

“The days are coming,” declares the Sovereign LORD, “when I will send a famine through the land – not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD.” (v.11)

Back in 2000, Newsweek published the story of Badia Omar, whose gleaming white teeth seem almost too pretty for her emaciated body. For months she and her family wandered together across the parched lowlands of Ethiopia, and watched as thirst and hunger claimed their 200 sheep, 25 cows and one goat. After two of their five children perished, Badia’s husband wandered off. “He could not stay and watch the children die,” she says. Together with her three surviving kids and two donkeys, Badia made for the town of Gode in the Ogaden region. After the eighteen day trek Badia crouched in the corner of a makeshift food centre and said “People told me there would be something here, some food for us.”

A heartbreaking story that continues today for many of the world’s poorest who suffer the effects of famine and drought across Africa. We in the rich West know little of this. The people in Amos’ day were all too familiar with this. Drought and famine often caused entire populations to uproot and migrate from one place to another. God’s own people had initially gone down to Egypt because of such a famine. Few calamities in the ancient world were as devastating.

The prophet Amos spoke of a different kind of famine in our reading today. He called it a famine of *‘hearing the words of the Lord’* (v.11). While a lack of food can lead to disease and death, a famine of the Word can produce eternal consequences. Without access to God’s Word, we lack wisdom for life and the message of eternal life in Christ. As Christians, we need the pure spiritual milk of the Word, that we may grow up in our salvation (1 Peter 2:2). We can identify with the prophet when he said, *‘When your words came I ate them; they were my joy and my heart’s delight’* (Jeremiah 15:16). May we not create a famine in our own lives but be found in God’s Word regularly.

Pray: asking God to renew our hunger and desire for His Word.

Reflect: do I delight in reading God’s Word? If not, why not?

In that day I will restore David's fallen tent. I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be. (v.11)

When Mount St. Helens (Washington, USA) erupted in 1980, it covered the surrounding area with a layer of ash that was several hundred feet deep. The hot ash and lava that spewed from the mountain destroyed all plant and animal life, leaving behind a landscape that resembled the moon. Yet nineteen years later an amazing transformation had begun to take place. Birds, grass, elk, and even frogs had all begun to flourish there again. The mountainside, once dead, had come back to life.

Amos closes his prophecy with a similar word of hope. He has challenged the people about their sin and they appear not to have listened. The Israelites in Amos' day had a form of religious observance. But they had no heart for God. When the festivals and holidays were taking place, instead of celebrating, they longed for them to be over, wanting to be back in the marketplace making money. Even today, there are many who attend church because of religious obligation. And from the moment they enter the building, they can't wait for it to be over. They glance at their watches, and look impatient all through service. They think about the F1 race or the tennis or the football they are missing or are about to start, and set their watches to beep at noon.

The fifth vision is given to Amos in chapter 9 - a clear picture of the destruction of the nation for sin. There will be nowhere to hide from God's wrath - they will be taken into captivity and then die. Even after proclaiming the terrible judgments that would befall the nation, God gives a message of future hope and blessing. He had made unconditional promises to the descendants of Abraham, and to the throne of David. These would be fulfilled in spite of the sinfulness of this generation.

We have the same hope because of Christ's sacrifice on the cross that restores our relationship with God, and we have the future hope of God making all things new when Christ returns for his people.

Pray: thanking God for the hope we have in Christ.

Reflect: do I come to church out of religious duty?

The pride of your heart has deceived you...though you soar like the eagle and make your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down. (v.3-4)

When Harry Truman was thrust into the presidency in America, by the death of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Sam Rayburn took him aside. “From here on out, you’re going to have lots of people around you. They’ll try to put up a wall around you and cut you off from any ideas but theirs. They’ll tell you what a great man you are, Harry. But you and I both know you ain’t.”

Great advice. Don’t be proud. Don’t think you’re better than you are. Don’t trust in your self and your personal strengths and what you’ve achieved and what you have gained in possessions. Trust only in God.

Well the people of Edom could have done with that advice. Edom was a proud nation that considered itself impregnable and invulnerable because it was situated ‘*in the clefts of the rocks*’ (v.3). They lived in a region of rugged mountains with high cliffs and narrow valleys that would dissuade any invader from attacking them. Like the eagles, the Edomites lived on the rocks and looked down from the heights with disdain upon the nations around them. The Edomites thought they were a great people, but God said he would make them small. Their wealth would be plundered (v.5), their alliances broken (v.7), their wisdom destroyed (v.8), and their army defeated (v.9).

Proverbs 16:18 reminds us that ‘*pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.*’ Friends, we have to watch in life that we do not place our confidence in our position, our purse, our possessions or the people around us. It is OK to have them but not to allow them to make us proud or for us to rely on them. We should be willing to lay them down and trust in God alone.

Pray: asking God to help us trust in him alone.

Reflect: do I trust in other things other than in God?

But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. (v.3)

The story is told of an elderly missionary who was discussing prayer at a women's conference. To the small circle of women gathered around her she explained that when she first went to the mission field, more than fifty years earlier, she was extremely lonely. She saw that other missionaries were married and had families, and she bemoaned the feeling that she was all alone. In her loneliness she begged God to pick out a husband for her. She told how she prayed and prayed and prayed, and was sure that God would answer her prayer.

One of the women in the group exclaimed, 'But you've never married! You're still single!' The elderly missionary said, 'You're right! But somewhere out there is a seventy four year old man who has been resisting God's will for more than fifty years!'

We laugh at the woman's response but for many of us we see the other side of that. For we are the one's who have been resisting God's will for some time. God has been calling us to do something for him and we have been ignoring it, resisting it, or simply running away from it. We do this due to fear, or ignorance of God's plans, or through the deceit of Satan or others who would draw us away from following God's will.

Jonah received a call from God to go to the people of Nineveh and preach against them. He didn't want to, so ran in completely the opposite direction. That was the start of a downward spiral. A storm came, he endangered the lives of others, and finally he went overboard and was swallowed up by a fish. God still had plans for Jonah, hence he sent the fish to rescue him and draw him back in.

Let's not run from God and be disobedient to him. Let's hear God's call and follow faithfully.

Pray: asking God to forgive us for our disobedience and to help us faithfully follow him.

Reflect: what am I running from at the moment?

In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help and you listened to my cry. (v.2)

In his book Great Themes of the Bible, Louis Albert Banks told of the time D. L. Moody visited a prison called “The Tombs” to preach to the inmates. After he had finished speaking, Moody talked with a number of men in their cells. He asked each prisoner this question, “What brought you here?” Again and again he received replies like this: “I don’t deserve to be here.” “I was framed.” “I was falsely accused.” “I was given an unfair trial.” Not one inmate would admit he was guilty.

Finally, Moody found a man with his face buried in his hands, weeping. “And what’s wrong, my friend?” he inquired. The prisoner responded, “My sins are more than I can bear.” Relieved to find at least one man who would recognise his guilt and his need of forgiveness, the evangelist exclaimed, “Thank God for that!” Moody then had the joy of pointing him to a saving knowledge of Christ - a knowledge that released him from his shackles of sin. The prisoner was running to God from his guilt and shame.

In chapter 1 we saw Jonah running from God and it not turning out well. God has rescued him and he is sitting in the belly of a fish. Here in chapter 2 as Jonah sits there he realises his sin and his disobedience and so he prays to God. He calls out for help and God hears and answers.

Whenever we find ourselves distressed on account of our failure and our sin, we should remember God. Sometimes when we hit rock bottom the only thing to do is look up. And when we look up we see Jesus high and lifted up. We remember who he is and all he has done for us. And suddenly we are able to see ourselves as we are – sinners in need of a Saviour. Jonah honestly reflected on his position and called out with a repentant and thankful heart. And then Jonah recommits himself to worshipping God, to following God, and to serving God.

Pray: thanking God for hearing our cries for help.

Reflect: do I cry to God when I am in trouble or do I try to resolve issues myself?

Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. (v.3)

I love the story of how Spurgeon came to faith. He was distressed with his life and desperately seeking. He had visited many places of worship but had found the answer. Then a snowstorm came this Sunday and he happened on a Primitive Methodist church. The minister had not turned up, apparently snowed in. A faithful deacon took to the pulpit. He was not the most educated man in the world but he was faithful to God and faithful to the text. He preached from Isaiah 45:22 'look unto me' and then he shouted as only a Primitive Methodist can: "Young man, look to Jesus Christ!" Spurgeon said 'I did "look" and I was saved.'

God is still looking for faithful people to do his work. He doesn't want the best educated, most sophisticated, handsome folks to preach the gospel. He wants ordinary people like you and me who will be faithful and go. God has called Jonah to go and preach at Nineveh. Jonah took fright and ran as far as he could in to the opposite direction. God found him and caused a storm to develop around him. He ended up overboard and in the belly of a fish. Jonah then came to his senses and called for God's help and forgiveness.

Here in chapter 3 God comes to Jonah a second time and calls him to go and preach at Nineveh. This time Jonah goes and faithfully follows and serves God. He preaches the word of God and that word hit home. We read that they turned from their wicked ways back towards God. And God had compassion on them and forgave them.

God is the God of the second chance (and third and fourth). Jonah is given another opportunity to faithfully serve God and he takes it. And through his faithfulness many are saved.

Do you think your opportunity to serve is over because you failed once before? Take hope, because God is the God of the second chance.

Pray: thanking God for the privilege of serving him.

Reflect: am I faithfully sharing the gospel?

But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. (v.1)

David Wilkerson tells the story of Aggie. A missionary couple went to Africa, and the wife died there, and left child Aggie who had been born there. In all their years spent there they saw just one convert, one boy. How bitter was the experience for the husband as his young wife died? All he had to show for his years of work was insignificant - one boy! He left the faith and went into a destructive path... alcohol. But the story is Aggie grew up and found out about her past. On the way to see her dad, God arranged for her to meet up with the boy convert one day. He had grown up to be an evangelist who led thousands to Christ in his native land and built hospitals. As she met her dad she found him in sorry state, alcoholic, and then told him about his one boy convert... it broke him up... he repented but his life was a mess... all because of his anger at God.

Jonah is a bit like that man. He has heard the call of God to preach to the wicked people at Nineveh but has run away. He is scared and doesn't want to do it. God sends a storm and Jonah ends up overboard and swallowed by a fish. He sees sense and calls out to God in repentance for help. God calls a second time and Jonah goes and preaches at Nineveh. The people hear and respond in repentance before God and God has compassion on them. And now in chapter 4 we see Jonah's response. He is angry and annoyed. He suspected this might happen and now it has. God is '*slow to anger and abounding in love* and saves them from calamity.

Jonah just doesn't get it. It was not how he had planned it and thought it would turn out. He wanted them destroyed. You would have thought he'd have been happy that hundreds of thousands of people had been saved. We so often get like Jonah at times as well as we are too quick to run ahead of God and not realise what has and is happening. God is interested in everyone's salvation and not just ours. He longs that none should perish and everyone should come to saving faith in Jesus. And God knows the beginning from the end. We have simply to trust him and do as he calls us to do.

Pray: asking God for a heart of compassion like his.

Reflect: am I joyful when others are saved?

All this is because of Jacob's transgression, because of the sins of the house of Israel. (v.5)

It's a scene straight out of an American sit-com "Leave It to Beaver" rerun. Two brothers are misbehaving, both equally at fault. But when Dad arrives he ignores one of the boys and heads for his brother, saying something like, "I saw what you did!"

In the meantime, the first brother breathes a quiet sigh of relief, thinking dad was overlooking his part in the fiasco. His relief melts away when his father suddenly turns to him and says, "And now for you, young man!"

The kingdom of Judah may have felt relief when God miraculously delivered Jerusalem from Sennacherib, king of Assyria (2 Kings 18:13-19). This occurred in 701 B.C., a full twenty years after Israel and its capital had fallen to Assyria. But God had a message of judgment for Judah as well. One of the prophets charged with delivering that message was Micah, a messenger to the common people. He served as a prophet during the reigns of three kings.

Micah gets to work straight away calling the people to hear the message of the Lord. The court is convened, the judge arrives and the defendants are named and their accusations listed. The defendants are listed – Samaria and Jerusalem. They are the capital cities representing their countries. The basic cause of God's judgement against them is sin and idolatry. The people have ignored God and made and worshipped their own idols. Micah goes on to lament what will happen in the cities as they will be ruined.

We have plenty of warning of our sin too. The bible teaches us what is right. The Holy Spirit convicts us of what is wrong in our lives. We are given opportunity to turn to Jesus for salvation. Let's not think we will get away with it like the brother – God deals with the sin of each and every person individually.

Pray: asking God to forgive our sin.

Reflect: what idols have I made for myself?

Woe to those who plan iniquity...they covet fields and seize them. (v.1-2)

One day an MG pulled alongside a Rolls Royce at the traffic lights. ‘Do you have a car phone?’ the driver asked the man in the Rolls. ‘Of course I do!’ ‘Do you have a fax machine?’ ‘Of course!’ ‘What about a double bed, do you have one of those in the back of the Rolls?’ There was no reply as the driver of the Rolls sped off. But that afternoon he had a double bed fitted to his car.

A week later, the Rolls driver passed the same MG. it was parked on the side of the road, its windows were all fogged up and there was steam coming out the gaps. The Rolls driver banged on the steamy window. Eventually the MG driver opened the door to be told that the Rolls had a double bed. The MG driver was not at all impressed. ‘You got me out of the shower to tell me that?’

A humorous story but it does some up well the attitude of many to keep up with or to outdo the Jones. We covet what others have and we always want more. Truth is this is nothing new; it has been going on for years and years. In the prophecy of Micah we learn of coveting as well. It is one of the accusations levelled at the people of God by Micah. The Old Testament prophet Micah struggled with the same issues we do during his thirty-year ministry in Judah as God’s spokesman during the eighth century before Jesus. The people are greedy and ignore God.

Micah lays the charges before his people that they covet and steal. He warns that God is judging them now on account of that. Micah’s prophetic words do not please his audience. Consequently they dispute his theological perspective on God and his relationship to his people, and they try to stop him prophesying. And that is what we do so often when we learn of our sin – we try to ignore it and cover it or talk our way out of it by justifying our actions. God sees the heart and knows what we are up to. We cannot hide anything from him.

Pray: asking God to help us deal with sin in our lives.

Reflect: do I try and justify my actions and sin?

Therefore because of you, Zion will be ploughed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets. (v.12)

A missionary in India was once teaching the Bible to a group of Hindu ladies. Halfway through the lesson, one of the women got up and walked out. A short time later, she came back and listened more intently than ever. At the close of the hour the leader inquired, “Why did you leave the meeting? Weren’t you interested?” “O yes,” the Hindu lady replied. “I was so impressed with what you had to say about Christ that I went out to ask your driver whether you really lived the way you talked. When he said you did, I hurried back so I wouldn’t miss out on anything.”

We hold influence over other people and that influence can either be for good or for bad. This missionary’s influence was such that the Hindu lady was desperate to hear more from him. Unfortunately here in Micah 3 the influence of the leaders is not good. And in the end the result will be destruction and devastation as he tells them in verse 12.

Micah’s prophecy is in three parts which each begin with the words ‘hear’ or ‘listen’. The first was a warning that judgment was coming. The second which starts here and goes through chapter 5 is a warning that a deliverer is coming. Before we see the promise of hope and victory, we see Micah bring a rebuke for the sins of the leaders.

Micah points out the corrupt politicians and their desire for evil over good (v.1), the compromising preachers (v.5) who lead people away from God rather than to him, and the complacent people (v.9) who see all this but think all will end well and follow blindly. We are like the complacent people as we consider our heritage of being a Christian nation and a people of the book and thinking now that all will somehow still all work out well. We need to be challenging corrupt leaders and drawing our preachers back to the truths of the bible. We need to provide good leadership to those around – we need to be living lives of integrity and influence.

Pray: asking God to help us set the right example and point people to him.

Reflect: am I a good influence on others?

Tuesday 11 June 2013

Micah 4:1-13

They will beat their swords into ploughshares...nation will not take up sword against nation nor will they train for war anymore. (v.3)

On the grounds of the United Nations headquarters in New York City is an impressive statue crafted by Russian sculptor Yevgeny Vuchetich. The sculpture, a gift to the UN from the then-Soviet Union, depicts a man with a huge mallet raised in his right hand. His left hand holds a sword, which the man is beating into a ploughshare. The piece is called, not surprisingly, "Let Us Beat Swords into Ploughshares." It was designed to echo the main purpose of the United Nations.

If you read today's text, you know that the artist got his inspiration from Micah 4:3. Whatever we may think of the United Nations' attempts to achieve world peace, the goal is a noble one. And it will be achieved some day, but it will require a far greater King and a far greater kingdom than any this earth has ever seen.

Micah is speaking of the deliverer coming in this portion of the text. We see hope through the promises of the Lord. The Lord promised the people through Micah three wonderful things: ***promised kingdom, promised deliverance*** and ***promised conquest***. Although Jerusalem would be destroyed in the coming times it would be restored and restored to its former glory. People will one day flock to Jerusalem and worship the Lord and learn of Him. The people will be taken captive but the Lord will deliver them. And there will be conquest as God overcomes their enemies.

For us we take hope too in the promises of the Lord. We have been promised a place in his everlasting kingdom – a place in heaven with Jesus for ever and ever. We take hope in promised deliverance for God has delivered us from our sin – Jesus died the death we deserved to die in order that our sins could be forgiven. We are so grateful to him for that. And we take hope in promised conquest – for we know the plans of the Lord – plans to prosper us and not to harm us, plans to give us a hope and a future.

Pray: thanking God for being the promise keeper.

Reflect: am I taking hope in the promises of God?

But you Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old from ancient times. (v.2)

During a visit to England's picturesque Stratford-upon-Avon a number of years back, I was struck by how a town's identity and future can be affected just because someone was born there. Every year, half a million people come to visit the birthplace of William Shakespeare, whom some consider the most influential playwright in the English language. Here in Stirling over 135,000 people visit the Wallace Monument each year to remember the part William Wallace played in the battles against the auld enemy. Birth places of famous people can be important.

What then of the birth place of our Lord and Saviour? Here in Micah 5 we learn of the promise of a coming deliverer. Bethlehem is defined by Jesus' birth. Bethlehem has an interesting history. The name means house of bread. Jacob's favourite wife, Rachel, died near Bethlehem when she gave birth to Benjamin and she was buried nearby (Genesis 35). In her pain Rachel named her son Ben-oni which means 'son of my sorrow'. Jacob you will remember renamed the boy Benjamin which means 'son of my right hand'. These two names remind us of the Lord's suffering and glory, the cross and throne at the Father's right hand.

Ruth and Naomi came to Bethlehem and there it was that Boaz fell in love with Ruth and married her. Ruth is on the ancestral line of the Messiah. Of course, David was Bethlehem's greatest son; and it was through David's family that the promised Messiah would be born. The Jews knew that their Messiah would come from Bethlehem we are told in John 7:42. Bethlehem was an important place.

Micah reminds his people that the deliverer is coming and he will be born in Bethlehem. He has brought the message of judgement to the people. He has warned them of their sin and has now spoken of the victory that will come in God's coming ruler.

Pray: thanking God for Jesus.

Reflect: am I looking ahead to the second coming of the Messiah?

He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. (v.8)

When Cardinal Basil Hume, the leader of the Roman Catholic Church in England in the 80s and 90s, was told that he had terminal cancer, his first thought was “if only I could start all over again, I would be a much better monk, a much better abbot, a much better bishop.” But then he reflected and said “Then I thought, how much better if I can come before God when I die, not to say, ‘Thank you that I was such a good monk, good abbot, good bishop,’ but rather, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner.’ For if I come empty-handed, then I will be ready to received God’s gift. God be merciful to me a sinner.”

That is the kind of message Micah has been trying to get across to the people around him. The first message was a message of warning and the second a message of promise. He is pointing out to the people their rebellion against God and their sin. His third message which we see in chapters 6 and 7 was a challenge for them to ***trust God now*** and obey his will, for only then could the nation escape terrible punishment and fulfil God’s purposes in this world.

The people are asking what sacrifices are acceptable to God – as if what they do and bring counts for anything. Micah doesn’t answer the question about what sacrifices a person ought to bring to the temple. Rather, the answer is focused on the questioner himself, on his quality of life. God is more interested in the person than in any gift a person might bring him. What God cares about is character. What God really wants is ethical purity in how we live our lives.

And so Micah answers in that wonderful verse (v.8) by saying they are ‘*to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*’ How are we on those counts? Are we acting justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God?

Pray: asking God to help us walk humbly with him through life.

Reflect: do I act with justice and mercy and humility?

Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? (v.18)

Several years ago, a businessman found out about an elderly widow who was unable to pay her rent. Feeling pity for her, he went to some of his friends and asked them if they would be kind enough to contribute something to help pay her rent. They responded, and he got two months' rent. He went to the widow's house that week to deliver the money. Although he knew she was inside, when he knocked he got no answer. He knocked a second time and still no answer. He knocked a third time, still no answer. He knocked a fourth time. Not knowing what else to do, he returned to his business. A couple of days later, he saw her downtown on the sidewalk looking destitute. He walked up to her and said, "Ma'am, some friends of mine and I found out about your situation. We want to help. We got enough money together to give you rent money for two months. I came to your house to give it to you this week, but I knocked several times and got no answer." She took a gasp of breath and put her hand to her face. She said, "Oh, I thought you were the landlord coming to evict me."

We often get worried that God is out to punish us but he is intent on pardoning us. Yes, sin has to be punished but God has such love for his people, his creation, that he sent his son to the cross in our place. Jesus paid the price which was ours to pay. God pardons us through Jesus' sacrifice. And yet sometimes we stay away from God on account of our guilt and shame. We think that because we are sinners he wants to do nothing but punish us. How far from the truth. God wants to pardon us and reconcile us. He wants to forgive us and restore us.

Micah laments over Israel's sin here in Micah 7 but then remembers how great a God he serves. He is waiting on God's salvation (v.7). And as he finishes his prophecy he praises God for pardoning sin (v.18). Let's trust in God for our salvation. Let's open the door of our hearts and let him in.

Pray: thanking God for pardoning our sin and forgiving us.

Reflect: is my hope in Christ alone for salvation?

The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him. (v.7)

The safest place in South Florida during the hurricane season may be the National Hurricane Centre in Miami. The \$5 million structure boasts 10-inch concrete walls designed to withstand the force of 130 mph winds. Because the fierce storms come every year, the Centre is there to provide a safe working environment for the people who monitor the weather and issue the warnings. When other residents leave, they must stay.

Just like hurricanes, the storms of our lives arrive with unnerving regularity. Often they strike without warning and linger without welcome, testing the limits of our faith and endurance. But God has given us a place of safety in the midst of our circumstances.

Nahum understood this which is why he wrote in Nahum 1:7 *'The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him.'* And the psalmist confidently stated, *'God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way'* (Psalm 46:1-2). Nahum wrote these words to encourage and comfort the people of Judah for the Lord was sending his judgement on Nineveh. Nahum is the sequel to Jonah...but the outcome is not as good. Nahum ministered in Nineveh just as Jonah had, but about 100 years later. This time, the Ninevites had no interest in repentance. Because of this, Nahum condemns Nineveh and proclaims judgment on the people (v.3).

We see in the stories of Jonah and Nahum that with every new generation comes the necessity of an individual response to God. No one's spiritual life can be handed off to another – just because our parents or grandparents were good and faithful believers doesn't mean we are automatically saved; we must each choose to serve the Lord from our own heart. God's message is as fresh today as it was hundreds of years ago: judgment for the unrepentant but mercy for the repentant. God is our refuge – let us take shelter in him.

Pray: thanking God for being our refuge in times of trouble.

Reflect: do I seek refuge in God in times of trouble?

The LORD will restore the splendour of Judah, like the splendour of Israel. (v.2)

One Sunday a young boy was “acting up” during a church service. The parents did their best to maintain some sense of order in the pew but were losing the battle. Finally the father picked the boy up and walked sternly down the aisle on his way out. Just before reaching the safety of the foyer the boy called loudly to the congregation, “Pray for me! Pray for me!”

We smile and giggle but there is a truth within the story...we cannot expect to get away with bad behaviour forever. You will remember that God sent Jonah to Nineveh to warn the people that God’s judgement was coming upon them. As they heard that message they realised their sin and turned from it. Like us, the people soon forgot all about that incident and have wandered back into sin again. This time God is coming to destroy them on account of their sin.

Nahum 2 speaks of the Lord coming to restore Judah and destroy their enemies and oppressors. “Sound the alarm, prepare for battle, the enemy has broken through!” That is the thought here in the first verse. And the reason God is bringing them down is because of what they did to His people. The Assyrians will be destroyed, and God’s people will be raised up!

Verses 3-10 describe the destruction of Nineveh. It is brutal and it is final. And then we see a taunt at the end ‘*Where now is the lion’s den?*’ And the Lord answers himself by saying ‘*I am against you.*’ And that is the end of the matter.

Friends, God is against sin. He cannot stand it. And he will destroy it. Don’t think your continued sin will go unpunished forever. Repent now and walk in his ways before it is too late.

Pray: confessing your sin to God and asking for his forgiveness.

Reflect: do I forget lessons learned and repeat sins of old?

“I am against you,” declares the LORD Almighty. (v.5)

Nicolae Ceausescu led a brutal regime in Romania over many years. The people were oppressed and beaten down. It seemed like his evil reign would continue until one mistake led to the uprising of the people. Ceausescu and his wife tried to escape but were caught and imprisoned. He was later tried and sentenced to the death penalty for his crimes.

The people of Nineveh were running riot doing what they wanted. It seemed like their oppression of their enemies would never end. But God is in control. In his time and with his justice he dealt with them for their crimes. Nahum’s prophecy speaks of their downfall. Here in Nahum 3 we see the charge brought against them (v.1-4). The Assyrians were clever diplomats who lied to other nations...then broke their promises and destroyed them. They would “promise peace” to cities they besieged, but brought only destruction upon them. They lured them in and then enslaved them.

Then we see the penalty due to Nineveh for their actions (v.5-7). They were going to be publicly exposed for their crimes. Nahum is very descriptive here. ‘*Lift your skirts over your face*’ was, in ancient times, what they did to prostitutes – they were often shamed by being “publicly exposed”. This is what God promised to do with Nineveh. Nahum then uses a number of images here to show their weakness and defeat (v.8-17).

The message of Nahum is that God is in control. He will bring judgement on the enemies of his people. There is a lot that stinks in this world. There are a lot of things that just aren’t right and just aren’t fair. But there will be a day when God makes things right. We have to trust in Him and allow Him to protect us and bring judgement in his time. Sometimes we feel we need to take things into our own hands. We feel that no one will look out for us if we don’t. The truth is that God will take care of us. God will handle the “vengeance”. Wait on God...he will not fail you.

Pray: asking God for strength to wait on Him.

Reflect: do I try and seek vengeance myself?

How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you “violence!” but you do not save? (v.2)

An old saying declares that “out of sight” is “out of mind” - people do not concern themselves with what they cannot see. In our case, however, it is the fact that we lose sight of God that sometimes causes us to think that He doesn't have us in mind. Our circumstances don't always immediately reveal God's purpose. This is especially true when these circumstances appear to favour the wicked. The prophet Habakkuk, who uttered the complaint in today's key verse, wrestled with this problem as he watched the ruthless Babylonians literally get away with murder.

The situation in Habakkuk's day was that Israel was backslidden, which is nothing new for Israel. Israel had turned from God; Israel had forgotten God, Israel was completely given over to idolatry. Habakkuk cries out to God saying the situation is a mess. Sin is rampant. And he has been crying out to God to intervene and break in to the situation. And until now he feels that God hasn't done anything about it.

God answers Habakkuk and tells him the solution that he is about to bring about. And this is where Habakkuk gets really perplexed. The Lord says that he is going to use the Babylonians to deal with the sin issue of his people. They are an evil people and we learn how feared and dreaded they are as the Lord speaks. Habakkuk then comes with a second complaint to God – ‘*Why then do you tolerate the treacherous?*’

And is this not what happens in life sometimes? We see evil all around and we pray to God to intervene and then we don't understand or like the answer. The lesson is fairly plain although it is hard for us to grasp – God's ways are mysterious. God knows the beginning from the end and he alone knows why he does what he does. He is in control though and we should never forget that. Take heart from Habakkuk – take your cries to God for he will hear and answer.

Pray: asking God to help us trust him more.

Reflect: in what ways have I seen God work in wonderful and mysterious ways?

*But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all earth be silent before him.
(v.20)*

In 1861, during the US Civil War, author and lecturer Julia Ward Howe visited Washington, DC. One day she went outside the city and saw a large number of soldiers marching. Early the next morning she awoke with words for a song in her mind. She was aware of all the ugliness of the war, but her faith led her to write: “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.” She saw, I believe, that in spite of and through all the ugliness, God was “marching on” toward the day when He will right the wrongs of the ages.

The prophet Habakkuk came to a similar conclusion. Chapter 1 of his book tells us how troubled he was when he learned that God was going to punish the people of Judah by letting them be conquered by the wicked Babylonians. In chapter 2, God assured His servant that - in spite of and through all the ugliness and wrongs of history - He is “marching on” toward the day when *‘the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord’* (v.14).

The Lord tells him to wait and watch for the appointed time when he would overcome the evil around him. And then he goes on to detail five woes for the evildoers. There is woe to ill-gotten gain (v.6-8), woe to inhumanity (v.9-11), woe to iniquity (v.12-14), woe to intoxication (v.15-17), and woe to idolatry (v.18-20). The Lord is going to deal with all evil. Habakkuk is to take heart and to wait for it to happen in God’s time and not his.

We are impatient like Habakkuk. We see evil around and wonder why it is the evil doer seems to prosper while good people suffer. We are encouraged to wait upon the Lord – for he does see and hear and he will come and help.

Pray: thanking God that he is still on the throne.

Reflect: am I impatient?

Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Saviour. (v.18)

While on a short-term mission trip, Pastor Jack Hinton was leading worship at a leper colony on the island of Tobago. A woman who had been facing away from the pulpit turned around. ‘It was the most hideous face I had ever seen,’ Hinton said. ‘The woman’s nose and ears were entirely gone. She lifted a fingerless hand in the air and asked, “Can we sing ‘Count your many blessings’?”’

Overcome with emotion, Hinton left the service. He was followed by a team member who said ‘I guess you’ll never be able to sing that song again?’ ‘Yes I will,’ he replied, ‘but I’ll never sing it the same way!’

Despite all of her problems and difficulties this woman knew what it was to praise God and thank him for all he had and was doing in her life. The prophet Habakkuk has learned to get to that stage here in Habakkuk 3. He has complained about sin and evil, and God answered him by saying he was doing something about it. Habakkuk then complained about the way God was dealing with it – he couldn’t understand God’s mysterious ways. And God graciously answered him again and assured him if he waited all would be well.

Well Habakkuk has got the message and here we see him praise God for his goodness and faithfulness. And he admits he is ready to wait on the Lord bringing justice in his own time and in his own way. He concludes his prophecy with the wonderful words that even if there are no animals or crops he is still going to praise God. God is his Saviour and Lord. He is his strength.

Friends, we would do well to recognise that God is with us all the way. He is our refuge and strength in times of trouble as well as showering us with blessings in the good days.

Pray: praising God for who He is and for all He has, is and will do.

Reflect: what am I grateful to God for today?

*Be silent before the Sovereign LORD, for the day of the LORD is near.
(v.7)*

Six-year-old Angie and her four-year-old brother Joel were sitting together in church. Joel giggled, sang, and talked out loud. Finally, his big sister had had enough. “You’re not supposed to talk out loud in church.” “Why? Who’s going to stop me?” Joel asked. Angie pointed to the back of the church and said, “See those two men standing by the door? They’re hushers.”

I don’t think we have to be silent in church but it is good to come with a sense of reverence. There is a time to be silent though and that is when we are confronted with our sin. The tendency when someone challenges us and confronts us is to quickly retaliate or answer back. We try to justify ourselves and our actions, trying to lessen the impact of our wrong doing. The trouble is when we stand before a Holy God he has all the facts before him. He knows what we think and say and do and he knows why we do it. We cannot hide anything from him. And since he is the one who made us, he knows how we ought to live. When God comes and confronts us with our sin the best we can do is listen and then cry out for mercy - confessing our sin and seeking his forgiveness.

Zephaniah is another prophet who has come to warn the people of their sin and the consequences of their actions – the consequences of their continued rebellion against God. He prophesied during the reign of King Josiah. As he brings the case against Judah he warns them to be silent before God and he speaks of the day of the Lord. The day of the Lord you will remember often speaks of a time of God’s judgement. It speaks of the upcoming Babylonian invasion but it also points ahead to the end of time, the Great Tribulation, when God’s wrath is poured out in judgment upon the earth.

When we are confronted by our sin, let the only noise from our lips be a pleading for God’s mercy and forgiveness.

Pray: asking God to forgive your sin.

Reflect: do I have a tendency to try and explain away my sin?

Saturday 22 June 2013

Zephaniah 2:1-15

Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the LORD's anger. (v.3)

Early in the 20th century, the city of St. Pierre, on the island of Martinique in the Caribbean, was known as the “Paris of the West Indies.” But it all came to a crashing halt on the morning of May 8, 1902. On that morning, a volcano named Mount Pelée erupted, sending hot ash, toxic gases, and magma down the mountainside at terrific speeds. Within minutes, the entire city had been destroyed, and 30,000 people had been killed. St. Pierre has never been completely rebuilt, and today only a fraction of the previous population currently lives there.

As deadly a disaster as this volcanic eruption was, it's nothing compared to what will happen on the Day of the Lord. In the Old Testament, the phrase ‘*day of the Lord*’ is often associated with divine judgments. In Zephaniah, God's judgments in both the immediate and distant futures are linked as parts of His unified plan for history. ‘*The great day of the Lord is near – near and coming quickly,*’ the prophet proclaimed (1:14).

Zephaniah has warned of the judgement coming for their but he has done so not simply to shock them and scare them, but to encourage them to repent. He exhorted the people to seek the Lord, humble themselves, and pursue obedience (v.3). To repent means to turn away from sin toward righteousness. And there is evidence that the people listened to his message during King Josiah's reign as their reforms delayed the short term fulfilment of this prophecy.

We have the same opportunity in our day: when we are faced with our sin we have the opportunity to repent and seek the Lord. And we have the time to warn others too that they might turn from their wicked ways as well and seek God's mercy and forgiveness. Let's undertake this with a sense of urgency for ‘*The great day of the Lord is near – near and coming quickly.*’

Pray: asking God to help us share the gospel with others.

Reflect: do I warn others of the consequences of sin?

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

I always used to love my grandmother looking after us when my parents went out. When she put us to bed she would hold us close and sing to us. She would sing choruses from Sunday School: Jesus loves me this I know, Jesus love is very wonderful, and so on. She would quieten us down with her love and her singing. And she was always smiling as she sang, knowing the truths of the words she was singing.

Whenever I read Zephaniah 3:17 it reminds me of those nights. The difference is that it's not my grandmother singing though but my heavenly father. God is mighty to save. He delights in me his child, he holds me close and he sings his songs of love over me. Zephaniah brings a word of hope to the nation as he closes his prophecy.

I often wonder why the prophets consistently closed their books with messages of hope. Zephaniah has warned of coming judgement and punishment for sin. There are going to be dark days ahead. But he finishes with a word of hope, a word reminding the people that God is mighty to save and he will keep the remnant of Israel safe.

These words of hope do three things I believe. First, hope is a great motivation for obedience and Zephaniah wanted to encourage God's people to submit to God's will and do what he commanded. Second, hope reminded the people of the faithfulness of God. God keeps his promises. The bible teaches us that if we confess our sin God is faithful to forgive us. And third, hope was an encouragement to the remnant to remain faithful. It is difficult to stand true to the Lord and his word no matter what others say. But the words of Zephaniah remind the remnant that God knows what they are going through and how faithful they are, and he will save them.

Pray: thanking God for messages of hope in His Word and for His promise of spending eternity with him.

Reflect: do I know the Lord's presence with me daily?

Give careful thought to your ways. (v.5)

(note: extra long story today...but it does illustrate the point well)

A young and successful executive was travelling down a neighbourhood street, going a bit too fast in his new Jaguar. He was watching for kids darting out from between parked cars and slowed down when he thought he saw something. As his car passed, no children appeared. Instead, a brick smashed into the Jag's side door! He slammed on the brakes and backed the Jag back to the spot where the brick had been thrown. The angry driver then jumped out of the car, grabbed the nearest kid and pushed him up against a parked car shouting, "What was that all about and who are you? Just what the heck are you doing? That's a new car and that brick you threw is going to cost a lot of money. Why did you do it?" The young boy was apologetic. "Please, mister...please, I'm sorry but I didn't know what else to do," He pleaded. "I threw the brick because no one else would stop..."

With tears dripping down his face and off his chin, the youth pointed to a spot just around a parked car. "It's my brother," he said "He rolled off the curb and fell out of his wheelchair and I can't lift him up." Now sobbing, the boy asked the stunned executive, "Would you please help me get him back into his wheelchair? He's hurt and he's too heavy for me."

Moved beyond words, the driver tried to swallow the rapidly swelling lump in his throat. He hurriedly lifted the handicapped boy back into the wheelchair, then took out a linen handkerchief and dabbed at the fresh scrapes and cuts. A quick look told him everything was going to be okay. "Thank you and may God bless you," the grateful child told the stranger. Too shook up for words, the man simply watched the boy push his wheelchair-bound brother down the sidewalk toward their home.

It was a long, slow walk back to the Jaguar. The damage was very noticeable, but the driver never bothered to repair the dented side door. He kept the dent there to remind him of this message: "Don't go through life so fast that someone has to throw a brick at you to get your attention!"

(please turn over the page)

God whispers in our souls and speaks to our hearts. The young boy gave careful thought to his ways and decided his only option was to throw a brick. The executive realised that he was travelling too fast through life and needed to slow down and give careful thought to his ways.

Haggai lived during the period when Zerubbabel led the first group of Israelites back from Babylon into their land. They had been in captivity for sometime and now returned to Israel. Haggai was the Lord's prophet and his task was to get the people to rebuild the temple. That was the task they were given when they returned to the land but for many years now they had left the temple alone and carried on with their lives. Indeed worse than that they lived very well and neglected God's house. Haggai came to encourage them back to work and to do this he encouraged them to give careful thought to their ways.

Haggai was calling the people to consider their ways – to give careful thought to what they had been and were doing. They were to give careful thought to their ways in regard to God's cause. He wanted the temple rebuilt but the people held back. They made excuses whilst looking after their own interests. Their houses were in excellent condition and God's lay in ruins. They were to give careful thought to their work – they worked hard but were never satisfied and this would continue as long as they neglected God's house.

We need to give careful thought to our ways. Are we holding back from God? Is he calling us to give our lives to him? Is he calling us into full time service? Is he calling us to tithe what we earn? Is he calling us to tithe our time to him? Is he calling us to give all we are able? Is he calling us to build his Church here in Cornton? Is he calling us to go and share the Good News with this community? Let us give careful thought to our ways – where we are at, what we have been doing and what we know God is calling us to do and the excuses we have been making. Let's not rush through life without stopping to consider what God would have us do.

Pray: asking God to help us take time to consider our ways.

Reflect: what is God calling me to do and what excuse am I making to not do it?

Be strong, all you people of the land and work. For I am with you. (v.4)

The famous inventor, Thomas Edison, tried again and again to find the right filament for the incandescent electric light bulb. One day he had completed his 10,000th experiment only to discover another way that would not work. When he arrived home that night, he shared this bit of news with his wife. “Aren’t you pretty discouraged, Tom?” she asked. “Discouraged?” responded Edison. “Certainly not! I now know 10,000 ways that won’t work!” Perseverance seems to be an outdated concept in our day of instant everything. If it doesn’t come easy, why pursue it?

I wonder if the people of Haggai’s day were getting discouraged and felt like giving up. There is certainly strong encouragement for them to persevere and to keep going at the task which they have started. God brings a word to them about perseverance here in Haggai 2. We learn that perseverance requires the right attitude: we are to be strong. Three times in verse 4 the encouragement comes to ‘*be strong*’. The people had the wrong attitude. They were weak because they had gotten their focus off the Lord and onto the slow, disappointing progress on the temple. Maybe they were thinking, “This will never get done. We’re just wasting our time!” Have you ever noticed how much your attitude affects your ability to persevere? If you’re motivated, you can stay up all night on some project. But if you get discouraged, you procrastinate and never get around to finishing it. God says ‘*be strong*.’

The attitude provides the motivation, but motivation without work won’t get the temple built. And so perseverance requires the right action as well: we are to work. We are to roll up our sleeves and get on with it. The Lord says to the people ‘*be strong...and work*.’ And if they needed extra encouragement he gave it to them by saying that he would be with them all the way.

We might get discouraged when we do not see results for our work in Cornton and feel like giving up...but the encouragement is to keep the right attitude and action – be strong and work for God is with us.

Pray: asking God for strength to keep going in the work.

Reflect: do I give up easily?

Turn from your evil ways and your evil practices. (v.4)

Zechariah was a contemporary of the prophet Haggai. Over 50,000 Jews had returned to their homeland under the decree of King Cyrus of Persia. Initially the Jews laid the foundation for a new Temple, but got sidetracked, hindered, delayed, and for 15 years the Temple remained unfinished. It was under the ministry of Haggai and Zechariah that the work got stirred up again. The dating of the book overlaps with the book of Haggai, this book was written between 520 and 518 BC. Zechariah's first words are to call the people to repentance. He is calling them to return to the Lord.

Evangelist J. Edwin Orr said that "the first word of the gospel" is repentance. It's a turning away from sin and toward the Lord. The prophet Zechariah cried out to the people of Israel to repent and return to the Lord: '*Turn from your evil ways and your evil practices*' (v.4). Salvation begins with repentance. It involves a change of mind about sin, which leads to belief in Jesus Christ and brings us the forgiveness of God. Yet repentance is more than a once-for-all act that initiates salvation. It is an ongoing choice - a change of mind that sees sin as wrong, confesses it, and rejects it.

Martin Luther put it this way in the first of the 95 theses he nailed to the door of the Wittenberg church: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said 'repent,' He willed that the entire life of a believer be one of repentance." It's an ongoing mindset toward sin.

Here's the point. The change of mind that is the heart of repentance should become a pattern of thinking - a lifestyle. Even though we are secure in Christ, we must continue to see sin through God's eyes and acknowledge it as evil. And when we sin, let's repent, confess our wrongdoing, and receive the forgiveness of God.

Pray: confessing our sin to God: sin committed today in thought, in word and in deed.

Reflect: is repentance a continual part of my life?

And I myself will be a wall of fire around it. (v.5)

John Paton was a missionary in the New Hebrides Islands. One night hostile natives surrounded the mission station, intent on burning out the Patons and killing them. Paton and his wife prayed during that terror-filled night that God would deliver them. When daylight came they were amazed to see their attackers leave.

A year later, the chief of the tribe was converted to Christ. Remembering what had happened, Paton asked the chief what had kept him from burning down the house and killing them. The chief replied in surprise, “Who were all those men with you there?” Paton knew no men were present - but the chief said he was afraid to attack because he had seen hundreds of big men in shining garments with drawn swords circling the mission station. Although spending the night in fear, the Patons were perfectly safe with God protecting them.

In Zechariah 2, we read about another wall of protection. Zechariah had a vision of a man with a measuring line, who was trying to determine the length and width of Jerusalem (v.1-2). His intention was apparently to begin rebuilding the fortified walls surrounding the city. The man was told that this would not be necessary, because the number of God’s people would be so great that Jerusalem’s walls would not be able to contain them (v.4). Besides, they would not need walls, for the Lord promised: *‘I myself will be a wall of fire around it, and I will be its glory within’* (v.5).

Physical walls can be scaled or broken through, no matter how high or strong they are. But as God’s children, we have the best wall of protection anyone can have - God’s personal presence. Nothing can pass through to us without first passing through Him and His will. In Him we are safe and secure. The picture is that God will surround and defend His people from their enemies.

Pray: thanking God for being our shield and defender.

Reflect: do I trust in God’s presence and protection?

See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you. (v.4)

When John Wesley was six years old, he awoke one night to the horror of being in a burning house. Everyone else had gotten to safety, but somehow he had been forgotten. At the very last moment, just before the roof collapsed, a neighbour climbed through the window and pulled the terrified child to safety. He always saw himself as a brand plucked from the burning. After his conversion, which came after years of trying to earn salvation by his good works, he realised even more how much God had rescued him from the eternal flames of hell.

In today's reading, the high priest Joshua is the original '*burning stick snatched from the fire.*' In this fourth night vision, Zechariah saw the Jewish remnant's religious leader, a living symbol for the nation. He stood before the "angel of the Lord," a title often indicating the preincarnate Christ.

When God called Joshua or Israel a "burning stick," He meant that the people had been saved from grave danger. The metaphor also showed helplessness, that is, the stick could do anything for itself. The context is itself a second picture, that of a court of law. The man stood silent before his would-be prosecutor, Satan, but the Lord was his defence lawyer and spoke on his behalf (cf. Revelation 12:10).

Next, we see a third picture: filthy clothes. These represent the nation's sinfulness, so when God re-clothed Joshua, this signified forgiveness and restoration. Such clothing imagery has deep historical roots - God mercifully provided garments for the fallen Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:21) - and is similarly used in the New Testament - for example, new linen is given to the bride of the Lamb (Revelation 19:8).

Let's remember God has done all the work here in saving Joshua and Israel...and he has done all the work in saving us. He has taken our sin away in Christ and clothed us in royal robes that we don't deserve.

Pray: thanking God for taking away our sin.

Reflect: 'In royal robes I don't deserve, I live to serve, your majesty.'

*Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit says the LORD Almighty.
(v.6)*

A man who worked for a television station accepted an invitation to attend a church's drama about the death and resurrection of Jesus. At the conclusion, a pastor invited attendees to call the church if they wanted to talk about what they had seen and heard. Simon, who was a sceptic, called the next day and made an appointment to meet with a pastor. Later that same year, after several meetings and much soul-searching and thinking, Simon decided to trust Jesus as his Saviour. He grew rapidly as a believer, and he was part of the cast in the next year's drama.

This type of testimony is encouraging because so often it seems that our efforts to shine the light of the gospel into our communities are met with resistance. In today's reading, the people were in the process of rebuilding the temple. It was a difficult task. They had encountered a lot of opposition in the form of threats and discouragement, fear and division. At this point, completing this project must have seemed to be an impossibility to Zerubbabel.

But God wanted to reassure him that it was not going to be accomplished based on him, and so He gave Zechariah this vision for Zerubbabel. The priests had to do the work continually, day and night, trimming the lamps, filling them with oil. It was a never-ending process. If they fell down on the job, if they failed to perform, the light would go out. But in the vision, this work was being accomplished on its own - supernaturally. It wasn't happening by might or power.

And that is what happens today with gospel work. We in the church may get discouraged because we don't see many results and when we face resistance to the gospel or even rejection of the gospel message. We need to remember it is God's work and not ours. The results are not accomplished by our might or power...but only by the work of the Spirit of the Lord. So take heart and keep going. God will accomplish his work through us by his Spirit.

Pray: thanking God for His Spirit at work in and through us.

Reflect: do I try to do it all in my own strength and power?

I looked again - and there before me was a flying scroll. (v.1)

US President Calvin Coolidge was not known for his talkativeness. A story, perhaps apocryphal, says that one Sunday he attended a worship service without his wife. When he returned home, she asked him what the minister had talked about. “Sin,” replied silent Cal. “What did the preacher say about sin?” his wife persisted. Coolidge replied, “He was against it.” Coolidge’s answer is a succinct summary of Zechariah 5, which tells us what God thinks about sin. In a nutshell, He is against it. Zechariah’s sixth and seventh night visions tell us, God will be relentless in judging all sin.

God wanted His people to get the message, so He sent His prophet Zechariah a vision of a scroll flying across the sky! Of course, the scroll was God’s Word, and to say that it was “flying” meant that it was unrolled, while also suggesting motion and life. The scroll’s dimensions were huge, and this added to the idea that it was easy to see, obvious, and clear. That is to say, God’s commands were not a hidden mystery, which made the sins of the people that much more flagrant.

Because of their sin, the interpreting angel told Zechariah that the scroll was a “curse,” reminding us of the Law’s blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience (see Deuteronomy 27–28). Two specific sins are condemned: stealing (a violation of the eighth commandment) and swearing falsely (a violation of the third commandment). Since the people were no doubt guilty of more than this, these are probably just a few examples of their sinful behaviour.

Sin cannot be tolerated in God’s presence. When He comes to dwell with His people, as He had promised in earlier visions, evil won’t be allowed to remain in the land. Sinners will be banished from His presence - the equivalent of spiritual death. When the scroll entered the sinner’s house to destroy it, this was a picture of the destiny of the wicked.

Let’s make sure there is no unconfessed sin in our lives.

Pray: thanking God for his justice and righteousness.

Reflect: am I flagrantly sinning against God?