

December 1

Some people seem to have no sense about what is really important in life. For them life is about having pleasure. The passage in Isaiah twenty-two echoed in I Corinthians fifteen, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die," seems to fit Belshazzar's thinking. The Median army was gathered outside the walls of Babylon. Belshazzar, co-regent with his father in his father's absence, called for a drinking party with his wives, concubines, and lords, and to compound the problem, he used the golden vessels taken from God's temple. The party was rudely interrupted by the figure of a hand writing with its fingers on the plaster wall. Belshazzar was so scared that his knees shook. His wise men could not read the writing, and so his mother the queen said he should call for Daniel. Daniel rebuked the young king for ignoring the lesson that his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar had learned, but he said he would read the writing for him. The message "*mene, mene, tekel, upharsin*" meant that his days were numbered, and he had been weighed and found lacking. That night the Medes diverted the river that ran through the city and marched into the city in the riverbed under the city walls. Belshazzar was killed. Are our lives consumed with our pleasure? Do we fail to understand the important things in life? If God weighs our lives, does he find us lacking? Do we realize that our days too are numbered?

When the Median king named Darius (perhaps the same as Cyaxares II) took over, he made Daniel one of three administrators. Daniel was so diligent that no negligence or corruption could be found in his work. Are we diligent in our work? Do we neglect certain tasks that we don't like? Others were jealous of Daniel and plotted to get rid of him. They appealed to the vanity of Darius, asking him to make it illegal to pray to any man or god for the next month under penalty of being thrown into a den of lions. Can we be manipulated by others because of our vanity? Daniel continued to pray to God and was thrown into the lions' den as a result. Do we have the faithfulness to continue to pray even if it is illegal? God protected Daniel from the lions, and Darius was impressed so much that he praised God. Do our lives bring God praise from others?

December 2

During the period when Belshazzar was co-regent with his father, Daniel had two visions. The first vision began with four beasts coming up out of the sea. First came a winged lion, which was a symbol for Babylon. It was followed by a bear with one side higher than the other; this represented Medo-Persia with Persia more important than Media. Next came a four-headed leopard with four wings; the wings represent the speed with which Greece conquered the world, but it was soon broken into four Greek kingdoms, thus the four heads. Finally, the last beast was described as being terrible with ten horns, iron teeth, and bronze claws. This represented the power of Rome with the horns as its kings. Three of the horns were replaced by one with a loud mouth. Then Daniel saw a figure that he called the Ancient of Days; he was clothed in white on a fiery throne. He sat in judgment, and the terrible beast was executed. Then one like a Son of Man came riding on the clouds, and the Ancient of Days gave him dominion, glory, and a kingdom so that all peoples, nations, and languages would serve him. This is the passage that Jesus referred to in his trial. It was considered blasphemy because in the scriptures God is the one who rides on the clouds. Jesus was claiming to be God in the flesh. The Jewish leaders had him killed for this, but he proved the claim by his resurrection from the dead. He ascended to the clouds and will return the same way. Do we honor Jesus as the one who will return to earth riding on the clouds? Do we spread the news of his kingdom to the people of all nations and languages? In his second vision Daniel found himself in the Persian capital of Susa. There he saw a ram with two horns, one larger than the other. It had power that no one could withstand. However, a male goat appeared from the west. It had one great horn between its eyes. It flew across the ground at the ram, knocking it to the ground and breaking its two horns. Then the one great horn of the goat was broken, and it was replaced by four horns. Daniel was told this meant that Medo-Persian would be replaced by Greece as a power, and its first great king would be replaced by four kings. Do we realize that God in these visions shows that he knows and controls the future? Do we trust him to do so?

December 3

When the Median army conquered Babylon, Daniel realized that he had been in Babylon for seventy years. Jeremiah had prophesied that the captivity would last seventy years, so Daniel began to pray about it with fasting and wearing sackcloth and ashes. He made confession of sins, not only his, but his people's. Like a good leader Daniel associated himself with his people even though they had not done right. If God calls us to leadership, do we adopt an "us and them" mentality? Or do we identify with those we lead as our people? Daniel prayed that shame belonged to the Israelites because of their rebellion against God; but he said that mercy and forgiveness belonged to God. Do we see God as forgiving even if we realize the shameful of our own sins? Daniel prayed that they were in captivity because they did not ask for the favor of the Lord, turn from their sins, and reflect on his faithfulness. Do we realize that God is faithful to forgive us if we turn from our sins? While Daniel was praying, the angel Gabriel came to him in the middle of the afternoon. He said that he had been sent as soon as Daniel began to pray. Even if our prayers seem to be delayed, God has heard them and put the answer into motion. Gabriel gave Daniel a prophecy about seventy weeks. Each of the weeks seems to relate to a period of years, although it is not certain that each week relates to the same number of years. The prophecy is primarily about the coming Messiah. He will be the one who will finish transgression, put an end to sin, atone for iniquity, bring in everlasting righteousness, put the seal on the visions of the prophets, and anoint a most holy one (or place). Jesus fulfills these. Events predicted include: the city being rebuilt, an anointed one coming but then being cut off, a strong covenant being made, the city and sanctuary being destroyed by an abomination of desolation, sacrifices and offerings coming to an end, and the desolator coming to an end. All these things have happened. Those who focus on the number of weeks sometimes miss that what God said would happen has come true. Do we realize that Jesus has atoned for our sins and brought in righteousness? Since that has happened, there is no need for that temple sanctuary with its sacrifices and offerings. Disciples of Jesus are the true temple now.

December 4

In the third year after the Medes and Persians captured Babylon, Daniel was fasting and praying for three weeks. Then he had a vision of what looked like a shining man. The angelic messenger told him that from the first day that Daniel humbled himself before God, he was sent with a prophecy but was hindered for twenty-one days. The spiritual prince of Persia had tried to stop his message from being delivered; it contained news of the downfall of Persia before Greece. The archangel Michael had come to help the messenger so that he could deliver this word from God. He said that after delivering his message he would have to return to fight the prince of Persia and after him the prince of Greece. Do we realize that there are spiritual forces at work in opposition to God's will? This shows the importance of prayer. Sometimes the answer to our prayers may be delayed because of these spiritual forces, but they will not overcome in the end. The apostle Paul told the Ephesians that our battle is not against people of flesh and blood, but against spiritual rulers and authorities, against cosmic powers of this present darkness, and against spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places. That is why we need to put on the full armor of God. Are we wearing that full armor?

The prophecy of the angelic messenger was about the future of the land of Israel. Several Persian kings would come, but then a great Greek king would follow. Upon his death, his kingdom would be split four ways. Most of the prophecy deals with the tug of war over the land of Israel between the various kings of the north in Syria (the Seleucid empire) and the various kings of the south in Egypt (the Ptolemaic empire). The scripture says that the kings of the north and south would sit at one table telling lies to one another. Do we depend on diplomacy of lies to have peace in the world? Special emphasis is given to the king of the north (Antiochus Epiphanes) who, in reaction to being stopped by the ships of Kittim (that is, ships of the Roman army) from invading Egypt, turned against Israel and profaned the rebuilt temple, putting an end to the sacrifices for three years. He would ultimately be destroyed. Do we unwisely take rejection by one person out on our friends in our anger?

December 5

In the last chapter of the book of Daniel, the angelic messenger told Daniel that those who sleep in the dust of the earth would awake; some would rise to everlasting life, and others would rise to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise would shine like a bright sky, and those who lead others to righteousness would shine like the stars. Jesus said that the day is coming when there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. How we live our lives now determines what we will rise to. Are we wise and lead others to righteousness? Are we looking forward to rising from death to everlasting life? It doesn't take much effort on our part to rise to shame and everlasting contempt. The messenger said that evil will increase. Are we surprised when it seems that people's values are getting worse and worse? Daniel asked the messenger about things that he had seen in the vision. He was given an answer, but he says that he heard but did not understand. Sometimes we just don't have enough background information to understand. But the angel also said that none of the wicked people would understand. Wickedness takes away understanding about the things of God. Do we strive to keep our lives righteous so that our understanding is not taken away by wickedness? That is the wise thing to do.

Hosea prophesied during the time that Assyria was threatening to destroy the northern kingdom of Israel. God told him to act out his prophecy by marrying a prostitute. Israel was to be God's bride, but the people had prostituted themselves with idols. The children born to Hosea were named Jezreel (after the city by that name), Not-pitied, and Not-my-people because they were of questionable parentage. But God said that the day would come when their names would be changed to Pitied and My-people. Do we realize that God takes us back if we turn to him? We can become pitied and his people even if our past is bad.

When Jesus walked and talked with two people on the road to Emmaus, he seemed to be traveling on further. They had to ask him to stop and stay with them. Do we ask Jesus to stay with us? Or does he travel on?

December 6

God told Hosea to take back his wife who had left him for a new lover. She had fallen on hard times, and he had to buy her freedom from slavery. He told her she was no longer to act as a prostitute. Do we realize that when we turn from God as our first love to the things of this world, we become enslaved to sin? But Jesus can rescue us from that kind of slavery. When that happens, we are to be faithful to him. Israel thought that when they worshiped the Ba'als, they were blessed with good crops and flocks. God said that he was the one who actually provided them with the crops and flocks. James writes that every good and perfect gift comes from the Father. Do we thank God for the blessings that we receive? Or do we suppose that they come from our own hard work? God told Hosea that Israel as his bride should no longer call him "My Ba'al" (that is, my master) but "My husband" (more exactly, my man). This suggests a closeness with God. Do we experience this closeness with God?

God told the prophet Hosea that there was no faithfulness, loyalty, or knowledge of God in the land. Because of this, the land was full of swearing, lying, murder, stealing, adultery, and more and more bloodshed. The land was suffering because of these things. God blamed the priests as the problem. They were supposed to be teaching the people what was wrong. Instead, they were following the example of the people around them. God said that his people were being destroyed because of the lack of knowledge. Further, he said that wine takes away understanding. He also said that there was a spirit of prostitution in the land because people did not know the Lord. Do we strive to know the Lord, to learn all we can about him and his will and then do it? Do we teach others about God so that our land will be healed?

The Great Commission in Luke is often overlooked. There Jesus told his disciples that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, and they were to be his witnesses. Do we preach repentance and forgiveness of sins to people of all nations?

December 7

God told Hosea that the pride of the Israelite people testified against them as being guilty. They brought their animals to sacrifice to the Lord and seek him, but they could not find him. He had withdrawn from them because they had been faithless in their actions. The prophet Isaiah said to seek the Lord while he may be found. Do we realize that our actions may drive God away from us so that we cannot find him? The time may come if we continue in sin that he cannot be found.

Hosea encouraged his listeners to return to the Lord. God may have struck them down, but he will also bind them up. He said that on the third day God would raise them up. This passage is applied to Jesus in the New Testament. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that the scriptures said that Jesus would be raised from the dead on the third day. Do we believe that Jesus fulfilled this scripture? He died a cruel death on the cross, but came back to life on the third day (counting inclusively like the Jews did, that is, starting with the Friday when he died as day one).

God told Hosea that he desires steadfast love rather than sacrifice and the knowledge of God instead of burnt offerings. The Hebrew word translated as steadfast love can also mean loyal mercy. It is a merciful love that is marked by loyalty. God has that kind of love for us. Do we have that kind of love for him? Are we loyal to him in our love, or do we forget about him sometimes? The things that God values in our relationship to him are internal things, not external. One can offer sacrifices without the heart being in it. But also one may sacrifice because of steadfast love for God. What motivates our offerings to God? Is it steadfast love and our knowledge of God?

God told Hosea that the people had sown to the wind, and therefore they would reap the whirlwind. Paul told the Galatians that a person reaps what he or she sows. If we sow wildly as to the wind, our sins will come back to haunt us, often with the destruction of a whirlwind. Do we think that God will overlook our wild sins and protect us from them?

December 8

God told Hosea that the people of Israel had forgotten their Maker and built palaces. He also said that the people of Judah had multiplied fortified cities that he was going to destroy with fire. Are we so caught up with our buildings and cities which we have made that we forget about God who made us? He will not be happy about that.

God told Hosea that because of the people's idolatry, he was going to bring a famine on the land. It would be so severe that people would eat all of the produce of the land, and there would be none left to offer to God. Then God was going to remove the people from the land, and nettles and thorns would grow up there. The people's response to this message was not repentance but to call the prophet a fool and crazy. How do we react when someone points out what we are doing wrong? Do we call the messenger names? Or do we repent?

God told Hosea that the people uttered mere words. They made covenants with one another, but the oaths they took to ratify them were empty. They didn't really mean them. The result was that litigation had sprung up in the country like weeds sprouting. They were suing one another over the broken covenants. Jesus said that we should be so honest that there would be no need for an oath. Our yes should mean yes, and our no should mean no. Do we break our oaths, vows, and promises? Are we careful to say what we mean and stick to it?

God told Hosea that the people had plowed wickedness and reaped injustice as a result. They had eaten the fruit of the lies they told. They had put their trust in their war chariots and how many warriors they had in their army. The result would be that they would see war, and their fortresses would be destroyed. Are we surprised when wickedness in our land results in injustice? Do we put our trust in our military strength and how many war machines that we have? Or do we put our trust in God and in living righteously as he commands us to live? Do we work to eliminate injustice from our society? Do we tell lies or truth?



December 9

God told Hosea that he loved Israel when it was just a child. He said he called his son out of Egypt. Matthew quotes this statement to refer to Jesus being taken to Egypt by Joseph and Mary and then returning to Nazareth. Although in the context of the book of Hosea that statement seems to be referring to the people of Israel in the exodus from Egypt, there are indications that it was worded in its quoted form to refer also to Jesus. Earlier in Hosea, Israel was referred to as an unfaithful wife. Here the shift is from an adult female to a young male, a shift which allows the statement to be used by Matthew in reference to Jesus. Do we realize that God was planning the life of Jesus from earliest days and giving clues hidden in the Old Testament as to who the Messiah would be? God knows and reveals the future before it happens, but he did not make it so clear that the devil would understand what the plan was.

In the book of Hosea, God called on the northern kingdom of Israel to return to him. He wanted them to hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for their God to act. However, in their trading they used false balances and loved to oppress other people. The people's idea was that they were rich, and this gaining of wealth had been accomplished entirely by themselves. They thought that they had done no wrong. God was going to take away their ill-gotten wealth, and they would be reduced to living in tents once again. Do we make excuses for ourselves if we cheat others in order to gain wealth? Do we think that God doesn't see this happening? Will this kind of wealth last?

Because the people continued to sin, God asked Hosea if he should ransom them from the power of Sheol, that is, the underworld where spirits are kept after death. He wanted to know if he should redeem them from death. He asked death where its plagues were and Sheol where its destruction was. Those questions are picked up by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Corinthians as he discussed the resurrection from the dead. He said the victory over death comes because of Jesus' promise to raise us as he was raised. Do we believe that promise?

December 10

Hosea told people to return to the Lord and ask him to take away their guilt. They should offer "the fruit of lips" to him. This phrase is found in the last chapter of the book of Hebrews as an explanation of a sacrifice of praise offered to God. Hosea said that Assyria would not save the people nor would their horses in their cavalry. Neither should they call the work of their hands their god. Do we ask God to take away the guilt of our sins? Jesus has paid the price on the cross if we will put our trust in him. But John writes in his first letter that we need to confess our sins to God. If we do so, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins. Do we also offer God a sacrifice of praise with our lips? He is the one who saves. The answer to peace is not found in diplomacy with powerful countries or in military might. True peace comes from God. Do the things that we make become our idols? We should worship God alone. He is the one who made us.

The prophet Joel warned the people that disaster was coming on the land. God was going to send an invasion of locusts on the land, and all of the green vegetation would be eaten up. There would be no grapes for the wine, and thus there would be a forced sobriety. There would be no grain or drink offerings for the Lord's temple. The crops would be ruined and the fruit trees withered. All this would be compounded by drought and wildfires. Joel recommended that people should fast and assemble and cry out to God for help. He said the day of the Lord is coming and it is a day of destruction. The word of God contains many warnings, but often people ignore them. Many people don't even think that God has anything to do with destructive events, and they don't see them as warnings at all. Do we see the events of this world as warnings from God? If we do, do we turn to him in prayer and repentance?

Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well that God is a spirit, and thus he must be worshiped in Spirit and in truth. She had asked where to worship, but Jesus answered her with how to worship. Do we offer God true spiritual worship? Or do we make up our own ideas of worship?

December 11

The prophet Joel told the people about how devastating the invasion of locusts that he called God's army was going to be. God's message to the people was that they should return to him with all their heart. They should show their repentance with fasting, weeping, and mourning. Instead of tearing their clothes in sorrow, they should tear their hearts. He said that God would accept them for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment. So Joel called on the people to gather in assembly and fast. The assembly was not just for the priests, but for everyone, even aged people and children, including infants that had not been weaned. Brides and bridegrooms should leave their bridal chamber to join the assembly. The people turned to God, and he had pity on them and destroyed the locust army. Do we realize that God wants people to turn to him rather than suffer punishment? Do we see him as gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love? Do we know the power of repentance in assembly to influence God? Or do we think that we don't really need to assemble to worship God?

God said through Joel that in the future he would pour out his Spirit on all people of flesh. He said that their sons and daughters would prophesy, their old men would dream dreams, and their young men would see visions. He was going to pour out his Spirit even on the male and female slaves. But there would also be a terrible day of the Lord accompanied by signs in the heavens and on the earth. Before that day comes, the sun would become dark and the moon turned to blood red, language that is used in the Old Testament when there is a violent overthrow of a nation. Those who call on the name of the Lord would be saved. Peter quoted this passage in Joel on the day of Pentecost. He said that the outpouring of the Spirit on that day was the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. He called on people to repent and be baptized, placing their faith on the name of Jesus. Three thousand responded to that call on that day. Have we heeded the call to repent and be baptized? Have we decided to live our lives calling on God as our Savior?

December 12

God gave Joel a prophecy about the nations that wanted to attack Judah. He said the nations would beat their plowshares into swords and their pruning hooks into spears. This is the opposite of the call to peace in the second chapter of Isaiah. They would gather their armies in the valley of Jehoshaphat, but God would judge them there. God gives the command to put in the sickle because the harvest is ripe. He says to tread the winepress until the vats overflow because of their wickedness. This judgment language is also found in Revelation chapter fourteen. Many people will be in the valley of decision when the day of the Lord comes. It will be a day when sun, moon, and stars are darkened, language that is used in the Old Testament for the overthrow of nations. There are many days of the Lord in the Old Testament when God brings judgment on nations. But in the New Testament the phrase "day of the Lord" is used for the time when Jesus will come again and all the world will be brought into judgment. That will be a day of decision when our fate is decided. But that fate will be based on whether we have decided to trust Jesus and follow his example. What kind of decision will we make? Will it be to do our own will or God's will?

God called Amos, a shepherd from Tekoa south of Jerusalem, to go to the northern kingdom of Israel and prophesy. His first message was about the sins of the surrounding nations. Damascus had attacked Gilead with the violence like an iron threshing sledge would make. The Philistines had made slaves of entire communities and sold them to Edom. The city of Tyre had done the same thing. Edom had attacked Israelites with the sword without pity, even though they were distantly related. The Ammonites had attacked Gilead to enlarge their territory with such a ruthlessness that they even ripped open the wombs of pregnant women. God considered all this violence to be sin, and he was going to bring judgment on the people of those nations. We too live in a violent world. Our weapons are even more powerful. Are we caught up in the violence of our world? Or do we follow the prince of peace who endured violence against himself? Are we peacemakers as sons of God?

December 13

The prophet Amos preached against the nations surrounding the northern kingdom of Israel. He listed the sins of Damascus, the Philistine cities, Tyre, the Ammonites, the Moabites, and also the sins of the Israelites who lived in Judah. These last people had rejected the instructions of the Lord, having been led astray by the lies told to them by their ancestors. Finally, he listed the sins of the people in Israel. They were abusing the righteous and the needy, trampling on the rights of the poor, committing sexual sins, keeping items that secured pledges, and laying fines on people to extort money from them. It is easy to look at the sins of others and list them. It is much harder to look at our own sins. Do we excuse our own sins by pointing out the sins of others? Do we compare ourselves with other people so that we look good in comparison? Paul wrote to the Corinthians that people who do this are not wise. Jesus said that we will be judged by the same standard we use to judge others. Do we think that God will overlook our sins if we don't recognize them? Self-examination is hard.

God told Amos that he had brought the people of Israel out of the slavery in Egypt. He had chosen them to be his out of all the peoples of the earth. Therefore, when they turned against him, he had to punish them for their sins. If we consider ourselves God's chosen people, do we also think that he will not punish us for our sins? God had warned the people through his servants the prophets, but when he looked at them, he saw oppression, violence, and robbery. They built idols in Bethel and Gilgal and houses filled with ivory for themselves. Their women oppressed the poor, crushed the needy, and called on their husbands to provide them with more wine. So to warn them to repent, God had sent famine among them, a drought of rain, blight and mildew on their gardens and vineyards, locust plagues, disease and warfare, and still they refused to repent. Do we see the hand of God in the things that go wrong around us? Or do we think that problems we face are just natural occurrences? Do we have hearts that are open to repentance? Or are our hearts hardened by the way we treat other people?

December 14

God told Amos that he was displeased with Israel's failure to repent. The message that Amos was to give them was "Prepare to meet your God!" He told Amos that the Israelites should seek him and live; otherwise, destruction would come on them because of their sins. He said that they hate the one who reproves them at the city gate; they abhor the one who speaks the truth to them. They trample on the rights of the poor and levy taxes on the grain they grow for food. They afflict those who are righteous, take bribes, and push aside the needy at the city gates. He said the times were evil, and those who were prudent knew to keep silent. So Amos called on the people to seek good rather than evil; he said to hate evil, love good, and establish justice at the city gates. He said that God is gracious and he may relent of the coming punishment. Do we seek the Lord? Do we want to hear the truth? Or do we close our ears to it and turn away from those who speak it? Do we hate evil, love good, and work to establish justice in our society? Or are times so evil now that it is prudent to keep silent?

The people were looking forward to the day of the Lord which they thought would be a day of deliverance. Amos said that it would be a day of darkness, not of light. It would be like someone running from a lion only to meet up with a bear. Because the people were unjust in their dealings, God was not pleased with their worship of him. He said that he hated their feast days and was not pleased with their assemblies. He would not accept their burnt offerings and grain offerings. Their songs were just noise to him that he wanted them to take away. He wouldn't listen to their music on their harps. What he wanted was to let "justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Do we suppose that God is pleased with our assemblies at church when our lives do not say to others that we believe in God? Do we think that our offerings can take the place of promoting justice and practicing righteous living? Do we sing songs of praise to worship God or to please ourselves with their beauty? Do we offer justice and righteousness in our society to God as acts of true worship?

December 15

God gave Amos three visions in a row. In the first, Amos saw God preparing locusts to send on the land of Israel. He pleaded with God not to send the locusts and God relented and said he would not send them. In the second, Amos saw fire ravaging the land, and he again pleaded with God not to destroy the land with fire. God again relented and said he would not send the fire. In the third vision, God showed Amos a plumb line and asked what Amos saw. When Amos answered correctly, God said that he was going to measure Israel to see if the people were living straight. He would not spare those who failed the test. Do we realize that our prayers can change God's mind about coming destruction? Do we also realize that God measures us by a straight standard like a plumb line to find out if we are obeying him?

Amos was confronted by Amaziah, the priest of the calf worship at Bethel, because of the prophecies that he was giving about Israel and its king. He sent word to the king telling him about the prophecies. Then he told Amos to go back to Judah and prophesy there. Amos replied that he was not a prophet but a shepherd whom God had told to go to Israel and warn them about the exile that was coming. He said that because Amaziah had tried to get him to stop, he would go into exile and die there. Are there people who try to get us to stop sharing God's word with others? What kind of answer do we give them?

The people of Israel were more interested in making money than in serving God. They wanted the days of the new moon and the Sabbath days to quickly be over so they could sell their goods. They used false weights and false balances and mixed the sweepings in with the grain to cheat the people who bought. When the poor couldn't pay their debts, they enslaved them to cover the debts. God said he was going to turn their feasts into mourning and their songs into lamentations. He was going to bring a famine of God's word on the land. Are we honest in our dealings with money? Do we put earning money above obeying God? Do we ignore God's word so that there is a famine of it in our lives?

December 16

Hosea wrote that the eyes of the Lord were on the sinful kingdom of Israel. Because they had rejected him, he was going to destroy it. However, he would not completely destroy it but would leave the few who did not reject him. God watches over the nations of the earth to see which of them are doing his will. This includes those that he had previously blessed. He had rescued the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, but now they had turned their back on him. Do we suppose that just because God has blessed us in the past, he will always bless us in the future? His eyes are on us to see if we still trust in him. Do we?

Hosea prophesied about the future day when God would again raise up the fallen booth (that is, shelter) of David and rebuild it as in days of old. It would be for the nations who are called by God's name. The word for nations is also the word for Gentiles. This is a prophecy about a descendant of David becoming king not only of Israel but also of Gentiles. Jesus is that king. In the fifteenth chapter of Acts, James, the brother of Jesus, quotes this verse as referring to the Gentiles who believe in Jesus. The people of Israel were chosen by God to be a nation that believed in him into which his Son could be born. However, he created all the people on earth and is concerned about all of his creation. That Jesus would be king of all people who are the called of God was God's plan from the beginning. Have we heard the call of God? Do we consider Jesus to be our king? Do we obey the king's commands?

Obadiah had a prophecy against the people of Edom. They were the descendants of Esau, the brother of Jacob, whose name was changed by God to Israel. Although they were related, they treated the Israelites as enemies. When the city of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians, the Edomites joined in ransacking the city for what possessions they could carry away. Job had said that he was not guilty of rejoicing over the ruin of those who hated him. But the Edomites did rejoice at the fall of Jerusalem. How do we treat our enemies who hate us when something bad happens to them? Do we rejoice about it?



December 17

God told the prophet Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh and cry out against it because of its wickedness. Jonah did not like this assignment and decided to flee to the distant city of Tarshish in the other direction to get away from God. He paid the fare for a ship sailing to Tarshish and went aboard. But on the journey God sent a great storm causing the ship to almost sink. Jonah discovered that a person can't run away from God. God who made the sea and the land is present in all these places. For some people that is an amazing discovery. When Jacob left home to go to his uncle Laban, he stopped at Luz (Jacob named it Bethel) and had a vision of God there. He said that God was in that place and he didn't know it. Many young people leave home and think that they have left God behind at home. At least that is the way they act. Do we think that God is only in one place? Do we think that the one place is the church building? Do we act like we have left God behind when church is over?

When Jonah fled from God on that ship, he endangered the lives of all the people on the ship. To try to save their lives, they threw all the cargo overboard. Do our sins bring harm to others? When Jonah was thrown overboard, he was swallowed by a great sea creature that God had prepared to save him. Inside the creature he prayed to God. Do we have to be in trouble before we pray to God?

God caused the creature to spit up Jonah, and this time Jonah obeyed God and went to Nineveh. He preached there and people repented with fasting and sackcloth. Jonah was not happy with the response. It seems that he wanted Nineveh to be destroyed. Do we call on wicked people to repent but secretly hope that they will be destroyed instead? Jonah became angry with God for not destroying the people of that great city. If God doesn't do what we want, do we become angry with him? We are supposed to do his will rather than him doing what our will is. Jonah waited around perhaps to see if God would change his mind. He became even more angry. Do we let our anger grow rather than getting over it? The Bible says we should get over our anger before the sun goes down.

December 18

In the time of the Judean kings Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, God gave the prophet Micah a message about the sins of Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel. God was going to destroy the city and nation because of its wickedness. He said that the wound of the city was incurable and had spread even to the gate of Jerusalem. Do we realize that people can get so deep in sins that the problems can't be fixed? Not only that, but our sins can lead other people into sins. Are we influenced by the sins of others to do the same things? He said not to tell about the problem in Gath, a city of the Philistines. When we are supposed to be God's people, but we live for the devil instead, it gives unbelievers an excuse not to turn to God. Do we bring shame on God by the way we live? That would not turn out well for us.

God told Micah that there are people who lie in their beds at night thinking about some evil they can do in the morning. If it is within their ability, they do it when they arise. They desire people's fields and houses and take them from their owners if they can. They end up oppressing people. God says he is devising an evil against such evil people. What do we think about on our beds at night? Do we think about how we can serve God the next day and thus glorify his name? Or do evil thoughts slip into our minds? How can we hope to escape from God if we should act on such thoughts?

When Micah tried to preach to the people about the danger they were in by continuing to disobey God, they told him not to preach like this. Micah said that his words were doing good to those who lived uprightly. He said that the sinners would like a preacher who would speak empty falsehoods to them; they would love one who would advocate wine and strong drink. God told Micah that he was against the false prophets who told the sinful people that they were going to have peace. Those same prophets would declare war on those who did not give them something. Are we upset when the preacher says something that we do not like? Do we only want to hear positive sermons and not hear of negative things?

December 19

God gave Micah a prophecy against the chief men of Israel. He said that they abhorred justice and perverted equity. They built up Jerusalem by doing wrong and shedding blood. They took bribes, and even the prophets would give a desired oracle if they were paid to do so. As a result the city would be plowed as if it were a field; it would become a heap of ruins. The mountain on which the temple was located would become a wooded height. This prophecy about the destruction of Jerusalem was referred to when Jeremiah was put on trial for saying the city would be destroyed. The argument was made that since the king did not kill Micah for making this prophecy, Jeremiah should not be killed either for saying the same thing. The words of the prophet were relevant over a hundred years later, and they are still relevant to us today if we will listen to them. Do we read those Old Testament prophets? Or do we say they are not relevant to us today and ignore them?

The first three verses of chapter four of Micah are also found in the second chapter of Isaiah. This prophecy about the mountain of the house of the Lord must be important because God gave the same prophecy to two of his prophets. For us today an important part of the passage is the statement that instruction and the word of the Lord would go out from Jerusalem. This was fulfilled when Peter and the other apostles began to preach on the day of Pentecost. Jesus had told them to wait in Jerusalem until they received the Spirit. God's new covenant was preached beginning at Jerusalem. Do we listen to that message and believe it? It was prophesied as being doubly important.

Micah also prophesied that One whose origin was of old would be born in Bethlehem. He would be great and known to the ends of the earth as a man of peace. He would be a shepherd of his flock and feed them in the strength of the Lord. When King Herod asked where the Christ would be born, the scribes quoted this passage from Micah. Jesus the Messiah was born in Bethlehem as prophesied. Do we believe in him? Do we spread the greatness of his name to the ends of the earth?

December 20

Micah wonders what he needs to offer God to please him. He thinks about burnt offerings of year old calves. He wonders if God wants what the pagans offer, their firstborn child for their sins. But then God reminds him of the good things that God requires of his people. He wants them to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with him. Are we interested in what is just in our society? Do we love being kind to other people? Do we live our lives in a humble way focused on God?

Micah says that God cries out against the wicked city. People are using wicked ways to accumulate treasure in their houses. In their trading they use false measures and wicked scales with a bag full of dishonest weights. People who are wealthy use violence to gain and protect their wealth. People tell lies to one another to deceive them. Their officials and judges ask for bribes. Powerful people dictate that others should do what they want. So God tells Micah that he is going to affect people's crops so that they will lose rather than gain. The day of their punishment is coming. If our society is doing these things, do we think that we can escape God's punishment? Are we careful to be honest in our dealings to please God? Or do we try to deceive people? Do we want to always get our way and use our power to get it?

Micah says that the earth will become desolate because of what the people who live in it do? He says this desolation is "the fruit of their doings." God told Adam and Eve to take care of the garden where he had placed them. Do we try to take care of the earth? Or do we do things that end up hurting it and thus hurt ourselves?

Micah says that God is greater than all gods because he pardons iniquity and passes over transgressions. He doesn't retain his anger forever because he delights in showing steadfast love. He has compassion on his people and throws away our sins, as if they were thrown into the depths of the sea. Do we praise God for his forgiving nature? Do we follow his example of forgetting anger, forgiving sin, and showing love?

December 21

God had sent Jonah to the capital city of Assyria, Nineveh, to call the people to repentance. When the people were threatened with destruction by God, they repented. However, it seems that the repentance was short lived. Assyrian soldiers made several trips into the northern kingdom of Israel, capturing land and taking the inhabitants into exile. They even captured most of the cities of the southern kingdom of Judah except for Jerusalem, and they put that city under siege. God gave a prophecy to Nahum that he was going to take revenge on Nineveh for the wicked way they had attacked these kingdoms. He had used them to punish the people, but they had attacked with savage severity. Fear of punishment is a legitimate reason to repent, but if it is not supplemented with greater motives such as the love of God, it can prove to be temporary. Unless there are continual threats of punishment, people tend to forget why they repented. Do we repent of our sinful ways only when we are threatened with punishment? Do we ever grow in greater motives, such as the desire for reward and the supreme motive, the love for God?

Nahum writes that God is jealous for his people and takes revenge and shows his wrath when they are hurt. He is slow to anger, but he does have great power. He will not clear the guilty. When he is angry, Nahum says that no one can endure the heat of his anger. For those who put their trust in him, he is good; he is a stronghold in the day of trouble. When we reflect on Nahum's message, we see that there are two sides to God. Those who trust him see his good side. However, those who disobey and become his enemies experience the power of his anger. Which side of God do we experience? Do we trust him or disobey him?

Jesus said that unless a seed falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it will bear much fruit. He had to die to achieve the benefit. He told God, "Glorify your name." When God replied that he had glorified it, some people only heard thunder. Jesus said that when he was lifted up (that is, on the cross), he would draw all people to himself. Are we drawn to Jesus? Or do we just hear thunder, not God?

December 22

The Assyrians took great pride in their military forces. But God told Nahum that he was against that city of bloodshed known as Nineveh. It would be attacked by soldiers wearing red. We know from Ezekiel twenty-three that the Assyrian soldiers wore blue outfits; it was the Babylonians that wore red. God wondered if those in Nineveh thought they were better than Thebes in Egypt, a powerful city that went into exile. God said their fortresses would prove to be like fig trees with first ripe figs. When the tree is shaken, the figs fall off. Their guards would be like grasshoppers sitting on a fence on a cold day. When the sun rises, they fly away and are not seen again. Do we place our trust in the strength of our military? Or do we place our trust in God? If our trust is in God, we need to be living as he says in his word.

The prophet Habakkuk asked God why he did not answer when he cried out for help. There was violence in the land of Judah. It was accompanied by wrongdoing, trouble, destruction, strife, and contention. There was slack enforcement of the law, justice did not prevail, and judgment was perverted. God replied that he was doing something about it, but people would not believe what he was going to do. He was going to raise up the Babylonians to attack the land. But then Habakkuk wondered how God, who was too pure to look at evil and wrongdoing, could use a country that was so wicked that it made Judah look righteous by comparison. He said he would wait for God's answer like a city watchman at his guard post. God answered and said he should write down the answer in plain letters so it could be easily read. The Babylonians would be destroyed in their turn. Do we cry out to God because of the wickedness in our society? Do we wonder why God does not immediately destroy the wicked, why he takes his time to bring judgment? Do we imagine that God is too pure to see those who are evil? Do we fool ourselves by thinking that God is too pure to see our sins? The only way that God could not see our sins is if they are hidden by the blood of Jesus. Have we put our trust in him? Do we realize that judgment is coming? Many people today seem not to believe that.

December 23

In speaking of the destruction of Babylon, God told Habakkuk that there is a vision about the appointed time that was coming. It may seem to tarry, but he must wait for it. It will surely come and not delay. We may say that the same thing holds truth for God's prediction of the end of this world at Jesus' return. Although it may seem to tarry, we must be expectantly waiting for it. What may seem to us like a delay is not one in fact. God alone knows the time of the end. Are we looking forward to Jesus coming again? Do we get tired of waiting? Do we give up hope and say that it will not happen?

God told Habakkuk that the righteous will live by their faithfulness (or faith). True faith expresses itself in faithfulness. The apostle Paul quoted this passage in the first chapter of the book of Romans. There he took the passage to mean that those who were righteous by their faith would live. In the fourth chapter of Romans he says that God takes our faith and counts it as righteousness. When we don't have righteousness on our own (which we don't have; all have sinned), God by his grace turns our faith into righteousness. That is the only way truly to be righteous in God's sight. We should live in a righteous way, but that does not make us righteous. What kind of righteousness are we trying to have, one we make for ourselves or one that God by grace gives us?

God told Habakkuk that the day would come when the earth would be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord so much that it will be like the waters that cover the sea. When Jesus told his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, he gave a command for this passage to be fulfilled. Are we working to share the knowledge of God's glory?

Habakkuk ends his book by saying that even if there are no crops of figs, grapes, olives, or grain, nor flocks of sheep nor herds of cattle in the pens, still he will rejoice in the Lord and exult in the God of his salvation. Do we depend on the physical blessings that God gives us to rejoice in his salvation? Or can we just rejoice that he is God?

December 24

God told the prophet Zephaniah that the time was coming when he was going to sweep away everything from the face of the earth. He would sweep away humans and animals, including the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. He would cut off humanity from the face of the earth. He said it will be a day of offering his sacrifice. That day is coming near and hastening fast. It will be a bitter day. For those who have sinned, the wealth that they have accumulated in silver and gold will not be able to save them. God will finally be acting on this wrath. The whole earth will be consumed by the fire of his passion. He will make a full terrible end of all the inhabitants of the earth. While this language in context may be using hyperbole to describe the destruction by Babylon of the land of Judah, it has a very literal sense when applied to the end of this world. God once destroyed the wicked world with a flood in the time of Noah. That did not touch the creatures of the sea. But this fire will destroy even the fish in the ocean. The apostle Peter talks of such a coming day in his second letter. He says that not only this earth but the heavens as well will be destroyed by fire. That fire will expose all the things done on this earth. So Peter says when we consider that all these things will be destroyed, we must live our lives with holiness and reverence. Do we have the end of the world in our consciousness? Do we accumulate things without realizing that the time will come when they will all be destroyed? Are we living holy and reverent lives as we wait for God's judgment of the world?

Before he died, Jesus told his disciples that he had loved them just like the Father had loved him. He said that if they loved him, they would keep his commandments just like he kept his Father's commandments. He said his commandment was to keep loving one another just like he loved them. This would give them great joy. He did not call them slaves because they kept his commandments; rather, he called them friends because of that love. Jesus has loved us too and given his life for us. Do we love him? Do we keep his commandments? Do we love one another? Do we have that joy? Are we friends of Jesus?



December 25

It has been said that there are three kinds of people in the world: those who learn from other people's mistakes, those who learn from their own mistakes, and those who never learn. It would seem that God gave the prophet Zephaniah a message about this latter kind of people. He said that the city was full of wickedness. The officials were as ruthless as roaring lions, the judges were like devouring wolves, the prophets were reckless and faithless, and the priests profaned the sacred things. To top it off, these unjust people were not at all ashamed. So God sent punishment on them. Their cities were made desolate. God thought that now the people of the cities would fear him. He thought they would accept correction and realize that he had brought all this trouble on them. But instead they were even more eager to make their deeds corrupt. So he was going to pour out his wrath on them. Are we able to learn from mistakes, either those of others or our own? Can we see the hand of God warning us to change our ways? Can we accept correction?

When the seventy years of Babylonian captivity were over, Cyrus king of the Persians issued a decree that the Jews could return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple there. The people who returned began to rebuild the temple. They laid the foundations, but when the surrounding peoples were upset and discouraged the rebuilding, they stopped work on it. After fifteen years, the temple was still in ruins. So God sent the prophet Haggai to ask the leaders, the governor Zerubbabel and the high priest Joshua, why the temple had not been rebuilt. He said the people were living in paneled houses, but God's house was still in ruins. He had sent them poor crops, but that didn't get them to work. They didn't have enough to wear, and they couldn't keep the money they worked for, but they had not resumed work on the temple. When the people heard the message of Haggai, they began the rebuilding process that very month. Do we sometimes become lax in doing the work of the Lord that we started? Do we spend more time working on our own things rather than God's things? Do we look for God's message to us in the events of everyday life? Do we repent and begin to work for God as at the first?

December 26

God told the prophet Haggai to go to the priests and ask whether something holy that touches food will make that food holy. The answer was that it did not. Then he was to ask whether an unclean person who has touched a corpse makes food unclean if he touches it. The answer was yes, the food becomes unclean. It seems that evil travels more than holiness. People seem to imitate the evil they see more than the good that they see. Thus evil spreads throughout the world. Only Jesus has the power to transmit holiness. He can make a person holy, but only if that person wants to be holy. Do we want to be holy people? Do we look to Jesus and his example for our holiness? Do we avoid the example of the people around us who are evil?

Two months after Haggai's first message, God gave a prophecy to Zechariah calling on the people to repent and not make the mistakes of their ancestors who failed to do so. Then three months later he gave him a vision of a man on a red horse with others on horses behind him. When Zechariah asked who these people were, an angel told him that they were the ones whom God had sent to bring peace to the world. It was a troublesome time and the Jews had just started once again to rebuild the temple. They had been made afraid to continue because of the opposition from the neighboring peoples. The message of the vision was that God was setting the world at peace so they could continue with the rebuilding. When God asks his people to do something, he also provides a way for it to happen. Do we become afraid when people oppose spreading the gospel message? Do we trust God that his message can spread even in the face of opposition?

At the arrest of Jesus, Peter made three mistakes. First, he did not look inward to see his true resolve when he bragged that he was willing to die with Jesus. Then he tried to use physical force to protect Jesus, who told him to put up his sword. Finally, he became a spectator at Jesus' trial and put himself in a position to be tempted. Do we fail to look inward to see our true selves? Do we become mere spectators of Jesus at church?

December 27

God told the prophet Zechariah that the day would come when many nations would join themselves to the Lord and be his people. He said he would live in their midst. This prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus who is God in the flesh, living among the Jewish people. After he rose from the dead, he told his disciples to go and make disciples from all nations. Do we believe that Jesus is God in the flesh who lived here on earth? Do we spread news of him to all the nations and make disciples from them?

Zechariah had a vision of the high priest Joshua standing before God's throne clothed in filthy garments. Satan the accuser was accusing him, but the Lord rebuked Satan. He told the angels to put clean clothes on Joshua. Our sins make us filthy before God and give Satan an opportunity to accuse us. But God is the one who can make us clean in his sight because of what Jesus has done on the cross. Do we accept the cleansing that only God can give through the precious blood of Jesus? Or do we want to stand before God on our own merits?

God had a message for the governor Zerubbabel through Zechariah: "not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts." He also said that Zerubbabel had laid the foundations of the rebuilt temple, and Zerubbabel would finish it. God was the one who was going to empower Zerubbabel to do this. Do we try to serve God by our own strength? Or do we rely on the power that only God can give?

God told Zechariah that he was going to bring the man named Branch to the earth. He had Zechariah make a crown and put it on the high priest Joshua as symbolic of the man named Branch who would rule as king. Now the Greek form of the name Joshua is Jesus. Jesus is the high priest who is also a king. The book of Hebrews explains his high priesthood. It is an eternal priesthood after the order of Melchizedek. He offered himself once of all time on the cross and presented his blood before God's throne in heaven. He is also from the royal Branch of David. Do we treat Jesus as our high priest and king?

December 28

The Babylonians had destroyed the temple in the fifth month of the year. Since Zerubbabel was rebuilding it, people came to Zechariah and wanted him to ask God if they still needed to fast in the fifth month as they had been doing. God's answer was that they were not fasting and lamenting for him in the fifth month. They were doing it for themselves. When they ate and drank and did the fast in the seventh month on the Day of Atonement it was the same. They were doing it for themselves. God had never commanded them to fast in the fifth month. They made up that commandment to fast themselves. He had commanded the Day of Atonement in the seventh month. But they were treating that day in the same way. With the temple destroyed, it could not be purified on that day. Is our worship of God something that he commanded? Or do we make up the way that we would like to worship him? Do we think we please God by worshiping in the way that we make up for ourselves?

God told Zechariah that he had said the people should render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, not oppress widows, orphans, foreigners, and the poor, and not devise evil in their hearts against one another. But people refused to listen and made their hearts hardened. That is why God's wrath came on them, and they were carried off into captivity. So now he told the people who returned from captivity the same things: they were to speak the truth to one another, render true judgments that make for peace, not devise evil in their hearts, and not love false oaths. Do we render true judgments that make for peace? Do we show kindness and mercy to the people around us? Do we treat widows, orphans, foreigners, and the poor fairly? Are our hearts clean of devising evil? The double listing means these values are important to God.

God told Zechariah that the promised king would be humble and come riding on a donkey's colt. This was fulfilled when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a young donkey the Sunday before he was crucified. Do we treat Jesus as our promised king? A king should be obeyed.

December 29

God told Zechariah that he was against the shepherds of the people. They were becoming rich by abusing their position. God had Zechariah to act out a prophecy. He became a shepherd of a flock and had two staffs. He named one Favor and the other Unity, referring to the reuniting of the Israelite tribes that had been divided into two kingdoms. He was opposed by other shepherds and removed three of them. After a while he became impatient with the shepherds and decided to quit. He took his staff Favor and broke it, symbolizing that God would no longer show favor to the shepherds. He asked for his wages, and he was paid thirty pieces of silver. God told him to throw the silver to the potter. So he threw it to the potter in the house of the Lord. Matthew refers to this passage in regards to Judas who betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. When he saw that Jesus was condemned, he regretted what he had done and threw the silver down in the temple and hung himself. The Jewish leaders took the money and bought a potter's field to bury strangers in. After throwing away the money, Zechariah broke his staff Unity, signifying that the union of Israel and Judah was broken. This undid the prophecy of the two sticks joined together in Ezekiel thirty-seven, for the people of the northern kingdom of Israel never repented. The promise of unity in the prophecy was conditioned on people returning to the Lord. Do we realize that God's promises to us are conditioned on our faith in him? If we reject him, he has the right to reject us. Do we merely regret our sins like Judas did instead of actually repenting of them and changing our lives? That will not turn out well.

Zechariah foresaw the death of Jesus when he wrote that people would look on the one that they had pierced and mourn like one mourns for an only child and weep like one weeps at the death of a firstborn. The apostle John says this scripture was fulfilled when a soldier pierced the side of Jesus after he was dead. Zechariah goes on to say that on that day a fountain would be opened to cleanse people of their sin and impurity. When Jesus was pierced, out came the blood that cleanses us from our sins. Do we value that cleansing blood that was prophesied?

December 30

God gave Zechariah another prophecy that Jesus used to refer to himself. It said for the sword to awake against God's shepherd who was also his associate. When it struck the shepherd, the sheep would be scattered. Before he was crucified, Jesus told his disciples that they would run away when he was captured. They said they would not run, but he quoted this prophecy from Zechariah to them. The scripture came true because they fled. They did not know either the scriptures nor themselves. Would we have fled when it became time for Jesus to die? Are we his sheep? Is he our shepherd? Do we look into the mirror of the scriptures to see the truth about ourselves?

Zechariah looks forward to the day when the Lord will come and bring all his holy ones with him. He says that day would always be daytime, even in the evening. There would be no bright light and no cold weather. This imagery is picked up in the last two chapters of the book of Revelation about the new heavens and the new earth. There would be no sun there because God is light. Do we look forward to Jesus coming again and bringing his saints with him? Do we look forward to the new heavens and new earth where God dwells with the resurrected saints? Do we want to see that world where God as light is not just metaphorical? Are we living our lives here and now to prepare for that world? There will come a time when we can no longer prepare.

God told the prophet Malachi that a son honors his father. He said that he was a father, but he wanted to know where his honor was. He said that the priests despised his name and offered polluted food on his altar. They sacrificed animals that were blind and lame and sick. He said that they should offer those animals to the governor and see what kind of response they would get. He wished someone would shut the temple doors because he would not accept such insulting offerings. Do we honor God? Do we consider him our Father? Do we offer the best of what we have to him, or do we give him the leftovers? Do we suppose he will accept just any old offering? Do such offerings dishonor him?

December 31

God told the prophet Malachi there was a reason why he did not regard or accept a man's offerings with favor, even if he approached God's altar with weeping and groaning. That reason was that the man had been faithless to the wife of his youth. His wife was his companion, and he had made a marriage covenant with her. God was looking for godly offspring from the marriage. He said he hates divorce and the violence that is sometimes found in marriage. Do we realize that how we treat our marriages can affect our offerings and our prayers? Are we true to the marriage covenant that we make with our spouse? Are we faithful or faithless to our spouse? Jesus said that marriage is rooted in the creation when God made people male and female. He said that Moses had permitted divorce only because people's hearts were hardened. Are our hearts tender, or have they become hardened? We need tender hearts.

God told Malachi that the people were robbing him by not giving him their tithes and offerings. When they failed in their offerings, they were under a curse. He wanted them to bring in their full tithe to the storehouse so there would be food in his house. They would not lose anything by doing so. He would open the windows of heaven for them and pour down an overflowing blessing. Do we offer a full tithe (ten percent) or more to God from the blessings he gives us? Or do we only give God a leftover portion of what we bring in? Does God see us as robbing him? Are we generous or stingy with what we have? It is striking that the only two people Jesus commended in the gospels for their giving were the tax collector who gave away half of what he had and the poor widow who threw her last two coins into the treasury.

God told Malachi that he was sending his messenger to prepare the way for him. He said he was sending Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord came. Jesus said that John the Baptizer was the Elijah that God had sent before him. John testified that Jesus was the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Do we believe that Jesus is that Lamb of God who was sacrificed on the cross to take away our sins?