piers, which was almost one kilometer long and 11 meters wide, with draw bridges that were removed at night. There was a tunnel under the river, 7 meters wide and some 4 meters high. In the days of ancient warfare, the city was impregnable.”

In Daniel’s day, Babylon was not only the premier city of the world, but it ruled the most powerful empire that had up to that time existed. Yet the empire lasted only seventy years. Daniel was there from its rise to its fall. He was friend and advisor to the king.

Nebuchadnezzar was a genius and the powerful ruler who built the Babylonian Empire. He led this world empire for forty-five of its seventy years.

Nebuchadnezzar’s authority and power were absolute. In the fifth chapter of Daniel we read, “Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared.” (19) It is difficult for many people today to appreciate the absolute authority of a dictator like Nebuchadnezzar. When you get some historical perspective on this man, however, you realize that a great miracle is being described when he records his profession of faith in the God of Daniel.

Daniel’s miraculous identification of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, and his interpretation of that dream (chapter 2), profoundly impacted this world ruler. In that dream, Nebuchadnezzar saw a statue of a man. The head was gold, the chest area was silver, the torso and the thighs were bronze, the legs were iron, and the feet were iron and clay.

Daniel’s interpretation was that these were four great world kingdoms. As Daniel interpreted Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, he said, in essence, “You are the head of gold because right now you are the world power, but your power will not last. Your kingdom is going to fall and be succeeded by another kingdom. That is the silver part of the statue. This kingdom, Persia, will not be as great as you. The kingdom of bronze, which is Greece, will follow. Finally, the

kingdom that is pictured by the iron legs is the Roman Empire.” The ten toes could represent the ten dimensions of the Roman Empire.

Apparently, Nebuchadnezzar was filled with pride when he heard that he was the “head of gold”. So he made a statue of gold and made everybody fall down and worship it. He was far from converted at this point! But as we will see, the witness of Daniel and his three friends had a profound and life-changing impact on Nebuchadnezzar that led him to a profession of faith in the true and living God.

Nebuchadnezzar Repents

In Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, a rock was cut out of the side of a mountain, but not by human hands. This supernatural rock fell on the feet of Nebuchadnezzar’s great statue, the feet that were made of iron and clay. That caused the whole statue to fall over, disintegrate, and blow away like chaff on a threshing floor. The interpretation Daniel gave Nebuchadnezzar was that all these kingdoms, the ones pictured by the gold, silver, bronze, and iron would be conquered one day by a supernatural kingdom, the kingdom of God.

We do not know exactly how God used the life and words of Daniel to reach Nebuchadnezzar, but miraculously, chapter four of Daniel reads: “It is my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed for me. How great are His signs, how mighty His wonders! His kingdom is an

eternal kingdom; His dominion endures from generation to generation.” (2–3)

In this extraordinary chapter of Scripture, Nebuchadnezzar describes another dream he had. In this dream, he saw a very tall tree, one that was so high, it could be seen by everyone in the world. Its branches were full of fruit, with enough for everyone in the world to eat. Then one of God’s angels came down from heaven and shouted, “Cut down the tree and trim off its branches; strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. ... But let the stump and its roots be bound with iron and bronze, remain in the ground, in the grass of the field.” (4:14–15)

The angel continued, “Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven, and let him live with the animals among the plants of the earth. Let his mind be changed from that of a man and let him be given the mind of an animal, till seven times pass by for him.” (15–16) The angel said that the purpose of the decree was that the world may understand that “The Most High rules the kingdoms of the world and gives them to anyone He wants to, even the lowliest of men.”

The king tells us that he also told this dream to Daniel. When the prophet heard this dream, he sat there stunned and silent for an hour, aghast at the meaning of the dream. Finally he said, “Oh, that the events foreshadowed in this dream would happen to your enemies, my lord, and not to you!” (19)

After the king solemnly charged Daniel to tell him the interpretation of the dream, Daniel said, “You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven times (years) will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High rules over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone He wishes.” (25)

However, Daniel went on to say that God would restore the kingdom to Nebuchadnezzar when he acknowledged God’s sovereignty. And then Daniel implored, “Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue.” (27)

Apparently Daniel then writes some verses that describe the fulfillment of his prophetic interpretation of this dream. After this terrible ordeal has ended, Nebuchadnezzar resumes writing his profession of faith and praise for the true and living God of Daniel. He raised his eyes toward heaven and praised, honored, and glorified the Most High!

Observe that God had a purpose for putting Nebuchadnezzar through that horrible experience: to learn that the Most High rules over the kingdoms of men. Nebuchadnezzar had to live like an animal for seven years until he finally learned what God wanted him to learn. What an enormous ego he must have had since it took God seven years to get this world ruler to bow his head.

Is it possible that there are times when we go through awful experiences, because God is trying to show us that He has every right to rule this world and our lives? When that happens, how long does it take before you say to God, “My Lord and my God! You are in charge. You are sovereign and have absolute authority over my life?”

Chapter Twelve

“Visions and Revelations of Daniel”

Since the first six chapters of Daniel are history, they are very easy to understand. The last six chapters, like the Book of Revelation and the prophecies of Ezekiel and Zechariah, are very difficult to understand. Daniel’s interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s first dream, in Daniel 2, gives us a model that can guide us as we attempt to interpret the difficult revelations and visions in the Book of Daniel. Only through the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit can we understand these visions that are a prophetic revelation of the great work of God in our world.

Here are some steps to take as you try to understand the visions and revelations in Daniel. First, observe the symbols in the vision. For example, in the first of these difficult visions of Daniel,

which is recorded in chapter seven, the symbols of the vision are similar to the first dream of Nebuchadnezzar.

Four great winds began to blow and stirred up a great sea, and then four great beasts emerged. The fourth beast was terrible and dreadful and destroyed the other beasts, but before that destruction, ten horns grew out of that beast. Then one little horn grew out of the ten horns. This little horn had eyes and a big mouth, and spoke great and mighty things.

Second, observe the action and interaction between the symbols. Consider the interpretation given in the text, which is the inspired interpretation of the passage. After you have done that, prayerfully ask the Holy Spirit to show you what it all means. Ask yourself, “What does it say, what does it mean, what did it mean to them, and what does it mean to me?”

The inspired interpretation of Daniel’s dream in chapter seven tells us that we are again looking at four great kingdoms. “The four great beasts are four kingdoms that will rise from the earth. But the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever — yes, for ever and ever.” (17–18) A fourth kingdom will appear on the earth and devour it. The ten horns are ten kings who will come from this kingdom. “After them another king will arise, different from the earlier ones; he will subdue three kings. He will speak against the Most High and oppress his saints and try to change the set times and the laws. The saints will be handed over to him for a time, times and half a time.” (24–25)

Anytime horns are mentioned in the Bible they represent power, like the horn on an animal with which it tears up other animals. These ten horns and one little horn also represent powers or kingdoms. Many people interpret this fourth kingdom as a revived Roman Empire. In Nebuchadnezzar’s vision, the legs of iron — the fourth kingdom — represented the Roman Empire. Some believe this vision also represents a revived Roman Empire but in some future time. Others say no, this fourth kingdom is more terrible than all the rest. It is a picture of the kingdom of God and prophetically profiles God expressing His wrath.

In my opinion, we cannot be dogmatic about our interpretation of these prophecies of Daniel. Whether or not we are correct about all the details, we must remember this one big truth from this prophecy in the seventh chapter of Daniel: If you are one of the people of God, you are part of the kingdom that is going to be victorious. All these visions end on an optimistic note. They picture the kingdom of God conquering all the other kingdoms and being an everlasting kingdom.

The Vision of the Seventy Weeks

Daniel’s most famous vision, or prophetic revelation is called “The Vision of the Seventy Weeks.” Daniel tells us that as he was reading the prophecies of Jeremiah, he realized that it was time for the people of God to return from the Babylonian captivity. Isaiah and Jeremiah both predicted that after the people of Judah had been captive in

Babylon for seventy years, they would return to their own land. When Daniel tells us, at the end of chapter five and the beginning of chapter six, that he is now under the rule of Darius the Mede, he is dating the end of the seventy years of captivity.

While Daniel prayed his magnificent prayer in chapter nine, he was obviously overwhelmed with the fact that the end of the seventy years had come. As Daniel prayed about this, he confessed his sins and the sins of the people. Daniel was one of the purest characters in the Bible, and yet he identified himself with the sins of the people by saying things like, “our sin” and “we have sinned,” thirty-two times in this prayer.

Daniel begged God’s forgiveness. He said, in effect, “God, You are not only willing to forgive us, but You are about through chastising us.” In his prayer he is obviously excited about the fact that God was going to forgive and restore His people.

As Daniel was praying, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and said, “As soon as you began to pray, an answer was given, which I have come to tell you.” (Daniel 9:23) This was God’s response to Daniel’s prayer, one of the most precise Messianic prophecies found anywhere in the Bible. The vision is essentially this: Seventy weeks of years are decreed concerning your people and your holy city. Here are the purposes of these seventy weeks that are decreed — to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a Most Holy place.

Mixed in with the good news that the return was about to happen is a message about the first advent, or coming, of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. The interpretation of this extraordinary prophecy involves some simple arithmetic. God tells Daniel, that just as the captivity lasted seventy years, the time between the captivity and the coming of the Messiah would be seven times seventy years, or four hundred ninety years. These years would be divided up into weeks of years (seven year periods of years), and in turn, these seventy weeks of years would be broken down like this: seven weeks, sixty-two weeks, and one week. In the middle of that one week, the Anointed One will be “cut off,” or put to death.

This prophecy is to be dated from the time Cyrus issued the decree that the people could return to rebuild Jerusalem. There were three such returns, but the principal one was in 457 B.C. If you take the sixty-two weeks plus seven, and multiply that by seven, you get 483 years. Move forward in history that many years from 457 B. C. and you come to the year 26 A. D., which scholars tell us was the year the Messiah began His public ministry. There was to be a week of years, (or seven years), following that, and in the middle of that week of years the Holy One was going to be cut off. The scholars believe that exactly three and one half years from 26 A. D. was when Jesus Christ was crucified.

While scholars disagree on details, the one thing that is clear about this prophecy is that it is an amazing prediction of the precise time of the coming and the crucifixion of the Messiah and the

beginning of His kingdom, of which there will be no end. This is the kingdom that was profiled prophetically in the second dream/vision of Nebuchadnezzar, which Daniel interpreted for him. (2:34,35,44,45) That kingdom was described as a huge rock that fell on the feet of statue that pictured the four world kingdoms and caused them to blow away like chaff.

The part of the statue upon which this rock fell was the part of the statue that represented the Roman Empire. This precisely and eloquently predicted that Jesus began this kingdom during the time of the Roman Empire, and that kingdom of God inaugurated by Jesus, which has now out lived the Roman Empire by two thousand years, will have no end.

The Personal Application of this Prophecy

One obvious interpretation and application of this miraculous vision/prophecy is that those who are part of this everlasting kingdom have eternal life because they are part of that everlasting kingdom.

To change the metaphor, if you are a believer, if you are one of God's people, then you are a soldier in the army that is going to win the war between good and evil. The war between good and evil has been fought for thousands of years and that war is being fought in many parts of the world today. The location is constantly changing; good and evil wear different faces, but that war has been raging ever since Cain killed his brother Abel.

Citizens of Heaven

The Apostle Paul writes that our citizenship is in heaven and the Scriptures tell us that people of faith are pilgrims passing through this world while looking for a city with foundations whose Builder and Maker is God. The people of God are described as a river flowing through this world into that city of God where there will be great rejoicing when that river arrives there. (Hebrews 11:13-16; Psalm 46:4,5)

Are you a subject in His everlasting kingdom and are you sharing in the victory that He and His Father God are sure to win? Jesus Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords, and the Leader Who will ultimately conquer the forces of evil in this world. If we are His authentic disciples, then we are soldiers in His spiritual army. We may lose some battles along the way, but we are going to win the war. For all eternity, we will live with this reality: It was the degree to which we were part of His victory that determined the quality of our eternity.