



Good News
Bible Reading Program

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

— December 2003 —

DATE	READING TOPIC	SCRIPTURES
1-7 Dec	WEEK-LONG BREAK	
8-9 Dec	The desolation and misery of Jerusalem	Lamentations 1
10-11 Dec	God's anger with His people	Lamentations 2
12-13 Dec	The prophet's affliction; Hope in God and His faithfulness	Lamentations 3
14-15 Dec	The horror of Jerusalem's affliction; Punishment to also come on Edom	Lamentations 4
16-17 Dec	Appeal to God for restoration	Lamentations 5
18-19 Dec	Gedaliah made governor of Judah; Jeremiah freed from prison; Message to Ebed-Melech	2 Kings 25:22; Jeremiah 39:11-40:6
20-21 Dec	Governorship of Gedaliah; Killed by insurrection	2 Kings 25:23-26; Jeremiah 40:7-41:18
22-23 Dec	God tells the remnant not to flee to Egypt; They flee anyway, taking Jeremiah, Baruch and king's daughters	Jeremiah 42-43
24-25 Dec	Jews in Egypt to be punished	Jeremiah 44
26-27 Dec	Exiles learn of Jerusalem's fall; Those left in the Promised Land to be destroyed; The exiles entertained by Ezekiel; Bad shepherds; God the true Shepherd will restore Israel	Ezekiel 33:21-34:31
28-29 Dec	Prophecy against Mount Seir (Edom)	Ezekiel 35
30-31 Dec	Israel will return to their land, the people will receive a new heart and spirit, and the land will become as Eden	Ezekiel 36

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Highlights to Think About From This Month's Reading

WEEK-LONG BREAK

December 1-7

Seven-day break in the program. Readings resume on December 8.

Introduction to Lamentations (Lamentations 1)

December 8-9

The author of Lamentations is not named in the book, but it is traditionally attributed to the prophet Jeremiah. "In fact, some copies of the ancient Greek Septuagint translation begin the book with these words: 'And it came to pass, after Israel [i.e., the remnant of Israel—Judah] had been carried captive, and Jerusalem became desolate, that Jeremiah sat weeping, and lamented this lamentation over Jerusalem.' Crediting Lamentations to Jeremiah is based on the following considerations: (1) Jeremiah was known as a composer of laments (see 2 Chr. 35:25). (2) Jeremiah was the prophet who mourned, 'Oh, that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!' (see Jer. 9:1). (3) In [Lamentations] 3:1, the author seems to identify himself with Jeremiah when he says, 'I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of His wrath.' (4) There are many linguistic similarities between Lamentations and Jeremiah" (*The Nelson Study Bible*, introductory notes on Lamentations).

"In the Talmud (*Baba Bathra* 15a), this book is called *qinot* ('Lamentations').... The name commonly used in Hebrew, however, is *ekah* ('How'), the first word of the first, second, and fourth laments [that is, chapters 1, 2 and 4]. In the Hebrew canon it stands in the Writings as the third of the Megilloth, or Scrolls, between Ruth and Ecclesiastes" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, introductory notes on Lamentations). We are reading it now to keep it in the context of its writing in the wake of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

"The five chapters of Lamentations are five poems with ch[apter] 3 as the midpoint or climax. Accordingly, the first two chapters build an 'ascent,' or crescendo, to the climax, the grand confession of 3:23, 24: 'Great is your faithfulness. The Lord is my portion.' The last two chapters are a 'descent,' or decrescendo, from the pinnacle of ch[apter] 3.... The poetry of the book enhances its purpose and structure. Chapters 1 through 4 are composed as acrostics of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Each verse or group of verses begins with a word whose initial letter carries on the sequence of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. This would be similar to an English poem in which the first line begins with A; the second begins with B, and so on. One purpose of this device was probably to aid in memorization of the passage. The acrostic also suggests that the writer has thought things through and is giving a complete account of the subject" (*Nelson Study Bible*, introductory notes on Lamentations).

While chapter 1 is a perfect acrostic, chapters 2-4 are slightly imperfect, and oddly enough for the same reason. In each case the 16th and 17th letters of the Hebrew alphabet (*ayin* and *pe*) are swapped—for what significance we don't know. The acrostic in chapter 3 comes in groups of three—that is, each of the first three verses begins with the first Hebrew letter *aleph*, each of the second three with the second letter *beth*, etc. (see *Expositor's*, introductory notes on Lamentations). And then there is the mysterious chapter 5, intriguingly not an acrostic even though it still seems to divide up into 22 verses. "That chapter 5 has twenty-two verses has caused some to suggest that the laments were first written in normal verse and then rewritten to include the acrostic. This idea is ingenious but unprovable" (same note).

Other laments are written in various books like the book of Psalms, but this is the only book solely devoted to lamenting. Orthodox Jewish custom requires that this book be read aloud on the fast of Tisha b'Av, the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Ab—the traditional day on which the temple of Solomon was destroyed in 586 B.C. and on which the second temple was destroyed by the Roman army in A.D. 70. Jeremiah was present at the destruction of Solomon's temple as Jerusalem was overrun and sacked by the Babylonian armies. He saw the horrifying imagery described in the book. And yet the terrible suffering portrayed seems to reflect even more than what occurred at that time. It evidently anticipates suffering that was, and still is, yet to come—for the judgment described here is what is to befall "all the dwelling places of Jacob...every horn of Israel" (Lamentations 2:2-3), not just Judah. The book, as we will see, calls for the coming of the Day of the Lord and the final judgment on Israel's enemies. Yet there is no question that the ancient anguish and suffering of Judah is also vividly revealed in the pages of this deeply emotional account.

In its introductory notes on the book, *The Bible Reader's Companion* (Lawrence Richards, 1991) states: "Lamentations does maintain a consistent theological outlook: Judah's [and later all Israel's] loss can be traced to God's sovereignty, His justice, and His commitment to a morality which His people abandoned. Yet Lamentations is primarily a book that plumbs the depths of human sorrow, not from an individual's perspective, but from the perspective of an entire people. Reading the book we experience something of the overwhelming sense of despair that can grip communities and even whole nations. Even the prayers recorded in Lamentations are desperate prayers; cries of anguish rather than affirmations of hope. It is terrible as well as wonderful to be human. It is terrible indeed if we surrender to our human bent to sin. The day must come when we will look back on our lost opportunities, and realize that the misery we endure now is a consequence of our own chronic craving for sin. If nothing else, reading the Book of Lamentations reminds us the pleasures of sin are at best momentary, the painful consequences lasting and deep."

The Desolation and Misery of Jerusalem (Lamentations 1)

Dec. 8-9 Cont'd

"The first dirge (1:1-22) focuses on the city of Jerusalem. The poet sees the city as a grieving widow, bereft of her children, dirty, poverty-stricken, and despised, bitterly remembering happier times (vv. 1-11b). The tearful city cries out to God. She describes the utter contempt others have for her, hoping desperately to awaken God's compassion (vv. 11c-16). The poet cries out too (v. 17), and then records Jerusalem's confession. It is Zion's own sin that caused God to judge her with the present distress" (*Bible Reader's Companion*, chapters 1-3 summary).

Jerusalem should be understood literally as the ancient city in which Jeremiah dwelt—spoiled by the Babylonian invasion. But it also represents all Judah—and even Jacob (verse 17), meaning all Israel. Again, this points to the time of the end, when Israel and Judah will be punished together during the time of "Jacob's trouble," the "great tribulation" (Jeremiah 30:7; Matthew 24:21-22).

In Lamentations 1:5 it is "recognized that Jerusalem's disasters were a result of her breach of the covenant; here [in verses 8-9] she is compared to a debased, slatternly harlot, shamelessly exposing her nakedness and indifferent to the marks of menstrual blood—'filthiness'—on her garments, while 'people shake their heads at her'.... Since harlotry is repeatedly used for Israel's idolatry and Baal worship, it is obviously implied here" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on verses 8-9).

Verse 9 says, "She did not consider her destiny; therefore her collapse was awesome." Failing to consider her destiny could be understood in one of two ways. It might mean that she did not think about the wonderful destiny God *intended* for her. As Proverbs 29:18 says: "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (KJV). Or it might mean she did not consider where her actions would lead—what she had essentially destined herself for. As Moses said, "Oh, that they were wise, that...they would consider their latter end!" (Deuteronomy 32:29). The fact that the people have no comforter (Lamentations 1:9, 17, 21) is that they have cut themselves off from God, the true Comforter (see 2 Corinthians 1:3-4). They spread out their hands (verse 17), meaning they pray, but there is no response. Proverbs 1:24 and verse 28 explain that God will neither hear nor respond to the pleas for help of a people that repeatedly refuse His guidance.

The end of verse 11 through verse 16 and verses 18-22 give us the words of the people themselves as they describe their desperate plight. In verses 21-22 a glimmer of recognition is given to the glee with which the enemies of Israel attacked and destroyed. Although God did use Egypt, Assyria and Babylon as well as other nations against Israel—as He will again in the future—He neither overlooked nor forgot the pleasure they took in their task of destruction (as will be the case when He again uses them to punish end-time Israel). The call is made for God to "bring on the day You have announced, that they may become like me." This is a plea for the coming of the Day of the Lord, the end-time period during which the enemies of Israel and Judah will themselves be punished. God will avenge His people. As Isaiah wrote of that time still ahead of us: "For it is the day of the LORD's vengeance, the year of recompense for the cause of Zion" (Isaiah 34:8). No doubt the Israelites in the Great Tribulation will be crying out for this deliverance.

God's Anger With His People (Lamentations 2)

December 10-11

"The second dirge (2:1-22) emphasizes the destruction God caused in unleashing His anger on the Holy City.... A grimly determined God has laid Zion waste, rejecting His city and its temple (vv. 1-9). In utter agony, Zion's proud inhabitants have crumpled to the ground. They are terrified, tormented, and stunned; shattered by the events which have at last revealed the futility of false prophets' reassurances. God has done as He promised and planned (vv. 10-17). The writer calls his people to prayer (vv. 18-19), and they cry out, describing their condition in pitiful terms, and acknowledging God as the cause of their pain (vv. 20-22)" (*Bible Reader's Companion*, chapters 1-3

summary). This is a bold reminder of the fact that God desires worship that comes from a converted heart, not that which comes from ritual or a building—even ritual He instituted and a building He blessed!

In verse 2 we see that destruction has come on “all the dwelling places of Jacob,” including, but not limited to, “the strongholds of the daughter of Judah.” Verse 3 shows God having cut off “every horn of Israel,” the horn being a symbol of strength and power. God “has blazed against Jacob like a flaming fire.” As noted previously, the book of Lamentations concerns not only what happened to ancient Judah, but also what will befall both Judah and Israel in the end time. This is startling to consider, when one realizes it encompasses the most powerful nations of the past 200 years—the former British Empire and the present superpower of the United States.

The beginning of verse 6 is perhaps better translated, “He has done violence to His tabernacle, as if it were *that of a garden...*” That is, as *Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Commentary* quotes Calvin in its note on verse 6, “His tabernacle (i.e., temple) as (one would take away the temporary cottage or booth) of a garden.”

Verse 9 laments, “The Law is no more, and her prophets find no vision from the LORD.” *The Nelson Study Bible* comments in its note on this verse: “These words do not suggest the end of the Law, but rather the ceasing of the work of the Law in the lives of the people for their blessing (see Deut. 6:1-3)... Divinely appointed instruction ceased for both the nation and the individual. This is not to say that the Law or prophecy were no longer available. God spoke to Jeremiah ten days after the prophet requested a word from God (see Jer. 42:4-7); furthermore Ezekiel and Daniel prophesied during the 70 years of the Exile.”

In Lamentations 2:11 we see the writer of the book—again, probably Jeremiah—with eyes swollen shut from weeping over what is happening to his people. As a true servant of God who cares deeply for the people he is sent to minister to, he is sick with grief to the point of vomiting. And yet this sense of overwhelming grief may not just be the mindset of the book’s writer, as it is inspired by the ultimate author—God Himself. God does not miss anything—not the cries of infants or their mothers. He is afflicted when His people are afflicted (as Isaiah 63:9 makes clear: “In all their affliction He was afflicted.”). Indeed, as we will see in the next chapter, “He does not afflict willingly” (3:33).

So why does He persist in the affliction? Besides being just and fair, God knows the punishment is totally necessary. Jesus prayed to His Father on the night before His crucifixion, “If it be possible, let this cup pass from me.” But that was not to be. Sometimes there is no alternative. God is working towards an everlasting plan, and punishment and suffering are sometimes necessary to produce positive results that last for eternity. The destruction and suffering of Israel is a lesson that all mankind can and will benefit from (compare 1 Corinthians 10:6-7). Even this study of these words is part of their benefit! When we have trials today and God allows them, His purpose is always a greater one of eternal good for the one afflicted (James 1:2).

Of course, in the midst of affliction, the suffering is hard to bear—and difficult for those trying to provide comfort. “How shall I console you?” the book asks. “Jeremiah had no words to help the grieving women of Jerusalem as they looked helplessly on their dying babies” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on Lamentations 2:13). Again, we should remember that God too, not just His prophet, grieved over what He decided had to be done in response to the rebellion of the nation. In this sense, we should view the book of Lamentations as not just the lamenting of Jeremiah and the people of Israel, but also of God Himself.

This situation is so dire that the mothers have actually cannibalized their children (verse 20), just as God had warned would happen in the terrible siege conditions that would result from His people forsaking Him (Deuteronomy 28:52-57). We will see this mentioned again in Lamentation 4:10. This horrifying act had been perpetrated in past siege conditions (see 2 Kings 6:28-29). And, as shocking as it is to contemplate, it will yet happen again at the end of the age.

This is a sobering picture of where disobedience leads. May we learn the lesson—and avoid the consequences—as we approach the terrible times that lie just ahead of us all.

The Heart of the Matter (Lamentations 3)

December 12-13

The third lament is 66 verses long, as each of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet is used to begin three consecutive verses. This dirge details the personal complaint of the poet. The writer identifies himself in the opening verse as “the man who has seen affliction by the rod of His wrath.” Again, the book is traditionally ascribed to Jeremiah, and that seems likely. Yet there is clear

identification throughout with the entire nation (verses 40-47 even being written in first person plural). However, the words of this chapter could not have been written by just anyone.

The Expositor's Bible Commentary does not agree with the assessment of some "that 'every man' is speaking. It would be an exceptional Israelite who could use this language, and some of his experiences could hardly be generalized. The commentary [here] is based on the assumption that Jeremiah is speaking.... The reminiscences of many psalms [in what is written] is one of the arguments used against authorship by Jeremiah. Behind this lies—consciously or unconsciously—the supposition that many of these were written later than the prophet, an assumption that modern psalm-studies have almost completely dissipated. If the prophet adopted the difficult treble acrostic...as a curb on his anguish, the adoption of familiar phrases from the Psalms, especially from the psalms of lamentation, should create no psychological or literary difficulty in the ascription of this lament to him" (note on Lamentations 3).

Verses 1-18 appear to describe Jeremiah's own suffering at the hands of his people—ultimately ascribed to God since He has ultimate oversight of all things. Verses 6-9 seem to describe the time Jeremiah spent in the prison dungeon. The statement "He shuts out my prayer" in verse 8 may recall God forbidding Jeremiah to pray for Judah's deliverance (see Jeremiah 11:14; 14:11). Of course, it may also refer to times Jeremiah called on God to rescue him and didn't immediately hear from Him. Yet we can also see in these verses the entire nation describing its plight of being bound in the chains of Babylonian captivity. (There is some irony, and justice, in the comparison in that the people are crying out in *their* affliction just as Jeremiah cried out over what *they* did to him.)

Verses 10-12, about God being like a bear or ambushing lion who has torn in pieces, seem more a reference to what the nation experienced. Yet Jeremiah may have felt this way at times during his own suffering, thinking that God was responsible for it since He could have prevented it if He chose to. Verse 14's statement "I have become the ridicule of all my people" fits Jeremiah and does not seem to fit the Jews as a whole. Nevertheless there is a parallel in that the Jewish nation became the ridicule of all the nations around them. We should also bear in mind that what happened in Jeremiah's day—to himself and his people—was a forerunner of what all Israel will experience at the end of the age.

Regarding verse 16, "some suggest the feeding on gravel and dust (or ashes) [is] in mockery; some, the violent grinding of the face in the ground by others. The latter seems the more probable. Yet again it could be argued that it refers to the type of bread made from the sweepings of the granary floor that Jeremiah must have received toward the end of the siege" (*Expositor's*, note on verse 16).

In verses 19-20 it appears that Jeremiah is praying, "Remember all the terrible things I've gone through. I remember them—and, alas, I feel worse than I did before." Then, in verse 21, he seems to recover, saying essentially, "But!...I also remember how I came through it all." That is, "I survived—You have not abandoned me." "Jeremiah's remembrance of God's faithfulness brought about a change in the prophet's emotions. As long as we contemplate our troubles, the more convinced we will become of our isolation, our hopelessness, our inability to extricate ourselves from the present trouble. But when we focus on the Lord, we are able finally to rise above, rather than to suffer under, our troubles" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 21).

Verse 22 is truly remarkable. Jeremiah expresses his conviction that in all the troubles, God is yet being merciful. For the entire nation to be totally exterminated would be justice—because the penalty for sin is death—but God continually shows mercy. "This verse seems to contradict all that had been written up to this point (see 2:1-5). Yet the very fact that there was a prophet left to write these words and a remnant left to read them show that not every person in Jerusalem had been consumed. The fact that there was a remnant at all was due to the mercies and compassions of God. Even in His wrath (2:1-4), God remembers to be merciful" (note on 3:22). Indeed, God's compassions "are new every morning" (verse 23). "Every day presents us with a new opportunity to discover and experience more of God's love. Even in the midst of terrible sorrow, Jeremiah looked for signs of mercy" (note on verse 23).

And then the pinnacle confession: "Great is your faithfulness" (verse 23). "Here is the heart of the Book of Lamentations. The comforting, compassionate character of God dominates the wreckage of every other institution and office. God remains 'full of grace and truth' in every situation (see Ex. 34:6, 7; John 1:14)" (note on Lamentations 3:23). Verses 22-24 are like a balm on a sore. Jeremiah is reminding himself of the true good and loving nature of God. That is one vital point that will strengthen a person throughout a trial.

This is not the mere painting of a happy face over a grievous situation. There is great blessing for those who wait on God (verse 25). “The idea here is the acceptance of God’s will and His timing (see Ps. 40:1; Is. 40:31)” (note on Lamentations 3:25). This idea carries through to verse 33 and helps us to understand the meaning of verse 27, which states that it is good to bear the yoke while young. The idea is that of a person of full vim and vigor willingly and humbly accepting the judgment God has placed on him. This is more clearly stated in verse 28. Putting one’s mouth in the dust in verse 29 means willing lying prostrate on the ground with, by implication, the conqueror’s foot on one’s back.

In verse 30, we see the idea of turning the other cheek in the face of oppression and maltreatment, just as Jesus would later direct the Jews of His day to do (Matthew 5:39). The point in Lamentations 3 is that we must not fight the judgment of God. We must bear it willingly and patiently, waiting on Him, with full hope and trust in the next verse: “For the LORD will not cast off forever” (verse 31). This is exactly why God’s message to the Jews of Jeremiah’s day was that they surrender to Babylon. Whatever the chastening, we must remember that it is only a temporary condition. God is full of mercy and compassion (verse 32). He does not afflict men willingly or easily (verse 33), but only when He, in His omniscience, deems it absolutely necessary. It hurts God to hurt His people—just as it does human parents to discipline their children. As many scriptures show, after Israel is humbled and repentant, God’s plan is to regather and restore His nation.

Jeremiah uses his own experiences that kept him humble to show the way that his people could once again regain the blessings of God. Verses 40-41 are a call to self-examination and change, which will renew the relationship with God. That is the path for all people ultimately. Repentance is required. This was the answer the apostle Peter gave to the Jews of his day in Acts 2:38: “Repent and be baptized.” Action is required to “be saved from this perverse generation” (verse 40). So, too, Israel was encouraged to act.

When the people lament their suffering at the hands of their enemies in verses 46-47 of Lamentations 3, Jeremiah in verses 48-51 again describes his own uncontrollable weeping and grief over what they must endure. He then looks back at his own sufferings at the hands of enemies (verse 52)—those enemies being some of the same people he is now weeping for. Jeremiah’s time in the cistern or dungeon is evidently referred to in verse 53 and 55, though the pit could also figuratively represent any dire situation. It appears that in verses 52-66 Jeremiah’s personal situation is again being used to represent the situation of the whole nation. His words in verses 55-58 are words of hope. God rescued Jeremiah in the past—and He would do so again. Just the same, God had rescued the Israelites in the past—and He will do so again.

Though calmed through renewed hope, Jeremiah “cannot contain a last cry to God to judge those enemies whose brutality has brought him and his people such pain (vv. 58-66)” (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, chapters 1-3 summary). Again we can see the irony and justice here. Jeremiah was personally referring to what many of his own people had done to him—and that they deserved to be judged. And they *are* judged—by the enemy nation God has brought against them. Now they plea for justice using Jeremiah’s own words. (In the last days, we can perhaps imagine true Christians crying out over persecution they experience from fellow Israelites—and later those same Israelites crying out in the same terms over what they will suffer at the hands of end-time Babylon.)

Serving God included suffering for the prophets just as it did for the apostles of Christ centuries later. Christians today also suffer for their beliefs and their work, as well as in the normal course of life. Yet there is a purpose to all of these experiences as each human being is carefully prepared for a future that is much more wonderful and rewarding than anything we can comprehend. Even Jesus was made perfect for a position in the future through what He suffered (Hebrews 2:10, 5:8; 1 Peter 5:10). James 1:2 tells us to rejoice when we face a trial. It takes a strong belief in God’s overshadowing care for a follower to accept that the negatives that often come will ultimately work toward his good (see Romans 8:28).

Almost all of the prophets of God, and in all likelihood all His people who have suffered, have at times experienced moments of weakness and discouragement. Depression was the result for a time. God also experiences hurt and is afflicted by the suffering of His children. But there is purpose to it all. We learn genuine empathy for the sufferings of others by sharing their experiences. Paul wrote of how the experience of suffering, coupled with God’s comfort during the trial equips us to serve others (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). Sometimes, we also have to learn the hard lesson that giving in to Satan’s temptations or to our human nature brings painful consequences. Jeremiah felt forsaken at times—and we see his depth of feeling over it portrayed in this powerful book. There are profound lessons for all of us in his experiences and in his emotions.

The Horror of Jerusalem's Affliction (Lamentations 4)**December 14-15**

Lamentations 4 gives graphic descriptions of the result of a long siege. Children are starving (verse 4), the noble and genteel have lost their arrogance (verses 5, 8), and the dead are better off than the others (verse 9). Most horrible of all is the cannibalism that is described in verse 10. One can only imagine the horrors that were taking place. Jeremiah witnessed them in graphic detail, and God did too. The sorrow and anguish of even the most sinful and evil human being is not lost to God's knowledge and enduring love. Hope is always extended—hope that the excruciating experiences will cause a stubborn and unyielding people to make lasting and permanent changes in all they think and do.

Some have objected to the wording of verse 1—"How the gold has become dim!"—because gold does not tarnish. However, "since the second line refers to the destroyed temple, we can easily see a reference to its gold-covered panels and golden vessels so covered with dust that their value is no longer discernible" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on verses 1-2). Moreover, the gold and stones of the temple are also used here to typify God's people—who were far more valuable than the physical temple (see verse 2). Yet they are discarded as broken pottery.

The siege of Jerusalem was so severe that no one was exempt, even those who were considered to be especially holy—the Nazirites, who were specially consecrated to God (verses 7-8; see Numbers 6:1-21). Interesting to note here is the skin color of these people. There are some today who argue that the ancient Israelites and Jews were black, brown or olive in color. Yet Lamentations 4:7 describes those in good health among them as "brighter than snow and whiter than milk...more ruddy in body than rubies." *Chambers Concise Dictionary* defines "ruddy" as "red; reddish; of the colour of healthy skin in white-skinned peoples" (1988). King David was also described as "ruddy and of a fair countenance" (1 Samuel 17:42, KJV). This is not the red of Native Americans but of Caucasian peoples with "ruby-red cheeks." Consider that the Jews of today are also white. The phrase "like sapphire in their appearance" in Lamentations 4:7 must denote *shiny* skin as opposed to bluish coloring. The fact that the ancient Israelites were white supports the identification of northwest Europeans as their descendants (see our free booklet *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy* for more on this identification). Yet in the terrible siege conditions the skin of the people, even the Nazirites, has become black and dry (verse 8) from malnourishment and lack of water.

Verses 13-20 describe the culpability of a corrupt religious leadership. "The guilt of prophets and priests was incurred in a variety of ways. They incited the leadership to resist Babylon and so brought disaster on the city. They also were responsible for the death of at least one prophet whose message was like that of Jeremiah (Jer. 26:20-23). Finally, Ezek. 22:1-22 shows that the concept of 'bloodguilt' was quite broad, and included acts which threatened the well-being and thus shortened the lifespan of another. The active hostility of the religious leadership to Jeremiah and their indifference to the needs of common men, as well as their destructive meddling in politics, all contributed to the corruption of Jewish society and made judgment inevitable" (*Bible Reader's Companion*, note on Lamentations 4:13-16). The religious leadership of the nations of Israel in the end time will be likewise culpable.

In verse 17, the people have watched for a nation that could not save them. In Jeremiah's day, this referred to the Jews looking to Egypt for deliverance—a deliverance that never came. Even some time after Jerusalem's fall, the Jewish remnant in the Holy Land will, as we will see, seek refuge in Egypt against God's command—and suffer the consequences.

In verse 20, we see that the people looked to their Davidic king as their life breath. For besides looking to their king as their deliverer, they considered the Davidic dynasty as inviolable. While this was true in the sense that the dynasty would not end, it was not true in the sense of trusting any particular king as being unassailable. That was clearly a foolish conclusion considering what had happened to previous Davidic rulers. And indeed, a worse fate befell Zedekiah and his sons. Moreover, as we know, God was in the process of removing the Davidic dynasty from the nation of Judah. Living under a divinely established king did not immunize them against needing to fear and obey God individually—any more than living in nations blessed by God today guarantees that everything will always go well, either for the nations or its citizens individually. Focusing upon being part of a "chosen" group takes one's eyes off of personal responsibility.

The chapter ends with a surprising reference to Edom, the perennial enemy of Israel. The Edomites routinely rejoiced over calamity that came upon God's people. Indeed, as other passages show, this enmity will persist to the very end of the age. Edom will even be part of the forces arrayed

against Israel at that time. In verses 21-22, God basically says to Edom, “Rejoice while you can—you’re next!”

Yet, as verse 22 states, Zion’s punishment will be accomplished. This was not ultimately fulfilled in Jeremiah’s day. The punishment of Zion was not yet over. It was finished for that moment, but destruction would happen again more than six centuries later under the Roman armies. Israel is still rebellious and is not yet turned to God. Scripture indicates a final great punishment for Israel as the return of Christ draws near. How difficult it seems to be for mankind to learn and to change. In fact, it takes a miracle and direct intervention by God through the gift of His Holy Spirit. Israel will undergo the terrible Great Tribulation that lies ahead, but God will draw the line before complete destruction has occurred. And when He intervenes on Israel’s behalf, He will judge Israel’s enemies.

“Turn Us Back to You, O LORD” (Lamentations 5)

December 16-17

“The final dirge (5:1-22) is a cry for relief. This poem is not an acrostic, and the use of some 45 Hebrew words ending in *u* bolsters the sense of lament. The poet cries out to God to act in view of the dread conditions of His people” (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, chapters 4–5 summary).

Verse 6 mentions the people giving their hand to the Egyptians and the Assyrians. Yet the Assyrian Empire had long before fallen to the Babylonians. The reference may be to the sin of past generations, as verse 7 notes that their “fathers sinned.” Yet it may also indicate events of the end time, when Assyria will again be a dominant power—a major component in the Babylonian empire of the last days.

In verse 16, we find the people full of remorse over their sin. Things seem hopeless indeed. But all is not lost, as we see in the last verses of the chapter. The writer, probably Jeremiah, recognizes on behalf of the people that “God’s eternal rule and reign are a hope and support during the bleakest moments of suffering and despair (see Ps. 80:1, 2; 89:3, 4; 103:19)” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on Lamentations 5:19).

Yet, as verse 20 asks, why must deliverance be so long away? None of the prophets could have foreseen centuries and millennia passing before God brings this evil age to an end. The history of the Jews tells of the plaintive condition that these people of God—the survivors of Jerusalem, we might say—have lived under for such a very long time. History does not record any other single small group of people who have been hounded and persecuted from place to place almost all over the world—while yet waiting for their God to rescue them. The final chapter of Lamentations is the cry of human beings about to return to their God in the full understanding of their sin and God’s great mercy and love toward them.

The plea of verse 21, “Turn us back to You, O LORD,” is a recognition of the fact that God Himself must *lead* us to repentance. As Jesus Christ explained, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me *draws* him” (John 6:44). Acts 5:31 states that God must “grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins” (NASB). And 2 Timothy 2:25 confirms that God must “grant...repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth” (NASB). He must remove the spiritual blindness that has come upon all human beings through the deceptive efforts of Satan the devil and their own corrupted human nature (see 2 Corinthians 4:3-4; Revelation 12:9; Romans 7:15-23). God must reveal to us His truth, and help us to see the error of our ways. We will never come to fully realize our depraved condition apart from God’s revelation.

The final verse of Lamentations seems an odd statement and quite a down note to end on. Yet it does make sense in context—and is not so negative after all. The people, through Jeremiah most likely, have acknowledged their sins and the fact that their punishment was deserved. Now they ask for God to give them repentance—to help them turn their lives around. To that they essentially add: “...unless you really have utterly rejected us.” But it is already recognized in the book that this is not the case (see 3:31)—which means that the final addendum is, in effect, saying, “...unless, contrary to what You have promised, You really have utterly rejected us.” Yet rather than doubting God, as it might seem, this statement implies trust that He will act to defend His integrity. In that sense, the statement is intended to prod Him to fulfill His promises to restore Israel. Ultimately, He surely will.

Jeremiah Finally Freed (2 Kings 25:22; Jeremiah 39:11–40:6)

December 18-19

Jeremiah’s experience provides a wonderful lesson for all Christians. No matter what we face in life, we can count on God seeing us through—sometimes in the most unexpected of ways.

After decades of living under constant threat to his life and having just spent the past two years in prison, Jeremiah is at last set free—by the Babylonians of all people. While God was ultimately behind this, it nevertheless makes sense politically on a human level. In its note on Jeremiah 39:11-14, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* explains: “Undoubtedly the Babylonians had favorable

information about Jeremiah and probably considered him a sympathizer. Besides, those who had deserted Judah in the siege gave a report of him. Jeremiah's advice about submitting to Babylon even during the siege had been proclaimed over so long a time that it could not have escaped the attention of the Babylonian authorities. They realized that he was no threat to them. Paradoxically he was treated better by foreign invaders than by his own countrymen whom he so dearly loved (v. 12)."

Moreover, "Prophets whose words were deemed verified were generally treated well by peoples of the ancient Middle East" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 40:2-3). In any case, "word was passed along (v. 13) to release Jeremiah from the courtyard of the guard and entrust him to Gedaliah, the appointed governor, with whom he was to remain (v. 14). Gedaliah was the son of Ahikam, who had been active in saving Jeremiah's life [during Jehoiakim's reign] (cf. 26:24). For three generations [Gedaliah's] family had been true to the word of the Lord that came through his prophets" (*Expositor's*, note on Jeremiah 39:11-14). Gedaliah's father Ahikam and his father Shaphan had both served as important officials during Josiah's reign (see 2 Kings 22:12; Chronicles 34:20).

"Since Nebuchadnezzar was fond of Jeremiah, Gedaliah's [well-known] relationship with the prophet could have influenced Nebuchadnezzar's choice of him as governor of Judah" (*Mastering the Old Testament*, Vol. 9: 1, 2 Kings by Russell Dilday, 1987). Moreover, "of the prominent men of Jerusalem, only Jeremiah and Gedaliah were left behind ([2 Kings 25] v. 22; cf. Jer 39:11-14)... Accordingly Gedaliah, who probably had the needed training, seemed the logical choice to be Babylon's governor designate over the newly formed district" (*Expositor's*, note on 2 Kings 25:22-24).

Remarkably, archaeology has confirmed Gedaliah's importance: "A clay seal-impression found at Lachish reads: 'Belonging to Gedaliah, who is over the house.' The title 'who is over the house' was reserved for the highest office at the royal court next to the king. In the Bible, this title was held by Shebna, under king Hezekiah, until Shebna was reduced in rank to a scribe (Isa. 22:15-7; 36:3; 2 Kings 18:18)" (Walter Kaiser Jr., *A History of Israel*, 1988, pp. 405-406).

Jeremiah 39:11-14 and 40:1-6 give us two accounts of Jeremiah's release, and some have seen a contradiction between them. "But," notes *Expositor's*, "the passages may be harmonized in this way: (1) at the command of Nebuchadnezzar, Jeremiah was released from prison and committed to the care of Gedaliah; (2) while captives were being transferred to Babylon, Jeremiah mingled with the people (cf. 39:14) to comfort and instruct them in their new life (3) in the confusion of the mass deportation, Jeremiah was not recognized by the soldiers who placed him in chains with the others; and (4) at Ramah [about five miles north of Jerusalem] he was recognized by officials and released (40:1)... Perhaps the situation was that those who had not borne arms, among them Jeremiah, were taken by the Babylonians to Ramah as prisoners until Nebuchadnezzar decided their fate. Later, when Nebuzaradan came to Jerusalem to carry out the king's commands regarding the city, at the special order of Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuzaradan sent for Jeremiah from the prisoners taken to Ramah, freed him, and allowed him to choose his residence. In a condensed account, Jeremiah's release from his imprisonment might be spoken of as a sending for him out of prison, even though at the exact time of his liberation he was not in the courtyard of the palace guard in Jerusalem but had already been carried away to Ramah as an exile" (note on 39:11-14).

Nebuzaradan recognizes that Judah's fall is the result of the Jews' sin against their God. "Consider the irony of a foreigner stating the truth concerning the reason for Jerusalem's destruction" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 40:2-3). Releasing God's prophet, Nebuzaradan gives him the choice of where to go. Apparently God told Jeremiah what to do or the mention of the "word...from the LORD" in verse 1 seems out of context. (Perhaps verse 1 should properly read, as in the NIV, "The word came..." rather than the NKJV rendering, "The word *that* came...")

The prophet goes to the new provincial capital of Mizpah to serve under Gedaliah, "staying with his people not far from his hometown [of Anathoth] and the property he had purchased while in the court of the prison (32:1-15). Mizpah was about eight miles north of Jerusalem," and thus just a few miles north of Ramah (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 40:6).

But before leaving, Jeremiah has a message to relay that God had given him while he was still in prison. During Jeremiah's terrible ordeal in the prison dungeon or cistern, a lone voice had cried out to rescue him—the voice of an Ethiopian eunuch for whom we don't even have a real name. He is simply referred to as *Ebed-Melech*, meaning "the king's servant." For reasons that are not explained, Zedekiah made an uncharacteristic decision and Jeremiah was taken out of the cistern. Notice, too, that Ebed-Melech's faith was a key element in this story (39:18). Being a foreigner didn't exempt him from God's grace and care. As the apostle Peter would later come to understand, "God shows no

partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him” (Acts 10:34-35).

The contrast between most of the Jews at that time and Ebed-Melech illustrates an important principle—that loyalty to God is ultimately an individual matter, not a collective one. A Christian’s salvation depends on his own dedication to, and personal reliance on, God—not a particular nationality at that time or membership in a specific church organization today (compare Philippians 2:12). God had promised the Israelites that if they obeyed Him, they would be blessed. But He also promised that foreigners who lived in Israel would share in Israel’s blessings if they, too, followed Him (Exodus 12:49; Leviticus 19:34; 25:35). He chose Israel in the first place not to make them an exclusive race, but rather to make them into a model people whereby all nations could learn of His ways and receive His benefits.

Like Jeremiah’s faith, Ebed-Melech’s was rewarded by God—as our own faith will be if we put our trust in Him.

Assassination of Gedaliah (2 Kings 25:23-26; Jeremiah 40:7–41:18) December 20-21

Not all Judean soldiers were exiled to Babylon. Some would have escaped with King Zedekiah while others manned fortresses throughout Judah. These army commanders had formed a resistance movement against the Babylonians and now came to Mizpah to meet the new Babylon-appointed Jewish governor, Gedaliah. With reference to one of the commanders, Jaazaniah or Jezaniah (2 Kings 25:23; Jeremiah 40:8), biblical historian Walter Kaiser makes this observation: “In the ruins of Mizpah, if *Tell en Nasbeh* is ancient Mizpah, a seal was found with this inscription: ‘Belonging to Jaazaniah, servant of the king’” (*A History of Israel*, 1988, pp. 406).

The Harper Study Bible notes on Jeremiah 40:11-14: “There was rest in Judah under Gedaliah, who was capable and prudent. Jews who had been dispersed all over Palestine returned to Judah and came under the care and control of Gedaliah. Some degree of prosperity came, inasmuch as they gathered a goodly supply of wine and summer fruits. [But] a dark cloud hung over the infant state under Gedaliah. Baalis king of the Ammonites wanted to destroy Gedaliah. He employed Ishmael, a Jew of royal stock, to settle in Gedaliah’s territory in order to slay the governor. Johanan, a friend of Gedaliah, tried to warn him about the plot, offering to kill Ishmael. But Gedaliah, a peaceful and honorable man, refused the offer and maintained his friend was speaking lies about Ishmael. Johanan’s warning, however, eventually proved to be well-founded.”

Author R.K. Harrison offers further explanation: “After the Chaldeans had devastated Judah, Gedaliah, who had befriended Jeremiah (Jer. 39:14), was appointed governor over the ‘poor of the land.’ Remnants of the old royal house who had managed to escape to Egypt regarded him as a collaborationist, however, and Ishmael, a descendant of the royal Hebrew line, slew Gedaliah at Mizpah while he was endeavoring to resettle the scattered populace” (*Old Testament Times*, 1970, p. 253).

“The ‘ten men’ [involved in the plot] (v. 2) should not be thought of as being alone, for they may have brought a retinue of attendants with them” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on 41:2-3).

“The year of the assassination of Gedaliah,” it should be pointed out, “is not given, only the month—the seventh month of Tishri—September-October. The murder of the governor could have taken place as soon as three months after the fall of Jerusalem [in 586 B.C.] Others associate the third deportation of 582 B.C. [of 745 Judeans (see Jeremiah 52:30)] with this rebellion. Ishmael’s act was especially despicable since it took place during a banquet” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 41:1-2).

Moreover, it is a sad reflection on Ishmael (and his collaborators) that in a time of utter devastation of his homeland and people, he would not only assassinate a decent leader but would also try to destroy the tiny remnant of poor people living there. He even kills a group of 80 men on a pilgrimage to the temple from Shechem, Shiloh and Samaria. These were probably Jews who, during the Babylonian invasion, had taken refuge in what was now Samaritan territory. It may be that they did not know that the temple was destroyed—although, as they were in mourning, it is also possible that they did know but considered the temple ruins as holy, just as Jews now consider the Western Wall of the temple to be. “These eighty men were mourning for the destroyed temple as well as for the ruined city (cf. 16:6; 47:5; 48:37). They had even gashed themselves—a relapse into heathen custom forbidden in Deuteronomy 14:1” (*Expositor’s*, note on verses 4-5)—demonstrating the corruption of Jewish religious practice at this time.

Ishmael then tries to take a group of captives into Ammon. Notice that among them are the “king’s daughters” (verse 10)—showing that all of Zedekiah’s children were not killed. He still had at least two surviving daughters (the number is not specified).

With Johanan’s forces in pursuit, Ishmael gives up his captives and manages to escape into Ammon. Johanan and those who are left worry that Babylon will come down hard on everyone, even those who weren’t involved. “Fearing imminent reprisal from the Babylonians on account of the rebellion, Johanan gathered the inhabitants of Mizpah, including Jeremiah, together with those he had rescued and began a trek toward Egypt, seeking a place of safety. Egypt was the only country in the region that was free from Babylonian control” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on Jeremiah 41:16-18).

We see how vulnerable people become when the government that structured their lives is torn from them—first their king and his government, then the governor put over them by Babylon. They are fearful, anxious for security and therefore vulnerable to self-seeking ambitious men who are eager to seize the leadership. It was a true test of whether they would trust God and His true servant or the men who seemed to offer security in a frightful time.

They camp near Bethlehem. We’ll see more about what they decide to do in our next reading.

Fleeing to Egypt (Jeremiah 42–43)

December 22-23

Fearing a new Babylonian rampage through the land, the Jewish remnant deems it important to have God on their side. So they ask Jeremiah to pray for God’s will to be revealed (verses 1-2). Yet it becomes apparent that what they really want is confirmation of what they have already made up their minds to do—flee to Egypt (see 43:2). “It is an insult to God to ask for his will, when a decision has already been made before his answer comes. Whoever prays with a closed mind might just as well not pray at all” (*Harper Study Bible*, note on 42:10). The people hadn’t fooled God or Jeremiah. God knew they were hypocritical and essentially deceitful when they asked Jeremiah to pray for them (verse 20).

The response from God didn’t come immediately. God doesn’t always answer us when *we* want answers, but when He chooses. They didn’t get the response they wanted. Even today, many pray for God to bless something that they want, rather than seek His will and accept what He gives. Some go to God’s ministers as if seeking counsel, yet having already made up their minds, expecting the minister to support their stand and vindicate their planned actions. When the advice doesn’t agree, they sometimes then become angry with the minister, perhaps even disparaging him. So it was with the Jews and Jeremiah at this time. They did not recognize that their stubbornness was the problem, not an “uncooperative” or “insensitive” servant of God.

Jeremiah 42:10 recalls the prophet’s original commission: “to root out and pull down, to destroy and to throw down, to build and to plant” (1:10). If the Jewish remnant would obey God, He would relent of the judgment of bringing the group down but would rebuild them as a people in the Promised Land. This was always God’s will—to bless and give an inheritance. Human rebellion impeded that.

Verse 11 of chapter 42 recalls another statement God made at the beginning of Jeremiah’s call. There God told him not to fear any who would seek to harm him for God would be with him to deliver him (1:8). Now God through Jeremiah says the same will be true for the Jewish remnant if the people will do what He says and remain in the Promised Land. *Mastering the Old Testament* says: “Think of the memories that would have rushed into Jeremiah’s thoughts as he delivered these words, the same words delivered to him at the time of his call (1:8). Truly he had experienced deliverance: from Pashhur’s stocks, from Hananiah’s accusations, from prison, from the mire of the cistern, and from Babylonian anger, but most of all he had been delivered from the temptation to compromise. No wonder there was such a resonance of faith in the words themselves as they flow on” (Vol. 17: *Jeremiah, Lamentations* by John Guest, 1993, note on verse 11).

Sadly, Jeremiah’s obedient and steadfast character was not shared by the Jewish leaders who were left. Faith in God cannot be given to others; all must learn and chose it over time and in their own life experiences. In rebellion they left Judah and went to Egypt, taking with them Jeremiah and Baruch—presumably against their will as God had forbidden going there. Once again, the “king’s daughters” are listed in the company. The group travels to Tahpanhes in Egypt. “The location of Tahpanhes is known, for the later Hellenized form of the name, Daphne, survives to this day in *Tell Deffeneh*, west of el Kantara. A prominent mound among the ruins was called by the natives ‘Palace of the daughter of the Jew.’ Some excavations were conducted there by Sir Flinders Petrie, which showed this “palace” to have been a strong fort. However, there must also have been a palace of the Pharaoh here, for Jeremiah performed a symbolic action at its entrance...Ezekiel speaks of the pride

of Tahpanhes (Ezek. 30:18), but like Jeremiah (Jer. 43:9 f.) foresees the disaster for the city” (Emil Kraeling, *Rand McNally Bible Atlas*, 1956, p. 318).

Biblical historian Walter Kaiser gives further information on the location and what happened there: “The migrants came to Tahpanhes (*Tell Dafanneh*) in the northeastern delta of Egypt (Jer. 43:1-7). There Jeremiah took stones, at Yahweh’s instruction, and hid them at the entry of the royal palace, predicting that God would one day bring Nebuchadnezzar to conquer this place and set his pavilion on that very spot (Jer. 43:8-13).... This site is twenty-seven miles southwest of Port Said. Sir Flinders Petrie excavated this site in 1883-94 and discovered the foundations of the castle there—perhaps the one mentioned in Jeremiah’s symbolic action” (*A History of Israel*, 1988, pp. 411).

After burying the rocks, Jeremiah gives the Jews another warning from God. In referring to Nebuchadnezzar as “My servant” (verse 10; see also 25:9; 27:6), God is not, as noted in regard to the earlier references, stating that the Babylonian king is a godly king or that he gets his orders by direct revelation from God. All rulers, whether good or evil, have their power through God’s ultimate oversight and direction of human affairs (Romans 13:1-6). God uses such rulers to deal with His people and to teach them lessons just as He used the Babylonians and Assyrians in dealing with Judah and Israel.

God will eventually deal with all nations who refuse to follow Him, and Egypt was no exception. Nebuchadnezzar would invade and lay waste to that country, too—incorporating it then into the Babylonian Empire. (Recall other prophecies of Egypt’s destruction in Jeremiah 46 and Ezekiel 29–32). “A fragmentary [Babylonian] text in the British Museum indicates that Nebuchadnezzar’s invasion of Egypt occurred in the thirty-seventh year of his reign (568-567 B.C.)” (*Expositor’s*, note on 43:10-11).

Verse 13 of chapter 43 refers to the sacred pillars of Beth Shemesh (“House [or temple] of the Sun”). There were a number of pre-Israelite settlements in Canaan known by this name, the most well known being on the northern border of Judah. But the one referred to here is in Egypt, known as Heliopolis in Greek and called On by the Egyptians.

“Heliopolis was perhaps most splendid in the Middle and New Kingdoms...when many pharaohs adorned its temples with obelisks. These were tall shafts, capped with miniature pyramids that caught the first and last rays of the sun” (“Heliopolis,” *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*, 1983, p. 233).

Many nations have their symbols of pride—their monuments, palaces and grand edifices that they perceive as symbols of strength—and Egypt was no exception. The sacred pillars or obelisks were symbols of Egypt’s pride, and God would hit the nation right at its heart. “Jeremiah likens the ease with which Nebuchadnezzar would do these things to the casual way in which a shepherd wraps himself in his garment.... The king of Egypt at this time was Pharaoh Hophra (cf. 44:30) [who is also known by the Greek form of his name, Apries]. The Babylonian historian Berossus confirms the conquest of Egypt by Nebuchadnezzar” (*Expositor’s*, note on 43:12).

“Since Heliopolis was indeed the city of obelisks (‘sacred pillars’), it is clear why Jeremiah predicts their demolition. Some obelisks originally at On have been carried off to Alexandria, Rome, Istanbul, London and New York. Only one has been left at On” (footnote on verse 13).

Rather than be a place of refuge for the fleeing Judeans, Egypt will prove eventually to be a place for them of judgment and death—just as Jeremiah warned in chapter 42. As the book of Proverbs says, “Sometimes there is a way that seems to be right, but in the end it is the way to death” (16:25, NRSV).

In the next chapter we’ll see more of what Jeremiah had to say to these immigrants.

Jeremiah’s Final Warning (Jeremiah 44)

December 24-25

Jeremiah 44 is the last chapter the prophet wrote in his book. The chapters that follow were written earlier—except for the final chapter, 52, which appears to have been added by someone else in later years.

Jeremiah delivers his final warning to the Jewish remnant that had refused to heed God’s warnings. It is evident that some time has passed since the previous chapter—given that many of the Jews have returned to idolatry and have moved throughout the land of Egypt. It should also be mentioned that there were also colonies of Jews living in Egypt that had moved there previously, as mentioned in the Bible Reading Program comments on Jeremiah 24:8-10 (a passage that stated that the Jews in Egypt would be among those delivered to trouble and destruction). Some of the Jews in

Egypt may have descended from those who had migrated in the days of Judah's King Manasseh a century earlier.

As Jeremiah 44:1 shows, the Jews were spread out over a vast area in Egypt. *Migdol* is a Canaanite name meaning "watchtower" or "fortress" and is most likely a city on the northeastern border of Egypt. There are a number of references to Migdol in the Old Testament. The earliest was on the route of the Exodus (Exodus 14:2, Numbers 33:7) just before the Israelites crossed the Red Sea. There is a further reference to Migdol in Ezekiel's prophecy concerning the destruction of Egypt (Ezekiel 29:10). We can't be certain whether these all refer to the place, but Ezekiel's reference as a key location in describing the extent of Egyptian destruction makes it a prominent city in the north.

Tahpanhes was also a prominent northern city and the location of the pharaoh's northern palace. It was to be the place where Nebuchadnezzar would set up his throne when he invaded Egypt. The Egyptians were proud of this city, which Ezekiel also prophesied would be doomed (Ezekiel 30:18). Tahpanhes and Migdol were close to the northern end of what is now the Suez Canal, on the edge of Lake Manzala.

Noph is the city of Memphis, the ancient capital of Lower Egypt (northern Egypt). Memphis sits just outside modern Cairo, about five miles south of the pyramids.

"Pathros is Upper Egypt [southern Egypt], or the Nile Valley between Cairo and Aswan. The name appears in Assyrian inscriptions of the seventh century B.C.... The Elephantine Papyri from the fifth century B.C. tell us that a Jewish colony settled there [in the area of Aswan]" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on Jeremiah 44:1).

Historian Walter Kaiser sums up the chapter as "a message prepared for the Jewish diaspora living in Egypt, who had by now adopted the Egyptian lifestyle and syncretistically adopted many features of Egyptian religious life, Jeremiah reminded them that they would be the same ones who would suffer the judgment of God. Pharaoh Hophra... would be handed over to his enemies and the shelter the Judeans had sought would no longer exist" (*A History of Israel*, 1988, pp. 411).

Syncretism or mixing religious customs—in this case blending the traditions and superstitions of other nations in with the ways God revealed He wanted His people to worship Him—was a historical weakness of Israel. And, it was directly contrary to God's warning in Deuteronomy 12:29-32. Remarkably, Israelites make the same mistake today!

Jeremiah reminds them that the reason for the calamity on Jerusalem and all the other Jewish cities is their rebellion against Him in serving false gods (verses 2-14). The response of the men says a great deal about their spiritual condition. And it was evidently the women who were now leading the push to incorporate pagan customs as part of their own religious practices, worshiping the so-called "queen of heaven" and dragging the whole population down. But while the women may have been the driving force in this apostasy, the men were in full agreement. Then the women reaffirmed their embracing of what was actually spiritual adultery—unfaithfulness to the true God who "was a husband to them" (31:32). They basically "reasoned that when they stopped worshiping the queen of heaven in the days of Josiah's reform, their king was killed and their land was overrun and destroyed" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 44:18). They looked back at the time of pagan worship as a time of blessing and prosperity. Because of their rebellious natures, they chose the simplistic and false reasoning that any rewards or punishments from God would come immediately. Amazingly, then, after all they had seen and experienced, they had learned nothing. Their reasoning seems utterly bizarre. Yet people today still reject biblical religion with similar arguments: "I haven't noticed any problems for not worshiping God; in fact, things have been better for me since I stopped." Or, "I think that trying to follow the Bible and its laws is what hurts people and that being free from all those restrictions is much better."

"The Jews maintained that when they had offered incense to other gods and had poured out libations to the queen of heaven, all went well. When they ceased to do these things, circumstances worked against them. Somehow they refused to realize that it was the doing of these things which had first occasioned the invasion of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar. Wicked people will always find excuses to evade guilt and justify illicit actions" (*Harper Study Bible*, note on verse 18).

Their shallow approach to religion is almost on the level of superstition or of those who follow horoscopes today—who read generically written "prophecies" that are so ambiguous that they can be interpreted any number of ways. Of course, that's the idea. For then people can still direct their own lives rather than submit to the authority of a Supreme Being.

Walter Kaiser provides some insight into the Queen of Heaven cult that has a lot of significance for today. "Jeremiah, like several of the other prophets (e.g. Ezek 8:14-15) indicted Judah for her

adoption and practice of the cultic rituals of the pagans around them. One apostasy that was particularly repugnant was the ancient cult of ‘the Queen of Heaven.’ In two separate passages, Jeremiah 7:16-18 and 44:15-19, 25, the prophet lamented the fact that the women were ‘making cakes’ [Hebrew *kawwanim*] for her, ‘like her image’ [Hebrew *leha’asibah*], and ‘pouring out drink offerings to her.’

“Now the interesting fact is that the Hebrew word for ‘cakes,’ which occurs in Hebrew only in these two passages, is a loan-word from Akkadian, an East Semitic Language, spoken in Mesopotamia from 2000 to 500 B.C. *Kawwanim* were sweetened cakes used in the Mesopotamian cult of the mother goddess Ishtar. Archaeologists discovered in the palace kitchen at the site of Mari, an ancient city located in the Middle Euphrates region, as many as forty-seven clay molds that may have been used for very similar purposes to those opposed by the prophet. Mold number 1044 seems to represent the nude goddess Ishtar, seen seated with her hands supporting her breasts, thus possessing the image of the goddess that Jeremiah had warned against.

“The exact identity of the Queen of Heaven has not been finally solved, with candidates ranging from the West Semitic Astarte [Hebrew *Ashtaroth* or *Ashtoreth*], Anat and Asherah to the East Semitic Ishtar. However, the title ‘Queen of Heaven’ was found at Hermopolis in 1945 (and published in 1966). Since the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar is identified with the planet Venus, and has as her symbol an eight-pointed star, it would seem Ishtar, and perhaps one or more of the West Semitic deities could be associated with her as this so-called Queen of Heaven” (*The Old Testament Documents: Are They Reliable and Relevant?*, 2001, pp. 163-164). It may be that the Jews in Egypt worshiped her as the Egyptian mother goddess Isis or perhaps Hathor.

God said that we are not to incorporate pagan worship practices into our worship of Him (Deuteronomy 12:29-32, Jeremiah 10:2-5). Yet popular Christianity continues elements of the worship of Ishtar (from which we get the word “Easter”), such as baking “cakes” (or buns) emblazoned with ancient pagan symbols and using fertility symbols such as rabbits and eggs in its major springtime religious celebration. “God wants us to worship Him ‘in spirit and truth’ (John 4:23-24)—not in corrupted, vile practices rooted in worship of other gods” (*Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Keep?*). (Download or write for a free copy of this informative booklet that explains how nominal Christianity has adopted many such pagan practices.)

Jeremiah then tells them of their final punishment. It may seem harsh, but they couldn’t say they weren’t warned. At the end of God’s punishment, there will be no Jews left alive in Egypt. A few will escape to act as witnesses to the truth—witnesses to whose word stands, theirs or God’s (verse 28).

Jeremiah’s final warning ends with a prophecy against Pharaoh Hophra (also known as Apries). Even he wouldn’t be able to save the Jewish remnant in Egypt. “In 569 B.C. Pharaoh Hophra went to aid the Libyans against the Greeks, who had established themselves on the African coast at Cyrene. He was defeated and a rebellion broke out in his army, a part of which elevated Amasis as Pharaoh. In a battle fought between the opposing groups in 569 B.C. Amasis prevailed over Hophra. The latter was able to co-exist with his rival for some time but then was put to death” (Emil Kraeling, *Rand McNally Bible Atlas*, p. 318). And, of course, Nebuchadnezzar’s invasion followed soon after Hophra’s overthrow.

What, then, of Jeremiah? This is not the end of his story. We leave him and his secretary Baruch in Egypt with more yet to do. Jeremiah still has his commission “to build and to plant” (1:10). Recall that Ezekiel had prophesied the transfer of the throne of David from Judah to Israel (Ezekiel 17:22-24). How interesting, then, that possible heirs to the Davidic throne, King Zedekiah’s daughters, are with Jeremiah in Egypt at this time.

For the rest of the story, be sure to read the supplementary material.

Supplementary Reading: “The Throne of Britain: Its Biblical Origin and Future” (online at www.ucg.org/brp/materials).

“They Hear Your Words, but They

Do Not Do Them” (Ezekiel 33:21–34:31)

December 26-27

Ezekiel 33:21 is a significant turning point in this book. Remember that in Ezekiel 24:26-27, God had foretold the fall of Jerusalem and said to Ezekiel: “On that day one who escapes will come to you to let you hear it with your ears; on that day [of his arrival] your mouth will be opened to him who has escaped; you shall speak and no longer be mute.” God, we recall, had forbidden Ezekiel from any spoken communication with the exiles except for the particular things God commanded him to say. Yet now the messenger has at last arrived—in January 585 B.C., seven months after Jerusalem’s

fall—and Ezekiel is finally able to communicate as normal. Also, whereas everything up to this point was mainly a warning message to Israel and Judah and other nations, the remainder of the book focuses mainly on the hope of Israel’s future deliverance.

Many biblical scholars maintain that since Ezekiel was among the Jewish exiles in Babylon, the last chapters are about the liberation of the Jews from ancient Babylon, allowing them to return to Palestine after their 70 years of captivity. But Ezekiel’s calling was to prophesy concerning the *whole* house of Israel, not just Judah. And his prophecies of the end time mostly refer to all of Israel—reunited. The restoration Ezekiel describes involves great miracles and is much grander than the return of a fraction of the Jewish exiles to their homeland after the fall of ancient Babylon. Far from being a mere technical difference in how to explain Ezekiel’s writings, this fact is crucial to understanding end time prophecy.

As hopeful and positive as this section of the book is, however, it does begin with a few rebukes and pronouncements of divine judgment. God informs Ezekiel that the remaining survivors in the ruins of the land of Israel have reasoned that, since they are still alive and have escaped deportation, they must be the righteous ones—the faithful remnant. Since Abraham was just one faithful man and God decreed the land his, they think that they, being many faithful and his rightful heirs, will surely be given the land back (33:23-24). Yet they fail to properly assess their own mindset and conduct. They rely on themselves rather than God. Even worse, they are idolaters, murderers and adulterers who persist in abominations (verses 25-26)—no way will they inherit the land of Israel! Instead, they will die as so much of the nation already has.

They fell into the typical trap of looking at circumstances for “signs” of divine favor, something people often do today. If one wants to know if his ways please God, he needs to take a more mature approach. That is, he needs to learn God’s will through His Word and come to regard that Word as the highest authority in his life. It’s not who you are or what you have that “proves” God’s blessing. He plainly says, “I will bless those who have humble and contrite hearts, who tremble at my word” (Isaiah 66:2, NLT).

It may well be that the description and warning of Ezekiel 33:23-29 also apply to those who will be left among the national homelands of modern Israel in the end time.

Ezekiel may have been an eloquent speaker because people talked about how much they enjoyed listening to him (verses 30-32). But God said, “They hear your words, but they do not do them; for with their mouth they show much love, but their hearts pursue their own gain” (verse 31; compare Isaiah 58:2; Psalm 78:36-37; James 1:21-24). Not much has changed in the last 2,500 years with most religious people. *The Bible Reader’s Companion* states: “The exiles of Ezekiel’s day were ‘churchgoers.’ They made it a regular practice to come to the prophet, sit down, and listen to his words. But to them the prophet’s eloquent speech was only entertainment! They did not come to hear, and then put into practice, the word of their God. What a reminder for us today. Do we go to church to see friends, listen to the choir, and enjoy the preacher’s jokes? Or do we go to hear God’s Word and take it to heart?” (note on Ezekiel 33:30-32).

God’s prophets and preachers are to warn the people about the prophesied consequences of failing to obey Him. When the prophecies come to pass, “then they will know that a prophet has been among them” (verse 33). Woe then to those who haven’t been obeying God. Indeed, this is quite interesting since, at this point in Ezekiel’s book, the ancient destruction of Judah and Jerusalem had come to pass—the news of Jerusalem’s fall just now arriving. And yet the wording of verse 33 seems to indicate that there was more to come to prove Ezekiel a true prophet. This may imply that, at least in part, the end-time fall of all Israel is in view here—and that the people gathering to listen to Ezekiel’s words may mean people in the modern nations of Israel assembling in church services shortly before that time to hear Ezekiel’s words preached in sermons. There are many who go to church services today clamoring to hear sermons on prophecy—but who fail to take personally any exhortations to repentance and spiritual growth.

“Woe to the Shepherds of Israel...!” (Ezekiel 33:21–34:31)

Dec. 26-27 Cont’d

Jerusalem had been conquered and burned—the climax of God’s punishment on Judah. God now makes it clear that a large measure of the blame for the sinfulness of Judah and Israel and their resulting captivities (both ancient and future) lay at the feet of the rulers, “the shepherds of Israel” (34:2). The metaphor of “shepherds” in this context refers more to kings and civil rulers than priests or prophets, but in God’s nation, civil rulers were expected to be spiritual leaders as well—to teach His laws and to set a godly example of submission to His laws (compare Deuteronomy 17:14-20). And, of course, the principles here would apply to religious leaders of the nation as well.

(It should be noted that some have tried to use Ezekiel 34 as a castigation of the ministry of *spiritual* Israel, the true Church of God, in the end time. However, the “flock” of God in this chapter is, according to verse 30, “the house of Israel,” a phrase repeatedly used in Ezekiel and the rest of Scripture to refer to the *physical nation* of Israel. Of course, the *principles* in this chapter could certainly refer to some leaders among the Church in the last days. Jesus Christ warned in Matthew 24:48-51 of some of God’s servants then abusing others, and we see that same problem throughout the Church age, as all ministers are human and subject to slipping into the self-centered corruption we read of here. Nevertheless, it is a misapplication of this prophecy to claim that it directly foretells corrupt ministers serving the true Church, men who fail to care for God’s spiritual flock.)

One of the best examples for rulers, Christian ministers and leaders of all kinds to emulate is that of a good shepherd—a “servant leader.” God repeatedly describes in the Bible what makes a good shepherd. God should know—Jesus Christ is “the good Shepherd” (John 10:11, 14), “the great Shepherd” (Hebrews 13:20) and the perfect Shepherd (Psalm 23). Jesus taught that a good shepherd is devoted and self-sacrificing, putting the needs of the sheep above his own desires—he “gives his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). By contrast, a “hireling” will readily abandon the sheep because he “does not care about the sheep” (verse 13). Leaders should have the mindset of being assistant shepherds serving under Jesus Christ, submitting to, following and applying His attitude and approach (see 1 Peter 5:1-4).

Jesus told His disciples, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men hold them in subjection, tyrannizing over them” (Matthew 20:25, Amplified Bible). But here in Ezekiel 34 God says the rulers of Israel—“My shepherds” (verse 8)—have been as bad as gentile despots about advancing and enriching themselves at the expense of the people. They acted more like wolves than shepherds, causing suffering rather than relieving suffering. Therefore, God pronounces, “Woe to the shepherds of Israel...!” (verse 2).

Good shepherds are concerned for every individual, diligently seeking to save even one lamb if it goes astray (Matthew 18:10-14). By contrast, God said the supposed shepherds of Israel had not “sought what was lost” (Ezekiel 34:4). God in His mercy would have saved and “brought back what was driven away”—either from Him spiritually or from the land literally—if the leaders and people had repented and begun to truly serve God.

In verses 5 and 8, God says that “there was no shepherd.” Yet in the second reference, note that God says that “there was no shepherd, nor did My shepherds search...” This might sound like a contradiction. Were there shepherds, or weren’t there? What is meant is either that there were no shepherds in their scattered condition or, perhaps more likely, there were no *true* shepherds over the Israelites. There were people in the *positions* of shepherds (national leaders)—but not ones who *thought and acted* as shepherds. (This should help us to see that political rulers were more in mind, for in Ezekiel’s day was not Jeremiah a true religious leader? And in the last days, will there not be true spiritual leaders, such as the two witnesses of Revelation 11?)

Because there were no right-minded rulers over the people—because there won’t be any at the end of this age—God says He will personally step in to lovingly serve as Israel’s shepherd (verses 11-16). He will “bring back what was driven away” (verse 16). While this refers in small part to the liberation of the Jews from their ancient Babylonian captivity, it refers more to the end-time restoration of “scattered” Israelites from all over the world, as the latter part of this chapter shows.

Official rulers are not the only ones guilty of evil. God judges each person individually—“I shall judge between sheep and sheep” (verse 17). All too often the stronger oppress the weaker—the “fat” sheep take advantage of the “lean sheep” (verse 20).

How valuable that King David’s boyhood experience was as a shepherd! God foretells that He will one day establish David as the shepherd over Israel and “prince” or ruler under Him (verses 23-24). Critics often don’t interpret this literally, saying this is simply a prophecy of the Messiah, who was to be of Davidic lineage. But Ezekiel specifically says that the resurrected and glorified David will once again be king over all Israel (37:24; Jeremiah 30:9; Hosea 3:5). To put it simply, Jesus will be King of all nations. David, serving under Him, will be king of Israel. And the 12 apostles, under David, will each serve as leader over one of the tribes of Israel (see Luke 22:29-30).

During the coming reign of Jesus Christ, God’s “covenant of peace” will even extend to the animal kingdom (Ezekiel 34:25, 28). This is also a type of transforming all people to act more like lambs than wolves and other wild beasts. God will cause rain to come in due season; and there will be many other physical and spiritual “showers of blessing” (verse 26). Blissful and wonderful conditions will prevail when all the world is cared for by the Good Shepherd. (To learn more, request or download our free booklet *The Gospel of the Kingdom*.)

God's Judgment on Edom (Ezekiel 35)**December 28-29**

Chapter 35 may appear a digression from the subject of Israel's restoration, and yet the removal of Israel's great enemy, the most persistent thorn in its side, is indeed central to Israel's restoration. Mount Seir is Edom (verses 2, 15; 25:8; 36:5; Genesis 36:30; 2 Chronicles 20:10). The Edomites are the descendants of Esau, Jacob's brother, so the strife began as sibling rivalry (Genesis 25:30). But Esau's resentment turned into never-ending "ancient hatred" (Ezekiel 35:5) and "anger," "envy" and "hatred" (verse 11).

"Edom had sought to block Israel's first entrance into the Promised Land (Num 20:14-21; 24:15-19)...There were conflicts during the times of Saul (1 Sam 14:47), Solomon (1 Kings 11:14-22), Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 20:1-23), Jehoram (2 Kings 8:21), and Ahaz (2 Chronicles 28:17). The prophets regularly made reference to Edom's antagonism toward Israel and the resulting judgment they would receive (Isa 11:11-16; Dan 11:41; Amos 2:1). Malachi demonstrated that the hatred between these nations was still common in his day (Mal 1:2-5)" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on Ezekiel 35:1-9).

The clearest example of hostility today is seen in the branch of Edomites that comprises many of the Palestinians, whose hatred regularly breaks out against the Israeli state. (The persistent failure of the West to understand that deep-seated hatred that transcends hundreds of generations is one of the principal reasons that peace plan after peace plan fails utterly—and will continue to fail.) It also appears that Edom will constitute part of the end-time Babylonian power bloc—the great enemy of Israel in the last days—perhaps through Turkish participation in the coming European empire as well as a large influx into Europe of Muslim immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa (see the Bible Reading Program comments on Obadiah).

Esau lost the birthright and the blessing, and in jealous envy has repeatedly tried to capture territory from the descendants of Israel. "These two nations" in verse 10 refers to Israel and Judah (see 37:15-28). Once ancient Israel and Judah both had gone into captivity, Edomites thought they could move in and take over the land. This will again be Edom's attitude in the end time—which may well be the primary reference in Ezekiel 35.

Mentioned more than once in Scripture is how the Edomites have attacked, and will attack, Israel at her times of vulnerability—when she is engaged in conflicts with other enemies (35:5; 36:2-5; 25:12; Obadiah 11, 13-14). *Unger's Bible Dictionary* says in its entry on "Edomites": "When Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem the Edomites joined him, and took an active part in the plunder of the city and slaughter of the Jews. Their cruelty at that time seems to be specially referred to in the 137th Psalm. It was on account of these acts of cruelty committed upon the Jews in the day of their calamity that the Edomites were so fearfully denounced by the later prophets (Isa. 34:5-8; 63:1-4; Jer. 49:17; Lam. 4:21; Ezek. 25:13, 14; Amos 1:11, 12; Obad. 8, 10, sq.). On the conquest of Judah, the Edomites, probably in reward for their services during the war, were permitted to settle in southern Palestine, and the whole plateau between it and Egypt; but they were about the same time driven out of Edom proper by the Nabataeans. For more than four centuries they continued to prosper. But during the warlike rule of the Maccabees they were again completely subdued, and even forced to conform to Jewish laws and rites and submit to the government of Jewish prefects. The Edomites were now incorporated with the Jewish nation, and the whole province was often termed by Greek and Roman writers *Idumaea*. Immediately before the siege of Jerusalem by Titus, twenty thousand Idumaeans were admitted to the Holy City, which they filled with robbery and bloodshed."

Scriptures indicate the Edomites will once again—in the end time—gleefully join in attacking the Israelites.

Edom has chronically been guilty of another sin that God despises—pride and arrogance. And when the Edomites exalt themselves against God's nations and God Himself, they are getting into deep trouble with their blasphemies (Ezekiel 35:10-13).

The history of the Edomites toward the Israelites has largely been hatred, hardheartedness, cruelty, and arrogance. Consequently, in several scriptures, prophecies of the end time foretell God's annihilation of all Edomites (see Ezekiel 35:14-15; 25:13; Obadiah 18; Jeremiah 49:17-18). The good news is they will be raised to life in the second resurrection, humbled, and ready to receive God's instructions—something we will read more about in Ezekiel 37.

A New Heart and a New Spirit (Ezekiel 36)**December 30-31**

Ezekiel 36 foretells the end-time repentance, conversion, and transformation of Israel. Of course, the offer from God to "give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you" (verse 26)

ultimately applies to all people, since all people will be invited to become a part of Israel in a spiritual sense (Romans 2:28-29; Galatians 3:26-29).

Although God uses nations to punish other nations, the nations inflicting the punishment are not truly mindful of this and end up heaping guilt on themselves in each endeavor—their pride becomes worse, they boastfully take credit to themselves, they take gleeful pleasure in causing suffering, they are too harsh, they think they can steal their enemies' land and get away with it, and they don't repent of their own sins. Some of those sins are stated in Ezekiel 36:2-5 regarding "the rest of the nations and against all Edom."

In verses 6-9, God reassures the land of Israel that "I am for you" and that "the nations that are around you shall bear their own shame." In verse 8, God speaks joyfully to the mountains and land of Israel and says, "they [the returning captives] are about to come!" The return of Babylonian exiles to the Promised Land in the time soon after Ezekiel was but a small forerunner of the great second Exodus of the end-time. God says, "I will multiply upon you man and beast" (verses 10-11, 38).

The "you" in verses 13-14 is again the Holy Land, which has gotten the reputation of being a cursed land that devours its inhabitants. Yet God is going to vastly change that reputation at the return of Jesus Christ.

The analogy of verse 17 is based on the laws of a woman's monthly "uncleanness" detailed in Leviticus 15:19-24. During her monthly period, a woman was considered ritually unclean for seven days, meaning primarily that she was not allowed to go to the tabernacle to participate in any sacrifices or other worship. But, also, everyone and everything she touched were then considered unclean for a time. So God is saying that the way of the people of Israel had not only been evil, cutting themselves off from fellowship with Him, but also that the Israelites had been a bad influence on everyone they had "touched"—"wherever they went, they profaned My holy name" (Ezekiel 36:20). The Israelites caused God's name to be profaned among the nations in two ways: 1) in misrepresenting Him themselves through their evil conduct before other nations—taking His name in vain by claiming to be His people and yet not living according to His will; and 2) provoking other nations to make derogatory remarks about Israel's God and religion based on Israel's sinful conduct.

God chose and blessed Israel with the intent that it would model His way of life, thereby making a way for all nations to come to know and worship Him—and to receive His blessings. Instead, the nations of modern Israel wallow in the wealth God gave them, their people living in such gross immorality that other nations are repulsed by the emptiness of their character. Plainly, the name of Israel sets upon the United States, Britain and other nations of northwest European heritage. While these nations provide the economic engine and the military might for the entire world, their spiritual heart is hollow. The rest of the world thinks of them as materialistic, not the spiritual model for their people.

In verses 22 and 32, God gives the justification for the restoration of Israel—in a sense, God's grace. It will not be because Israel has earned it by a record of righteousness. God will do it, He says, "for My holy name's sake."

In verse 25, God says He will "sprinkle clean water" on His people. Numbers 19 describes the process of purifying those who, for whatever reason, are ritualistically "unclean." Water from a running stream (verse 17) was mixed with ashes from a burned red heifer (verses 2, 9) to make "water of purification" (verse 9) that is "sprinkled on him" who was unclean (verse 20). (Interestingly, the Hebrew term in verse 17 translated "running water" in the New King James Version literally means "living water.") Hebrews 9:13-14 calls this process the "purifying of the flesh" and goes on to say that real spiritual cleansing is only possible by the blood of Christ. This true purification is referred to in Hebrews 10:22 as having "our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience." So in Ezekiel 36:25, God is saying He will take Israel through His spiritual cleansing process.

In the Bible, water is used to represent many things, including God's Spirit (John 7:37-38). However, before one receives the Holy Spirit (Ezekiel 36:26-27), he must first begin to receive "the washing of water by the word [the gospel, the Word of God]" (Ephesians 5:26). So whereas the primary emphasis in Ezekiel 36:25 is on God's forgiveness of sin and the whole process of spiritual cleansing, the sprinkling of clean water on His people may also have the specific meaning of the dissemination of the gospel among them.

Ezekiel 36:25-28 is a prophecy of the New Covenant with its better promises. Peace on earth and God's showers of blessings will only come about when there is a radical change in human nature. Man's "heart of stone"—his hardened, stubborn nature—must first be replaced with a pliant "heart of flesh" (verse 26). This change of heart was earlier described in these terms in Ezekiel 11:19-20. It will happen when Satan and his demons and their corrupt society are no longer present to harden

man's heart. The powerful presence of Jesus Christ will put the humble fear of God in people's hearts as well. After that, and once people learn the truth of God's plan of salvation, most will eventually repent of their sins (36:31), trust in Jesus Christ to be their Savior and receive water baptism, whereupon God will fulfill this wonderful promise: "I will put My spirit within you" (verse 27).

Studying these scriptures demonstrates the *spiritual* message of the Old Testament, a concept often little understood in nominal Christianity. Misled by teachers who themselves do not understand the truth, many think that the words of the Old Testament belong on a dusty library shelf and have no bearing on their lives. Nothing could be further from the truth. Not only does much of the New Testament draw upon the language, events and spiritual direction of the Old Testament, but also the New Testament Church of God believed and practiced God's law as revealed there. Indeed, the point of receiving God's Spirit is to help us develop and grow in His character, which is expressed through His laws!

The rest of the chapter describes the condition of the earth during the millennial reign of Christ—peace, agricultural abundance, the rebuilding of cities, and a population explosion. "So they will say, 'This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden'" (verse 35). It will be a return to paradise, as we also read earlier in Isaiah 51:3: "For the LORD will comfort Zion, He will comfort all her waste places; He will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness will be found in it, thanksgiving and the voice of melody."

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