

JUSTICE, MERCY AND TRUTH

50 Days of Prayer for the PCA

May 7 – June 25

*“He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?”*

Micah 6:8

Devotional text by Michael F. Ross
Edited by Fred Marsh
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IN DEDICATION

To those men who have been my
close friends, encouragers and colleagues
in ministry for twenty-seven years...

Art Scott, Randy Riddle, Barney Heyward,
Harry Reeder, Ligon Duncan, Carl Kalberkamp,
Earl Adams, Scott Pierce, Rick Stark, Steve Lanier,
Mike Milton, Doug Hudson and Ronnie Crudup...

And

To those men who presently serve with me
on the Pastoral Staff of Christ Covenant Church...

Bernie Lawrence, Kris Decker, Gabe Sylvia, Bruce
Creswell, Steffen Mueller, Joe Naramore, John Haines,
Mike Folk and Sandy Spitz.

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken. Ecc. 4:9-12 (ESV)

CONTRIBUTORS

Allen M. Baker, III: Organizing pastor of Christ Community PCA Church in West Harbor, CT. Al has served as a church planter, assistant pastor, and senior pastor at five different churches, as well as an evangelist for the Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship (PEF). Al's great burden and devoted interest is revival.

J. Ligon Duncan, III: Senior Pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Jackson, MS. Ligon is one of the four founders of *Together For The Gospel* and the founder of the *Twin Lakes Fellowship*. He is the president of both the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals and the Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. He is a theologian, adjunct seminary professor and prolific writer.

George Grant: Organizing pastor of Parish Presbyterian Church in Franklin, TN. George is the leading influence in the Reformed and classical education movement, the founder of the several schools, a well-published author, and the director of the Kings' Meadow Study Center.

Michael A. Milton: President of Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, NC. Dr. Milton has been a church planter, director of Coral Ridge Ministries, a U.S. Army Chaplain, on the faculties of Knox Theological Seminary and Erskine Theological Seminary, the author of several books, and a songwriter.

Randy A. Nabors: Organizing pastor of New City Fellowship Church in Chattanooga, TN, for thirty-three years! He is a leader in mercy ministries in the PCA. Randy also serves as an Army Chaplain. He frequently speaks at mission's conferences and seminars on the subject of racial reconciliation and urban ministry. Randy also planted Community Presbyterian Church in Nairobi, Kenya.

Richard D. Phillips: Senior Pastor of Second Presbyterian Church in Greenville, SC. Rick is the Chairman of the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology, and served as an associate pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, PA. He has written several books and commentaries.

Philip Graham Ryken: Senior Pastor of historic Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, PA, where he succeeded James Montgomery Boice. Dr. Ryken is a well-known author, a respected scholar, and a national radio preacher. He serves on the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals and hosts the annual Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology. He is also, by the way, a "jam-up" basketball player!

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RUM Reformed University Ministries

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INTRODUCTION

JUSTICE, MERCY AND TRUTH

In his book, *Working The Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity*, Pastor, Professor and Author Eugene Peterson addresses the three “angles” of the pastoral ministry: the Word, Prayer and Spiritual Guidance. “Working the Angles” means applying leverage from these three aspects of the ministry in order to maximize spiritual influence. Each angle is, by itself, effective; used together they become quite powerful. Pastors and elders must become specialists in these three angles of ministry in order to fulfill their calling to the Gospel ministry.

What is true for pastors and church officers becomes true as well for the people in the pew—the congregation, God’s Church in the world. The prophet Micah speaks to the Church of these three angles of spiritual living. In what is undoubtedly the signature verse of his prophetic book, Micah says, “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8). Here are presented to us the three angles of living for Christ in a bent and broken world. I would summarize them as justice, mercy and truth.

Another way to understand these angles is to see them as the three offices of Christ delegated to His people as their official duties. The saints of God are called to be God’s worshipers, witnesses and workers in His world. As such, they possess three callings: the prophetic, the priestly and the pastoral. We can easily see these offices of Christ and these callings from God in the offices of church leaders. Teaching elders (i.e., clergymen) major in the prophetic office and calling in their preaching of the Gospel and their teaching of the Word. Deacons possess a priestly office and calling in the mercy and service ministry of the Church. And ruling elders inhabit the kingly office and calling by means of their shepherding and duties; they govern, guard and guide the flock.

But these offices and callings are also shared by the ones we call the laity of the Church. Through the spiritual gifts that Christ gives the Church, the saints are enabled and employed in the many ministries of the Church (Ephesians 4:1-16). In fact, these spiritual gifts are given to the members of the Church for the growing of the Church in three dimensions: numerical growth, spiritual growth and organization growth. Some Bible scholars refer to these as quantitative, qualitative and organic growth.¹

We can easily see this when we look at the seven basic or “motivational” gifts in Romans 12:1-8. These seven motivational gifts are prophecy (preaching), service, teaching, exhortation, giving, leadership and mercy. How these spiritual gifts impact the Church in differing aspects of growth is obvious. Perhaps what is less clear is how they break down to enhance and empower the three angles of ministry: The Prophetic Calling (preaching), the Priestly Calling (service, mercy, giving) and the Pastoral Calling (leadership, teaching, exhortation).

Paul tells us in Ephesians that Christ “gave gifts to men” (4:8). These spiritual gifts are described as “grace...given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (4:7). And these gifts are “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up (i.e., growing) the body of Christ (i.e., the Church)” (4:12). God has a missionary plan for His Church, and Christ, the Head of the Church, has given us the gifts, the callings and the ministries to fulfill this great mission.

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:4-7).

There is in the Church today a great restlessness about the Church’s place in the world. Different groups from different denominations are asking hard questions about the Church: Is the Church really preaching the Gospel? Does the Church possess a coherent and Biblical worldview? Has the Church lost the moorings of its confessional integrity? Can the Church reach lost men in a pluralistic culture and lead them to Christ? What is genuine worship? How is the Church to be the Church in a postmodern society? Where are the Church’s salt and light for the world?

In this set of devotions for the 2009 50 Days of Prayer for the PCA, I would like to focus on the three angles of ministry God has given the Church: the prophetic, the priestly and the kingly. Our theme verse for these 2009 devotions is Micah 6:8, hence, the title of this booklet: “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8).

These devotions are the second installment of a three-year cycle of devotions. Last year, we read and prayed through the Pastoral Epistles with special insights from the first generation of PCA leaders. Some of our Founding Fathers addressed us from the vantage point of their generation’s ministry: Frank Barker, Kennedy Smartt, Terry Gyger, Paul Settle, Charles Dunahoo, John Kyle, Morton Smith and Jim Baird. These men are your fathers and my fathers in the PCA.

This year, we will hear from a second generation of PCA leaders, those men who now lead some of your key churches and institutions. These are my colleagues, friends and contemporaries in ministry. Their task is to speak the great themes and issues found in the prophets and so very relevant to ministry in this 21st century: Justice, Mercy, Truth, Hope, Humility, Holiness, Revival and love for one’s nation. I have asked these men to share their hearts on these subjects: Mike Milton, Al Baker, Randy Nabors, Ligon Duncan, George Grant, Phil Ryken and Rich Phillips. These men are now our mature leaders whose vision and values are steering the course we now share together.

Next year, the 2010 devotions will focus on the three great discourses of Jesus Christ: The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24-25) and the Upper Room Discourse (John 13-17). I will ask the third generation of PCA pastors to address the Church. These young men are now our church planters, younger pastors in ministry and a new wave of missions leaders. Their leadership will pace us and propel us into a new era of Kingdom expansion and growth. We need to hear from them their heartbeat for the PCA, the Church and our beloved nation.

The prophetic books of the Bible—from Isaiah to Malachi—may well be the most

neglected wellspring of spiritual insight and Gospel vision in all of Scripture. Our nation now operates from within the religious orientation that sociologist Christian Smith calls “a therapeutic moralistic deism.”² Most Americans are more concerned about personal peace and affluence than they are justice, mercy and truth. Francis Schaeffer warned us that these days were coming, even in the Church.³ They have arrived. Though they are not able to express it in words, our people are tired of soul, disillusioned in heart and angry in spirit because the American Dream promised by the civil religion of “God Bless America” has not materialized.

Pastor after pastor and church after church have majored on the self. Their message has been all about individual salvation, assurance of God’s love and personal relationships. Our campus ministries have focused almost exclusively on three doctrines: justification, adoption and Scripture. Church growth methodology has turned the congregant into a consumer of religious goods and services. The new Gospel has been abbreviated. No longer does Life with God rest upon justification, adoption and sanctification (as Galatians teaches). That third leg of salvation (sanctification) is now considered “moralism” by some and “legalism” by others. American Christians are now, in large measure, worldly people who have been justified in Christ and adopted by God. And why not? Evangelicalism has shortened the Ten Commandments to seven. Gone, it seems, are the commandments on the Sabbath, honoring your parents and coveting. We are told that 78% of all abortions are by church members. Our moral vision, David F. Wells writes, has been lost.⁴

Ironically, the very issues that trouble our culture and which form the debates in political campaigns are clearly addressed by the Prophets of the Old Testament. Abortion, gender issues, morality, the poor, justice and righteousness, the economy and the environment, war and domestic troubles—all these are front-and-center in the prophetic books. These spokesmen for God have a vision of faith in God that is larger than life, greater than self, and lasting forever. Their voices raised on behalf of the Kingdom of God sound so pertinent to the world of America. It is true of each of them: “though he died, he still speaks” (Hebrews 11:4).

The tension we feel between the generations and the deep divisions within our own culture seem to call out for a clarion voice. We need a voice that creates clarity and not confusion. And that voice is the voice of the prophets: “Thus says the Lord!”

Let us join together prayerfully in these devotions to listen for the voice of God mediated through His prophets. And let us do so with confidence, remembering this remarkable truth: “For the Lord God does nothing without revealing his secrets to His servants, the prophets” (Amos 3:7).

DAY 1

Read Deuteronomy 18:15-22

THURSDAY, MAY 7

THE NATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER

GOD'S COVENANT PROSECUTORS

*The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen.
Deuteronomy 18:15*

God's intended government for His people, the Church, included three officials: the prophet, the priest and the judges. Though Israel rejected this triumvirate in favor of a monarchy (see First Samuel 8), God nevertheless continued to rule His Old Testament Church through three offices: the prophet who spoke for God to the people; the priest who represented the people before God; and the king who ruled through the counsel and guidance of prophets and priests.

These three governmental offices reflect the three-fold office of Jesus Christ: Prophet, Priest and King. They are reflected in the offices of the New Testament Church and in the Presbyterian Church in America, though in modified form. Teaching elders are preachers who are to speak with a prophetic voice. Deacons exercise a priestly function through their ministry of prayer, service and mercy, and financial care of the needy. Ruling elders rule the Church and thus perform the kingly (pastoral) office. As such, the Church lives in the world with three perspectives in mind—the prophetic, the priestly and the pastoral.

In our churches today we experience the pastoral aspects of ministry often, primarily, but not exclusively, from the ones we call “pastors” (clergymen). And we can see a growing interest in the priestly ministry of the Church as congregations become involved in the ministries of justice and mercy. But it appears to me that the prophetic voice of the Church is fading away. Why is this so? Let me venture a guess.

Ours is a culture that values civility. Ironically, it is in short supply, but people long for it, especially the younger folks. This longing for civility makes any confrontation undesirable. The prophets and their books seem controversial, harsh and even too dogmatic. The prophets are simply not civil...not nice. As such, we shy away from them, until we learn why God raised them up to speak to us.

Willem Van Gemeren describes the essence of the prophetic office in his wonderful survey of the Old Testament prophets: *Interpreting the Prophetic Word*. Van Gemeren refers to these prophets as “God's covenant prosecutors.” Here is how he describes their purpose and function:

Elijah is the beginning of a long line of prophets who charged God's people with breaking the covenant and pronounced God's judgment on them. He was God's first covenant prosecutor, for he charged Israel with its failures to conform to the covenantal expectations. This is the essence of the prophetic lawsuit.⁵

These prophets were not censorious old curmudgeons who bludgeoned people into their own way of doing things. They were men who loved God and deeply loved their people...their country. They spanned the course of history from Moses to Jesus—the last being the Great Prophet of God: the Word of God incarnate.

They called out to their fellow countrymen with voices choked by tears, exhorting them to “return to the Lord,” and to the covenant God had made with them. They prosecuted God’s case against His people: They had broken their covenant with God. That covenant was multifaceted: the covenant of marriage, the covenant of church, the covenant of community, the national covenant, and most importantly, the covenant of grace with God (faith).

If we examine the state of divorce and the American marriage, our strife torn communities, our deeply divided churches and the rift revealed in our latest national election, we can only conclude that God’s covenant with the American church and the American people has been violated. On this National Day of Prayer, let us begin a 50-day journey through the Prophets. And let us listen to the voice of the Lord and the case His covenant prosecutors set before us. Then let us “seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near” (Isaiah 55:6).

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

AC: Please pray that the Holy Spirit will draw the Assembly together in unity of heart, vision and a deep desire to glorify Jesus Christ. Pray that His unity will pervade the Assembly gatherings during worship, committee meetings, business sessions and beyond. And join us in praise to God the Almighty for His grace, mercy, and care. To His Name be all honor and glory.

CTS: Praise the Lord for his great blessings on Covenant Seminary’s *By His Grace, For His Glory* capital campaign, which was completed in December. Thank him for the many generous donors who gave of their time, their treasure and their talents to make the campaign the most successful in the Seminary’s history.

MTW: By God’s providence, the number of missionary applicants seems to be growing, even in challenging times. Please pray that these whom He has called will also find His provision to get to the field.

RUM: Pray that the Lord will protect and strengthen the marriages of our campus ministers.

RBI: RBI has a Strategic Plan to direct its ministry to the PCA, and the Mission Statement broadly expresses this service plan to the denomination. The RBI Mission Statement is: “RBI is committed to serve the Lord and His Church by providing financial direction and ministries of encouragement and support. As a member of God’s covenant family, RBI will deliver its services through a trusted and confidential relationship. We will provide professional expertise and competitive products designed to meet the retirement, insurance and ministerial relief needs of our Church family.” Please pray RBI can fulfill this Mission Statement for God’s honor.

THE SECRET THINGS

*The secret things belong to the Lord.
Deuteronomy 29:29*

As a follow-up to yesterday's devotion on Deuteronomy 18:15-22, we turn today to Moses' statement on Deuteronomy 29:29. Most Christians don't see Moses as a prophet, but in fact he is considered the first of all the prophets (Deut. 18:15; Acts 3:22). The "school of the prophets" began with Moses, the lawgiver.

These secret things (literally "hidden things") are to be interpreted in the context of this chapter: the renewal of God's Covenant with the second generation of exodus Israel, about to enter the Promised Land. The question would be asked: "Why would God destroy His people in His anger" (v. 24). And the answer would be, "Because the Church did not keep God's Covenant—neither they nor their children" (vv. 25-28). So the implication is: If we teach our children to obey the secret things God reveals to us, all will be well for them.

These secret things the New Testament calls *mysterion*, Greek for the word "mystery." These are not mysteries that men can figure out with clues, scientific evidence or logical investigation. These mysteries must be revealed because mankind would never know them or believe them unless God revealed such divine truths (see First Corinthians 2:1-16).

In fact, all the cardinal doctrines of our "most holy religion" are divine mysteries revealed: The articles of the Apostle's Creed. That God creates everything—visible and invisible—out of nothing, by His Word, in six days; a virgin birth; a God-man who is God in flesh; an execution that atones for the world's sin; a resurrection; a second coming; one God in three persons; the Spirit of God in man; a religious group (the Church) that is the Body of Christ on earth; justification and forgiveness by faith; the Gospel; resurrection; heaven (and hell)—none of these things make sense to man, but they are true, real and pertinent.

Ours is an age and a church that doesn't do what doesn't make sense to them. Reason cancels out revelation; probability overrides promise, and pragmatism trumps principle. Tithes to the church? Why that makes no financial sense at all in an age of recession and volatile stock markets! Believe in creationism and not evolution? Why all the scientists and school teachers say otherwise! Keep the Sabbath holy? I've only got one day a week to really have fun so why waste it in church? No one believes all this stuff anyway...anymore!

God does. And He has let us in on these secret things: the promises, principles, precepts and practices of Covenant living. These things have been told to us by the prophets for the benefit of nation, church and children. Obedience to them guarantees a long and blessed life in the land God gave to us.

I once was invited to a function at the Billy Graham Library where Presidents Jimmy Carter, George W. Bush and Bill Clinton were on the rostrum. Mr. Bush leaned over and whispered something in Billy Graham's ear that made the aging evangelist smile. I said to myself, "Boy! I'd like to be in on those secrets!" In fact, One greater than the President of the United States has spoken His secrets to those of us less impressive than the world's greatest evangelist. Are we listening? And are we telling these things to our children? God gives us express permission to tell these secrets to our kids and grandkids. Let's do so...for their blessed future.

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

CEP: Pray for Dennis Bennett as he oversees the training for the denomination in areas of *Equip* Conferences, Regional Trainers, Presbytery Reps, Distance Education, Church Based Ordination and so forth.

CC: Our adult degree completion programs in organizational management and early childhood education continue to touch the lives of students returning to the classroom while maintaining a life in the work world. These adult students are influenced significantly by the college and have a significant impact in their workplaces. Please pray for our continued influence in this area.

MNA: Pray that God will call courageous, believing, risk-taking and faithful men who will plant churches and lead in the development of other new ministries in communities of need.

PCAF: Pray that the PCA Foundation's report to General Assembly will be informative and that Commissioners will be supportive of our ministry through prayer and encouraging words, and that they will make wise decisions concerning the PCAF's business.

RH: Give thanks with us for the financial "turn around" experienced since the summer of 2008. God worked His grace doing exceedingly abundantly above all that we could ask or think!

THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

*Because our God is not among us?
Deuteronomy 31:17*

Jesus once rebuked His contemporaries because they knew not how to “interpret the signs of the times” (Matt. 16:1-4). That rebuke is again warranted in our times. I stand amazed, at times, when people—especially preachers—refuse to spiritually give insight into the signs of our times.

I can remember how clergyman after clergyman struggled to define what happened to the United States on 9-11. Was it a “judgment,” an “act of God,” or something that could “just happen” anytime? Most settled for this: It was a “wake-up call” for Americans, or at least for the church. This seemed certain to most of us. The house was divided about calling 9-11 a “judgment” from God. A judgment on whom? And why?

Perhaps it is because we don’t want to unsettle folks any more than they are now. How much bad news can American souls take in one day, week, month? Or maybe it’s because we’re afraid: fearful of guessing wrongly and interpreting God’s actions inaccurately or making people angry. Or could it be that we really don’t want to hear a prophetic comment on our social malaise? Perhaps we really can’t judge our own hearts and we (rightly) don’t trust our own souls. Nevertheless, it seems to me that people need (and want) an answer.

Look at Deuteronomy 31:17-18: “Then my anger will be kindled against them in that day and I will forsake them and hide my face from them, and they will be devoured. And many evils and troubles will come upon them, so they will say in that day, ‘Have not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us?’ And I will surely hide my face in that day because of all the evil that they have done, because they have turned to other gods.” Could this be the answer for us, the one we are afraid to speak, reluctant to hear, refusing to accept?

Fifty million children have been sacrificed to the god Molech, whom we call “a woman’s right to choose.” Families are falling apart because we fornicate before the god Marduk, whom we call “acceptable alternative lifestyles.” Our economy is collapsing around us because we worship Mammon, whom we call the American Dream. And perhaps there are other minor deities whom we love—Leisure, Entertainment, Fitness, Sports, and the twin-gods Beauty and Brawn—who are causing us havoc. At least the pagan world had specific names for these real idols: Dionysus, Aphrodite, Eros, the Nymphs, Artemis and Apollo. They were the personifications of their passions.

If we believe in a Sovereign God, then we must reject the idea that “things just happen”—even in a bent and broken world. If God is far from us, it is because we have moved away from God, not the reverse. President Reagan once coined the phrase “pain index”: a combination of unemployment and inflation. But there is a new kind of pain index

facing President Obama and the United States—“these evils have come upon us because our God is not among us.” One would hope and pray for a President who would join with the prophets in the pulpits of America, who must proclaim that.

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

AC: Pray for the upcoming 37th General Assembly in Orlando, June 16-19, that God will be worshiped and honored in all that we think, say and do in every meeting and gathering.

CTS: Praise God for Covenant Seminary’s new Founders Hall educational building funded by the recently completed *By His Grace, For His Glory* capital campaign. Pray that the Lord will work mightily to expand his Kingdom through the future pastors and other church leaders who will be trained in this facility.

MTW: Pray for workers and national believers in restricted access countries or sensitive ministries in open countries. Ask God for courage, protection, opportunities to minister and growth of the Church.

RUM: RUF Students from all over the nation will gather in Florida for one week in May for preaching, seminars and fellowship. Please pray for these 1300+ students as they sit under the teaching of the Word. Join the staff of RUF in praying for the safety of the students and that young men and women will be drawn into the Kingdom.

RBI: Please pray for the RBI Relief Ministry assisting pastors, their families and widows who are living on a fixed income, so that these recipients may be able to maintain a standard of living sufficient for their needs.

GOD'S COVENANT PROSECUTORS

To Love Mercy

Randy Nabors

Senior Pastor, New City Fellowship, Chattanooga, TN

I wonder if being the pastor of a small church is like being a “minor” prophet. You do significant and important work but you often get overlooked. The message is the same, and sometimes even more interesting than the “major” prophets (or larger church pastors); you just don't get quoted that often. I'm just wondering.

One of the minor prophets I find very compelling and convicting is the Prophet Amos. He is a prophet who calls out for justice and condemns the Lord's people for their callous treatment of the poor. Providing justice, and thus mercy, for the poor seems to be a very important issue with God. In fact, there is a denunciation in the book of Amos (5:18-22) of not only religious practices and rhetoric, but even religious emotion when it is not proven by justice and righteousness. The passage ends with the oft quoted lines from chapter 5 verse 24, “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

In reading the book of Amos one might wonder what God means by justice and mercy when he seems to be so ready to bring judgment. This is why theology is so important to good Bible interpretation. A good Biblical understanding of mercy has as its foundation a grasp of God's sovereignty. In Amos we realize that the Lord is at work even in disaster, and that God's mercy is not confined to making things easier for people.

Chapters three and four of Amos are powerful reminders that God is sovereign and that he does bring judgment and disaster so that God's people might return to him: “Does disaster come to a city, unless the Lord has done it?” (3:6b). “I overthrew some of you, as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and you were as a brand plucked out of the burning; yet you did not return to me,’ declares the Lord. ‘Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel; because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel!’” (4:11-12).

In Amos we realize that God is so angry at the way we treat the least among us that he will absolutely tear apart a city, a country and a whole people if they will not do right. We realize upon close reading that God brings judgment so that his people might return to him. Therefore even disaster can be seen as a mercy from God, if we would just listen and respond to Him.

We live in the United States, and we are not the nation of Israel or Judah. Yet the church of the Lord Jesus Christ is very active in our country, and our witness and our testimony do not go unnoticed. America is not the latter-day nation of Israel, we are not (as a nation) the chosen people. Yet, many of God's chosen people (the Elect) live here and we are noticeable as churches and congregations. It is so important as the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world” that we remember that a “city set on a hill cannot be hidden” (Matthew 5:13-16). Our good works, especially in regard to justice and mercy, make an impact in our society. This applies to us Christians in both the individual sense

as believers and the corporate sense as communities of faith. The text in Matthew seems to be a plural or corporate challenge, and not just about individual Christians in the world.

God holds nations accountable, even secular non-confessing nations (see the first chapters of Amos), for their behavior. How much more will He hold America accountable since there is so much Christian witness here, and how much more will He hold us (the Church) accountable if we do not bring justice and mercy into the life of the nation in which we live? Our task is not simply to proclaim judgment, but to help be the force that moves our culture and society into being moral, just and merciful to the poor.

What a wonderful thing to pray for and about: that we as saints would live out justice and mercy in our individual lives and vocations, and that our congregations would demonstrate powerful good works of mercy and justice so that the world might give glory to God. This is exactly what we were created in Christ Jesus to do (Ephesians 2:10).

If God brings disaster, such as what happened on September 11, 2001, and during hurricane Katrina, then should we not seek the Lord and as believers also seek to show mercy to those who suffer? God is speaking in disaster, and God gives us an opportunity to do good at the same time. Pray that the Lord will give our churches merciful hearts so that whenever disaster strikes we will be ready to help, not just our own congregations and families but our neighbors as well (Galatians 6:10). Some folks in our society suffer from generational and chronic poverty, and their disaster is a daily occurrence. When a “natural” disaster affects them they move from living on the edge to falling into the abyss.

Pray that justice will prevail in things as basic as measurements and balances so justice might be upheld. Some economists think that some of the economic troubles of our nation came about when the government changed standards for the inflation index, which is tied to the interest rate and risk for credit. That standard was no longer based on “real” inflation (“Skimping the measure, boosting the price, and cheating dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat” (Amos 8:5-6). Can you imagine leaving out the cost of gasoline in estimating the cost of inflation as if it had nothing to do with the cost of living our lives? Can you imagine fifty companies buying insurance policies on one other company never going bankrupt, when the insurance company hasn't enough capital to guarantee those policies, such as happened to AIG though credit swaps? Holding up a standard of balanced measures is part of being moral in our economic life and it powerfully affects us all, keeping some from falling into poverty and protecting those who are in it.

Pray that our hearts will not be hard in understanding the reality of poverty in our own country. We know of course that poverty in America is not as severe as in Third World countries. Yet, when you can't pay your rent, can't afford to buy medicine and can't afford to buy food, comparison with the Third World doesn't house you, heal you or feed you. I love the music of worship, and I love to worship God, but may all of us when we hear those sweet songs of praise to God remember God's Word which says, “Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:23-24).

GOD'S COVENANT WITH AMERICA

*But like Adam they transgressed the covenant;
there they dealt falsely with me.*

Hosea 6:7

All of life is covenantal. In God's creation of the world, He established a covenant with Adam and Eve, seen in Genesis 2:15-17 and clearly referenced in Hosea 6:7. Therefore, all the key relationships of life, basic institutions and human society are covenantal in nature. The proof of this is found in the giving and taking of oaths and vows that seal these vital relationships and make life functional. People take marriage vows. Children are baptized with vows. Individuals join churches and take vows. Church officers, elders and deacons and clergymen are ordained with vows. Policemen, military personnel (both enlisted men and commissioned officers), appointed officials, and even the judges, congressmen and President of the United States take vows. Why? *Because we recognize that all of life is covenantal and, as such, all of life necessitates mutual responsibilities.* Duty is an unavoidable part of being human, of being made in the image of God: "I will be a God to you and you will be My people" (See Genesis 17:1-8).

This is why our Westminster Confession of Faith includes an entire chapter on "Lawful Oaths and Vows" (chapter 22). Please notice that this chapter comes after the one on "Christian Liberty" and "Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day" and before the chapters on "The Civil Magistrate," marriage and the church. The Westminster Divines were acknowledging that all of life is covenantal.

We who are members of the PCA and who embrace both the Confession of Faith and reformed theology have no trouble accepting Covenant Theology and applying it to the Church. But are we willing to recognize that God has a Covenant with America? The Nation? Our forefathers thought so. Puritan leader and governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, had no problem acknowledging God's Covenant with New England. He clearly states this aboard the ship *Arbella*, anchored in the Massachusetts Bay in 1640. In a sermon to his fellow English pilgrims he spoke of both a Covenant with God and a City on a Hill:

Consider that wee shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us; soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our god in this worke wee have undertaken and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a byword through the world.

What the American pilgrims acknowledged the American presidents have reaffirmed. After taking the oath of office of the President of the United States on January 20, 1965, Lyndon Baines Johnson gave his inaugural address to the American people. In it, he spoke of The American Covenant. He said this:

They came here—the exile and the stranger, brave but frightened—to find a place where a man could be his own man. They made a covenant with this land. Conceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union, it was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind; and it binds us still. If we keep its terms, we shall flourish.⁷

I recently read where President Obama denied that America is any longer a Christian nation. Most all of us would agree. So many see no need to seek the fulfillment of Winthrop’s vision of that City Upon a Hill. But the nature of any covenant is that it binds fathers and sons “to a thousand generations”—Abraham and Israel, a married couple and their great-grandchildren, pilgrims and an American Dream, presidents and the people. In fact, to transgress the covenant is simply to renounce God’s claim upon us and to reject the vows our forefathers took before God.

The prophets are indeed “God’s covenant prosecutors” who call us to revival through a renewal of our covenant with God. Please read Hosea 6:1-3.

In the wake of last week’s National Day of Prayer—instituted by President Lincoln and our forefathers and set to law by Presidents Eisenhower and Reagan—let us seek the word of the prophet in order to return to our Covenant with God; renew our marriage vows; refresh our church vows; remember our civic duties; restore our love and devotion to America. Seek the favor of God found in the blessings of the Covenant. Please read Psalm 33:10-12 and Psalm 144:12-15.

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

CEP: Pray for our Regional Trainers. These men and women make themselves available throughout the denomination offering training for teachers, Christian Education directors, small groups.

CC: Pray that current capital projects will proceed on schedule and within budget. Also, pray for the Lord to direct the planning of future projects.

MNA: Please pray for Ted Powers in his role as Church Planting Coordinator for MNA. Specifically, please pray for him as he casts vision for key leaders in PCA church planting around North America, provides resources for them in their Kingdom building endeavors, and as he coordinates efforts with others in presbyteries, church planting networks and churches around the denomination. Finally, pray for laborers for the harvest. There are many needs and opportunities for church planting ministries in a variety of settings around North America. Ask God to provide the resources necessary.

PCAF: Pray for the PCA Foundation’s many grant recipients, that their respective needs will continue to be met, and that God will encourage them in their ministry.

RH: Pray for the spiritual health and vitality of the Ridge Haven staff, that each one will give daily attention to their personal relationship with the Lord and continually look to Him, rest in Him and serve Him.

GOD’S CONTROVERSY WITH AMERICA

For the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land.

Hosea 4:1

About twenty years ago, my wife and I attended a pastor’s conference at Ben Lippen Camp when it was located in North Carolina. We met up with some friends of ours, Jim and Jane Barnes—also a PCA pastor and his wife. John MacArthur was the preacher for the conference. One evening he spoke from Psalm 19 about the sufficiency and inerrancy of Scripture. Present at the conference were hundreds of Southern Baptist ministers and wives.

That evening at supper I sat next to a missionary from Thailand. Little did I know that he did not believe in the inerrancy of Scripture. In an effort merely to make small talk, I said, “Wasn’t that a great sermon on the Scripture?” To my surprise and dismay a verbal brawl broke out at our table between a pastor who believed in inerrancy and the missionary who did not. Later, Jim Barnes said to me jokingly, “Ross, I can’t take you anywhere that you don’t cause a fight!”

Controversy in Christian service is disconcerting, often unexpected, but always inevitable. The Word of God has that two-edged dividing power that always leads to controversy (Hebrews 4:11; Matthew 10:34-40).

In Hosea 4:1-19 God tells us about the sorrow and suffering that comes about when people resist God’s Word. This sad state of affairs comes in three phases: (1) God’s controversy, (2) the people’s contention, (3) the nation’s confusion.

God’s controversy (4:1-3) comes about when God brings a complaint against His Church and prosecutes a case against them. This is God’s way of provoking people to repentance, faith and obedience. One early preacher in America’s colonial history penned a poem by the title of “God’s Controversy with New England.” Here is what he wrote, in part:

*Our healthful days are at an end
And sicknesses come on
From year to year, because our hearts
Away from God are gone.
New England, where for many years
You scarcely heard a cough.
And where physicians had no work,
Now finds them work enough.⁸*

The people’s contention arises from their arguments with prophets and priests who bring God’s controversial message (Hosea 4:1-6). Verse 4 of this passage really should read: “yet let no one contend and let no one accuse, for your people are like those who contend with the priest.” It appears that “getting in the pastor’s face” on the part of angry congreg-

gants is nothing new. The sad result of this opposition to God's Word and His preachers is a lack of knowledge about spiritual things. This is deadly. Please read Hosea 4:6-7.

The nation's confusion is the end result. So ignorant of God, so far from the Gospel are these people that they look to idols for help and a stick of wood for divine guidance (Hosea 4:12). Witness the rise of bizarre and neo-pagan religions in America, like the immensely popular new-age tripe of Eckart Tolle and Oprah Winfrey!

There is only one solution to this sad situation. That is for ministers not to be afraid to enter into God's controversy with America. It is for the good of the American soul and the salvation of the American people that preachers prosecute God's case against this nation. We do so out of love, divine love rooted in Christ and His Gospel; a love that will not sit idly by while God's people perish for lack of knowledge. If you are a preacher and if you love your people, then stand up and speak out for God on behalf of their souls. Sometimes lovers quarrel. And often God's love leads to God's controversy. Don't be afraid, my fellow preachers, to argue with your people. Their soul, the souls of their children and the soul of our nation hang in the balance.

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

AC: Give thanks for this year's Host Presbytery, Central Florida Presbytery, who have been diligently working for over a year to make arrangements for this Assembly, and pray for the comfort and edification of the Commissioners and their families.

CTS: Pray that God will grant wisdom and strength to Bryan Chapell, president of Covenant Seminary, as he handles the many responsibilities of family, leadership, preaching, teaching, writing, speaking and traveling on behalf of the Seminary. Pray also for his wife, Kathy, and their children.

MTW: Pray for Oscar Aylor, MTW's new mercy ministry director, that God will grow the ministry and give him wisdom, insight and faithfulness in his new leadership role.

RUM: Please pray for the RUF Campus Ministers and their wives as they seek to minister to the students' daily needs by opening their homes and lives to them.

RBI: Moral Oversight of RBI is the responsibility of the Committee of Commissioners of the General Assembly. Please pray that the commissioners will continue to have wisdom to direct this vital aspect of our ministry

HIS SERVANTS THE PROPHETS

*For the Lord does nothing without revealing
his secret to his servants the prophets.
Amos 3:7*

Christians often underestimate the vision and interpretive power of the Word of God. We have no problem with the doctrine of revelation: the inspiration, infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible. We believe the Word of God is *inspired*, that it is “God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16). We accept that it is *infallible*, that by its very divine origin it cannot possibly err. And for the most part, we hold to the *inerrancy* of God’s Word, that it has, in fact, not erred in its original autographs. What we struggle with today is not its revelation but rather its *relevance*. Does the Word of God adequately address the issues of our time?

Amos makes a startling statement in Chapter 3, verse 7, of his prophecy: “For the Lord does nothing without revealing his secret to the prophets.” Alex Motyer explains this wonderful sentence to us. He writes,

To such an extent did Amos hold that prediction belonged to the essence of the prophetic office that he was ready to commit himself to the general principle that surely the Lord does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets (3:7). But there is also an aspect of this saying, which leads into our discussion of the inspiration of the prophet. The future which was the subject of his prediction was not merely ‘coming events,’ an exercise in crystal gazing or fortune telling; it was ‘God’s future,’ the coming acts of God as arising out of the nature of God and His reaction to the affairs on earth.⁹

When we look at verses 7 and 8 together, Motyer points out several things to us. First, God does have a divine policy for governing His world, announcing His intentions and driving forward His program: The Kingdom of God. Second, these prophets were only let in on God’s secret plans due to their fellowship with God. The word “revealing his secrets” reads more literally in Hebrew, “opening His fellowship.” Because God graciously brought them into His circle of grace and favor they were able to hear from God about life and eternity. Thirdly, the responsibility of this intimacy with God was to speak forth God’s message to all men: “Thus says the Lord”—whether people liked the message or rejected the revealed secrets.

I would suggest that in our reformed and evangelical doctrine of Scripture, we struggle with the idea of relevance because we doubt the Spirit’s *illumination*. Does God still have a masterplan for the Kingdom of God, even in a postmodern World? Is His Word still living, active and incisive with regard to the human experience (Heb. 4:12)? Does God love His people, the Church, and desire to share His heart and mind with us? The answer

to all these questions is “Yes!” Moses clearly says so: “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law” (Deut. 29:29).

Here are the issues we struggle with: faith, intimacy and obedience. If we do not hear God’s voice in the Word it may well be that we don’t expect to do so. We doubt that God still speaks. If we feel that God is silent it may well be that we do not groom the art of intimacy with God the way Amos and his peer-prophets did. If we “can’t get anything out of the Word” it may well be that what we do get we don’t apply. We fail to obey the revelation we already know.

God is still building His Kingdom and still reacting to the affairs on earth. This indicates to me that God is very active in speaking to us. But a mind of unbelief, a distant soul and a heart of disobedience will stop the ears every time. Hear what the greatest of all the prophets had to say:

“He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” (Matthew 13:9)

“But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.” (Matthew 13:16-17)

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

CEP: Pray for our training conferences, such as *Equip*, Mercy Ministry, WIC Leadership, Christian and Home Schooling, and our six regional Children’s and Youth Conferences.

CC: Please pray for the implementation of a strategic plan that will strengthen the college’s ability to equip our students and community to live out extraordinary callings in ordinary places for the glory of Christ.

MNA: Please pray that God will raise up more African American pastors through the leadership of Wy Plummer—pastors who will plant churches, pastor existing churches, serve as associate pastors, and start RUF ministries.

PCAF: Pray for the PCA Foundation’s grant recipients, that the funds they receive from us will result in material needs being met, souls saved and hearts encouraged.

RH: Pray for the Lord to provide at least 600 campers for summer camp. Pray that God’s Spirit will move in the life of each camper for coming to faith, growing in grace, and making a life-commitment to be His disciple.

WHAT GOD REQUIRES

*...to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God.
Micah 6:8*

We have mentioned that Willem Van Gemen and other Old Testament scholars consider the prophets God's covenant prosecutors. That being the case, Micah sets forth God's covenant lawsuit in Micah 6:1-8. Micah calls God's message "an indictment against His people" (6:2). I once served six months on a grand jury. I learned that an indictment was not the same as a conviction. The indictment simply determined if an accused was to be arraigned in court for trial.

In each indictment four things were to happen: The Attorney General called witnesses, interrogated the accused, recounted the facts of the case before the jury and reviewed the demands of the law. These four things are exactly what Micah does to Israel. First, he summons all creation to serve as witnesses and to verify both the justice and mercy of God as well as the sin of God's people (6:1-2). He then interrogates Israel: What has God done wrong to cause Israel to forsake Him for other gods? (6:3). He gives the people an opportunity to respond and defend their actions. Next, he recounts for them God's faithfulness to Israel—the facts of history (6:4-5). Finally, he reviews the demands of the Law (the Covenant) and what the Covenant required (6:6-8). His summary statement is found in what may be the most famous verse in the Minor Prophets. Please read Micah 6:8.

When Jimmy Carter was inaugurated as President of the United States on January 20, 1977, he referenced this verse in his inaugural address. The 39th President reminded Americans of the core of our national covenant:

Within us, the people of the United States, there is evident a serious and purposeful rekindling of confidence. And I join in the hope that when my time as your President has ended, people might say this about our Nation: that we had remembered the words of Micah and renewed our search for humility, mercy, and justice.¹⁰

What are these three pillars of a godly life, a Gospel church and a good nation? "Do Justice." The Hebrew word is *mishpat*. It points to the proper, fair and equitable use of power and authority, especially in the protection of the helpless and the care for the poor. "Love kindness." The word *hesed* in Hebrew is usually rendered "lovingkindness" or "steadfast love." It literally means Covenant love and loyalty. Here God commands us not only to be merciful to the needy but to be loyal to others. This has to do with fulfilling our duties to both God (Commandments 1-4) and to our neighbor (Commandments 5-10). "Walk humbly with your God." In the prophetic literature, the humble are those

who listen to God's Word and obey. Humility is directly related to Truth. The humble person responds to truth; the proud argues, resists and resents the Truth.

Of course, Micah wrote to a theocratic nation, a people (Hebrews) whose nation (Israel) was one with their religion (Judaism). America is different. Nation and Church are independent of one another. But then, Micah uses precise words in his indictment: "He has told you, *O man*, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you?" Micah speaks to "man"—mankind, humanity, all people in every state, in every place, in every time. This is what is "good" for all: Justice, Mercy and Truth. These are the three parameters of a good life, a godly church and a gracious society. Please read 1 Timothy 2:1-4.

What God requires begins with you as an individual. It becomes the core curriculum of your school of Christ—your family. It constitutes the official duties of your church: The Presbyterian Church in America and your local congregation. And it forms the basis for public life, common discourse and civic virtue in the State. This is not just the American Dream. This is more; it is the Prophetic Vision, and beyond that, it is God's will for His creation. The indictment lies open before us. How then do we plead: Guilty or Not Guilty?

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

AC: The theme for the 2009 General Assembly is "Connecting PCA People, Churches and ministries. May all aspects of General Assembly serve to remind us of the privilege, responsibility and blessing of being "connected" to one another and the Body of Christ.

CTS: Pray that God will grant insight and discernment to Covenant Seminary's Board of Trustees as they make plans for the future of the Seminary, and that He will continually renew their energy and enthusiasm for the Seminary's mission.

MTW: MTW is developing a site in Qunajuato, Mexico, to serve as a hub for church planting, training and theological education, as well as a short-term ministry site. Please pray for relationship building in the community and for the ministry of short-term teams beginning spring 2009.

RUM: Pray that the university administrations where RUF chapters are located will be receptive and fair to the ministries' presence on their campus. Pray that as political issues arise, campus ministers will have wisdom and discretion in dealing with the administration and more than anything that the truth of the Gospel will begin to impact the university from the top down.

RBI: Pray for RBI as an agency of the PCA General Assembly, as it shares a common vision with the other committees and agencies and fulfills a unique role in the denomination.

LET JUSTICE ROLL DOWN

*Let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
Amos 5:24*

During this past year's general election, the topic of God and Government came up for discussion, as it always does when elections are upon us. I noticed especially that the younger folks were troubled by the mixing of the two kingdoms—Church (religion) and State (government). The questions from these young people drove me to thinking. Was their reaction against the involvement of the Church in the Moral Majority, the Republican Party and in issues of elections, appointment of judges and legislation justified?

As I mused on these things, I came to two conclusions. First, the Evangelical Church's unqualified support of the Republican Party was neither wise nor always justifiable. The Church of Christ is above party politics, for it represents the Kingdom of God—something larger than life, greater than self and lasting forever. Much of politics is both partisan and prejudiced, representing the coalition of strange bedfellows to foster personal (and selfish) agendas. This is true of both Republican and Democratic politics. The Church loses its prophetic voice when it is co-opted by any political party.

Second, it is truly impossible for God and politics not to interface. Both Church and State were ordained by God as His servants in pursuit of what is good (Romans 13:1-6). Both have the same goal in mind, from two complementary perspectives: temporal and eternal (1 Timothy 2:1-4). Both, by necessity, deal in the realm of morality: Law and ethics for the State, and Theology and religion for the Church. Hence, both are rightly concerned about marriages, homosexuality, life in the womb, poverty, racism, war, free speech and the like. God in politics is just as necessary as the State in morality.

Amos reminds us of this. In our passage for today (Amos 5:18-24), the prophet warns us not to be in a hurry for the Day of the Lord. This expression, found also in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Zephaniah, Zechariah and Malachi, refers to God's day of recompense and judgment—a prefiguring of the second coming of Christ and His final judgment (Revelation 20:11-14).

Amos has a simple message: "Do not attempt to please God with religion alone. Your faith has a place in the public square. Justice and righteousness have a way of both transforming the church and correcting the State. God will be heard in the public square. Church and State are His right hand and left hand. God in politics is a reality of the Kingdom of God."

John Perkins of Mississippi is a Christian leader, a civil rights advocate and the founder of Voice of Calvary Ministries. His biography, depicting the squalor, prejudice, violence, pain and shame of a black man's life in the rural South in the 1940s and 1950s, is titled *Let Justice Roll Down*. When I was a pastor in Jackson, Mississippi, I came to

know and respect John Perkins. I once spoke with him about the challenge of racism and the Christian Church. I'll never forget what he told me. He said, "Go read Amos 5:24. Here's what you'll find. 'Justice' is the Hebrew word *mishpat*. It has to do with doin' right in public things. 'Righteousness' is the Hebrew word *tsedaqah*. It has to do with doin' what's right in personal things. You can't be personally for God and publically for the world. You can't be privately a Christian but publically a Republican. You can't be half a man, and you don't look to me like half a preacher. Go be all God called you to be. Let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Go and do what the Gospel freed us to do...all of it!"

You know, I never knew if John Perkins was a Democrat or a Republican. He never talked about the elections. But John was used by God in both Church and State. He understood the prophets. He was one...is one to this day, and I have been both challenged and privileged to know him. He taught me that God in politics is really not the issue. The real issue is how we live for God in the affairs of men and work for what the Gospel brings. Please read Psalm 85:8-13.

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

CEP: Pray for the development of a system of training that will allow us to offer live two-way training through the Internet. This will allow us to help small and large churches alike and keep the costs low. While it is not as personal as being there, it will allow us to be in many places at one time.

CC: Pray for the extension of our BUILD capital campaign. Pray that God will send those who have the heart and the ability to partner with us in this endeavor. Pray that all the gifts and talents to support the campaign will be provided.

MNA: Pray that the economic challenges facing the people of North America will bring revival in His Church. Pray that the PCA will find new ways to reach out to people in our communities who are hurting in ways not experienced in more comfortable days.

PCAF: Pray for the PCA Foundation's grant recipients, that more people will be moved to support them with prayer, their time and their financial resources.

RH: Please pray for the outpouring of God's Spirit on the unique "Brave Heart" camp for children who have lost a parent, sibling or close friend. Pray that the God of all comfort will comfort these grieving children, give them hope for eternity and courage to pursue life in the Lord Jesus Christ.

WHEN GOD MAKES NO SENSE

*But the righteous shall live by his faith.
Habakkuk 2:4*

Love for one's country is a manifestation of God's common grace. Patriotism is not wrong. Ethnocentrism is quite normal. And blind support of one's nation is to be expected, though not wise. God has created peoples and given them both places (homelands) and characteristics (cultures) that are unique to them (Acts 17:26). Therefore, it is extremely difficult to accept two theological truths that often seem to conflict: God is sovereign and God always does what is right (Genesis 18:25).

The trouble comes when God chooses to turn against our nation (the good guys, our boys) in apparent favor of another nation (the bad guys, our enemies). Sure, America may be increasingly secular, but we're not as godless as those Russian or Chinese Communists! Sure, the American Church is worldly, even in places apostate, but at least we don't worship a false god and terrorize the earth like the Muslims! The thought of the Red flag flowing over Washington, D. C. or America becoming a nation under Shariah law is appalling. This is the stuff of nightmares.

Put yourself in the place of Habakkuk. He lived in a time when Israel and Judah had been afflicted by the pagan, violent and extremely cruel Assyrians. No doubt he lived to see the fall of Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, in 612 B.C. And he would have experienced the death of godly King Josiah at the battle of Haran in 609 B.C., as well as the world-changing battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C., when Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian Army crushed, for good, the Assyrian Empire. How shocking would be the news God would give him: Babylon's next victim would be Judah and Jerusalem!

Habakkuk can't believe it! Prophets, like people, do not always like God's revelation; the difference is that they submit to it rather than resist it. But that is not to say they don't argue with God. Habakkuk does. He presents to God a question: "Will God really let the wicked crush the righteous? Babylon capture Israel? Or, at the worst, the crass pagan victimize the backslidden saints?" God answers his heart-broken prophet: "Yep! That is exactly what I intend to do" (1:1-11).

So Habakkuk sets forth a second complaint: "Are you not the holy, righteous, covenant-keeping God and yet you intend to let the wicked slay the righteous and not punish the wicked for their evil?" God answers again: "In due time, I will punish all the wicked—the wickedness of My own people first and then the wickedness of the evil nations most severely" (1:12-2:5).

God calls Habakkuk to faith—"the righteous shall live by his faith" (2:4). At first things *seem* to be wrong (God using evil to punish the good?), but faith allows us to see things as they really *are* (God cannot confront the world about evil if He tolerates the same

in His Church). Habakkuk's message is stated more succinctly and more simply by the Apostle Peter. Please read 1 Peter 4:12-19.

What Habakkuk chose to ignore, out of love for his people, were these facts: Israel worshiped the Canaanite god Baal; they sacrificed their infant children to the god, Molech; they dedicated their horses to the sun god; their women prostituted themselves for the goddess Asherah; they broke the Sabbath; they ignored the law of God; and they violated the covenant codes of holiness in the Levitical system. They were saints who lived like pagans.

God had to clean house. Why? For the sake of Israel's salvation and that of the whole world. Ultimately, their discipline was for Christ's sake. Had God not judged Israel, then the baby Jesus would have been born into a system that may well have polluted Him as the Messiah of the nations. God preserved a monotheistic and scriptural incubator into which the Christ could be born, nurtured and developed into the Savior of the world. God knew what He was doing. What He did was right, holy and good. Men with eyes of faith can see this, as our friend, Habakkuk, came to see. Please read Hab. 3:17-18.

If God chooses to deal harshly with us, it will be for His good purposes and for the blessing of His world. He does what He does for the salvation of the nations. As he lived by faith, Habakkuk came to acknowledge this truth. May we do the same as we grow in faith as those righteous in Christ.

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

AC: Pray that the Holy Spirit will move powerfully through the men chosen to preach His Word in each of the three evening worship services of the Assembly: Paul D. Kooistra, W. Gregory Thompson; Martin Richard Ban. The focus of the worship services is around the theme of "Renewal." Pray that every participant will worship the Most High God in spirit and in truth.

CTS: Pray for people around the world who are now considering training for ministry at Covenant Seminary, and that the Seminary's Admissions staff will continue to minister effectively to prospective students and their families.

MTW: Thank God for those who support the missionaries and ministries of MTW, often sacrificially. Pray He will bless their stewardship and meet the needs of their own families.

RUM: Please pray for the new Campus Ministers who will begin working with RUF groups this fall. Pray that they will have a smooth transition from seminary or ministry positions to their campus work and for encouragement as they raise support over the summer months. Pray for their wives and young children as they transition to new lives.

RBI: The PCA Retirement Plan is one of the benefit plans available to PCA employees. Please pray for this plan to succeed in its purpose of providing retirement income for participants. Pray the financial markets will improve through 2009.

CONSIDER YOUR WAYS

*Thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider your ways.
Haggai 1:5, 1:7, 2:15, 2:18*

Haggai was an old prophet who accompanied the Jews back to the promised land when Cyrus of Persia allowed them to return to Jerusalem in 539 B.C. His companion and colleague in those days of prophetic ministry was a younger prophet, a priest named Zechariah. In 520 B.C., between August and December, Haggai spoke to the people of God on five occasions (from August 29 to December 18) about finishing the task of rebuilding the second temple.

Repeatedly he asks the Israelites to consider the values, their lifestyles and their sins. He calls their attention to five realities of their lives:

- Their prosperity has been hindered because they have not put God as their top priority (1:1-11).
- God was with the people to empower and encourage them in their great building project (1:12-15).
- God has greater plans for His Kingdom in the future than He had for the past; do not get stuck in “the old glory days.” This dishonors God (2:1-9).
- Holiness affects all of life. God blesses holiness and disciplines unholiness. Unholiness spreads naturally, like a virus. Holiness is something we must work at (2:10-19).
- God’s master plan has never changed: He will judge the nations and establish His Kingdom. His covenant people lie at the center of this plan (2:20-23).

American people are not very reflective. Oh, we are plenty introspective! We are psychoanalyzed to death and awash with a myriad of “syndromes,” “disorders” and “deficiencies.” (I recently read that basic shyness is now a psychological disorder. It’s called SAD—“social anxiety disorder.” Seems it affects most children under the age of six whenever they are around adult strangers!) But introspection is not the same as self-examination. Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones—both a medical doctor and a pastor—once noted:

Those two terms remind us that the fundamental trouble with these people is that they are not always careful to draw the line of demarcation between self-examination and introspection. We all agree that we should examine ourselves, but we also agree that introspection and morbidity are bad. But what is the difference between examining oneself and becoming introspective? I suggest that we cross the line from self-examination to introspection when, in a sense, we do nothing but examine ourselves, and when such self-examination becomes the main and chief end in our life. We are meant to examine ourselves periodically,

but if we are always doing it, always, as it were, putting our soul on a plate and dissecting it, that is introspection. And if we are always talking to people about ourselves and our problems and troubles, and if we are forever going to them with that kind of frown upon our face and saying: I am in great difficulty—it probably means that we are all the time centered upon ourselves. That is introspection, and that in turn leads to the condition known as morbidity.¹¹

Haggai will have nothing to do with introspection. He calls the people of God to “consider your ways.” Introspection would have led to excuses about bad finances, melancholy about their difficulties, bitterness about the past, discouragement about the temple and resentment toward God. Haggai, in each of his five messages, calls the people of God to look at God Himself: His covenant, His promises, His plan, His law and His character. And in lifting up their eyes from selves to God, they lifted up their spirits. What a great message for the Church facing the uncertainties of our faltering economy and troubled society!

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

CEP: Pray for CEP as we develop more study and training resources. We are also working on a curriculum that will help churches understand how to disciple people from a pre-Christian state all the way to being mature believers capable of discipling others and doing the work of the ministry.

CC: Please pray for the members of the support staff who work diligently to serve the community and provide learning opportunities for the students.

MNA: Pray for Jim Hatch as he is in contact with scores of seminary students, assistant pastors and others who show interest in starting a church. Pray for wisdom, effective ministry and that many will hear God’s call to church planting.

PCAF: Pray for the PCA churches who are working with the PCA Foundation, that God will continue to meet their needs and that our service and assistance will glorify God and edify the church.

RH: Pray for the ATA (Appalachian Trail Adventure) camps. The “phase one” ATA is a four-day, three-night introduction to the Appalachian Trail. The “phase two” ATA is for advanced hikers up for an even greater adventure. Pray that the Lord will keep all participants safe and receptive to the discovery of the attributes of God and His saving grace through all that is experienced on the trail.

CONFRONTATION AND COMFORT

Repentance in the Prophets

George Grant

Pastor of Parish Presbyterian Church, Franklin, TN

The primary message of the Old Testament prophets was a call to repentance. It was not to predict the future. It was not to offer new moral mandates. It was simply to declare the “words, statutes, and commandments of the Lord” that the people might “be overtaken and repent” (Zechariah 1:6). It was that they might “put on sackcloth and lament” (Joel 1:13). It was that they might “repent and turn” from all their transgressions “lest iniquity be your ruin” (Ezekiel 18:30). It was that they might “return to the Lord” for healing and restoration (Hosea 6:1). This is the constant refrain of hope in the prophets:

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

Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: Repent and turn away from your idols, and turn away your faces from all your abominations.
(Ezekiel 14:6)

Of course, this was not exactly a welcome message—even if it was a refrain of hope. It wasn't in the days of the prophets and it still isn't today. As the renowned English preacher of the last generation, D. Martyn Lloyd Jones, once remarked, “The great effect of preaching repentance is to make everybody feel condemned, and nobody much likes that.”

None of us wants to hear that our hearts are “deceitful and wicked above all things and beyond cure” (Jeremiah 17:9). We don't want to hear that “we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23) or that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). We don't want to hear that our corrupt lives have resulted in a corrupt culture where the innocent are exploited, the helpless are despoiled and the downtrodden are utterly forgotten. We don't want to hear that there are very real and tangible consequences to our sin that ultimately must be dealt with. We would much rather find a series of steps that would “enable” us, “empower” us or help us to “recover,” than we would to hear the clear message of grace:

In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength. (Isaiah 30:15)

According to Lloyd-Jones, if the prophets “had come and told us that the way of salvation was to consider a great, noble and wonderful teaching and then to set out and do it, why, we would have liked it. Thoughts of imitating the Lord always please mankind, because they flatter us. They tell us that if we only use our wills we can do almost anything. The world today in its state of trouble is very ready to listen to sermons that tell it somehow or another about the appli-

cation of Christian principles. No one is annoyed at them. What wonderful thoughts people say. What a wonderful conception. But the message of the Gospel is that the world is as it is because you are as you are. You are in trouble and confusion because you are not honoring God; because you are rebelling against Him; because of your self-will, your arrogance, and your pride. You are reaping,' says the Gospel, 'what you have sown'.... We all dislike that, and yet it is always the message of Christ—He called upon men and women to repent, to acknowledge their sin with shame and to turn back to God in Him, but the message of repentance always has been and still is a cause of offense.”

As a result of this native resistance to the message of repentance, the prophets were often cast in the role of God’s “prosecuting attorneys.” Sometimes, this prosecutorial role is very explicit, as it is in Micah’s prophecy:

Hear what the Lord says: “Arise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the indictment of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth, for the Lord has an indictment against his people, and he will contend with Israel. “O my people, what have I done to you? How have I wearied you? Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. O my people, remember what Balak king of Moab devised, and what Balaam the son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the Lord.” With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:1-8)

With all the elements of a dramatic courtroom scene, the prophet here describes a kind of covenant lawsuit—brought by the Lord against His chosen people. The case is called from the very throne-room of heaven (vs.1). All of the teeming creation—from the mountains and hills to the very foundations of the earth—is summoned to hear the evidence and to bear witness to the proceedings (vs.2). The prosecutor then presents His evidence (vss.3-5) and the defendant explores the possibility of a plea bargain (vss.6-7).

Apparently, Israel had “wearied” of the Lord (vs.3). Thus the charge against her was a very serious one: infidelity. The indictment rested on four incidents from the people’s redemption-history. The first was their dramatic rescue from slavery in Egypt (vs.4). The second was the raising up of Godly leadership—Moses, Aaron and Miriam—during the wilderness wanderings (vs.4). The third was the reversal of Balaam’s curses just as they were about to make their way into the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey (vs.5). And the fourth was the long-awaited crossing over the Jordan—Shittim was the last east

bank encampment, Gilgal was the first west bank encampment (vs.5).

In each case, God had demonstrated His covenant faithfulness. In His good providence He had brought the people through every danger and supplied their every need. But Israel had failed to respond in kind. Her love had grown cold.

Notice that the defendant readily accepts her guilt but then wonders how reparations might be made. Perhaps burnt offerings? Maybe yearling calves? Or thousands of rams? Or ten thousand rivers of oil? Or even the first-born among her children (vss.6-7)?

No, the King, Judge and Lawgiver answers by saying that He requires something far greater, far more precious than any of these things. He does not require a gift. Instead, He requires the giver:

He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord requires of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?
(Micah 6:8)

The call to repentance here is inescapably clear. No wonder Jesus would later sum up “the weightier matters of the law” by repeating this very passage (Matthew 23:23), calling the Scribes and the Pharisees unto repentance. Alas, they didn’t receive it any better than their forefathers did. Thus, “He came unto His own and His own received Him not” (John 1:11).

We know that the Gospel is “foolishness” to some (1 Corinthians 1:18). It is a “stumbling block” to others (1 Corinthians 1:23). But it is an “offense” to all who disbelieve (Galatians 5:11). It is an offense to us for precisely the same reason the prophets were persecuted (Matthew 5:12; Acts 7:52). It is an offense to us because the message of repentance fails to flatter us. And so like the people in the days of the prophets we cry, “Do not speak out,” and “Do not prophesy about these things” (Micah 2:6). We shy away from the harsh truth—thinking that surely the Word of the Lord only brings “good things” (Micah 2:7).

COME LET US REASON

*Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord:
though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.
Isaiah 1:18*

In one of the most tender and touching passages in the prophetic literature, God invites His people to join Him in a rational discussion about sin. Not a debate. And not a discourse. But a discussion. “Come, let us reason together” about your sin, God says. God appeals here to that moral compass within each of us: the conscience. He awakens that conscience with His prophetic word, and He mobilizes the human conscience to war against sin.

In his address to the Pacifist Society of Oxford, “Why I am Not a Pacifist,” delivered in 1940, C. S. Lewis reminds us of the limits of reason and the working of the conscience. Lewis insightfully said:

Every teacher knows that people are constantly protesting that they “can’t see” some self-evident inference, but the supposed inability is usually a refusal to see, resulting either from some passion which wants not to see the truth in question or else from sloth which does not want to think at all. But when the inability is real, argument is at an end. You cannot produce rational intuition by argument, because argument depends upon rational intuition. Proof rests upon the unprovable which has to be just “seen.” Hence faulty intuition is incorrigible. It does not follow that it cannot be trained by practice in attention and in the mortification of disturbing passions, or corrupted by the opposite habits. But it is not amenable to correction by argument.¹²

The Oxford professor went on to say that all of our reason and the workings of the conscience have four elements at work in the human mind at any one time: the facts gathered from experience, pure intuitions about right or wrong, a process of argumentation by which we arrange our intuitions logically, and some authority which comments upon this moral process and informs us of right and wrong.

We see God following this very process of enlivening the conscience in Isaiah 1:1-20. First, God reviews the “facts of life” that are undeniable from mere observation. The difficulty of life in 8th Century B.C. Israel was undeniable. God then calls upon Israel’s pure intuition. Did they not know good from evil? Could they not see the bad all around them and the good they’d forsaken? Of course, they could. Thirdly, God helps them “connect the dots.” He takes them through an airtight and logical process of both argumentation and arrangement. He argues His case and He arranges the issues of life to point to one irrefutable conclusion. Finally, He appeals to authority: His own authority spoken through the prophetic Word. In the end, the issue is not about interpretation of data, rationality of intuition or agreement with argument. No, the issue is authority. Please read Isaiah 1:19-20.

Tim Keller of Redeemer PCA Church in New York City concludes his argument for faith in Christ in his book, *The Reason for God*, in this manner:

I believe that Christianity makes the most sense out of our individual life stories and out of what we see in the world's history. The Christian understanding of where we came from, what's wrong with us, and how it can be fixed has greater power to explain what we see and experience than does any other competing account. It is time to draw together the various threads of the narrative we have been examining and view the story line of Christianity as a whole. The Bible has often been summed up as a drama in four acts—creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.¹³

There it is: recognize the *facts* of creation; reason through the *intuitions* of a fallen world; review the *arguments* for redemption; respond to the *authority* of the Gospel of restoration. In the end, fact will lead to faith...if you follow the trail of the rational mind. In the end, reason will be informed by revelation...if you hear the call of God on your heart. And argument will bow to authority...if you respond to the Word of the Lord in your soul.

This we love about God: *He is reasonable*. He knows that our problem is not that we can't see and understand the Truth; it's that we don't want to see it and obey. Yet with tender mercy He relentlessly calls us through Christ: "Come, let us reason together. Let us talk and think as friends. Let Me help you see, understand, repent and obey. Then life will be good to you." Who can resist such a reasonable invitation and such a warm welcome to grace? This is God's invitation to you as you attend Church this Sunday. God is waiting there to reason with you.

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

AC: Pray that the peace, purity and progress of the Presbyterian Church in America will be in the forefront of the Commissioners' minds as they prepare for the Assembly.

CTS: Pray for Mark Dalbey, Covenant Seminary's vice president for student services, as he and his staff seek to provide ongoing opportunities for community worship, family nurture and Christian fellowship for all those who are part of the Seminary community.

MTW: Thank God for the development and growth of specific ministry partnerships between MTW, PCA churches and leaders, and national church leaders. Pray God will use these new working relationships to give fresh vision and energy for ministry.

RUM: Please pray for the applicants for Intern positions with RUF for fall 2009. Pray for them as they transition from being students or from other jobs. Pray for wisdom as these applicants are interviewed and placed on campus. Pray that they will grow in faith as they raise the necessary funds for their ministry on campus.

RBI: RBI provides term life insurance and long term disability insurance for full time PCA employees. Pray these insurance plans will continue to be quality products for the needs of participants.

WORLD TRANSFORMATION

*For the earth will be full of the knowledge
of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.
Isaiah 11:9*

Isaiah 11 is one of the hallmark chapters of this chief of all prophets. It speaks of the fulfillment of Christ's mission at His second coming. It pictures the final answer to Christ's prayer: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." It presents three glorious Truths about the Kingdom of God yet to come.

First, the ideal king has already come and will come again, a second and last time (11:1-5). This King, Jesus Christ, is the prophesied "son of David," "the shoot from the stump of Jesse." And He is also the anointed One; the One full of the Holy Spirit. He possesses what the Church has traditionally called "the seven-fold gift of the Spirit." In other words, he possesses the fullness of the Spirit. (Seven is a symbolic number of God's complete work.) His is the Spirit (1) of the Lord, (2) of wisdom, (3) of understanding, (4) of counsel, (5) of might, (6) of knowledge, and (7) of the fear of the Lord. The medieval Church saw these as "the gifts of the Holy Spirit bestowed at the believer's confirmation:"

Q. Which are the effects of Confirmation?

A. The effects of Confirmation are an increase of sanctifying grace, the strengthening of our faith, and the gifts of the Holy Ghost.

Q. Which are the gifts of the Holy Ghost?

A. The gifts of the Holy Ghost are Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Fortitude, Knowledge, Piety, and Fear of the Lord.¹⁴

We understand them better as a symbolic picture of the fullness of God's anointing, through the Spirit, on Christ's life. This is what every people, nation and Kingdom desire: a king anointed with all the gifts and graces a leader needs. Jesus has them all.

Second, this ideal king brings with Him a perfect Kingdom (11:6-9). The imagery here is so marvelous that it arrests the soul and mind in visions of an almost surreal world. This world knows no conflict or animosity: wolves nap with lambs, bears and cattle graze together and infant toddlers play with venomous serpents like our kids play with puppies. Nothing hurts or destroys in this City of God. Even better is this truth: the entire creation possesses a fullness of the knowledge of the Lord. Eden is restored. "It is the picture of the whole creation put back into joint."¹⁵ This is what the poet John Milton called "Paradise Regained."

Third, this ideal king conquers all the nations in the warfare of His Gospel mission (11:10-16). Isaiah speaks of a "signal" being raised up—a banner, an ensign, a battle flag emblazoned with God's coat of arms. His weapons in this warfare are His words: "He

shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked” (v. 4). His Gospel will divide and conquer. First, it will gather and save His chosen people (depicted here as Israel). Second, it will judge and condemn the unbelievers—“the nations”—who war against Christ and the true knowledge of God. This victorious King builds a “highway” (one of Isaiah’s favorite images of eschatological restoration). This highway leads people homeward to the Kingdom of God and to the “city of the great King” (Psalm 48). That highway is the Gospel way of salvation.

What a glorious picture! What a powerful promise of things to come! Recently, as I returned from lunch with a staff member, he said to me, “Mike, it seems that every day I discover some new thing about the depth and devastation of mankind’s fall into sin.” I reminded him that such will be the glory of the City of God: Each day we will say to Jesus, “Lord, I never imagined your world and our lives could be so wonderful!” And Christ will answer us, “This is how my Father, the Spirit and I always intended it to be. This is our life. This is how the three Persons of the Godhead have always lived. This is what I meant by the Kingdom of God!” And this is why the last words of Jesus in the Bible are so wonderful: “Behold, I am making all things new” (Revelation 21:5).

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

CEP: Pray for regional conferences that are being held around the country to equip and encourage those who work in children’s ministry.

CC: Pray for our in-hall, live-in staff of Resident Directors and Resident Assistants as they care for our students throughout the year.

MNA: Pray for all of our staff, for growth in God leading volunteers and additional staff into the vision for what God is doing in all MNA ministries. Thank God for the significant additions of new ministries for MNA in both church planting and outreach ministries over the past few years.

PCAF: Pray that God will allow the PCAF to serve more PCA churches and their members.

RH: Pray for Al Bennett, Ministry Director, as he completes preparations for summer camps, including counselor training and speakers, musician and director-communications for the 18 separate camps to be held this summer.

THE FALL OF LUCIFER

*How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn!
Isaiah 14:12*

This portion of Isaiah 14 is one of the most intriguing passages in all of the prophetic literature. Isaiah 14:12-21 begs the question “To whom does Isaiah refer?” Commentators have differed widely over the years as to the identity of this one called “Day Star” and the “Son of Dawn.” Some say this refers to Lucifer, the devil; others point to the king of Babylon; and still others see an allusion to the reality of evil in general. I would suggest that all three are true and all included in this poem.

The Church has long believed in the three great enemies of the soul: the world, the flesh and the devil. Isaiah 14:12-21 speaks of the fall of the world (Babylon and the godless world order; Revelation 17-18), of the evil residing in every human soul (“the flesh”) and of the father of all sin and evil; the prince of this world, the devil. Satan’s fall from heaven to earth, his corruption of humanity through sin, and his mastery over the world are well accounted for in Scripture. Read Revelation 12:7-13:18 for a clear synopsis of this fall.

J. Alec Motyer sets forth the idea that behind Isaiah 14:12-21 lies the old Canaanite myth of the “fall of Helel.” In Canaanite mythology, one named *Helel* (“shining one”) revolted against Baal, the chief god, and when his attempted coup failed, he was cast to earth, among men, with the loss of his divine status.¹⁶ We see in this pagan myth a glimmer of divine revelation. For just as in pagan creation stories or flood narratives there remains the kernel of truth from Genesis, passed down orally and with corruption through the centuries, so in this Canaanite myth the reality of Revelation 12-13 faintly shines through.

Satan fell—“I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven,” Jesus said in Luke 10:18. He fell like a shooting star—the “Morning Star” or “Day Star.” His fall was caused by his unimaginable pride, vocalized in his five famous “I will’s”:

- *I will ascend to heaven; above the stars (i.e., angels) of God—I will become “the Lord of Hosts in heaven”.*
- *I will set my throne on high—my throne will be preeminent over all, even God’s.*
- *I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north—in old Canaanite and in Israelite poetry God always sat in the “far north” where the angels (gods) assembled together (similar to Mount Olympus in Greek mythology).*
- *I will ascend above the heights of the clouds—above the limits of creaturely habitation, where only God may go.*
- *I will make myself like the Most High—I will become God and I will replace Him!*

Sound familiar? It should. This same fallen star said to our first parents, “You will be like God,” if you only eat the forbidden fruit! (Genesis 3:5). Such has been the LIE that has corrupted human nature (the flesh) and reordered human society (the world) ever since.

The king of Babylon bought into this lie. So do all the kings and kingdoms of this world (read Psalm 2). And every sinful soul harbors in its center a deeply-rooted desire to be its own god. Such is the essence of sin. So, you see, Isaiah speaks of the fall of all that is evil...the Devil, its prince; the world, its domain; the flesh, its accomplice. Who brings this triumvirate of evil crashing down around itself? Jesus Christ does. He is the true “bright morning star” (Revelation 22:16). He is the king of this world, and of all God’s creation (Revelation 11:15). And he alone possesses the perfection of human nature (Colossians 2:9 and Hebrews 4:15). Christ alone has the right to ascend above the angels, share the divine glory and sit at the Father’s right hand, in the assembly of the far north. For Jesus alone is like God, equal to God, is God. And this is why the Son of God became incarnate—took on human flesh, entered the world, crushed the devil: “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). And so He has!

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

AC: Pray for the AC/SC office staff in these days remaining before the Assembly, that as they face the myriad of details involved, nothing will be overlooked and all will go smoothly.

CTS: Pray for students pursuing Master of Divinity (MDiv) degrees at Covenant Seminary, that their studies will spark fire in their hearts for the Gospel of Jesus Christ and inspire revived faith in the congregations to which the Spirit will one day lead them.

MTW: Pray for the continued growth and development of church-planting centers throughout the Muslim world, that our workers will help train and resource hundreds of indigenous church planters who will bring the light of the Gospel to needy areas.

RUM: Please pray for the Assistant Coordinators for Reformed University Ministries: John Stone, Assistant Coordinator for Pastoral Care and Training, and Clif Wilcox, Assistant Coordinator for Administration and Interns. Pray that they will oversee their areas of responsibility with wisdom and commitment to the Gospel.

RBI: The staff of RBI converse with many pastors, church staff and missionaries concerning benefits by informing, counseling and encouraging; please pray for wisdom and good advice in these conversations.

WHAT GOD WAITS FOR

*Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you.
Isaiah 30:18*

Years ago, I sat in the sanctuary of the historic Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. Jim Boice walked up to the pulpit, put his hands in his suit coat pockets, and rocked back and forth on his heels in his inimitable way. He began in his deep baritone voice, boyish face lit with a smile: “Well, we’ve come tonight to talk about preaching. And young ministers say to me, all the time, ‘Jim, preaching just isn’t popular anymore!’ And I say, ‘Well, when has it ever been so? People resent and resist the Word at first. Isn’t that the glory of it all?’” And then he delivered a marvelous message on God’s grace in God’s Word.

That’s what Isaiah preaches in Isaiah 30:1-18. He speaks of politics, government, preaching and grace—all in one neat package. We seldom hear the likes of this in our Day. Barry G. Webb comments:

It may be strange to modern ears to hear politics and religion so intimately connected, but for the people of God in Old Testament times life was not compartmentalized into the sacred and the secular as it all too often is with us. The one Lord was Lord of all, and whether or not you respected his lordship was inevitably reflected in the way you made political decisions, just as in any other sphere.¹⁷

Israel, it appears, was just plain “stubborn” (v. 1) and “rebellious” (v. 9). They were like recalcitrant children who said to Isaiah, the prophets and God: “Do not see... Do not prophesy to us what is right; speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions, leave the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel” (vv. 10-11). In other words, “Give us a different god with a different message. We don’t like a Holy God with His message about holiness. Tell us what tickles our ears” (2 Timothy 4:3-4).

God’s response is amazingly surprising. He neither shouts nor reacts in anger. Instead He does three things. First, he warns them of the dire consequences of their stubborn rebellion and refusal to hear the Word of the Lord—their collapse and captivity (vv. 12-14). Second, He shows them the way back to salvation and strength. They are to quiet their souls and trust in God’s Word (vv. 15-17). They may run from God, even on swift horses, but they will end up alone and desolate. Third, He shows them His heart: He longs to be gracious to them, and He glories in blessing them. Their rejection of Him cannot kill His love for them. God will wear them down, work His way and win them back with His grace (v. 18)!

If there was ever a message for today’s preachers it is Isaiah 30:1-18. God has something to say, from the pulpit, about all of life: political elections, public policy, private

decisions and personal lifestyles. If people don't like that, too bad! God is not asking permission to speak into our lives. When the pew says to the pulpit, "Stay out of politics! Keep your opinions to yourself! Don't cram your religion down our throats! Give us something positive! Enough about sin, salvation, holiness! Tell us about health, wealth and personal happiness!" preachers should respond. Please read Isaiah 30:15a and Isaiah 30:18.

Will they like it? No, not at first. Do they need it? Yes, every Sunday. Will they ever respond in both gratitude and obedience? Yes, in time God's grace will break through, overpower and win their hearts. In the meantime we "preach the word, in season and out of season" (2 Timothy 2:2). We do so not because the people love us, but because God loves them. And we wait, with God, until that Gospel truth changes their lives for good and forever.

And that, as Dr. Boice would say, "Is the glory of it all!"

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

CEP: Pray for the parents of the children in our churches today, that they will seek to honor God in the nurture and training of their children.

CC: Pray for safety for the Advancement (fundraising and marketing arms of the college) team as they meet with donors and friends of the college. Pray that the Office for Advancement will continue to present the distinctive of a Covenant College education that promotes Christ's Kingdom first and foremost, bringing glory to His name rather than our own.

MNA: Please pray for MNA Special Needs Ministries Director Steph Hubach's work on developing educational materials for PCA churches so that we might reach out as a denomination to people with disabilities and their families more effectively.

PCAF: Pray that PCA churches will respond to efforts made by the PCA Foundation to communicate its ministry, and that churches will understand the value of its ministry as well as the benefit of telling their congregations about what we do.

RH: Pray for the "Youth Ops" leadership training week to be held in conjunction with the summer camp program. This special leadership training opportunity, especially for youth pastors, leaders and workers, will explore philosophy of ministry, student characteristics, generational cultures and creation as an environment for evangelism and growth.

A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

*A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.
Isaiah 40:3*

Isaiah's prophecy is divided into three volumes: the Book of the Sovereign (1-39), the Book of the Servant (40-55) and the Book of the Spirit (56-66); three books—Father, Son and Spirit. Isaiah 40:1-11 is the introduction to Isaiah's second book. This wonderful passage has been likened to an overture to a great symphony. It introduces all the themes yet to follow in Chapters 40-55: comfort, revelation, incarnation, redemption, the Way of the Lord, the Glory of Christ, the City of God, the Power of the Spirit and the Wonder of Zion's Savior—the Suffering Servant.

The Evangelists use this text to identify and explain John the Baptist and his ministry (Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:2-3; Luke 3:4-6). Its message could be summarized in Isaiah's own words: "Behold your God!" (v. 9). In Isaiah "Behold" is a big word. The prophet uses it over 106 times in his three books. What Isaiah wants us to "Behold!" is this:

First, we are to behold the great comfort of God in His redeeming love. Isaiah is "the Gospel prophet" above all others. For this reason, he is quoted by Jesus and the Apostles in the New Testament more than anyone else in the Old Testament, except for David and his Psalms. The wonder of redemption is a great theme of Isaiah, especially in Book Two (chapters 40-55).

Second, we are to behold our great God and all His marvelous works. Isaiah asks us again and again: To whom can you compare God? The answer is obvious: No one! Isaiah repeatedly calls Israel to compare and contrast: "Behold your idols...behold your God!" Only the irrational man who is blind would choose the works of wood, stone and metal over the Living God.

Third, Isaiah calls us to behold God's servant, the special Suffering Servant, whom the Gospels identify as Jesus Christ. Indeed, and most surprisingly, this is the theme of Isaiah: Servanthood. John Oswalt says this about Isaiah:

It is my conviction that the overarching theme of the book of Isaiah is servanthood. Of course this point of view is explicit in chs. 40-55, but I am convinced that it is implicit in all the others and forms the thread which binds the book together. God has called all people, but particularly his own people, to lay down their self-exaltation and be dependent upon him, to become evidence of his character and deliverance in order that the world might know him as he is and thus be delivered from their own destruction.¹⁸

Thus, fourth, Isaiah makes us behold ourselves. The people of Israel were anything but the servants of Jehovah—worshipping idols, given to sin, focused on self, proud, rebellious and worldly. Since men are made in the image of God, once they beheld their God,

catch a vision of the Servant-Savior, and see the marvel of the divine word and work, they will see themselves as they really are: the servants of God.

God calls Israel “My servant” 14 times in Isaiah. A servant God expects a servant people. Jesus said as much: “Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leaders as the one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at the table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves” (Luke 22:26-27).

There, you see, is the voice of one crying in the wilderness; there is the prophetic message, the word of John: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). The prophet’s song is not really “Thus says the Lord,” or even essentially “Repent for judgment is nigh!” The real voice of God through a prophetic preacher sounds like this: “I stand among you as One who serves. The servant is not greater than the Master. I, your Master, serve you; therefore, you must serve one another. Only in this way will you be able to behold your God!”

Maybe this is really the key that unlocks those wonderful but mysterious Beatitudes. Only the servant of the Kingdom will be blessed, happy, fulfilled. Blessed is the servant of God. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8).

Now that is a radical message for a society of consumers and a culture of the self. There is the voice of God in the wilderness: “Behold your Servant God! Behold, then, yourself!”

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

AC: Ask the Lord to grant traveling mercies and security and safety to the Commissioners and their families before, during and after the Assembly.

CTS: Pray for Sean Lucas, Covenant Seminary’s vice president for academics, as he oversees many aspects of the Seminary’s educational mission, including the continuing enhancement of library and other campus resources, and the strengthening of the Seminary’s various outreach ministries.

MTW: Pray for strong relationships on missionary teams and with their national partners in ministry.

RUM: Please pray for all of the RUF Campus Ministers to grow in their personal devotion to Christ. Pray for the wives that support these men. Pray that these families will be rooted in the Gospel and encouraged and strengthened as they give their lives to minister at universities.

RBI: Please pray for the leadership of RBI as they implement the Strategic Plan developed during 2007. The Core Values, Vision Statement and Mission Statement provide a foundation for this plan, so pray RBI will be true to these values and statements as the Strategic Plan are put into practice with the end result of glorifying God and serving His Church.

THE STRANGE WAYS OF GOD

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.
Isaiah 55:1-13*

When I was a freshman at The Ohio State University, back in 1967-1968, I took as general electives Philosophy 101 and 102. In the second of these two courses our final exam was a unique one. The professor posed to us a dilemma. Here it was: An ocean-liner hit an iceberg and sank. Only five people found their way to a lifeboat: The Pope, a scientist who had just discovered a cure for cancer (not yet revealed), an escaped murderer from a prison and a mother with her newborn infant. Radio contact confirmed that they could not be rescued for five days. But the lifeboat carried only enough water for (1) either five people for three days, or (2) four people for five days. The dilemma was clear. Someone had to go overboard in order to save the rest. Who would it be: Pope? Scientist? Criminal? Mother? Baby? We were to write out our answers with ethical and philosophical reasoning. Our whole quarter grade depended on that one 3,000 word essay.

Isaiah's message of 55:1-13 places us in the same sort of dilemma. We are faced with thirst, hunger, danger and (eternal) life and death issues. From where shall we gain the answers and reasoning for our life-changing decisions? Isaiah is clear: God's Word. Indeed, God's Word will not always seem logical to us; sometimes it will seem even wrong, and always it will stretch our minds and souls. In the end, though, it will always lead to our joy and enrichment.

In 1967, I was still a young Roman Catholic. So the answer to my essay was easy and the rationale was clear. The Pope should volunteer to sacrifice his life for the others. I said, "He should hear the criminal's confession, baptize the baby, pray for the mother and write his last decree funding the scientist's published cure for cancer. Then he should say, "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Then pray, slip overboard and die.

The rest of the class came, almost unanimously, to another conclusion: the Pope should absolve the murderer of his sins and then the group should throw him overboard because he was the least "useful" member of society. Only one student in the class got an A: the Roman Catholic boy.

But my black composition booklet came back with a strange note at the end. It had an F crossed out, then an A beside it, with a note, "See me in my office...ASAP!" When I went to the professor's office, he told me how much my essay had troubled his soul. Then he said to me, "Why, Sir, are you wasting your life in business school? You should be in Philosophy, Theology or Ethics, not in the business of making money. I loved your answer; I hated your reasoning; I am angry over your choice of careers. I gave you an A...well...because I had to; not because I wanted to."

He then asked, “Where did you get your ideas?” I said to him, “I think they’re from Jesus Christ.” And he said, “Ahhh, Jesus! That man bothers me, but I can’t help but like him.” I knew not the Gospel then and so I said nothing, took the A grade, and went to get a pizza with my buddies.

Would that I could meet that professor just one more time. He’s likely deceased by now. How wonderful it would have been to read him Isaiah 55:1-13 and then discuss the Gospel with him. To this day, that professor troubles me, but I can’t help but like him. It is my prayer that God’s strange ways found him out and gave him the gift of eternal life: “For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace” (Isaiah 55:12).

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

CEP: Pray for the local church, that ministry to our children will be focused on raising a generation of Kingdom disciples. Pray for the repentance of our generation as we have given priority to so many other things before this.

CC: Pray that God will give strength and discernment to the Student Development Team as they seek to create an environment that will assist students in developing life skills and enhance their ability to take personal responsibility for their spiritual growth as intentional learners. Pray that they will have wisdom as they assign roommates, design and implement a vibrant Orientation week and train Resident Directors and Resident Assistants to mentor students and create hall identities.

MNA: Please pray for God to continue to open hearts in the PCA to support MNA Special Needs Ministries financially, prayerfully and personally in their local congregations.

PCAF: Pray that God will work through the PCA Foundation more and more to benefit the other PCA Committees and Agencies.

RH: Pray for the Ridge Haven Board of Directors as they move through the search process for a new Executive Director, and for the Executive Committee as they oversee operations during the process.

THE FAST THAT GOD CHOOSES

Is this not the fast that I choose?

Isaiah 58:6

Fasting is a strange thing. It is a lost discipline in a gluttonous age of self-consumption. But according to God, it is a mark of true religion. Of course, it must be the right kind of fasting—the kind God chooses. Isaiah 58:1-14 sets forth in clear, even confrontational, language what kind of fasting God likes. It involves two things.

First, it is a fast that benefits the poor and starves the flesh from the consumption of goods and services (Isaiah 58:1-12). To be deeply religious while we ignore issues of justice, mercy and benevolence is offensive to our God. The Church that can live comfortably in the American brand of capitalism, where the gap between rich and poor is ever widening, where the working class and middle class bear increasing tax burdens but see less and less relief, where common folks can't afford health care or health insurance, where Social Security and retirement funds are consumed by overpaid, dishonest financial executives and squandered by government raids on public savings, is not the religion with which God is comfortable. Somewhere along the line, the Christian must ask, "How much is enough, and how can I help to change the system and provide for the poor?" Sound radical? It is. Sound un-American? It once was not.

Second, this fast God chooses is a fast from busyness and recreation through the observance of the Sabbath Day (Sunday; Isaiah 58:13-14). Life is made up of two precious but limited commodities—money and time, and the latter may well be most in short supply. To rob God of His day of worship and your soul of its day of rest is as sinful as to rob the poor of their daily bread. Isaiah 58:13-14 calls us to do three things with every Sunday we have in the brevity of our lives:

- To honor the day as sacred and set it aside for the corporate and public worship of God
- To delight in the Lord's Day and see it as a happy blessing, not a burdensome duty
- To refrain from our work and from worldly recreations that pull our souls back into the world and away from the Kingdom of God

I must be frank: I am deeply troubled by the way the majority of our PCA Churches no longer have Sunday evening worship services, and all the ministers who declare Chapter 21 of The Westminster Confession of Faith ("Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath") as an exception in their views. Whatever happened to fasting from sports, restaurants, shopping malls and yard work on the Lord's Day?

Perhaps the consumption of time, which ravages our souls, is rooted in the same sin that causes us to consume goods and services to everyone's detriment. Could it be greed? The coveting of more things (even the poor man's things) and more time (even God's one day a week) is the double-root of all evil (1 Timothy 6:10). Think about it.

I believe that Isaiah is unpacking what James summarizes as "pure and undefiled religion:"

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. (James 1:27)

When we give to the poor, spend less and tithe more, save rather than consume and fast from feeding the greedy soul with more stuff, we are able to “visit (care for) widows and orphans (the poor) in their affliction.” And when we take a genuine day off, attend worship at church morning and evening, and fast from feeding the busy soul with more activities, we are able to “keep oneself unstained by the world.”

God promises us wonderful things if we fast from consumption: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). And He promises us greater things still if we fast from busyness and rest in Him: “I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob, your father” (Isaiah 58:14). And the implications are wonderful. Giving and Sabbath keeping restore the foundations of a good and noble society. That is God’s promise.

*And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to dwell in. (Isaiah 58:12)*

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

AC: Pray that the Lord will guard his servants against mistakes in handling the large volume of paperwork necessary to facilitate the Assembly and the other business meetings taking place during the week. Pray also that the technology and equipment used to enhance the flow of business will serve us well!

CTS: Pray for Jimmy Agan, Covenant Seminary’s dean of faculty, as he continues to facilitate deep and rich relationships among the members of the faculty. Pray that each professor will serve the seminary community and the broader church with a humble heart, a spirit of grace and an infectious love for Jesus Christ.

MTW: Pray for MTW’s short-term teams, that their work will be fruitful, and that many short-term workers will respond to the call to long-term missions.

RUM: Please pray for the Interns who are returning to serve for another year on the campus as RUF staff. Pray that they will have a heart for serving others and that they will seek the Lord’s direction as they attend training during the coming months. Please pray for these young men and women, that Jesus and his work will sustain them as they pour themselves out for the sake of the Kingdom.

RBI: RBI employees talk with many PCA pastors and staff who are struggling personally with family and church problems. Pray for the staff to have opportunities to advise and assist.

VISIONS OF THE SON OF MAN

A Vision for Revival

Allen Baker

Pastor of Christ Community Presbyterian Church, West Hartford, CT

Therefore, thus says the Lord, I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy; my house shall be built in it, declares the Lord of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem. Cry out again, Thus says the Lord of hosts: My cities shall again overflow with prosperity, and the Lord will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem.—Zechariah 1:16, 17

Is there a future for Christ's Church in America? More specifically, is there a future for our beloved denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America? I suggest the answer is a qualified "Yes." Here's what I mean.

In Daniel 9 the prophet has been reading the prophet Jeremiah concerning the return from exile after the seventy years in Babylon. Daniel realizes the seventy years are nearly completed and he sees no movement whatsoever of a return to Jerusalem. He is so deeply grieved over this situation that he mourns for three weeks, giving himself to prayer night and day. The thrust of his prayer is contrition and confession. "We have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and rules . . . To you, O Lord, belongs righteousness, but to us open shame, as at this day, to the men of Judah, to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to all Israel, those who are near and those who are far away, in all the lands to which you have driven them, because of the treachery that they have committed against you." (Daniel 9:5, 7). The return from exile occurred in 536 B.C. during the first year of the reign of Cyrus of the Medo-Persian Empire, meaning Daniel is praying this prayer around 550 B.C.

Within this historical context the prophet Zechariah is preaching around 430 B.C., calling God's people, who have by that time returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon, to rebuild the temple. Haggai, a contemporary, is urging the same thing (Haggai 1:7ff). The work had been postponed for one hundred years due to opposition and worldliness, but now under the able leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah the work has begun again. Both these servants of God are deeply grieved at the worldliness of God's people, pulling their hair out, and even that of the people, for giving their children to those who worship foreign gods. Don't miss the similarity of passion between Daniel, Nehemiah and Ezra. Nehemiah sat down and wept and mourned for days when he heard of the broken walls in the city (Nehemiah 1:4). Ezra arose from his humiliation, tore his robe, fell on his knees and stretched out his arms to Yahweh, saying that he was ashamed and embarrassed to lift up his face to God (Ezra 9:5, 6). They were broken, humbled to the dust, humiliated over their sin and the sin of the covenant people.

So the hope in Zechariah's prophecy, that Yahweh would return to Jerusalem with compassion, that His house would be rebuilt, that His cities would again overflow with prosperity, that He would again comfort and bless His people, was founded on heartfelt, genuine repentance and revival prayer. An abiding sense of degradation, desperation, humiliation and condemnation drove Daniel, Nehemiah and Ezra to seek Yahweh for His promised blessing. They would not rest until God sent His promised blessing.

One other piece of the puzzle, before putting this all together practically, is Psalm 85, written after the exile. The Psalmist acknowledges that the Lord has shown favor on His people, that He has restored the captivity of Jacob, that He has forgiven their iniquities, that He has turned aside from His righteous anger. He then asks the Lord to revive them again, that His people may rejoice in Him, that He would keep them from folly. This revival is tied in with salvation. In verse 7 he prays, "Show us your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation." In other words, true revival always brings salvation to many, that Jerusalem will be known as the very center of salvific activity. In fact, Isaiah says that we are to give Yahweh no rest until He establishes Jerusalem as a praise in all the earth (Isaiah 62:7).

The prophecy of Zechariah promises the restoration of worship in Jerusalem, that prosperity will come to God's people in His land. Later Zechariah prophesies that many nations will join themselves to the Lord in that day and will become His people (Zechariah 2:11), reminding us of the wondrous picture of the glorified Christ, in which those of every tongue, tribe, people and nation give adoration to Him in heaven (Revelation 5:9, 10), where there is a multitude that no one can number (Revelation 7:9).

Old Testament prophecies are generally fulfilled in several segments in redemptive history. This one is no different. The first fulfillment came in the day of Ezra and Nehemiah when the temple and the wall around Jerusalem were rebuilt. The second came at Christ's first advent, when He came into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to die five days later for the sins of His people, when the people cried out, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" (Matthew 21:9). The third came fifty days after Christ's resurrection when the promised Holy Spirit came in direct fulfillment of Joel's prophecy (Joel 2:28, 29), when Peter preached Christ, and three thousand Jews and proselytes coming into Jerusalem from other parts of the world were saved. And the ultimate fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy is Revelation 21, where John sees the vision of the new Jerusalem, the holy city, coming down out of heaven from God, where the nations will walk by the light of the glory of God.

Can there be any doubt that Zechariah, Joel, Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah were looking to the great day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit would be poured out in Jerusalem, when thousands would be saved, when repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem (Luke 24:47)? Furthermore, can there be any doubt that the book of Acts is normative for the church of Jesus? In other words, we ought to be seeing, even in our Western, secularized, postmodern world vast numbers of conversions.

And surely you will recognize that this is not happening in the American church, that it is not happening in PCA churches. There are, of course, some wonderful exceptions to this. There is an oasis or two where God is mightily pouring out His Spirit, but surely you

will agree that this is unusual, not normative. Do you believe that Jesus is more powerful than Islam? Do you believe He is more powerful than secularization or postmodernism? I am sure you say, "Of course He is." Then why are we losing the war? Why are we continuing to close down churches—35,000 over the last ten years? Why are there so few conversions in PCA congregations? Why are we so ready to praise pastors and sessions for "being faithful" even though their churches are dying, even though they see so few conversions? Of course men are gifted in various ways and some will have far more evangelistic gifts than others, but should we not see more conversions? Do you honestly believe the glory of God has passed us by forever? At the time of the American Revolution, Presbyterians comprised 25% of our population. King George III referred to the Revolution as the Presbyterian Rebellion. Now Presbyterians make up less than 2% of the American population. Something is amiss.

What is the problem and what must be done? Could it be that we lack humility, desperation, degradation and a guilty sense of condemnation? We do not grieve. We are not brokenhearted over the demise of Christianity in the West. We do not weep over the lost. We have failed to grieve over the fact that untold legions go to hell each year.

Is there hope for the American Church in general and the PCA in particular? There is if we hold fast to Zechariah's prophecy and if we are willing to pay the price to obtain the fruit of it. What we need is revival, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on preachers and congregations. We need a visitation of the Holy Spirit, not unlike what we find in the book of Acts, a movement which brought mighty preaching, mighty conversions, mighty worship assemblies, mighty generosity, mighty leadership and mighty combat with forces of evil. And how does it come? How can we see the fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy in our day? This kind comes only by prayer and fasting. Until we acknowledge our corporate guilt, our coldness and dryness of heart, until we admit our sins of presumption, pride and arrogance, thinking we have a corner on truth and methodology, until we cry out to God in sincere repentance, until we give ourselves earnestly to revival prayer, then we will see nothing of significance and power in our day. We will continue to limp along, seeing few conversions, seeing church plants fail, seeing established churches close down, seeing an escalation of the eradication of Christian virtue in our nation, seeing secularization and Islamization overtake our country. The choice is ours. Will we see our sin, grieve over it, confess it and seek God earnestly; or will we maintain the status quo and die? May God move thousands of us to revival prayer so that Jerusalem may once again become a praise in all the earth.

THE GLORY HAS DEPARTED

Then the glory of the Lord went out from the threshold of the house.

Ezekiel 10:18

Do you think if God was suddenly missing anyone would notice? I mean, if God just left us, was not around anymore, couldn't be found in our world, do you think people would recognize His absence? Sounds silly, doesn't it? But that is precisely what happened to Israel in the Old Testament: God's presence left the Temple and no one noticed for quite awhile!

Think of it. In the wilderness the "Presence" always went before Israel. We call it the Shekinah Glory—that theophany of God in which the preincarnate Son of God was present with Israel in the wilderness. He was a pillar of fire by night and of smoke by day (Exodus 13:21-22). Later, when Moses constructed the Tabernacle, that Shekinah Glory filled the tent of meeting, coming eventually to rest, like a small tornado-shaped pillar of fire and smoke on the Ark of the Covenant, in the Holy of Holies (Exodus 40:34-38). When Solomon built his magnificent Temple, that Glory of the Presence of God came to rest upon the Ark of the Covenant once more (1 Kings 8:10-11).

For over eight centuries, the Presence of God would abide with His people, in His Temple. But when Israel and Judah had backslidden to such an abominable state that idol worship, temple prostitution and infant sacrifice were incorporated into the religion of Israel, God decided to leave.

When this catastrophic event took place, we do not know. Ezekiel 8-11 is a vision or a dream. Yet it portrays an actual event: The exit of the Shekinah Glory from the Temple of the Lord, probably just prior to 605 B.C. and the fall of Jerusalem. I say this because in 605 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar carried off some of the Temple vessels, something he could never have done had the Son of God still been present in the Holy of Holies.

Can you imagine the horror and sense of loss Israel felt when this happened? As Nebuchadnezzar's army surrounded Jerusalem, King Jehoiakim would have ordered the priests to go and fetch the Ark. God would fight for them. As the High Priest pulled back the curtain and as the priests prepared to insert the poles into the Ark of the Covenant and carry God to another victory...no presence! No Shekinah Glory! No pillar of fire and smoke! Gone! God was gone and no one had noticed!

Strange as it may seem, this happens again and again in churches in America. The Holy Spirit, Christ's presence with us, departs. Why? Oh, it could be due to theological apostasy, incessant grieving and quenching the Spirit through disunity and unholiness, or simply because He is no longer preeminent in our lives. We have slowly, subtly come to worship the gods of our culture. Or, worse yet, we have invented a new Christ who is much, much easier to live with. The church (denomination) now operates in its own power, with its own stock of resources, and by its own wisdom. God simply

withdraws...quietly, unnoticed, deeply grieved. He warned us: *“I will not share my glory with another.”* We just didn’t believe Him.

Patrick Morley warns us that there are always two Christs out there on the religious landscape: The Jesus we’d like to exist and the Jesus of the Bible. Tell me, which Jesus is at your church? Really? You say, “Oh, the second, of course; the real Jesus!” And I ask you, “Have you checked recently to see if He’s still there?” Maybe you’d better go peek behind the veil.

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

CEP: Pray that CEP through all of its training and resources will strategically assist local churches in teaching and modeling a biblically Reformed world and life view that will result in members being intentionally missional in all of life.

CC: Pray that God will prepare the hearts and minds of the incoming new students as they prepare to begin the college experience and that God will protect the incoming students from the temptations that come with the new freedoms of being away from home. Pray that He will enable them to use their time wisely during this first year and that He will help them grow to new depths in their relationship with Him in the context of new acquaintances, greater independence as the body of Christ and living obediently to the Word of God.

MNA: Pray for MNA Native American/First Nations Ministries, led by Bruce Farrant. Pray that we in the PCA will seek a deeper awareness of the vast differences between Native culture and mainstream American thinking.

PCAF: Ask God to continue to bless current donors to the PCA Foundation and help them in their stewardship of His resources.

RH: Please pray for the Ridge Haven search for a new Operations Director and Development Director. Pray that that the Lord will give success, enabling these individuals to move into positions and responsibilities quickly.

JACKALS AMONG RUINS

*Your prophets have been like jackals among ruins, O Israel.
Ezekiel 13:4*

On August 26, 2008, Dr. Mike Milton, President of Reformed Theological Seminary (RTS) in Charlotte, North Carolina, delivered a message at the Convocation of RTS to start this academic year. His message was taken from Ezekiel 13:1-5; it was titled “Jackals Among Ruins.” Dr. Milton spoke of a “quiet killer” that was taking the lives of millions of Americans: false preachers.

These preachers are like those of Ezekiel’s day who taught what was in their own spirit rather than that which is in God’s Word. My friend, Mike Milton, describes these failing preachers this way:

The quiet killer of ministry is preaching and teaching the things that are not of God and His Word. The quiet killer of ministry is putting our efforts into causes and movements that do not promote what saves people. When we have neglected the ordinary means of grace, then our churches are weakened, the unconverted neglected and the Great Commission ignored. In short, our people will fall into ruin. The leaders of such churches will become like jackals among those ruins. Few would deny that Western secularized Europe, Britain and—sadly we must add—the United States, look like the spiritual ruins of a bygone faith. Today we know of scandals and scandalous spiritual leaders who are jackals among the ruins.¹⁹

Why was God so concerned about these bogus prophets? Well, besides dishonoring God and lying in His name, they had not prepared the people for “the day of the Lord” (v. 5). Later in his prophecy, Ezekiel would define what this “day of the Lord” would be. Please read Ezekiel 30:1-4.

God would say: “On that day, messengers shall go out from me in ships to terrify the unsuspecting people.” (Ezekiel 30:9).

Let’s be candid: Who wants a ministry like that? We are told today that “the Gospel” needs to be preached, not fire ‘n brimstone! By that, pundits mean only a message of personal forgiveness and assurance in Christ. It seems that we are told by some that grace that justifies us is enough; we need not expect to be sanctified. I may be odd, but I am neither comforted nor encouraged by that message. That, to me, is not good news.

What if the Gospel were about the *Kingdom of God*? What if the good news was about something far, far beyond me and more significant than my little life? What if the Gospel were about something larger than life, greater than self and lasting forever? What if the Gospel taught me to worry less about self and more about “the day of the Lord”?

What if the Gospel actually set me free (Galatians 5:1, 13) to ignore myself and focus my life on the Great Cause of Christ?

Herein lies the glory of our witness: We are called to lift up the hearts and heads of bowed and bewildered sinners and help them gaze upon the horizon where they might catch a glimpse of the City of God—their ultimate destiny and eternal home.

If I preach only what is in my own heart and spirit, then I preach a psychological version of the Gospel that devolves into an evangelical self-help message. Instead of using techniques of positive thinking, I merely turn grace into a baptized method to cope with the reality that the world is dying and the “day of the Lord” is nearer than it was yesterday, while I remain unchanged. This is not the Gospel of Jesus, the Gospel of the Kingdom.

And if I preach that way, Mike Milton and Ezekiel are correct, I become a jackal among ruins. I live like a scavenger among the fallen glory of a once-great civilization, a churlish coyote of a man, unequal to the heroic task of calling God’s people away from Babylon to the City of God.

Prophets were never popular. Preachers of the Kingdom are not much better received. Pastors who stroke the sheep while the world collapses around them are usually well-liked. But in the end, they whimper and growl among the ruins of the world (1 John 2:15-17). How much more noble and necessary it is for us to have men who will prepare us for that inevitable Day of the Lord.

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

AC: Pray for wisdom for each of the members of the Nominating Committee, that they will be sensitive to the needs of each Committee and Agency as they work to propose a slate of names for election by the General Assembly.

CTS: Pray for staff members who work behind the scenes to assist with the mission of Covenant Seminary—especially for those in the Admissions, Financial Aid and Registration offices—that they will serve students with respect, wisdom and a clear love for Christ.

MTW: Pray God will use MTW’s church resourcing team to serve PCA churches and help strengthen their missions ministries.

RUM: Please pray for the Atlanta-based office staff of Reformed University Ministries as they provide administrative support to the 117 campuses across the country. Pray that they will have fresh encounters with Jesus as they serve behind the scenes.

RBI: Please pray for all RBI staff members as they pursue continuing education, enhancing insurance products, plan administration, counseling, communication and financial skills in order to serve the PCA.

THE SOUL WHO SINS SHALL DIE

*Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well
as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die.*

Ezekiel 18:4

People often argue with God about justice and mercy. Israel did, and they had a proverb that God said was wrong: “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge” (v. 2). In other words, the father’s sin and the children are unjustly punished.

We can understand Israel’s confusion. God had said elsewhere in Scripture that the sins of the parents would cause the children to suffer:

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.”
(Exodus 20:4-6)

Please note carefully what God said. First, the dire consequences of our sins affect others, especially our children, who are shaped by our sinful patterns and harmed by our sinful lifestyles. Second, this applies to people who hate God—who reject Him in unbelief. They leave their children only a legacy of Christlessness. Third, the bad results are mercifully limited by God—three or four generations; whereas righteousness goes on for “thousands” who follow after. The gist: our godless ways harm our descendants.

There is no contradiction between Exodus 20:4-6 and Ezekiel 18. Here is why: Sin has its dire consequences, but every person—fathers and sons—is judged on the basis of his own conduct. Israel did not like this principle.

They said to God: “If a man sins, he and his family should be punished.” God responded, “No. Only the soul (individual) who sins will die. The Father dies for his sins; the son dies for his sins, but no one dies for another’s sins...except Christ.”

Israel then said, “What if a man starts out good and ends up bad?” Answer: The man dies for how he ends his life. And so do his children. Conversely, if he starts out bad, repents and ends up good, he will be spared. Israel said, “Lord, you’re being duplicitous; you’re not just.” God countered, “No! You are the ones who are not just. I give people a second chance—a chance to repent, an opportunity to break a parent’s sinful pattern, a lifetime to finish well. It would be unmerciful never to factor in repentance, and it would be unjust to punish junior for Dad’s sins.” It’s hard to argue with God’s logic.

The things God says in Ezekiel 18 bear out in real life. Compare, if you will, two families. In 1677, an immoral man married a fornicating woman. From them came 1,900 descendants. Of these, 771 were criminals, 250 were arrested for various crimes, 60 were thieves, and 39 were murderers. They spent a total of 1,300 years behind bars and cost the state of New York \$3 million!

In the same era, in 1728, a godly young pastor married the daughter of a pastor. Her father was the founder of Yale University and his father, grandfather and great-grandfather were all Puritan ministers. This young couple produced 1,344 descendants. Of these, 186 became ministers, 86 were state senators, 3 were congressmen, 30 were judges, a number were either college professors or presidents, and one (Aaron Burr) became Vice President of the United States. I write, of course, about the descendants of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards.

Underlying this great reality of fathers and sons is the great power of grace. Twice in this passage, God says: “Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live? ... For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live” (vv. 23, 32). God’s grace, through repentance, can change one man’s legacy into that of another man’s blessing. All it takes is for the Gospel to penetrate one life—one son, one granddaughter, one descendent of a broken family. The results can be revolutionary—to thousands who follow after. Such is the power of God’s grace to fathers and sons.

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

CEP: Pray for our children. Pray that they will become leaders in a revival in Jesus’ church, in our culture and in the world.

CC: Please pray for all of our students and especially those students undecided on a major and/or vocational direction to pursue. Pray that God will provide wise counsel to examine God’s calling in their life, and to encourage students to investigate majors and vocations that complement that calling.

MNA: Mapping out an itinerary for the summer months is always a huge and exciting challenge for MNA Native American/First Nations Ministries. Pray that God will give clear direction and open doors to serve and to expand and develop the ministry.

PCAF: Ask God to bring to the PCA Foundation new individuals and families who would benefit from our ministry and services.

RH: Pray for Larry Kramer, the Ridge Haven Accounting Manager, as he gives special direction to the management of Ridge Haven finances. Much wisdom and careful stewardship is needed both to honor the Lord and to provide an appropriate accountability of Ridge Haven to many people.

THE CITY OF BLOOD

*And you, son of man, will you judge, will you judge the bloody city?
Ezekiel 22:2*

Ezekiel 22:1-31 is the classic prophetic text. It seems as if all the woes and sins of Israel are summarized and surveyed in this one chapter. All that the other prophets spoke about prior to the exile are summarized once more by Ezekiel: bloodshed, idolatry, ritual impurity, sexual immorality, oppression of the poor, Sabbath-breaking, extortion, profaning of holy things (irreligion or impiety), contempt for authority, false prophecy, corrupted priesthood and incompetent leadership.

This is a picture of the ripple effects of turning away from God; this is the corruption and ruin of the city of man. It begins with personal sins of omission and backsliding. This affects families and communities (vv. 7, 8). Then the religious community (the church) is defiled. Finally, the “City” (society) is torn by anarchy and violence. The basic parameters set forth in Genesis 1 and 2 are deconstructed and “the way of Cain” (Genesis 4) results in human misery.

These realities are not just perceived by the deeply spiritual or the faithful church people in our nation. They form the very bedrock of human society: Our covenant with one another as a people. On January 6, 1941, just two month after his election to the Presidency and one year prior to entrance into World War II by the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt delivered his most famous speech. It was his State of the Union Address before the assembled government. In this address, FDR outlined what has now become part of the American mystique. What he said is now part of the American psyche and has become known as “The Four Freedoms.” Here are his actual words:

In the future days which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms. The first is freedom of speech and expression—everywhere in the world. The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way— everywhere in the world. The third is freedom from want, which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants—everywhere in the world. The fourth is freedom from fear, which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor—anywhere in the world. That is no vision of a distant millennium. It is a definite basis for a kind of world attainable in our own time and generation. That kind of world is the very antithesis of the so-called “new order” of tyranny which the dictators seek to create with the crash of a bomb. To that new order we oppose the greater conception—the moral order.²⁰

These four freedoms have been immortalized in four paintings by Norman Rockwell. Freedom of speech is depicted by a New England working man standing to speak his mind in a town hall meeting. Freedom of worship is pictured by the busts of four or five people of different faiths all bowed in prayer. Freedom from want is portrayed as a Thanksgiving dinner with grandparents serving three generations assembled around a table of the traditional turkey dinner. And Freedom from Fear is artistically rendered as a mom and dad checking on their children, sound asleep and safely in their bed. They are heart rending, tender and vivid pictures of the common blessings of grace.

Do we stretch the point of Ezekiel 22 by imposing on it a president's speech and an artist's imagination? I think not. As the people of God pursue God's Will and try to apply God's Word to all of life—community life, commerce, church and family—all of society is blessed. Why else would Jesus refer to us as "salt and light?" Surely not merely for evangelistic purposes! Indeed, the apostle Paul wrote to Titus that such pursuit of God's Will and Word was good for all men, women and children in society. Please read Titus 3:8.

As the Church goes, so goes the City. Hence the admonition of King Solomon: "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain; unless the Lord watches over the City, the watchman stays awake in vain" (Psalm 127:1). And Jeremiah tells the exiles in Babylon: "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jeremiah 29:7).

If the City becomes "the bloody city" then it is only because the Church has become unclean. As the Church is repentant, revived, and reformed, the City is restored to God's grace and blessing. As the Church goes so goes the City.

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

AC: Many of our General Assembly Committees and Agencies will be meeting during these days of prayer in preparation for the Assembly. Ask that these committees will accomplish their work with effectiveness and efficiency.

CTS: Pray for students in Covenant Seminary's Master of Arts in Counseling (MAC) program as they prepare to bring the hope of the Gospel to troubled people and hurting families; may they be a means of grace to the broken-hearted.

MTW: Pray for Paul Kooistra, MTW coordinator. Ask God to give him wisdom, insight and encouragement.

RUM: Please pray for the Coordinator for Reformed University Ministries, Rod Mays. Pray for wisdom and direction in his leadership of RUM as he seeks to assist the presbyteries and churches in providing college ministry for the PCA.

RBI: Please pray for the spiritual growth of RBI staff members as they are challenged in their faith while serving in their various jobs.

A TALE OF TWO SISTERS

*Son of man, there were two women, the daughters
of one mother. They played the whore.
Ezekiel 23:1*

In Ezekiel 23:1-49, the prophet presents a parable about two sisters. Their names are *Oholah* (“my tent”), and she is Israel (the Northern Kingdom), and *Oholibah* (“my tent is in her”), and she is Judah (the Southern Kingdom). They come from one mother: Judaism. They are presented as two young girls in adolescence who live in Egypt. There they were fondled and lost their virginity in a lifestyle of fornication. God takes them to Himself, marries them both and teaches them a new way of life. But whoredom is deep within their souls. The older sister (Israel) runs off to live with Assyria in spiritual adultery. Little sister (Judah) has an affair with Assyria but then goes and settles into a life of fornication with Babylon. Both lovers abuse, rape and plunder these two sisters. The tale is a sad one; the parable is poignant with implications.

How we transfer the parable to our time may be debatable. Are the two sisters European Christianity and her little sister American Christianity, both enamored and in bed with postmodernity? Or should we think of Roman Catholicism and her sister Protestantism, both given over to neo-orthodoxy in different but similar ways? Or perhaps, if we keep things closer to home in America, *Oholah* is the mainline church and *Oholibah* is Evangelicalism, once very distinct and different, but now both violated by worldliness. Even more provocative: Can we see two generations in the Presbyterian Church in America struggling with how to be as much like the culture as possible without getting obviously pregnant with apostasy?

Even to write (or read) of such things seems, well...inappropriate, does it not? But I, for one, cannot see this parable merely as an historical commentary on the decline of the divided monarchy from Solomon to Zedekiah. I'd love to do so, but Paul won't let me. Please read 1 Cor. 10:11-15.

Sisters have the tendency to dress alike, act alike, date alike, and even marry alike. Therefore, it would be a good exercise to think through who lovely *Oholah* and her pretty little sister, *Oholibah*, are for us. They may be headed for a life of heartbreak and shame.

Vince Melamed and Gary Barnhill have written a Country/Western song, sung by Trisha Yearwood, called “Walkaway Joe.” It's about a 17-year-old girl who, against her mother's wishes and advice, runs off with a no-good boy, into a life of sadness. Here's the song, in part:

*Momma told her baby, girl take it real slow
Girl told her momma hey I really gotta go
He's waitin' in the car*

*Momma said girl you won't get far
Thus are the dreams of an average Jane
Ninety miles an hour down a lovers lane
On a tank of dreams
Oh if she could've only seen
But fate's got cards that it don't want to show
And that boy's just
A walkaway Joe*

We've seen this sad story a dozen times, it seems, in our neighborhoods. We know of cases like it in our own families. But is it possible that Evangelicalism in America (and maybe the PCA) is flirting with ole Walkaway Joe? Let us pray to God that this not be so.

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

CEP: Pray that the enemy will be thwarted at every point as he tries to steal our covenant children from their purpose in Christ's Kingdom.

CC: Please pray for students who are struggling with personal issues that prevent them from functioning at their greatest potential in a rigorous academic program.

MNA: Please pray for continued protection for our deployed military chaplains. We praise God that we have not had any of our chaplains seriously injured or killed. Many of them are ministering in very dangerous places, and we have had several near misses. Pray for Doug Lee as he leads MNA Chaplain Ministries.

PCAF: Pray that as the PCA Foundation cultivates relationships with prospective donors, God will be glorified and He will move them to take advantage of our services.

RH: Pray for Steve Cobb, Guest Services Manager, as he takes, processes and responds to all reservations and assists with camper registrations. Steve also has responsibility for oversight of all of the housekeeping staff and procedures. Pray for continued good health and strength, especially during those times when the housekeeping staff is rushed to provide for hundreds of people with less than eight-hour turnaround times.

THE VALLEY OF DRY BONES

*Son of man, can these bones live?
And I answered, "O Lord, God, you know."
Ezekiel 37:3*

In a book by the title of *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism*, Joel A. Carpenter examines the revivalism and hope for national revival that both inspired and changed American Fundamentalism into modern Evangelicalism, under the influence of Billy Graham and the "new evangelicals" in the first half of the 20th century. Carpenter dismisses the hope for national revival in his conclusion to the book:

Here was a mythic understanding of revival that could never be fulfilled across a vast and variegated modern nation like the mid-century United States. Over the next generation America's secular pundits would discern one national crisis after another and call repeatedly for national renewal. Perhaps the dream of a great and sweeping revival would continue to elude them. But they had been revived and, to a certain extent, rehabilitated as well.²¹

Many evangelical Christians would be put off by Carpenter's assessment. I am. The vastness and the variety characterizing the American Church and culture have little to do with the possibility of revival or great awakening. The proof of that is Ezekiel 37:1-14.

This small pericope is certainly the most famous of all the parables, visions and prophecies of Ezekiel. Its popularity must certainly reside in the dramatic picture presented here. God had promised Israel a new land, a new heart and a new spirit (Ezekiel 36:22-38). In the discouragement and dismay of the exiles in Babylon, Israel would certainly ask, "How can this ever be possible again?" God answers in this vision.

He takes Ezekiel, the one He calls repeatedly "son of man," in a vision, to the remains of an old battleground. Perhaps this valley of dry bones is the scene of Israel's cataclysmic defeat at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar's Chaldean army. You've read this story: "Can these bones live?" Ezekiel is non-committal: "O Lord God, you know."

God tells Ezekiel to preach—three times: "Prophecy over these bones...prophecy to the breath (spirit)...prophecy and say to them..." So Ezekiel preaches. What he preaches we are not told, but he speaks God's word to the dead as if they were alive. And God's promise to them is powerful and precise. Please read Ezekiel 37:14.

It is after all, you see, not the condition of the nation, not the vastness or plurality of the society or the deadness of the culture, church or soul that matters. The essential element in revival of the Church and great awakening of the nation is the Spirit of God.

In 1840, a number of ministers of the Church of Scotland delivered a series of lectures on the subject of the revival of religion. Alexander Moody Stuart, pastor of

St. Luke's Church in Edinburg, spoke of the work of the Holy Spirit in the revival of religion. He opened his message with these words:

In the revival of the work of God there are two effects of the Spirit which we would mention at the outset of our discourse: He enables ministers to preach with far more than ordinary power, and the people to hear with far more than ordinary perception.²²

There is the explanation of the miracle of Ezekiel 37 and the supernatural providence seen in great awakenings. God's Spirit enables pastors to preach with life-giving power not common to their ministries. At the same time, He enables the spiritually dull and the spiritually dead to hear God's Word as never before. The result is new life, just as Jesus said it would be: "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life" (John 6:63).

Some may give up on the hope of revival in our land and in our time and call it "a mythic understanding of revival." But even the most dubious Christian cannot dismiss the surprising power of the Holy Spirit to "revive us again" (Psalm 85:6). We hope in the Lord, and "The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Corinthians 3:17). The power and freedom to revive us again.

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

AC: Rejoice with us in the Lord's goodness to all the Committees and Agencies for the oversight and leadership provided by the various boards.

CTS: Pray for Bob Burns, Covenant Seminary's dean of lifelong learning and director of the Center for Ministry Leadership (CML); Anthony Bradley, director of the Francis A. Schaeffer Institute (FSI); and their staffs as they seek to help both experienced pastors and future church leaders grow in their ability to engage the world compassionately but courageously with the Gospel so that our churches and culture might be renewed and transformed.

MTW: A continual need on the field is for teaching elders who can mentor, train and provide theological education in order for new churches to mature and expand. Pray that more of these men will consider God's call to the mission field.

RUM: Please pray that presbyteries will desire to begin new campus works in the West, the Northeast and the Midwest and that existing works in these frontier regions of the PCA will remain strong. Pray that the process will go smoothly and that churches in these presbyteries will join in providing financial support.

RBI: A Core Value of RBI is service to others, and the RBI staff members work closely with each other in serving PCA churches. Please pray for quality servant hearts in assisting each other.

THE RISING TIDE

*Then he brought me back to the door of the temple, and behold,
water was issuing from below the threshold toward the east.*

Ezekiel 47:1

A few years ago, when I was living in Jackson, Mississippi, a friend gave me a book by John Barry, titled *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America*. The book records the devastating and revolutionary effect the Mississippi flood of 1927 had on not just the Old South but the nation as well.

First, it crushed once and for all the old Delta plantation society. Second, it altered the balance of economic and political power in the capital city of the Mississippi, New Orleans. Third, it led to the mass exodus of almost a million African Americans to the West and North. Fourth, it reshaped the Democratic Party and ushered in the welfare state approach to racial relations. Finally, it taught America one costly lesson: The mighty Mississippi could never be controlled but, at best, channeled.

In Ezekiel 47, the prophet receives yet another vision from God. Out from under the altar of the heavenly temple, there issues forth a trickling stream of clear, fresh water. As Ezekiel wades in it, this trickle becomes a brook, then a stream, then a canal, and finally a river so deep and broad that it could not be forded by man. Along its banks were trees whose fruit never falls nor leaves ever wither (See Revelation 22:1-5). This river is full of fish and fishermen. And wherever the river flows, two things happen: Life springs forth and what is polluted becomes crystal clear.

Here is another picture of revival and great awakening, much like that of Ezekiel 34:25-31 or 37:1-14. David J. Reimer comments in the footnotes of the *English Standard Version Study Bible*: “This aspect of the vision coheres with 34:25-31 in affirming that renewal is not just moral and does not just come to people but affects the entire natural world” (p. 1576).

What few people realize is how deep, how powerful and how swift the Mississippi River is at the bottom of its channel. The “Ole Black Water” seems to lazily make its way downstream. As the Broadway song says, “Ole Man River, he just keeps rolling along.” Don’t be fooled. At the bottom of the Mississippi River, no man can stand and very few diving vessels can go. The River moves almost one million cubic feet of silt *per second!* In the 1927 flood, it pushed 3 million cubic feet of earth along, per second, by means of a 100-foot wall of water. This Rising Tide shows forth the awesome power of its Creator and Guide.

So does the Gospel stream of mission: It appears at the surface to lope along slowly. But where no man can go and no instrument may measure, it carves deep into people groups, cultures, nations and the flow of world history. The rising tide of the Spirit of God is changing the world before our very eyes.

Every so often it overflows its banks—the “normal” way the Spirit chooses to work—and breaks out in a divine flood of grace and a spiritual wall of power. It sweeps everything before it. We call this Revival. No one can manufacture it. No method of man can control it. No time can predict it. But when the tide rises and the waters of grace flow over our normal limits, amazing things happen. The world itself is changed!

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

CEP: Please pray for the youth ministry volunteers around the country. They are the backbone of youth ministry and often work without recognition (if you have ever taught Jr. Boys Sunday School then you know what I mean). Also include the hundreds of PCA churches without paid youth staff, and the men and women who are leading the Sunday School programs, youth groups, discipleship groups, retreats and summer trips on a volunteer basis.

CC: Please pray that the Admissions Office staff will accurately and effectively portray the distinctiveness of a Covenant education to prospective students and their parents.

MNA: Please pray for our PCA Military personnel and the chaplains who minister to them. Pray also for the military families who are making a great sacrifice for our freedom, particularly with the multiple extended deployments.

PCAF: Pray that the PCAF brochures we have distributed to all PCA churches will be effective in communicating to the church members our services and ministry.

RH: Pray for Steve Cobb as he assumes additional responsibility for the day-to-day operations of Ridge Haven during the Executive Director Search process.

THE DAY OF THE LORD

The Justice of God

Ligon Duncan

Senior Pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, MS

Of the characteristics and attributes which are descriptive of God and which are most dear to the believer's soul, perhaps justice does not come readily to mind. Mercy, compassion, patience and love may more easily be recalled in times of trial and tribulation, or when the mind is set on things above. As my colleague, Derek Thomas, likes to ask, "What do you think about when you are not thinking about anything?" My guess is that very few respond with "the justice of God." And there is a biblical appropriateness to our emphasis on the kindnesses of God that mirrors the emphases of Scripture and certainly the thrust of the Gospel message—that God, in Christ, motivated by His love, pardons sinners and welcomes them in to His family as adopted sons and daughters. This is grace in large writ, free gifts offered to offending creatures based on the love of God. And as sinners, it makes perfect sense that we would be drawn to the aspects of God that deal kindly with sinners, things like patience, covenant faithfulness and mercy. But there is much to be thankful for when it comes to the justice of God.

Justice is, in its most basic sense, a right relationship with respect to right and wrong. That is to say, justice is both being and doing that which is right. For finite creatures such as you and me, this means conformity to what the ultimate law giver has declared to be right and avoidance of those things which He has declared to be wrong. To be just (or "righteous," an intimately related term) is to be one who is on the right side of things as defined by the Judge and, as a general concept, can entail both a legal/forensic dimension ("declared" to be right in the context of a trial) and a moral component (one who does what is right).

As the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong, God is of Himself just. If you want to see the right, look no further than what God does. The right and wrong as defined for us is defined by God who is Himself right and incapable of doing wrong. In this sense, God's justice (or righteousness) is an offshoot of His holiness. God both does what is right, and judges rightly according to the perfect standard of right and wrong as He has defined it.

Traditionally, in theology, God's justice has been further divided between retributive and remunerative justice. Retributive justice is God's activity of passing judgment on sin and is related to His wrath, while remunerative justice has to do with God's activity of rewarding those who do what is right and is motivated by His love.

In the Garden of Eden, God instructed Adam to cultivate the paradise which was entrusted to him and to enjoy its fruits, but to refrain from consuming the fruit of one particular tree. This command was buttressed with a threat, and by implication, a promise: obey and live; disobey and die. Adam stood by as a talking creature cast aspersions on the goodness of God, enticed his wife to eat and traded the paradise of a "good, good and very

good” creation for the fleeting pleasure of a piece of fruit. In so doing he thrust humanity into bondage to sin and caused the creation to moan under the curse of the fall.

For this crime, Adam and Eve received the immediate retributive justice of God, as evidenced by their banishment from the Garden of Eden and, even more, though delayed by 900 years, their own death. Genesis 5 recounts the generations of Adam down to Noah, and while we so often find the focus of the chapter on the tremendous age of these men (Adam lived 930 years, Enosh for 905 years, Methuselah for 969 years), Moses’ refrain captures the meaning of the chapter: “and he died.” Though exalted in their life spans when compared to our threescore years and ten, each man (except Enoch) died. The mortality of man is on display as the retributive act of the justice of God.

And while this feature of God’s justice runs throughout the Bible, His remunerative justice occupies a more prominent position, especially as it relates to His dealings with His people. Because they are His “treasured possession” (Exodus 19:8, I Peter 2:9) and objects of His salvific work, they can expect to be the recipients of His blessing in this life, but especially in the one to come. The way of the righteous is blessed in this life (Psalm 1) and, as a general rule, God’s justice is on display through the benefit those who pursue righteousness in this life enjoy (Proverbs 11:18). As adopted children, Christians can expect treatment in keeping with a beneficent Father who loves to give good gifts (Matthew 7:11). What is more, when God does chastise His people for their sin, the general pattern is one where He quickly relents from His anger and leaves behind a blessing, where the years which the locust have taken away are restored (Joel 2:14,25), and where the lewd acts of the unfaithful bride are atoned (Ezekiel 16). And these rewards are only intensified in the life to come, where present persecution is said to be justly rewarded in heaven (Matthew 5:12), and where those who continue in the faith receive their inheritance (2 John 1:8). After all, our elder brother returned to heaven in order to prepare the many rooms which are part of His Father’s house. God does good to those who do His will, is the rewarder of those who earnestly seek Him, and will bring all who are His into His eternal presence where every tear is wiped away.

To put it another way, God is just as He punishes evil in this life and the life to come and as He does good to those who do what is right. God is just when Sodom is destroyed and when Hannah’s womb is opened, when the Canaanites are driven out of the land and when Daniel survives the lions’ den. But while these are both aspects of God’s justice, they are not exactly mirror images of each other. One is based on absolute merit (the retributive justice) while the other is more relative and conditioned. The sinner who is justly condemned receives justice in perfect relation to his iniquity, for the wages of sin is death. But the Christian who enjoys God’s favor does so fundamentally because he has been reconciled to God by something which God did on his behalf. God has become both the just Judge and the justifier of the ungodly (Romans 3:26) so that the Christian enjoys these benefits as one who has received the very righteousness of God (Jeremiah 23:6). Additionally, the good which the Christian does is an enabled good, for it is the power of God that is at work (Philippians 2:12), so that the Spirit of God is involved in the pursuit of righteousness which the believer is then blessed for doing. And finally, the reward of the remunerative justice of God is out of proportion with the right behavior which is its antecedent. Even when the servant does all that his Master says, he is only doing what is

required, and yet a cup of cold water given in the name of Jesus is seen and remembered by the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth.

Finally, because the days are evil and the creation groans, because the cause of Christ is under attack and the wicked seem to prosper, because sin and sadness still exist, Christians can wait in expectation that one day there will be a Righteous Branch who will reign wisely and execute justice in the land (Jeremiah 23:5), a place where nothing that is unclean can ever enter (Revelation 21:27) and where all that was lost at the Fall is restored and preserved for all eternity. Right now we live in a world where in the space of 100 days, from April through June 1994, some 800,000 Tutsi were slaughtered by their Hutus rivals in Rwanda, the most concentrated genocide in recorded human history. Such events cry out for a good and just God who punishes the wickedness of men, who rewards the righteous and who will one day bring forth the new heavens and a new earth. Even so, Lord, quickly come.

THE GOLDEN CALF

*Hear this word, you cows of Bashan...
who oppress the poor, who crush the needy...
Amos 4:1*

This week we will examine a major theme in the prophetic literature: the day of the Lord. This phrase occurs in nine prophetic books: Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Obadiah, Zephaniah, Zechariah and Malachi. The first and earliest use of the phrase occurs in the preaching of Amos. Please read Amos 5:18-20.

This day of the Lord has a number of nuances to its meaning, but the overriding emphasis of the term is that of judgment: A day of reckoning with God.

Amos lived and prophesied during the days of Judah's King Uzziah and Israel's King Jeroboam II (c. 793-739 B.C.). This was a golden age of prosperity, unknown since the days of Solomon. The Assyrian Empire was unable to continue its rapid expansion and conquest from 780-745 B.C. As a result, a time of peace and prosperity came upon both the northern kingdom (Israel) and the southern kingdom (Judah). This affluence made the Jews both worldly and haughty. They longed for the day of the Lord when God would judge all their enemies, especially Assyria, and usher in an age of Israelite domination over the Gentiles. As a result of this false hope, Israel and Judah failed to see their own sins. As is usual among men, they interpreted economic prosperity as God's blessings and favor. They were wrong.

Assyria was not in a time of decline but of internal reorganization. It's zenith as an empire was yet to come. In 754 B.C. a brilliant military leader and governor, Tiglath-pileser III, would succeed to the Assyrian throne, and in 722 B.C., he would conquer Israel, scatter its people in the dispersion of his vast empire and subdue Judah to the status of vassal state. The worst was on the horizon, but only Amos could see it.

Amos compares the women of Israel to the "cows of Bashan" (4:1), a rich pastureland northeast of Galilee. These bovines were well-fed, fat and lazy. Hardly a complimentary comparison to the comfortable, affluent and fashionable women of Israel. This would be like a preacher today referring to his hard-bodied, well-heeled, suburban "alpha moms," fresh out of the Lady Fitness Center, as "fat cows." Offensive to say the least; offensive, but true.

What was the sin of the "cows of Bashan?" Their materialism had driven their husbands to unethical, greedy and oppressive practices that hurt the poor. Their wives' dainties were purchased at the expense of a poor man's family.

This is nearly impossible for conservative, well-to-do, middle-class Christians to accept. But the facts cannot be argued with: In America, the gap between the rich and the poor widens every year, and the middle class of workers is both shrinking and laden down with taxes and inflation. The "haves" deny this; the "have-nots" know this for a fact. Truly,

this was perhaps the one overarching reason the majority of Americans—white and black, urban and rural—threw out the Republicans and elected President Obama.

The church is not in the business of the redistribution of wealth. The church traffics in truth, and the truth seems painfully obvious to all except “the Israel of God,” the Church (Galatians 6:16). Our prosperity cannot be acquired at the cost of those who work for us being unable to afford medical coverage. Low wages for workers and excessive packages for executives are sin. Second wives cannot join the country club with dues paid for by their husbands’ truancy in paying his first wife her alimony and child support, leaving her and his kids impoverished.

The Bible presents the principles upon which capitalism is based as the path to prosperity. But runaway, irresponsible, consumerist capitalism is our Golden Calf. “What the market can bear” may be the law of Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” in economics, but it is certainly neither the law nor hand of God. Our economic collapse may well be the day of the Lord for us. A dark day. A day to listen to what the Lord of the Nations has to say about our money.

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

AC: Pray for the members of the Administrative Committee as they meet on June 16th, that they will have wisdom and discernment in the decisions they make, especially relating to the work of the Assembly.

CTS: Pray for energy and faith for Covenant Seminary’s faculty of pastor-scholars as they teach in the classroom, in local churches and around the world, and that the Lord will use their experience, knowledge and wisdom to edify, enrich and encourage their students.

MTW: Ask God to bless the PCA with an increased burden of and love for prayer, including prayer for missions and missionaries.

RUM: Please pray for RUF to effectively serve and provide pastoral care to covenant students on their university campuses. Pray that Reformed University Fellowship’s desire to build Christ’s church will be made manifest through teaching students the importance of belonging to the body of believers. Pray that the RUF graduates will quickly root themselves in a church.

RBI: Patience is a great virtue for the staff at RBI. They often work long hours and serve many people, some of whom are struggling with problems and anxious about life. Please pray for patience for the RBI staff.

WAKE UP CALLS

*Blow a trumpet in Zion; sound an alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day
of the Lord is coming; it is near.
Joel 2:1*

No prophet makes central the day of the Lord more than Joel does. It is the theme of his brief prophecy. When Joel was written, and for what occasion, remains a mystery. Evidence for both a pre-exilic and a post-exilic date exists. The occasion of the prophecy may be less important than its message.

Joel interweaves three themes in his message: the day of the Lord, repentance and the Spirit of God given to His people. Joel's prophetic approach is classic. He takes the occasion of an actual locust infestation, and its resulting devastation, and uses it as a prophetic picture of what is to come (or has come) upon Israel: The invasion of the Babylonian armies, the destruction of Judah and the exile.

Joel calls the people to repentance. His word of warning becomes a Biblical principle later set forth by Peter the Apostle. Please read 1 Peter 4:7, 12-19.

Joel's message is simple and clear: God is about to judge His people with severe *remedial* judgments, in order to bring them to repentance and draw them closer to Him. He will then pour forth His Spirit on the Church (2:28-32), to revive and reform it (Pentecost and all subsequent revivals). Then, God will turn to judge the nations in a greater, final day of the Lord: the second coming of Christ and the final judgment of mankind.

In a very real sense, Joel sets forth the divine pattern of expansion of the Kingdom of God: pouring forth of the spirit in power, advancement, decline, judgment, repentance, and another pouring forth of the spirit in revival. These cycles of revival—decline—judgment are known to church historians as the cycles of redemptive history. So obvious is this divine pattern that Jonathan Edwards wrote: "It may be observed, that from the fall of man, to our day, the work of redemption in its effect has mainly been carried out by remarkable communications of the Spirit of God."²³

What must be observed here is that *both* the judgment of God *and* the outpouring of God's grace are seen as attendant to the day of the Lord. Tragedies, devastations, difficult events serve as precursors to days of spiritual refreshment and renewal. It appears that we cannot have the one without the other, for repentance always precedes revival, so judgment always prepares for blessing.

We moderns would do well to view the tragic events of our day as the Hand of the Lord working in the day of the Lord—terrorist attacks, economic recessions, unsettled times. This awesome day of the Lord is not just a far-off, futuristic and final event. Listen to Peter: "The end of all things is at hand...the fiery ordeal when it comes upon you...for

it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God.” Plagues of locusts or the plague of AIDS, are they not both under the Hand of God? Are they not both part of the day of the Lord? And are they not both wake up calls to repent, draw near to God and look to Christ for yet another outpouring of Gospel grace through the Spirit? Such is the warp and woof of Life with God. Behold, the day of the Lord is at hand!

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

CEP: Please pray for youth pastors and their families. The demands of youth ministry such as weekend retreats, weeknight youth group activities, ball games, school plays and week-long summer trips can be difficult on the families of youth pastors. Please ask the Lord that in the midst of these time demands, youth pastors and their families will have quality time together and that husbands and wives can carve out time to grow their marriage relationship.

CC: Please pray for our faculty as they do research and write articles and books in their academic disciplines. Active research is an important factor in enabling our faculty to provide the first-rate Christian education that is at the heart of Covenant’s mission, and so your prayers for energy, focus and fruitfulness in these areas are much needed and appreciated.

MNA: The first edition of the Church Planting Wives Ministry (Parakaleo) toolkit is completed and the second part is being written. Pray for the new groups who are starting and will be using the new toolkit as they begin planting churches. Pray for Shari Thomas as she leads this ministry.

PCAF: Pray for safe travel of PCA Foundation staff and their supplies to and from the 2009 General Assembly in Orlando, FL.

RH: Pray for Dale Hagedorn, the Maintenance Manager, as he bears responsibility for the day-to-day operations of all the Ridge Haven vehicles, water system, buildings, grounds and many types of equipment. Dale is also responsible for ensuring that Ridge Haven is in compliance with many state regulations.

THE DAY OF RECOMPENSE

For the day of the Lord is near upon all nations. As you have done it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head.

Obadiah 1:15

Obadiah is another prophet difficult to date. Most commentators place his prophecy at the time of the Babylonian invasion, though good arguments have been made that Obadiah is the earliest of the Minor Prophets. In either case, Obadiah speaks forthrightly of the day of the Lord. For him, it is a day of recompense.

“The day of the Lord” is a term that describes “events that especially vindicate God’s character and purposes” (ESV Study Bible; notes; p. 1681). One of the character traits or attributes of God is His justice. He pays back evil for evil and good for good, and gives to men what they deserve. This may well be the most basic principle of life: When men do good, they are blessed; if they do evil, they are punished. Our postmodern pessimism will cause many of us to say, “That’s not so! I know lots of people who’ve done good and were persecuted or left unrewarded, while evil men seem to thrive.” Agreed. Psalm 74 seems to answer this dilemma for us. But as a rule, God rewards good and punishes evil, and He certainly does so ultimately (in the end). This is always the case. Hence, the existence of heaven and hell.

One way the wicked are punished is that their evil returns on their own heads—they reap what they sow. The good also accrue for themselves grace and favor from others. Jesus codifies this rule in His Sermon on the Mount: “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12). This is the summary of the Old Testament: The Golden Rule. Life has a way of paying us back for what we’ve done.

This truth applies to individuals, families, churches, communities and even nations. We reap what we sow. Obadiah put it this way: “As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head” (v. 15). This truth is both comforting and disquieting. I am comforted by the fact that others get justice. I am disquieted by the fact that so do I! And this is precisely God’s point.

God’s grace comes to us in a number of ways. At times (most of the time?), God’s grace forbears our sin and counts it not against us for Christ’s sake (Romans 8:1). At other times, God’s grace gives us ample and repeated warnings to turn from our sin (especially that which harms others) before judgment falls. But can we deny that part of God’s favor (grace) is to teach us painful lessons by means of the recompense we receive from Him due to our blindness about our own sinful ways? We might call such a day of the Lord a severe mercy.

I have often been hurt by the sins of others only to finally realize that I had been hurting others in the same manner for months or even years. It's a painful lesson. It is humiliating at times. But I count it as the harsher side of God's grace.

The Edomites felt justified in helping to punish Israel for her sins. After all, they were instruments in God's hands in doing just that. What they were blind to was their own spiteful, vengeful and angry hearts. They took delight in Israel's fall; God did not. So, in time, the same would befall them: The ravages of Jerusalem would be visited upon them. What they did to Israel, Babylon would do to them. Fair is fair.

The Gospel should bring out in each one of us a broken and contrite heart, and an honesty to see how our sins impact others. Repentance includes remorse over the unintended harm we have done to others. It calls for both a vertical reconciliation toward God and a horizontal restitution toward others. At the very least the day of the Lord, whenever it appears in our lives, calls us to pray with the utmost earnestness: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us." You see, that too is part of God's law of reciprocity: We are forgiven as much as we forgive. Sometimes it takes the day of the Lord to call us to the recognition of how strangely grace works in our lives so that we can extend that grace to other's lives.

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

AC: Pray that the Holy Spirit will guide each member of the committees of commissioners as they work for the Assembly, reviewing the work of the General Assembly Committees and Agencies and making recommendations to the Assembly.

CTS: Praise God for the continued success of Covenant Seminary's Worldwide Classroom online ministry and ask Him to use these free downloadable educational resources to bless untold numbers of church leaders and self-learners around the world who are not able to come to seminary.

MTW: College students are vitally important to the future of cross-cultural missions. Please pray for MTW's outreach to these students, especially at Covenant College.

RUM: Please pray for those campus accounts with deficit balances to be built up to allow them to continue their work with RUF. Pray that Campus Ministers will be encouraged as they are reminded to rely on the Lord for provision.

RBI: Oversight of the PCA Relief Ministry, Insurance Plans and Retirement Plan is the responsibility of the RBI Board of Directors. Please pray for them that these men might have wisdom to direct these ministries.

THE DAY THE LORD ANSWERED

*At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will
punish the men who are complacent, those who say in their hearts,
“The Lord will not do good, nor will he do ill.”
Zephaniah 1:12*

I remember watching on television a documentary on the Nuremberg Trials that followed the end of World War II. Nazi officials, including Nazi Air Marshall Hermann Goering, were tried for a multiplicity of war crimes against humanity. The thing that struck me most was their three layers of defense.

First, these criminals repeatedly took as their defense the plea that they were “only following orders.” Gone from their consciences was any concept of the moral responsibility as both government officials and military officers to refuse to obey an illegitimate or immoral order. Second, they repeatedly reminded the allied judges that they had not done anything that the British, French, Russian or American governments had not done. They said, in effect, “If Germany had won the war, the allied officials would be on trial for war crimes. Such was the nature of war—you do what you have to do to win.”

But their third defense tactic was truly amazing. These Nazi Generals, in particular Goering, believed that the Allied Powers lacked the moral fortitude to punish the Germans at all. This led them to respond to the Chief Justices of the free world with a mixture of arrogance, dismissive attitudes and flippant humor. At times, they acted as if the judges were on trial! It was this attitude of moral indifference that sealed their fate years before the war had begun.

Zephaniah, more than any other prophet, emphasizes the day of the Lord. His brief prophecy is all about God’s coming judgment, first for Israel and then the nations. This day of the Lord is a day of both retribution (1:1-3:8) and hope (3:9-20). This coming day promises destruction for the world and the conversion of the world. Meanwhile, the hearts of men are being examined by God.

What is mankind’s root problem? It is much like that of General Goering and his cohorts: an arrogant heart of moral indifference: “I will punish the men who are complacent, those who say in their hearts, ‘The Lord will not do good, nor will he do ill.’” (1:12) God, so they think, lacks the moral fortitude to punish all the evil of the world. They are fatally incorrect in their thinking!

A young man once said to me that the Christian doctrines of judgment and hell were nothing but scare tactics to force people to go to church and believe in God. “There’s no way,” he confidently told me, “that God is going to punish all sin! Why, if God did that He’d have to judge all men and send all of us to hell! No way!”

My misguided friend was correct on one point: God must judge all men for their sins on that great and terrible day of the Lord. And, hard as it may be for us to accept, God *will*

send all people to hell, unless they repent of their sins—their war crimes against heaven—and believe in Jesus Christ. God does not need “the majority” with Him in heaven; He has been perfectly content from eternity past with the fellowship of Father, Son and Spirit. The thought of losing the majority of people does not cause God to lack the moral courage to judge the guilty. The only question is this: Are you willing to be judged now in Jesus Christ and escape hell, or would you prefer to stand before the heavenly tribunal and take your own chances? “The Lord will not do good, nor will He do ill.” Oh, really? Better rethink that statement before the day of the Lord arrives.

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

CEP: Please pray for the one hundred or so students and twenty-five adults who will take part in YXL, CEP’s summer leadership conference July 6-11 at Covenant College. Thirty to thirty-five churches from around the PCA will identify one to five high school students as potential leaders and send them to the conference. This year we will be wrestling with what it means to “Live Free” as sons and daughters of God.

CC: Please pray for our faculty as they teach and mentor our students. Pray that they will be continually grounded in God’s truth in Scripture as the framework for all their academic work, and that God will bless and multiply the impact they have on our students in equipping them for lives of Christ-honoring service in the church and for the Kingdom.

MNA: Pray for the financial resources needed to continue expanding and growing ministries to Hispanic Americans in North America; pray for Tim McKeown as he works with key leaders in developing these resources.

PCAF: Pray for the PCA Foundation’s Board of Directors, that they will continue to exemplify Godly character and integrity as they deliberate and contemplate the direction and progress of the PCA Foundation.

RH: Pray for Dick Hagedorn, Food Service Manager, and his assistant, Jennifer Huskey, as they labor long hours six days a week throughout the summer months. These long hours and heavy schedules also exist other times of the year. Pray that the Lord will provide good health, joyful and creative perseverance, helpful staff and wisdom to create enjoyable meals with critical efficiency.

THE DAY OF VENGEANCE

*That day is the day of the Lord God of hosts, a day of vengeance.
Jeremiah 46:10*

In chapters 46 to 51 of Jeremiah, God pronounces a series of judgments upon the nations of Egypt, Philistia, Moab, Babylon and other lands. That day of judgment and vengeance is called the day of the Lord (Jeremiah 46:10). The first nation singled out for this divine visitation of judgment was Egypt. This ancient land of the Pharaohs was both Israel's oldest enemy and chief of allies. The life of the Hebrew people in the Old Testament was almost inextricable from the influence of Egypt. There was something both horrid and seductive about the "land beyond the wilderness"—the place of pyramids, palaces, dark-skinned beauties and tantalizing gods.

God's judgment of Egypt in the day of the Lord was intended not only to recompense Egypt for its evil ways but also to release Israel from its captivity to Pharaoh's land. Though Moses had led the people through the sea and away from Pharaoh, their hearts longed for the things, the way of life, of Thebes, Memphis and Tahpanhes. It was true: You could take the boy out of Egypt but you couldn't take Egypt out of the boy. So it may well be for American Christians.

In the August/September 2008 issue of *First Things*, editor Joseph Bottum wrote a stellar article: "The Death of Protestant America: A Political Theory of the Protestant Mainline." In that article, Bottum noted that Protestantism served a dual function in American society: "It was simultaneously the happy enabler and the unhappy conscience of the American republic—a single source of both national comfort and national unease."²⁴

Protestantism served as the "third leg" of what America rested upon: capitalism, democracy and free religion. But as American mainline Protestants were co-opted by politics and political parties, she lost her prophetic voice and with it her unique place as both America's pastor and America's prophet. Bottum wrote:

Every so often, there would explode from the churches a moral and prophetic demand on the nation. But, looking back, we can now see that these showy campaigns were mostly a secondary effect of religion's influence on America. Each was a check written on a bank account filled by the ordinary practice and belief of the Protestant denominations.

As it happens, the denominations were often engaged in what later generations would scorn as narrow sectarian debates: infant baptism, the consequences of the Fall, the saving significance of good works, the real presence of the Eucharist, the role of bishops. And yet, somehow, the more their concerns were narrow, the more their effects were broad. Perhaps precisely because they were aimed inward, the Protestant churches were able to radiate outward, giving a characteristic shape to the nation: the centrality of families, the pattern of marriages and funerals, the vague but widespread patriotism, the strong

*localism, and the ongoing sense of some providential purpose at work in the existence of the United States. Which makes it all the stranger that, somewhere around 1975, the main stream of Protestantism ran dry.*²⁵

What Bottum is saying is this: Israel may well live in Egypt, to serve as the enabler of Egypt's goodness and the critic of Egypt's evil, but Israel can never become Egypt. The church may live in America, to serve as the enabler of America's good things and the moral conscience for America's sins, but the Church cannot become pure American.

To prevent this from happening, God sends His day of the Lord. As Egypt dies under the weight of God's judgment, Israel is awakened to the reality of who and what they are—God's people, not Egypt's. As we see American democracy stymied by layers of bureaucracy and partisan politics, American capitalism ruined by the twin gods of greed and corruption, and American religion reduced to a shell of its old glory, we are reminded that we are Christ's people, not America's. It is a tearful lesson, for it is natural for you and me to love being part Christian and part American—the best of both worlds—as it was natural for the Jews to be part Israel and still part Egyptian.

The Cross takes no prisoners. It kills everything under its shadow: Jesus Christ, the apostles and martyrs, the “old man” in each of us, and all cultures that see only the shame of the Cross but none of its glory. The Cross is ever there as a reminder of the day of the Lord (Good Friday) and the fact that Christ has claimed us for His own. We belong to God and to Christ, and since that day of the Lord on Calvary two millennia ago, we ceased to belong to America.

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

AC: Pray for wisdom and discernment for the Commissioners on the Overtures Committee as they process and recommend action on overtures brought to the Assembly.

CTS: Praise God for his blessing on the launch last year of Living Christ 360, Covenant Seminary's Internet broadcast ministry featuring the daily Bible teaching of Bryan Chapell. Pray that people all over the world will find spiritual enrichment and encouragement through this ministry.

MTW: Praise God for open doors in India, where 30,000 people are coming to Christ every day. Pray for our growing and aggressive church-planting program that is seeking to take advantage of the opportunities God is providing in this populous nation.

RUM: Please pray for the RUM Area Coordinators: Bebo Elkin (MS, LA, West TN, AR Area), Keith Berger (Southwest Area), and John Pearson (SC, NC, VA). Ask that the Lord will give them insight and wisdom as they minister to the many staff under their care.

RBI: Gary Campbell, Chet Lilly, Mark Melendez and Terry Aiello are in leadership positions at RBI. Please pray that they will be granted divine guidance and strength to fulfill their important roles.

THE DAY OF THE LORD

*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the
great and awesome day of the Lord comes.
Malachi 4:5*

Years ago, I preached through the Minor Prophets on Sunday evenings. The series took me the better part of five years, with few interruptions. What a mistake! Were it not for the stalwart saints at Trinity Church in Jackson, Mississippi, who were committed to Sunday evening worship, I would have killed the evening worship service altogether. The Minor Prophets are heavy material.

Some may be feeling the same way as we come to the end of this week and our review of the day of the Lord: a week about judgment, vengeance and wrath! Not entirely. The day of the Lord is referred to nineteen times in the Old Testament by nine prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Zephaniah, Zechariah and Malachi. The phrase occurs four times in the New Testament. Its meaning is vast and varied, from a specific event of judgment to the second coming of Christ. But it also refers to the day of salvation.

Malachi 4:1-6 speaks of a day that yet lies in the future of Malachi, but in the past for us. Malachi's prophecy is interpreted by Luke, and it points to the lives and ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. Please read Malachi 4:5-6.

And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared. (Luke 1:16-17)

But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. (Malachi 4:2)

*And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins,
because of the tender mercy of our God,
whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace. (Luke 1:76-79)*

The day of the Lord thus points to the redemptive life, ministry and message of Jesus of Nazareth. In describing His own person and work, Jesus took up the message of the

prophets and the imagery of the day of the Lord. In His first sermon in His hometown and synagogue, Jesus preached from Isaiah 61:1-4, another day of the Lord text. Please read Isaiah 61:1-4.

Jesus came to proclaim “the year of the Lord’s favor”—the Jubilee of the Gospel age when men could be released from the slavery of sin, be relieved of all spiritual debt to God and receive again their birthright of salvation previously bartered away for sin. And Christ also preached “the day of vengeance of our God”—not a revenge taken against us who believe, but against our three great enemies: the world, the flesh and the devil. You and I are now living in the year of God’s favor (See 1 Corinthians 5:17-6:2). And we share the Gospel of God with all who would join us in this Jubilee and who would escape the judgment of God’s day of vengeance.

So...the day of the Lord is not *all* bad news. It is a day of reckoning, but a reckoning between God and His Son, Jesus Christ, for our sake. It is a day and a time in which you and I can repent of sin and believe in Christ and it will be reckoned unto us as righteousness. Not all days of reckoning are foreboding. Some are gracious, even redemptive. But all are glorious as God deals definitively with sin and exalts His champion, Jesus Christ. The day of the Lord is the victorious day of the Lord Christ.

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

CEP: Please pray for spiritual renewal in the lives of “burned out” youth pastors, paid youth staff and youth volunteers. Due to conflict with parents, sessions or Senior Pastors, or due to the pressures of producing a youth program that satisfies youth, parents, sessions and Senior Pastors, or due to personal spiritual laziness, many youth workers are in the process of burning out. Please ask God to give them encouragement today so that they won’t grow weary in the work that God has allowed them to be part of.

CC: Please pray that God will allow us to honor Him by being good stewards of the resources He has given the college, and that we will have integrity in following Federal and State Regulations regarding the handling of allocated funds while awarding students financial aid to allow them to obtain a Covenant College education.

MNA: Pray that more volunteers will be called into MNA ShortTerm Missions opportunities throughout the year and that these ministries will be widely and overwhelmingly supported.

PCAF: Thank God for the PCA Foundation’s Board Chairman, John N. Albritton, Jr., and for the attitude of service and commitment to Christ that he exemplifies.

RH: Pray for the numerous Ridge Haven volunteers who work throughout the year assisting with registrations, the bookstore, the camp store, the camp bank, food service, house-keeping and maintenance. Many of these volunteers are retirees who live in the Ridge Haven residential community.

THE DAY OF THE KING

*And the Lord will be king over all the earth.
On that day the Lord will be one and His name one.
Zechariah 14:9*

Zechariah's visions are akin to those of Daniel—apocalyptic, expansive and eschatological; they are grand visions of the future restoration of Israel and the whole earth. For this reason, Zechariah has been called “the New Testament Prophet” because his prophecies are much quoted, alluded to or referenced by the apostolic writers. One estimate is that 54 passages of Zechariah find their way into 67 passages in the New Testament.

For that reason, Zechariah's visions are sometimes confusing. He mixes his message to Israel and their times with messages about the age to come. No other prophet so clearly presents the day of the Lord as an event at the consummation of human history as does Zechariah. For him (and therefore for us) what happened to Israel was a mere foreshadowing of what will happen to the Church in the last days. Paul sees the Old Testament in the same way: “Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Cor. 10:11).

We could not exhaust in one day's devotion, not even in these 50 Days of Prayer, all the prefigurations of the Old Testament that serve as lessons for us. But one lesson overshadows them all: the day of the Lord.

Zechariah's picture of a new world that arrives on the day of the Lord is mirrored in the last three chapters of the Book of Revelation. The City of God descends from heaven to transform the city of man (earth). All of the warfare of God is over. All of the suffering of man has ended. The full scope of Jesus Christ's Gospel mission now comes solidly into view: Christ was remaking God's broken world.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” And He who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also He said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” (Revelation 21:1-5)

The words of the prophets are now the words of Jesus Christ Himself: *“I am making all things new.”* This is the day of the Lord in its fullest glory...the day when the City of God becomes the house of mankind.

We see now why all the prophets spoke so much about the day of the Lord—the day that Jesus brings us home to God for good, for once and for all. All of those days of remedial judgment, all of those times of national calamity, all of those events when nations fell, all of the eras of sorrow and suffering, the day of atonement on Calvary and the day of the Lord’s return now fit together. They are all part of a process. They are the sequential stages of Christ’s destruction of an old world order and construction of a new world order. They are the process by which Jesus makes all things new.

I once visited an aged and ailing minister in a nursing home. He was refusing to eat. As I entered the cafeteria, the nurse said to me, “Mr. Ross, will you please talk to Mr. ___; you’re the only one he’ll listen to.” I gently scolded the old pastor for his causing distress to the nursing home staff and for not eating his lunch. As I spoon-fed him his Jello, he said to me: “Ross, do you know why I don’t want to eat? I want to die; and these people have never realized that the old must always die if the new is to be born!” He was gone in a matter of three months.

I’ve never forgotten what my heaven-bound friend told me that day: “the old must always die if the new is to be born.” So it is with our ways and our world. Thus we have the day of the Lord. And now we know why Jesus says, “Behold, I am making all things new.”

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

AC: Pray for the women and children at the Assembly, for their spiritual enrichment, fellowship, education and enjoyment in the many activities provided by the Host Committee.

CTS: Pray for the church leaders seeking to prepare themselves for further service to God’s people by pursuing Doctor of Ministry (DMin) or Master of Theology (ThM) degrees at Covenant Seminary, or who will attend ministry conferences or seminars at the Seminary.

MTW: Veteran Berlin missionary Ken Matlack has assumed responsibility for the oversight of MTW ministries in Europe and Africa. Ask God to give him wisdom, strength, perseverance, discernment and fresh vision to meet the demands of this ministry.

RUM: Pray for the RUM Affiliated Committees as they give oversight, pastoral care, accountability and encouragement to the Campus Ministers.

RBI: Vickie Poole, Myra Davis, Sybil Pullen, Sally Kaplan, Jim Mansell and Harry Cooksey are all important staff at RBI. As they carry out the vital work of this ministry, please pray they continue to serve our participants in love, and encourage them in the midst of trials.

THE ANCIENT PATHS

Gospel Truth

Phil Ryken

Senior Pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, PA

We are living in post-Christian times. By all accounts, the evangelical church is in decline, and so is American culture. At the start of the twenty-first century the Bible is considered largely irrelevant to public life. Sometimes its adherents are even considered dangerous. Witness the current bumper sticker: “God, Save Me From Your Followers.”

Christianity no longer shapes the social, political and moral landscape of our nation the way it once did. Other forces are at work. Although there are many ways to analyze what's wrong with American culture, two of the biggest culprits are relativism and narcissism. Relativism is extreme skepticism, the denial that there is any such thing as absolute truth. It is the mind-set that led a housewife from Dayton, Ohio, to say, “Nothing is black and white and every circumstance merits its own judgment.” Narcissism is extreme individualism, the demand for absolute individual autonomy. It is self-admiration, self-satisfaction, self-glorification. It was the narcissist who said, “I believe everybody should really be able to basically do what they want to do.”

In these relativistic, narcissistic times, some Christians say that we need to find a new way of doing church. We are facing new challenges that require a new response. So we should change the style of our preaching, worship, outreach, architecture—possibly even our message—anything to attract the interest of the lost and dying people in a lost and dying culture.

How does the church respond to relativism? It starts with Biblical teaching, with making God's Word plain in an evangelical, doctrinal and practical way. The standard of Biblical authority is preserved and protected by the church's elders, who are the shepherds of God's flock. Relativism is also countered by a Biblical approach to missions and evangelism, in which Jesus Christ is presented as the only way to God. Expository preaching, pastoral care, world missions—these priorities help the church promote God's unchanging truth in changing times.

At the same time, the Biblical pattern for the church helps preserve us from becoming self-centered, despite the fact that we live in a culture of narcissism. God-centered worship shifts attention away from what we want to what God wants, so that the goal becomes pleasing God with our praise. Within our fellowship we use our gifts to care for others, not to serve ourselves. Then, in gratitude to God for His great love, we extend the mercy of Christ to those who are outside the church.

In order to do all this effectively, we must pay the cost of discipleship. Thus a church for post-Christian times is a counter cultural community that stands for God and His truth, rather than for me and my agenda. It is the alternative spiritual society in which we learn not to live for ourselves, but to die to the world and all it seems to offer.

The problem is that the world is too much with us, and so the church is too much like the world. Christians are fast becoming as relativistic and narcissistic as anyone else. Even non-Christians have started to notice. *The New Yorker*, of all places, complains: “The preacher, instead of looking out upon the world, looks out on public opinion, trying to find out what the public would like to hear. Then he tries his best to duplicate that and bring his finished product into a marketplace in which others are trying to do the same. The public, turning to our church culture to find out about the world, discovers there is nothing but its own reflection.” Of course then the question becomes: Why even bother to go to church?

As a pastor, I am often amazed that the church is able to do anything good at all. I really mean this. The sins I know about are shocking enough, but there are many more sins that have never been discovered. We are so desperately sinful that it is remarkable God is able to use us to convert anyone, or to help anyone grow in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. We have only one saving grace: the grace that God has given us in the Gospel of His Son. In the whole history of Christianity, there has never been a church that did not need the Gospel in the most desperate way.

This is the twenty-first century, in which God has called us to live for Christ in post-Christian times. To that end, we offer everything we are and everything we have for His service. If we are wise, we will recommit ourselves to expository preaching, God-centered worship, loving fellowship, pastoral care, costly discipleship, global evangelism and practical compassion. But none of this will matter unless we recognize our need—our daily need—for the Gospel. A church can only be a city on a hill if it confesses its sin and trusts in the crucifixion, resurrection and intercession of Jesus Christ for any hope of salvation.

FACE THE NATION

*The harvest is past, the summer is ended,
and we are not saved.
Jeremiah 8:20*

There used to be a television show airing on Sunday mornings called *Face the Nation*. (It may still be on, but I am busy at church on Sundays.) Perhaps, if we were to put a title to this sermon in Jeremiah 8:4-9:26, we should call it “Face the Nation.” Jeremiah’s message has three points.

In 8:4-17, the prophet reviews the *sin* of the nation. Their perpetual backsliding has led to a loss of God’s blessings and to spiritual discouragement. He then speaks about the *sorrow* of the nation (8:18-9:6). In what is easily one of the most poignant verses in the Bible, Jeremiah laments, “The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved” (8:20). Jeremiah pictures what we call late fall—past summer and post harvest, that time before the dead of winter. His imagery is heart-wrenching. The golden age of Israel was over (David and Solomon’s kingdoms). And the prophetic age, intended as a time of spiritual renewal and the harvest of many souls, was about to end. And still, Israel was not saved. Finally, Jeremiah lifts up the hope of the *salvation* of the nation (9:7-26). This salvation manifests itself in four acts of God: refinement from the Lord (9:7-16), repentance from the people (9:17-22), reliance upon the Gospel (9:23-24) and the recompense of God upon nominal religion (9:25-26).

Jeremiah summarizes the message of all the prophets over the previous four centuries prior to his day:

Thus says the Lord: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord.” (Jeremiah 9:23-24)

Boasting in human wisdom, human strength and human wealth will foolishly lead to spiritual ruin. As I pen this devotion, our nation (and, therefore, our Church) is suffering from this uncalculated failure. Our brightest, boldest and best in the marketplace and the government have failed. The result has been a major recession with unprecedented worldwide effects and dramatic political fallout. Yet, I fear that we Americans have yet to get the message. Let me attempt to connect the dots: “The harvest is over and summer is ended, and we are not saved...but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows (God), that (God) is the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth” (8:20; 9:24).

Face the Nation, look at its sins. Pray for its spiritual condition and its moral order. Our only hope is in the Gospel, and in particular, the Christ of the Gospel. We need not the wisdom of the academy, the strength of the government or the wealth of Wall Street to save us. We need an outpouring of steadfast love, justice and righteousness from Jesus Christ. The harvest of our capitalistic wealth may well be past, and the summer of America's golden age may have ended, but still there is hope that we might be saved. "Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you? Show us your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation" (Psalm 85:6-7).

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

CEP: Pray for the teenagers in PCA churches who must wrestle every day with what it means to be salt and light in a society that does not operate by the same moral and religious code. Today would be a great day to lift up in prayer teenagers you know from your church, asking that God will raise up adults in the church who will form meaningful relationships with them so that they can learn what it means to stand firm and by doing so become a generation that is known as one that seeks after God. Please pray also for the salvation of thousands and thousands of teenagers that are connected with PCA churches who are not yet followers of Christ.

CC: Pray for the members of the President's Staff: Jeff Hall, Vice President for Academic Affairs; Wallace Anderson, Vice President for Enrollment Management; Troy Duble, Vice President for Advancement.

MNA: Pray that more PCA churches will take on the ministry of being prepared for disasters and seize these very important opportunities to reach out with the Gospel. Pray for Arklie Hooten as he leads MNA Short Term Missions and Disaster Response.

PCAF: Ask that the PCA Foundation's President, Randy Stair, will be uplifted, encouraged and given Godly direction as he manages the ministry, staff and business affairs of the Foundation.

RH: Pray for staff protection from the attacks of the Adversary. Sometimes the Adversary attacks by illness, by discouragement and by hindering necessary financial support or by creating equipment breakdowns. Sometimes he hinders by keeping us spiritually occupied by the "tyranny of the urgent."

THE ANCIENT PATHS

*Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths.
Jeremiah 6:16*

There is a hauntingly beautiful literary image that the prophet Jeremiah uses three times in his great prophecy. It is the picture of “ancient paths” (6:16; 18:15; 31:21). The mental image is of an old, forgotten, forsaken highway that is no longer in use and is now overgrown with underbrush. It remains where it has always been, but it is hardly visible anymore.

In the state of Mississippi there is one of the least known, but most lovely, of all of American’s national parks: The Natchez Trace Parkway. It is a two-lane road stretching from Natchez, Mississippi, to Nashville, Tennessee. The speed limit is 50 mph (and strictly enforced). There are no signs, no commercial buildings, other than historical cabins and old inns), and no private homes on the Natchez Trace. This road follows an ancient Indian pathway made by the Natchez Indians prior to Europeans coming to North America. The old Trace is never more than a few yards from the blacktop highway. To stop, walk down onto the Old Trace and stand there is a wonderful thing... a step back into ancient history. I used to get in my car, get on the Trace, set the cruise control at 50 mph and ride for hours—going nowhere, praying, thinking, unwinding with God in the car with me. My wife and I often rode up and down the Trace, talking and praying together.

There is something annoying, even grating to the soul, about modernity. I have heard it called “the arrogance of the modern.” It’s the idea that anything old is inferior and all things new are better. It’s stupid. This arrogance of the modern causes Americans to be afraid to grow old, to be enamored with youth, to make their children idols, to be imprisoned to whatever is trendy, to crave the latest fashion and to worship and rely upon new technology. I’ll let C. S. Lewis explain the root of this insanity.

It may spring from the belief that human history is a simple, unilinear movement from worse to better—what is called a belief in Progress—so that any given generation is always in all respects wiser than all previous generations. To those who believe thus, our ancestors are superseded and there seems nothing improbable in the claim that the whole world was wrong until the day before yesterday and now has suddenly become right. With such people I confess I cannot argue, for I do not share their basic assumption. Believers in progress rightly note that in the world of machines the new model supersedes the old; from this they falsely infer a similar kind of supersession in such things as virtue and wisdom.²⁶

There is no logic to this disdain for the old. There is no good reason for thinking God’s Word is no longer relevant or His ways are not beneficial to us. Listen to Jeremiah:

Thus says the Lord: "Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls. But they said, 'We will not walk in it.'" (Jeremiah 6:16)

Pure and simple: "We will not! We don't want to! No one else is doing it. We will not walk in your ways. We will not pay attention. The answer is 'No!' We refuse to obey."

And yet, the ancient paths are still there. The old ways that the old folks used to tell us about—a life with God at the center and not man, a life that was concerned more with spiritual growth than technological progress. We need only walk off the highway of modernity a brief distance, and we'll find ourselves on an old trace that was once the ancient pathway.

There is an irony about modernity. The more people experience "the latest in modern advancement," the more they yearn for something ancient, deep down in their souls. Somewhere, in the back of their minds they know that not *all* those ancient people were stupid and going nowhere. Modernity lives with this unsettled apprehension: The old ways slowly led us to God, while our modern highways click along at an ever-increasing pace of change and excitement. The only problem is this: We're not quite sure where we are headed and why we're in such a hurry to get there.

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

AC: Please petition our heavenly Father to grant generous giving and the increased participation of each of our churches in financially supporting every General Assembly Committee and Agency. These gifts enable the various arms of the General Assembly to carry out the ministries committed to us.

CTS: Pray for pastors, alumni and others who seek to enhance their understanding of Scripture through Covenant Seminary's continuing education opportunities, such as our intensive 24-hour classes or Lifetime of Ministry course offerings.

MTW: Pray for the Church in Africa, which is facing issues of HIV/AIDS, political and religious upheaval, and internal strife in many countries. Ask God to strengthen His Church, open hearts to the Gospel and grow His Kingdom.

RUM: Please pray for the training of student leaders while on campus and the ongoing ministry they will have in the church in years to come. Ask God that He will enable Campus Ministers and staff to teach students how to minister to those around them in the campus community.

RBI: Please pray for Mr. Scott Schanen and Mr. Ross Walters, Jr., as the newest members of the Board of Directors for RBI. Pray the Lord calls these men to seek His face and equip them to carry out His Kingdom's work as they serve on the RBI Board.

THE RISE AND FALL OF GREAT NATIONS

*Can I not do with you as this potter has done?
Jeremiah 18:6*

Years ago someone gave me a book by the title of *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*, written by Paul Kennedy. The book was an historical review of the mistakes in economics, international policy and military expansion that brought one great nation after another to ruin. The thesis, of course, was that America was on that same trajectory from greatness to decline.

On December 22, 1641, one of the Divines of the Westminster Assembly mounted the steps of St. Margaret's Church, Westminster, and delivered a sermon to the House of Commons. His text was Jeremiah 18:7-10. The title of his sermon was "England's Looking Glass." His thesis was simple, derived from the pages of the Old Testament: "Sin ruins kingdoms." He was, as the English say, "Spot on":

*Righteousness exalts a nation,
but sin is a reproach to any people. (Proverbs 14:34)*

As Edmund Calamy of London preached, he set before the Parliament of Oliver Cromwell a simple truth: Repentance was more crucial to the blessing of a nation than good public policy, military victories or the best men in government. One historian commented on the puritan preacher's intent:

As Calamy preached, he emphasized the importance of repentance in their tumultuous times. He boldly claimed God's sovereignty over nations. That morning, Calamy sought to apply his teaching to the Church, to the nation as a whole, and to Parliament in particular, because he believed that Parliament was the representative body of the kingdom. This representation was not so much to represent the people's rights before the king as to represent its responsibilities before God. Therefore, repentance and reformation should start with them. The seventeenth-century parliamentary preachers had grasped that the greatest need for any nation was reformation according to God's Word. When they had the ears of some of the most powerful men in the country, they preached not so much about policy as about repentance.²⁷

Jeremiah 18:1-12 is as true today as it was six centuries before Christ. And its message is just as valid for America as it was for Israel. It asks our PCA pastors a probing question: If President Barak Obama invited you to speak to the Congress during his State of the Union Address, what would you preach on?" I must admit, my first tendency would

be to speak on the sanctity of life, the integrity of gender, the honor of marriage, the freedom of religion or the protection of our nation from violence, crime and war. After all, these are the first five ethical themes in the first four chapters of Genesis. But as I reflect a bit more, I think I agree with the Westminster Divines who preached to the English Parliament on a regular basis in the 1640s and 1650s.

Repentance is what we all need. For if sin is a reproach to any people and if righteousness truly does exalt a nation, then repentance is the message the preachers of any land need to carry to their people. Here is the glory of it all: We who are PCA pastors do not have to wait and hope to be invited to Washington D.C. to speak to a few hundred congressmen, senators, judges and administration officials. Every Sunday we speak to literally thousands of Americans. And we preach under the auspices of One who is greater than the President of the United States. We have the privilege and the awesome responsibility to speak for God to God's people on behalf of the nations. As such, there can only be one repeated theme that we preach week after week. It is the message of Jesus Christ Himself:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." (Mark 1:14-15)

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

CEP: Please pray for Women's Ministries Coordinator Jane Patete. Pray for godly wisdom and direction in leadership to PCA women. Pray for Cindy Bennett, Assistant to the Coordinator. May the Lord equip and encourage her in this Kingdom ministry.

CC: Please pray for Chaplain Aaron Messner as he oversees all aspects of Covenant's chapel program.

MNA: Pray that churches will recruit volunteers easily for English as a Second Language ministries, led by Nancy Booher, and that ESL workshops will reach the nations that God has brought to our doorstep.

PCAF: Pray that God will be encouraging to and provide safe travel for Randy Stair as he visits local churches, presbyteries, donors and prospects to present our services.

RH: Please pray for the Lord to surround each staff member with encouragement that will keep everyone going when the responsibilities are overwhelming and the rewards few.

THE HIGHWAY OF GOD

*They made them stumble in their ways, in the ancient roads,
and to walk into side roads, not the highway.*

Jeremiah 18:15

Here is the second time Jeremiah references the “ancient paths” (roads). He bemoans the fact that Israel’s idols have led them astray, even when these idols were incorporated into the old religion of Moses. This syncretism of Biblical and pagan ways confused the people of God, caused them to stumble badly and led them astray—down “side roads” and away from God.

Christian sociologist and professor at The University of Notre Dame, Christian Smith has insightfully dubbed American civil religion as “moralistic, therapeutic deism.” Many would be both shocked and offended by that assessment, but Professor Smith’s book and the result of years of research about American teenagers, their parents and their religion validate his conclusions. American preaching is moralistic. American theology is therapeutic. American religion is deism. We need to try harder to do good, aim at being happy and know that God is out there somewhere watching us at a distance. “God Bless America.”

What will offend and shock us even more is this author’s suggestion that Evangelicalism may well be devolving into moralistic, therapeutic deism. The shocker comes in this: The very people who thought themselves “Gospel preachers” seem to have warped that Gospel into a vaguely familiar American format. Here me out.

Moralism: There is an increasing reliance upon a few very popular preachers to the point that their opinions become Gospel truth. Their formulary statements, their books, their online sermons and their associations drive our preaching more than the Word of God does. Tell me, is it any worse to trust in the morals of *Aesop’s Fables*, the musings of existentialist Søren Kierkegaard or the mysticism of Dag Hammarskjöld than to take all your cues from today’s evangelical celebrities? Whatever happened to “Thus saith the Lord”—whether it was grace-based or not?

Therapeutic: Why must we turn everything in the Bible into our pursuit of spiritual assurance? Is not the Gospel about something larger than life, greater than self and lasting forever? Does a good sermon always have to “work”? (I ask, what does it mean when someone responds to the preached word with this: “No, that just doesn’t work for me?”) I have a thought I’d like you to consider: When Jesus and the Apostles preach the Gospel, they are proclaiming the reality that the Kingdom of God has come to earth, and that salvation is *more* about surrender to Christ and entering the Kingdom of God than about a person’s justification and adoption! Think about it.

Deism: It is possible to turn Jesus into the mirror of what we are rather than God incarnate, to such an extent that Jesus becomes everybody. Does this happen? You bet! To

what else can you attribute this statement? “Well, that’s the Jesus of my parents. That’s not my Jesus!” The marvelous thing about Deism is that God is so far removed from us that we can make Him into our image, and He doesn’t care. Let’s be careful we don’t do this to Jesus Christ. We all live with two Jesuses—the one who really is and the one we’d like to exist. But only one Jesus is real.

We’re headed down a dangerous side road, I fear. God is calling us back to the highway, away from moralistic, therapeutic deism to Biblical discipleship in Jesus Christ. We may well be at a crossroads. Stop. Read the signs. And proceed with caution.

*There is a way that seems right to a man,
but its end is the way to death. (Proverbs 16:25)*

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

AC: Pray for the continued ministry of the print magazine *by Faith*. Pray that it will serve to connect people, churches, events and missions of the PCA through the proclamation of the Gospel. Pray that Editor Dick Doster and his staff will exercise wisdom in handling the many details associated with the magazine.

CTS: Pray for the students in Covenant Seminary’s Master of Arts in Educational Ministries (MAEM) program, that they will minister well to children, youth or adults, and that the Spirit will use their ministries to raise up strong disciples of Jesus Christ.

MTW: The MTW StreetChild Ministry was especially close to the heart of Paul Kooistra’s wife, Jan, who went to be with the Lord in April 2008, and the new StreetChild home in Bangalore, India, will be named in her honor. Please pray for funds to complete the property purchase and build the ministry center.

RUM: Pray for the RUM Permanent Committee members as they oversee the ministry. Pray that as new members join this year, they will quickly grasp the work of RUM and continue the vision with unity and focus.

RBI: Pray for the Service Center Representatives at RBI as they interact with our pastors, staff and PCA churches and organizations. Pray for wisdom, guidance and strength for Myra Davis, Sybil Pullen and Harry Cooksey as they answer questions and administer benefit plans.

THE GUIDEPOSTS OF GOD

*Set up road markers for yourself;
make yourself guideposts.
Jeremiah 31:21*

Perhaps the religious periodical that best illustrates the moralistic, therapeutic deism we spoke of yesterday is the popular magazine *Guideposts*, founded by Norman Vincent Peale, the father of “positive thinking.” Its monthly collection of feel-good stories, testimonies of nebulous faith on the part of celebrities and moralistic tales feed the pseudo-Christian faith of many Americans. The magazine takes its name from Jeremiah 31:21.

Ironically, the guideposts Jeremiah had in mind were a far stretch from the theology of positive thinking. What the prophet pointed to was the guidance of the ancient paths (“the road by which you went”). Jeremiah’s prophetic reasoning seems odd to us: The good way forward is found in the old ways of the past. This is the message we need in the Church today.

Stephen J. Nichols teaches at the Lancaster Bible College in Pennsylvania. His book, published this year, is titled *Jesus Made in America: A Cultural History from the Puritans to “The Passion of Christ”* (Intervarsity Press). Nichols was interviewed by Ken Myers on volume 92 (July/August 2009) of the *Mars Hill Audio Journal*. In that interview, Nichols spoke of American Evangelicalism’s love for innovation—newer is better, cutting edge is everything—and its constant need to reinvent itself and its message. Nichols thinks this desire to reinvent and remake Evangelicalism makes it highly susceptible to cultural movements and moods. He comments: “Sometimes we have a vision of the reformation that might need some correction here. As American evangelicals, we like to celebrate the reformation, and rightly so. But even the reformers, and in their sense of reforming the Church, were really not talking about something new but something that had been lost. They did not like to be called innovators or creators. They wanted to sort of get back to something that was lost. But I think that in American evangelical sensibilities being an innovator is something that we champion, something that we want to be.”²⁸

Historian Sidney Meade credited this weird American fetish for the new with what he called “America’s historylessness”—a lack of tradition and a loss of the value or importance of tradition. Jeremiah would not make a very good American evangelical.

The prophet calls the Church not forward but backward. Back to the old guideposts back to the ancient “highway” back to “the road by which you went” (i.e., the road you long ago travelled upon). What would these guideposts look like today, these road markers that point “this way” for the people of God? Let me suggest several to you:

- Sabbath-keeping: Putting God and Church back into our weekly schedules (and lives) with both morning and evening worship services, something virtually lost in the PCA.

- Community: Building a Church around relationships and shared lives rather than big buildings and programs.
- The means of grace: Focusing more on preaching, prayer, the sacraments and fellowship than on music (Acts 2:42).
- Ministerial Fellowship: Pastors getting together to pray and encourage one another and not compare or compete.
- Multi-generational communion: Building a congregation into a trans-generational family rather than catering to age groups with niche marketing techniques.
- Confessional: Rediscovering the ancient creeds and confessions rather than the latest pop-psychology or church-growth technique.
- Discipleship: Majoring on maturity rather than numbers; membership and not attendees; holiness over happiness.
- Local Impact: Planting churches in communities that will take “ownership” of a neighborhood and practice the theology of presence.
- Tradition: Old hymns, the church calendar and a reverence for things proven and rooted in history.

Impossible? I think not. As the American church reinvents itself to the point of no identity, these old guideposts and road markers will point the way back to authentic Christianity. As in Jeremiah’s age, it is only a matter of time before the saints desire to find the way back, to “return to these your cities.”

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

CEP: Praise God for CEP’s biblical training and resources that equip women in the church to mature in Christ. Pray for local churches to value these tools.

CC: Pray for the Advancement Office as we go about fundraising efforts, that we will promote a giver’s heart in our donors and in ourselves. We believe that God gifts some with financial resources and the means to support Kingdom efforts. Where Covenant College programs match the hearts of donors, pray that we will be clear; where they do not, pray that will encourage fellow believers to give to the cause that God has laid on their hearts.

MNA: Pray to the Lord of the Harvest to raise up laborers for Hispanic American Ministries in the PCA and that the rate of growth in number of churches with Hispanic American ministries will multiply rapidly.

PCAF: Pray that the Lord will encourage the PCA Foundation’s Business Manager, Mark Bailey, as he assists the PCA Foundation’s President with various administrative responsibilities, implements new information technology systems and helps keep the Foundation’s operations effective and efficient.

RH: Pray for the success of the capital campaign as it completes at the end of the summer.

THE CHILDREN OF OUR FATHERS

*The fathers have eaten sour grapes,
and the children's teeth are set on edge.
Jeremiah 31:29*

When I was in college, my parents shook their heads in discouragement and befuddled amazement at us, their children known as the Baby Boomers. We wore bell bottoms, had long hair, protested the Vietnam War, shut down college campuses, and then all went out and became Republicans who ushered in the Reagan Revolution. Now, our ways have returned to us.

We Baby Boomers, now in our 50s and early 60s, shake our graying heads at our kids, the Millennials. They wear jeans with holes in them, have short and spikey hair, dislike the War in Iraq, voted Democratic in their first election and brought "Change to America" by putting Barak Obama in office.

It seems that things make no more sense today in 2009 than they did when I was in college in 1968. Think of it: The Baby Boomers were part of the greatest evangelical resurgence in history, the most "religious" generation in American history to date. Yet on our watch *Roe vs. Wade* paved the way for abortion on demand, divorce reached a peak in American history and same-sex marriages became legal in some states.

Now, after we've reared our kids in evangelical churches and kept them in church daycare, Vacation Bible Schools and youth groups from pabulum to puberty, all we have to show for it is the rising "new atheism," and young evangelicals who think global warming and the economy are more important than abortion and homosexuality!

Case in point: In the Fall of last year, buses in London carried signs that read, "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." American buses in Washington D. C. answered in kind last Christmas: "Why believe in a God? Just be good for goodness sake!" Even Santa Claus would be offended at the lifting of the lyrics from his song for such blasphemous tripe! Is this the world we Campus Crusade for Christ Baby Boomers built?

Jeremiah answers our questions: He points to an old proverb and says, "The Fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (v. 29). In other words, "Fathers sin and the kids pay the consequences." Not so, says Jeremiah, each generation is responsible for its own sins.

What pastors need to do for these young, independently minded and searching twenty-somethings is to teach them the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34). The Gospel will answer the questions of the soul of our youth as it did those of the souls of their fathers in their youth. Life with God may look a little different under Obama than it did under Reagan, but it will still be grounded in the Covenant of Grace.

In the end, are things really that different? At Ohio State University, my philosophy professor held up a magazine one day and with great delight showed us the cover. It read: “God is Dead.” Now, our sons and daughters read books with the title *The God Delusion*. What’s new?

Jack Kennedy or Barak Obama, Vietnam or Iraq, Communism or Islam, pollution or global warming, the civil rights movement or the right-to-life movement—they all remind us of the truth that spans all generations. The only thing that makes sense out of life is this overarching and magnificent truth: “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” (31:33).

So, confused Baby Boomer parents, listen to some of your own guitar prophets: “Teach your children well.” Teach them the Covenant of Grace...the Gospel.

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

AC: The General Assembly relies on a cadre of volunteers (local to Orlando as well as from across the country) to function smoothly and efficiently. Pray that we will have sufficient numbers as well as the experience levels needed to accomplish our tasks.

CTS: Pray for Dave Wicker, Covenant Seminary’s chief operating officer, as he and his staff continue to develop strong and lasting relationships with Seminary friends and donors; ask the Lord’s blessing on their ongoing efforts to raise funds to support the Seminary’s work.

MTW: “Living in Grace,” a discipleship training seminar originally designed for missionaries, is now available to PCA churches through MTW’s Spiritual Life Department. Pray that God will use this seminar to more fully ground His people in the power of the Gospel for daily living.

RUM: Please pray for the five RUF International groups as they reach out to share the Gospel with students from over forty different countries. Many of these students will return to their home countries after a year. Pray that they will be strengthened and equipped to live for Christ and participate in building the Church. Also, pray for these Campus Ministers as they daily strive to overcome their own culture to meet the needs of those in other cultures and to apply the Gospel to these students.

RBI: PCA Ministerial Relief provides for financial assistance to those who qualify according to need. Please pray that more churches will participate in the annual PCA Christmas Offering this year, as it is the source of this financial help. We praise God for a Church that cares about the needs of their servants.

THE DECEPTIVE HEART

*The heart is deceitful above all things,
and desperately sick; who can understand it?
Jeremiah 17:9*

American Evangelicalism is uniquely known for its emphasis on individual faith. It was the American evangelical who invented the idea of “a personal relationship with Christ.” There is, you know, no such phrase in the Bible. I will be foolishly bold to insinuate that, indeed, there is really no such concept in Scripture.

Certainly, our faith must be more than the rubrics and rituals of a formal religion. Going to Church does not make a true Christian. But the converse is true as well. God does not make true Christians who don’t go to Church. Our idolatrous lust for independence, our resentment of both authority and structure, and our fear of conformity—all crass American traits—have combined to create a spiritual anomaly: A “born again” Christian with a personal relationship with Christ but no religion, who is baptized but not a Church member, or a Church member but not “active.” Can this be so? Can we really be one with Christ and not His church? Can the Holy Spirit really live in us but our faith be inactive? Can we be born again, baptized but not belong to a congregation of saints? The answer is “yes” in American Evangelicalism, but “no” in the Bible.

Jeremiah addresses this very issue. He locates the problem in the human heart. And he states that we indeed can be personally spiritual but spiritually lost at the same time. You see, our penchant for “Just Jesus and Me” is dangerously deceptive. Why? Because the heart—that place Jesus is supposed to live when we “ask Him into our heart”—cannot be relied upon to adequately guide us in our Life with God.

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (17:9). Because that is obviously so, “asking Jesus into our hearts” doesn’t do a whole lot of good, does it? No, what is needed is to become engrafted into the people of God, the Church. I am not speaking about the Invisible Church, that doctrine all evangelicals believe. I am speaking about a visible, real, local body of professing believers who gather in a building on a street corner somewhere to worship, work and witness together. I’m talking about the Tenth Presbyterian Church on Spruce Street in Philadelphia PA, or the New Zion Lutheran Episcopal Church on High Street in Columbus Ohio, or the Saint Phillips Episcopal Church on Church Street in Charleston SC.

You see, it’s the flesh-and-blood people in such local churches who keep our deceitful hearts honest. How so? When our heart says to us, “You’re really a committed Christian,” one of the elders from Tenth Presbyterian will call to see why you haven’t been in worship services in the last six months. No one from the Invisible Church is going to do that. When our heart tells us, “You really are a loving person,” a postcard from New Zion will show up in the mail reminding you of your turn to keep the two-year-old nurs-

ery this coming Sunday. Jesus doesn't send out postcards. And when your heart tells you, "You're really a very giving person," one of the vestry members at St. Phillips' will send you a reminder that you're behind on your pledge to the Church this year. The Holy Spirit doesn't send out notices.

Yep, a personal relationship with Jesus is really quite easy. It's so nice to have Jesus in our deceptive, inscrutable little hearts. What's tough is to live among other saints who know that your heart is as rotten as theirs, and perhaps worse apart from the communion of the saints. Life in the local church keeps the heart honest. And for that we are both resentful and thankful, but always needy.

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

CEP: Pray for the annual Leadership Training Conference and the General Assembly programs and seminars to be rooted in the Gospel and to encourage and strengthen PCA women.

CC: Pray for our alumni in their many and varied walks of life, that they will seek first the priorities of Christ and His Kingdom and use the gifts God has given them to serve His Church with excellence and passion. Please pray for the Alumni Executive Committee as they engage the alumni community in prayer, admissions and fundraising opportunities for Covenant.

MNA: Pray for MNA Ministry to State Director Chuck Garriott, and that the weekly and monthly gatherings in Washington DC and in other state capitols will be used to bring many to Christ.

PCAF: Pray for God to encourage the staff to think outside the box to see ways to advance God's Kingdom.

RH: Pray that PCA churches have a renewed vision for the expansion of Ridge Haven, and that we may meet the great need for Presbyterian and Reformed camp and conference resources throughout the country. Such a vision will allow us to complete Ridge Haven Southeast and possibly begin work on Ridge Havens Northeast, Central and West.

THE POWER OF AN UNCOMPROMISING LIFE

Life in the Kingdom of God

Michael F. Ross

Senior Pastor of Christ Covenant Church, Matthews, NC

My favorite book in the Old Testament is the Book of Daniel. Since I was a little boy, the dramatic stories of Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, have exerted a strong drawing force upon my imagination and a spiritual influence upon my soul. The same could be said of Daniel's effect upon the Church of all ages.

The stories and visions of these four remarkable exiles in Babylon were used by God to comfort the Old Testament Church in the days of Israel's restoration. The prophecies of Daniel were read by the high priest, Jaddua, to the young Macedonian Conqueror, Alexander the Great, in 332 B.C. Alexander was greatly impressed that the prophet spoke of him some three centuries prior. Daniel fueled the rebellion of the Sons of Maccabee against the oppression of Antiochus Epiphanes. An entire body of apocryphal literature grew up around the lives of these four men: *The Story of Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, The Prayer of Naboridus* and *The Song of the Hebrew Children*.

In New Testament times, Daniel continued to speak, though he was dead (Heb. 11:4). Jesus quotes Daniel's prophecy in His own Olivet Discourse on the last days (Matthew 24:15). The author of Hebrews clearly references these four men in Hebrews 11:33-34:

...who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. (Heb. 11:33-34)

Sunday School songs and negro spirituals are written about Daniel and his friends. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association now operates a summer discipleship program for teenagers called "Dare to be a Daniel." And to this day, in its morning song liturgy, the Anglican and Episcopal Churches continue to sing or recite the *Benedicite*: that apocryphal "Song of the Hebrew Children."

Why is it we moderns talk about having "feet of clay" or of being "in the fiery furnace," or of going into a hostile environment called "the lion's den," or making note of both the obvious and the inevitable as "the handwriting on the wall?" Yes, Daniel's stories of a Babylonian king and his pagan kingdom, and his odd visions of beasts and dreams of large statues continue to impact our souls to this day. Why?

I believe it is because Daniel's book reminds us of two great truths we easily forget. In the first part of Daniel are a collection of stories (chapters 1-6). As we read them, we become convinced, once more, of the power of an uncompromising life—a life lived singularly for God, on the cutting edge. We ask ourselves "Why don't I live like that? I used

to, when I was a younger man (woman) and newly converted. How did I lose my spiritual edge? When did I begin to play it safe in life and with God?"

In the second half of Daniel's book are visions and prophecies (chapters 7-12). As we pore over these, we discover that there is a greater reality than the world we see; something "more real" than politics, economics, warfare and the rise and fall of nations. The great reality is the Kingdom of God: The realm of the Ancient of Days and the dominion of the Son of Man.

How easy it is to forget these two overarching truths of the Christian life: You and I are called to lead uncompromising lives of faith, obedience and moral courage for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Can we do that by just "daring to be a Daniel?" No, trying harder won't work. Frankly, you are no Daniel, I am no Shadrach and our family and friends are neither Meshachs nor Abednegos! But let us not lose the Gospel of Daniel.

This wonderful book is not primarily about Daniel's faithfulness but rather about God's. Daniel, like you and I, was a man redeemed by grace, indwelt by the Spirit, moved by the Word, tested and refined by the circumstances of his life. Daniel is a book about four young teenage boys who grow up before our eyes into spiritual giants as old men because the Son of Man grabs hold of them and enables them to exert the power of an uncompromising life, whose ripple effects cause spiritual waves even to this day. Join with us this week in our 50 Days of Prayer by reading through the stories of Daniel and his friends. And ask God, by His grace, to grant to you "the power of an uncompromising life."

AN UNCOMPROMISING LIFE

*But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself.
Daniel 1:8*

We will spend this week's devotions in the Book of Daniel (my favorite book of the Old Testament). Daniel divides itself into two parts and two languages. Part one (chapters 1-6) contains stories about the experiences and exploits of Daniel and his three friends: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. The stories in part two (chapters 7-12) are all about grand visions of world history from Babylon to the Roman Empire, and the future Kingdom of God. The book uses Hebrew in 1:1-2:3 and Chapters 8-12. But in Daniel 2:4-7:28 the language switches to Aramaic, the court language of Babylon. Why? Most likely because these middle chapters address issues of universal scope and significance, and not just things peculiar to Israel.

In 605 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took captive the young royalty of Israel and carted them off into Babylon in what was the first of three waves of exile (605, 597, and 586 B.C.). Daniel and his three friends would have been mere teenagers at the time of their deportation to Babylon ("youths," v. 4). You can imagine the trauma and trials of four young men, uprooted from their homeland, demoted from princes to servants, witnesses to the death of family and destruction of their homes, and forced to become Babylonian instead of Jewish.

But these four young men were a cut above the rest. The tragedy of these events brought out in them a living faith in God. I remember that after Hurricane Katrina destroyed the Gulf Coast of Mississippi, our Governor, Haley Barbour, told his fellow Mississippians that the tribulations of that storm would bring out the best in some and the worst in others. He was right. Daniel and his three friends rise to the challenge.

They decide to live on the razor's edge of commitment to God. First, on the one side, they would follow God's Word given through Jeremiah. Please read Jeremiah 29:4-14.

They chose to live in Babylon, serve the Babylonian king, seek the welfare of the Babylonian Empire and love the Babylonian people. We have every reason to believe that these four young men married Babylonian girls, gave their children Babylonian names and entered into family and friendships with Babylonian people. They did as God commanded.

But second, on the other hand, they refused to become Babylonian inside—in their souls. They refused to eat meat, delicacies and wine of the royal palace because it would "defile" them. How so? First, it was not clean and not kosher; it violated the Levitical code. Even beyond that, these foods and drinks were offered to idols. To eat them was thus idolatry in a vague form. But the primary reason was this: To eat the fine foods of the kings' palace would have seduced and ensnared their souls and led to their complete enculturation. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah chose to be holy—to be "set apart" for God. Only in this way could they live with and love the Babylonians *and* serve as missionaries who would lead their family and friends to saving faith in God.

Two young men of our time have chosen to be Daniels. Their names are Alex and Brett Harris, brothers and the sons of Joshua Harris, Senior Pastor of Covenant Life Church in Gaithersburg, Maryland. At age 16, these two young men chose to be different from all other teens. They tell their story in a fascinating little book: *Do Hard Things: A Teenage Rebellion Against Low Expectations*. Their experiences led to a web-site called “Rebelution”—from “rebel” and “revolution.” Alex and Brett write:

*We’ve been motivated by a simple but very big idea. It’s an idea you’re going to encounter for yourself in the pages ahead. We’ve seen this idea transform “average” teenagers into world-changers able to accomplish incredible things. And they started by simply being willing to break the mold of what society thinks teens are capable of.*²⁸

Daniel and his friends chose to “do hard things” because they saw their young manhood as the launching pad for the rest of their lives. What a launch it was, and what an impact these four boys had on their people, their time and their world. They did hard things. They lived holy lives. They had heavy responsibility. And in it all Christ used them for the Kingdom of God. Where are the likes of these young men today?

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

AC: Join us as we thank our Father for the service of Wayne Sparkman, Director of the PCA Historical Center in St. Louis, MO. He records and chronicles the faithfulness of the Lord to His people in the PCA as he has been tasked by the Assembly’s Administrative Committee.

CTS: Pray for Jay Sklar, Covenant Seminary’s associate dean of academics and director of the Master of Theology (ThM) program, that God will grant him wisdom and grace as he works with students seeking deeper understanding of God’s Word and more effective ways to teach and communicate the beauty of that message to others.

MTW: Pray for the children of our missionaries as they make continual adjustments back and forth from the U.S. to the field. Pray for wisdom for their parents and mentors to assist them through these difficult transitions.

RUM: Many of our interns and Campus Ministers have experienced great suffering and loss over the last year. Pray for those who have lost unborn children and family members, battled with cancer and chronic illnesses, and those who have encountered heart breaking family struggles. Pray that the grace of the Lord will be abundant in their daily lives and the abiding love of their Heavenly Father will sustain them through these difficult times.

RBI: The RBI leadership developed a Vision Statement that states, “To glorify God by helping our ministry partners achieve financial security.” Pray RBI can bring glory to our great God by fulfilling this vision statement.

STEWARDS OF GOD'S MYSTERIES

But there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries.

Daniel 2:28

In 601 B.C., King Nebuchadnezzar had a troubling dream, just about the time that Daniel and his three young colleagues finished their training at the diplomatic school in Babylon. The King was troubled by the dream, and so he assembled his seers and magicians (“the Chaldeans”) and demanded that they do two things; first, tell him what dream he had; and second, interpret that dream for him. He was tired of their empty flattery, their formulaic interpretations and their lies (2:9). He wanted the 100% blunt truth.

Daniel prays to God for wisdom and insight, and God reveals the dream to him. His Psalm of praise to God is the highlight of this chapter. Please read Daniel 2:20-23.

The interpretation Daniel receives from God was this: The large statue of a man was an image of successive world kingdoms. The golden kingdom was Babylon with King Nebuchadnezzar as its sterling head. The silver kingdom was the Medo-Persian kingdom of Cyrus and his successors. The bronze kingdom was that of Alexander the Great and his Greek Empire. And the iron kingdom was the Roman Empire of the Caesars—one that was so vast and variegated that it would eventually become part iron mixed with clay, due to mixed marriages (2:43). Thus it was strong but brittle and would eventually collapse. A cornerstone—Jesus Christ—cut out of a mountain would fall on the Roman Empire, shatter it like dust, and then would grow into a great mountain swallowing up all the kingdoms of the world. This is the Kingdom of God, ruled by Jesus Christ, and foretold in the Scriptures:

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.” (Revelation 11:15)

As we read Daniel’s interpretation, we are forced to ask ourselves, “Where in this vision are the nations in which we live?”—The British Empire, the American Nation, the Soviet Block, the European Common Union? The answer is obvious: *We are part of the last Empire. We are extensions of Rome.* Commentators increasingly agree that the empires and states from the Holy Roman Empire of the Middle Ages to modern states all derive their laws, structure, basic culture and military prowess from Rome.

Please note: Each Empire becomes less precious in the type of metal, from gold to iron, but stronger in composition. Meaning? As nations and kingdoms progress through time, there is both a degradation in morality and righteousness in government and a strengthening in power and endurance. Hence, there is a great contrast between the kingdoms of the earth and the Kingdom of heaven. The empires of men experience not a rise upward to glory but a decline downward to dishonor and disunity. Technology makes the world empires stronger; sin makes them more decadent. Conversely, the Kingdom of God starts out small—just Jesus alone—but it grows until the Mountain of God fills the earth and subdues all the peoples with the Gospel.

With what can we compare the Kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade. (Mark 4:30-32)

Let us teach our young people three things, the very things we must first know in order to pass on to them. First, that the mysteries of God (revelation) are of more value and more true than the information of CNN, the Internet or the *Drudge Report*. Second, America is part of Rome and a great-grandchild of Babylon. America will never be the Kingdom of God. We must love America and serve it, as Daniel did both Babylon and Persia. But America can never be our first love or our last hope. Third, we must develop eyes to see the Kingdom of God, as Jesus told us to do in His Kingdom parables (Matthew 13:10-17, 34-35, 51-52).

Paul likens all true Christians to Daniel. He reminds us that we too are given these great mysteries of the Kingdom of God to know, understand, interpret and share with others. And on our stewardship of these mysteries we will be judged.

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. (1 Cor. 4:1-2)

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

CEP: Pray and support the annual Women in the Church Love Gift offering. CEP is the 2008 recipient. The love gift will go to disciple the next generation with the strength and clarity of the biblically Reformed faith. May we be found faithful—Psalm 71:17-18.

CC: We are grateful for the Board of Trustees as they generously give of their time and energy to support the college. Pray for their leadership in this role. Please also pray that the Lord will lead potential Board candidates to the college so that we may continue following the path He has laid out for us.

MNA: Pray for all of our churches to grow in their calling to evangelism, community outreach and deeds of mercy.

PCAF: Ask that the PCA Foundation's Administrator, Valerie Tidwell, will be encouraged and given Godly guidance as she oversees the day-to-day operations of the PCA Foundation office.

RH: Pray for the safety of all guests! Though we make every effort to provide for the safest experience possible, we need the Lord's protection from human error, equipment failure and weather-related problems, as well as His provision for traveling mercies. Pray for the Lord's grace for wise decisions.

THE BOTTOM LINE

*But if not, be it known to you, O King,
that we will not serve your gods.
Daniel 4:18*

Few stories are more famous in all of Scripture than the story of the three Hebrew children in the fiery furnace. Along with the creation story, Noah's Ark, the Exodus and Daniel in the lion's den, this story is learned by every child at the start of Sunday School or the earliest Vacation Bible School. And why not? It is perhaps the most heroic of all stories in the Old Testament. Though the story is well known, perhaps the bottom line of the tale is not.

We live in an age of unbridled pragmatism. The motto of modernity is this: *Only do what works*. Translated: "If it benefits you, it's o.k.; if not, then forget it." We have experienced our present economic collapse precisely because this pragmatism and its effects have come home to roost. Want a big home? Buy it! Can't afford it? Get it now and hope that later it will sell for more. Can't make the payments? Walk away from it, and let someone else clean up the mess. Too much credit card debt? Default on payments and then go get another card. Marriage no longer fun? Get a new wife; or better yet, have several, but don't marry any of them. Feeling the urge to have sex? Do it! Use the pill; if that fails then just pay \$400.00 for a "pregnancy termination" (It's your right to choose!). Religion necessary for the kids? Shop around: the children's ministry is great at First Baptist; the youth group is best at New Directions Church; and VBS is a knockout at Covenant Presbyterian. Carpool the kids from one to another on Sunday mornings. When they outgrow these things, forget going to Church. Hey! It works for me!

But what happens when God, Jesus or the Christian faith *doesn't* work out? You tithe, but God does not bless your finances? You say "No!" to premarital sex, but you're still single? You do the upright thing at work but get passed over for promotion? You rear your children in the faith, and they walk away from Christ in college? What happens when following Christ doesn't work out as it should?

Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah answer that question for us. In their magnificent response to the king's challenge, they set the bar at the level it should be for people of faith in Christ. Please read Daniel 3:16-18.

Three verses. Three sentences. Three answers. Three truths.

1. We don't need to answer to men what God will and will not do. God knows. We don't. If you ask me, "Why hasn't this worked out like God said it would?" I need not answer you. God can speak for Himself.

2. God is able to do whatever He wants, and doing the supernatural is no problem for God. In the end, one way or another, God will work for us, and He will deliver us from evil and bless us. Now or in eternity.
3. If God's ways don't work out as we'd like or as we'd planned, so what? Good or bad, blessings or not, we will never forsake God, deny Christ or turn from the Holy Spirit. To die in faith is better than to live in pragmatism.

This is all so...so...*un-American!* Things are *supposed* to work out for our good (Romans 8:28). God is *supposed* to bless those who follow Him. Christ is *supposed* to answer our prayers—in the affirmative. And the Holy Spirit is *supposed* to make our faith successful so others will believe in Jesus! Who wants to follow a God who gives us no guarantees?

Answer? Those who love God do. Job answers for all of us: “Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?” (Job 2:10). As the Scripture says elsewhere: “Is it not from the Lord that both good and ill go forth?” We don't like this answer, but it's true. Grace does not always work the way we like it to. But love works this way: We are loyal to God even if He “doesn't work.” And He is loyal to us, His people, because we never do for Him all we should. Job learned from the pain and disappointment what Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego learned in the furnace: “Though he slay me, I will hope in him; yet I will argue my ways to his face” (Job 13:15). This is the bottom line of living faith.

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

AC: Please pray for Roy Taylor, Stated Clerk, and John Robertson, Business Administrator, that they will handle with wisdom, insight and discernment the many different issues and questions that come to the Office of the Stated Clerk each week.

CTS: Pray that all Covenant Seminary students will gain an even greater passion for God's world mission and that the Lord will bring forth much fruit from the various short-term mission trips in which students, faculty and staff participate.

MTW: Pray that the growing mercy ministries of MTW will open many hearts to the Gospel, allowing us and our national partners to bring the love of Christ into otherwise resistant areas.

RUM: The Universities today are alive with conflicting ideas. Please pray that Reformed University Fellowship will effectively help college students to understand the authority of Scripture, the ministry of the Spirit and the means of justification and sanctification. Pray that our students will be rooted in the life-giving Scriptures as they engage with the world.

RBI: The Ministerial Relief Ministry has contact with pastors who are without a ministry call. Pray that their needs will be met during the transition and that the Lord will direct them to a new field of service.

EYES FOR THE KINGDOM AND A VOICE FOR GOD

You have been weighed in the balances and found wanting.

Daniel 5:27

It is truly amazing how many English-American idioms come from the Book of Daniel. When people are put through great tests and trials we speak of them being “in the fiery furnace.” If a person is to go into an environment full of tension, opposition and hostility, we say he’s “in the lion’s den.” When we acknowledge human frailties we say they have “feet of clay.” And if everyone can see the end of something and its inevitable demise, we say, “The handwriting is on the wall.” Of all the stories of Daniel, chapter five is my favorite. It is the most poignant, full of drama and pathos. At no time in the book is Daniel as heroic as he is in the courtroom of the king, interpreting the hand of God writing on the wall of the palace.

Here is the chronology of events: Nebuchadnezzar II, who loved and admired Daniel, had died in 562 B.C. He was succeeded by Amel-Marduk, Nergal-Sharezer and Labashi-Marduk, his sons, who ruled from 562 to 556 B.C. (a mere six years). In 556 B.C., Nabonidus usurped the throne and in 550 B.C. he made his son, Belshazzar, co-regent with him. On October 6, 539 B.C., the Medes and Persians, under the command of Darius the Mede, came into the city through an aqueduct in the wall and captured the city of Babylon while Belshazzar partied in a drunken orgy. Babylon fell without a fight.

It appears that Daniel had been forgotten by Nabonidus, put away in retirement (for he would now be in his eighties), and seldom if ever consulted on state issues. Indeed, Belshazzar seems to not even know who Daniel is. It is the queen mother (Beshazzar’s mother) who remembers Daniel and sends for him.

Now, an aged Daniel, wise, sober and godly, stands before a young court of drunken Babylonians. The contrast could not be more dramatic. The hand of God had written on the wall of the banquet hall: “*Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin.*” Literally, “numbered, numbered, weighed and divided.” Here is the sober meaning:

- *Numbered, numbered:* Written twice to emphasize both urgency and shortness of time. The days of Babylon had been numbered and would soon come to an end.
- *Tekel:* Weighed as in a balance or scale, and found to be wanting, lacking, too light-weight. Babylon lacked the substance to remain a world power of dominance. They failed to measure up to the task of dominion.
- *Peres:* Divided. That night Babylon would fall and would be divided between the Medes and the Persians.

Daniel's fearless deliverance of this word of divine judgment illustrates two things. First, Daniel was old and ready to die and be with God. He feared not what a drunken king and raucous court might do to him. Second, and of more importance was this: Daniel had eyes for the Kingdom of God, a vision he had received eleven years earlier (7:1). And his voice still belonged to the Ancient of Days, even after 66 years of public service. Daniel loved God, he loved the Kingdom of heaven, and he loved Babylon, his adopted home. And the best way to serve the best interests of Babylon was to speak for the King of heaven about the Kingdom of God.

Each Christian bears this same responsibility. The days of our nation are numbered. We are closer to the end than to the beginning of the American Hour. Our culture is being weighed by God, and the more godless it becomes the more the scales tip against her. We are a divided people, with divided hearts, who someday may well be divided among the nations. It is my humble opinion that this is already taking place—not militarily, but economically, as the nations of the world buy up our land, our businesses and our banks. We are slowly but surely coming under the control of other nations.

We must speak out for God, His co-regent, Jesus Christ, and this eternal Kingdom. *Numbered:* They shall reign forever and ever. *Weighed:* Christ has been placed on the scales of time and been found more than sufficient for the salvation of mankind. He lacks nothing. *Divided:* The Kingdom of God is dividing the wheat from the chaff and gathering the elect of God from all the nations, while it unites the world in a City whose architect and builder is God. The handwriting is on the wall. Who will help our neighbors read and understand its message?

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

CEP: Give praise for the Women's Advisory Sub-Committee, WIC Trainers, PresWIC and local women's leadership. Pray that the Lord will guard their hearts and sustain them as they pour themselves out in Kingdom service.

CC: Above all else, please pray that Covenant College will stay true to its mission to prepare students to serve the church and the world as courageous, biblically grounded, Gospel-centered agents of Christ's transforming truth and grace.

MNA: Pray that the MNA approved Church Renewal Resources will be truly helpful and well-utilized by our churches.

PCAF: Ask that the Lord will bless the work of the PCA Foundation's Administrative Assistant, Joan Henry, and the Accounting/Administrative Assistant, Jim Standridge, and that they will be encouraged as they provide vital assistance to the Foundation.

RH: Pray for the Lord's provision for Ridge Haven and all the families desiring to send children to camp.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

And to him was given dominion, and glory, and a kingdom.

Daniel 7:14

The seventh chapter of Daniel begins the second half of the book of Daniel, and is the first of a series of visions about the history of Israel in the world from the Babylonian Empire to the Roman Empire, and beyond—to the end of time. At this pivotal point in the prophecy, there appears a vision of the throne room in heaven. The book of Daniel turns on this axis: *The Vision of the Ancient of Days (God the Father) and the Son of Man (Jesus Christ) ruling their eternal kingdom.*

It is the sad mark of a declining nation and a failing culture that great leaders cannot be found. I do not want to sound unkind or censorious, but when I think of our truly great presidents, I think of mostly men of the past. Let me illustrate. While voting this past year, I stood in line with an older couple behind me and a woman my age with her 22-year-old son in front of me. We all got to talking and the man behind me said, “Name the four greatest presidents of the United States.” I chose George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan. The older fellow, a Democrat, chose Lincoln, FDR, Truman and Jack Kennedy (all Democrats). The woman my age, also a Democrat, could only name two: Kennedy and Carter. And the young man said, “I can only think of one: Bill Clinton.” (Of course, he could only remember two presidents in total: Clinton and George W. Bush.)

I thought to myself, “How did we go from such unanimity about the greatness of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln to the frustration we seem to have about more recent presidents?” I wish I had a nickel for every time someone has said to me, “Pastor, I’m just not excited about voting for either candidate in this election.”

Daniel sees a vision of a succession of powerful, violent, frightening beasts, each representing the Gentile powers of the ancient world: Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome. His vision comes in the first year of Beshazzar’s co-regency with his lackluster father, Nabonidus. Gone were the glory days of Nebuchadnezzar—perhaps the greatest ruler in all of antiquity.

It could have been very discouraging to see these visions of the fall of Babylon, Cyrus and the Persians, Alexander and his divided kingdom and the decadent Caesars of Rome. But God gives Daniel a vision within a vision that lifts his heart in hope. Please read Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14.

Here Daniel sees what no other man in history saw, other than Christ. He actually saw God the Father on His heavenly throne and Jesus standing before that throne. He was granted the privilege to see God give to Christ the Kingdom of God, and with it the kingdoms, nations and peoples of the earth. Daniel calls the pre-incarnate Son of God, the “Son of Man” (7-13). This would be Christ’s favorite title for Himself, especially in the

Gospel of Luke. This title speaks not of Christ's humanity, but rather of His dominion, ownership and judgment of all mankind.

Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." (Matthew 26:64)

What encouraged Daniel was what should encourage us. Because we are "in Christ" by faith (Galatians 2:20) and are united to Him forever (Colossians 3:1-3), then the Kingdom of God, Christ's Kingdom, belongs to us. This is the climax of this great vision.

*And the kingdom and the dominion
and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven
shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High;
their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom,
and all dominions shall serve and obey them. (Daniel 7:27)*

History can, and will, get pretty rough. The times will be increasingly unsettled. The kingdoms of the world will go from bad to worse. And world leadership may well decline until a company of fools controls the governments of men. But God sits on the throne. The scepter of heaven is in the able hand of the heavenly prince Himself. And the Kingdom of God is marching forward, unabated and right on schedule. Soon our day of triumph will appear as Vaughan Williams wrote in his hymn, "But now there breaks a yet more glorious day, the saints triumphant rise in bright array. The King of glory passes on His way!"

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

AC: Pray that the Lord will provide all those associated with the General Assembly countless opportunities for witness to the lost, encouragement to fellow brothers and sisters and praise to the Triune God, and that each person will use every opportunity to His glory.

CTS: Please pray that the many students who come to Covenant Seminary from distant lands will feel at home and that the Seminary community will be blessed by the unique cultural and geographical perspectives these students bring to their studies, ministries and worship.

MTW: Pray that all MTW staff would serve with hearts full of love and joy in Christ.

RUM: Please pray for the new Reformed University Fellowship (RUF) groups that will begin in the fall of 2009. Pray that they will be used to spread the Gospel of God's grace on the campus, reaching students with the transforming power of God's Word as it is taught in these groups.

RBI: RBI employees meet together every Monday morning for Bible study and prayer. Please pray this will be a rich time of spiritual insight and fellowship.

A PRAYER FOR REVIVAL

*We have sinned and done wrong, and acted wickedly and rebelled.
Daniel 9:5*

There are many prayers for revival in the Old Testament; prayers by Solomon, Ezra, Nehemiah, Habakkuk, the Sons of Korah and others. But no prayer for revival is as glorious as Daniel's prayer in Daniel 9:1-19. The old prophet, now in his eighties, is in Babylon in 539 B.C., during the inauguration of a new administration: the rule of Persia under Darius the Mede (Cyrus). Daniel realizes that Jeremiah's prophecy that had shaped the life of him and his three companions (now probably all dead) was about to be fulfilled. Please read Jeremiah 29:10-14.

So Daniel does what God said he should do: He seeks God's face in earnest prayer for his own people. What is so wonderfully unique about Daniel's prayer is the way he shapes his thoughts. He is able to summarize the seventy years of captivity under four grand thoughts.

First, Daniel states that it was the sin and rebellion of God's people that caused this traumatic captivity. In particular, the people refused to listen to God's prophets again and again. Their rejection of God's word became their national sin.

Please notice that Daniel prays in the first person plural: "We" have sinned, done wrong, rebelled, acted wickedly and broken the covenant. Daniel includes himself in that "we." He personally takes responsibility for the corporate sins of his ancestors: "for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers" (7:16). Daniel does not stand apart from his nation's sins.

Second, Daniel acknowledges that God has ever and always been faithful to His Covenant. His love, mercy and loyalty to Israel are unquestioned. The Covenant had been broken by the Church but never abrogated by the Church's God. God is faithful even when His people are not.

Third, Daniel remembers Deuteronomy 28-30 and Moses' warnings that the Covenant carried with it both blessings and curses. The lawgiver had told the people that someday they would fall to ruin because they spurned the Covenant of Grace. Daniel admits that the people of God got what they deserved. They had been forewarned.

Fourth, Daniel asks God to forgive, revive and restore the people to faith and to return them to Jerusalem and the promised land for one reason: "Delay not for your sake, O My God, because your city and your people are called by your name" (7:19). It is primarily for God's glory that Daniel asks God to complete His word and fulfill Jeremiah's prophecy. The nations will see it and will honor God for His faithfulness to both His promise and His people.

I used to meet monthly for lunch with the late John Reed Miller, a true churchman and the retired minister of First Presbyterian Church in Jackson, Mississippi. My day for

lunch with him was, like clockwork, the third Thursday of every month. And every time I dropped him off at his Belhaven apartment after lunch, he'd take me by the hand and say to me: "Mike, the church will not see revival until the people of God take responsibility for the corporate sins of America." It was like a mantra—every month the same profound reminder.

How does the Church do this? Look to Daniel's example. First, humility: We pray not in anger, self-righteousness or frustration about "those dirty pagans." We pray as broken people who say, "Lord, these are our sins! Why, 78% of all abortions are by Church people. Racism is rife in our congregations. Our marriages end in divorces by the same percentage as the world. We have sinned with our fathers and with our neighbors."

Second, we intercede for our people. We ask for forgiveness, for reviving, for reformation, for restoration to favor and for a release from captivity to our culture. We ask God to deliver our double-minded souls from the things we love about Babylon.

Finally, we ask God to refine and repolish His glory in us. His name we have drug through the American mud, especially for the last 70 years since the Roaring Twenties. It is time, we think, for God to rise up and reclaim His honor in our land, the honor we sacrificed to the gods of this age.

"The Church will not see revival until the people of God take responsibility for the corporate sins of America," and until it begins to pray for America like Daniel prayed for Israel.

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

CEP: Pray that God will enable CEP to continue to help churches develop a strong PCA men's ministry.

CC: Pray for the continued safety and security of our campus, especially with so much campus violence in the past few years around the country.

MNA: Pray for Leadership and Ministry Preparation (LAMP), led by Brian Kelso, for their learning sites and for the students and their families as God continues to move them through the LAMP program.

PCAF: Pray for the PCA Foundation's Board of Directors, that their focus will continue to be on helping to financially support God's Kingdom.

RH: The continuation of Ridge Haven's services depends on the number of people we serve. Just as an increase allows us to expand ministries and services, so also do decreases hinder our ability to maintain equipment, facilities and sufficient staff to do the job. Pray that all will be done in such a way as to bring all glory and honor to the Lord.

IN HEAVENLY PLACES

*The prince of Persia withstood me for twenty-one days.
Daniel 10:13*

In his letter to the Church in Ephesus, the Apostle Paul informs the saints about the reality of spiritual warfare and the nature of the opposition the Church and each Christian faces:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Eph. 6:10-12)

These spiritual forces in the heavenly places (i.e., the spiritual realm of angels and the invisible but real dimension of the cosmos) wage a war against the Kingdom of God on several fronts. They harass and oppress individual believers, they attempt to deceive and discourage the Church and they lead astray the nations of the earth.

Angelology (the study of angels) has long debated over whether or not believers have assigned to each of them a “guardian angel.” Historically, the Church has believed this is so. I hold that view. We know that Churches have angels assigned to guard and preserve them. These angels are mentioned in Revelation 2 and 3. The word “messenger” in most English texts is really the Greek word *angelos*, rendered either “angel” or “messenger.” The English Standard Version translates it literally (“angel”), and is one of the few English translations unafraid to render the Greek in that manner.

In Daniel 10, we meet an even more startling revelation about angels. It appears that powerful angels—both holy and fallen—are assigned to nations by God to preserve them and by Satan to pervert them. In a massive vision that spreads from Daniel 10:1 to the end of the book, the prophet learns that “the prince of Persia” grappled with a heavenly messenger until Michael, the archangel, who is also the guardian of Israel (12:1), came to break the stalemate and release the messenger to speak to Daniel (10:10-14).

The Scripture seems to allude to some order of rank, power and glory among the angels. Lucifer, the devil and Satan, was a cherub in the angelic ranks, the “Son of the Dawn” or the “Day Star,” as he is called in Isaiah 14:12. Michael, the archangel, is the commander of the heavenly ranks of angels (Revelation 12:7). Then came the cherubim to carry the throne of God; followed by the seraphim to guard the throne of God; then “rulers” (principalities), “authorities” (powers) and “cosmic powers” (forces) seen in Ephesians 3:10 and 6:12. Last in line would likely be the “messengers” (like Gabriel and the “man” of Daniel 10), the “angels of the churches” (Revelation 2 and 3), and

“guardian angels” especially of children, and the ones who aid us unseen or unknown (Hebrews 13:2).

Here is the sobering reality of life: As we pray, worship, work, witness and go about our daily lives as God’s people in the world, angelic forces fight all around us—from the White House, to your house of worship, to the nursery in your home. God’s heavenly forces are there to protect and preserve you, to strengthen and encourage you, and to push forward the Kingdom of God against evil’s spiritual forces.

The first Psalm in the Bible (Exodus 15) calls God “a Warrior” (in the ESV “a man of war;” Ex. 15:3). And with the Lord of Hosts (armies) goes forth the legions of angels from Michael to the guardian of the crib. We are not in this alone. Greater is He who is in us than he who is in the world, and great is His army of heavenly watchers He sends to our aid. Praise the Lord for our powerful friends in heavenly places!

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

AC: Pray for the Administrative Committee office staff: Bob Fiol, Assistant to the Stated Clerk; Angela Nantz, Operations Manager; Sherry Eschenberg, Meeting Planner; Priscilla Lowrey, Documents manager; Susan Cullen; Monica Johnston; Peggy Little; Ashley Cloud; Carla Schwartz; and Jeanne Dunham. Ask that in the day-to-day work of the Stated Clerk’s office each will demonstrate the mind of Christ.

CTS: Remember Covenant Seminary graduates serving as missionaries and church planters around the globe, especially those in areas that are actively hostile to Christianity, and pray that they will reflect the character of Christ in all they do, drawing many to eternal life in Him.

MTW: Pray that God will continue to bless and protect new believers, protect them from false teaching and cultural pressures, give them courage in persecution and bring them to maturity as disciples

RUM: Please pray for the RUF groups that continue holding meetings during the summer months. Pray that this unique opportunity to minister will be a time of fellowship and learning for those who remain on campus.

RBI: A number of our PCA churches have limited financial resources for providing benefits for their pastors and staff. Please pray that these congregations may be able to adequately supply their pastor’s compensation and benefits, especially during the difficult economic times.

THE SONGS OF THE SERVANT

The Servant and His Song

Rick Phillips

Pastor of Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC

All the Gospel writers mark the beginning of Jesus' public ministry at the Jordan River, where he received from John the Baptist the baptism of repentance. Overcoming John's objections, Jesus was baptized in fulfillment of Isaiah 53:12, which says he "was numbered with the transgressors." Jesus then was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where he successfully overcame the devil's temptations (Luke 4:1-13). From the wilderness he returned to his hometown of Nazareth, there to announce the saving ministry he had earned the right to begin. There Jesus set forth the character of his messianic ministry by pointing to the last of the Songs of the Servant in Isaiah.

When Jesus showed up in his hometown of Nazareth and entered into the synagogue on the Sabbath, the people had already heard of miracles he had performed in other nearby towns. We can only imagine how high the expectation ran, inspired by the reports that came before him.

What a scene it was, then, when Jesus was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, to read and to speak—Jesus, the Son of God, the very Servant of the Lord written about by that ancient prophet but known to this audience mainly as a local son, and now as the object of these amazing reports. It seems that Jesus was given liberty to pick his text. Luke tells us:

*And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him.
He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,*

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:17-19)*

This citation is mainly from the opening verses of Isaiah 61, although it also seems to contain a line from Isaiah 58. It is likely that Jesus would have had a number of chapters open to his eyes as he held up the scroll, and it would not have been unusual for the reader to link together like passages for the sake of one unified exposition. These lines from Isaiah are particularly striking, not the least because in them the voice of the promised Messiah, the Anointed One, is heard speaking. We can imagine, I think, that the voice Isaiah heard in his mind when receiving this prophecy, the voice of God in revelation, was the voice now heard in the synagogue at Nazareth. In applying these verses to himself,

Jesus was clearly defining his own calling as that messianic ministry promised of old, for which Israel had so long hungered and thirsted. The passage not only identifies the speaker but also defines the character and mission of his saving work.

There were many prophets who came before Jesus, Isaiah serving as an excellent example, as well as John the Baptist. But what sets Jesus apart and above them all is the second task for which he was anointed, that is, the accomplishment of the deliverance he proclaimed. God has sent me, he says, "to release the oppressed." An ordinary prophet could proclaim the promises of deliverance, but he could not bring them to pass. Here is the One who comes not only with good news but also with power to achieve what is promised—setting free those held in captivity.

The final words of Jesus' quotation summarize his whole mission and recall the jubilee year that was established under the Mosaic economy. He says he is anointed "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." In the jubilee year, which came every fifty years, land was returned to its original owners and indentured slaves were set free.

Such was the vastness of Jesus' claim that these verses applied directly and specifically to him. He came as the promised Messiah who would both reveal the salvation from God and bring it to pass, with the result of freedom for those held in bondage.

Jesus read the scroll and handed it back to the attendant. With an evident intent to convey the dramatic, Luke tells us "the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him" (Luke 4:20). The sermon that followed was perhaps short, but it was unquestionably one of the most profound ones ever preached. Jesus began with these words, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (v. 21).

What he proclaimed was nothing short of Israel's hope of the ages. It was for this that thousands and thousands of priests had for years and years lit incense in the Holy Place of the temple. It was for such news that generations of Jews had longed with a physical aching. And yet Alfred Edersheim is right when he describes the reaction in Nazareth as "an epitome of the history of Christ. "Here we have in microcosm what would be played out over the three years of Jesus' ministry: "He came to his own, and his people did not receive him" (John 1:11).

And he said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself.' What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well." And he said, "Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown." (Luke 4:23-24)

Thus Jesus of Nazareth walked out from the home of his youth, never, apparently, to set foot there again. Refusing to receive him in faith, the people of Nazareth would never see the miracles of power or receive the healings they had heard about from other places. Rejecting Jesus they had rejected the grace of God for salvation.

Shortly thereafter Jesus went to the house of Simon Peter, whose mother-in-law was lying sick with a deadly fever. Jesus rebuked her fever, and she got up completely restored. Finally, before that same sun had set, multitudes with various ailments and demonic possessions came to Jesus, and a day that witnessed vast power from God ended with this outpouring of healing and restoration. You see what is so dramatically depicted

by these events. What Nazareth had refused by rejecting Jesus now was outpoured in staggering abundance where faith was to be found.

The point is this: those who reject Jesus Christ reject the grace of God for salvation. But those who trust in him, who instead of driving him from their lives confess their need and bring all their ailments to him, receive a manifestation of saving power.

THE SERVANT'S JUSTICE

*Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen,
in whom my soul delights.*

Isaiah 42:1

There are five wonderful poems in the Book of Isaiah that are known as “The Songs of the Servant.” They were first named as such by Bernhard Duhm in 1892. Duhm designated four servant songs: 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9 and, the most famous, 52:13-53:12. Many other Bible scholars see a fifth servant song in Isaiah 61:1-3. There are four “Canticles of Christ” in Luke: the Magnificat by Mary, the Benedictus by Zecharias, the Gloria in Excelsis by the Angels, and the Nunc Dimittis by Simeon; all of them foretelling the life of Jesus Christ. So too, there is a similar set of songs in Isaiah; all of them predict the Messianic ministry of Jesus Christ, God’s Servant.

Service to God is the theme of Isaiah. Both Israel and a mysterious “Suffering Servant” are seen throughout Isaiah’s message as “the Lord’s Servant.” We know this mysterious servant to be Jesus Christ. We know this because both the Gospels and the Apostolic writings reference these servant songs in Isaiah as prophecies that point to Jesus Christ and His redemptive mission.

This week we will look at these five Songs of the Servant to close out our 50 Days of Prayer. It seems that Israel was not a very good servant of God, despite being called “My servant” by God 14 times in Isaiah. Service to God is measured by three things: faith, obedience and righteous living. Israel failed on all three counts. What the people of God needed was one who would come, fulfill their duty to God for them, and set before them the model of a servant life. This is what Jesus Christ did. And these servant songs are quoted by Matthew, Luke and John to point to Jesus Christ. The essence of Christ’s life and ministry was that of service. This Jesus clearly states: “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

In the first of these Songs of the Servant (Isaiah 42:1-4) the nature of the Servant’s life and ministry is set forth; it will be a life of “justice” (*mishpat*), a word used three times in the four verses and three sentences that make up this song. “Justice” (*mishpat*) carries with it the root meaning of “to govern” (*shapat*). This first Servant Song explains the three facets of Christ’s gracious government. The three basic meanings of *mishpat* have to do with the three functions of any good and balanced government: judicial, legislative and executive.

First, the Servant will render for God a just decision in a court case brought by God Himself against Israel. That case is set out in Isaiah 41:21-29: Israel worships false gods (idols), and they are guilty for doing so. The Servant (Christ) will render for God the judicial settlement that no god but God is real, and that the only way to know this true God is to behold Him in His Son, Jesus Christ (Isaiah 42:1). This is exactly what Jesus told us Himself: “And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3).

Secondly, the Servant will reveal God the King’s law (42:2, 3). His legislative duty is to show forth God’s proclamation (His *euangelion* or good news; a decree of a king) in

Himself. As the Word made flesh (John 1:1-18) Jesus reveals God's new law: the Gospel. This is first and foremost in Jesus' earthly ministry (See Mark 1:14-15).

Thirdly, His executive function will establish a just order, a God-ordained government, known as the Kingdom of God. This is the third meaning of *mishpat*: a society under righteous and just law and order (42:4). The very ends of the earth ("the coastland") wait for this government to make right all that is wrong and do justice where injustice has reigned for millennia. Of course, this pressing forth of the Kingdom of God and its Gospel government is the very essence of Gospel missions (Matthew 24:15). Edward J. Young comments on this law that changes the world:

This law refers to this servant's teaching or doctrine which the servant will give to the world. The content of this teaching is simply the Gospel itself.²⁹

This first Song of the Servant is a restatement of a wonderful promise given earlier. Please read Isaiah 9:6-7.

In a year when a new president takes office—one whose election has left America with mixed feelings about "the time for change"—it is comforting to know that all three branches of God's government—judicial, legislative and executive—are in the competent hands of The Servant: Jesus Christ the Lord.

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

CEP: Pray for CEP staff and regional trainers as they work with local church leaders in equipping them with a kingdom framework for disciple making.

CC: Please pray for students, faculty and staff as they travel off-campus to locations throughout the world for study abroad and missions opportunities, including Break on Impact missions trips, May Term study abroad programs, and summer internships. Pray that they will learn to appreciate a new culture and be able to navigate cultural barriers. Pray that they will graciously interact with their hosts and share the good news of the Gospel with those they meet.

MNA: Pray for Dony St. Germain, Haitian Ministries Coordinator, for wisdom and strength as he oversees the planting of healthy, worshipping, and evangelizing Haitian churches both in the United States and Haiti. Pray also that the various short term opportunities available in Miami will attract many volunteers and be a blessing to the community.

PCAF: Pray for the men who will serve on the PCA Foundation's Committee of Commissioners, that they will have a heart for and an understanding of the work and services necessary to help financially support God's Kingdom, and that they will make wise and proper decisions regarding business referred to General Assembly.

RH: Pray for Administrative Assistant Christy Mitchell, as her responsibilities include helping the Guest Services Manager, the Ministry Director and the Executive Committee.

CHRIST'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SONG

"But I said, 'I have labored in vain.'"

Isaiah 49:4

The second Song of the Servant is different from the first one. It is autobiographical—the Servant speaks for Himself and about Himself. H. C. Leopold comments, "Some have suggested that the Servant, whoever he may be, is in reality telling the story of his life (Volz). Our approach to the problem of identity of the Servant is that he is in the last analysis none less than the Messiah"³⁰ I agree, and so in Isaiah 49:1-6, Jesus talks about the three phases of His life

His years of solitude (49:1-2)

His years of suffering (49:3-4)

His years of significance (49:5-6)

In His youth, adolescence and young adulthood, Jesus Christ, the Servant, was "hidden" by God from the world, in order that He might develop into the Savior of mankind (49:1-2). These hidden years of Christ are alluded to by only five verses in the Gospels: Luke 3:39-40 and Matthew 2:23 and 2:51-52. These were years of financial poverty, social obscurity, political oppression, sorrows of life in a fallen world and sinful family, and a myriad of human disappointments. Jesus suffered in all things like us. But these were also the years of self discovery and development, when Jesus slowly but surely came to grasp the full measure of His Messianic calling. In Luke, chapter 2, when Jesus visits the Temple in Jerusalem for His bar mitzvah, He comes to realize more fully his atoning life. When He sees the endless sacrifices and the river of lamb's blood that flows from the altar of God, He realizes that He is the Lamb of God who will take away the sin of the world.

This forms the second part of this second Servant Song: The Years of Suffering (49:3-4). The sadness of these years almost overwhelms the Servant. He begins to muse: "has it been for nothing that I endured all I did to reconcile God and His people?" "No!" He answers. First of all, in the Suffering Servant, God is glorified (49:3). Luther was right. God is never more glorious than when He is in Christ dying on the cross to reconcile and redeem the elect. As well, "justice" is due the Servant. There is that ever-popular prophetic word *mishpat*; the idea of God's perfect order installed on earth. ("Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.") God cannot let His faithful servant go unrewarded.

Thus, the third part of the song: The future significance of the Servant's life and mission (49:5-6). God "honors" Christ. His life will impact mankind more than any other person in human history, and His mission of suffering will transform the world. He will restore the people of God to divine favor. He will bring an end to all false religion. He will gather the elect together in the Church. He will bring the nations to salvation. And He will restore creation to its intended end...glory!

The One who suffers for God will be glorified by God. First the cradle, then the cross, and finally the crown. Such is the way of God, the way of the cross, the way of the Gospel life. We who suffer now will rejoice in the Kingdom yet to come. Christ knows our sorrows and sufferings; He has gone through them Himself. His promise to us is sure: "Suffer now for My Father; share My glory in the future...with Me." The Suffering Servant offers hope to all God's servants.

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

AC: Ask the Father, by His gracious Spirit, to enable the staff of the Stated Clerk's Office to serve the Church in wisdom and godliness as they handle a wide variety of needs and requests by PCA members and others. We need the wisdom and fruit of the Holy Spirit to be able to serve his people.

CTS: Pray for Brad Anderson, Covenant Seminary's vice president for advancement, as he and his staff nurture relationships with Seminary friends and supporters, recruit promising new students to our pastoral training program, and seek new ways to walk beside and support our alumni as they engage in ministry.

MTW: Pray for strong missionary marriages, families and spiritual lives.

RUM: Much of the summer is spent equipping the staff of RUF. Please pray for the various training sessions held during the summer months. Pray that this time of learning and fellowship will be centered on the Gospel and leave the staff encouraged and strengthened. Pray that the instructors will be well prepared and able to communicate the goals and philosophy of ministry to the new staff members.

RBI: Gary Campbell, Mark Melendez and Harry Cooksey travel to Presbyteries, churches, conferences and schools to make presentations to those in leadership positions, as well as church and organization employees. Pray for traveling mercies and effective communication of PCA employee benefit plans. Also pray that those opportunities will continue to open.

QUALIFIED TO REDEEM

*The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught.
Isaiah 50:4*

In this third Song of the Servant, Jesus is portrayed as the Great Disciple. In fact, this is how the *New American Standard Bible* translates verse 1 of this song: “The Lord God has given me the tongue of disciples.” And this little song shows us the qualifications necessary for one to be the Redeemer of mankind. If we were advertising for the job of Savior, what would we be looking for? God tells us in this second autobiographical Servant Song.

First, the Servant must possess a humble mindset. Please read Isaiah 50:4-5.

He must be characterized by four marks of a true disciple. First, he must be a learner, willing to model his life after God’s Word and Will. Second, he must be an encourager; one who uses words not as weapons but as balm for other weary souls. Third, the Servant must be a teachable man willing to change, grow and be shaped by One wiser than he. That is, he must be a good listener. Fourth, obedience must be the hallmark of the servant’s life. For this is always the preeminent qualification of disciples: They do what the Master commands. Obedience marks discipleship as genuine.

Second, the servant must possess a resolute spirit. He cannot give up if things get rough. He cannot quit if suffering results from discipleship. Please read Isaiah 50:6-7.

There appears here a reference to Christ’s passive and active obedience. Verse 6 points to the passive courage of Jesus Christ and His surrender to the passion of His atonement. They graphically predict the humiliating abuse Jesus forebears in Pontius Pilate’s palace. Verse 7 points to Christ’s active pursuit of the cross. Isaiah speaks of the Servant who would “set [his] face like flint” in doing God’s Will. Luke tells us that Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). Servants of God are resolute in purpose: They will do God’s Will, come what may.

Thirdly, the Servant must possess a clear conscience. He is unafraid to stand before both God and men and be judged. Please read Isaiah 50:8-9.

This means that Christ (and Christians) are both accountable to others while ultimately judged by God. The test of time will prove the sincerity and the service of a servant of God (v. 9). Paul would put this truth before us in different words. Please read 1 Cor. 4:1-5.

Only the Gospel can transform selfish people into servants of Christ. Its power changes their hearts and their lives: The proud become humble, the insecure become teachable, words are no longer used as self-defensive weapons but to give grace to others, cowardliness is overcome by courage, a staying power appears where before we quit too easily, and, perhaps greatest of all, we are conscientious toward others but no longer slaves to their approval. Our consciences rest with God in Christ.

Servants are not born; they are made. And it is the grace of God that does the renovation—sinner to servant. “Behold, the Lord God helps me” (v. 9). Indeed He does. He saves us, and He saves us to serve Him.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. (Romans 12:1-3)

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

CEP: Pray for CEP to be effective and missional in communicating the Kingdom perspective throughout all of the training and resources.

CC: Please pray for our international students, missionary kids and all diversity students who often face cultural challenges in their transition. Pray that Covenant, and especially those who work closely with the Cultural Diversity Program, will provide an environment that is open and comfortable, while celebrating and mirroring the varied texture of the world God has created. Pray that students can build relationships, gain support and encouragement, and experience true fellowship which looks out for one another while fully engaging and serving in the greater Covenant and Chattanooga communities.

MNA: Pray for Network of Portuguese Speaking Churches Coordinator Renato Bernardes, and for the churches in the network. Pray that the network will be strong in advancing God’s Kingdom through planting churches with a broad multicultural vision. Pray also that plans for their annual gathering in August will result in an event that is a great encouragement and time of equipping for the participating churches.

PCAF: Pray that God will be glorified in the day-to-day work and activity of the PCA Foundation and that the staff would be encouraged by their calling and be effective in ministry.

RH: Pray for increasing opportunities to serve individuals, families, PCA congregations, presbyteries, committees and agencies, including additional RUF groups, CEP, WIC, youth and children’s ministries, MNA, and MTW regional retreats and training opportunities.

THE SUFFERING SERVANT

*Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.
Isaiah 53:4*

The fourth Song of the Servant is the one from which the whole group receives its title: Songs of the *Suffering* Servant. In each of the songs, there is a progressive revelation of the Servant's suffering that climaxes in the fourth (and what many believe to be the last) Song of the Servant. This passage (Isaiah 52:13-53:12) is considered one of the most magnificent chapters in all the Bible. Martin Luther wrote that this passage "ought to be written on parchment of gold and lettered in diamonds," and then memorized by every Christian. The Puritan Thomas Manton said that this passage "may rather be called the Gospel than prophecy."

The passage is wonderfully constructed like a "sandwich." It comprises five stanzas: 1 and 5 speak of Christ's glory; 2, 3 and 4 describe Christ's suffering. Hence the "sandwich" structure of Glory—Suffering—Glory. Or, better yet, Heaven—the Cross—Heaven again.

First, Isaiah tells us about the *prosperity* of the Messiah. Not apparent to all (v. 14) but true nevertheless, this suffering servant will baptize ("sprinkle") many nations. The Hebrew could also read "startle" the kings of the nations. Why? Because the unassuming suffering servant would turn out to be the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

But for a season, it would look quite the contrary (53:1-9). He would come from a very unspectacular background: carpenter's home, Nazareth, poor folks, common stock. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). Then, he would be homely, even unattractive. He would not fit the picture in our minds of the conquering hero. As much as a handsome ladies' man and stud that David was, this Son of David would be the opposite. Third, Jesus would not be esteemed or honored among the Who's Who of society. He was not held in high regard by most men. He would suffer, almost like a criminal. And He would not display any of the political power, personal charisma or privileged authority you'd expect in a Messiah. In fact, he'd be like a lamb led to slaughter. His weakness in the hour of testing would be...well frankly, quite an embarrassment to his family and disappointment to his followers.

But, to everyone's surprise, the portion of his reward from God would be incredible (53:10-12)! He will be numbered among the great and enjoy the spoils of God's warfare. In fact, he will be exalted above every great name. His name will become *the* name!

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:9-11)

This is Isaiah's description of "the way of the cross." This is the way of salvation. And what Christ saves us *by* He saves us *to*. His atoning life of sacrificial service calls us to a life of that same suffering, sacrifice and service. The privilege of being redeemed is the honor of serving Christ.

I remember when I was a young military officer, a Colonel said to me once: "Ross, a career in the Army can be explained this way: a lifetime of thankless service sandwiched between the glory of commission and retirement." That is one of the reasons I chose to exit the Army after two years of service. But, lo and behold, I have entered another warfare, as an officer in another army. Now, my life is a life of thankless service sandwiched between justification and glorification. But what a glorious life it is! It is the life of my Master. And, in the end, the benefits are worth the difficulty...glory!

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

AC: Give thanks to the Lord for the PCA and for the vision and calling He has given to so many who serve the Lord through the Committees and Agencies of the church.

CTS: Pray that God will provide funds to cover all of Covenant Seminary's operating expenses, student scholarships and other needs, so that this ministry may continue to be productive—by His grace and for His glory. (The Seminary's fiscal year ends on June 30, 2009.)

MTW: Praise God for the recent graduation of over 20 church planters and evangelists serving in South East Asia, who have completed our theological training program over the past three years. Pray that the Lord will protect and sustain them as they encounter much discouragement, opposition and trials. Pray also that their ministries will bear much fruit for the Kingdom.

RUM: RUF seeks to reach students for Christ and to equip them to serve. The Lord is gracious in allowing his children to advance the Kingdom. Pray that this ministry will be kept humble and dependent on the Holy Spirit. Pray that in all decisions and actions, the Gospel of Jesus Christ will be in-working and out-flowing.

RBI: RBI's purpose is to help PCA employees achieve financial security. Pray that the staff will stay focused on the Core Values and that the Strategic Plan will help RBI to better serve the denominational needs.

THE ANOINTED ONE

*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me.
Isaiah 61:1*

The last of the Songs of the Servant is the greatest of all, in my opinion. I say this because it is the only one quoted by the lips of Jesus Himself. When Christ launched into His public ministry, He first preached in His home synagogue in Nazareth. The text He chose, the text for the synagogue reading of the day, was Isaiah 61:1-3. You can read about this in Luke 4:14-30.

This final song of the set of five presents Jesus as both the “anointed” (i.e., the Messiah; Christ) and as a preacher of the Gospel. Puritan Thomas Goodwin once commented: “God had only one Son, and He made Him to be a preacher.” Our anticlerical attitudes may buck at this truth, but it is hard to argue with Christ’s own assessment of His ministry, mission and message in life. Immediately after the sermon in the synagogue, Jesus clarified His calling for us:

*And when it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place.
And the people sought him and came to him, and would have kept
him from leaving them, but he said to them, “I must preach the good
news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was
sent for this purpose.” (Luke 4:42-43)*

In this passage, Christ sets forth the three facets of Gospel ministry. We see them in the three sets of couplets, each containing two infinitive verbs (i.e., two statements each beginning with the word “to”). These are the three obligations of Gospel preaching.

First, we are to preach the *forgiveness of sins* (61:1), in particular “to bring good news to the poor” and also “to bind up the brokenhearted.” The parallelism of the Hebrew poetry here explains what Christ means. Those poor—both in spirit and in society—are the brokenhearted of the earth. These are the people spoken about in Christ’s Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-11). These folks always respond more eagerly to the Gospel than do the healthy, the wealthy and the socially upscale. Perhaps we evangelicals are going after the wrong crowd—the affluent and comfortable suburbanite. Jesus trafficked among the poor: prostitutes, lepers, tax gatherers, Roman officials and mercenaries—the uncouth, unclean and uncool.

Second, we must preach the *freedom from sorrow* (61:2)—“to proclaim liberty to the captives” and “to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.” Jesus has in mind here the

Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:8-12). This was a 50th year (a Pentecost) in which all debts were cancelled, all slaves were set free and all land was given a rest. It was a time of favor. Paul alludes to this when he speaks about Gospel mission: Please read 2 Cor. 6:1-2.

This favorable time of the Gospel dispensation offers us freedom from sin: its penalty, power, pollution, patterns, and finally, its presence (Galatians 5:1, 13). There is a joy that should mark Gospel proclamation—a spiritual jubilee!

Third, we are duty bound to preach the “*foundation of social order*” (61:2b-3). How? By preaching “*to comfort all who mourn*” and “*to grant to those who mourn...the oil of gladness.*” The Gospel does have social implications because God’s redemptive work forms the foundation for a new social order—a Gospel society. We can see this in the way the Gospel changed the West while the rest slept in misery’s darkness. We see it now as the Third World is being transformed by the Gospel, and as the New World (The City of God) appears on the horizon.

The Gospel is glorious and the Gopeller—Jesus Christ—is the Hero of it all! Slowly, but surely, He is completing His mission. Through the Spirit in the Church, He is “*preach(ing) the good news of the Kingdom of God to the other towns*” of the earth. Praise God the Father and Author of the Gospel, God the Son and Preacher of the Gospel, God the Spirit and Enabler of the Gospel for the new world order they are bringing about through their Good News—a new forgiveness, a new freedom and a new foundation for a better world!

PRAYING FOR THE PCA

CEP: Given the difficult financial challenges, pray for wisdom in CEP in making decisions regarding training and resources.

CC: Pray for the leaders of the Enrollment Management division: Rodney Miller, Dean of Records; Brad Voyles, Dean of Students; Brenda Rapier, Financial Aid Director; Roy Heintz, Athletic Director; Tom Schreiner, Director of Auxiliary Services.

MNA: Pray that God will encourage first generation Korean churches to engage in more second generation multiethnic church planting. Pray also for Korean Ministries Coordinator Henry Koh, as he works in leadership development with the second generation leaders.

PCAF: Pray that God will provide for the PCA Foundation’s own operational financial needs for 2009.

RH: Pray that the Lord will pour out His Spirit with such a blessing upon Ridge Haven and the PCA that there will not be room enough to contain it. This includes revival, conversions and new levels of commitment, faithfulness and service that are worthy of the price that has secured our justification, sanctification and glorification.

EPILOGUE

Michael A. Milton

President and Professor of Practical Theology
Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, NC

“Your prophets have been like jackals among ruins, O Israel”—Ezekiel 13:4

“What manner of man was the prophet?”

This question was posed by Abraham Joshua Heschel, a Jewish theologian of the last century.^{1, 2} In asking this question, he reached his hand into the depths of Old Testament revelation about the prophets to grab the clay of evidence and reconstruct their image for his day. What he found led him to a better understanding of the prophets as men who were willing to be humiliated before their communities, who were willing to be used of God in strange ways to communicate His message to the people of Israel and to the world around them or were willing to die for the message they bore. I am convinced as a minister of the Gospel, as a believer living with you in these early years of the 21st Century, that the study of these men and their message is not a wasted exercise. For as it was at the time of the Old Testament saints there are also “jackals” in our midst today. Distinguishing between the real and the false, between those who bring healing and those who make matters worse, is essential to living our faith. Back to the jackals in a bit, but first just this: What about the true prophet? “What manner of man was the prophet?”

As we have explored the Scriptures and integrated the Word into our life of prayer we have found that the prophet was “a man who feels fiercely.” He was “sensitive to evil.” He may have been “luminous and explosive.” He was to many “one octave too high.”³

The Old Testament prophet must have appeared overly dramatic to the world around him, to people who preferred their preachers to be more “stable.” He must have appeared overly emotional about things. This man burned for God and others came to watch him burn. He burned for God's honor in a depraved world. He burned for God's promises in a world that seemed to deny those promises. He burned for God's Messiah in a society that was content with messiahs of their own making. This man wept when others were laughing. He cried out for mercy for the guilty when others preferred to castigate them. And yet he castigated those who were thought to be “respectable” when others were singing their praises. He was against the world, *contra mundum*, as he warned that their sin would lead to destruction. He was for the world, *pro mundum*, as he lay prostrate in the ruin and rubble of their destruction and cried out to God for compassion. He stood with his back to God and announced the Word of the Lord to Israel and to the heathen nations. Then he turned with his face to God, and was brokenhearted over the sins of the people. At once he brought an indictment against the people and then tearfully pleaded their case before a holy God. The prophet stood in the midst of the people. And yet he stood alone.

This was the prophet.

But why do we care? No one else did. Why do we bother to listen and learn from him? Why do we continue to think about these things after 50 days of prayer of focusing on this man and his message?

Because doing so will help us find our way from our place of spiritual sojourning and into a place of practical living.

I guess there are many places to turn at this point. But here is one response to consider: What if, after being led so well by Mike Ross in these 50 days of prayer and time in the prophets, we each committed to take something away from our experience in terms of attitudes and actions: the attitudes and actions of the prophets now coming alive in us.

Let us take away an attitude of prophetic boldness.

Like Amos in the court of the Northern Kingdom, who was scandalized by the religious gentry of the royal palace, we too who follow the Lord will become spectacles unto God before this “present evil age.” But is there an alternative? We must proclaim the unsearchable riches of Jesus as well as the Biblical truth that there is no other way to God but through Christ. To preach the whole counsel of God, whether in the pulpit or in our witnessing to unbelievers around us, we must be prayerfully and uncompromisingly truthful about the claims of Jesus. This postmodern age would have us water down the Gospel, domesticate Jesus and place Him amidst the pantheon of our religious deities and forget about this “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life” talk.

But we have lived with the prophets now for 50 days. If they were anything, they were bold. We think of Amos in the North Kingdom, John the Baptist before Herod and his brother's wife, and Peter before the rabbinical counsels of Jerusalem. We think too of 1st and 2nd Century martyrs before the mad Roman Caesars. Like them and like Knox before Mary Queen of Scots and Luther before the corrupt Roman ecclesiastical hierarchy of his day and Bonhoeffer before the Nazis, “necessity is laid upon” us (From 1 Cor. 9:16). We must preach Christ and Him crucified!

I think of my friend the Anglican Archbishop of Uganda, the Rt. Rev. Henry Luke Orombi. As a young seminarian, Henry preached Jesus Christ before Idi Amin and he barely escaped death. Now, still burning with the light of the Lord who touched his own life, Archbishop Orombi preaches the cross of Christ and the free offer of eternal life for all who will turn from their sins and trust in Jesus. He preaches in spite of death threats from radical Islamic clerics and the apparent embarrassment of liberal Anglicans in the West. This man is bold in the Gospel. There are millions like him in the lands of revival all over the earth. But what of us? What of believers in suburban or small town America? What of those of us not living in a land of revival but in the “dry and thirsty lands” of our great urban centers? But this is just it! The prophets lived in such places and in such times! They lived more like we do than like the Archbishop. In many ways the deadly forces of apathy threaten the Church and her members today as much as antagonism threatened her in the past. I am not ashamed to quote the revivalist hymn, “Stand Up, Stand Up for

Jesus.” For that is our call in this age. That is the spirit of the prophets. That is the attitude of boldness in Jesus Christ that our nation needs today!

But we must not stop there. As we stand to sing out the claims of Christ, we must also reflect another attitude of the prophets.

Let us also take away an attitude of brokenness.

Jeremiah wept for his people who were taken away in bondage as he confessed, “My eyes are spent with weeping” (Lamentations 2:11a). The Almighty Himself was like Hosea, with a heart of brokenness for his adulterating wife, Israel, when he said, so pathetically, “My people are bent on running away from me...how can I give you up...how can I hand you over...my compassion grows warm and tender” (Hosea 11:7, 8).

And our Savior wept. He wept over death's apparent triumph over His friend. He wept over Jerusalem's certain rejection of their Savior. Shall we proclaim the truth so boldly without weeping in our hearts? Can we stand as prophets in our generation to announce truth without love? Can the Gospel be the Gospel without brokenness over the lost?

When I was a boy there was a little tabernacle down the dirt road from where I lived. These folk were simple, hard working believers who wanted to reach out to others in the name of Jesus. They built their little rough hewn tabernacle, as they called it, as a Gospel station to reach sinners. Their pastor was a plumber by day and a preacher by night. His name was Brother DeValle. I don't remember his first name. But I remember that my Aunt Eva would take me by the hand and we would walk there on Wednesday nights, swatting mosquitoes as we went. There we would listen to this little “Holiness” flock sing with joyful voices as a happy accordion was played, and we would listen to them pray. Oh how they would pray. One night they began to pray for my alcoholic daddy, who was not following the Lord. In that little pine chapel there were tearstains on the little pews. Some of those tears were for my father. One day Aunt Eva asked my father to go to that chapel with us. He did. And on a wonder-filled night, the prayers of those brokenhearted believers were answered. I will never forget my daddy, sitting right next to me on that balmy South Louisiana night, dropping to his knees in the sawdust and crying some tears of his own. Brother DeValle came down from his piney pulpit to lay hands on my father and receive him as a brother. I will see my father in heaven because of the tears on the pews in that little chapel. Oh may we leave this study with an attitude of boldness and with a heart broken for those caught in sin. Then we will be like the prophets. Then we will be like our Lord.

Are you complaining about our world or are you praying about our world? And I dare ask, are you weeping about our world?

Let us take away an action plan.

Okay. Ready? Got your pen ready for a list of things to do? Wait. Maybe praying and weeping is our “take-away” from this time in our lives. Maybe our action plan is to *be* before we *do* so that we *do* as an overflow of His life in us. Maybe our work is to first love

people before we “minister” to people, to listen for God before we speak to men and to repent of our own sins before we call for the repentance of others’ sins. But then as we rise from our time of earnest prayer, we join the prophets and the disciples and the Christians of all ages whose hearts burn for justice and mercy for all of God’s creation. Then and only then when we have been brought low by the startling awareness of our own depravity and been reconciled to our God through the equally startling grace of Christ Jesus can we feel the prophetic longing for peace between brothers at odds with each other, or experience, in our own souls, the prejudicial walls that must be removed between the races, or the dehumanizing hatred between the “classes,” or the Spirit-quenching estrangement that we all know exists between Christians in our very own congregation.

The work of the prophets that included addressing these and many other sins of God’s people in their culture and in the world itself always flowed from the prayers of the prophets. That is what we have learned. That is what we must take away. It is not just mercy for mercy’s sake but mercy for Christ’s sake. It is not merely racial harmony for man’s dignity in himself but for God’s image in us. It is not just social action for a better world, but prophetic longing for a new world, a redeemed world.

Alright. Back to the jackals. An appalling sin of the false prophets in Ezekiel, those “jackals among ruins,” was that they lived on the pain of others rather than alleviating that pain through the Word of God. And if we were to offer human beings in the captivity of sin a boldness without brokenness or a brokenness without boldness, that would make jackals out of us. But the true prophets were the men who boldly and compassionately held out the ancient promise to trust in God that the ruins would be repaired, the wounds would be healed and the people would be freed through God’s Messiah. What if we not only study these things, and pray these things, but also now rise to live out these things with new attitudes and actions? Well, I suppose that the jackals would have to flee. And I believe that Christ’s Kingdom would have to come.

What a fitting conclusion to our 50 Days of Prayer: to go build up the ruins of this old world with the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Endnotes

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