

September

September 1

Ezekiel 1-4

Ezekiel's vision in chapter 1 is magnificent, awe-inspiring, breathtaking,...weird.

I remember the title of a book from many years ago, The Spaceship of Ezekiel. I never read through the book, but I remember that the author focused much of his attention on the wheels in this vision. They have a gyroscope quality to them, a wheel spinning within a wheel, a concept ahead of its time. I've never spent a lot of time trying to understand the symbolism in the vision; the part that stands out to me are the eyes! The four faces and for creatures could see all directions at all times and, verse 18, it says the wheels had eyes all around. *Nothing escapes being seen by God.*

This strange vision in chapter 1 is part and parcel of Ezekiel's call to be a prophet. God speaks to us individually, calling us to Christian service in different ways.

In verses 3:24-27, I don't take literally the words about somebody tying Ezekiel up with ropes each day. Much of Ezekiel I do take literally, but this passage is making the point that Ezekiel was not to have ordinary conversation with the Jewish (from Judah) exiles, only prophetic utterances. That is, when Ezekiel spoke, they would know it was God's words.

I take chapter 4 very literally! Ezekiel lived out his prophecy. God included visual aids! Every day, the prophet would get up and go to the same public place, set up his little siege works scene, and lie there on his side. Many health food stores still sell "Ezekiel bread", made with the same combination of grains.

September 2

Ezekiel 5-9

As I look ahead to the Bible reading for the rest of this month, I'm amazed at how many books we'll go through at the end of the month. Those last 12 books of the Old Testament, the "minor prophets", are scheduled for just 12 days.

Ezekiel again is called on by God to act out a prophecy against Jerusalem. (Remember that most of the country is already subject to Babylonian rule. The best and brightest people have already been taken to Babylon in exile, including Ezekiel.) He shaves his beard, normally a disgraceful thing for a Jewish man to do, to make a point: The survivors of the conquest of Judah will be an incredibly small fraction of the former population. They will be like just a few hairs of a man's beard. I think Ezekiel is being called on by God to use visual images because His people have not obeyed the written Word of God.

In 7:19, the compelling description of people throwing their gold and silver into the streets to appease an invading army is very sad. They'll do anything to maintain their freedom...except turn back to God.

September 3

Ezekiel 10-13

Ezekiel the prophet is sitting with the exiled elders of Judah when God sends His vision. The prophet again sees his vision of cherubim and 'wheels within wheels, with eyes everywhere'. Did Ezekiel go into a trance, or suddenly seem to be in another world? Obviously, when the vision was over, the elders would be eager to hear about it. God found a time and place to get their attention.

In chapter 12, Ezekiel is called on by God to again act out a sign for the people. We recall that Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian emperor, has set up Zedekiah as a 'puppet king' in Jerusalem, but Zedekiah is trying to lead the city in rebellion. Ezekiel acts out King Zedekiah's attempted escape to Egypt (and abandonment of those under his leadership), saying nothing until his little playlet is done at the end of the day. Is God preparing the guy for a future career on the stage? In 12:17, Ezekiel acts out the horror the people in Jerusalem will feel when they are taken captive.

Don't miss the description of Zedekiah's capture in 12:13: He'll be taken to Babylon to live, but he'll never see it. You recall that his captors gouged his eyes out before he was taken to Babylon. The last thing he sees is his sons being killed.

God speaks to the false prophets at the beginning of chapter 13. These were prophets employed to advise the king of Judah. They claim to have visions of what will happen in the immediate future, but God knows they are making them up in their own minds. I wonder if they realized that their imaginings weren't what a vision from God was really like? If they'd never had a real vision...

September 4

Ezekiel 14-16

Chapter 14 says God will bring judgment on those who "set up idols in their hearts and put up stumbling blocks before their faces". Of course, He was speaking through Ezekiel to those Jews of the 6th century BC. I suspect that still applies to us today! What would this kind of person look like?

"Idols in the heart" would be comparable to idols made of wood or precious metals, that a person worships instead of God. It could be anything you put before God. A person can't go to church because the football game comes on TV at noon. A person can't tithe because they wouldn't have enough money left for both of the car payments. A teen chooses to go to the mall with friends instead of going with the church youth group to the nursing home. It can be possessions or friends or even family.

A "stumbling block before your face" keeps you from seeing God. Maybe your vision is clouded by an inappropriate comment or action by some 'good Christian', and you can't look beyond it. Maybe prayer has been introduced to you as a kind of necessary burden instead of the joy it should become.

Verse 14:14 mentions Noah, Daniel, and Job, three held up as very righteous men. Could this Daniel be the same one described in the Bible book by the same name? Daniel was taken into captivity the same time Ezekiel was. If 14:14 refers to

the same Daniel, he must have made a big impression at an early age of being holy. It might be, judging by the events early in the book of Daniel.

God makes a point in chapter 14 that He honors individual righteousness. Your punishment can't be blamed on something your father or son did---take responsibility!!!

The vine mentioned in chapter 15 makes the point that, yes, the woody part of the vine makes decent firewood, but what a vine *is supposed to* do is produce fruit. Use the abilities God has gifted you with to fulfill your calling. Don't focus your attention on your lesser ability, using them to try to copy somebody else's calling.

We'll hear more of the 'prostitute' allegory in chapter 16 when we read Hosea.

September 5

Ezekiel 17-19

The prophet speaks of two cedar transplants. The first refers to the planting by Nebuchadnezzar of King Jehoiakim in Babylon. Babylon was known for its willow trees and was a "land of merchants". The second cedar transplant was Zedekiah, planted by Nebuchadnezzar as king of Judah.

What is the "shoot from the very top of the cedar" that God plants on a high and lofty mountain in 17:22? Surely this speaks of Jesus, the Messiah, for in 17:23 it says "birds of every kind" will nest in the resulting tree. That's people of every nationality, not just Jews.

In describing the righteous man at the beginning of chapter 18, it mentions (18:8) that he does not charge excessive interest to non-Jews. I guess I missed that before; I knew that God's people were not to charge each other interest, but I'd never seen any admonition against high interest to outsiders (though we should have taken that for granted).

Chapter 18 dwells on the point that each person is responsible for their own sin. Any person that whole-heartedly turns to go will find His blessings, regardless of the righteousness of past or future generations.

Though God is bringing great punishment on His chosen people, verse 18:32 reminds us that God takes no pleasure in the death of anyone. Take that to mean spiritual death.

September 6

Ezekiel 20-21

In chapter 20, God centers his charges against Jerusalem on not keeping the Sabbath. "Also I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, so they would know that I the Lord made them holy."(20:12) The Sabbath was the seventh day of the week, on which people were to do no work, and it was also the seventh year, in which they were to forgo planting fields and just rely on the Lord's provision. By providing their needs on that day off, and year off, God was giving them a sign that He was keeping his promises to them. They would also find that resting and focusing on God was the best medicine for their ailments. We still have trouble observing the Sabbath, though it was made for our good.

It is said several times in chapter 20 about God's laws that "the man who obeys them will live by them". You get the feeling that God wanted the word "live" in capital letters and in bold print and underlined! Try these interpretations: "The person who obeys them will find life." "If you obey My laws, you'll really live." What God is saying is that His laws are meant to improve your life. Some folks think God's commandments are fetters, and try to find better living by breaking those laws. Just looking at the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20), you can see what a mess we've made by leaving off the Sabbath, coveting, adultery, etc. Life is worse, not better, by breaking His commandments.

I'm thrilled by the ferocity of God's will, to never let His children leave Him, though they fight to follow other gods.(20:32-34) God will never let you go!!!

September 7

Ezekiel 22-24

Ezekiel's language is getting more and more graphic. Is it because the people he is speaking to are 'dull of hearing'? The "princes" or leading men of the land lead the people in sin, "like a roaring lion tearing its prey". God speaks through the prophet about burning the people inside Jerusalem's walls like the the leftover impure dross of the metal refining process.

Chapter 23 is not for young children! As God likens Israel and Judah to children who have grown to become prostitutes, the language gets pretty lewd. I suppose Ezekiel is speaking to elders, all mature men in private council. This symbolism will stick in their minds.

God says Judah will be taken away "naked". That is, all their perverted ideas of religion will be taken away---how much faith will be left?

When Ezekiel's wife dies, he reaches one of the hardest parts of his career as a prophet; God does not allow him to mourn her as persons normally would, only with groanings. The only words Ezekiel has spoken in years to the public have been God's words I suppose he's been conversing with his wife at home; after word comes from Jerusalem of the fall of that city, God will release the prophet to have normal conversation with others. So, along with no mourning, Ezekiel has not even been able to share his grief by pouring out his heart to his friends. All this has been a sign to the other exiles, part of his job, part of his calling.

September 8

Ezekiel 25-28

Today's reading brings back to mind the question of corporate guilt. When God deals judgment on a country, does that mean that every individual is guilty? Of course not. The judgment, however, is as real to the righteous as it is to the

unrighteous. There must have been at least a few people in these foreign countries that didn't go about doing evil every chance they got. Some folks just went about their daily lives loving their neighbors as themselves, and a few worshiped the God of Israel. Why did they have to die with the rest? If our own country is evil, does God have the right to judge the country as if it were one like-minded individual?

To tell you the truth, I don't have all the answers about the suffering of the righteous. I know that, even in Abraham's time, they that believed in God were counted as righteous. (See Hebrews 11.) I also know that there is eternal life for those, even from ancient times, who are righteous in God's eyes. We put way too much emphasis on this lifetime, when eternity is *so* long. If the good died with the bad, their eternal home was very different.

The kingdom of Tyre was a great trading nation. Their ships went all over the Mediterranean, with all kinds of goods. Many of these goods were not available any other way, so the providers from Tyre could charge whatever they wanted. The country became quite affluent. It's not surprising that pride became a problem. When one has a low opinion of God, and a high opinion of self, it's too easy to confuse the two.

September 9

Ezekiel 29-32

Egypt now becomes the subject of God's prophetic words through the faithful prophet. Egypt has been a power in the region for many centuries. God actually saved that country through Joseph, at the time of a seven-year famine around 1800 BC. The pharaoh (king) often considers himself a god, and the country has worshiped various idols, especially the "sun god".

The pharaohs, of course, knew they were not gods! They knew they were born of a woman and would die, just like their fathers before them. Their power was only in what they could order to be done.

God doesn't take kindly to a fool supposing himself to be His equal.

It's unusual, in this section of Ezekiel, to find prophecy that is not immediately fulfilled. However, in this case, Egypt's destruction was still fifteen years away. Why, that would be plenty of time for a king to lead his country in repentance and avert God's wrath!

September 10

Ezekiel 33-36

Do you accept your job as a watchman? Ezekiel is specifically called by God to be one who warns his countrymen of the wrath of God ahead. Basically, that is the same call we receive in the Great Commission at the end of Matthew 28. If people aren't told about the wrath of God and the salvation available through Jesus Christ, we bear the guilt if they spend eternity separated from God. Whenever we are given an opportunity to share the love of Christ, it is our responsibility to do so.

The description of 'church-goers' in 33:30-32 still is relevant today! Many go to a worship service to hear from the Lord, to hear a kind of entertainment, with no inclination to act on what God has said. Jesus, in Matthew 7, likens such a person to one who builds his house on sand.

The priests have failed to be good shepherds for God's people. God promises to send "David" to be a righteous shepherd (34:20-24), which we see as an obvious reference to Jesus.

Chapter 36 is filled with promises of restoration. Though they will suffer defeat, and Jerusalem will be destroyed, God promises to bring the house of Israel back to their land and to bless it like never before. The nations around them will be destroyed, but only Israel (including all inhabitants of Judah and Israel that had been taken into captivity) will be restored. Exception: God has said that Egypt will be restored to a shadow of its former self.

September 11

Ezekiel 37-39

Ezekiel's vision of dry bones has been a favorite of preachers for a long time, because it is a vision of hope. 'Dry bones' days come to all of us, when it seems like a part of us has died and will never live again. We need a vivid reminder that God can restore anything or anybody, no matter how hopeless the situation seems. God's restoration, though, can be derailed by a lack of faith. How do you keep hope alive? In this scripture, it is by the Word of God.

Ezekiel prophesies that Israel and Judah will be made one nation again, healing the separation that occurred after Solomon's death. Chapter 38 doesn't pursue the idea that *all* nations will be under the Lordship of a descendant of David; the point that needs to be heard here concerns the Divided Kingdom.

Chapters 38 and 39 tell of Armageddon, a battle at the end of time between Satan and God. Some scholars have taken this very literally, including details about horses and burial of dead bodies. Others see a lot of symbolism, openly doubting that a war at some future date will be waged on horseback. Who is right? I just don't know! I stick with the basics that everyone agrees on: God will finally vanquish all evil, in a battle that is short and very lopsided.

September 12

Ezekiel 40-42

This is tough reading! If you can, find a Bible commentary that pictures what the man with the measuring rod is measuring.

This temple never existed! Much of its description can be considered a model and an ideal. So why is Ezekiel given this vision? Why should we painstakingly read through all these details?

When the Babylonian commander destroyed the temple in 587 BC, the Israelites also saw all their hope destroyed. The temple had become the greatest symbol of who they were as a nation. Though they had strayed far from God's commandments, and their religion was more action than belief, the temple gave them a spiritual foundation. When it was destroyed, hope was gone.

Ezekiel is given a very exact description of a temple in his vision. He could see it and describe it to his people. His vivid description was a source of hope that they needed, something to latch their dreams to.

September 13

Ezekiel 43-45

It's a little surprising that God is reinstituting the sacrificial system. With Solomon's temple gone, it would look like the time to try something else. God has said that a son of David will rule all people at some future date, but at present God chooses to exclude all foreigners from temple worship.

It seems like the Israelites are starting over. They must learn how to be a set-apart, consecrated people. They must give the blood of animals to cover their sins, to begin to understand the value of forgiveness. They must learn that giving an offering is giving of themselves. Judging by how far they have fallen away from God, it may be awhile before the sacrificial system can be replaced by one in which the people give their whole selves to the Lord.

I really don't know why Nehemiah and his group built a temple that didn't correspond to the one in Ezekiel's vision. Perhaps there was a communication problem. We do know, however, that the leaders at the new temple were as strict as Ezekiel 44 demands. They really had a heart, now, to obey God.

September 14

Ezekiel 46-48

There are several oddities in these chapters, including the fact that this temple never existed. The descriptions don't match Solomon's temple or the one built after the return from Babylonian exile.

Notice the distribution of the land described in chapters 47 and 48; this is just east-west slices, stacked on top of each other. No regard is given to rivers, mountain ranges, or whatever. This division was not carried out, either; the old boundaries were used, from Joshua's day. The most interesting part in the division of land is in 47:22-25, where it states that aliens residing in the land are to be given property as if they were native-born Israelites!

Who is the prince talked about in chapter 46? It seems to be the ruling monarch. It is significant that God calls on him to lead by example when it comes to worship. That's an ideal that we still long for, a leader that will lead us back to God. Instinctively, we know that we can't expect God to bless our land without a Godly leader.

The river of life described in 47:3-12 is thrilling to me. God's Spirit is the river talked about here, bringing life to all who partake of it. Lining the banks are trees that produce food for us in all seasons of our lives. This same river is described in Revelation 22.

September 15

Daniel 1-3

There are many treasured Bible stories in the book of Daniel. We have etched them in our memories...but let's look for new information.

In chapter 1, Nebuchadnezzar, the emperor of the Babylonian Empire, chooses the best and brightest of the Jewish captives to reeducate into government workers. Among them are Daniel and his 3 friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. The king wants them fed well while they learn the Babylonian language and customs, but Daniel wants to stick with a kosher diet, and gets approval after a 10-day test period. Notice that Daniel makes this a vegetarian diet; it would have been nearly impossible to get approval for a Jewish priest to slaughter meat in a ceremonially-clean fashion; this is not the Bible's promotion of a vegetarian diet!

In chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar has a troubling dream, and asks the "wise" men of the kingdom to tell him its meaning. This would include Daniel and his 3 buddies. The emperor will not tell the dream, deciding that a real wise man will be able to discern both the meaning *and* the dream. If only the Judean kings had tested their court prophets this same way! The false prophets were constantly leading the kings astray and leading the people away from God.

I'm impressed at Daniel's compassion. He pleaded with Nebuchadnezzar to let all the wise men live, since God had given the emperor the meaning of his dream. Daniel could have easily decided that false prophets *ought* to be killed.

I'm sure you noticed that, in the interpretation of the dream, the final kingdom that God sets up will be the kingdom of Christ, destroying all vestiges of the previous empires (Babylonian, Persian, Greek, Seleucid, and Roman) and including the whole earth.

In chapter 3, the emperor is impressed that in the previous dream his empire is depicted by gold. Following through with this, he has an idol of gold made, which everyone will be expected to worship. When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego can't by conscience worship an idol, the emperor loses his temper. He appoints some of his best soldiers to throw the three into the fiery furnace...and loses those warriors. God saves the three from harm, the emperor is impressed, but falls short of leading his people to worship God.

September 16

Daniel 4-6

The common theme in these chapters is bringing the various emperors to the understanding that God is supreme.

Nebuchadnezzar was put into position by God to bring long-withheld judgment to the land of Judah. God had been patient and merciful for centuries, but justice required that He finally put his foot down. God chose the Babylonians, under Nebuchadnezzar, to be His rod of judgment. The emperor, however, didn't recognize that it was God's power, not his own, that powered the Babylonian Empire. The Almighty censured Nebuchadnezzar by taking him out of power for seven years, with a deranged mind. When Nebuchadnezzar came to his right mind again and was restored to power, he gave God glory as the ruler of the universe. Still, the emperor didn't denounce all other gods as human inventions.

His grandson, Belshazzar, also was censured by God. This emperor pushed God beyond His limits when he toasted the gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone while using goblets captured from Solomon's temple in Jerusalem, originally dedicated to God. Immediately, God sent a sign (interpreted by Daniel) that Belshazzar's rule would immediately end. (Darius the Persian invaded that very night, ending the Babylonian Empire.)

Darius, first emperor of the Persian Empire, also lacked the understanding that the Jewish God was the one and only true God. Through a miraculous salvation of Daniel (the emperor's favorite official) from ravenous lions, Darius was brought to the point of calling on the whole empire to worship Daniel's God. This, in turn,

brought favor to the Jews, which may have been largely responsible for Darius allowing Jews to return to their native land at the beginning of his reign.

September 17

Daniel 7-9

Daniel's prophecies here reach far into the future. By his words, he had these visions around 540 BC. He speaks of empires that succeed the present Babylonian Empire, all the way to the time of Christ. Some Bible scholars have a hard time with this, preferring to date the writing of this book at about 165 BC.

Daniel's terms for time are unfamiliar to us. "Time, times, and half a time" (7:25) means 3 and a half years ("time" equals one year). The seventy "sevens" or weeks are 70 sets of 7 years, or 490 years.

God may have not meant these counts to be exact. Many have used some very creative methods to make God's numbers match earthly events.

Whether or not Daniel was written in the sixth or second century BC, his visions of empires and the Messiah are amazingly accurate. The part that particularly impresses me is in 9:26, when Daniel prophesies that the Messiah will be 'cut off', followed by the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem (destroyed in 70 AD).

September 18

Daniel 10-12

What does the reader find here to encourage his soul?

Daniel receives knowledge of future wars from an angel. Much of this refers to the coming of the Greek and then Roman empires. The Middle East continues to be an unstable area, even to our day. Israel is in a strategic geographic location, along a major trade route and at the east end of the Mediterranean Sea, which causes it to have very fertile lands.

God is able to know the future, for he knows the inclinations of each heart. Along with this, God has a set of plans for the future of the world which He will be careful to carry out. Our ability to make good and bad choices does not keep God's will from being done.

Daniel was faithful to write down his vision, even though it certainly could not have made sense to him at the time. It would be hundreds of years before readers would be able to fit the parts of his vision into what was happening in the world.

We are sometimes called to be faithful even if we aren't granted all the answers to our "why" questions.

September 19

Hosea 1-6

God calls many prophets to show signs or speak boldly. In Hosea's case, he is called to act out the relationship between God and his chosen people in his family life. He marries an adulterous woman to act out the infidelity of Israel toward God. The prophet is obedient, but he goes into the marriage knowing that his wife will probably 'run around on him' and bring him much heartache.

Hosea's wife is notoriously unfaithful to him, but God instructs Hosea to go buy her back (she evidently had left home and had to sell herself into slavery to stay alive). I would assume that his friends and neighbors would think this was remarkable love, after what she had done. God is making a point how remarkable His love for His people is.

Verse 4:14 reminds me of Jesus' forgiveness of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). Here in Hosea, God says he will not punish the adulterous women because "the men themselves consort with harlots". Recall, in John 8, that the male party to adultery was not brought to Jesus, and that Jesus did not allow punishment of the woman.

Hosea 6:6 reveals the heart of the sacrificial system. The animals offered were to be an acknowledgement of God's rule in their lives, a symbol of reconciliation and relationship. The sacrifices had become empty ritual.

September 20

Hosea 7-14

Look at 7:2- "Their sins engulf them; they are always before me." God has just said through the prophet that He is ready to restore the people. However, their unrepentant sin is so prominent in His eyes that God just can't do it right now. It's like trying to throw a dirty cloth in the washing machine, but you can't find a place even clean enough to pick the filthy thing up. They needed to show some slight affection toward God, but it just wasn't there. They obviously need God, but look for help everywhere else. (7:8-16)

As in the early chapters of Hosea, the allegory using prostitution continues in 8:9-10 and 9:1. The Israelites have left God, who had been their husband, just like an unfaithful wife.

You must sow righteousness (10:12) if you expect it to grow, for you reap what you sow. That sounds like a mother's last words to a child going off to college or to make a home for themselves!

In 11:1, we see a prophecy concerning the Messiah. This is quoted in Matthew 2:15: "Out of Egypt I have called my son." I, for one, wouldn't have recognized this as words about the coming Messiah. Our understanding of the Bible is enlightened different ways as we read; sometimes the same passage will strike us differently on the next time through. Evidently the writer of Matthew had this experience.

In Jesus' day, the Pharisees and Sadducees argued over whether or not there was life after death. Doesn't 13:14 make it abundantly clear?

September 21

Joel 1-3

The book of Joel was written over 200 years before Judah was taken into exile. God gives this Southern Kingdom an early warning of the calamity to come, if they will not change their ways.

Joel calls the priests to lead the people in returning to God. It's time! Surely it's obvious that the country has drifted far away from authentic worship of God. The most vivid example is in 2:13 : Rending or tearing one's garments used to be an extreme act of repentance, but now it has become only a meaningless display. It should be a visible sign of a heart broken for God.

Joel prophesies the horror of the coming of the Babylonian army in 597 and 589 BC. His writing is from about 800 BC! That terror of being overrun by an unstoppable horde can be avoided ... if anyone will listen to God's words through this prophet.

Far beyond the days of exile, Joel predicts a day of the outpouring of God's spirit (2:28 -32), which happens in 33 AD (quoted by Peter in Acts 2). Joel's prophecies were so far into the future that he could not have possibly known what it all meant. He was just faithful to pass on to the people what God told him.

September 22

Amos 1-5

The prophet starts out with words that are pleasing to the ears: "Your neighbors have sinned three or four times, and God's wrath will not be turned away." Go get 'em, God! Soon, though, Amos brings the message around to apply to Israel , and THEN I'll bet they would rather God not bother with just "three or four" sins.

God has found the Israelites to be very greedy, caring more for money than the needy around them. Surely we all know that God has particular passion for the least, the last, and the lost. It has been said that "God helps those who help

themselves”; yes, He does expect us to use the gifts God has given to us. It’s even more true, though, that “God helps those who *are unable to help themselves.*”

Verse 3:10 hits a little too close to home for many of us: “They do not know how to do right,” declares the Lord, “who hoard plunder and loot in their fortresses.” That is, as we pile up possessions in our ‘fortresses’ or nice homes, we indicate a firmly planted self-centeredness that blinds us to righteousness. (We can’t serve our neighbor if the only needs we see are our own.)

On the day Israel is punished, God will cut off the “horns of the altar”. That is, no mercy will be shown. Criminals desperately seeking pardon would grab onto the horns of the altar, knowing few would punish them in the house of God.

God declares through Amos how superficial Israel’s religion had become. Persons would freely sin, then bring a sacrifice to God, assuming that it would make everything alright. However, God always had the expectation that a sacrifice was an outward sign of inward repentance. This was no longer true in Israel.

September 23

Amos 6-9, Obadiah

I’m sure Israel didn’t feel they were that bad. Each person probably saw themselves as a pretty decent individual. Perhaps they were, by the standards of that corrupt time. However, when measured against God’s plumb line (7:8), they were far from straight. God’s standard is eternal and unchanging...something has GOT to be!

The royal prophet for the king, Amaziah, reports to the king that this guy from Judah, the farmer Amos, is causing grass-roots discontent. He is making people dissatisfied with their lot in life, wanting the country to make radical changes (to get back to God). Amaziah tells Amos to go home to his own country, but Amos is a man on a mission, and won’t leave Israel as long as God wants to say something through him.

Verses 8:11-12 identify the key to the whole mess. Israel can’t repair its own tangled mess because “there is a famine of hearing the words of the Lord”. The word of God is a guiding lot to straighten anything out, but not if it is not *heard*.

The prophet Obadiah has only a short message, all against the land of Edom. The Edomites were descendants of Abraham, just like Israel and Judah, but shamefully did not act like it. They exulted in the exile of those two countries. With the recurring phrase “you should not have”, God speaks through the prophet words of punishment. Never let your relatives down.

September 24

Jonah

Jonah heard from God, very clearly: Go warn the enemies in Nineveh of coming judgment. This was very distasteful to Jonah. You get the impression that he would be only too happy to see God’s judgment come on this capital city of the Assyrian Empire.

How would he explain it to his fellow Israelites if his preaching brought repentance and subsequent mercy from God? Isn’t that some kind of treason? God’s point is that the people of Nineveh are just like Jonah, loved by God.

Jonah tried to go beyond where God could see him, but that is of course impossible. Even if he had gotten successfully to Tarshish, God would see him.

God tenderly brings Jonah back, and gives him another opportunity to serve as a prophet to Nineveh . He agrees. What a success Jonah is, even though he is a reluctant prophet! The people repent, from the least to the greatest. God can use us even when our bottom lip is sticking out.

September 25

Micah 1-7

Micah prophesies against the whole of God's chosen people. We've gotten used to God sending His word to describe punishment to either the northern kingdom of Israel or the southern kingdom of Judah . Both countries are descendants of Jacob, and both countries have turned against God's ways. Micah does not differentiate.

In Micah's day, there are few prophets who sincerely hear from God. Most prophets make up words to suit their listeners; if someone pays them well, they prophesy good fortune for them, but if the gift is inadequate the giver finds that the prophet has only bad news for them. (3:5-6) If a prophet is supposed to be someone who hears from God, the listeners are being taught that God can be persuaded with money!

Micah does not spend a lot of time speaking of the destruction to come. He doesn't hammer the words into their heads, like Isaiah or Jeremiah did, repeating over and over. God expected the people to hear this prophet the first time! The words of wrath for a people gone astray are plain...but so is the hope for a glorious distant future. Verse 5:2 becomes memorable to them (a ruler will come from Bethlehem who has eternal origins); if only verses 6:6-8 had been just as memorable (sacrifices aren't the point, but justice and mercy and holiness).

September 26

Nahum 1-3 and Habakkuk 1-3

What is this!?! I thought Jonah had already prophesied to Nineveh , and they had turned their lives around. Well, it seems their repentance didn't last but a few decades.

Nineveh is the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. The empire relied entirely on its military strength, and was ruthless when attacking other countries. Military strength is a weak reed to lean on, though, as history has shown time and time again.

Where is there something to lean on? Money can fail, good looks don't last, intelligence can slip away with cruel disease. Isn't there anything that will always be secure? Only God is an anchor that will always hold.

September 27

Zephaniah 1-3, Haggai 1-2

Though the first part of Zephaniah 1 sounds like total destruction of the earth (like the flood in Noah's day) will soon follow, 1:10-18 prophesies destruction against Judah's upper class. Indeed, when Nebuchadnezzar invaded in 597 BC, the first exiles included only the rich, influential, and skilled. Only eight years later did Nebuchadnezzar return to exile the rest of the people (except the poorest of the poor).

Verse 3:8 says "for in the fire of my passion all the earth shall be consumed". Judging by what we've read in the other prophetic books, this means God will judge all nations, not that He will "wipe it clean as a bowl". Some will never be a nation again, some will be greatly reduced. Then, at a later date, God will change his relationship to one that interacts with *all* people, not just the natives of Israel and Judah.

Haggai was mentioned in the book of Ezra. (5:1) Along with Zechariah, he encouraged the Jewish exiles returned from Babylon to finish building the new temple. Their very life depended on it (1:5-6). At his urging, Zerubbabel a descendant of David, and Joshua of the high priest lineage, took leadership of the rebuilding effort.

September 28

Zechariah 1-7

Zechariah, a prophet along with Haggai, was called by God to encourage the Jews who had returned to their land from exile in Babylon. When the exiles first returned, they had government support, and immediately began building a new temple. However, opponents convinced the emperor that allowing the temple project would inflame nationalistic feelings in the Jewish people, bringing rebellion. The emperor had the work stopped.

Zechariah and Haggai, however, heard from God that the building should continue. Zechariah had a series of dreams, each encouraging not only building of the temple, but also holiness. God would call His people to return to Jerusalem from all the countries they had been scattered to; they also must return to Him with their hearts.

September 29

Zechariah 8-14

There is a lot of messianic prophecy in the last chapters of Zechariah, concerning both Jesus' 33 years on earth and his final return. There are also some tremendous symbols here:

Verses 9:15 and 10:7 speak of being drunk with the Spirit as with wine. We remember Peter's words on the day of Pentecost, "These men are not drunk, as you suppose." There is a 'high' or giddiness or extreme joy we sometimes feel when we are in the very presence of God's glory. It doesn't often last very long. It might be during a worship service, or deep in prayer, or when a blessing just kind of jumps into our lives. If you've ever experienced that, and I certainly hope you have, you can think of heaven as having that feeling endlessly.

Symbols for the Good News that is Jesus Christ include "the cornerstone" (10:4), "an immovable rock" (12:3), "a firepot in a woodpile" and "a flaming torch among sheaves" (12:6), and "a fountain...to cleanse them from sin and impurity".

The Philistines are mentioned again in 9:5-8. Who were these people? Evidently the Philistines ("the sea people") migrated to the eastern shore of the Mediterranean around 1400 BC, probably from Crete. They were technologically advanced for their time. They occupied an area of fertile plains at the southwest extreme of the "promised land", and were a constant irritant to Israel. At times they dominated Israel, at other times they were held in check, but were never removed from their territory until the time of the Babylonian Empire.

September 30 Malachi 1-4

The part of Malachi most of us remember is in 3:10, "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse," concerning tithing. It's a really good teaching, on both money and faith.

Most of Malachi is a prophecy to the priests, in the period after the Jews returned from exile in Babylon. The prophet expressed God's surprise that the Jews would not exhibit strict religious discipline. What had the experience of exile taught them? God expected the priests to be leaders, to teach obedience, and they just weren't doing it.

Malachi ends with a statement about eternity. The day of judgment will bring unquenchable fire for some, while others will "leap like calves released from the stall". I'd rather be a leaper than a burner.