

Because he delights in mercy

Dale Ralph Davis observes, ‘As Micah began his prophecy with the fury of God’s wrath (1:2-9), so now he closes it with the fountain of God’s mercy (7:18-20) – MICAH, pages 162. God had promised that the Messiah would shepherd his people (5:4). Micah called to mind the rich pasture land of Bashan and Gilead and prayed, ‘Shepherd your people’ (14). The Lord answered him by promising to *show them marvellous things* just as he had done when he had brought Israel out of Egypt (Exodus 14). The nations would see this and the fear of the Lord would come upon them (15-17). Micah’s name (see introduction to Micah on page 26) is, ‘Who is like Jehovah?’ When God delivered Israel from the pursuing Egyptian army, Moses asked in his great victory song, ‘*Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?*’ (Exodus 15:11). Micah also asked, ‘*Who is a God like you ... ?*’ (18) and he goes on to describe the grace of God in his dealings with his people.

Though God will surely punish those who refuse to turn from their sin and to obey his Word, *he delights in mercy* (18). Do you feel far away from God because of sin and failure? Come to God confessing your sin and repenting of it. He will accept you *because he delights in mercy*. He promises to cast our sins into the depths of the sea, never to remember them *because he delights in mercy* (19). Hallelujah!

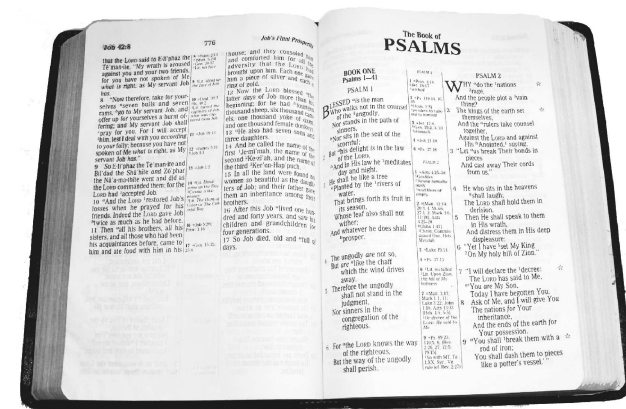
Let these words, ‘*because he delights in mercy,*’ ring in your ears and rejoice your heart! Praise the Lord with joyful singing, *because he delights in mercy*. **Come to God’s throne of grace with all your needs, ‘because he delights in mercy.’** Let us proclaim to the needy world around us that God delights in mercy!

*Great God of wonders! all thy ways
Are matchless, godlike, and divine;
But the fair glories of thy grace,
More godlike and unrivalled shine:
Who is a pardoning God like thee?
Or who has grace so rich and free?*

(Samuel Davies)

PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God’s holy Word simply explained and applied



April 2019

Bible readings from Amos chapters 6 to 9
Obadiah, Jonah and Micah

Therefore I will look to the LORD

Dale Ralph Davis writes, ‘It’s hard to avoid despair when your nation and the cause of Christ in it seem to be going to wreck and ruin. One gets a whiff of the same in Micah’s lament here in 7:1–7’ (MICAH, pages 140). Micah lamented over the desperate spiritual and moral situation in Judah. He has exercised twenty years of his ministry during the reign of wicked king Ahaz. The situation described was so dreadful, that some Bible commentators believe that Micah must have been prophesying of the reign of Manasseh, who followed Hezekiah as king of Judah. He *shed very much innocent blood* (2 Kings 21:16).

Just as summer fruits were difficult to find after Israel had gathered her harvest, so faithful men were few (1–2). Justice was perverted by bribery, none could be trusted, and children were set against their parents (3–6). Jesus quoted verse 6 to show how following him can divide families and bring opposition from loved-ones (Matthew 10:35–36).

What are we to do when the spiritual outlook is bleak? We must do what Micah did! He said, ‘*Therefore I will look to the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me*’ (7). Jehovah is our God and he does hear us! When Satan attacks us, we can affirm like the prophet, ‘*Do not rejoice over me, my enemy; when I fall, I will arise; when I sit in darkness, the LORD will be a light to me*’ (8). In John Bunyan’s ‘Pilgrim’s Progress,’ Christian uttered these words as he defeated Apollyon. Micah acknowledged that God’s dealings with us are just, and that he will vindicate his people who are taunted by their enemies (9–10). When God’s people were taken into captivity, the proud heathen may have said, ‘*Where is the LORD your God?*’ (10), but the captivity was not for ever. There is a note both of hope and judgment in verses 11 to 13.

Are you discouraged? Do you despair because of the widespread wickedness around us and the indifference of people to the gospel? Look to the Lord and wait for him. He will hear your prayer!

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The treasures of wickedness

God now speaks to the city of Jerusalem: *The LORD'S voice cries to the city* (9). His voice is heard through his prophets. Matthew Henry observes, 'When the sin of a city cries to God, his voice cries against the city; and when the judgments of God are coming upon a city, his voice first cries unto it; he warns before he wounds, because he is not willing that any should perish.' Those who are wise will see the name (character) of God and take his words to heart (9).

God requires us to do justly (8) but he had found in Jerusalem, *the treasures of wickedness* (10). The business men of the city were condemned for their dishonesty, violence and deceit (10–12). Unfair commercial practices are not acceptable to God! God had appointed a 'rod' with which to strike Jerusalem (9,13). This may refer to the Assyrians, whom he was to use as an instrument to chastise his people. The punishment in verses 14 and 15 echoes those threatened against Israel for covenant-breaking in the law of Moses (Leviticus 26:20; Deuteronomy 28:38–40). The Lord warned through his prophet that those who had built up their businesses by dishonesty and deceit would not be allowed to enjoy the fruit of their evil gains. God describes his judgment in three ways (15):

- 'You shall sow, but not reap.'
- 'You shall tread the olives, but not anoint yourselves with oil.'
- You shall 'make sweet wine, but not drink wine.'

Judah had followed the ways of wicked Ahab and his father Omri (16). Ahab was an idol worshipper and had seized Naboth's vineyard through lies and murder. God did not allow him to escape punishment (1 Kings 21:17–29).

If we seek *the treasures of wickedness* we will treasure up for ourselves wrath and judgment (Romans 2:5). Be determined to lay up for yourself treasure in heaven by doing justly, loving mercy and by walking humbly with God. The Lord Jesus reminds us, '*for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*' (Matthew 6:19–21).

Woe to you who are at ease in Zion

Amos addressed the luxury-loving rulers classes of Israel who thought that their life of luxury and ease would continue. The Lord said to them, '*Woe to you who are at ease in Zion, and trust in Mount Samaria*' (1). They felt secure in their prosperity but God reminded them of the fate of the neighbouring kingdom cities of Calneh, Hamath and Gath. The fortifications of Gath had earlier had failed to save them from their Syrian enemies (cp. 2 Kings 12:17). Samaria, capital of Israel, was no better than those cities and was just as vulnerable. Ray Beeley points out that leaders of Israel and Judah were 'deceiving themselves by thinking that the day of danger was very far off. In fact the evils found in their midst, including "acting violence against the poor" continually hastened its approach' (THE ROARING OF THE LION, page 81).

Verses 4 to 6 give a vivid picture of the luxuriant lifestyle of the rich who lived for material things and for pleasure. They made musical instruments as David did, but these were not used in the praise of God, but to accompany their giddy, drunken songs. Only the most expensive fragrances were good enough for them, but they had no compassion for those in Israel who were afflicted (6). They were first in extravagance and they would be the first to go into captivity (7–8).

We may be shocked to read of such wickedness but we too can be '*at ease in Zion*' (in the New Testament, 'Zion' represents the church – Galatians 4:26; Hebrews 12:22; Revelation chapter 21). It is possible for professing Christians to be smug and complacent without realising their wretchedness (Revelation 3:14–19). **The love of this world has ruined many a Christian who had shown so much promise. Are you content to drift along at ease in the Christian life, or are you seeking to please your Saviour who died for you?**

*Must I be carried to the skies
On flowery beds of ease,
While others fight to win the prize,
And sail through bloody seas?*

(Isaac Watts)

We dare not mention the name of the LORD

Judgment was unthinkable for those living in great luxury (3) but the Lord swore on oath, by himself, that he loathed the pride of Israel and that he would deliver up the city of Samaria to her enemies (8). Amos goes on to say *‘that if ten men remain in one house, they shall die’* (9). They may escape captivity, but were would not escape death (probably killed by disease). There would be a recognition that this devastation was brought about through divine judgment and someone would say to the survivors, *‘Silence, we dare not mention the name of the LORD’* (10). They would be filled with dread when God’s judgment came upon them. They had despised God and his Word and they would be left helpless and without hope.

The prophet repeats the reason for judgment upon Samaria in verse 12. He points out that it is absurd to expect horses to run on rocks or to plough over such terrain with oxen. The leaders of the land had turned away from dealing justly and had behaved in a crazy fashion. They had *turned justice into gall* (‘bitterness’) *and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood* (‘poison’).

Some Bible commentators believe that Lo Debar and Karnaim were cities taken by Jeroboam II from the Syrians and that there is a play on the words ‘Lo Debar’ which means ‘a thing of nought’ and ‘Karnaim’ meaning ‘horns’ which were a symbol of strength. Israel was boasting in her own strength when in reality she had accomplished nothing (13). Judgment was inevitable – God would raise up a nation to invade Israel (14); that nation was Assyria.

Amos has a solemn message for national leaders today. God holds them responsible for their wickedness in despising his teaching on marriage and the family, and for removing laws that uphold biblical standards. If they are arrogant and godless, they will surely come to grief. **What does Amos say to message for those of us who profess to follow Christ? If we are not leading holy lives, our religion is in vain.**

And what does the LORD require of you but to do justly

God states his case against Israel in these verses. Those silent spectators of human history, the mountains and the hills, are called upon to be the Lord’s witnesses. He tenderly pleads, *“O my people, what have I done to you? And how have I wearied you? Testify against me”* (1–3). How could they be weary of such a gracious and kind God who had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt, who had given them great leaders, who had caused Balaam to bless them when their enemies had hired him to curse them (4–5)?

A would-be worshipper and follower of God is shown what the Lord expected from them. He did not require devotion to the Levitical law by lavish sacrifices and offerings, nor did he expect them to offer their children as human sacrifices (a forbidden practice), as their king, Ahaz had done (6–7; cp. 2 Chronicles 28:2–3)? God gave his answer in the sublime words of verse 8: *‘He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?’* The Lord requires us:

- To do justly; that means doing wrong to no one but doing what is right to all.
- To love mercy and to delight in it (cp. 7;18).
- To walk humbly with God. To walk with God is to enjoy fellowship with him and to delight in obeying his will. The closer our walk with God, the more humble we will be.

Christian reader, have you become weary of God (3) so that your spiritual life is a drudge rather than a delight? Think of all that the Lord has done for you. Ponder the greatness of God’s love in giving his beloved Son to die at Calvary to save you from your sin. Count the blessings that he so freely bestows upon you and repent of your coldness of heart. Do you have plenty of outward religious show like Micah’s generation? That is not good enough! **If you have true faith, it will be seen in your life as you behave justly, show mercy to those who have wronged you, and as you walk humbly with your God.**

He shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD

This chapter contains the well-known prophecy of the birth of the Lord Jesus at Bethlehem, the city of David (2; cp. Matthew 2:4–6). His human descent came through the line of David, the shepherd-king of Israel. He was no ordinary babe however, but the eternal Son of God, *whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting* (cp. Luke 2:4; John 1:1–3). Jesus is the great Shepherd-King! *He shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD*. He is a caring, providing King, who gives his people peace, whose kingdom shall be *to the ends of the earth* (4). ‘Ephrathah’ was the older name of Bethlehem (Genesis 35:19; 48:7). Bethlehem was *‘too little to be among the clans of Judah’* (ESV) and is not named among over one hundred cities allocated to Judah (Joshua 15:21–63). God chose an obscure town to be the birthplace of the Messiah!

We have already seen that the Old Testament prophecy often blends the near and the far. Verses 5b and 6 take us to Judah’s immediate problem – the threat of Assyrian conquest. God wonderfully delivered Jerusalem from the mighty Assyrian army just as these verses prophesied (cp. 2 Kings 19). Verses 7 to 9 consist of a poem which speaks of the remnant of Jacob. In the first part, the people ‘are free and beautiful as summer rain, gentle, refreshing, sparkling, elusive.’ They are then ‘represented as being strong, terrible, kingly, irresistible.’ (from NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY, January 1958 edition).

The chapter ends with a list of some of the things in which Judah trusted instead of her God and King – horses and chariots (10), strongholds (11), sorceries and soothsayers (12), various idols (13–14). ‘*Heard*’ should be translated ‘*obeyed*’ (15). God warned them that he would destroy and remove these things which were so offensive to him. **Many today still vainly trust in some of these things. We have a solemn obligation to tell them of the Saviour who wisely and lovingly watches over those who trust and obey him.** They need to know that it is a great and joyful privilege to follow the Good Shepherd who will never fail his people.

O Lord GOD, forgive, I pray

The last three chapters of Amos include five visions which the Lord gave to the prophet. In these chapters. God is described as ‘*the Lord GOD*’ eleven times (as opposed to nine times in the previous six chapters). This title indicates that God is absolutely sovereign. It is also interesting to note that in chapters 7 to 9, the Lord speaks of Israel as ‘*my people*’ (five times). There was still a remnant of godly people in Israel.

The first vision was of a plague of locusts which consumed all the crops and grass. This vision drove Amos to urgent prayer for the people and he said, ‘*O Lord GOD, forgive, I pray.*’ The Lord heard him and promised not to send the plague (1–3).

In the second vision, God showed Amos an all-consuming fire which was devouring the land with such ferocity that even the waters of the great deep could were unable to quench it. The prophet again cried out to the Lord asking him to ‘*cease*’ and God again heard his prayer (4–6).

We must never think of the prophets as men who delighted in uttering spine-chilling threats of doom. They were men of great compassion who yearned to see their hearers turn to the Lord (perhaps Jonah was an exception, in the case of Nineveh). Amos was driven to prayer, seeing that Jacob (Israel) ‘*is small*’ (3,5) and God heard him.

You may ask, ‘If God is sovereign and has determined certain things to happen, how can prayer affect the outcome of events? Surely, we cannot change the eternal purpose of God?’ — That is true, but we must recognise that God has purposed to use prayer in accomplishing his purpose. The Lord Jesus commanded us to pray (eg. Luke 18:1) and if we are walking with him, he will lay certain people and needs on our hearts so that we will be driven to pray. **What an amazing privilege to be used in the purposes of God in prayer!** There is a desperate need in our churches for faithful men and women of prayer. Are you ready to meet that need?

Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people

In his third vision, Amos saw the Lord standing beside a wall with a plumb line in his hand (7–9). God said to the prophet, ‘*Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel.*’ What did this mean? The wall represented the kingdom of Israel and the plumb line the searching judgment of God. A plumb line reveals whether or not a wall has been built straight. A crooked wall would soon collapse and Israel was like such a wall. The religious and political life of the nation was rotten to the core and final collapse was inevitable.

Amos did not pray for the people after this vision. They were so hardened in their sin, that they had passed the point of no return. There comes a time when God will not hear prayer for those who stubbornly persist in their sin (cp. Jeremiah 14:11–12; 15:1). When God ‘passes by’ it is to pardon sin but in a fearful sentence of doom he said, ‘*I will not pass by them any more*’ (8).

There is much wickedness around us, but the Lord has not told us to refrain from praying for anyone. **Let us rise to the challenge to pray and to work for the kingdom of God so that his name may be magnified in the salvation of sinners.**

‘*The high places of Isaac*’ (9) is an unusual phrase which calls to mind that God had spoken to Isaac in Beersheba, promising to bless him and his descendants (Genesis 26:23–25). Beersheba, in the south of Judah, was now a sanctuary of corrupt religious worship (5:5). The Lord warned through Amos that the places of idol worship in Israel would be destroyed and that the house of Jeroboam would perish by the sword. Jeroboam’s son, Zechariah, reigned only six months before he was assassinated by Shallum (2 Kings 15:10).

God knows you through and through. How do you measure to his holy standards (his ‘*plumb line*’)? Is your life righteous or rotten?

But they do not know the thoughts of the LORD

Our attention is directed from ‘*the latter days*’ to the judgment that God was to bring upon Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians (10). Bear in mind that when Micah prophesied, Jerusalem was threatened by Assyria and not by Babylon. The word ‘*now*’ is found in verses 9,11 and 5:1; it does not refer to the present but to the future, predicting what would happen to Judah at the hands of the Babylonians. Jerusalem would then writhe like a woman in labour. Her people would flee to the fields before being taken to Babylon as captives (9–10; 5:1).

The rulers and judges of the people had not upheld justice (3:1–3, 9–10) and God warned that the judge of Israel (the king) would himself be smitten (5:1). God’s grace is wonderful! He promised that the people would be delivered from the hand of their enemies (10). Babylon was eventually conquered and the Jews were allowed to return to their own land (2 Chronicles 36:22–23; Jeremiah 25:11–12).

Those who besieged Jerusalem did not realise that they too would be punished by the Lord: ‘*But they do not know the thoughts of the LORD, nor do they understand his counsel*’ (12). Matthew Henry comments, ‘They aim at Zion’s ruin, but God aims at theirs ... the designs of enemies for the ruin of the church often prove ruining to themselves.’ ‘*The thoughts of the LORD*’ are good towards his people (Jeremiah 29:11). We must take hold of this principle whenever we feel discouraged or dismayed. Those who oppose God’s people ‘*do not know the thoughts of the Lord.*’

Suffering child of God, your precious Saviour has kind and caring thoughts towards you. He will bring you through all your trials, difficulties and heartaches. Take heart because nothing is able to separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:35–39).

*We expect a bright tomorrow, all will be well;
Faith can sing, through days of sorrow, all, all is well.*

(Mary Peters)

But we will walk in the name of the LORD our God forever

The prophecies of the Old Testament are often difficult to understand. Micah prophesied of the Jews' captivity in Babylon and the ruin of Jerusalem (3:12) and of their return from exile (10), but he also looked beyond this to *'the latter days'* (1). Verses 1 to 5 are almost identical to Isaiah 2:2–5. Some understand *'the latter days'* to refer to the restoration of Israel as a nation ruled by Christ with Jerusalem as the centre of worship for the people of all nations. I do not agree with such an explanation. Old Testament prophecy has a message for the people of that particular time, but there is often a message which looks to the more distant future. Judah was restored to her land after seventy years of captivity in Babylon but the ultimate blessing prophesied is to be found in the church, not in the nation of Israel (Ephesians 2:20–23; 3:20–21). *The mountain of the LORD'S house* (1) was the site of the temple in Jerusalem but the church is God's temple where he dwells (1 Corinthians 3:16–17; Ephesians 2:19–22).

Israel was restored as a nation in the twentieth century, but this does not fulfil these prophecies. Modern Israel does not acknowledge Christ as the promised Messiah and is hostile to the gospel. Peter, preaching on the Day of Pentecost, quoted from Joel, showing that *'the latter days'* refer to the gospel age (Acts 2:16–17; cp. Hebrews 1:1–2). Prophecies relating to Israel in the latter days and the conversion of Gentiles also point to the same age (Acts 15:16–17; Galatians 4:24–27; 6:16; Hebrews 12:22). Verses 3 and 4 find fulfilment in God's kingdom of *righteousness and peace and joy* (Romans 14:17).

What is the significance of verses 6 to 8? David had vowed that the lame would not be allowed into his house in Jerusalem (for details, see 2 Samuel 5:6–9). David's greater Son, the Lord Jesus indicated that there is now little significance in Jerusalem as a place of worship (John 4:21–22), but he will assemble the lame and the outcasts as a remnant and he will reign over them in his church. **We have a glorious future in Christ! Other people may follow false religions, but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God forever and ever** (5).

Then the LORD took me as I followed the flock

The fearless prophesying of Amos was bound to bring opposition, and it came from Amaziah, the priest of Bethel (where Jeroboam I had set up a shrine with a golden calf; 1 Kings 12:25–33). Satan hates the faithful servant of God. Look at the pressures faced by Amos:

- False accusation. – Amaziah informed the king that Amos was plotting against him (10). This was a crafty charge to make and would have put his life in danger. It was quite feasible that Amos, who was from the southern kingdom of Judah, could be involved in a conspiracy. Though he had prophesied of divine judgment against the house of Jeroboam and of captivity (9,11), he was not guilty of conspiracy.
- Contempt. – Amaziah said to him, *'Go, you seer! Flee to the land of Judah. There eat bread, and there prophesy'* (12). You can imagine a scornful Amaziah saying, *'Away with your visions; take them to Judah. Your prophecies of doom against the northern kingdom will be popular there. They will give you ample bread; you will never starve there.'*
- Prohibition. – Amaziah told Amos never to prophesy again at the royal shrine at Bethel (13). The faithful preaching of God's Word often brings a hostile reaction, especially from religious people who are *not able to bear* what God has to say to them (10; cp. Acts 5:28–29).

Amos would not be silenced. He responded by saying that he was from a humble background but the Lord had commanded him to prophesy against Israel (14–15). A man who knows that God has called him will be bold in the face of opposition. Amos told Amaziah that the Lord would bring terrible judgment on him and his family (17).

The Lord requires faithful and fearless servants in these desperate times. We must get on with the work that God has given us to do. Amos testified, *'Then the LORD took me as I followed the flock'* (15). He had no formal training but God equipped him. **Your own home, church and place of work is where your training begins (specialised training may come later). Be faithful in these places and the Lord may have greater things in store for you!**

Shall not the land tremble for this?

The fourth vision which God gave to Amos brought another warning of impending judgment. The Lord showed the prophet a basket of summer fruit and asked him, *‘What do you see?’* (1–2). The Hebrew words for *‘summer fruit’* and *‘end’* (2) are very similar in sound. Ripe fruit needs to be gathered immediately and Israel was like ripe fruit. Her sin demanded action because it made her ripe for judgment. The singing in the palace would become cries of mourning (the Hebrew word translated *‘temple’* is the same word used for *‘palace’*). Dead bodies would be scattered everywhere. The shrieks of pain and the silence of the dead would confirm that God had kept his word to punish faithless and wicked Israel (3,10). God would not pass by his people in mercy anymore (2; see notes on Amos 7:8).

The Lord directed a solemn warning to the rich who oppressed the poor to make themselves richer. These people resented the inconvenience that holy days and the Sabbath imposed upon their trading. The days of rest made them restless because they were eager to resume their dishonest business. They gave short weight and charged high prices (*‘making the ephah small and the shekel large’*) and *‘bad wheat’* (*‘chaff’*) was sold instead of genuine wheat. They falsified their scales so that the poor, who were the victims of their deceit, were driven into slavery (4–6). The Lord warned that he would never forget what they were doing (7).

Israel had drifted far from the Lord who asked, *‘Shall not the land tremble for this?’* (8). What a timely word there is here for us. The Lord will not overlook dishonesty or corruption and he will punish us if we treat others with contempt. If seeking personal gain becomes more important than honouring God’s Word, we are heading for trouble. What happened to Israel could also happen to us if we lead ungodly lives. **Let us pray much that the Lord will have mercy on our wicked nation and let us be determined to remain faithful to him in these needy times.**

Full of power by the Spirit of the LORD

There are three oracles in this chapter (verses 1–4, 5–8 and 9–12) in which the rulers, prophets and priests of Judah are all censured for their failure to see that justice was upheld and corruption stamped out. The rulers are asked, *‘Is it not for you to know justice?’* (1). God had placed them in authority in order to serve the people and to see that justice was done but they had abused their position, robbing when they should have been protecting. They were likened to cannibals in their treatment of the people (1–3). God warned them that the time would come when they would cry to him, but he would not hear them (4).

Rogue prophets lulled the people into a false sense of security which encouraged them to stray from God. They would have no word from the Lord and there would be no answer when they sought him for guidance (5–7). The practice of divination was strictly forbidden in Israel (Deuteronomy 18:9–14). It would be futile for diviners to seek a word from God (7). Micah denounced the rulers and judges who perverted justice for bribes, and priests and prophets who were prepared to compromise righteousness for monetary gain. They professed to lean on the Lord and vainly imagined that he was among them but they were corrupt (9–11). All this was happening during the reign of Hezekiah, a good king who ended his days in shame because of his pride (2 Chronicles 32:24–26).

Micah described his own ministry in verse 8: *‘But truly I am full of power by the Spirit of the LORD, and of justice and of might.’* He warned of divine judgment on sinners (8). Over a century after Micah’s prophecy in verse 12, it had such a great effect on some of the nation’s elders, that they spoke up for Jeremiah and saved him from death (Jeremiah 26:17–19). It is important to understand, however, that it is not good enough to stand for social justice unless sinners are pointed to Christ. **Pray that God will be pleased to raise up men *‘full of power by the Spirit of the LORD, and of justice and of might’* to lead and build up his people in these evil and confusing days.**

Do not my words do good to him who walks uprightly?

There were some in Judah who coveted the fields and houses of the poor whom they violently oppressed, seizing their inheritance in order to increase their own wealth and power. They devised all this evil as they lay on their beds but God was also devising coming disaster from which they would not be able to escape. All their lands and ill-gotten gains would be plundered. These oppressors were behaving like enemies to their own people who had trusted them (1–5).

These people did not want to hear Micah's message of judgment. They said, '*Do not preach ... one should not preach of such things*' (6, ESV) but the prophet would not be silenced. He answered them, '*Do not my words do good to him who walks uprightly?*' (6–7). Micah called upon them to arise and to depart from their sinful ways which would lead them to destruction. They had robbed fellow Jews of their very garments and had driven women and children out of their homes (8–9). They did not want a godly prophet, however, who rebuked them for their sin and warned of coming judgment. They wanted a jolly charlatan who would babble of wine and strong drink (10–11).

The faithful preacher will not compromise his message to please sinful men and women. He knows that his words do good to those of his listeners who are godly (7). **We must not be surprised when people reject the message of the Bible concerning sin, judgment and hell, and of Christ's death and resurrection to save sinners.** There is a remnant waiting to be gathered for whom God's words will do good. Let us seek them out to share with them our good news.

The chapter closes with a message of hope which points to the coming of the Messiah (the Lord Jesus Christ). He would gather *the remnant of Israel* and would shepherd them. They are pictured as being penned up in a narrow fold which their Shepherd would break open to enable them to go free, to follow him who is their King (12–13).

A famine ... of hearing the words of the LORD

The Lord again warned that there would be mourning and lamentation in the land (9–10, cp. verse 3). When God speaks to us through his Word, it is a great mercy. If we are like Amaziah and Israel, refusing to listen to God's Word and to obey it, he may withdraw it from us. We will then be faced with the worst possible type of famine. Not a famine of food or of water, but *a famine ... of hearing the words of the LORD* (11). What happens when such a famine comes upon a nation?

- There is a thirst that is never satisfied; the young are particularly vulnerable and without hope (12–13).
- There is an upsurge in false religion. The '*sin of Samaria*' refers to idol worship. People went on pilgrimages to Dan in the far north of the country to worship at the shrine of idols (cp. Judges 18:30–31), and to the far south to Beersheba in Judah. The Lord warned that false, corrupt religion would not save their followers from disaster (14).

There is a very timely warning for us here as we observe the trends in some professing evangelical churches where people want entertainment rather than spiritual worship and do not give themselves to the serious hearing of God's Word. They are not being taught to apply the teaching of Scripture to their own lives. They tell us that 'preaching has had its day'. Will they one day seek the Word of the Lord but not find it (12)? Do you wonder why such confusion abounds? It would be far better to starve to death with our hearts filled with the Word of God, than to be filled with food and yet starved of God's Word. When truth is despised, Satan sees to it that error fills the vacuum in the life of an individual or of a nation. Think of our present situation. People are turning in their thousands to false cults, to new-age occult religion, to spiritist mediums and fortune-tellers. May God have mercy on us!

Christian, prize your Bible! God's Word is more precious than gold (Psalm 119:162). Pray that the Lord will be pleased to bless the preaching of his Word this coming Lord's Day. Prepare your own heart to receive that Word and be ready to obey it.

The eyes of the Lord GOD are on the sinful kingdom

In his fifth vision, Amos sees the Lord *standing by the altar*. Some Bible commentators believe this is a reference to the altar in the temple at Jerusalem, but I agree with those who believe that the reference is to the altar at Bethel, the centre of Israel's worship (1). Bethel was *'the king's sanctuary'* (7:13) but Amos saw a greater king there – the eternal and almighty God! He saw the Lord bringing the sanctuary crashing down on the worshippers within it. Some, probably those outside, fled in terror, but there was no escape from the judgment of God. They could dig into *hell* (Hebrew = 'sheol' – the abode of the dead) or *climb up to heaven* (the abode of God), they could *hide themselves on the top of Mount Carmel* (which had many deep caverns) or in the depths of the sea, but they would not be able to hide from God who would send them into captivity (2–4). The God whom the people had forsaken is sovereign over earth and heaven (5–6).

The Israelites considered themselves to be a privileged people (and they were). Their forefathers had been miraculously delivered from bondage in Egypt but Amos reminded them, *'The eyes of the Lord GOD are on the sinful kingdom'* (7–8). The people had clothed themselves with the seeming comfort of false religion, but they would not be able to escape the judgment of God. Though the Lord would *not utterly destroy the house of Jacob* (8–9), he would sift them as chaff is sifted from grain. He warned that he would punish *all the sinners* of his people. They were complacent in their sin because they could not imagine judgment coming upon them (10). They said, *'The calamity shall not overtake us nor confront us'* but they would die by the sword.

Most people make the mistake of believing that a God of love would never punish sinners, except for the most wicked. They forget that God is holy and just in all his ways. A once popular Christmas song affirms, 'And man shall live for evermore because of Christmas Day.' That is not true! **Christ's coming into the world does not guarantee eternal life to everyone, but only to those who repent of their sin and who trust and obey him.**

Therefore I will wail and howl

Prophets were also known as 'seers' (cp. Amos 7:12) because they saw visions and they saw the word of God: *The word of the LORD that came to Micah of Moresheth ... which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem* (1). Those who heard Micah knew that God would judge the world (2–3) but would be shocked to hear that the Lord would visit terrifying judgment upon Israel (4–5). The northern kingdom, would be punished for her idolatry and the sexual immorality associated with the pagan religions she had embraced. Samaria, her capital would be reduced to *a heap of ruins* and her useless idols destroyed (6–7). Sinners often feel very secure in their godless ways, but Christians who know and love the Bible 'see' that God will surely punish the ungodly.

These verses contain a vivid description of the helplessness and terror of the people as the mighty Assyrian army marched from Samaria. Micah sees them rolling on to the area of Judah that he knew so well, which bordered Philistia. He made a play on some of the names of the towns listed here. Some commentators point out that Gath means 'to declare' and the opening words of verse 10 could be rendered, 'Tell it not in Tell-Town.' Beth Aphrah means 'house of dust' and 'rolling in dust' was an expression of grief after military defeat (cp. Jeremiah 6:26). Zaanai, despite its name ('going out') would not go out to battle but would cower in fear in their city. Lachish is described as *the beginning of sin to the daughter of Zion* (13). Lachish may have encouraged Israel to rely on horses imported from Egypt for use in battle rather than to trust in the Lord (Deuteronomy 17:15–16; 1 Kings 10:28–29).

What effect did this tragic situation have upon Micah? He saw Judah like someone with an incurable disease, who would surely perish. He said, *'Therefore I will wail and howl'* (8–9). He mourned and wept over his nation's sins and over the certainty of future judgment. **How do we react over the plight of sinners around us? Do we have any love and compassion for them? Do we ever cry to God on their behalf?**

MICAH

9 APRIL

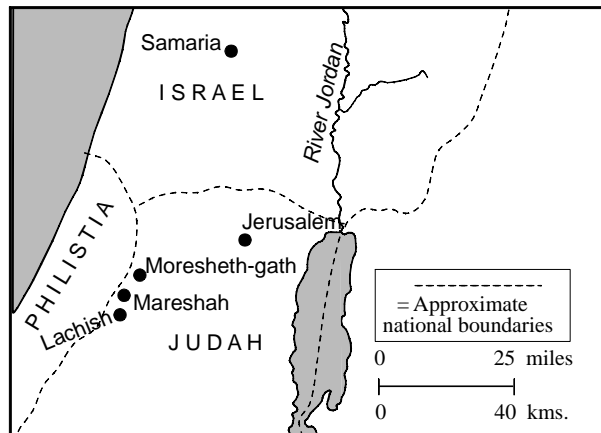
Amos 9:11–15

On that day I will raise up the tabernacle of David

Micah prophesied during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah (1). He was a country-dweller from Moresheth which lay near the border of Philistia and was a younger contemporary of the prophet Isaiah who prophesied in Jerusalem. The northern kingdom fell in 722 BC but was still standing when Micah prophesied (1:5–6). Micah warned that God would severely punish Judah and Israel for their wickedness. Their religion was corrupt (3:11) and the poor were oppressed by the rich (2:1–2, 8–11; 3:1–3, 9–11; 6:10–12; 7:1–6). Micah's name means 'Who is like Jehovah?' It points us to his message which shows the greatness of God's power (1:2–4) and of his pardoning grace (7:18). Micah prophesied that Christ would be born in Bethlehem (5:2–5).

Outline of Micah

- | | | |
|---|---|-------------|
| 1. Coming judgment of Israel and Judah | – | 1:1–16 |
| 2. Denunciation of evil-doers | – | 2:1 to 3:12 |
| 3. The Messiah's kingdom and his coming | – | 4:1 to 5:15 |
| 4. The Lord's complaint against Israel | – | 6:1 to 7:20 |



For further reading, I recommend: 'Micah' by Dale Ralph Davis published by Evangelical Press.

Amos ends his prophecy with a verses which are full of encouragement and hope. In the previous chapter, the expression, '*Behold, the days are coming*' was followed by a stark picture of judgment, of a famine '*of hearing the words of the LORD*' (8:11). In chapter 9, the words are followed by the promise that God would bring back the exiles to restore their ruined cities, to plant vineyards, to gather in bumper harvests (13–15). Notice the phrases, '*I will bring back*'... '*I will plant*'.

The Lord points us, however, beyond the return of the exiles to the coming of the gospel age. He says, '*On that day I will raise up the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down*' (11). The house of David would have its glory restored at the coming of the Messiah, the Son of David (Acts 2:29–30). When the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would bear the promised Messiah, he said, '*The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. And he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end*' (Luke 1:32–33). Christ the eternal King will triumph over all opposition. '*Edom*' (12) is seen in the Old Testament as a type of opposition to the Lord and his people. Not only will a remnant of the tribes from both Israel and Judah trust in Christ, but also Gentiles (12). James, one of the leaders in the early church at Jerusalem, referred to verses 11 and 12 as being fulfilled when Gentiles were saved and brought into the church (Acts 15:13–17).

The northern kingdom had suffered under many wicked kings, but in Christ, we have a King who is entirely righteous. He is almighty and he cannot fail. Are you trusting in him and rejoicing in him for all that he has done to save you from your sins?

*Hail to the Lord's anointed, great David's greater Son
Hail, in the time appointed, his reign on earth begun!
He comes to break oppression, to set the captive free.
To take away transgression, and rule in equity.*

(James Montgomery)

OBADIAH

We do not know anything about the life Obadiah whose book is the shortest in the Old Testament (where we find twelve men named ‘Obadiah’). Some scholars (and Jewish tradition) place Obadiah in the 9th-century BC. Others believe that his prophecy against the Edomites came after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC.

The twin brothers, Jacob and Esau, had little in common and never enjoyed an easy relationship (see Genesis chapters 25 to 36). Their descendants, the nations of Israel and Edom, became bitter enemies. The Edomites refused to allow the Israelites, who had solemnly promised not to take their crops or pasture, to pass through their country as they journeyed to Canaan (Numbers 20:14–21). David conquered the Edomites (2 Samuel 8:14) but they regained their freedom during the reign of Jehoram (2 Kings 8:20,22). They attacked Jerusalem during the reign of Ahaz (2 Chronicles 28:17). Edom fell into Arab hands in the 5th-century BC, and was overrun by the Nabateans in the 3rd century BC. Many Edomites fled to Judah during these centuries and were later incorporated into the Jewish nation during the time of John Hyrcanus in the 2nd century BC.

For further reading: I warmly commend John Blanchard's book MAJOR POINTS FROM THE MINOR PROPHETS, published by Evangelical Press. This book is very helpful in dealing with all the Minor Prophets.

21 APRIL

Jonah 4:1–11

Is it right for you to be angry?

The Lord is slow to anger and he patiently and lovingly showed Jonah the dark and hardened state of his heart. See what the Lord prepared! – *The LORD God prepared a plant ... a worm ... a vehement east wind* (6–8). Jonah was pleased to have the plant that God had prepared and made to grow quickly so that he had shelter from the scorching wind and sun. He was angry when a worm attacked it causing it to wither so that he was exposed to the wind and heat of the sun and he again expressed a wish to die (8). God asked him a second time, ‘*Is it right for you to be angry?*’ The sinful prophet insisted that he was right to be angry, even if he were to die (4,9).

Are you burning with self-pitying anger? Burning so much and so bitter of spirit that you are a hard person, knowing little of the enjoyment of God in your life? Oh, learn from Jonah’s mistakes! Surely, you know that it is not right for you to be angry? Where is the attractiveness of Christ in such a life? If you do not repent of your sin, God may choose to blast your life so that you are driven to seek him.

The Lord rebuked Jonah for having more compassion for the plant than he had for Nineveh (10–11). Jonah had plenty of passion (it is seen in his anger), but he lacked compassion. As he preached, he would have seen children thronging around him. Jonah was not concerned that they would perish without God. He had more pity for a plant than he had for the people of Nineveh. They would have perished in their ignorance but for the grace of God who sent the reluctant prophet to warn them of judgment.

The Lord Jesus was moved with compassion for the multitudes who were as sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36) and he wept over Jerusalem which had rejected him (Luke 13:34–35). Are we like Jonah or we like the Lord Jesus? **If the love of God is throbbing in our hearts, we will feel that love constraining us (2 Corinthians 5:14) to tell out the good news of ‘a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in loving-kindness’ (2).**

I know that you are a gracious and merciful God

Jonah had preached to wicked, errant Israel to woo them back to Jehovah, the Lord (2 Kings 14:23–27) but he had been very reluctant to go to Nineveh (2). He had no love for the Assyrians but his preaching to them was an outstanding success. He was greatly displeased and angry, however, that God had spared Nineveh and would have been far happier had God destroyed the Assyrians (1–3).

His words in verse 2 were right, but his heart was all wrong: ‘*Ah, LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in loving-kindness.*’ Some people believe that the Old Testament teaches that God is harsh and severe, delighting in the punishment of the wicked. Verses such as this (and many, many more) show just how wonderful God is in his grace towards sinners.

The sulking, petulant prophet was in such a dreadful mood that he prayed that God would take his life (3). It was good for Jonah that God did not take him at his word. The Lord challenged him, asking him, ‘*Is it right for you to be angry?*’ (4). He went out of Nineveh to see what would become of the city (5). He may have been hoping for its destruction though the people had heeded his preaching.

God withholds judgment in order to give sinners time to repent. The day of judgment will surely come when Christ will return according to the many promises in Scripture: *The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some count slackness, but is long-suffering towards us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance* (2 Peter 3:9). **Let me close with a word of warning to any reader who knows that his heart is not right with God.** The Lord is graciously giving you many opportunities to repent of your sin. Oh, turn to the Lord who is so gracious and merciful, *slow to anger and abundant in loving-kindness!* He will then accept you and make you his own.

The pride of your heart has deceived you

The Edomites were a proud and arrogant people who lived in a rugged, mountainous land situated to the south of the Dead Sea. They felt secure in their mountain fortresses and could not believe that they would ever be conquered (3; cp. Jeremiah 49:14–16). Their ancestor Esau is described as a ‘*profane person*’ (Hebrews 12:16). The Greek word translated ‘*profane*’ means ‘without religion’ or ‘godless.’ We never read in the Old Testament of Edomite gods or religion. They were secular in their outlook, priding themselves in their wisdom and might (8). The wisdom of Teman is mentioned in Jeremiah 49:7; one of Job’s counsellors was Eliphaz from Teman (Job 2:11).

God told Edom, ‘*The pride of your heart has deceived you*’ (3). He warned her that he would bring her down suddenly as a thief comes in the night. She would be utterly ruined and her wise men destroyed (‘*cut off*’; 5,9). Her own allies would be God’s instruments of judgment (7).

The Edomites may have been clever and shrewd but their wisdom was no match for the wisdom of God! What a warning there is here to godless people who boast of their wisdom and despise the Word of God. Such people are pathetic in the way they have closed their minds to the teaching of the Bible. If you have a haughty attitude, if you despise the Word of God – beware! The time will come when you will discover that you have been deceived by the pride of your own heart. *Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?* (1 Corinthians 1:20). Let us always remember that *the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom* (Proverbs 9:10).

As you have done, it shall be done to you

Verses 11 to 14 appear to describe the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians (cp. Psalm 137:7; Jeremiah 49:7–22). The Lord brought two charges against Edom:

- They had *stood on the other side* from God's people in their hour of need (11; '*stood aloof*' – ESV) when Jerusalem was invaded. Edom is described as the brother of '*Jacob*' (the Israelites) because both were descended from the sons of Isaac (10,12; cp. Deuteronomy 23:7). It was this common ancestry that made the crimes of Edom against Israel the more reprehensible in the sight of God.
- They had gloated ('*gazed*') over the calamity of the Jews, plundered their possessions, and prevented those who fled from Jerusalem from making good their escape. Notice the repetition of the words, '*You should not have*' (12–14).

The Edomites were treacherous as well as proud. The ruthless Doeg was from Edom (1 Samuel 22:9–23) as were the wicked Herods of New Testament times. Edom richly deserved God's judgment and the Lord told them, '*As you have done, it shall be done to you*' (15). There is a very solemn warning here to any professing Christian who seeks to harm or to hurt a fellow-believer. There are some men and women in our churches who are callous and heartless, behaving in a manner more fitting to the godless wicked. They trample over others with little regard for their feelings or to the warnings found in holy Scripture. If you have been unkind to another Christian, do not imagine that God will forget your sin. *God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap* (Galatians 6:8). — '*As you have done, it shall be done to you.*'

The Lord Jesus said, '*A new commandment I give to you; as I have loved you, that you also love one another*' (John 13:34). **Let us be sure that we are obeying the Lord Jesus and show love and kindness to our Christian brothers and sisters at all times (Ephesians 4:32).**

So the people of Nineveh believed God

The Lord told Jonah, '*Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you*' (2). Jonah had learned his lesson. He no longer tried to run away from God. He *went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD* (3). Greater Nineveh was a huge city with a circumference of about sixty miles. What message did the Lord give Jonah for the wicked city which was ripe for judgment (cp. 1:2)? He proclaimed that Jehovah, the true and living God would bring down Nineveh in forty days. God did not send him to make the people laugh, nor to entertain them. Jonah preached to make the people of Nineveh mourn over their sin. The gospel of entertainment with its performances of rock-music, mime, dance, drama, clowns and the like will never bring our modern 'Nineveh's' to their knees. God's work must be done in God's way, according to Scripture.

So the people of Nineveh believed God (5). They were gripped with fear and they proclaimed a fast. They stripped off their fine garments and put on sackcloth – coarse robes which symbolised humiliation and mourning. This action was seen from king to peasant, from the greatest to the least of them. The King of Nineveh proclaimed a decree ratifying the fast and the mourning over their sin. He came off his throne and sat in ashes (6)! He ordered the people to cry mightily to God. He urged everyone to turn from their evil ways and violence. What an amazing order from a cruel heathen king (8)! He asked, '*Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from his fierce anger, so that we will not perish?*' (9). The people of Nineveh repented of their sin and were spared. Let us give thanks to God for his great mercy to sinners (10).

We have already seen that Jonah preached the judgment of God. **A gospel without a message of divine judgment for sin, that fails to warn of hell, that does not call on sinners to repent and to trust in Christ to save them through his death and resurrection, is no gospel at all.**

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time

The grace of God shines out in this wonderful chapter – restoring grace for a disobedient prophet and saving grace for a wicked city. Are you feeling miserable because you know that you have failed the Lord or disobeyed him? Do you despair of ever being used again by God? There is a word of hope here for you: *Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time* (2). Jonah did not deserve a second chance, but the Lord did not cast him off. He graciously recommissioned him and sent him to Nineveh (2). God could have easily raised up another prophet but he wanted to use Jonah. What grace, what patience, what love!

O. Palmer Robertson observes, ‘God simply does not hold grudges against people who humble themselves and ask his forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Men have a much greater problem forgiving and forgetting than does God. You may discover that you have a very difficult forgetting your mistakes of the past. But God does not have that kind of trouble’ (JONAH, page 42).

If you have failed God by disobedience or folly, do not allow Satan to write you off, do not listen to his despairing whispers. Repent of your sin and ask the Lord to receive you and to make something of your life. Remember how he graciously restored Peter who had denied him (Luke 22:31–32; cp. Mark 16:7; John 21:15–19). It was from Joppa that Peter heard God’s call to take the gospel to the Gentiles (1:3; cp. Acts 9:43; 10:1–48).

*O Jesus, full of truth and grace,
More full of grace than I of sin,
Yet once again I seek thy face;
Open thine arms and take me in,
And freely my backslidings heal
And love the faithless sinner still.*

(Charles Wesley)

The kingdom shall be the LORD’S

‘*The day of the LORD*’ (15) is a day of reckoning and punishment for all who are wicked, for all who are like the Edomites. The nation of Edom was utterly destroyed but the Lord brought back the Jews from their captivity. ‘*The day of the LORD*’ will be a wonderful day for the people of God, however. When God pours out his judgment on the nations, there is one safe place: *But on Mount Zion there shall be deliverance, and there shall be holiness* (17). The word ‘*holiness*’ refers to separation rather than purity in this verse. God promised that he would punish Edom through ‘*saviours*’ (or ‘*deliverers*’) who would come to Jerusalem (21).

The prophecy of Obadiah was given in very dark days, but it looks beyond the judgment on Edom and the return of the Jews from captivity to the everlasting reign of Christ our Saviour (cp. Revelation 11:15–18). The Lord’s people will be separated from those on whom judgment falls. The church of Christ is *the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem* (Hebrews 12:22; cp. Galatians 4:24–26).

There are some and cruel regimes and terrible governments in the world but we must not despair. God always has the last word. *The kingdom shall be the LORD’S* (21). The Lord Jesus will destroy all his enemies when he comes again (2 Thessalonians 1:7–9). Christian, do you feel troubled by the increasing wickedness in the world around you? Be encouraged that you belong to the Lord. Let it be a challenge to pray and to work for the kingdom of God which will never pass away.

The kingdom shall be the LORD’S.

*The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord
and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever!*
(Revelation 11:15).

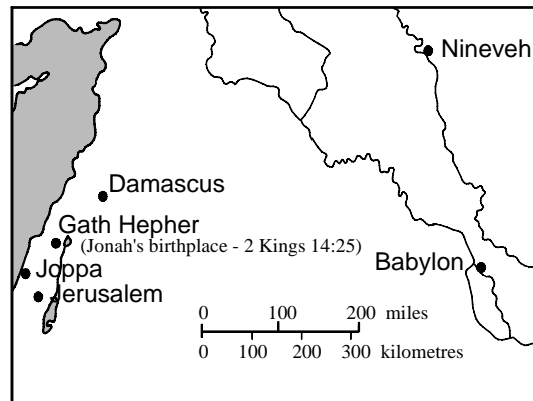
JONAH

17 APRIL

Jonah 2:1–10

The name ‘Jonah’ means ‘a dove’ but the prophet was a ‘hawk’ in his attitude to Gentiles. Like Amos, he prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (793–753 BC). He not only prophesied to Nineveh, but also to the wicked northern kingdom (2 Kings 14:25). Jonah came from the village of Gath Hepher which was just a few miles north of Nazareth. The Lord Jesus used Jonah’s three days and nights in the stomach of the great fish to illustrate his own death, burial and resurrection (Matthew 12:40–42; 16:4).

Obadiah’s message was one of wrath upon the wicked and unrepentant Edom. The book of Jonah shows the mercy of God to the wicked people of Nineveh who repented of their sin. We see in this book the sovereign power and greatness of God as he worked in miraculous ways to teach the reluctant prophet his will and to save Nineveh. The key verse is *Salvation is of the LORD* (2:9). When God determines to save, no one can hinder his purposes, not even disobedient prophets!



Outline of Jonah

1. Jonah Fleeing (chapter 1)
2. Jonah Praying (chapter 2)
3. Jonah Preaching (chapter 3)
4. Jonah Complaining (chapter 4)

For further reading, I recommend: ‘Jonah’ by Hugh Martin and ‘Jonah – A study in Compassion’ by O. Palmer Roberston, both books published by Banner of Truth.

Salvation is of the LORD

Jonah promised God, ‘*I will pay what I have vowed*’ (9). He may have once made promises to God when he was called as a prophet and he was now prepared to re-consecrate his life to the Lord. Many people have made vows to God but have never kept them. They promised all kinds of things to God if only he would help them when they were in great trouble. Once he has answered their prayer they forget their vows. **Have you made vows to God which you have not kept?** Do you really think about the words of the hymns that you sing to God? Some hymns contain very solemn promises and it is so easy to thoughtlessly sing them. Think as you sing those hymns! Let us be sure to pay our vows because God will hold us to our promises.

The stricken prophet had been vividly reminded that idols are powerless to save when he saw the plight of the sailors in the storm. Their gods had failed them and they later called on Jehovah (1:5,14). Jonah said, ‘*Those who regard worthless idols forsake their own mercy*’ (8). He confessed his trust in Jehovah: ‘*Salvation is of the LORD*’ (9). He was unable to rescue himself and he depended on God alone to save him because only God could deliver him. God who saved Jonah from the stomach of the fish, God who saved Nineveh, is able to save the most stubborn sinner. Let us renew our vows to God and pray for our loved-ones who are lost and for whom we are so concerned. ‘*Salvation is of the LORD.*’ Jesus said, ‘*The things that are impossible with men are possible with God*’ (Luke 18:27). **He is able and willing to answer our prayers. Hallelujah!**

So the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land (10). At God’s command, the fish vomited the chastened prophet onto some Mediterranean beach (10). When God speaks, things happen! He spoke at the beginning and the world was created at his word. He speaks and the dead are raised (John 5:25, 28–29). **Let us trust in him at all times, especially when we are in deep trouble and filled with fear.**

I cried out to the LORD ... and he answered me

God's sovereign work is again seen in the statement of verse 17: *Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah.* The Lord had prepared it! Scoffers reject the book of Jonah saying that it is impossible for a man to be swallowed by a fish or for a man to survive in the stomach of a fish for three days. One species, the sperm whale is capable of swallowing six men and we must remember that nothing is impossible with God. Men have invented nuclear submarines which are able to keep their crews under water for months at a time. Why should we think it strange that almighty God had prepared the fish and was able to keep Jonah alive inside it for three days?

The captain of the ship had urged Jonah to call on his God to save the stricken vessel and its occupants (1:6). We are not told that Jonah did pray at this time; after all, he knew that he was the cause of the trouble. Jonah prayed from the stomach of the fish, however, perhaps as he had never prayed before: *Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God* (1). He was a man who had memorised Scripture for we find overtones of the Psalms in his words (cp. verse 2 with Psalm 18:6; verse 3 with Psalm 42:7; verse 9 with Psalm 50:14). The use of Scripture enriches our prayers (cp. Acts 4:24–26).

If we truly belong to the Lord, he will never let us go even though we drift from him and backslide. He may bring distressing circumstances upon us to drive us to our knees to seek him in prayer. Jonah prayed from the stomach of the fish, saying, *'I cried out to the LORD because of my affliction, and he answered me'* (2). He likened his terrifying ordeal in that slimy stomach to being in Sheol, the place of the dead. He recognised the sovereign hand of God in his affliction: *'You cast me into the deep ... all your billows and all your waves have passed over me'* (3). Jonah felt faint in his soul when he remembered the Lord and he prayed (7). **When we seek God with all our heart, nothing can keep our prayers from reaching him. Let us now come to him with thanksgiving and prayer.**

But Jonah arose to flee ... from the presence of the LORD

The Lord told Jonah to go and to cry out against the great city of Nineveh, capital of Assyria, because of the wickedness of its people (2). About fifty years later, God was to use the Assyrians to conquer Jonah's own people and to carry them off into exile. Jonah was not a coward, nor did he fear preaching judgment, but he was unwilling to take God's Word to Assyria. He did not want to go to Nineveh because he had no love for Gentiles and he did not care if they perished. He knew that his warning message would give the people an opportunity to repent of their sin and to prove the grace and mercy of God (4:2).

Does it concern you that people all around you are perishing in their sins? **Remember, it is not unloving or harsh to warn people of God's wrath and of hell.** We must tell sinners of their plight that they may come to repentance (cp. 2 Peter 3:3–9). Do you pray and work for the salvation of those who are lost?

But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD (3). God had told him to go east to Nineveh but he was determined to go west to Tarshish (which may have been in Spain). He tried to do what he knew was impossible – to run away from God (cp. Psalm 139:7–12). At first, all seemed to go well for the prophet and he found a ship just about to sail to Tarshish. We may be tempted to use apparently favourable circumstances as a sign that God is overlooking our disobedience to his will. If we know that a course of action is contrary to the Word of God or will hinder us spiritually, all the favourable circumstances in the world are not an indication that God's smile is upon us. **All is wrong that seems most right when we disobey God's will!**

*It is the Lord, my covenant God,
Whose claims are all divine,
Who has an undisputed right
To govern me and mine.*

(Thomas Greene)

Why have you done this?

Jonah was very foolish to imagine that he could run away from God: *But the LORD sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up* (4). The Hebrew verb, translated ‘sent’ is literally ‘hurled.’ — God hurled a great wind on the sea and the violent storm threatened to destroy the ship. Jonah was sleeping through this terrible storm while the heathen sailors were praying to their gods and throwing out cargo to lighten the ship (5). **Satan will see to it that the disobedient child of God will slumber when there is a need for urgent prayer.** The ship’s captain roused the sleeping prophet and said to him, ‘*What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call on your God; perhaps your God will consider us so that we may not perish*’ (6). Are you prayerless because your heart is not right with God?

The sailors cast lots to determine who was the cause of the trouble and Jonah was singled out (7). He told them that he *feared the LORD* (an expression used to express his belief in Jehovah). Who is this God whom he fears? Jonah tells us: He is ‘*the God of heaven, who made the sea and dry land.*’ Jehovah is not a god limited to a certain country, who has to be carried around on some platform. He is the Almighty! He created the heavens, the stars, the sun and moon. He made the sea and the dry land. How could Jonah have imagined that he could run away from such a God?

Jonah had told the ship’s crew that *he had fled from the presence of the LORD* and they were now seized with fear. They recognised more than Jonah, the folly of disobedience to God and they asked him, ‘*Why have you done this?*’ (9–10). If we wilfully disobey God, we will bring nothing but trouble to ourselves, our church, and even to others outside of our church. God does not afford us the luxury of ‘doing our own thing’ in the Christian life. **If you are determined to pursue a path of disobedience, let these words ring in your ears, ‘Why have you done this?’**

For you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you

The terrified sailors now knew that their ship was in trouble because they had with them a man who was fighting against the will of God. Jonah had admitted this, but he had not repented of his sin; he was still in a state of rebellion. It is not enough to say to God after we sin, ‘I own up.’ We must put matters right with God and Jonah still had not done that.

The storm became increasingly severe and the men asked Jonah what they should do. He was trapped and he knew it! He told them that the tempest would be calmed if they threw him into the sea. They now they knew that God’s hand was against them because of Jonah. They were most reluctant to throw Jonah overboard and they rowed with all their might in a vain attempt to reach land (11–13). Do you see the irony of all this? Here is the man of God, hard-hearted, lacking compassion for the heathen, and yet these ignorant heathen sailors had compassion for him. They did all that they could do to save Jonah’s life, though his rebellion had caused them to lose their cargo and threatened their lives. Jonah did not care whether the heathen of Nineveh perished, but these heathen sailors cared for Jonah. **How do you compare with Jonah in your concern for the lost? Do you care that they will perish in hell unless they are saved?**

The Gentile sailors prayed to Jehovah, the living God, for the first time and acknowledged his absolute sovereignty. Their prayer was far more sound than the prayers of many professing Christians: ‘*For you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you*’ (14). They also prayed that God would not hold them guilty if Jonah died. As he witnessed their prayer, the rebellious prophet was given a foretaste of God’s work in the lives of Gentiles. When the sea became calm after they had thrown him overboard, *the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows* (16). God had sovereignly touched their hearts. Are you trying to go your own way instead of God’s way? You will never be right or content until you tread the path of obedience.