

# THE WRITING PROPHETS: AN INTRODUCTION

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## WEEK 1: GOD'S PROPHETS

I congratulated myself in being able to avoid having to study prophets and prophecy in any detail. So, I was hesitant about this topic because far as these books were concerned, I was content to know a few familiar passages from them and the familiar stories of Jonah, Daniel in the lion's den; or that Jeremiah was the prophet of doom and gloom and Ezekiel had these weird visions that you couldn't make head or tail of. And if anyone had asked me about Micah or Zephaniah or Haggai or Nahum, to name a few of the others, I wouldn't have been able to say even one sentence about them. On top of that, the idea of being able to say something meaningful about 17 books of the Bible in 4 weeks just didn't make sense, so that is why these next four weeks will be just an introduction. Hopefully these 4 weeks will at least give you the gist of what all these prophecies are about, so that when you read them for yourselves you will have some idea about what they are referring to. The reason that this topic came to mind is that there is a lot of emphasis on prophecy in some religious circles today.

Just a general survey tells us that Muslims claim that Mohammed was the last prophet appointed by God and his words will apply to the end of time; Mormons believe that Joseph Smith was the last prophet appointed by God to make His church ready for the second coming of Christ. Jehovah's Witnesses claim their collective movement is prophetic. The Apostolic Church promotes itself as 'The Prophetic Voice' and recognises people in its congregations as prophets. Even within more conservative evangelical circles, there is an on-going debate as to whether or not prophecy still exists today; or did it end in the with John the Baptist or in the apostolic age?

So, in view of what is doing the rounds in religious circles, Christians do need to find out what the Bible says first. In the first of his August sermons, David said that God was moving history forward to a divinely appointed time. What I found in these books were 16 amazing guys, doing an amazing job at critical points not just in the history of their own peoples, but at turning points in the progressive revelation of salvation history. In the writing prophets we see God taking giant strides towards His ultimate plans for humanity which will culminate in the prophetic Day of the Lord at the end of time. So, since the Bible is the oldest and only source of primary information about prophets, that is where we need to go if we want to know God's method and use of prophecy. After all, when we talk about the writing prophets we are talking about texts that have stood the test of time for over 2500 years. Because these are being challenged from many different sources nowadays, we need to be sure of our grounds for sticking with those in the Old Testament. And, especially so, in the light of Jesus' words in Matthew 24:24.

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**For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce great signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.**

In approaching these books too, we need to remember that the three most important offices in Israelite society were those of prophet, priest and king. That order is historically significant. Prophets existed from the beginning of Hebrew history. Moses, the most revered Jewish prophet was the one who oversaw the establishment of the priesthood at Sinai after the exodus from Egypt; and it was centuries later before Israel had a king. So, prophecy was the most enduring means of communicating God's messages not only to His chosen people, but also to the nations surrounding them.

From the time of Moses, the three qualifications that God's true prophets had in common were firstly, that they were Israelites, secondly, they were like Moses, and lastly that they had a special calling and an anointing of God's Spirit to carry out their tasks. This chart gives an overall view of where the prophets fitted into the history of the time. In fact, we could justifiably claim that the times of the prophets defined the different eras covered in the Old Testament from the time of the divided kingdom after Solomon's death. Times that had enormous impact on God's relationship with His chosen people. Obadiah, Jonah and Nahum are separate because the prophecies are not addressed to the Israelites. Other prophets also include prophecies against the nations of the then known world and the overall fact drawn from this is that, even in the Old Testament, God concerns Himself with every nation. But Israel had been chosen to be God's witness to them by means of worship of the one true God and obedience to all the commandments, laws and decrees given in the Sinai covenant. In that respect, the people had failed miserably. By the time of the 'writing prophets' Israel had been treading a downward path for at least 700 years – a testimony to God's love for His people, His slowness to anger, His grace, His mercy, His deliverances. But within the next 500 years, Israel was going to experience what would happen when God had reached the limit of His endurance with their failures. Failure to heed Amos and Hosea led to the fall of the Northern Kingdom to the Assyrians; and ignoring the prophets of the Southern Kingdom finally led to the Babylonian captivity and exile. Ezekiel even urged the exiles to repent, but their failure to do so was followed by the destruction of Jerusalem in 586BC – an event of unparalleled disaster for the Israelites. David spoke on Sunday of devastation facing Nehemiah when God gave him the task of rebuilding the walls.

That happened when the Babylonians were in turn defeated by the Medes and Persians in 539BC and the Jews were permitted to return to and rebuild Jerusalem. However, within 120 years or so of that return the same things that had led to the fall of the two kingdoms were again prevalent in Israel and after

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Malachi's ministry, which is thought to have ended around 415BC prophecy ceased in Israel for 400 years.

So much for the times in which they lived. But what do we know about the prophets themselves. Who were they? Where did they come from? When did they prophecy? Apart from the few personal details given by Isaiah, Jeremiah and Daniel, we can't really answer those questions. Joel and Obadiah could be called 'Anonymous Prophets' because all we know of Joel is that he was the son of Pethuel, and we are given no details at all about Obadiah. When they prophesied is also a bit of a mystery. Both could have done their work as early as the 800sBC. But the prophecies also could have come from as late as the 500s BC. We also have no information about Habakkuk, but like many of the other prophets, we can be sure of when his and their prophecies came, because of their reference to the kings or rulers of their times and also about the international treaties and alliances that were happening around them.

So if we haven't enough personal details to decide whether or not these were an amazing bunch of men, how do we justify saying that they were. The key lies in their common characteristics. They had to be very special in order to deliver the Lord's words in turbulent times to a rebellious people. Considering that in 4-500 years we only have the accounts of 16 prophets, we start to realise, that for God to give a spiritual commission only on these occasions, what these 16 men had to say was according to God's timing and according to what revelation God regarded as relevant at any point during that period. As one scholar has put it, only "they experienced the divine reality." Isaiah's call is the most well-known but there was no set formula. Jeremiah was a reluctant prophet, while Isaiah accepted his call willingly. Amos denied he was a prophet and we learn that he had a single call. This contrasts with Ezekiel who cites the day, month and year of several calls he received. But regardless of the method of the call or the responses of the prophets involved, one thing stands out in all the accounts. The prophets were the specifically chosen mediators of God's word to the peoples they addressed, as Amos, one of the first writing prophets affirms in **3:7 Surely the Lord GOD does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets.**

In other words, prophets were to be the living evidence of the truth of God's word. And, convinced that they had been given a God-appointed task, they risked being ridiculed, rejected and threatened with death by their communities. In the case of the writing prophets, theirs was a thankless task and these next few examples show it.

In plain language, Amos was told to clear off back to where he came from by Amaziah the priest, when he gave God's word to the Northern Kingdom. Now

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admittedly, Amos had come from the Southern Kingdom of Judah, so he wouldn't have been welcomed on that account alone. But this was not just an inhospitable insult. Amaziah had reported Amos to Jeroboam the king of Israel, accusing Amos of raising a conspiracy against him. Amos was predicting Jeroboam's death and Israel's exile, you can just imagine the consequences for Amos had he stayed.

The prophets were also commanded to enact signs. How would you feel if you had to give your children names like that of Hosea? Jezreel was the site of a massacre by Jehu of the family of Ahab whom he had defeated, and also relatives of the king of Judah. The name signified God's retribution for those killings. Lo-Ruhamah meant that God had withdrawn His love for Israel. Lo-Ammi meant "You are not my people, and I am not your God" indicating God's rejection. Bearing in mind the importance of the meaning of names in ancient times, you would have thought these names would have made Israel take the prophet's words seriously and amend their ways.

If this wasn't bad enough, how would you feel being commanded to make a public spectacle of yourself like Ezekiel or Isaiah?

Ezekiel 4:4-8 giving a sign of the length of punishment for Israel and Judah.

**Then lie on your left side, and place the punishment of the house of Israel upon it; ... For I assign to you a number of days, three hundred ninety days, equal to the number of the years of their punishment; ... When you have completed these, you shall lie down a second time, but on your right side, and bear the punishment of the house of Judah; forty days I assign you, one day for each year. ... See, I am putting cords on you so that you cannot turn from one side to the other until you have completed the days of your siege.**

Or Isaiah

**Isaiah 20:3 Then the LORD said, "Just as my servant Isaiah has walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign and a portent against Egypt and Ethiopia...."**

Bearing in mind that public nudity was shameful in the extreme for any Israelite, can you imagine what Isaiah had to put up with for three years.

And being a prophet was not without its dangers. Jeremiah was probably living in the most dangerous time when the Babylonian threat was imminent. Because he prophesied about the fall of Jerusalem, his life was threatened on more than one occasion.

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**Jeremiah 11:21 Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the people of Anathoth, who seek your life, and say, “You shall not prophesy in the name of the LORD, or you will die by our hand”**

This example stands out because Anathoth was Jeremiah’s home village. These people would have been his neighbours. Another time he faced a particularly harrowing death, but fortunately was rescued on that occasion.

**Jeremiah 38:6 So they took Jeremiah and threw him into the cistern of Malchiah, the king’s son, which was in the court of the guard, letting Jeremiah down by ropes. Now there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud.**

And of course, probably the most famous story in the Old Testament of a writing prophet under the threat of death for being faithful to God, is that of Daniel in the lion’s den?

Just from these examples we can see that these men possessed a strength and a courage that could only have come from God. They continued to publicly challenge the assumptions and behaviour of kings, priests, prophets and people, knowing that it entailed setting themselves apart from mainstream society. Only the certainty that God had called them to speak on His behalf could have brought the prophets through many of the trials, tribulations and threats that they faced. All because people were not prepared to accept the truth of their condition before God.

This essentially is what prophecy is about. One scholar has likened prophecy to a ‘Window’ through which we see the revelation of God’s purposes and plans for His people and for the world. In other words, what God says about any period of time and how He is using or will use the circumstances of that time to further His agenda. Prophecy differs from preaching or teaching in that just as you can look through an ordinary window from both sides, so the nature of prophecy is two-sided. Looking through the window from one side we find that prophecy is about forth-telling. Generally speaking, both Old Testament and New Testament prophecy is primarily concerned with forth-telling. That is, telling people what God wants them to know in their present circumstances and what response is expected from them.

There is also a general consensus among scholars that all the prophecies must first be applied to the age in which the prophet was living. They spoke about the prevailing circumstances at whatever time and whatever place they were called to minister. Not only did they prophesy the destruction of the Israelite

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kingdoms by the Assyrians and Babylonians, they exhibited a high degree of courage in denouncing the practices that were bringing God's judgement upon them. Throughout the prophecies, they demonstrate that they are fully aware of the evils of their societies. They demonstrate God's intervention in the history of both kingdoms was due to covenant unfaithfulness that manifests itself in such a way as to constitute rebellion against God Himself. Over the next three weeks, we will look in more detail about some of the prophetic declarations, but in terms of forth-telling, the messages highlight all the activity God disapproved of in national life, collectively and individually. Forth-telling prophecy identified the problems – in other words, 'named and shamed'; and called for repentance and a remedying of wrongs. The forth-telling themes of the writing prophets could be summed up as rebellion and repentance.

Looking through the window from the other side we find fore-telling. Many modern scholars dismiss predictive prophecy saying that the things mentioned by the prophets were written by someone after the events had happened. But as far back as the time of Moses, God stated the means by which the fore-telling of prophets could be authenticated

### **Deuteronomy 18:22**

**If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing DOES NOT TAKE PLACE OR PROVE TRUE, it is a word that the LORD HAS NOT SPOKEN. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously.....**

Mostly, fore-telling in the written prophecies takes form of a warning to the Israelites about the consequences of failing to heed what is forth-told. That is why prophecies about the future are grounded in present or past dealings with God and/or with surrounding nations. That means that any study of predictive prophecy must first be considered in the light of the circumstances of the prophet's time, not applied to other times and situations. This example from Isaiah and Ezekiel is a perfect illustration of an 'O yes it will!' - O no it won't' situation.

Isaiah in the 8<sup>th</sup> century saying Jerusalem would not fall and Ezekiel in the 6<sup>th</sup> century saying it would fall. Isaiah was right: Jerusalem did not fall to the Assyrians in 722BC. Ezekiel was also right because Jerusalem did fall to the Babylonians around 586BC. This point may seem academic, but it points to the importance of seeing the truth of what God has inspired these men to say according to the circumstances of their own times.

With the benefit of hindsight we can see that what is fore-told in these books have come to pass, thus passing God's own test. The prophecies speak of the rise and fall of four great empires – Assyria, Babylon, the Medes and Persians and the Greeks under Alexander the Great. With the first two, God opened a

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window into the consequences of ignoring, disbelief of or disobedience to His revealed disapproval of people's conduct and activity. In this respect it was a prediction of coming judgment and only repentance was the appropriate response. While there is much scholarly dispute over whether or not Isaiah was written by one prophet or two or three, the fact remains that Cyrus, the ruler of the Medes and Persians enters into prophecy: and this is continued in Daniel, who then goes on to include the coming of the Greeks and the consequences for the returned exiles when that happens.

But fore-telling also involved the revelation of what God would do for His people even though they had not remained faithful. In this sense fore-telling was a revelation of a God who would remain true to His covenant, regardless of how severely He had to discipline His people and the nations. It was message to give hope and sustain it through the trying times. The fore-telling themes, then, could be summed up as retribution and restoration.

These four terms rebellion, repentance, retribution, and restoration sum up the messages of the writing prophets. All of them are important elements in the so-called pre-exilic prophecies. Later we will see how the prophetic themes changed during the exile and the different emphasis it had when the exile ended. Restoration plays a major role, but there are at least three aspects of that theme. The dominant theme of prophecy, however, is still repentance which is a continuous theme from the time God chose the Israelites to be His witnesses to world right to the present day.

So, just by seeing these prophecies in their proper contexts, we not only see how God moved His plans for His people forward, but also by bringing about what He had promised, gave them the grounds for what should have been a wholehearted commitment to Him and the covenant He had made. As mentioned, Malachi showed that that did not happen. But when God silenced prophecy in Israel, it was because the time had come to reveal, through His chosen people, His final solution to the problem of rebellion against Him and to provide the Witness that He had expected the nation of Israel to be to the world.

Since God has been true to His Word in all these Old Testament prophecies, we have good reason to take a closer look at what the writing prophets have to say to us. They give us solid evidence that our God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow because the message of rebellion, repentance, retribution and restoration is still in place regarding God's dealings with this world. Over the next three weeks, it is even possible to see how these prophecies give us a picture of the world we are now living in and why these messages are still so relevant in our modern society.

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### WEEK 2: GOD'S PERSPECTIVE - REBELLION

What is your reaction to persistent bad behaviour? We find it difficult to put up with persistent bad behaviour whether it be from our children, other family members, people with whom we come in contact in various other settings. Knocking people's heads together to make them see sense is probably the least we would want to do in some situations. Sometimes we may just feel like walking away, leaving them to it, and letting them take the consequences. We can be thankful that God did not adopt that course of action. He did act, but only after giving countless warnings over centuries. And those warnings extended to other nations as well. From what the prophets say about the nations surrounding Israel and Judah, we learn that God's sovereignty extends to all peoples and He is just as much the God of their histories as He is of that of His chosen people the Israelites.

The Israelites had been meant to be witnesses to Yahweh among these nations. Although they, as His chosen people, failed miserably in this task, from God's perspective, anyone who was hostile to them or did them harm, was rebelling against Him. Zechariah 2:8 **For thus said the LORD of hosts (after his glory sent me) regarding the nations that plundered you: Truly, one who touches you touches the apple of my eye.**

This becomes clear in the prophecy of Obadiah. It is the shortest prophecy yet the scope of the prophecy ranges over centuries. Edom is condemned also in Amos at the beginning of the period, through Joel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel to Malachi at the very end of the period. Why is Edom singled out for destruction. Two reasons are given. Obadiah 1:3 talks about the "pride of the heart" of people "who say to yourself 'Who can bring me to the ground?'" The second reason is in verse 10 "Because of the violence against your brother Jacob you will be covered with shame; you will be destroyed forever." The people of Edom were descendants of Esau and was thus the sister kingdom of Israel, the descendants of his brother Jacob. Yet Edom throughout the history of the kingdoms was a constant threat to Israel and showed continual hostility towards it, even helping its enemies to invade and taking its share of the spoils. Edom's persistent hostility to God's people, was tantamount to an attack on God Himself. Through Obadiah God foretold that should Edom not repent of these conditions, they would be invaded and that there would be "no survivors from the house of Esau."(18) Did that prophecy come true?

Well, invaders from the Negev, south of Edom are mentioned in verse 19. The Nabateans invaded and Edom was renamed Idumea. Does that have any relevance for us as Christians? The answer is 'yes' because Herod the Great was an Idumean and that is why the Jews hated him. And through Herod, that



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hostility towards the people of God continued and was shown to be an attack on God, for this was the Herod that attempted to kill Jesus through the slaughter of the children under 2 years old in Bethlehem.

This prophecy is a microcosm of the pattern of rebellion that existed in the other great empires of the Old Testament world. From God's perspective, pride, arrogance, self-sufficiency and hostility and cruelty to God's people were the hallmarks of the nations' rebellions. A similar picture emerges with the prophecies of Jonah (c780BC) and Nahum to Nineveh. Nineveh was a great Assyrian city and it too had a history. It is mentioned in Genesis 10:11 as a city founded by Nimrod who also built the tower of Babel, which was a symbol of rebellion against God. By God's mercy, Nineveh was given a chance to repent of its wickedness as a result of Jonah's message. Much to his disgust it did, but soon fell back into its old ways. Fifty years later, in 722BC, Israel fell to the Assyrians. Twenty years later Sennacherib attempted to do the same to Judah, which was at that time ruled by Hezekiah. And it was Isaiah who prophesied that the Lord would deal with both Sennacherib and the Assyrian army. We find the story in 2 Kings chapters 18 and 19. Sennacherib returned to Nineveh where he died and an angel of the Lord destroyed the army surrounding Jerusalem. But Assyria recovered from this setback and became a mighty empire. By the time of Nahum, about thirty years after this event, it was at the height of its wealth and power. But it was also renowned for its cruelty (Nahum 3:19). All the gains from Jonah's time had gone and once more God's judgment was directed towards Nineveh. This time the failure to repent ended in Assyria's defeat by the Babylonians in the south and Medes and Persians in the north around 614BC

In each of these cases, the prophets have given us a picture of rebellion against God and retribution for it. It was a failure to repent of clearly defined anti-God attitudes and actions that inevitably led to complete destruction. It is also clear that God was concerned not just about these great empires, but also about the other nations and places surrounding Israel and Judah mentioned in the different prophecies. Isaiah and Jeremiah prophesy against Damascus. Ezekiel brings together prophecies against Edom, Moab, Philistia, Tyre and Sidon, Damascus, Ammon and Egypt in chapters 25-32. And every one of the prophecies concerning these nations have been fulfilled and may still be being fulfilled because all these territories are caught up today in the turmoil of the Middle East.

While the nations were advancing towards their judgements, Israel and Judah were heading inexorably towards disaster, God tried to head it off by sending the rest of the prophets specifically to Israel and Judah to warn of impending catastrophe and to urge the repentance that could avoid the defeat and collapse

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of both Israel and Judah. With the benefit of hindsight we can see that what happened to both kingdoms was a result of their complacent belief that God would never desert them or bring disaster upon them; and their deliberate choice not to heed the prophets before disaster struck in 722BC and 597BC, with the ultimate devastating event being the destruction of Jerusalem and Solomon's magnificent temple in 586BC.

Being honest, even if it were possible, would you wait nearly 500 years to see if people would see the error of their ways and to take steps to remedy the situation? We can only speculate about it, but would Israel have fallen to the Assyrians if they had heeded Amos and Hosea? Would Assyria's own decline have been avoided, if Nahum had been heeded? And after seeing what happened to its northern neighbour, you would have thought that Judah would have paid more attention to its prophets throughout this time. Why did they not listen to what the prophets said? In many cases it was because people refused to believe that these men were prophets to begin with, or, that they were false prophets. Hence nobody was prepared to take them seriously. Israel's and Judah's past history should have rung alarm bells. Israel's greatest prophet Moses' final words to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 30:19:20 can be summed up as 'If you live by the covenant God made with you then all you do will prosper. If you choose not to live by that covenant and choose to go your own way, in spite of God's messages to you, then there will be adverse consequences.' And it was towards the end of the period of exile that Daniel's prayer in 9:11-13 explicitly states that the Israelites' plight was firmly rooted in their failure to heed Moses' words.

**“....Therefore the curses and sworn judgements written in the Law of Moses, the servant of God have been poured out on us, because we have sinned against you.....Just as it is written in the Law of Moses, all this disaster has come upon us, yet we have not sought the favour or the Lord our God by turning from our sins and giving attention to your truth.”**

During this period these 16 prophets, together with Judah's two good kings Hezekiah and Josiah, had tried to put the people back on the right track. The prophets were ignored and the reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah were quickly overturned by their successors and it was left to the last two prophets of Judah – Jeremiah and Ezekiel to unsuccessfully attempt damage limitation. Even after being taken captive, people were still refusing to listen to Ezekiel who was warning them that God's judgement would finally fall on Jerusalem itself. The Israelites, according to God's perspective in 2:3 were **“... a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their fathers have been in revolt against me to this very day. The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, This is what the Sovereign Lord says.**

**And whether they listen or fail to listen – for they are a rebellious house – they will know that a prophet has been among them.”**

### **Ezekiel 5:5-6**

**This is what the Sovereign Lord says: “This is Jerusalem, which I have set in the centre of the nations....Yet in her wickedness she has rebelled against my laws and decrees more than the nations and countries around her. She has rejected my laws and has not followed my decrees.**

Before Ezekiel, Jeremiah too had predicted the fall of Jerusalem and came under sentence of death for it. Jeremiah 26:11.

**Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and to all the people, “This man [Jeremiah]deserves the sentence of death because he has prophesied against this city, as you have heard with your own ears.”**

The very people who should have been encouraging the people to listen to Jeremiah were the ones opposing him. Jerusalem is singled out because it was the Holy City where the presence of Yahweh dwelt in the temple holy of holies. The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, in effect, was the destruction of the Israelites national identity as Yahweh’s chosen people. Such a disaster was unthinkable both for Judah before the exile and for those who were taken into captivity before the Babylonians destroyed the city. The people simply refused to believe God would do it in spite of all the warnings.

From God’s perspective, however, the Israelites had exhausted His tolerance of their sinful state. Isaiah 1:4-6 sums up their condition.

**Ah sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the Lord; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turn their backs on him... Why do you persist in rebellion? Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted. From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness –**

In other words the mind, heart and body has deserted the Lord and rebelled against Him. The prophecy of Hosea is the most graphic picture of God’s view of that situation. It is a familiar prophecy because, in a western world that seems to be beyond shocking, the idea that a man should marry a prostitute and take her back even when she continued to be unfaithful to him, still has the power to give us the sense that this is definitely way beyond the call of duty – something that shouldn’t be demanded of anyone. It’s good if it does give that reaction, because it gives us the realisation that God has taken the part of Hosea vis-à-vis a people who were continually unfaithful to the covenant He had made

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with them. A covenant that would have provided for their well-being in every sense of the word; far superior to anything they would find elsewhere, yet had been forsaken and rejected for an inferior and degrading way of life. That was how God viewed the relationship with the people He had chosen to be His witnesses in the world. God's perspective of the Israelites as an adulterous and/or unfaithful people is a recurring theme throughout all these writings, sometimes expressed in what we would consider very crude sexual terms – references which, in themselves, are an indication of God's disgust at the conduct of the people He had singled out from all other nations to be His witnesses in the world.

When we look at the conduct that constituted what God saw as rebellion, we can see why the prophets unanimously agree that His subsequent judgement and actions were fully justified. Rebellion manifested itself in three practical ways, all of which are roundly condemned in the forth-telling of the prophets.

Firstly, there is pagan worship. Because the Israelites did not destroy some of the Canaanite peoples as God had ordered when they entered the Promised Land, Moses' prophecy of what would happen came true. The Israelites not only adopted many of the religious practices of the pagan nations around them, but in some cases went beyond them. The subsequent history of God's people after the division of the kingdom shows that all the kings of Israel actively engaged in the worship of pagan gods and encouraged the people to do so as well. Particularly heinous in God's perspective was child sacrifice, introduced into the united kingdom by Solomon. 1 Kings 11:7 tells us

**7Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Molech the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem.**

This was in direct contravention of Leviticus 18:21 and the same prohibition mentioned 4 times in chapter 20.

**Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to MOLECH for you must not profane the name of your God. I am the Lord**

It had become so prevalent in Judah that both Isaiah and Jeremiah, speaking nearly 100 years apart, single it out for condemnation

**Isaiah 57:9 9 You journeyed to Molech, with oil, and multiplied your perfumes;**

**Jeremiah 32:35**

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**They built the high places of Baal in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to offer up their sons and daughters to Molech, though I did not command them, nor did it enter my mind that they should do this abomination, causing Judah to sin.**

Baal worship, including fertility cults, gods made of wood, stone and precious metals, asherah poles, all were adopted by both Israel and Judah. Jeremiah 44:17 shows that even those who fled to Egypt to avoid capture by the Babylonians refused to abandon the worship of the queen of heaven.

**Instead, we will do everything that we have vowed, make offerings to the queen of heaven and pour out libations to her, just as we and our ancestors, our kings and our officials, used to do in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem.**

But insult was added to injury, for not only did the Israelites worship false gods, they often combined it with the false worship of Yahweh. So disgusted did God become with this lip-service that Isaiah is told to say in no uncertain terms

Isaiah 1:13-14

**Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me....I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.**

Zephaniah, 3:1-4 provides some detail for that perspective. Jerusalem, the Holy City itself is said to be “the city of oppressors”, “rebellious and defiled.” A place where the men of God like the prophets are called ‘arrogant’ and ‘treacherous’; while the priests “profane the sanctuary and do violence to the law.

The tragedy is, even after the Jews returned to their land, this kind of rebellion did not stop. In particular, Malachi’s prophecy from verse 6 in chapter 1 to the ninth verse of chapter two is a very forthright forth-telling of the sins of the **priests** in offering blind, crippled and diseased animals as sacrifices. God saw this as profaning His altar and rightfully challenges them by asking if they would offer such animals to their governors – yet they offer them to Him. While the people themselves bear culpability for paying lip-service to God, the priests are especially condemned in Malachi “**For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction....But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi....you**

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**have not followed my ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law.”**

And that last statement brings us to the third way in which rebellion manifested itself – social evil, which is summed up for us in Micah 3:9-11

**Hear this, you leaders of the house of Jacob, you rulers of the house of Israel, who despise justice and distort all that is right; who build Zion with bloodshed and Jerusalem with wickedness. Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money. Yet they lean upon the Lord and say, “Is not the Lord among us? No disaster will come upon us.”**

The complicity of rulers, priests and prophets led to an ever-widening gap between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’; the corruption of businesses which used false weights; and the oppression and injustice suffered by the most vulnerable in society. Micah echoes Amos who had highlighted these blights in society in the Northern Kingdom. Micah even gives some specific details, in particular, the wealthy landowners acquiring more land by bribing corrupt judges to fix land deeds in their favour. This was impoverishing smaller landowners and greed for land meant many could not afford to own it. This in turn created a class of landless peasants who often had to go to the cities looking for a livelihood, which in turn created a class of urban poor who often had to beg just to stay alive. Particularly obnoxious to God was the exploitation of widows and orphans, the most vulnerable groups in society. What Micah was highlighting was something Isaiah had been doing for nearly 20 years. Both of these prophets of Judah knew of the fall of Israel to the Assyrians and both of them were aware that the conditions which had led to that conquest, were happening before their very eyes in Judah. Both prophets consistently proclaimed that if Judah did not repent and turn to God, then Judah would meet the same end as Israel. And, 60 to 80 years after Isaiah and Micah, Habakkuk 1: 2-5 expresses his despair that God is still tolerating violence, destruction, strife and conflict, a paralysed legal system which allows the righteous to be exploited and injustice to prevail in society.

From God’s perspective abandonment of His sovereignty and His covenant arrangements with the people, and the ways in which this was manifested in the persistence of pagan practices, false worship and social evils, had reached a point where the culmination of these things could no longer be tolerated. What is remarkable is that God had kept reminding the people of their rebellious ways for 4-500 years. He kept calling for repentance and gave more than enough warning that His people and all the other nations were already under His judgement and retribution would come if they refused to listen to those He had

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sent. I don't know if you would agree but it seems that all three kinds of rebellion are prevalent in our world today. And we cannot fault God if, or when, His retribution comes to us just as it came to Israel and Judah. There may come a time when we, too, will find the truth of Hosea's words in 8:7, **the people who had sowed the wind, reaped the whirlwind.**

### WEEK 3: GOD'S PURITY – REPENTANCE AND RETRIBUTION

Have you ever asked yourself the really profound philosophical question of why we needed things to be whiter than white? If you have, it might be wise not to mention it to too many people!! And what about our attitudes to stains? Would you go to somewhere important knowingly wearing a stained white top or shirt? If not, why not? If you think about it, the reason why we usually wouldn't do that is because of what other people would think of us if we did. We know there would be judgement on our standards of cleanliness or sense of propriety. Whatever the judgement we know it would detract from our reputations to some extent or other. If it didn't, why do we take so much trouble to remove stains? We take steps to eradicate stains maybe by first rinsing the item under to tap to see if comes out of its own accord. Then maybe a gentle rubbing with a mild soap. Then if it's a stubborn stain maybe a 60 degree wash with washing powders, and finally, if that fails a torturous 90 degree wash with some harsher chemical stain removers like Vanish or Ariel. And if the stain cannot be permanently removed we eventually discard the item completely.

Now, think of a new, pristine garment as God's people covered by the pure laws and decrees of the Sinai covenant, which reflected the total purity of God's character. They had been chosen for the important mission of publicly displaying this purity in the form of justice and righteousness among themselves, which in turn would be a witness to all other nations. Instead, as we saw last week the covenant clothing was stained by pagan worship, nominal and syncretic worship of Yahweh and a proliferation of social evils which negated and perverted justice and righteousness. And those stains were glaringly obvious for all to see. If we feel our reputation is adversely affected by something as trivial as stains on a garment, how much more was God's reputation being adversely affected by the conduct of His people? If we feel the need to remove stains, sometimes by harsh treatment, how much more did God have the right to take steps to eradicate the stains on His covenant arrangements with the Israelites.

And the prophets are in no doubt that God had a right to do so because of the purity of His character. Habakkuk tells us 1:13

**Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?**

In effect, Habakkuk is accusing a God, whose character is totally pure of tolerating impurity in His people. We saw last week the extent to which they had departed from the purity of the Sinai covenant and that is why Habakkuk is complaining to God that He is tolerating the conduct of society which has paralysed His laws to the extent that all the righteous experience is a perversion of justice or no justice at all. Habakkuk sees God's reputation for purity tainted by a toleration of the lack of justice and righteousness in His people.

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Before Habakkuk's outburst, God Himself had already recognised that His character and reputation were being damaged by the very people who had been charged with maintaining it. Ezekiel 22:26

**Her priests have violated my law, and have profaned my holy things: they have put no difference between the holy and profane, neither have they showed *difference* between the unclean and the clean, and have hid their eyes from my sabbaths, and I AM PROFANED AMONG THEM.**

Something had to be done because this damage to God's reputation had been going on for centuries. And just as we may start to remove stains by the gentlest way possible first, so God tried the gentle means of persuasion. Over all these centuries God's first and foremost response was to give the opportunity to repent.

Listen to Joel 2:13

**rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.**

Hosea showed the Northern Kingdom of Israel just how far God was prepared to go to bring back his unfaithful and rebellious people. In Micah 6:3, God asks, **My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you?** God reminds them in the following verses how He brought them out of Egypt, redeeming them from the "land of slavery" Gave them leaders like Moses, Aaron and Miriam, and, despite opposition, brought them into the Promised Land. Isaiah 5 gives a beautiful picture of the Israelites as God's vineyard, trees which required an abundance of tender loving care, yet in the end God asks, Isaiah 5:4 **What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it?**

**Isaiah 65:1-2 I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, "Here I am, here I am," to a nation that did not call on my name. I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices;**

And probably one of the best known texts is Isaiah 18

**Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be as wool.**

That promise is in itself a picture of purity. Scarlet is the symbolic colour of culpability and guilt for doing wrong. We talk of something being as white as snow; and the label of 'pure new wool' on a garment speaks of a perfect quality of material. Repentance was the way to purity. The entreaties to repent from Amos, Hosea and Joel would have saved the Northern Kingdom from the Assyrian conquest and captivity. Yet, in spite of those divine entreaties being rejected, they remained on offer, for a century or so later God is insisting that He takes no pleasure in the deaths of the Israelites and twice in Ezekiel 18 pleads with them to "turn and live". Another plea comes in Ezekiel 33:11

**Say to them, As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?**



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Even cruel Nineveh was told by Nahum 1:7 **The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust him.** God was asking for a heart that would trust in Him and Habakkuk confirmed this when he gave us in 2:4 the foundation doctrine of our Christian faith **...but the righteous will live by his faith...** Repentance meant a turning away from the people and the things people were putting their trust in – kings, priests and false prophets, material wealth and power – and once more accepting the provisions of the Lord’s laws and decrees given at Sinai. This was the basis upon which God could forgive the sins of the people while maintaining the purity of His justice and righteousness. This is something all the prophets agreed on.

Isaiah 1:27 **Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness.**

Zephaniah 3:5 asserts **The Lord within her is righteous; he does no wrong. Morning by morning he dispenses his justice and every new day he does not fail, yet the unrighteous know no shame.**

The proof of repentance from the heart was a changed lifestyle. And the prophets spelled out what true repentance would mean in practice. God could not have been more explicit regarding proof of repentance. Amos 5:14-15 **Seek good, not evil, that you may live....Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts.** And the very familiar words of verse 24 **But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like an never-failing stream.** The people of Judah not only knew what had happened to their Northern neighbour, they also had knowledge of the words of Amos and Hosea. And Judah’s prophets added to them. For example, Micah 6:8 told Judah **He has showed you O man what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.**

Scholars are agreed that the word ‘humbly’ means to walk circumspectly – having respect for God’s ways and being mindful of the behaviour or response He would expect in any given situation. Approximately a century later, in the days approaching the Babylonian conquest Jeremiah 22:3 and Zephaniah 2:3 are still urging people **Thus says the LORD: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place.**

and

**Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility, perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord’s anger.**

God had also tried some harsher methods to bring people to their senses. Amos chapter 4 mentions famine, drought, pestilence, blight, mildew and locust devastation, even death for some. To all of these Amos adds the comment “yet you did not return to me, says the LORD.” The result was the disastrous first Day of the Lord in which Israel was destroyed.

Lessons were not learned for by the time of Jeremiah, Zephaniah and Habakkuk, God’s reputation had suffered to such an extent that retribution was necessary and came in a way that was completely in accord with God’s pure righteousness and justice. The second ‘Day of the Lord’ came in the form of the Babylonian exile. The prophets would mention three more

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‘Days of the Lord’ and term applies to a significant moment in the unfolding of God’s purposes for this world. The first two refer to the retribution visited upon Israel and Judah. The last three refer to the stages of God’s restoration of His people and His original creation from the return from exile to the end of the age. This talk will only deal with the first two days of retribution because they were days that neither Israel or Judah ever expected to happen.

The Israelites of the Northern and Southern kingdoms were so certain that as God’s chosen people, He would never do anything to harm that special status or harm that national identity or withdraw His presence from them. That presence was made tangible when Jerusalem was established by David as the Holy City. This was reinforced when Solomon built the magnificent temple with the ultra sacred area of the Holy of Holies within it. When the kingdom split after the death of Solomon, Jeroboam and 10 of the tribes set up the Kingdom of Israel in the North with its capital Samaria and main shrines at Bethel, Gilgal and Beersheba, the birthplace of Jacob. These were meant to rival the national shrine of Jerusalem. Regardless of the location of the shrines, both Israel and Judah complacently believed God would tolerate whatever arrangements had been made and would continue to bless the people regardless of their actions. By the time of the writing prophets, God was about to shatter their illusions. The people spoke about the Day of the Lord in terms of great blessing. The prophets tried in vain to warn them that unless they mended their ways, the Day of the Lord would be anything but that. Amos is the earliest prophet to mention the Day of the Lord and does so in very uncompromising terms.

Amos 5:18-20

**Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord! Why do you long for the day of the Lord? That day will be darkness, not light. It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet with a bear, as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him. Will not the day of the Lord be darkness, not light – pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness.**

In other words, just when people have escaped one danger and believe they are safe, they will only face another danger from which there is no escape.

**Joel 1:15**

**Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is near.**

In the rest of the chapter the catastrophic nature of the day and the total devastation it will bring is given in the picture of a gigantic locust swarm which leaves nothing living in its wake. The imagery of the locusts as an unstoppable mighty army is continued in chapter 2.

**2:1-2**

**Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near - a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come.**

And even before Israel fell to the Assyrians, Amos 6:1 warns “**Woe to you who are complacent in Zion**”, indicating that a continuation of that attitude would see Judah facing a similar fate. He was not heeded there either and all the prophets of Judah also gave their warnings in vain.

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In Judah, Isaiah 39:5-8 tells of the complacency of Hezekiah in his palace in Jerusalem. **Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, “Hear the word of the LORD of hosts: Days are coming when all that is in your house, and that which your ancestors have stored up until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left, says the LORD. Some of your own sons who are born to you shall be taken away; they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.” Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, “The word of the LORD that you have spoken is good.” For he thought, “There will be peace and security in my days.”**

Then when the Babylonian invasion was imminent, we find Zephaniah repeating the messages of Amos and Joel.

### **Zephaniah 1:15-17**

**That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements. I will bring such distress upon people that they shall walk like the blind because they have sinned against the LORD.**

“**That day**” did come too for Judah. There were three waves of the Babylonian invasion. Daniel and his friends were taken in the first wave, Ezekiel in the second wave in 597BC. It is so hard to believe that even in these circumstances the exiles just refused point blank to believe that God meant what He said. They stubbornly clung to the notion that God could not and would not destroy His holy city, His dwelling place on earth. In vain Ezekiel warned them to prepare for that very event saying in 5:8-13

**Therefore, this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself am against you Jerusalem, and I will inflict punishment on you in the sight of the nations. Because of all your detestable idols, I will do to you what I have never done before and will never do again....I will inflict punishment on you and will scatter all your survivors to the winds....I myself will withdraw my favour; I will not look on you with pity or spare you. A third of your people will die of the plague or perish by famine inside you; a third will fall by the sword outside your walls; and a third I will scatter to the winds and pursue with drawn sword....And when I have spent my wrath upon them, they will know that I the Lord have spoken in my zeal.**

Could anything have been stated more clearly throughout the period of the writing prophet’s activity? In particular, given its glorious history associated with the covenant God made with David, the destruction of Jerusalem was inconceivable to the Israelite mind. They looked to the past, while God was concerned with judging the present.

### **Ezekiel 7:8:9**

**I am about to pour out my wrath on you and spend my anger against you; I will judge you according to your conduct and repay you for all your detestable practices. I will not look on you with pity or spare you; I will repay you in accordance with your conduct and detestable practices among you. Then you will know that it is I the Lord who strikes the blow.**

But tragic as the captivities and exile were, they were only the tangible manifestations of what lay behind them. In the 170 years between 586BC when Jerusalem fell and the end of Malachi’s prophetic ministry around 415BC God had purged His people of the foundations of

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His interaction with them. Both Israel and Judah ceased to be kingdoms. To this day their descendants have never had an earthly ethnic Israelite as king. In addition, the people of both territories lost their tribal rights to the land and the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom were scattered throughout the Assyrian empire. Samaria did become a major city again, but the destruction of the northern shrines ended the historical connections with the Patriarchs. Many of the descendants of the Judean exiles in Babylon chose to remain there even after they were allowed to return and rebuild Jerusalem. Even when Jerusalem was rebuilt, it came under the jurisdiction of the rulers of the great empires that arose in the following centuries. The reluctance to complete the rebuilding of the Temple mentioned by Haggai and the subsequent regression to the ways of life that brought about God's retribution mentioned in Malachi, also removed from national life priests and prophets appointed by God. From the coming of the Greeks and then the Romans, the High Priests were political rather than divinely called appointees and prophecy itself ceased for 400 years.

However, even in retribution, the purity of God's ultimate intentions towards His people comes through, for unlike what we do with permanently stained garments, He did not discard forever His irreversibly stained people. In this period, the overall result of God's retribution on His people enabled the foundation of a new era to be laid. Interspersed with the themes of repentance and retribution were messages of hope and encouragement to a people who had either come through, or had heard, a record of the greatest national catastrophes that could have befallen them. Those prophetic messages pointed to a third Day of the Lord – a day of restoration, when a remnant would return.

You may think that all of this is just ancient history, because these events will never again be repeated. But the prophetic messages of repentance and retribution are still key elements of salvation history and will remain so until the end of time.

God is still saying to the world today.

**Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be as wool.**

and

Ezekiel 18:23

**“Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked,” declares the Sovereign Lord. “Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?”**

We all still bear the stain of sin, but we live in the days of grace in which there is a guaranteed way to avoid the eschatological retribution of the fifth Day of the Lord.

**There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Immanuel's veins  
And sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains.**

### WEEK 4: GOD'S PURPOSE – RESTORATION

The word 'restoration' can mean different things to different people depending what an individual's interests are. But generally speaking, when we talk of restoring something, it usually comes over in a positive sense. During the summer these two examples showed just how different restoration projects can be. Both, in their own ways, have the purpose of making our environment a better place and giving pleasure at the same time.

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But what about restoring something that played a negative role in people's lives? Why restore the Dornier, a German warplane that is only in British waters because it was on a mission to leave death and destruction in its wake? Now I know the purpose of the people who started this project are perfectly reasonable in their views. But I couldn't help but think that if they can make replicas of dinosaurs, why could they not just make a replica of the Dornier and put that on display? Why not leave the original, with all its associations with aggression, where it was brought down? Whatever the ultimate purpose for raising that plane, we have to accept that some people do have valid reasons to restore some things from the past that do bring back negative and painful thoughts and feelings. And, potentially, with the added risk that their successors may do something similar in the future.

With the benefit of hindsight we can see that this is the situation God was in when He had inflicted the retribution of captivity and exile on His people. He also knew that should restoration take place, they would eventually repeat all the failings of their predecessors. The pagan worship and apostasy together with inflicting untold misery to a countless number of people over centuries would reappear in national life. In spite of that negative aspect of restoration, we are privileged in having the knowledge that God's reason for the restoration of a people that had failed Him so badly was vastly superior to any human reason for restoration projects. God's purpose in restoring His people is nothing less than the salvation of the world and the complete restoration of His original perfect creation. God was about to embark on the greatest restoration project in the history not just of the world but of the whole of eternity. Paradoxically, the retribution was itself part of the restoration plan.

We know that restoration projects go through phases of development. God's is no exception. Just as architects and engineers will make a model of what the final project will look like and will do, so God revealed to these 16 prophets both the stages of development and what the final process would achieve. Amos was perfectly right when he said that God did nothing without revealing it to His prophets. An overview of these 16 books shows us that from Amos at the beginning of the period to Malachi at the end of it, God was progressively revealing every stage of the restoration process.

The simplest way to identify those stages seemed to be to use the very frequently used prophetic terms the "Day of the Lord" or "In that day" as marking each stage. Sometimes, because the books don't come in chronological order, it is difficult to figure out what the prophets were referring to when they used these terms. We have already mentioned the first two 'Days of the Lord' and it is these Days that start the process of restoration.

Day 1	Assyrian captivity – fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel
Day 2	Babylonian captivity – fall of the Southern Kingdom of Judah
Day 3	Return of the remnant
Day 4	Arrival of a Davidic leader
Day 5	The final restoration of God's original perfect creation

All 5 days are referred to in the prophecies, and sometimes the references can point to one or more of these occasions. Whatever way they are interpreted however, one thing is clear. Each of these stages builds upon its predecessor. If we use the analogy of a building, we could regard days 1 and 2 as clearing the ground in order to lay the foundation. Day three is the foundation upon which the building will rest. Day 4 is the actual building and Day 5 is the moment when the building is finally complete in every detail.

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The question that crossed my mind was why did God have to clear the ground by putting the Israelites of the Northern and Southern kingdoms through these traumatic experiences, if He was going to embark on a restoration project anyway? Why was God prepared to risk laying a foundation on something that had already led to the disastrous collapse of the Northern and Southern kingdoms?

It seems the answer to these questions lie in the fact that it was only by inflicting a national catastrophe on both kingdoms that the people could be shaken out of their complacency and disregard of their duty and obligations to Yahweh which had resulted in them having a false sense of security. This was bolstered by false prophets who had been saying, **“Peace, peace,” when there is no peace.**” (Jeremiah 8:11) God’s judgement came as a reality check. We saw last week that retribution had stripped the people of both kingdoms of their territory, ethnic rulers and their covenantal worship rituals and practice. It had also exposed the false prophets and the degenerate priesthood. God’s people were faced with the undeniable fact that retribution was His judgement on their whole way of life. The future would have to be different for, in effect, God had cleared the ground to make a fresh start. The third Day of the Lord, which was to mark this new beginning, according to the prophets, was the time when a remnant would return from captivity. Regardless of past failure, God’s faithfulness to His covenant relationship with the Israelites meant that He would not break covenant, hence His promises which must have given hope and encouragement to a people whose circumstances would have led them to believe God had permanently forsaken and rejected them.

Listen to Jeremiah 24:4-6 when God showed him a basket of figs.

**Then the word of the LORD came to me: Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans. I will set my eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not pluck them up.**

As Jeremiah 33:7-8 shows, even as the Assyrian captivity and diaspora was continuing and the Babylonian exile was just beginning, God’s purpose was to restore His relationship with His people

**I will bring Judah and Israel back from captivity and will rebuild them as they were before. I will cleanse them from all the sin they have committed against me and will forgive all their sins of rebellion against me.**

Zechariah 8:14-15 was later to remind the returnees how God had honoured those promises. **For thus says the LORD of hosts: Just as I purposed to bring disaster upon you, when your ancestors provoked me to wrath, and I did not relent, says the LORD of hosts, so again I have purposed in these days to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah;**

When the ‘Day’ came for the exiles to return, even the Chronicler and Ezra acknowledged the role of prophecy in the event.

Jeremiah had predicted in 25:11-12

**This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years. But when the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish**

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**the king of Babylon and his nation, the land of the Babylonians....and will make it desolate forever.**

2 Chronicles 36:22-23

**In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfil the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing. This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: “The Lord God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed men to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you – may the Lord his God be with him, and let him go up.**

The books of Nehemiah and Ezra give us accounts of the return, but the circumstances of the return to this ancestral territory was now vastly different to the entry into the Promised land. Firstly, only a remnant of the original 12 tribes did return. By the time of the return from Babylon the people of the Northern Kingdom would have been scattered throughout the ancient Near East for over 200 years. The Babylonian captivity would have spanned one or two generations and it had involved only the people of Judah. It would appear that many of the original captives and their descendants remained in Babylon, perhaps, like Daniel, because they were advanced in years, or like the Jews in the book of Esther because they had prospered and had put down roots there.

Additionally, the decree permitted resettlement only in Judah and Jerusalem. That meant that the foundation upon which God’s restoration of His people had a much narrower focus in both territorial and ethnic terms. The nucleus of God’s people would be the people of Judah, and Ezra confirms that at the head of the returning exiles were the family heads of Judah and Benjamin (1:5). In the rest of the list given by Ezra in chapters 1 and 2, there is no mention of any remnant from the 10 northern tribes.

Secondly, the returning exiles did not have possession of the land. Their settlement there was dependent on the goodwill of the rulers of the empires that arose at that time. The return was made possible only because of the defeat of the Babylonians by the Medes and Persians. Jurisdiction over Judea as it became known, subsequently passed to the Greek and then to the Roman empires. It was from this time too that the name Israelite became obsolete and the Judean people became known as Jews.

From this it can be seen that regaining ancestral inheritances would have become impossible, especially for the Northern tribes. The prophets spoke true when they predicted that only a small remnant of the God’s chosen people would remain. As a result of this the nature of prophecy itself changed. After the fall of Jerusalem, Ezekiel’s, Daniel’s and Zechariah’s prophecies become apocalyptic in tone. The greatly reduced state of what had once been a powerful and proud nation led to longings for a day when that golden age would come again. In the post exilic period Zechariah envisaged greatness returning to the city of Jerusalem.

**13:1 On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to cleanse them from sin and impurity.**

This prophecy was in line with how the Jews viewed their post-exilic circumstances and many Jews expected these prophecies to be fulfilled within a few generations. Daniel’s apocalyptic visions, however, pointed more to the political situations that the Jews would find themselves in after the exile under subsequent imperial rulers. Faced with a future of

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subservience to whatever empire came to power, the foretelling of the arrival of a Davidic ruler who would usher in an era of everlasting blessing became the long-term hope and expectation of the Jewish people. That was the substance of the fourth Day of the Lord. But, in order for that to happen according to God's plans, the right people had to be in the right place at that time.

That takes us back to the returning exiles for the foundation for that Day was laid in restoring the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. Some of your minds are probably starting to connect the dots here, but let's just spell it out. The exiles returned to the original territory granted by Joshua to the tribes of Judah and Benjamin Joshua (chapters 15 and 18). Centuries later, when the tribes demanded a king, it was King David who united all the disparate clans of the tribe of Judah and welded them into a single nation. With their support, he eventually united all the tribes under his rule. This was not to last because after the death of Solomon, civil war broke out between his two sons Rehoboam and Jeroboam. Rehoboam was the rightful heir to David, and, according to 1 Kings 12:20 and 21, when civil war broke out "Only the tribe of Judah remained loyal to the house of David" and only the tribe of Benjamin supported Judah against the tribes following Jeroboam. In other words, the returning exiles of Judah and Benjamin were the true descendants of the Davidic kingdom and therefore were the only channel through which God could fulfil the covenant He had made with David.

And that brings us to the third major difference in God's dealings with His people. While the ethical and moral laws and decrees of the Sinai covenant remained in force, Day 4 of God's restoration plan was to rest on the covenant He had made with David, for David had been unconditionally promised eternal house, kingdom and throne.

2 Samuel 7:17

**Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.**

This was the covenant which the prophets predicted would underpin the restoration of the people of Judah to their own land before and during the exile.

**Amos 9:11**

**11 On that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen, and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old;**

**Hosea 3:4-5**

**4For the Israelites shall remain many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or teraphim. 5Afterward the Israelites shall return and seek the LORD their God, and David their king; they shall come in awe to the LORD and to his goodness in the latter days.**

**Isaiah 11:10**

**On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.**

**Isaiah 16:5**

**5The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and**



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**righteousness in the land. 6In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”**

**Jeremiah 23:5**

**5The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. 6In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”**

**Ezekiel 37:24**

**24My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes.**

It was these prophecies that led the returning exiles, and Jews to the present day, to believe in the physical restoration of their independence from foreign rule under a strong military ruler like David. However, in the 120 years or so after the return, this leader failed to materialise, and, according to Haggai and Malachi, the people resumed their pre-exilic way of life. Jerusalem was rebuilt, but Haggai had to castigate the Jews for leaving the temple unfinished for over 16 years. And while they were prepared to believe a Davidic ruler would one day come, what they failed to recognise and believe was a fourth change God had made to the foundation of their relationship with Him.

From the very beginning, God had intended that fulfilling the externals of the Sinai covenant should have stemmed from an internal ethical and moral spring, which was the essence of God’s purity, manifested in justice and righteousness. But from the beginning also, the externals of the covenant in terms of sacrifices and priestly ritual, the establishment of Jerusalem as Zion, the Holy City, and the building of the temple had become more important to the Israelites. From the return however, God laid the foundation of a new covenant, built not on external rituals and tangible symbols of God’s presence but one which required an internal spiritual disposition.

**Jeremiah 31:31-33**

**The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.**

**Ezekiel 36:26-28 promised the exiles**

**A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.**

Additionally, the maintenance of the covenant would not rest with human will but would be galvanised by an outpouring of God’s Spirit as revealed in Joel 2:28-29.

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**28 Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. 29 Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.**

We see that as the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, but up until that time, the outpouring of the Spirit was the spiritual insight and power to come to a deeper knowledge of God which would lead to a richer form of relationship. It was the means by which an even smaller, faithful remnant, having learned the lessons from God's dealings with them through exile, served and worshipped Him as He desired and continued to do so through the succeeding years of apostasy and even through the 400 years of prophetic silence. We meet the descendants of some of them at the beginning of the New Testament – Mary, Joseph, Zachariah, Elizabeth, Simeon, Anna.

### **Malachi 3:16**

**Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honoured his name.**

And, it was that faithful remnant who believed and waited for the fulfilment of Malachi's prophecy of both the coming of a forerunner to the promised Davidic heir.

### **3:1**

**“See I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me...the messenger of the covenant whom you desire will come”, says the Lord Almighty**

Malachi chapter 3 is about the fourth Day of the Lord which would be marked by this coming and would lead to the fifth and final stage of God's restoration purpose and plan at the end of the age.

Regarding the fourth Day of the Lord – that will have to wait until the Advent talks!!