



Good News
Bible Reading Program

A free educational service provided by the United Church of God, *an International Association*

— February 2003 —

DATE	READING TOPIC	SCRIPTURES
1 Feb	Death of Jehoshaphat; Rule of Jehoram over Judah	1 Kings 22:50; 2 Chronicles 21:1-18; 2 Kings 8:16-22
2 Feb	Judgment on Edom; Final triumph of Israel	Obadiah
3 Feb	Elisha raises the Shunammite woman's son; Woman leaves for famine and property restored	2 Kings 4:18-37; 8:1-6
4 Feb	Naaman's leprosy; Gehazi's greed; Floating ax	2 Kings 5; 6:1-7
5 Feb	Elisha's servant sees angelic army; Syrians blinded	2 Kings 6:8-23
6 Feb	Siege of Samaria by Syria; Syrians flee	2 Kings 6:24-7:20
7 Feb	Death of Ben-Hadad; King Jehoram of Israel stricken by God and dies; Ahaziah king of Judah; Jehu anointed king over Israel	2 Kings 8:7-15; 2 Chronicles 21:19-22:6; 2 Kings 8:23-9:13
8 Feb	Jehu kills Joram, Ahaziah and Jezebel	2 Kings 9:14-37; 2 Chronicles 22:7-9
9 Feb	Reign of Jehu over Israel; Wicked Queen Athaliah	2 Kings 10:1-31; 2 Kings 11:1-3; 2 Chronicles 22:10-12
10 Feb	Joash king of Judah; Death of Athaliah	2 Chronicles 23; 2 Kings 11:4-21
11 Feb	Early reign of Joash, Jehoiada serving as priest	2 Kings 12:1-5; 2 Chronicles 24:1-5
12 Feb	Destruction of the land prophesied	Joel 1
13 Feb	Day of the Lord; Call for repentance; Renewal of land; Pouring out of God's Spirit	Joel 2
14 Feb	God deals with the nations and rescues Israel	Joel 3
15 Feb	Death of Jehu; Jehoahaz king of Israel; King Joash of Judah repairs the temple	2 Kings 10:32-36; 13:1-2; 12:6-16; 2 Chronicles 24:6-14
16 Feb	Jehoiada dies; Joash's apostasy; Death of Joash; Israel oppressed by Syria; Death of Jehoahaz; Jehoash (Joash) king of Israel; Death of Elisha; Jehoash fights Syria	2 Chronicles 24:15-27; 2 Kings 12:17-21; 13:3-11, 14-25
17 Feb	Amaziah king of Judah; Wins war against Edom; Loses war against Israel	2 Kings 14:1-14; 2 Chronicles 25:1-24
18 Feb	Death of Jehoash of Israel; Jeroboam II king of Israel; Death of Amaziah; Uzziah (Azariah) king of Judah	2 Kings 13:12-13; 2 Chronicles 25:25-28; 2 Kings 14:15-27
19 Feb	Jonah flees commission; Into sea and swallowed by fish	Jonah 1
20 Feb	Jonah's prayer, his deliverance and the fulfillment of his commission; Jonah's anger at God's mercy on Nineveh	Jonah 2-4

21 Feb	King Uzziah (Azariah) of Judah does right before God	2 Kings 15:1-4; 2 Chronicles 26:1-15
22 Feb	Amos preaches against the nations	Amos 1:1-2:3
23 Feb	Amos preaches against Judah and Israel	Amos 2:4-3:15
24 Feb	Israel's punishment for failing to heed the warnings	Amos 4-5
25 Feb	God condemns Israel for its emphasis on prosperity and pride; Amos' conflict with Amaziah the priest	Amos 6-7
26 Feb	Harvest of judgment; Israel's destruction; To be restored	Amos 8-9
27 Feb	Hosea's family a type of God's relationship with Israel	Hosea 1-3
28 Feb	Death of Jeroboam II; Zechariah king of Israel; Coups by Shallum and Menahem; Israel's abominations worsen	2 Kings 14:28-29; 15:8-18

Rulers and Prophets of Israel and Judah

KINGDOM OF ISRAEL	PROPHETS	KINGDOM OF JUDAH
Jeroboam I 931-910	925 B.C.	Rehoboam 931-913
Nadab 910-909		Abijah 913-911
Baasha 909-886	900 B.C.	
Elah 886-885		Asa 911-870
Zimri 885 (7 days)		
Omri 885-874	875 B.C.	
Ahab 874-853		Jehoshaphat 870-848 (coregent with Asa 873-870)
Ahaziah 853-852	Elijah 850 B.C.	Jehoram 848-841 (coregent with Jehoshaphat 853-848)
Joram 852-841	Elisha Obadiah	Ahaziah 841 (1 year)
	Joel 825 B.C.	Athaliah 841-835
Jehu 841-814		
		Joash 835-796
Jehoahaz 814-798	800 B.C.	
Jehoash 798-782		Amaziah 796-767
Jeroboam II 782-753 (coregent with Jehoash 793-782)	Jonah 775 B.C.	
Zechariah 753/752 (6 months)		Uzziah 767-740 (overlap/coregent with Amaziah 792-767; isolated 751-740)
Shallum 752 (1 month)	Amos 750 B.C.	Jotham 740-736 (coregent with Uzziah 751-740; abdicates 736)
Menahem 752-742		Ahaz 736-729 (coregent with Jotham 744-736)
Pekahiah 742-740	Hosea 725 B.C.	
Pekah 740-732		Hezekiah 729-686 (regent for Ahaz 729-715)
Hosea 732-722	Isaiah	
FALL OF SAMARIA, 722	Micah 700 B.C.	
	675 B.C.	Manasseh 686-642 (coregent with Hezekiah 696-686)
	650 B.C.	Amon 642-640
		Josiah 640-609
	Zephaniah 625 B.C.	
		Jehoahaz 609 (3 months)
	Nahum	Jehoiakim 608-598
	Habakkuk 600 B.C.	Jecooniah 598/597 (3 months; coregent with Jehoiakim 608-598)
		Zedekiah 597-586
	Ezekiel 575 B.C.	FALL OF JERUSALEM, 586
	Daniel	

NOTE ABOUT DATES

While scholars' opinions about the dates of kings' reigns and the timing so some prophets' ministries may vary, the dates on this chart are based on the best knowledge and evidence available to us at this time. Most reputable scholars' dates will be close, though not necessarily identical, to these. There simply isn't enough specific information available in the biblical record to identify the timing of each king's reign with certainty.

Rule of Jehoram of Judah**(1 Kings 22:50; 2 Chronicles 21:1-18; 2 Kings 8:16-22)****February 1**

As mentioned before, after Jehoshaphat's death, his firstborn son Jehoram, who reigned with him for the last few years of Jehoshaphat's life, became sole king over Judah. Although Jehoshaphat had been, generally speaking, a righteous king, his son Jehoram was extremely wicked—even slaughtering his brother and other princes. This helps to show that the righteousness of parents is not automatically passed on to their children. Of course, Jehoshaphat did not help matters through the terrible mistake of having Jehoram marry Athaliah, the daughter of wicked King Ahab. In fact, this directly contributed to the corruption of Jehoram's character. Indeed, we are specifically told that she influenced him to walk in the way of the kings of Israel, who lived in idolatrous rebellion against God (2 Chronicles 21:6). Still, Jehoram bore responsibility for his own actions. The letter from Elijah rebuked him for the terrible things he had done (verse 13).

Since Jehoram and the nation of Judah had forsaken God, God forsook *them*, enabling nations like Edom and Libnah to revolt against Judah (verses 8-10; 2 Kings 8:20-22). (Edom designates the descendants of Jacob's twin brother Esau, who sold his birthright for a stew of lentils, Genesis 25:31-43.)

As the apostasy of Jehoram and the people worsened (2 Chronicles 21:11), God Himself stirred up enemy nations to attack Judah (verses 16-17). When Jehoram still refused to repent, God struck him with an incurable disease. As we will soon see in a later reading, he dies from this disease in severe pain (verses 18-19), exactly as Elijah had warned him (verse 15). Listen to this unflattering summary of the life and death of this evil king, which we will read again in sequence when we soon come to this later reading: "He reigned in Jerusalem eight years and, to no one's sorrow, departed" (verse 20).

Since God was faithful regarding the covenant He had made with David, He would not cut off the kingship from the house of David. Rather, He would see to it that there would always be a descendant of David sitting on David's throne (verse 7; 2 Kings 8:19; see 2 Samuel 7:14-16; Jeremiah 33:20-22, 25-26). So Jehoram remains on the throne until his death. And after Jehoram's death, his one remaining son, Ahaziah, will become the next king of Judah, sitting on the throne of David (2 Chronicles 21:17; 2 Kings 8:24). It is this seat of power, the present form of which is the throne of Great Britain, to which Jesus will return and on which He, as a descendant of David, will sit and from which He will rule the nations (see Luke 1:31-33; "The Throne of Britain: Its Biblical Origin and Future," www.ucg.org/brp/materials).

Introduction to Obadiah; The Identity of Edom (Obadiah)**February 2**

Nothing is known of the prophet Obadiah beyond the words of his prophecy. His name, meaning "Servant of the Eternal," may have been a name or it may have simply been used as a title. As to when he lived and preached, while most modern scholars date his book to the time immediately following the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., "some scholars date the book very early, in the mid-ninth century B.C., following raids by the Philistines and Arabian tribes during the period of King Jehoram of Judah (see 2 Chr. 21:16, 17). This date would make the Book of Obadiah the earliest of the prophetic books" (*Nelson Study Bible*, introductory notes on Obadiah). Under inspiration, the prophet Jeremiah later utilizes some of Obadiah's prophecy in his own prophecy against Edom (see Jeremiah 49:7-22).

As mentioned, Edom or Esau rebelled in the days of King Jehoram against Judah, and they would continue to be in revolt (see 2 Kings 8:20-22). The book of Obadiah describes in more detail the future of Edom. Indeed, the prophecy of Obadiah is clearly for the end time, as the reference to the "day of the LORD" shows (verse 15; compare Joel 2:1-2)—as well as the references to the return of all Israel, the ultimate defeat of Edom and the establishment of the Kingdom of God (verses 17-21).

Yet who is Edom today? As discussed earlier, Edom is another name for Esau (Genesis 25:30). Esau and his descendants originally lived in the region of Mount Seir (Genesis 36:8-9), southeast of Judea, in what is now southern Jordan, around the city of Petra. The Greeks and Romans called this area Idumea (i.e., Idum = Edom). Because the Bible refers to end-time Jordan as "Edom, Moab, and the prominent people of Ammon" (Daniel 11:41), it is evident that many Edomites must still live there. It should also be noted that Idumea extended into southern Judah: "The Edomites were gradually pushed into the southern half of Judea, including the region around Hebron, an area which the Greeks later called Idumaea" ("Idumaea," *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, 1966). (The biblical king Herod the Great was an Idumean—an Edomite). One of Esau's grandsons (and a tribal chief) was Amalek (Genesis 36:10-16), who became father of the Amalekites. Some rabbinical schools in Israel

teach that the Palestinian Arabs—the most fervent adversaries of the modern Israeli state—are Amalekites. In light of the prophecy in Exodus 17:16 of conflict between the Amalekites and Israelites from generation to generation, there may be considerable validity to this identification (see also Obadiah 10). Jordan's population is heavily Palestinian, and many of the Palestinians in Jordan and Israel are evidently Edomite by descent.

This identification of the Palestinians becomes clearer from a careful reading of Obadiah 19. It is speaking of territories—that those who control particular territories in the Holy Land will come to possess additional territories there. In context, we can see that Israelites in this verse are retaking areas that the Edomites have stolen. Fascinatingly, the areas listed as doing the taking here are areas that are today populated by Jews. The areas being taken back are now populated by Palestinians—thus apparently identifying the Palestinians as Edomites, at least in large measure. Notice: “The South [the Negev, now held by the Israelis] shall possess the mountains of Esau [southern Jordan and perhaps the area of Hebron, the southern West Bank now populated by Palestinians], and the Lowland [the Shephelah, or lower hills between the central hill country to the east and the coastal plain to the west, now populated by Jews] shall possess Philistia [most of which is now the Gaza Strip, territory now held by Palestinians]. They [the Jewish Shephelah inhabitants] shall possess the fields of Ephraim and the fields of Samaria [the northern West Bank, now occupied by Palestinians]. Benjamin [the area around Jerusalem, presently held by the Israelis] shall possess Gilead [northern Jordan].”

But Edom's descendants may be found elsewhere as well. Besides their sedentary life in the Mount Seir region, some of them appear to have become nomadic, ranging over vast territories as early as patriarchal times. A text from the ancient city of Ugarit, on the northern Syrian coast, mentions “the well-watered land of Edom,” which was evidently in some proximity. Later, in the sixth century B.C., Nebuchadnezzar carried many Edomites of the Mount Seir region away captive to Babylon and other Babylonian territories. Perhaps that is why we find the city of Basra in Iraq—possibly a slight variation of the biblical Edomite city of Bozrah (Genesis 36:33; 1 Chronicles 1:44; Isaiah 34:6; 63:1). It is thus likely that there are still Edomites in Iraq and scattered throughout the Middle East. During the laxity of Persian rule, Edomite wandering appears to have resumed. The chief tribe of Edom was Teman (see Obadiah 9), named after Esau's eldest grandson (Genesis 36:10-15). And the rocky plateaus of Persia and Turkestan eventually became known as the land of Temani. In Turkestan in Central Asia was a city named Amalik, seemingly after Amalek. The name of Teman appears to have come down to us in the form of the name Ottoman—that is, the Ottoman Turks (only the vowels in spelling being changed over the centuries). While the Turks appear to be a somewhat mixed people, it does seem that a large number of them are Edomites. The historical Hor Turks may be named after the Horites, who were closely associated with the Edomites in Genesis 36.

Perhaps most surprising is to find that elements of Edom may be found in Europe. The Jewish Talmud says that Edomites settled very early on in southern Italy. It is believed by many Jews that the people of Edom became dominant among the early Romans, establishing themselves as the ruling elite among them and later among the Germans. There may be some truth in this, as Isaiah 34 and 63 describe the ultimate destruction of end-time Babylon (a power bloc led by a final resurrection of the Roman Empire) as the destruction of Edom and the Edomite capital of Bozrah. However, Edomites in Europe would seem to make up a rather small percentage of the population there. (More research on the modern identity of Edom can be found at www.british-israel.ca/Turkey.htm and at www.britam.org/now72.html—with the caution that the citing of outside sources for further study is not an endorsement of everything in those sources).

The Fate of Edom (Obadiah)

Feb. 2 Cont'd

Despite their self-imagined greatness and pride, God says he will make the Edomites small and despised among the nations (Obadiah 2). Their dwelling in the “clefts of the rock” (Obadiah 2; Jeremiah 49:16) may refer to the rock-hewn city of Petra mentioned earlier (the word for “rock” being the Hebrew *Sela*, equivalent to the Greek *Petra*), and perhaps other rock fortresses. High above Petra and on other mountains of Edom were high places for worship, lookouts and refuge. “Some of the mountain peaks of Edom reach over six thousand feet; Jerusalem [by comparison] is about 2,300 feet above sea level” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on Obadiah 3). Yet the Edomites would be brought down—not just physically, but figuratively from their exalted prideful arrogance (Obadiah 4; Jeremiah 49:16).

In Obadiah 5 God says that grape gatherers or even thieves would take merely their fill—not everything. But God will go way beyond this. Edom will be utterly laid bare, completely plundered of everything and everyone (Obadiah 6; see Jeremiah 49:9-10).

In verse 7 of Obadiah we see Edom in a “confederacy”—an alliance—perhaps the same one prophesied in Psalm 83:1-8. In any case, we see that the Edomites’ allies will turn on them. Yet the Edomites won’t be able to see it. Their “wisdom” or cunning (as the Hebrew could also be rendered) and understanding will not reveal it—as God will confound and destroy them (Obadiah 8-9; Jeremiah 49:7).

Proverbs 24:17 says, “Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles.” A comparison of that principle with Obadiah 12-14 shows one of the major reasons God is and will be angry with Edom. In the past invasions of Israel and Judah, Edom has often cheered it on and even participated, as will again be noted in the Bible Reading Program comments on Amos 1:11-12 (another prophecy of Edom). Apparently, the Edomites of the end time will continue in the same pattern, cutting off the escape of Israelites, contributing to their devastation and turning them over to the enemy (Obadiah 10-11, 13-14).

Yet Edom will pay dearly—as will all nations that have dealt maliciously with God’s people (verses 15-16). But it will be particularly bad for Edom. At the time of Christ’s return, Obadiah tells us, the land of Edom will be destroyed, and it appears from verse 18 that, *at that time*, none of the physical descendants of Esau will survive. (We will examine this matter further when we later read the prophecy of Edom in Jeremiah 49:7-22.)

This does not mean, however, that none of the Edomites will ever be in the Kingdom of God. They will be raised in the second resurrection, which will take place after the Millennium of Christ’s reign (Revelation 20:5), and which is commonly referred to in the Church of God as the “Great White Throne Judgment” (see verses 11-12). At that time, everyone who has not been called by God in this age prior to Christ’s return will be given an opportunity to accept God’s way of life and enter into His Kingdom. And those of the *first* resurrection at Christ’s return—the comparatively few called and faithful people of this age—will be there to help guide and teach those who will be raised in that second resurrection.

As we’ve seen, Obadiah evidently concerns the Israelites retaking Palestinian territories at the return of Christ. Verse 20 then concerns the redistribution of the land to all of Israel and Judah returning from captivity. The “land of the Canaanites as far as Zarephath” is perhaps the entire Holy Land, stretching up into former Phoenician territory in modern Lebanon—though it could be that only northern Israel is here denoted as the land for the returning house of Israel. Then notice the “captives of Jerusalem who are in Sepharad.” The last word here may come from *sephar*, “which in the Aramaic vernacular would denote furthest limit or seacoast” (Seth Ward, “On the History of the Term ‘Sepharad,’” Foundation for the Advancement of Sephardic Studies and Culture, www.sephardicstudies.org/ward2.html). By early medieval times, the Jewish people of Spain were referring to themselves as Sephardic Jews, evidently from this term. Perhaps it refers to the Jews who have been scattered since the Diaspora. They return to possess the cities of the Negev.

Finally, observe again this very encouraging promise at the end of the book of Obadiah: “Then saviors shall come to Mount Zion to judge the mountains of Esau, and the kingdom shall be the LORD’s” (verse 21). Who are these “saviors,” or deliverers, who judge? Describing the time of Jesus Christ’s return, Daniel 7:22 says, “Judgment was given to the saints of the most High; and the time came that the saints possessed the kingdom” (KJV). Yes, God’s saints, glorified as divine kings and priests, will be given the privilege of playing a part in saving Israel and the rest of mankind. What an awesome future!

Regarding the closing words of the prophecy, “the kingdom shall be the LORD’s” (Obadiah 21), *The Nelson Study Bible* says this in its note on the verse: “These were Obadiah’s last words against all human arrogance, pride, and rebellion. Edom had thought itself indestructible; but the Lord humbled that nation and restored the fallen Judah [and will do so in a far greater way for all Israel in the future]. Many people are tempted to consider themselves beyond the reach of God. But God will bring them low, just as He will lift those who humble themselves before Him. And one great day, He will establish His just rule over all.”

Raising the Dead; Blessed Again (2 Kings 4:18-37; 8:1-6)

February 3

There are only a few episodes in the Old Testament wherein a dead person is brought back to life. Elijah had raised the son of the widow of Zarephath. And now we see Elisha performing a like miracle for one with whom he had a friendship similar to the one Elijah had with the Zarephathite

widow. The Shunammite woman's son, who had been miraculously conceived, suddenly died of an unexplained cause. The mother traveled to Elisha and begged him to accompany her to her dead son, obviously fully believing that Elisha could bring him back to life. Elisha prayed to God and then established personal contact with the child twice, until the child awoke (2 Kings 4:33-35). We find that Christ often would touch people when He healed or resurrected them (see Luke 8:54-55), and His ministry is instructed to anoint a sick person with oil as a symbol of the Holy Spirit (James 5:14), *and* to lay their hands on the head of a sick person (Mark 16:18). This signifies the power of the Holy Spirit flowing from God through the agency of His human representative into the sick person to heal, again establishing the important truth that God alone, through His Spirit, has the power and ability to perform right and profitable miracles. Also, God shows who His human representatives are by working through them, and the whole process of going to God's ordained servants for anointing helps strengthen the bonds His people have with these representatives and with God Himself.

Later, in 2 Kings 8, the Shunammite woman follows Elisha's instruction to leave Israel during a famine. This section appears to fall here sequentially since Gehazi is still in Elisha's service. (In our next reading, though an earlier chapter than 8, it appears that Gehazi departs from Elisha's presence.) Upon the Shunammite woman's return, all her property is restored to her, and all the proceeds from her field are given to her as well. Thus, she was again blessed for following the instructions of God's prophet.

The Healing of Naaman; Floating Ax Head (2 Kings 5:1–6:7)

February 4

Naaman was a very powerful and successful commander in the Syrian army, and the personal assistant to Ben-Hadad II, the king of Syria. He was, however, a leper. When the Syrians found out that Elisha could perform miracles, Ben-Hadad sent Naaman to Israel. Naaman arrived with an entourage at Elisha's house, expecting an "official" and pompous welcome—and that Elisha would come out and perform a spectacular healing right before his eyes. Elisha, however, told him through a messenger to wash himself seven times in the Jordan to be healed. Naaman became furious, as this "prescription" to restore his health did not meet with his expectations. Receiving second-hand instructions to bathe in the silt-laden waters of the Jordan was offensive to him. Feeling humiliation and anger, he snorted out the names of Syrian rivers, which were cleaner and colder than the Jordan (see *Jamieson, Fausset & Brown's Commentary*, note on 5:12).

We don't know exactly why Elisha would not meet with Naaman in person. In the long run, that decision certainly helped Naaman to see that it was God, not Elisha, who performed the healing—and that may have been a factor. Perhaps the reason also involved Naaman's disease rendering him unclean—so that contact with Elisha would have made Elisha unclean, interfering with his ministry to others (compare Numbers 5:1-4). The command to wash in running water was in line with the law for those to be cleansed of leprosy by the priesthood (Leviticus 14:8-9). With no Levitical priesthood in the northern kingdom, it seems that God's prophets there carried out certain priestly functions. Perhaps the washing in the Jordan was symbolic. After all, the Old Testament washings prefigured spiritual purification and baptism—and seven times would denote completeness. Moreover, of all rivers Elisha chose the Jordan—which would seem to be symbolic of entering the Promised Land, or at least a connection with it, and receiving God's blessings there. In that sense, it may be that this gentile had to be symbolically "cleansed" before partaking of God's promises to Israel, in this case for physical healing.

It could also be that Elisha's seeming snub and the comparably humiliating instructions were to humble Naaman and test him as to whether he would obey instructions. In any event, Naaman's servants encouraged him to follow Elisha's direction and, to his credit, he did what he was told. When he did, his leprosy was healed. Because health trials have such a profound effect on us, mentally as well as physically, God will often use these experiences to work with us spiritually. It appears He may have been doing this with Naaman.

The commander returned to Elisha and offered him money, but Elisha refused to accept it. Again, as we saw earlier, it was the power of *God* that healed—Elisha understanding himself to merely be God's instrument. No one can buy this power, nor can anyone "pay" for a miracle. But Elisha's servant, Gehazi, had a different mindset and secretly and deceitfully asked for and accepted payment. Not only was the servant guilty of greed, but also he greatly misrepresented God's truth and His ways. Elisha, though, saw in a vision from God what Gehazi had done and pronounced the curse of leprosy on Gehazi and his descendants.

Before Naaman departed, he told Elisha that he had now accepted the God of Israel as his God. Then he asked for two things—two mule-loads of earth and that he be pardoned for his future bowing

in a pagan temple. The *Broadman Bible Commentary* states: “Naaman leaves Elisha with two requests. His desire for dirt from Israel is closely linked to the common belief that gods were identified with the land itself—an attitude that continued even in Israel for an embarrassingly long period of time.... Naaman’s second request dealt with the necessity of accompanying his master (apparently the king of Syria) when he worshipped Rimmon, or better, Rammon, the god of storm and rain better known as Hadad. Elisha apparently grants both requests, for the text records that Elisha sent Naaman away with the traditional benediction, ‘Go in peace’” (note on 2 Kings 5:17-19).

Regarding the first item, it would appear that Naaman’s belief system was not really “educated” yet. The concept of the God of heaven being connected and somehow limited to the land of a particular territory—if such was his thinking—was not accurate. However, a slightly different explanation of his view on the matter of land is that he accepted the concept expressed in the Old Testament that “foreign lands were polluted by the existence there of idolatry (cf. Josh. 22:19; Hosea 9:3-5; Amos 7:17). In taking back earth from Israel Naaman acknowledged that the Lord is the God of Israel” (Lawrence Richards, *The Bible Reader’s Companion*, 1991, note on 2 Kings 5). It may even be that Naaman viewed the dirt as merely symbolizing his newfound connection with God and God’s special land. In any case, the taking of dirt was certainly unnecessary. Whether Naaman knew that or not is now unknowable. Either way, it is likely that, being new to God’s truth, his understanding of God’s requirements was rather incomplete.

Regarding Naaman’s second request—that he be pardoned for continuing to bow in a pagan temple—some might use it, particularly Elisha’s perceived approval, to say that a converted Christian can continue to actively participate in non-Christian worship services. But the apostle Paul makes clear that a Christian must never do this (compare 1 Corinthians 10:16-22). Why then didn’t Elisha *prohibit* Naaman from doing so in this case?

Notice up front that 2 Kings 5:19 does not explicitly say that Elisha sanctioned Naaman’s chosen course. *Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Commentary* states, “Elisha’s prophetic commission not extending to any but the conversion of Israel from idolatry, he makes no remark, either approving or disapproving, on the declared course of action, but simply gives (vs. 19) the parting benediction” (note on verse 18). *Soncino* concurs with this understanding of Elisha’s benediction, adding that Elisha left the apparent inconsistency in Naaman’s proposed conduct up to Naaman’s own judgment (*Soncino Books of the Bible*, note on verses 18-19).

What, then, are we to make of Naaman’s thinking? Again, it may well revolve around the fact that his faith was not yet educated. We do see that he was very concerned about not offending God—and it is clear that his bowing in the temple of Rimmon would be only in compliance with his official duties. But he obviously could not yet have learned all of God’s statutes regarding the avoidance of the accoutrements of pagan religion. God teaches us true understanding gradually—not all at once. Christ told His disciples that He had to tell them so much, but that they could not understand it then (John 16:12). They would, however, understand later—in time (verse 13). Indeed, it is not at all unusual for people new to God’s truth today to believe that it’s acceptable to participate in Christmas parties at work and the like. Naaman may have been reasoning similarly regarding pagan temple services. Moreover, for someone in Naaman’s position and society, totally avoiding any appearance of participation in the national religion would be much more difficult than it is in the freedom of the modern Western world.

Yet it should also be mentioned that it’s possible that Naaman’s kneeling was not really to bow in the temple himself. He mentions the king leaning on his arm. Perhaps Ben-Hadad was frail or infirm and needed someone to physically help him kneel and rise. Naaman’s kneeling may have only been to physically assist the king, whom he regularly accompanied, not to bow in the temple. Still, if this is the case, it would seem wiser for Naaman to have had someone else take over this function as it would probably have conveyed a wrong impression to others—either that he was worshiping a pagan god himself or that he was helping someone else to do so. In any case, it appears that Naaman made a commitment to God according to the best of his understanding. And Elisha let it go at that.

The story of Naaman is one that demonstrates that though God is the God of Israel, He loves the whole world (see John 3:16). It shows that God desires to bless the gentiles and bring them—not just the physical descendants of Israel—into a relationship with Him. In fact, as does the example of Nineveh’s repentance at the preaching of Jonah, it demonstrates that gentiles have sometimes been keener in responding to God’s instructions than the Israelites have. Christ used the example of the faith Naaman had shown to indict the lack of faith among His own countrymen (Luke 4:27).

Next we see Elisha calling on God to miraculously make an iron ax head float that had fallen into the water. As always, no task is difficult for God. If there is a need, “ask, and it will be given to you” (Matthew 7:7). This was not a cheap trick to show off the power Elisha had from God—it was a legitimate need and an example of outgoing concern for the benefit of others, as the ax had been borrowed by his servant and would have to have been replaced by him (2 Kings 6:1-7). Miracles performed by God’s true servants have meaning and are not done to draw attention to the person performing the miracles. On the other hand, many prophecies in Scripture foretell the rise of a religious figure called the False Prophet, who will perform “miracles” as well, yet “according to the working of Satan.” His “miracles” are described as “lying wonders,” as they will be used to impress and deceive people, not to help them (2 Thessalonians 2:9-10). We find a forerunner of this deceiver in the person of Simon Magus, a “sorcerer” who, in the days of the early apostles, attempted to “buy” the Holy Spirit to perform miracles and draw a greater following after himself (Acts 8:9-23). His concern was clearly not for the welfare of others.

Servant Sees and Enemy Blinded (2 Kings 6:8-23)

February 5

Second Kings 6:8-23 gives us a powerful example of God’s supernatural help and His law in action. Ben-Hadad II, king of Syria, while at war with Israel, becomes aware that the prophet Elisha receives supernatural insight from God about the king’s actions. He therefore sends an army into the city of Dothan in Israel to capture the prophet. Elisha’s servant becomes afraid when, early in the morning, he sees the city surrounded by the Syrian army with their horses and chariots. Elisha, though, prays to God to open his servant’s eyes, and he sees “the mountain...full of *horses and chariots of fire* all around Elisha” (verse 17). God had sent an angelic army to protect His servants.

Since God is the same yesterday, today and forever (see Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 13:8), and since God is impartial (Acts 10:34), we can have trust and confidence that He will grant the same kind of protection to His servants today. Jesus Christ *knew* that the Father would have sent Him more than 12 legions of angels—72,000 of them—to protect Him from the armed multitude sent to apprehend Him if that had been God’s will at the time (Matthew 26:53). Christ had been assisted and protected and even strengthened by angels throughout His human life (4:11; Luke 22:43). He reassured His servants that they too would have angelic protection in their lives (Matthew 18:10). Sometimes, people actually meet angels without even realizing it (Hebrews 13:2). None of this is meant to imply that God’s servants have a guarantee against suffering or even martyrdom. Rather, whatever happens to His people is according to His strict allowance. And God will always use His infinite power in our best interests.

Answering Elisha’s prayer, God strikes the Syrians with some sort of temporary blindness, and Elisha leads them right to the camp of the army of Israel. The king of Israel, Jehoram, wonders whether he should kill the Syrians, but Elisha instructs him to “set food and water before them, that they may eat and drink and go to their master” (2 Kings 6:22). Jehoram heeds this advice and prepares “a great feast for them.” The result is amazing. After they returned to the king of Syria, “the bands of Syrian raiders came no more into the land of Israel” (verse 23). While this may have been due to fear over the supernatural intervention they had witnessed, it is likely that a lessening of ill will was also a factor. When they could have been slaughtered, they were instead fed and freed.

The Bible tells us to provide our enemy with food and drink when he hungers and thirsts. The lesson here is not one of satisfying the demands of an invading host. Rather, it is that of showing mercy to an enemy who is *at* our mercy. When we do so, the enemy may become ashamed of his unkindness toward us and possibly even change his attitude (Romans 12:20). In fact, if our ways please God (and it *is* pleasing to God when we love our enemies and do good to them, Luke 6:35), He will make our enemies to be at peace with us (Proverbs 16:7). The episode in 2 Kings 6 is a powerful example that we can rely on this promise.

Miraculous Delivery From Famine (2 Kings 6:24–7:20)

February 6

After a lengthy siege of Samaria under Syrian King Ben-Hadad II, famine had broken out in the city—so severe that women were cannibalizing their own children (6:28-29). Somehow, King Jehoram of Israel blamed Elisha for this tragic state of affairs (verse 31). Elisha, though, told the king that God would deliver those in Samaria and provide food for them the very next day: “You will be able to buy a large sack of flour or two large sacks of barley for almost nothing” (7:1, Contemporary English Version). But this seemed impossible under the circumstances. The chief officer accompanying the king responded, “Look, if the LORD would make windows from heaven, could this thing be?” (verse 2). The Contemporary English Version paraphrases this as, “I don’t

believe it! Even if the LORD sent a rainstorm, it couldn't produce that much grain by tomorrow"—that is, produce enough to make grain cheap during a famine. However, through a chain of miraculous events carefully directed by God, Elisha's prophecy came true. The fleeing Syrians abandoned all their foodstuffs. And the doubting officer was "accidentally" killed and therefore could not enjoy the food, just as Elisha had announced (verses 2, 17-20).

This passage should serve as a good example for us. Many times, when we are in need and distress, there does not seem to be relief in sight, and we begin to doubt God's powerful might to work miracles. If we can't "see" HOW it could happen, we don't *believe* THAT it will happen. But we are to walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). Christ pronounces a special blessing on him who does not see but still believes (John 20:29). We don't have to know *how* God will intervene—but we must believe that everything will work out for good as long as we love God (Romans 8:28). But if we doubt, as the officer did, we won't receive anything from God, as James 1:6-8 tells us.

Hazael King Over Syria, Ahaziah King Over Judah, and Jehu Anointed

King Over Israel (2 Kings 8:7-15; 2 Chronicles 21:19–22:6; 2 Kings 8:23–9:13) February 7

Why did Elisha go to Syria? Ben-Hadad II, king of Syria, felt that his arrival was accidental. But, in fact, Elisha was fulfilling a commission that had earlier been given to Elijah. At Mount Sinai, God had commissioned Elijah to anoint Hazael king over Syria, Jehu king over Judah and Elisha as a prophet in his place (1 Kings 19:15-16). Yet Elijah did not finish this commission. He anointed Elisha but not Hazael or Jehu. Thus, Elisha is now being used to complete Elijah's commission, appearing here on the scene at the time of the prophesied transfer of power.

When Ben-Hadad, who had fallen sick, heard that Elisha had come to Damascus, he asked his assistant Hazael to inquire of him whether he, the king, would recover. Elisha notified the king that he would recover, but he went on to explain that he knew that the king would die (2 Kings 8:7-10). Though seemingly inconsistent, this was nonetheless a truthful statement considering that the king would not die because of his sickness, but because he would be murdered by Hazael. Elisha also told Hazael that he would be the next king of Syria, and that the war he would wage against Israel would be severe and brutal (verses 12-15). Elisha must have anointed Hazael at this time, between verses 13 and 14.

After Jehoram, king of Judah, died, Ahaziah, his youngest son, became his successor. He was only 22 years old and reigned only one year. He was a wicked king, the "son-in-law of the house of Ahab" (2 Kings 8:27). He followed the bad advice of his mother Athaliah and his counselors (2 Chronicles 22:1-6). Pursuant to their advice, he engaged in warfare together with Israel's King Joram, referred to earlier as Jehoram, against Hazael, king of Syria. The Syrians, however, wounded Joram, and Ahaziah visited him in Jezreel (2 Kings 8:25-29). It is interesting to note that this battle was fought at Ramoth Gilead (verse 28), the same place Ahab and Jehoshaphat had fought against Ben-Hadad, which resulted in the wounding and death of Ahab (1 Kings 22).

It was now time for Jehu to be anointed king of Israel. To complete Elijah's commission, Elisha sends one of the sons of the prophets to do the anointing (9:1-6). (As an aside, there's an interesting lesson here. God often commissions one of His servants to fulfill a task, which may span many years and include several other servants of God. That is, the commission given to one person isn't necessarily fulfilled by that person alone.) God's command to Jehu is that he "strike down the house of Ahab your master, that I may avenge the blood of my servants the prophets, and the blood of all the servants of the LORD, at the hand of Jezebel [the infamous wicked wife of Ahab]" (9:6-7).

Jehu Kills Joram, Ahaziah and Jezebel (2 Kings 9:14-37; 2 Chronicles 22:7-9) February 8

While Ahaziah was visiting the injured Joram in Jezreel, where he was recuperating, Jehu and his men pressed furiously toward the city. Joram and Ahaziah went out to meet him on the property of Naboth (whose vineyard Ahab and Jezebel had stolen by murdering him, 1 Kings 21:1-16). Jehu killed Joram and had Ahaziah, who tried to escape, tracked down, brought back and killed as well (2 Kings 9:24-27; 2 Chronicles 22:9). Jehu also killed the princes of Judah (verse 8).

At first it may seem like Jehu was going overboard in killing the king of *Judah* and the royal princes there. But it should be remembered that King Ahaziah of Judah was the grandson of Ahab. Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, had contaminated the royal family of David with Ahab's lineage and idolatrous influence, and Jehu was being used to destroy it in Judah as well as in Israel.

When Jezebel heard that Jehu had come to Jezreel, she "put paint on her eyes and adorned her head," obviously with the intent of seducing him (2 Kings 9:30). But Jehu did not fall for it, and Jeremiah and Ezekiel prophesied that Israel and Judah's future enemies would not fall for such

conduct either (Jeremiah 4:30; Ezekiel 23:40), though in the latter case the enemies do go ahead and have improper relations with them, taking advantage of their willingness (verse 44).

Some believe that these passages prohibit Christians from using makeup. Although the use of makeup clearly would be wrong if used for an improper purpose, these passages do not condemn its use in general. Note that it says, figuratively, in Ezekiel 23:40 that Israel and Judah adorned themselves with ornaments, painted their eyes, *and washed themselves* for them, i.e., powerful men they sent for. Obviously, there is nothing wrong with washing—we are *supposed* to do that. The problem is that the use of jewelry and makeup and the washing were being done “for them”—that is, with the intent of seduction. Israel, like Jezebel, was prostituting herself to buy favor with a conqueror. The *motive* is condemned here, not the mere act of washing—nor the act of wearing jewelry or applying cosmetics. (Note also that even today, ancient Egypt remains famous for its use of cosmetics. Even the lower classes in Egypt wore makeup—both men and women. And yet God says nothing at all about makeup in the extremely detailed statutes He gave when Israel *left* Egypt.)

Jehu ordered those in the palace who decided to follow him at this point to throw Jezebel down from the wall, “and some of her blood spattered on the wall and on the horses, and he trampled her underfoot.” Later, when they wanted to bury her, they found only “her skull and the feet and the palms of her hands” (2 Kings 9:33-35). Jehu realized that Elisha’s prophecy regarding Jezebel had been fulfilled precisely (verses 36-37; 1 Kings 21:23-24). Although this punishment might sound cruel, let’s not forget the Bible’s evaluation of Ahab and Jezebel’s deeds and character: “But there was no one like Ahab who sold himself to do wickedness in the sight of the LORD, *because Jezebel his wife stirred him up*” (verse 25). Jezebel was so evil that Christ uses her name to symbolize spiritual corruption (see Revelation 2:20). Remember also that she had mercilessly slaughtered God’s prophets (1 Kings 18:3-4); now their blood was being avenged (2 Kings 9:7). We should always be mindful of the fact that God will repay the wicked (see Deuteronomy 7:9-10).

Jehu Over Israel; Athaliah Over Judah

(2 Kings 10:1-31; 11:1-3; 2 Chronicles 22:10-12)

February 9

Jehu begins his bloody deed of wiping out the house of Ahab, pursuant to Elisha’s prophecy. Seventy of Ahab’s sons lived in Samaria (2 Kings 10:1). When Jehu threatens the city, the elders slaughter the sons and deliver their heads in baskets to Jehu in Jezreel (verses 2-8). Jehu then proceeds to kill everyone remaining from the house of Ahab (verse 11, 17). He also kills the brothers of the late King Ahaziah of Judah (2 Kings 10:12-14), as well as all the priests of Baal (verses 18-28). As we saw earlier, he was eradicating the line of Ahab even across national boundaries.

Jehu, however, was by no means a righteous ruler. Although he seemed to understand that he was an instrument in God’s hands, carrying out God’s vengeance on the house of Ahab and “destroying Baal from Israel” (verse 28), he himself did not obey God in other matters (verse 29). While God rewarded him for what he did do in accordance with His will (verse 30), this does not mean that Jehu lived a life pleasing to God.

The Nelson Study Bible comments: “Jehu’s merciless purge of the official Baal priesthood was a major step in eradicating evil from the northern kingdom. However, the purge only brought Israel back to the syncretism established by Jeroboam I and his successors. God rewarded Jehu with a reign of twenty-eight years, the longest of any northern king so far, and allowed his sons to rule Israel for four more generations, the longest dynasty in Israel’s history. Jehu had an opportunity to be one of the greatest kings, but he did not follow God’s law completely. He did not stop the worship of the golden calves left at Dan and Bethel. While not as overt as during the time of Ahab, the slide to Baal worship in Israel continued even after Jehu’s purge of the worshipers of Baal. Tragically, Jehu did not take the opportunity to lead the Israelites back to complete obedience of God’s law” (“INDepth: A Missed Opportunity: Jehu,” sidebar on 2 Kings 10).

Rather, we read, “Jehu took *no heed* to walk in the law of the LORD God of Israel with all his heart; for he did not depart from the sins of Jeroboam, who had made Israel sin” (verse 31). This example shows that not everyone used by God for a specific purpose must also be a truly repentant believer.

This story also shows the tragic continuing negative heritage of Jeroboam I, whose disobedience and false religion set a pattern of habit and tradition for the nation and its kings from which it was very difficult to break free. Repeatedly throughout the history of Israel’s kings, we read the phrase, “the sins of Jeroboam, who made Israel to sin.” Seeing his great potential, God had offered him a dynasty like that of David (1 Kings 11:38). But, like Lucifer, Jeroboam chose to use his wonderful talent for evil instead of for good.

After Ahaziah, king of Judah, had been killed by Jehu, Ahaziah's mother Athaliah tried to kill all the royal heirs so that she could reign over the land. Here we see another woman of power corrupting herself with the lust for greater influence. However, Ahaziah's sister, Jehosheba, saved Ahaziah's son Joash (or Jehoash) from death and hid him for six years (2 Kings 11:1-3; 2 Chronicles 22:10-12). Jehosheba, also called Jehoshabeath, was the wife of Jehoiada the priest. Her courageous character is a refreshing contrast to the evil queen.

Ironically, Athaliah's actions further purged the Davidic family of Ahab's corrupt lineage. But Joash would survive to reign, as we will see. Yet Joash was himself of Ahab's lineage, being the son of Athaliah's son, King Ahaziah. So why did God allow him to survive? To understand, we must consider the problem with Ahab's lineage in Judah. Remember that after Jehoshaphat's son Jehoram married Ahab's daughter Athaliah, this evil and idolatrous woman became mother and grandmother to many Davidic princes and princesses. Thus the line of Ahab became widely diffused throughout the Jewish royal family. Being queen, mother and grandmother to these other royals enabled her to have a great and corrupting influence on them. This wide diffusion with its accompanying corruption was the real problem. That is why these people needed to go. And through the purges carried out by Jehu and Athaliah herself, all of these corrupt individuals were wiped out. No longer was Ahab's idolatrous lineage widely diffused throughout the family of David. Only one line of descent from Ahab would be allowed to continue—that of Joash, who as a baby was removed from any corrupting influence of other relatives of Ahab's lineage, particularly Athaliah.

Joash Becomes King of Judah (2 Chronicles 23; 2 Kings 11:4-21)

February 10

In the seventh year of the reign of evil Queen Athaliah, Jehoida the priest, with the support and protection of the "captains of hundreds" of the army and the Levites and the "chief fathers of Israel," anointed Joash to be the new king of Judah. This was done on the Sabbath (2 Chronicles 23:4, 8). Joash was seven years old when he was appointed and proclaimed to be the new king (2 Kings 11:21, 12). Jehoida had Queen Athaliah killed by the captains of the army (2 Chronicles 23:14-15). He then "made a covenant between the LORD, the king, and the people, that they should be the LORD's people, and also between the king and the people" (2 Kings 11:17; 2 Chronicles 23:16 adds that the priest was also a party to this covenant.)

Note that two agreements (covenants) were made: one between the Lord, the king and the people, rededicating themselves to God; and a second between only the king and the people. This second covenant was apparently a rededication to constitutional monarchy, in which the king is not above the law. Jehoiada was engaged in reestablishing right government in Judah after the disastrous reigns of Ahaziah and Athaliah. A feature of that reestablishment was settling Judah's government upon its original ground—that of a limited monarchy established under Samuel's superintendence when he "explained to the people the regulations of the kingship" (1 Samuel 10:25, NIV).

Also interesting in this reading is that when Joash was crowned he "stood by *his* pillar" (2 Chronicles 23:13)—2 Kings 11:14 reads "*a* pillar." Israel's kings, according to the custom (2 Kings 11:14), were crowned in a ceremony involving a "pillar." This pillar was apparently a *matsebah*, a standing stone. It is interesting to note that Britain's sovereigns are also crowned in a ceremony involving a "pillar"—Jacob's stone. The Hebrew in these passages is even more interesting, for it literally says the king stood "*upon* his pillar." Britain's monarchs are also crowned "*upon*" a pillar stone—*sitting* upon it (i.e., upon a throne that contains it). Thus, though slightly modified, the custom still prevails thousands of years later. Indeed, the royal house of Britain is a continuation of the very same dynasty of ancient Judah—the dynasty of David (see "The Throne of David: Its Biblical Origin and Future," www.ucg.org/brp/materials).

As a consequence of renewed commitment to God under Joash, the people destroyed the center of Baal worship in Judah (2 Kings 11:18; 2 Chronicles 23:17), and they reinstated the proper sacrificial worship system, as commanded "in the Law of Moses" (verse 18). But, as we will see, some idolatry remained in the land.

Joash's Early Reign (2 Kings 12:1-5; 2 Chronicles 24:1-5)

February 11

Joash (also referred to as Jehoash) reigned 40 years in Jerusalem. As long as Jehoida lived and instructed him, he generally did what was right in the sight of God (2 Kings 12:2; 2 Chronicles 24:2). Undoubtedly his mother Zibiah also had a positive influence on him, as she is specifically mentioned in 2 Kings 12:1 and 2 Chronicles 24:1. Jehoida must have assumed a fatherly role for Joash—we read that the priest selected "two wives for him, and [Joash] had sons and daughters" (verse 3).

Regrettably, we are told that “the high places were not taken away; the people still sacrificed and burned incense on the high places” (2 Kings 12:3). Was this the fault of the people who did not cooperate with the young king’s instructions? Was it the fault of the priest for failing to instruct the king properly? Was it Joash’s fault? The Bible does not provide us with a clear answer. It should be noted that Scripture levels this criticism at the reigns of most of the few righteous kings of Judah. In any event, Joash did “set his heart” on repairing the temple (verses 4-5; 2 Chronicles 24:4) and instructed the priests and Levites to collect money for the necessary repairs. However, we are told that “the Levites did not do it quickly” (2 Chronicles 24:5), which perhaps takes on some significance in light of our next reading in the book of Joel.

Supplementary Reading: An inscription has just recently come to light purportedly from the reign of Joash. If confirmed this would be an astonishing confirmation of Scripture. See the following news articles on the Internet:

“Sensation or Forgery: Researchers Hail Dramatic First Temple Period Finding”

(www.haaretzdaily.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=251230&contrassID=2&subContrassID=1&sbSubContrassID=0&listSrc=Y);

“Old Tablet From King Solomon’s Temple?”

(www.cnn.com/2003/TECH/science/01/14/israel.tablet.ap/);

“There’s Nothing Else Like It”

(www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=252531&contrassID=2&subContrassID=11&sbSubContrassID=0&listSrc=Y)

Introduction to Joel; Joel’s Warnings (Joel 1)

February 12

In its introductory notes on this prophecy, *The Nelson Study Bible* states: “Scholars have offered various dates for the writing of the Book of Joel, from early preexilic times [that is, before the exile of Judah to Babylon] to as late as 350 B.C. Some believe that internal evidence in the Book of Joel indicates that the book was written during the reign of Joash king of Judah (835-796 B.C.), and in the time of the high priest Jehoiada. This view is based on the following considerations: (1) The location of the book between Hosea and Amos in the Hebrew canon suggests a preexilic date of writing. (2) The allusion to the neighboring nations as Judah’s foes rather than Assyria, Babylon, or Persia points to an early date for the book. (3) The book does not mention any reigning king, which may suggest a time when the responsibility for ruling rested upon the priests and elders—as was the case during the early reign of young king Joash (see 2 Kin. 11:4–12:21).” This dating seems reasonable.

It is possible that the prophet Joel, prophesying during the reign of Joash, gave his warnings in chapter 1 during the time when, as we saw in our previous reading, the Levites and the people were slow in doing God’s work (see 2 Chronicles 24:5). Although the prophecy is clearly for the end time, the “day of the LORD” (Joel 1:15), it does carry a secondary relevance for the days when ancient Israel and Judah would be overthrown by Assyria and Babylon.

Joel pictures the inhabitants of the land as being *concerned only with eating and drinking* (verse 5), and so it will be that the fields will be wasted, and the wine will be dried up (verses 10-12). Joel also admonishes the priests to lament and mourn, as the necessary sacrifices have been withheld from the house of God (verse 13). Such a message may well have stricken fear in the hearts of the Levites and priests, who were slow in gathering money to repair the damaged temple, and also in the hearts of the people who were apparently slow in responding to the king’s appeal.

Of course, this warning should strike home today as well—and even more so, as we are fast approaching the primary time described in Joel’s prophecies. We too must be concerned about the work of God. If our priorities are directed toward personal pursuits and pleasures, God will take those away from us. “Alas for the day,” Joel writes, “for the day of the LORD is at hand; it shall come as destruction from the Almighty. Is not the food cut off before our eyes, joy and gladness from the house of our God?” (verse 15). Terrible times are ahead. That is why Christ wants us to have the same sense of urgency that He had while here on earth. He told His disciples, “*I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work*” (John 9:4).

Likewise, He tells all of us, especially those in His ministry: “Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find *so doing*. Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods. But if that evil servant says in his heart, ‘My master is delaying his coming,’ and begins to beat his fellow servants, *and to eat and drink with the drunkards* [see Joel’s

admonitions above], the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of it, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 24:45-51).

Rather than straying into compromises, self-centeredness, apathy and indifference, an urgent sense of concern and genuine compassion for others are needed. Through His prophet, God exhorts people in this first chapter of Joel to weep and wail (verse 5), lament (verse 8), mourn (verses 9-10), lament, wail and wear sackcloth (verse 13), fast (verse 14), and cry out to God (verses 14, 19-20).

In verse 19, we find Joel’s remarkable lament: “O LORD, to You I cry out.” *The Bible Reader’s Companion* states in its note on this verse: “Unable to move any in Judah by his urgent words, Joel sets a personal example. Others will not call on the Lord, but Joel does. What should you and I do if the leadership of our churches seems insensitive to God? How should we react if no one listens to our urgent warnings? Just as Joel did! We don’t despair. We don’t strike out angrily at others. We turn to God, and in so doing model the response that the Lord wants all of his people to make to Him.”

As we approach the end of this age, it is increasingly vital that each of us develop a *personal* relationship with God, learning to obey Him and trust Him completely. It may even be that our example will lead others to do the same.

“A People Come, Great and Strong” (Joel 2)

February 13

Joel’s warnings now turn specifically to the final trumpet warning to Israel and Judah (Ezekiel 33:3-6; Amos 3:6). They have been warned repeatedly about not following God, but now their time is about to run out. It is clear from the evidence in this and the following chapters that much of the prophecy is for the end time. In addition to the expression “day of the LORD” (Joel 2:1), there is a strong indication of the end time in verse 2: “The like of whom *has never been; nor will there ever be* any such after them, even for many successive generations.” This is reminiscent of other prophecies about a time of great distress like no other (Daniel 12:1; Jeremiah 30:7; Matthew 24:21). Verses 10 and 30-31 describe dramatic heavenly signs that are also mentioned in New Testament prophecies (Matthew 24:29; Acts 2:20; Revelation 8:12).

However, the strongest evidence here for this not being a prophecy for Joel’s time is the latter part of the chapter that describes the outpouring of God’s Spirit—which finds initial fulfillment in the New Testament Church age following Jesus’ first appearance, greater fulfillment at the time of the heavenly signs preceding His future return, and ultimate fulfillment under the rule of the Kingdom of God on earth, when the way of salvation will be open to all mankind (compare Acts 2:14-21).

Some consider the “day of the LORD” to refer to the whole Christian era, from apostolic times onward. However, the references to it in Joel and other places generally refer to the time immediately surrounding Christ’s return and beyond (compare Joel 3; Zephaniah 1:18; Zechariah 14:1-4; Acts 2:20; 2 Peter 3:10). Note especially this paraphrase of Amos 5:18-20 in the New Living Translation: “How terrible it will be for you who say, ‘If only the day of the LORD were here! For then the LORD would rescue us from all our enemies.’ But you have no idea what you are wishing for. That day will not bring light and prosperity, but darkness and disaster. In that day you will be like a man who runs from a lion—only to meet a bear. After escaping the bear, he leans his hand against a wall in his house—and is bitten by a snake. Yes, the day of the LORD will be a dark and hopeless day, without a ray of joy or hope.” Clearly, this does not refer to the whole Christian era starting with the days of the apostles—and neither does Joel 2.

The invading army of chapter 2 is represented as a huge locust swarm—extremely loud, climbing walls, entering through gaps, darkening the sky and utterly devastating everything in its path. In this chapter, then, the locusts of chapter 1 (verse 4) are thus revealed to be an army of *people* (2:2, 25). Also interesting is the fact that though this is a foreign, gentile army, Joel refers to it as *God’s* army (verse 11). This is because they are acting as the agent of His judgment. Similarly, God elsewhere refers to Assyria as “the rod of My anger” (Isaiah 10:5). As ancient Assyria was located to the northeast of Israel, its forces could rightly be described as the “northern army” (Joel 2:20). Yet while these prophecies apparently found some fulfillment in the destruction brought against Israel and Judah by Assyria in the eighth century B.C.—beginning less than a century from when it appears that Joel wrote—the ultimate fulfillment, for the end time, is yet to come. Later, when we come to Isaiah 10 in our reading, we will consider evidence showing that *modern* Assyria is located to the *northwest* of Israel—in Central Europe.

However, it should be pointed out that “God’s army” of verse 11 is not necessarily synonymous with the “northern army” of verse 20—as it may be that “God’s army” in this context is the 200-million-man army of Revelation 9:16 reacting to the takeover of the Holy Land by the “northern”

(i.e., European) army. Indeed, that event does occur during the Day of the Lord, as it follows Revelation 6:17, whereas it is evident from other passages that the end-time European invasion of the Holy Land will occur *before* the Day of the Lord, at the beginning of what is termed the Great Tribulation (compare Daniel 11:40-41; Luke 21:20-24; Matthew 24:15-22). Still, there may be other possibilities regarding the identities of these armies.

In any case, Joel's message is a serious warning of great "doom and gloom." Yet it also reveals the loving, gentle and patient character of the Creator. He sends out a plea for repentance (a complete turnaround, not just an outward show, Joel 2:12-14) and assures everyone that "He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm" (verse 13). Even when God has warned people of punishment for their sins, He is willing to change His mind if they repent (Jeremiah 18:8; Psalm 106:40-45; Jonah 3:10). Here is an example for all of God's people to follow—to be gracious, merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness.

Joel continues with his serious request for change by pleading with *all* the people, from the priests even to the children, to take the warning seriously, to fast and pray.

After the call to repentance comes the reference to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit (verses 28-31). This has enormous significance for the Church today as we near the end of the age. If we are prepared to heed the warnings and turn our lives around with the help of the Holy Spirit, we too can reap the promised blessings.

"Multitudes, Multitudes in the Valley of Decision!" (Joel 3)

February 14

After God deals with Israel and Judah, He now turns to those nations that have abused them. He will now judge *all* the nations. Indeed, the Israelites of the end time will suffer a period that Christ called the Great Tribulation (Matthew 24:21-22). Jeremiah refers to it as the "time of *Jacob's* trouble" (Jeremiah 30:5-7). Yet notice this about the Day of the Lord, referred to in our previous reading: "For it is the day of the LORD's vengeance, the year of recompense for the cause of Zion" (Isaiah 34:8). Thus, the *Day* of the Lord here appears to be the final *year* immediately preceding Christ's return. Immediately following Israel's Tribulation, it is a time of divine punishment on the world at large for their sins, including what they have done to Israel. (However, it should be noted that in some contexts the Day of the Lord extends past this time to include the millennial reign of Christ and even eternity beyond.)

Some equate the "Valley of Jehoshaphat" (verse 2) with the area of "Armageddon," citing Revelation 16:16. Yet this verse actually shows the area of Armageddon—i.e., the Hill of Megiddo overlooking the Valley of Jezreel (the modern plain of Esdraelon)—to be the *assembly point* for the final battle, not the scene of the battle itself. So where will the final battle itself take place? In Zechariah 14, God answers, "Behold, the day of the LORD is coming.... For I will gather all the nations to battle against *Jerusalem*.... Then the LORD will go forth and fight against those nations, as He fights in the day of battle. And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives" (verses 1-4).

Concerning the reference to the Valley of Jehoshaphat in Joel 3, *Jamieson, Fausset & Brown's Commentary* has this to say: "Parallel to Zechariah 14:2, 3, 4, where the 'Mount of Olives' answers to the 'Valley of Jehoshaphat' here. The latter is called 'the valley of blessing' (*Berachah*) (II Chronicles 20:26). It lies between Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives and has the Kedron [i.e., Kidron] flowing through it." This depression is now known as the Kidron Valley, which runs north to south along the east side of the Old City. It stretches south for more than 20 miles through the Judean wilderness to the area of the Dead Sea. Continuing from the *JFB Commentary*: "As Jehoshaphat [righteous king of Judah] overthrew the confederate foes of Judah, viz., Ammon, Moab, etc...in this valley [see 2 Chronicles 20:16, 26—and actually *God* overthrew them while Jehoshaphat and company merely despoiled the bodies], so God was to overthrow the Tyrians, Zidonians, Philistines, Edom, and Egypt, with a similar utter overthrow ([Joel 3:]4, 19). This has been long ago fulfilled; but the ultimate event shadowed forth herein is still future, when God shall specially interpose to destroy Jerusalem's last foes, of whom Tyre, Zidon, Edom, Egypt, and Philistia are the types. As 'Jehoshaphat' means 'the judgment of Jehovah [i.e., Yahweh],' the valley of Jehoshaphat may be used as a *general* term for the theater of God's final judgments on Israel's foes, with an allusion to the judgment inflicted on them by Jehoshaphat. The definite mention of the Mount of Olives in Zechariah 14, and the fact that this was the scene of the ascension [of Christ], makes it likely the same shall be the scene of Christ's coming again: cf. 'this same Jesus... shall so come *in like manner* as ye have seen Him go into heaven' (Acts 1:11)" (same note).

Of the Kidron Valley, *Smith's Bible Dictionary* states, "It is now commonly known as the 'valley of Jehoshaphat'" ("Kidron," 1986). Still, as the *JFB Commentary* points out, it may be that Valley of Jehoshaphat connotes more than just the Kidron. Revelation 14:20 says that the "winepress," a figurative representation of the Valley of Jehoshaphat, the "valley of decision" (Joel 3:12-14), is an area nearly 200 miles long. This is far longer than the Kidron Valley. Indeed, that's as long as the modern state of Israel. So perhaps the entire Jordan Valley is indicated. We can imagine troops stretching all the way from well above Megiddo, down the Jezreel Valley to where it connects to the Jordan Valley, then south to Jericho, and finally ascending to the Kidron Valley at Jerusalem. This seems reasonable when we consider that the forces of the kings "of the whole world" that will be present (Revelation 16:14)—some of whom will shortly before have fielded an army of 200 million men (9:16), more than two thirds the current population of the United States. "Multitudes, multitudes," Joel writes (Joel 3:14). And yet they are as nothing against God—indeed, their incredible numbers will only make for a very great slaughter.

The nations have never been kind to Israel (verses 2-3). Joel lists a number of them that have been cruel to Israel, some having plundered God's people over many centuries. Slave trading (verse 3), common among ancient nations, will be practiced again before Christ returns (compare Revelation 18:11-13). And numerous other scriptures show that it is the end-time Israelites who will be slaves. God will repay the nations for the way they have treated His people.

Joel 3 is full of graphic imagery, often in stark contrast to similar imagery used elsewhere. The enemies of Israel are to turn their plowshares into swords and their pruning hooks into spears (verse 10)—that is, prepare for war—the opposite of what God says will happen after He does away with war (Isaiah 2:4). He likens the nations' sins to grapes ready for the winepress, as already mentioned (Joel 3:12-14; compare Revelation 14:17-20).

Finally, Joel describes how God will replace man's wicked rule over the earth with His way of government (Joel 3:17). In the end, Israel will become beautiful once again (verse 18). Some claim that the return of the Jews to the land of Israel in modern times is the fulfillment of this prophecy, but the description given here shows that this prophecy hasn't yet been fulfilled. Indeed, the Jews are seen here receiving forgiveness of their sins (verses 20-21), which comes only through acceptance of Jesus Christ as the Messiah (see Zechariah 12:10). Furthermore, the Jews make up only a small portion of the modern descendants of Israel (see our free booklet *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*.)

Finally, God says that He will live in Jerusalem (Joel 3:17, 21)—another clear proof that Joel is a prophecy of end-time events and is yet to be fulfilled.

The Failure of Jehu and His Son Jehoahaz; Joash Repairs

the Temple (2 Kings 10:32-36; 13:1-2; 12:6-16; 2 Chronicles 24:6-14)

February 15

Note on the names of the kings: The passages for the next few days refer to "Joash" or "Jehoash" as being kings of Israel and Judah. This can be confusing to the casual reader. In 2 Kings 11:2 the king of Judah is referred to as "Joash," while in 2 Kings 12:2 he is referred to as "Jehoash." The name of the king of *Israel* is also written both ways, even in the same chapter. Second Kings 13:9 refers to him as "Joash," while the next verse spells his name "Jehoash." In 2 Chronicles the king of Judah is referred to as "Jehoash." The New International Version uses "Jehoash" in 2 Kings 13:9-10 in both places, while other versions use the original Hebrew spellings. The answer to the dilemma is that, as in the cases of other Israelite kings, they are variations of the same name and are interchangeable—and there was a King Joash (or Jehoash) in both Judah and Israel. For the purpose of these notes, we have followed the practice of other commentators in referring to the king of Judah as "Joash" and the king of Israel as "Jehoash."

In Israel: During Jehu's reign, Israel began to pay tribute to Assyria in a partly successful effort to buy Assyrian protection (as a vassal state) from the Aramaeans (Syrians). An inscription of Shalmaneser III engraved upon his famous Black Obelisk, now in the British Museum, recorded, "The tribute of Jehu, son [i.e., royal successor] of Omri, silver, gold, bowls of gold, chalices of gold, cups of gold, vases of gold, lead, scepter for the king, and spear shafts, I have received" (quoted by T.C. Mitchell, *The Bible in the British Museum*, 2000, p. 47).

Yet, "because Shalmaneser III was occupied with political pressure in the east, Hazael [king of Syria] took advantage of the situation, harassing Israel throughout [Jehu's] long reign. After Jehu's death, Hazael marched freely into Israel and even into Judah ([2 Kings] 12:17, 18; 13:22). The important point of these verses is that the attacks of Hazael were part of God's judgment on Israel" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 10:32-33). It is Jehu's failure to complete the task of removing pagan

worship that leads to God again taking action against Israel through the hand of the king of Syria (verses 32-33). Yet even with this punishment, when Jehu died, his son Jehoahaz failed to correct the wrongdoing (13:1-2).

In Judah: Meanwhile, in Judah, the Levitical priests had not undertaken the task committed to them by Joash to repair the temple (12:4-5). The collection commanded by Moses was of three types (verse 4): money collected in the census (Exodus 30:14), money assessed on personal vows (Leviticus 27:1-8) and voluntary offerings. Evidently, the priests were considering all that was given to them to be their personal income. “Apparently the priests were unwilling to divert ‘their’ income to the repair project, and were incapable of doing the work themselves. So Joash had them hand the money over directly to others who would do the work” (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, note on 2 Kings 12:6-8).

Disappointed with the priests, Joash summoned Jehoiada the priest, and arrangements were made for the repair of the temple to be handed over to skilled workmen. The king had Jehoiada make a special box to collect the offerings, and he issued a proclamation through the land. The response of the people was magnificent and more than what was required for repairing the temple. The temple repairs were placed ahead of other requirements, yet there was still sufficient left over to provide for the various articles for the temple.

Such was the honesty of those given responsibility over the funds that they were not required to keep accounts of the money supplied. And the workmen not only restored the temple to its original splendor, but even reinforced it. Sadly, the spiritual commitment of the people exceeded that of those who were supposed to be their teachers and good examples in following the ways of God.

Joash’s Apostasy; Elisha’s Last Signs

(2 Chronicles 24:15-27; 2 Kings 12:17-21; 13:3-11, 14-25)

February 16

In Judah: Judah’s leaders once again depart from the truth. Jehoiada had provided a great deal of strength and encouragement. The nation respected the results of his work. But as is so often the case, the other leaders didn’t appreciate the *means* to that end—obedience to God—and soon sank back into idolatry. Again, God took action to show them how wrong they were. He had warned them through Moses about what would happen (Leviticus 26:17; compare verse 8).

The really sad part of the story is that of King Joash. From the time he came to the throne as a seven-year-old boy, Jehoiada had been almost an adoptive father to him, even having chosen his wives (2 Chronicles 24:3). And Joash had done so well in restoring proper worship in Judah. Yet he “comes across as a man of weak character. As long as Jehoiada lived, he followed the Lord. But with the priest gone, the king was just as easily led into sin. The measure of our children’s character is not how they behave while they are at home, but the choices they make after they leave!” (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, note on verse 17). Incredibly, the king, who had been like a son to Jehoiada, ended up killing Jehoiada’s actual son for giving advice he didn’t like. This was his own cousin (22:11; 24:20). “This once-good king had sunk to the level of his evil grandmother Athaliah (see 22:10), despite decades of past faithfulness to God” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 24).

This should serve as a warning to us all. In the end, Joash was murdered. But he “was excluded from the royal cemetery because he fell far short of the Davidic ideal (see 21:20). Ironically, Jehoiada, who was not a king at all, was buried among the kings because of his faithfulness to God and to God’s chosen king (v. 16)” (same note). There are other examples in Scripture of apostasy following the removal of an influential righteous figure. The apostle Paul, for instance, knew that apostasy would follow his own death. And sadly, this pattern has persisted.

In Israel: While Joash was starting to rebuild the temple in Judah, Jehoahaz was coming to the throne in Israel. But his rule was nothing like what was happening in Judah. Jehoahaz continued in the sins of Jeroboam, as Jehu had. The reduction of Israel’s power as divine punishment was severe (see 2 Kings 13:7), “a far cry from the time when Ahab alone could muster two thousand chariots for the allied forces at Qarqar” (*The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on verse 7).

The next king of Israel was Jehoash (or Joash) and he too persisted in wrongdoing. In 2 Kings 13:14, “Jehoash’s cry over the aged Elisha repeats the words of Elisha spoken when Elijah was taken up to heaven (2:12). Thus, both at the beginning of his ministry and at its conclusion, Elisha is unmistakably linked to his mentor Elijah. The grief of Jehoash at the impending death of Elisha shows that, like his father Jehoahaz (see vv. 4, 5), this Israelite king possessed some genuine spirituality. The line of Jehu had its good moments and received some reward from the Lord (see 10:30). However, none of this line or any other of the kings of Israel served God with all their heart (see 10:31)” (*Nelson*, note on 13:14).

A slightly different take on Jehoash's grief is explained in *The Bible Reader's Companion*: "Even the wicked king Jehoash wept at the death of Elisha, but only because he was a national resource; the equivalent of a chariot army! Yet even this cry shows a lack of faith. Elisha died [or, at this point, was dying]. But God lived [—a point illustrated by the miracle of Elisha's bones].... Let's not make the mistake of trusting in God's ministers, and not in God" (note on verse 16).

Before his death, Elisha asked Jehoash to shoot an arrow and then to strike some arrows on the ground. "This section describes a symbolic act that Elisha had Joash perform to ensure victories over his enemies; the king was only partly successful in completing the task. Elisha's symbolic act of putting his hands on the king's hands should have alerted the king that the aged prophet was conveying a divine blessing on him. Jehoash's halfhearted compliance with Elisha's instructions exposed his weak faith and illustrated God's unfavorable evaluation of his character (v. 11). God's dying prophet was rightly disturbed. Although God would allow Israel to defeat the Aramean army three times, their victory would be incomplete" (*Nelson*, note on verses 15-19).

After this, Elisha died. But the miracles associated with him didn't stop. God had one more dramatic sign: the raising of a dead man who came in contact with Elisha's remains. "There was no magic in Elisha's bones, but a demonstration of the power of God associated with his servant" (note on verse 21). "The juxtaposition of this event with the account that precedes it makes it clear that herein was another divinely intended sign for Jehoash and Israel; God was the God of the living, not the dead (cf. Luke 20:38), not only for Elisha [who would one day be resurrected] and the man who had [now] been restored to life, but for Israel as well. Israel could yet 'live' if she would but appropriate the eternally living God as her own. The entire episode was, further, a corroborative sign that what Elisha had prophesied would certainly come to pass. Only a living God could guarantee such a thing (cf. Isa 44)" (*Expositor's*, note on 2 Kings 13:21). "This miracle should have reassured Jehoash that God intended to rescue Israel from the deadly grip of Aramean domination (see v. 25)" (*Nelson*, note on verse 21).

"In accordance with Jehoash's striking the ground three times with arrows (v. 18), God gave Jehoash victory over the Arameans only three times. Yet God graciously overruled Jehoash's inadequate faith by granting Israel full victory over the Arameans during the reign of his son Jeroboam II" (note on verse 25).

Amaziah's Reign and War With Israel (2 Kings 14:1-14; 2 Chronicles 25:1-24) February

17

Like so many people, Amaziah, king of Judah, started off on the right track, but his initial acts soon faded away. Indeed, it is specifically mentioned that he did "everything as his father Joash had done" (2 Kings 14:3)—meaning that he followed the right example that Joash set early on. But he later follows the example of Joash in apostasy and resultant disaster.

His first action as king was to execute those who had murdered his father (2 Chronicles 24:25-26). In doing so, he followed what God had taught Israel through Moses by not killing the sons of the perpetrators for their fathers' crime (compare Deuteronomy 24:16).

Then, however, we see Amaziah starting to waver. Instead of relying on God (2 Chronicles 14:11; Jeremiah 17:5), he thought he could protect Judah by hiring mercenaries from Ephraim—but God is not limited to our human efforts (Mark 9:23). To his credit, Amaziah listened to a man of God who came to him with sound advice (2 Chronicles 25:7-10). God honored his obedience with victory—but his earlier lack of trust was to backfire on him. The mercenaries he dismissed took advantage of the armies being away and pillaged Judah's frontier towns.

Sadly, it all went downhill from there. At this point, Chronicles records an utterly unconscionable fact not mentioned in Kings. Instead of thanking God for his victory, Amaziah "brought the gods of the people of Seir [that is, of the Edomites, whom he'd just defeated], set them up to be his gods, and bowed down before them and burned incense to them" (2 Chronicles 25:14). This was totally irrational to the point of absurdity. "The futility of 'gods, which could not save their own people' should have been obvious, but *men still worship that which is demonstrably inadequate*" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on verse 15, emphasis added). It seems that Amaziah couldn't learn the lesson.

There was no way God would allow Amaziah to get away with such outrageous behavior, and He sent a prophet to correct the king. But Amaziah didn't want the advice. Rather, he became a victim of his own pride. Overconfident following his victory over the Edomites, and angry at the Israelite mercenaries who raided Judah's cities after his dismissal of them, Amaziah challenged Jehoash of Israel to a battle—a senseless undertaking as portrayed by Jehoash's fable, where he likens Amaziah

to a thistle fighting a cedar of Lebanon. Yet Amaziah would not see reason—indeed, this development “came from God,” we are told, as a way for Him to impose judgment (verse 20).

Judah lost the battle. And, more humiliating still, Amaziah was taken captive and treasures from the temple and the palace were taken as spoils of war. Biblical historian Eugene Merrill writes: “Amaziah himself narrowly escaped with his life. Why Jehoash spared him at all is a mystery, for he evidently took him back to Samaria as a prisoner (2 Kings 14:13-14) [after taking him to the plunder of Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 25:23-24)]. The answer may lie in the date of these events. Both the author of Kings and the chronicler stress that Amaziah outlived Jehoash by fifteen years (2 Kings 14:17; 2 Chron. 25:25). This may be their oblique way of suggesting that Amaziah’s release from Israelite control is to be tied in with the death of his captor” (*Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*, 1987, p. 372). Merrill’s explanation has Amaziah being released soon afterward—seeing the battle described here as occurring just before Jehoash’s death. However, he also offers the possibility that the battle occurred 10 years prior to Jehoash’s death (see p. 372 footnote).

In comparing all the biblical data on when the kings of this period reigned, the latter appears to be the case. This would mean that Amaziah was a captive of Israel for 10 years, during which time his son Uzziah (or Azariah) was elevated to the throne of Judah. Upon the death of Jehoash, Amaziah is evidently permitted to return to Judah, where he lives for 15 more years in a coregency with his son (see Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, 1983, pp. 113-116).

Conspiracy Against Amaziah; Reign of Jeroboam II

(2 Kings 13:12-13; 2 Chronicles 25:25-28; 2 Kings 14:15-27)

February 18

In Judah: Amaziah’s acts now brought him into conflict with his own people, who conspired against him and eventually killed him in Lachish. “The fact that Amaziah reached the city of Lachish on the border with Philistia, some 25 miles from Jerusalem, suggests that he may have been seeking sanctuary among the Philistines” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 2 Chronicles 25:27). That the plot “was not a move against the dynasty of David is clear from the fact that Amaziah was replaced by his own son Azariah (= Uzziah), who had been coreigning with him for over twenty years. The most likely theory is that the foul deed of murder had, ironically, been motivated by the desire to restore a pure worship of Yahweh to the kingdom (see 2 Chron. 25:27)” (Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, pp. 372-373).

In Israel: Meanwhile, in Israel, the continuing apostasy of the Jehu dynasty in the sins of Jeroboam can be seen in Jehoash actually naming his son Jeroboam. And this son, Jeroboam II, becomes the next king—the fourth king of the Jehu dynasty. He was coregent with his father from around 793-782 B.C. and sole ruler from around 782-753. One of Israel’s most illustrious kings, he enlarged the northern kingdom of Israel to its greatest territorial extent. However, “Israelite society, in spite of its healthy appearance, was in an advanced state of decay, socially, morally and religiously” (John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 1981, p. 256).

Sadly, Jeroboam himself continued in the sins of his namesake (2 Kings 14:24). Yet, in spite of Israel’s idolatry, God was still incredibly merciful to His people. Through the prophet Jonah, God had recently foretold the restoration of territory just mentioned (verse 25). Incidentally, this gives us a historical context for Jonah’s ministry and the book of Jonah, which we will be reading next.

Jeroboam II was to accomplish a great deal during his long reign, and God left a major legacy through him. Sadly, Israel’s spiritual standards had fallen so low that it would not stand for long as a nation. Despite the 40-year flush of restored power and prestige under Jeroboam II, Israel’s first deportation by the Assyrians occurred only 20 years after his reign ended—just two decades after the peak of the northern kingdom. And Israel was *subject* to Assyria in even less time. America, having won the Cold War and feeling secure today as the world’s only superpower, would do well to reflect on that.

It should be noted here that the reign of Jeroboam II and subsequent kings of Israel are not mentioned in Chronicles. In fact, of the last seven rulers of Israel, only one, Pekah, is mentioned at all (2 Chronicles 28:6).

Introduction to Jonah (Jonah 1)

February 19

As we saw in our previous reading, 2 Kings 14:25 shows that Jonah preached during the reign of Jeroboam II (ca. 792-753 B.C.). He “was from Gath Hopher, a town in the territory of Zebulun (see Josh. 19:10, 13; 2 Kin. 14:25), several miles northeast of Nazareth. Nothing is known of his father Amittai. The name Jonah means ‘Dove.’ We associate the dove with peace and purity; however, this positive meaning is not the only possible association. A ‘dove’ could also be a symbol of silliness (see

Hos. 7:11), a description that sadly applies to this tragicomical prophet” (*Nelson Study Bible*, introduction to Jonah).

The story of Jonah and the big fish (or whale) is one of the best known from the Old Testament. Many skeptics have regarded the story’s miracles as folklore or allegory. Yet the validity and importance of the story are made plain by Jesus’ own reference to it and the use of it as proof that He was the Messiah (Matthew 12:38-41; Luke 11:29-32).

The book is unusual in that it only contains one prophecy (Jonah 3:4) and is actually a story about the prophet rather than details of his messages.

The book of Jonah reveals a great deal about God’s mercy. With regard to Nineveh, the *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* makes this comment: “Is God’s salvation available even to such people? For God to be so concerned about the positive future of nations such as Assyria was intolerable to some: How could God think of saving a nation that had so devastated God’s own people? Jonah himself is a type representing certain pious Israelites who posed such a question regarding the extension of God’s mercy to the wicked.... *God’s way with the world, not simply with Israel, is the way of mercy in the face of deserved judgment*” (“Jonah,” 2000, emphasis added). As God states through the apostle James, “Mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13).

You Can’t Run From God (Jonah 1)

Feb. 19 Cont’d

The story begins with Jonah’s call by God to go to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, founded by Nimrod, the great-grandson of Noah (Genesis 10:8-12). Like so many others, Jonah didn’t want to go—but unlike any other recorded scriptural examples of God’s true servants, Jonah not only refused to go, but he actually tried to run from God. Jonah later gives his reason as objection to God’s inclination to show mercy (Jonah 4:2)—as this could result in Nineveh, Israel’s enemy, being shown mercy if they repented at his preaching. But Jonah was to learn that when God gives His servants a job to do, He expects them to carry it out.

And, of course, you can’t run from God. As King David wrote, “Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell [i.e., *sheol*, ‘the grave’], You are there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me” (Psalm 139:7-10). Jonah surely knew these verses, as he was familiar with the Psalms (demonstrated in the next reading). And yet he tried to defy them by fleeing across the sea to *Tarshish*: “The name means ‘to smelt,’ and thus the city was associated with the metal trade. The furthest known metal producing port in the 8th century B.C. was Tartessus, in Spain. Most believe this port was Jonah’s destination. The identification is not vital, however. What is key is that metal producing areas along the Mediterranean were in the *opposite direction* from Nineveh” (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, note on 1:3). “In any case, it represents the farthest place known to the people of ancient Israel. It is similar to going ‘to the ends of the earth’” (“INDepth: Jonah: A Reluctant Missionary,” *Nelson Study Bible*, sidebar on Jonah 1). Obviously, it was not far enough—indeed, there’s no place so far as to place us out of the reach of God. Ironically, it is this fact that will also save Jonah from death in the sea.

God can use all sorts of means to get His servants to do His will. In this case, He brought the real problem of Jonah’s attitude and disobedience into the open. Not only did it force Jonah to carry out his task, but it had a profound impact on the sailors he sailed with (Jonah 1:16). *The Bible Reader’s Companion* notes: “Even out of fellowship with God, Jonah had an evangelistic impact on the sailors. His admission that he was the reason why God brought the great storm; his demand the sailors throw him overboard; the sudden stilling of the storm as soon as Jonah left the ship; all these witnessed to God’s greatness and led the crew to greatly fear ‘the LORD’ and to make ‘vows’ to Him.’ It’s a mistake to assume just because God is using someone in others’ lives that that person must be godly. The Lord uses imperfect agents and even some who are actively disobeying Him at the very time they serve as channels of grace! So give God the glory. And do not hold His servants in awe, as though what God does is a testimony to some human being’s holiness” (note on 1:6-16). Of course, recognizing a pattern of unrighteous conduct would be a reason to question or even reject someone as a spiritual leader. The point is that God can use anyone—righteous or not—to direct others to His truth. (This in no way removes the responsibility all of us have to make sure that the spiritual leaders we follow are godly and doctrinally on track.)

Returning to the account, we next come to the saga of the “great fish,” as translated from the Hebrew. When Christ refers to this incident in the New Testament, it is interesting to note the Greek translation of what He said. Rather than the common Greek word for “fish,” *ichthus*, another word,

ketos, is used. This is the same word the Greek Septuagint uses in its translation of Jonah. The King James Version renders this word in the New Testament as “whale,” but it literally denotes “a huge fish, a sea monster” (*Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, 1985, New Testament Section, “Whale”).

This does not necessarily rule out a whale, as the word may allow for that. Many people have said that a whale could not have swallowed a man and, even if it had, he wouldn’t have survived. Yet the evidence against the whale story is far from conclusive. Note this section from *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*: “While the throats of most whales are too narrow to swallow a man, the *cachalot* or sperm whale can.... Even other species of whales could preserve a man alive, were the man able to reach the great laryngeal pouch. This structure, with its thick, elastic walls, is large enough to contain a man and to supply him with air for breathing. A.J. Wilson (*Princeton Theological Review*, 25 {1941}, 636) records the case of a man swept overboard by a harpooned sperm whale in the vicinity of the Falkland Islands. The whale was eventually killed and cut apart. After three days, the missing sailor was found in the animal’s stomach, unconscious. He was successfully revived, although the skin of his face, neck, and hands was bleached by the whale’s gastric juices” (“Jonah, Book of,” 1982).

Still, another source argues: “Until the Bible was translated into English, no one had ever heard the story of Jonah and the whale. For the great fish that’s mentioned in Jonah 1:17 was considered by ancient and medieval scholars to be a sea monster and was designated accordingly in Greek and Latin Bibles.... [This] interpretation is faithful to Greek *ketos*, which designates a sea dragon or monster. Just what creature was in the mind of the original writer of Jonah’s saga remains a matter of conjecture. Probability points to some semi-mythical sea serpent rather than to the shark or humpback whale.... Many twentieth-century versions and translations reject ‘whale’ and use ‘sea monster’ or ‘dragon’ in rendering the ancient account” (Webb Garrison, *Strange Facts About the Bible*, 1968, 2000, pp. 103-104). This is not out of the question. It may even be that God specially created this creature, as we are explicitly told that He “had *prepared* a great fish” (verse 17). Indeed, with other biblical references to Leviathan, a sea serpent and clear type of Satan, the great dragon (Revelation 12:9)—and considering the idea of being in his clutches as a type of death for sin—this seems a very strong parallel with Christ’s death.

In any event, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* adds this important comment: “As the type of fish is not identified and the story is told in the most general terms, we should avoid making the incident, which in itself is physically possible, more difficult by our interpretations. Jesus placed it alongside the even greater miracle of his own resurrection. What we must do, however, is find an adequate spiritual reason for so great a miracle” (introductory notes on Jonah).

This is a reference to Matthew 12:39-40. The scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus for a sign to verify His claims. He responded: “An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

Many theologians, believing that Christ died Friday afternoon and rose Sunday morning, interpret the period to mean *parts* of three days and just two nights—a little bit of Friday afternoon, Friday night, all day Saturday, Saturday night and a little bit of Sunday morning. However, it is illogical to interpret the Hebrew of Jonah in the light of an unproven theory from New Testament times. Typical of mainstream Christian thinking is this statement from *Adam Clarke’s Commentary*: “That days and nights do not, among the Hebrews, signify complete days and nights of twenty-four hours, see Esth. iv.16, compared with chap. v.1; Judg. xiv.17, 18. Our Lord lay in the grave one natural day, and part of two others; and it is most likely that this was the precise time that Jonah was in the fish’s belly” (1967, note on Jonah 1:17). Actually, the references he quotes do *not* prove his point.

Note this accurate explanation from *The Companion Bible*: “The fact that ‘three days’ is used by Hebrew idiom for any part of three days and three nights is not disputed; because that was the common way of reckoning, just as it was when used of years. Three or any number of years was used inclusively of any part of those years, as may be seen in the reckoning of the reigns of any of the kings of Israel and Judah. *But when the number of ‘nights’ is stated as well as the number of ‘days,’ then the expression ceases to be an idiom, and becomes a literal statement of fact.*

“Moreover, as the Hebrew day began at sunset the day was reckoned from one sunset to another, the ‘twelve hours in the day’ (John 11.9) being reckoned from sunrise, and the twelve hours of the

night from sunset. An evening-morning was thus used for a whole day of twenty-four hours, as in the first chapter of Genesis. Hence the expression ‘a night and a day’ in 2 Cor[inthians] 11.25 denotes a complete day (Gr. *nuchthemeron*). When Esther says (Est. 4.16) ‘fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days,’ she defines her meaning as being three complete days, because she adds (being a Jewess) ‘night or day.’ And when it is written that the fast ended on ‘the third day’ (5.1), ‘the third day’ must have succeeded and included the third night.... Hence, when it says that ‘Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights’ (Jonah 1.17) it means exactly what it says, and that this can be the only meaning of the expression in Matt[hew] 12.40; 16.4” (App. 144).

Jonah Saved (Jonah 2–4)

February 20

As chapter 2 begins, we read of Jonah’s prayer from the belly of the sea creature. The prayer of chapter 2 tells us a great deal about Jonah—about his attitude toward God and especially his knowledge of God’s Word. The prayer is reminiscent of many passages from the Psalms:

Jonah 2	Psalms
verse 2	3:4; 120:1; 18:4-5; 30:3
verse 3	88:6-7; 42:7
verse 4	31:22; 5:7
verse 5	69:1-2
verse 6	49:15; 56:13; 103:4
verse 7	107:5; 142:3
verse 8	31:6
verse 9	50:14; 69:30; 107:22; 3:8; 37:39

It appears that Jonah was able to recall much Scripture and use it as the basis for his prayer and thanksgiving to God. This should be an example for all of God’s people today. We can never tell when we may find ourselves alone, with no Bible, and only our remembered knowledge of God’s Word to encourage us. Even though Jonah was still in the belly of this creature from the deep, he was thankful that he was still alive. The apostle Paul had a similar approach to life (Philippians 4:11).

In verse 2, Jonah prays, “Out of the belly of Sheol I cried for help.” The King James Version translates *Sheol* as “hell.” This is a confusing verse for many given the common misconception that *Sheol* is a place of the dead in the spirit realm. However, the Hebrew word literally means “grave” or “pit.” People become confused because they attach to death the pagan concept of going to heaven or hell, a teaching that the Bible never supports. Hence, the idea that *Sheol* can mean the netherworld. It must be noted that “nowhere in the O[ld] T[estament] is Sheol described as a place of torment or punishment for the wicked. At most it is a place of confinement away from the land of the living.... Not until the Hellenistic era (after 333 B.C.) was Sheol (Hades) conceived of as compartmentalized, with places of torment and comfort” (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, “Sheol”). Thus, the creature in which Jonah lay was, in essence, a tomb—a watery grave. Yet even though he was “as good as dead,” Jonah understood the power of God. Notice his reference to the “belly” of Sheol. Here “Jonah uses the Hebrews *beten* (=womb)... (2.2)” (*Companion Bible*, App. 144)—that is, something to be “born” from. Finally, then, God intervened. He spoke to the fish and it immediately responded, demonstrating His sovereign power over His creation. Recall that the entire universe came into being when God spoke (Psalm 33:6-9).

There are some important points to consider here. The disobedient Jonah being as good as dead in a watery grave was a type of Christ, bearing our sins (though without sin Himself), being put to death and buried in the earth. The miraculous vomiting up of Jonah to new life was a type of Jesus’ resurrection from the grave, having paid our sins. Moreover, Christ was “born” from the “womb” of the grave, being described as the “firstborn from the dead” (Colossians 1:18; Revelation 1:5). And this was accomplished by the same power that created the universe and preserved Jonah.

Consider further: Christian baptism in a “watery grave” is a figurative burial of the old, sinful self with Christ (Romans 6:4, 6). And our emergence from the waters of baptism represents resurrection with Christ into newness of life—looking forward to our actual future resurrection (verses 4-5). In this way, our very own baptism is in a sense tied to what Jonah experienced!

God spoke to Jonah again and this time he obeyed, now walking in “newness of life.” In Jonah’s case it meant a full realization that he had to serve God just as all creation ultimately serves God. As forces of the natural world that brought him to this point had operated at the command of God, so he had to obey. Of course, God could have used someone else to go to Nineveh, but He was showing Jonah that he couldn’t shirk his responsibilities. No doubt, Jonah was also grateful for his miraculous deliverance—motivating him to be more devoted in his service to God. However, as we later see, he

does not *maintain* a right attitude. It is the same with all Christians. God often humbles us and brings us to repentance—but we do not continue in that frame of mind indefinitely as we should (1 John 1:8). Still, God is patient with us—as He was with Jonah—as long as we continue to repent and overcome.

Nineveh Repents (Jonah 2–4)

Feb. 20 Cont'd

Arisen from the depths, Jonah takes God's message to Nineveh. The reference to "a three-day journey in extent" is probably not the distance Jonah had to travel to get there, but rather the time it took to walk around Nineveh, demonstrating its vastness: "The city wall of Nineveh had a circumference of about eight miles, indicating that Nineveh was an exceedingly large city for the times. But the reference to 'three days' likely refers to the larger administrative district of Nineveh [i.e., the suburbs], made up of several cities, with a circumference of about 55 miles" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 3:3). *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* expresses a similar view, stating that "Diodorus Siculus (first century B.C.) gave the circumference of the city as approximately sixty miles" (note on verse 3).

There is an important change in the name of God at this point. When the story talks about Jonah and his relationship with God, the writer uses the Hebrew name YHWH (*Yahweh*, "the Eternal", usually substituted with "the LORD" in English Bible translations). In fact, it was distinctly Yahweh whom the sailors had come to fear (Jonah 1:16). But to the people of Nineveh, Jonah uses the name *Elohim* ("God," the All-Powerful, i.e., the Creator). "The obvious purpose is to bring home that Jonah had not been proclaiming Yahweh to those that did not know him but that the supreme God, whatever his name, was about to show his power in judgment. Behind all polytheism with its many gods and many lords, there was always the concept of one god who could enforce his will on the others, if he chose. There is not the slightest indication that Jonah had mentioned the God of Israel or had said that he came in his name. The Ninevites, however, recognized the voice of the supreme God, whatever name they may have given him, and repented" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on Jonah 3:5-10). And God did not bring upon them the announced destruction.

Was Jonah, then, a false prophet? "If the test of a true prophet is that his words come true (Deut. 18:22), how do we explain the failure of Jonah's message of judgment? The answer is that nearly every message of judgment is conditional, a truth that Jonah clearly understood (Jonah 4:2). The principle is illustrated in 2 Sam[uel] 12:14-23; 1 Kings 21:27-29; and 2 Kings 20:1-6" (*Bible Reader's Companion*, note on Jonah 3:1). Indeed, God says in Jeremiah 18:7-8, "The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it, if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it." We see in the example of the Assyrians a primary reason why God reveals the future through His prophets—that *human beings may see what is coming and repent*. Prophecy isn't simply a futile exercise, revealing the future as an end in itself. God reveals what is coming so we can understand and be motivated to *change*—to repent—so as to avoid His pronounced punishment! The example of the Assyrians should be an example for all humankind.

We might wonder why the inhabitants of the capital of the powerful Assyrian Empire, of all people, would respond to God's call to repentance at this time. "Events had prepared the people of Nineveh for the prophet's message. Assyria was led by weak rulers between 782 B.C. and 745 B.C., and was threatened by mountain tribes from the north who had driven their frontiers within a hundred miles of the capital. The danger of destruction was very real in Nineveh in this period" (note on 3:3).

Indeed, "Assyria, following the reign of Adad-nirari III (810-873), was in a dismal state of affairs. Internal upheavals and pressure from powerful enemies such as Urartu [Armenia] and the Aramaean states kept her in a defensive holding position until mighty Tiglath-pileser III came to power in 745. This is precisely the period in which Israel under Jeroboam II and Judah under Uzziah regained territories which had been forfeited earlier and a great measure of their international prestige. It is also the period in which Jonah was occupied in his prophetic ministry. Given these chronological limits, the most likely time for the mission of Jonah to Nineveh was in the reign of Assur-dan III (772-755). Though no royal inscriptions whatsoever have survived from his years in power, the Assyrian eponym list and other indirect witnesses attest to his tenure as a period of unparalleled turmoil. Assur, Arrapha, Gozan, and many other rival states and dependencies revolted. In addition, plague and famine struck repeatedly until the empire was left impoverished and in total disorder. This would have been an ideal time for Jonah to deliver his message of judgment and of the universal redemptive program of the God of Israel. Assyria's own pantheon and cult had failed

miserably. Surely now, if ever, the king and people were prepared to hear a word from the only living God” (Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, p. 388).

Jesus attested to the amazing repentance of the Ninevites—and sadly, to the fact that they set a better example than did the religious leaders of His day (Luke 11:32).

Jonah’s Reaction—and God’s Compassion (Jonah 2–4)

Feb. 20 Cont’d

Chapter 4 tells us that Jonah did not want the Ninevites to repent. Assyria had dominated the Israelites not long before in the days of Jehu, even collecting tribute from them. He wanted Assyria to be *punished*, not *sustained* and given further chance of destroying Israel. Incredibly, Jonah stated that he wanted to die rather than see God’s mercy on Nineveh! And yet, only a few days before, he had pleaded with God to keep him alive. Such thinking is clearly irrational. Sadly, though, the desire for retribution and revenge is commonplace. Even Christians are not immune. Yet all of us need to learn to be as gracious and compassionate as God is. Our desire should be for those who have done wrong *to change*, not for them to be punished. Again, we must remember that “mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13).

Ironically, Jonah’s message would postpone the fall of Israel. Yet Jonah’s mission wasn’t obvious even to the prophet himself. As *Halley’s Bible Handbook* states in its introduction to the book, Jonah’s message “would prolong the life of the enemy nation that was already in the process of exterminating...his own nation. No wonder he fled in the opposite direction—he was in patriotic dread of the brutal and relentless military machine that was closing in on God’s people” (2000, p. 459). Possibly Jonah thought that if he didn’t go to Nineveh, God would simply destroy Assyria, thus freeing Israel of her enemy. Of course, this was faulty reasoning. Obviously God could still have used Assyria as a means of punishment for Israel anyway. And in actuality, rather than further threatening Israel, Assyria’s repentance spared Israel from conquest for a time, as the lust for violence and conquest was one thing of which Assyria repented (Jonah 3:8). So while God strengthened Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:26-27), He also prevented Assyria from conquering Israel until a later time—and this He accomplished through Jonah’s preaching.

After finally delivering his message, Jonah went away and waited for God to do something. It’s obvious from the context that this was the hot season and the temperature may well have been as high as 110 degrees Fahrenheit in the middle of the day. But God was to teach Jonah (and us) a further lesson about priorities. Jonah was concerned about the plant dying. God showed him that if the plant was important, how much more the people of Nineveh? The reference to 120,000 people “who cannot discern between their right hand and their left” has been the subject of debate. *The Bible Reader’s Companion* states: “The number either refers to the entire population, or to young children. Since the maximum estimated population at that era was about 175,000, the former is the better interpretation. The saying ‘not tell their right hand from their left’ refers to a lack of moral knowledge, stemming from the fact that Assyria had not been granted special revelation from God” (note on 4:11). In that sense, it would also seem that God here views all such human beings as little children in need of being taught.

Expositor’s makes a fitting concluding statement: “The declaration of God’s loving care was made, not to Nineveh, but to Jonah (4:11), and so to Israel. Taking the book as a whole, it is a revelation to God’s people of God’s all-sovereign power and care. It had a special relevance to Israel over which the shadow of Assyria was falling, and later to Judah, as it faced destruction at the hands of Babylon” (introductory notes on Jonah).

Uzziah Successful by Following God (2 Kings 15:1-4; 2 Chronicles 26:1-15) February 21

A note about the name of the king: 2 Chronicles uses the name “Uzziah” for this king of Judah, whereas 2 Kings calls him “Azariah.” In the original Hebrew, there is only one letter different (“r”) in the two names. It is believed that Uzziah may have been his official name as king and Azariah his given name.

The story of Uzziah again reveals the problem of human nature that we can all face. He started well (2 Chronicles 26:4) and did a great deal to build up Judah, but as we shall see in a later reading, his good attitude didn’t last and his reign ended in tragedy.

Putting the chronologies together, we can come up with the following picture. Uzziah’s father Amaziah was only 15 when Uzziah was born, when Joash still reigned on the throne of Judah. On the death of Joash, Amaziah became king when Uzziah his son was 12 years old. And when Amaziah was taken captive by Israel four years into his reign, Uzziah was made king at age 16. Amaziah was

released from captivity 10 years later, when Uzziah was 26. The two then had a coregency until Amaziah's death 15 years later, when Uzziah was 41. Uzziah then reigned 27 more years.

His mentor was a godly man called Zechariah. This was not the prophet of the book of Zechariah. Very likely, it refers to the son of Jehoiada (24:20-21), who was still alive in Uzziah's childhood before his execution by Uzziah's grandfather Joash. For a number of years, Uzziah followed the godly advice he was given. Judah's prosperity at this time owed much to the king's loyalty and faithfulness to God.

Uzziah had a great interest in agriculture, building towers and wells in the desert, and promoting farming and animal husbandry. Archaeology confirms that forts were built in the Negev desert during the 8th century B.C.

"From earliest times farming has been difficult in Palestine. Water is seldom available in ample quantities, making necessary the construction of cisterns (cf. 2 Chron. 26:10; Neh. 9:25) or the use of streams...for irrigation. During the five-month summer season a farmer could expect little if any rain, and even after October the rainfall was often irregular. Added to these natural difficulties were the amazingly stony terrain, the devastation that often followed the hot desert winds from the E. and crop losses from such eventualities as locust plagues" ("Agriculture," *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*, 1983).

The fact that Uzziah was able to achieve tremendous prosperity for Judah in such a difficult location is a tribute to his foresight and obedience to God. The wealth this generated meant that he could equip and extend his defense forces, and this led to a period of national expansion—which happened at the same time as the national expansion of the northern kingdom under Jeroboam II. Surely no coincidence, this simultaneous expansion prevented one nation from taking over the other one. Indeed, "Uzziah and Jeroboam formed an alliance for much of their reigns and together ruled for a brief time an area nearly as large as the empire of David and Solomon" (*Nelson Study Bible*, introductory notes on Amos).

Sadly, in the end, as we will later see, Uzziah's pride in his strength was his downfall, as it so often is (compare Leviticus 26:19; Proverbs 16:5; 29:23; Isaiah 2:12; 13:11; 2 Chronicles 32:26; Malachi 4:1; James 4:6). This should serve as a warning for all leaders—and, given the religious context, particularly those in God's Church (1 Timothy 3:6). Indeed, the warning applies to all Christians. Pride and ego are great destroyers. Paul writes about our need to resist and suppress these aspects of human nature (Philippians 2:3-4).

Finally, it should be noted that even though Uzziah did what was right during most of his reign, all was not well in Judah. The prophets Amos and Hosea preached during this period—their warnings, which we will be reading next, indicating the likelihood of serious problems at the time (though their messages, as we will see, were primarily for the future). Indeed, it is usually in times of plenty that character is corrupted the worst, and God's judgment becomes imminent (compare Deuteronomy 8:10-20).

Introduction to Amos (Amos 1:1–2:3)

February 22

The prophet Amos came from Tekoa in Judah, 10 miles south of Jerusalem, and was a "sheepbreeder"—a term used elsewhere in Scripture only of King Mesha of Moab (2 Kings 3:4). Mesha's business was enormous—regularly paying 100,000 lambs and the wool of 100,000 rams as tribute to Israel. In contrast, Amos' was obviously a small business. For, like David, he took care of the flocks (7:15), and he tended sycamore fig trees (verse 14). "The sycamore fig tree bears thousands of figs very much like the common fig, but smaller and not as good. Before this fruit could ripen properly, a small hole had to be pierced in the bottom of its skin. This piercing was done by hand and was a tedious and time-consuming task. Why was Amos obliged to tend the sycamore? Western Judah, the oasis of Jericho, and lower Galilee were the regions where sycamore figs grew most abundantly. The shepherds needed to bring their flocks to one of these regions in late summer, after the desert pastures had dried up. Since this was the time for piercing the sycamore fruit, landowners would exchange grazing rights for labor. A shepherd could watch his flock while sitting on the broad limbs of the sycamore, piercing its fruit. Thus Amos was not a wealthy man. Wealthy sheepbreeders hired shepherds to tend their flocks. Amos followed his flock himself (7:15), and when that meant piercing sycamore fruit, he pierced sycamore fruit" (*Nelson Study Bible*, introductory notes on Amos).

His preaching took place during a time of great prosperity in both Judah and Israel. Uzziah was on the throne in Judah and Jeroboam II ruled in Israel. The nations were going through a period of great optimism, business was booming and both countries were extending their borders. But as is often

the case in times of prosperity, the attitudes of people degenerated, greed and injustice became commonplace, and a careless attitude toward religious practice replaced true godly worship.

Amos's prophecy is dated to a time "two years before the earthquake" (1:1; referred to also in Zechariah 14:5). According to the first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, this earthquake happened when Uzziah sinned in attempting to offer incense (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 9, chap. 10, sec. 4). Since this action was perpetrated 11 or so years before Uzziah's death, the earthquake would have occurred around 751 B.C., thus dating Amos' prophecy to around 753 B.C. The earthquake being used as dating, "along with Amos's dialogue with Amaziah, the priest of Jeroboam's temple at Bethel (7:10-17), reveals that the period of Amos's prophetic activity was very short, unlike many of the other prophets. Amos went to Bethel from Tekoa, delivered his prophetic oracles, and returned home. He probably stayed in Bethel only a few days" (introductory notes on Amos). Very soon after the prophet's appearance at Bethel, Jeroboam II died, beginning Israel's rapid decline.

Amos Preaches Against the Nations (Amos 1:1–2:3)

Feb. 22 Cont'd

As the book begins, Amos appears before a throng of Israelites worshipping at Bethel. Prior to his oracle against Israel, he pronounces God's judgment against the surrounding nations, including Judah. Each of the first seven oracles follows the same format.

1. Damascus (verses 3-5) was the capital of Syria, one of Israel's long-term rivals. The Syrian king Hazael and his son Ben-Hadad (verse 4) were cruel in their treatment of Israel (see 2 Kings 8:12-13). Gilead (verse 3) was a rich forest area east of the Jordan River. "It had belonged to Israel since they had taken over the land, but Aram often had fought Israel for possession of northern Gilead, gaining control there in Israel's times of military weakness" (*Nelson*, note on Amos 1:3). It is likely that the threshing attack is the same incident referred to in 2 Kings 13:7. "The metaphor Amos used is that of a threshing sledge, an agricultural implement made of parallel boards fitted with sharp points of iron or stone.... The intensity of the metaphor, however, implies the most extreme decimation and may hint at especially cruel or inhuman treatment" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on Amos 1:3).

Concerning the Valley of Aven and Beth Eden, "Amos may have intended a play on words here. Aven means 'Sin' in Hebrew; Damascus was a verdant oasis city on the edge of the desert that could be compared to Eden. However, Amos may also have been referring to the Beth Eden region on the north bank of the Euphrates" (*Nelson*, note on verse 5). Or perhaps the reference to Aven (*Awn* in Hebrew) "may be rather to the valley between Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon, called *El-Bekaa*, where are the ruins of the Baalbek temple of the sun; so the LXX [i.e., Septuagint] renders it *On*, the same name as the city in Egypt bears, dedicated to the sun-worship (Gen. 41:45; *Margin*, Ezek. 30:17, *Heliopolis*, 'the city of the sun'). It is termed by Amos 'the valley of Aven,' or 'vanity,' from the worship of idols in it" (*Jamieson, Fausset & Brown's Commentary*, note on Amos 1:5). Kir, where Amos said the Syrians would be taken captive, was "a region subject to Assyria (Isa. 22:6) in Iberia, the same as that called now in *Armenian Kur*, lying by the river Cyrus which empties itself into the Caspian Sea. [Assyrian ruler] Tiglath-pileser [III] fulfilled this prophecy when Ahaz [king of Judah] applied for help to him against Rezin king of Syria, and carried away its people captive to Kir" (same note). This occurred "in 732 B.C. Amos later referred to Kir as the place from which the Syrians had originally come (9:7)" (*Nelson*, note on verse 5).

It is also stated that God's punishment is to send "fire" to "devour." The *JFB Commentary* explains this as "flames of war (Ps. 78:63), [and notes that it] occurs also in vss. 7, 10, 12, 14, and 2:2, 5" (note on verse 4). However, the book later speaks of actual conflagration, such as destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah (4:11). Fiery destruction is referred to as "it" in chapters 1 (verse 14) and 2 (verses 2, 5). The *Anchor Bible Commentary* states: "All eight oracles refer to the same 'it' which will not be retracted or reversed. There was a single decree covering them all... declaring judgment on the entire region as a unit.... This unity suggests *one cosmic holocaust*, not just several invasions that would pick these countries off one by one" (note on Amos 1). Thus, rather than the ancient Assyrian and Babylonian invasions of the region, this seems to point to a great end-time destruction, which is elsewhere pointed to in the book.

It is interesting to note that the inhabitants of Syria in our day have continually tried to take control of the northeastern territory of the modern state of Israel by force and remain some of Israel's most implacable enemies.

2. Philistia (Amos 1:6-8): The southern coastal plain of Palestine was occupied by the Philistines, who lived in five main cities (Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, Gath and Gaza). Four of these

are mentioned in this oracle. Indeed, among all the biblical prophecies of the Philistines hereafter, Gath is conspicuously left out. “It is noteworthy that Gath is not mentioned in these prophecies, from which it may be inferred that Gath ceased to be of any major significance after the time of Uzziah” (“Philistines,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1986, p. 843).

Of taking “captive the whole captivity,” the *JFB Commentary* says, “i.e., they left none.... Under Jehoram already the Philistines had carried away all the substance of the king of Judah, and his wives and his sons, ‘so that there was never a son left to him, save Jehoahaz’; and after Amos’ time (if the reference includes the *future*, which to the prophet’s eye is as if already done), under Ahaz (II Chron. 28:18), they seized on all the cities and villages of the low country and south of Judah” (note on 1:6). Then we learn that they “deliver them up to Edom” (verse 6). “Judah’s bitterest foe; as slaves (vs. 9; cf. Joel 3:1, 3, 6). [Commentator] Grotius refers to the fact (Isa. 16:4) that on Sennacherib’s invasion of Judah [yet future at this point], many fled for refuge to neighboring countries; the Philistines, instead of hospitably sheltering the refugees, sold them, as if captives in war, to their enemies, the Idumeans” (note on Amos 1:6). God’s punishment is to send “fire.” Again, *JFB* says, “i.e., the flames of war (Num. 21:28; Isa. 26:11). Hezekiah fulfilled this prophecy, smiting the Philistines unto Gaza (II Kings 18:8). Foretold by Isaiah 14:29, 31” (note on Amos 1:7). It is, of course, possible that these statements refer dually or even solely to events that are yet future. A large part of the territory of ancient Philistia is today the Palestinian Gaza Strip.

3. Tyre (Amos 1:9-10) was a major Phoenician port city to the north of Israel and southwest of Damascus. God brings the same charge against the Tyrians as against the Philistines. However, the betrayal in this case is worse, considering “the covenant of brotherhood” between Israel and Tyre—perhaps the league of King Hiram of Tyre with David and Solomon. “The Phoenicians were master seafarers. Tyre and Israel had forged an alliance that was profitable for both. However, Tyre ignored the long-standing covenant of brotherhood, and sought commercial gain by selling Israelite slaves to Edom” (*Nelson*, note on 1:9). As punishment, God sends “fire” (verse 10). Tyre was beset by literal fire when “many parts of Tyre were burnt by fiery missiles of the Chaldeans under Nebuchadnezzar” (*JFB*, note on verse 10). And old Tyre was eventually destroyed in 333 B.C. by Alexander the Great.

A similar scenario will occur in the last days. As Tyre was a major center of commerce in the ancient world, “Tyre” is also given as the name for the end-time global trading bloc in Ezekiel 27 (called Babylon in Revelation 18, it is dominated by a final revival of the Roman Empire centered in Europe). Here we also see Israel and Judah as trading partners in this alliance (Ezekiel 27:17). Yet this friendly relationship will come to an end. Modern Israelites and Jews will be conquered by this system, the survivors taken captive as POWs, then to be bought and sold as slaves (compare Ezekiel 6:8-9; Leviticus 26:33, 38-39; Jeremiah 30:3, 8; Revelation 18:9-13). Yet God will bring great fire and destruction on end-time “Tyre” at the return of Jesus Christ.

4. Edom (Amos 1:11-12), as noted in the Bible Reading Program comments on Obadiah, lay to the southeast of the southern tip of the Dead Sea, in modern Jordan. Indeed, it is interesting that the ancient territories of the next three nations mentioned by Amos are all now embraced by the same country. In a prophecy of the last days in Daniel 11, “Edom, Moab, and the prominent people of Ammon” (verse 41) are grouped together still—apparently meaning the modern state of Jordan and perhaps, since most Jordanians are Palestinian, the Palestinians in general. (The Bible Reading Program comments on Obadiah explained that many of the Palestinians are evidently of Edomite descent.) The Edomites were descended from Esau, the twin brother of Jacob, so there was a close relationship between them and Israel, and God considered them as brothers (Numbers 20:14; Obadiah 1-12; Deut 23:7). But Edom was always set against Israel (Numbers 20:14-21; 1 Samuel 14:47; 2 Kings 8:20-22), an enmity beginning from the time Esau lost his blessing to Jacob (Genesis 27:41). In so many cases, “Edom chose the day of Israel’s calamity for venting his grudge. This is the point of Edom’s guilt dwelt on in Obadiah 10-13” (*JFB*, note on Amos 1:11). Indeed, when Judah was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, Edom, as a closely related nation, should have helped Judah’s refugees. But instead of offering sympathy and help, Edom handed Judeans over to the conquering Babylonians. The Edomites even murdered some of the refugees” (*Nelson*, introductory notes on Obadiah).

Temam (verse 12), named after the eldest grandson of Esau and Edom’s first tribal chief (Genesis 36:10-16), is believed to have been one of the largest cities in Edom, and Bozrah was a major fortress. Both were overrun by the Nabataeans—although the punishment of verse 12 may refer to destruction that is still future (compare Isaiah 34). Today the Edomites may be found among the

Palestinians and Turks and in other areas of the Middle East (see the Bible Reading Program comments on Obadiah).

Over the centuries, Edom has not been compassionate—suppressing even the natural feeling of pity for a brother in distress—and this is one of the reasons for God’s judgment. How much more should we be compassionate today? (Psalm 86:15; Zechariah 7:9; Matthew 18:33; Mark 1:41; Luke 10:33; 1 Peter 3:8.)

5. Ammon (Amos 1:13-15) was further to the north in the area of modern day Amman in Jordan. The city of Amman now sits on the site of the ancient city of Rabbah (verse 14). The Ammonites (like the Moabites to the south) were descended from the incestuous incident of Lot’s daughters with their father (Genesis 19:30-38). As Lot was Abraham’s nephew, Ammon and Moab were related to Israel, though not as closely as Edom. Horribly, as Hazael of Syria had done (2 Kings 8:12), the “Ammonites killed pregnant women in order to prevent the increase of the Israelite population in Gilead, which they were trying to wrest from Israel’s control” (*Nelson*, note on Amos 1:13). The Ammonites were later to rejoice at the fall of Jerusalem at the hands of the Chaldean-Babylonian Empire (Ezekiel 25:1-7). Indeed, they “joined the Chaldeans in their invasion of Judea for the sake of plunder” (*JFB*, note on Amos 1:13). But the Ammonites were to suffer the same downfall during Nebuchadnezzar’s onslaught. At the end of this age, the Jordanians are prophesied to escape the initial invasion by the European “Babylon” (see Daniel 11:41). However, Zephaniah 2, Isaiah 15–16, and 34, Jeremiah 48–49 and Obadiah foretell the ultimate destruction of Ammon, Moab and Edom at the time of Christ’s return.

6. Moab (2:1-3) lay between Ammon in the north and Edom in the south, again in modern-day Jordan. Moab, like Ammon, was a descendent of the incestuous incident of Lot’s daughters. Both Ammon and Moab would have been blessed if they had behaved toward Israel as brothers, but their refusal to grant Israel passage through their territory at the time of the Exodus caused God to reject them (Deuteronomy 23:3-4). Later, the Moabites were to join forces with Ammon and Amalek against Israel for 18 years (Judges 3:13-14). One of Moab’s crimes was the desecration of the remains of the king of Edom, “a heinous act in ancient times and a great dishonor to the person’s memory” (*Nelson*, note on 2:1). This probably refers to the Edomite king who was allied with Jehoram of Israel and Jehoshaphat of Judah against Mesha, king of Moab (see 2 Kings 3:4-27). “The reference here in Amos is... to the revenge which probably the king of Moab took on the king of Edom, when the forces of Israel and Judah had retired after their successful campaign against Moab, leaving Edom without allies. The Hebrew tradition is that Moab in revenge tore from their grave and burned the bones of the king of Edom, the ally of Jehoram and Jehoshaphat, who was already buried” (*JFB*, note on verse 1).

In any case, “highly significant is the fact that Amos here pronounced the punishment of Yahweh on a social crime involving a non-Israelite. In his other oracles, the crimes were, for the most part, against the covenant people. Amos understood that an aspect of God’s law transcended Israel. He affirmed a moral law that extended to non-covenant nations, a law that would surely bring punishment if violated. It is not the complex legal code of Sinai for which the Moabites were held liable but the law of social responsibility, respect for human dignity and the rights of all people” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on Amos 2:2-3). Certainly, this was within the spirit of the laws God revealed to Israel—indeed, such principles were revealed by God from the very beginning of mankind (and all of mankind is thus accountable).

Moab was eventually conquered by Nebuchadnezzar. Yet, again, the devouring fire of verse 2 seems to mainly point to a coming latter-day destruction, as described in Isaiah, Jeremiah and Zephaniah.

Amos Preaches Against Judah and Israel (Amos 2:4–3:15)

February 23

Amos continues his oracles.

7. Judah (Amos 2:4-5) is also condemned along with the heathen nations. People have often claimed that God had favorites, but these prophecies show that God is fair in dealing with the nations. All would suffer similar consequences if they failed to live up to what the world at large knows as plain human decency—moral principles transmitted down from God’s earliest revelations to man. God is not a respecter of persons (Acts 10:34). But the condemnation of Judah is for more than violating common human decency. The inhabitants of Judah, like those of Israel, were God’s covenant people. Their special relationship with Him made them even more accountable than the gentile nations. They were to obey God’s law, but rejected it (verse 4). In fact, they even followed false gods when, more than anyone, they should have known better. The devouring fire prophesied

for the gentile nations is seen here coming against Judah too. And while Judah was overrun by Nebuchadnezzar, (2 Kings 24–25), who did burn Jerusalem (25:9), this prophecy is almost certainly for the end time as well.

8. Israel now becomes the object of Amos' correction. And it was to Israelites that he was preaching at Bethel. Concerning his oracles, *The Bible Reader's Companion* states: "Amos begins with the most distant nation, and then, in a wide swing, moves to lands circling Israel. One can almost hear the delighted 'Yes! Yes!' of his listeners as they hear the prophet denounce one enemy after another. But then, unexpectedly, the prophet pounces. The severest condemnation of all is reserved for Israel itself. How his listeners' hearts must have sunk as Amos' finger at last pointed directly at them!" (chap. 1–2 summary).

He begins with their sins against society (Amos 2:6-8). They have become so hardened through their disobedience to God and following false religion that God's ways of righteousness and mercy no longer influence their thinking. The "righteous" being sold here simply means those who are in the right—they should have justice on their side but are condemned as guilty. Bribery takes the place of true justice. The language in the Hebrew here strongly suggests that litigation is the main issue. "Either a bribe as small as a *pair of shoes* is enough to swing the verdict, or a debt as small as that of a pair of shoes is enough to bring a man into the dock: such is the covetousness of the community" (*New Bible Commentary: Revised*, 1970, note on verse 6)

Amos then reminds Israel of God's gracious acts towards them throughout their history. They have ignored Him as a source of needed help and would suffer the consequences (verses 6-16).

In chapter 3, Amos quotes God as saying, "You only have I known" (verse 2), which, "in this context, means 'You only have I chosen.' God's relationship with Israel was not only intimate, it was exclusive. God had been faithful to Israel; yet Israel had not been faithful to God. For this reason, the nation would be judged" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 2). God then asks the question, perhaps the most well-known quotation from the book, "Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?" (verse 3)—that is, unless they continue in general agreement. Others translate the verse a little differently: "Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?" (NIV). The answer to either question is a resounding *no*. Israel and God had an agreement that they would walk together, but Israel broke the covenant and the law of *cause and effect* comes into play. That's the point of verses 3-6—each effect must have a cause. "It follows that disaster is an effect of some action, in this case action by the Lord.... It should have been clear to Israel that their sufferings were God's messengers, warning them against their sins. We are not to take every personal disaster as a warning of judgment or judgment itself. But we are to examine ourselves to discover if anything in our lives might have moved God to act" (*Bible Reader's Companion*, note on verses 3-6).

Verse 7 is one of the most important statements about prophecy in the Bible: "Surely the Lord GOD does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets." God is not cruel and uncaring. If He is going to punish a nation, He will let them know in advance to give them an opportunity to repent (Ezekiel 3:17; Ezekiel 33; Jeremiah 18:7-8). And if a true servant of God understands a revelation or warning from God, he cannot keep it to himself. Both his fear of God and his concern for people compel him to preach and pass along God's message (Amos 3:8; 7:14-15; 1 Corinthians 9:16; Matthew 10:27).

In verse 9 of Amos 3, God calls the Egyptians and Philistines to witness His judgment on Israel, implying that Israel is even worse than they were. While they had attacked other nations, Israel's oppression was against its own people. Moreover, "they had not received God's revelation at Sinai; yet Israel, having received it, had violated it grossly and repeatedly" (*Nelson*, note on 3:9-10). Indeed, the Israelites' morality was so warped that they no longer knew to do right (verse 10). As the chapter ends, Amos' prophecy deals specifically with two major problem areas in Israel—false religion (verse 14) and the importance attached to wealth and power (verse 15).

Israel's Punishment for Failing to Heed (Amos 4–5)

February 24

Amos again reminded Israel of the way God had dealt with them since they came out of Egypt and how they had ignored the warnings. God would now destroy Israel as a political power, saying, in effect, "enough is enough." God then lists six calamities to come upon Israel: famine (4:6); drought (verses 7-8); crop destruction (verse 9); plague (verse 10); defeat in war (verse 10) and fiery destruction of cities comparable to what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah (verse 11). This final calamity tells us that the prophecy is for the end time, as this did not happen in the destruction of ancient Israel by the Assyrians. Ezekiel 6:6 makes it even more plain: "In all your dwelling places the

cities shall be laid waste.” Referring to major cities of our day, this seems to signal nuclear devastation or some as yet unknown means of mass destruction.

God says, “Therefore thus will I do to you, O Israel; because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel!” (verse 12). For some, this will be by death. But for the rest, it means God soon coming to earth—i.e., in the end-time return of Jesus Christ. “To be confronted—inescapably—by the God it had scorned and rejected would be a fate more terrible than Israel could imagine” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 12). In chapter 5, God lists a seventh calamity through Amos: captivity (5:3), a punishment mentioned in 4:2-3 and made clearer in 6:7. In 5:3, we are told that of those who go into captivity, only a tenth will survive (compare Isaiah 6:11-13, Living Bible).

God explains that He is the ultimate power to whom Israel should look—not their false gods. Interesting in His proclamations is a mention of the hydrological cycle of evaporation and rain, also referred to elsewhere in Scripture (compare Ecclesiastes 11:3; Job 36:27-29). One might wonder how this could have been so accurately understood by ancient authors—thus perhaps providing further evidence of God’s inspiration of Scripture.

In Amos 5:18-20, God issues a warning through Amos to those desiring the Day of the Lord, for that Day will bring judgment on the disobedient—and they themselves were thoroughly disobedient, just as modern Israel is today. “The lesson for us is clear. Look eagerly for Christ’s return—but not if you’re living a life of sin” (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, note on verses 18-20). It should be noted that while these prophecies are primarily for the end of this age, we can certainly see a secondary relevance for those to whom Amos preached—against whom an invasion by the Assyrian Empire was imminent. We can even envision the worshipers at Bethel cringing as Amos foretold its destruction, along with that of other centers of false worship in Gilgal and Beersheba (verses 5-6). In mentioning Beersheba, Judah is condemned along with Israel. These places of false worship serve as types of great houses of false worship in the end time. The true God is not to be found in them, but in seeking “good and not evil” (verse 14). And this, of course, is to be found in the revealed Word of God.

Israel of Amos’ day had forsaken God and all His ways as found in His Word. For instance, since the days of Jeroboam I, Israel had her own feast days, which God utterly despised (compare verse 21). He had told them before that they should not look to the pagan nations and copy their modes of worship (Exodus 23:24, 33; Deuteronomy 12:29-32; Jeremiah 10:1-4), but that’s just what they did. Likewise, today, the nations of modern Israel have forsaken God’s biblically commanded Sabbaths and Holy Days for pagan celebrations such as Christmas and Easter (Astarte).

Furthermore, God did not and does not want any worship that is “hypocritical, dishonest, and meaningless” (*Nelson*, note on Amos 5:21-23)—whether offerings, music or anything else. “After dismissing Israel’s empty worship as noisy and tumultuous, God called for the honest tumult of the rolling waters of *justice* and the perennial *stream of righteousness*, the only foundation for true praise and worship of the Lord” (note on verse 24). If Israel would only listen to God and heed, then He would not send the calamities (verses 14-15). But history shows that the Israelites failed to listen—and Israel, as a political entity, ceased to exist. Just so, history will repeat itself in the end time.

Israel’s Prosperity and Pride; Opposition of Amaziah the Priest (Amos 6–7) February 25

As chapter 6 begins, those of Zion (i.e., Jerusalem) and Samaria, the capitals of Judah and Israel, are warned together. The wealthy of both lands were overcome with pride in their possessions and indifference to the issues that really count (6: 6)—caring “nothing for the affliction of their fellow Israelites, though it was their transgressions that had caused it” (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, note on verses 4-6). Increasingly, it is becoming the same today. Amos told his audience to look at certain foreign cities. “It was the boast of Israel’s elite that no other nation was greater than they were. Their boast came back upon their own heads, for just as Calneh [the capital of a small kingdom in northern Syria], Hamath [an important central Syrian city north of Damascus], and Gath [one of the five main Philistine cities] were subjected to Assyrian rule, so Israel would be subjugated by the Assyrians” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 2).

The paraphrase of verse 3 in the New Living Translation makes the situation very plain: “You push away every thought of coming disaster, but your actions only bring the day of judgment closer.”

Of the references to Lo Debar and Karnaim, the *Nelson Study Bible* states, “Israel’s pride in its military strength would be its downfall. Lo Debar was a city east of the Jordan that Israel regained from Syria when Assyria crippled the strength of Damascus. Karnaim, a city east of the Jordan near the farthest limits of Israelite possession, was also regained when Assyria weakened Syria. God’s

punishment of Israel would fit its sin of pride. As the Israelites reckoned that they had extended their borders by their own military strength, God would allow them to be harassed and defeated from border to border” (note on verses 13-14)—ironically, by the very same enemy that previously enabled their growth.

In chapter 7, God showed Amos three visions.

Locusts (7:1-3): They were to come after the king’s reaping. The king apparently took the first harvest of hay as a tax. If the locusts came after that, the people would have nothing. This could utterly destroy the Israelites, a fact that induced Amos to pray for them. “One function of the prophet was to serve as intercessor for the people before God. Amos prayed that the vision decreed in heaven might be halted before it was accomplished on earth. The basis of Amos’s petition lay in the true assessment of Israel’s position. They were not large and strong, as they thought; rather they were small and weak. In response to Amos’s intercession, and out of His own love for Israel God stayed His decree” (note on verses 2-3).

Fire (verses 4-6): This is an all-consuming fire that was to dry up all water—even the springs from underground—thus destroying the land beyond hope. Again Amos prays—and again God relents. Thus, we again see God willing to change His mind—just as He did when Moses interceded for the Israelites in the wilderness (Exodus 32:9-14; Numbers 14:11-20).

Plumb line (verses 7-9): “The plumb line is a simple but basic builder’s tool. A weight attached to a line was held against a wall to measure its vertical trueness.... When God measured the morality of Israel’s society, it was shown to be so far from true that the whole construction had to be torn down” (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, caption of illustration for verses 7-9). “Unlike the first two visions, God did not give Amos opportunity to intercede, nor did He relent. These judgments would be executed. The plumb line of God’s revelation in the law had been set *in the midst of...Israel* for many generations. Now God would stretch a plumb line to demonstrate how ‘crooked’ the people’s observance of His commands had been” (*Nelson*, note on verses 7-9).

God proclaims through Amos that He will bring “the sword against the house of Jeroboam” (verse 9). “Jeroboam may refer to Jeroboam I, the first king of Israel, who instituted idolatry in the northern kingdom (see 1 Kin. 12:25-33), or to Jeroboam II, the monarch during the time of these prophecies [given through Amos]. If it is Jeroboam I, then the house of Jeroboam is a metaphor for the nation. If it is Jeroboam II, then the prophecy specifically concerns the royal household” (note on Amos 7:7-9). If it was a prophecy against the ruling king, then it was not specifically about him but about, as it says, his dynasty, since we know that Jeroboam II did not die by the sword but that his son Zechariah was assassinated just six months after taking the throne (see 2 Kings 15:8-10). It seems more likely, however, that Jeroboam I was in mind as a metaphor for rebellious Israel in general since the destruction mentioned did not come in the days of Jeroboam II or his son. Moreover, the prophecy of destruction is probably dual, mainly concerning that of the end time.

Amos’ message upset Amaziah. He was the priest of Bethel and would not have taken kindly to Amos’ prophecies against the worship center he presided over (Amos 7:9; 5:5-6). As Amos’ name meant “Burden” or “Burden-Bearer,” it is interesting to note that, though using a different Hebrew word, Amaziah complained to King Jeroboam, “The land is not able to bear all of his words” (7:10). Insidiously, Amaziah *twisted* the prophet’s words. Amos never said that Jeroboam II himself would die by the sword, as Amaziah reported (verse 11). Worse still, Amaziah imputed motives to Amos that he didn’t have—claiming Amos was behind a conspiracy against the king (verse 10). We should let this be a lesson for us. When seeing what others do or listening to what they say, it’s very easy to let our imaginations take over from fact, imagining what the motive might be, often on the basis of our evaluation of the other person’s character. But to act on this assumption as if it were fact puts us on dangerous ground spiritually.

Amaziah then addressed Amos. He seemed to recognize him as a “seer” (verse 12), a term used even of Samuel (1 Samuel 9:9, 19), but ignored Amos’ message except for its “seditious” elements. As a national official, Amaziah ordered Amos out of the country (Amos 7:12). The inviolability of Bethel, in his eyes, lay in its royal sanction (verse 13). Thus, this religious leader chose loyalty to the king over loyalty to God. And, of course, for Amaziah to submit to God’s true religion would have meant that he could no longer have been priest of Bethel—with all of the power and prestige of this position. No doubt, this played a part in his rejection of God’s servant.

Amos responded to Amaziah by telling him that it was the great God who had called him to prophesy. And now Amaziah’s own family would suffer the consequences of his sins.

Harvest of Judgment and Future Restoration (Amos 8–9)**February 26**

Two more visions are related in the book.

The basket of summer fruit (Amos 8): Israel was ripe for punishment and it would come quickly. Again, Amos enumerates the Israelites' sins: their inhumanity, their dishonest business practices and their injustice. But now he adds another matter—their careless approach to the Sabbath. Instead of keeping the Sabbath as holy time (compare Exodus 20:10-11; Isaiah 58:13), they were busy planning what they would do when it ended. “You can't wait for the Sabbath to be over and the religious festivals to end so you can get back to cheating the helpless” (Amos 8:5, New Living Translation). Christ is the Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28), and, despite those who try to do away with God's commandments, His Sabbath law is binding on Christians today. Keeping the Sabbath is more than staying home from work and just going to church services for an hour or two. The Sabbath is an entire day—from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset—that God declared to be holy. Whenever that time comes to us, we are in holy time. It is *God's* time, not ours. He commands us to *keep* it holy. To profane it is a sin.

In verse 11, God says He will send a famine of hearing His words. Shockingly, the only thing that could rescue the Israelites at this point—i.e., God's truth, if they would only heed it—is taken away from them. That this is an end-time prophecy can be seen in the heavenly signs of verse 9. As God's “two witnesses” will be proclaiming God's words publicly for three and a half years leading up to Christ's return (see Revelation 11:1-13), it seems evident that the famine of the Word would precede their preaching. Putting other verses together, it is also evident that the two witnesses begin their preaching at the same time the Great Tribulation befalls Israel. Thus, it appears that the famine of the Word will occur prior to the Tribulation, when destruction and captivity is imminent. Still, it may be that the famine of the Word does run through the Tribulation, since it may not be so easy for the captive Israelites to hear the message of the two witnesses. In any case, with the coming famine of God's Word in mind, His servants today should have the same urgent mindset that Jesus Christ had in His human ministry. He told His disciples, “I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work” (John 9:4).

The Lord standing by the altar (Amos 9): “The people would have expected a vision of God by the altar to mean that He intended good for them, blessing them with His presence. Instead God would start at the altar, commanding that the destruction of the sinful nation begin there” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 1). If this meaning is correct, then the verse is parallel with Ezekiel 9:6, where God says that destruction will begin at His sanctuary. However, it may be that the altar of Amos 9:1 is the pagan altar of Bethel—perhaps indicating that false worship is to be destroyed. Or the altar image may symbolize God making a “sacrifice” of many people (compare Isaiah 34:6; Jeremiah 46:10; Ezekiel 39:17-20). In any case, this vision does not bode well for the Israelites.

God even seems to say that He will slay Israel to the last man (Amos 9:1), finding them no matter where they go (verses 2-4). Yet He clarifies that a remnant of Israel would survive, passing through the nations as grain is sifted through a sieve (verses 8-9). While the political entity of Israel is destroyed, the Israelites are not utterly obliterated as a people. This, we should note, is an end-time prophecy, referring to the final captivity of Israel. However, for Israel to even exist in the end time, the exact same “sifting” process must have occurred in the wake of Israel's ancient captivity, making this prophecy dual in its fulfillment. The northern kingdom of Israel was taken captive by Assyria, but the “lost ten tribes” survived, being “sifted” through the nations, later to emerge as modern peoples in Northwest Europe. In fact, the United States and Britain are the principal nations of Israel today (see *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy* for more detailed information). We would do well, then, to take warning.

Amos' prophecy ends with a picture of the wonderful restoration of Israel under the rule of Jesus Christ. The “lost ten tribes” will return to their homeland, and the land will flourish as never before. “Israelite farmers plowed at the beginning of the rainy season, from mid-October. They harvested the grain crop—first barley, then wheat—from late March to early June. For the *plowman to overtake the reaper* would mean such an abundant harvest that it would last all summer and would not be gathered until the plowing had started again. Grapes were harvested from mid-summer to early fall. The grain crop was sown after the plowing in late fall. For the *treader of grapes to overtake him who sows seed* would mean the grape harvest would be so abundant that it would be extended for several weeks. The harvest of grapes would be so great that it would seem as though the mountains and hills themselves were flowing with rivers of sweet wine” (*Nelson*, note on verse 13). The Jewish

resettlement of the Holy Land in the 20th century has certainly not fulfilled these verses. They describe the time following Christ's return, when Israel will never be uprooted again (verse 15).

“Take Yourself a Wife of Harlotry” (Hosea 1–3)

February 27

The prophet Hosea was contemporary with Amos, both having preached during the reigns of Uzziah of Judah and Jeroboam II of Israel (1:1; Amos 1:1). But Hosea tells us that his ministry also spanned the reigns of Judah's kings Jotham and Ahaz, ending in the reign of Hezekiah (Hosea 1:1). Though not mentioned, this means that he also witnessed the reigns of the last six of Israel's kings.

The New Living Translation's introduction to the book of Hosea calls it “a tragic love story with a happy ending.” What Hosea went through serves as a powerful object lesson of what God has gone through with His covenant people. Another source states: “Hosea's marriage was extraordinary in that he was called to marry an unfaithful woman (Ho 1.2). Gomer's exact background is not known, but it could be that she had been unfaithful to a previous husband, or she might have been a prostitute. She might have been the particular kind of prostitute that was associated with some of the pagan religions that were being practiced then in Israel. Whatever Gomer's background, she was a powerful symbol of Israel's spiritual adultery against the Lord (2.2). The nation had departed almost entirely from worship as prescribed in the Law. Instead, the people had taken up the religions of the cultures around them such as the Canaanites, the Phoenicians, and the Moabites....

“Just as Israel abandoned God, Gomer left her husband and returned to a life of prostitution. She seems to have ended up in the slave market, where Hosea bought her back for fifteen pieces of silver and some grain (3.2). This was not much money, just the common price of a slave (compare Ex 21.32). But it was a great sacrifice of love on Hosea's part. The prophet was demonstrating the love of God for his unfaithful people, and providing a symbol of the reconciliation that would someday take place (Ho 3.4, 5)” (*Word in Life Bible*, “Prodigal Wife, Prodigal People,” 1998, sidebar on 2:2).

In the meantime (2:1), God gave Israel another chance to repent. But if she refused, she would be dealt with harshly. *Halley's Bible Handbook* further explains: “Not only was Hosea's marriage an illustration of the thing he was preaching, but the names of his children proclaim the main messages of his life. *Jezreel* (1:4-5), his firstborn, was named after the city of Jehu's bloody brutality (2 Kings 10:1-14). The valley of Jezreel was the age-old battlefield on which the kingdom was about to collapse. By naming his child Jezreel, Hosea was saying to the king and to the nation, ‘The hour of retribution and punishment has come’” (note on Hosea 1–3). Moreover, “in Hebrew ‘Jezreel’ means ‘God scatters (seed).’ Here the name is used as a threat (meaning the LORD will punish Israel by scattering its people)” (*Word in Life*, note on 1:4).

“*Lo-ruhamah* (1:6), the name of the second child, meant ‘Not loved.’ God's mercy had come to an end for Israel, though there would be a respite for Judah (v. 7). *Lo-ammi* (1:9), the name of the third child, meant ‘Not my people.’ Hosea then repeats the two names without the ‘Lo’ prefix—*Ammi* and *Ruhamah*—‘My people’ and ‘My loved one’ (2:1), looking forward to the time when Israel would again be God's people. And in a play on the words, he predicts the day when other nations will be called the people of God (1:10), a verse Paul quotes to support his message that the Gospel will also be extended to include Gentiles (Romans 9:25)” (*Halley's*, note on Hosea 1–3). Actually, the gentiles must become Israelites in order to be God's people—that is, *spiritual* Israelites (compare Galatians 3:26-29; 6:15-16; Romans 2:26-29; 9:8; 11:1, 11-24; Ephesians 2:11-13, 19-22).

God shows us through Hosea that He still loves Israel in spite of her infidelity. “Having separated Israel from her lovers, the Lord would seek to win her back by making romantic overtures and wooing her with tender words of love” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note Hosea 2:14). At that time, the Israelites are to call God *Ishi* (“My Husband”) instead of *Baali* (“My Master” or “My Lord”) in order to remove all remembrance of their former devotion to Baal. Actually, ancient Israel practiced syncretism, i.e., blended religion, often confusing the identities of Baal and the Eternal—in part because both were referred to as Lord. We should note two things in this regard. One is the fact that Baalism had again reared its ugly head in Israel at the time Hosea preached, despite Jehu's earlier purge. The other is the fact that Hosea's message was primarily to Israel of the end time. Interestingly, the nations of modern Israel supposedly worship the “Lord”—but this Lord is not really the true Lord of the Bible, as he is usually worshiped with many of the trappings of Baalism. To put it more directly, what the world at large understands to be Christianity is actually a blended religion, a mix of some of the same customs of the ancient pagans with concepts and language of the New Testament. Millions of people think they “accept Christ as their Savior,” when in fact, they embrace a religion that Jesus will reject (Matthew 7:21-23).

Thankfully, after a long exile (Hosea 3:4), the Israelites will finally be reunited with the true God in the Land of Promise (verse 5). The time when all Israel returns to God will be a magnificent period of peace (2:18), when weapons of war will be gone (Isaiah 2:4, Micah 4:3), and when there is rain in due season (Hosea 2:21; Leviticus 26:4) and agricultural abundance (Hosea 2:22). Then, the people of Israel will at last *know* their God (verse 23). In Hosea 1:11, the name Jezreel, again meaning “‘God scatters (seed)’... is [this time] used as a promise (meaning the LORD will bless Israel by giving their nation many people, just as a big harvest comes when many seeds are scattered in a field)” (*Word in Life*, note on 1:4).

Succession of Coups in Israel (2 Kings 14:28-29; 15:8-18)

February 28

After the death of Jeroboam, the situation in Israel grew steadily worse. His son Zechariah was king for only six months and was no better than his father, thus bringing to an end the prophecy that God had made to Jehu: “Your sons shall sit on the throne of Israel to the fourth generation” (10:30). The assassination of Zechariah also fulfilled a portion of the prophecy we just read in Hosea that “in a little while I will avenge the bloodshed of Jezreel on the house of Jehu” (Hosea 1:4).

Following Zechariah’s assassination, Israel was ruled by a succession of usurpers. Shallum, like the usurper Hazael (8:15), was referred to in Assyrian records as “the son of nobody,” indicating that he was not of royal descent. He lasted only a single month, being overthrown by Menahem. The lesson of history shows that whenever a person takes over a leadership role through a coup, whether in a nation, in the church or in any organization, he is setting an example to his followers that they too can do the same if they are dissatisfied.

Menahem attacked Tiphseh (15:16), that is, “Thapsacus, on the Euphrates, the border city of Solomon’s kingdom (1 Kings 4:24)” (*Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Commentary*, note on 2 Kings 15:16). It appears that Menahem was trying to maintain the expansion that had occurred under Jeroboam II, who had died just seven months before he took the throne. Tiphseh would be an example to all those who would try to stop this brutal king. His abominable and egregious evil in ripping open the pregnant women was an all-too-common heathen practice (8:12; Hosea 13:16; Amos 1:13). Ironically, the name Menahem meant “Comforter.”

None of these Israelite rulers are recorded in 2 Chronicles. In fact, as noted previously in the Bible Reading Program, almost none of the final kings of Israel, from Jeroboam II on, are even mentioned in Chronicles.

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