

Things Surely to be Believed, Part 2

by Ray C. Stedman

In the last few years I have come to learn to love the Old Testament as much as the New, and it has done as much to change my life as anything I have discovered in the New. The secret is that the two complement each other. This is one of the marks which prove that this book comes from the hand of God. Forty authors, writing over the course of sixteen hundred years, without collusion have produced a book which fits together in absolutely perfect harmony, dovetailing in every detail. This harmony, of course, is far beyond the ability of man to produce. It marks God's hand upon this book.

The Old Testament is the part of the Bible which prepares us for the truth we get in the New Testament. And, as we have seen in the course of this survey of the Bible, the whole purpose of revelation is to mature us, to perfect us, to make us grow up. It is to make us become what God intended us to be in Jesus Christ – to enable us to discover all the potential of our manhood or womanhood in Jesus Christ. Therefore, we desperately need the whole book.

The prophets in the Old Testament are the expounders of the mighty promises of God. What would we be without the promises of God? Someone has counted more than three thousand promises in the Bible which are intended to be fulfilled in this life. They have nothing to do with the life to come; those promises are another category. Three thousand promises are made for us today. How many have you claimed? They are intended to be fulfilled now.

A promise, as we saw in our last study, is an offer of self. When we promise someone something, we are expressing a willingness to give them a part of ourselves – our time, our interests, our sympathy – whatever it may be. So when God makes a promise he is promising himself, committing himself. All these promises, then, come out of

the character of God. Therefore, each of the prophets was given the task of expounding some vast and wonderful side of God's character, so that we might rest upon it and claim it and know that God will act this way. A study of the promises reveals how God acts and what he is like. This is why the book of Hebrews begins with this great statement:

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; {Heb 1:1 RSV}

Of course it goes on to say,

but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, {Heb 1:2a RSV}

But all of this is so that we might know God.

Now, what do you do with a promise? Well, you either believe it or reject it. There are no alternatives. You might say, "Well, I'll just ignore it." But then you are rejecting it, because a promise is a demand for commitment. The easiest form of reaction is to simply walk away from it – but that is a rejection, isn't it? So promises must either be believed or they must be rejected. That is why we have called this pair of studies: *Things Surely to be Believed*.

We have already seen the promises set forth in the first eight books of the prophetic section. Now we will look at the last eight, beginning with perhaps the best known of the minor prophets. (*Minor* here means smaller in size, not lesser in importance.)

Who is that? **Jonah** – and the fish story! This is the book which is the butt of more ridicule, the object of more censure, than perhaps any other book in the Old Testament, because it contains the remarkable story of how Jonah was swallowed by

the fish. But, as someone has pointed out, this is an encouraging book: if you are ever down-in-the-mouth, remember Jonah – he came out all right! However, the message of Jonah is not a fish story. It is the promise of a second chance. God said to Jonah, as recorded in Chapter 3, Verse 1:

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, {Jonah 3:1 RSV}

This is why the book of Jonah is such an encouragement to faith – because it shows God’s patience with man; God’s willingness to give us another chance, and yet another chance, and still another chance. It is a book which reveals the stubbornness of men’s hearts sometimes. Jonah, as we know, was called by God to go to the great city, Nineveh, and to declare its judgment. He refused to go; he ran in the other direction. But God gave him a second chance; and after he was coughed up on the beach by the fish, he decided to obey God and went to Nineveh. He declared God’s message to the city: “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” {Jonah 3:4b RSV} – a vast city of over 112,000 inhabitants. But Nineveh repented, and God gave it a second chance. Nineveh was not destroyed at this time, simply because it repented.

This is the great message of the patience of God – the promise of a second chance.

The prophet **Micah** was a contemporary of Isaiah. They both ministered to the Southern Kingdom – Judah. Someone has called the book of Micah “Isaiah in shorthand.” Micah summarizes many of the predictions and prophecies and even uses some of the very wording of the book of Isaiah. These two men worked together, so this is not to be wondered at. The message of Isaiah, you remember, is the promise of a new beginning. Micah’s is the promise of God’s pardon. Micah, by the way, is the favorite Old Testament book of liberals because of Chapter 6, Verse 8 – that famous verse quoted by Adlai Stevenson as his favorite in the Bible:

**and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?
{Micah 6:8b RSV}**

This seems to the liberals to sum up God’s entire requirement of man; and it is true – it does.

This is what God does require of man – that he do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with his God. But who can do this? That is the point.

The obvious message of Micah is that you can’t do this until you have received the pardon of God – until you have come in dependence and have received his life. Only the life of God can fulfill the requirements of Micah 6:8. So this is the book of pardon.

The brief book of the prophet **Nahum** is the prediction of the destruction of Nineveh. The books of Jonah and Nahum go together. At Jonah’s preaching, the great city repented – from the king down to the lowest street cleaner. Because of that repentance the city was spared, and God turned back the judgment which he had said would fall within forty days of Jonah’s preaching. But a hundred years later Nahum issued his prophecy of the destruction of Nineveh, and it was fulfilled to the letter. Nahum predicted the city would be destroyed by the opening of the river gates which would allow an enemy to come in. This is exactly the way the judgment did fall upon Nineveh, some fifty years later. A hundred years after Jonah’s prediction of promised ultimate judgment – after the exercise of his patience. This is the promise: God does not change; he does exactly what he says he will do. He does not forget, nor does he grow weary in the passing of time, nor does he change his mind. He reserves his judgment whenever there is repentance, but if there is no repentance – or if there is repentance from the repentance, as in the case of Nineveh – God’s judgment still falls. This is the unswerving character of God expressed in Nahum.

In some ways, the most interesting of the minor prophets is **Habakkuk**. I hope you will get acquainted with Habakkuk. This is a marvelous book, for here you have the answer to the eternal question: “Why?” Why does God let injustice prevail? Why does he allow the nations to run rampant over the poor and the downtrodden and the unoffending?

This is the book where the prophet is faced with the silence of God, and it looks as though God is doing nothing when the situation cries out for God to do something. In his agony the prophet calls out, “Why?” This book becomes the promise of ultimate answers. God finally answers the

prophet, and his response is very remarkable. His first answer makes Habakkuk even more bewildered and more upset. But finally there comes the answer which satisfies his heart.

If you are troubled with this great question Why? I suggest you study the prophet Habakkuk.

This book, by the way, was the basis of the Protestant Reformation. It is in this book that the phrase occurs which struck fire in the heart of Martin Luther and set in motion the wheels of the Reformation: “the just shall live by his faith” (2:4b KJV).

This book is the basis of three New Testament books – Romans, Galatians and Hebrews. In each of these books this phrase is quoted: “The just shall live by faith.” There is an emphasis peculiar to each. In Romans the emphasis is on “the just;” in Galatians it is on “shall live;” and in Hebrews it is on “by faith.” These books tie together beautifully in this way.

One of the shortest of the books is that by the prophet **Zephaniah**. Yet it is a book which is almost overwhelming in its darkness and gloom. The theme of this book is “the day of the Lord.” It is a view of the back side of God’s love – in other words, his wrath. It is a book which sets forth the burning jealousy of God.

The Bible frequently says that God is a jealous God. That doesn’t mean jealousy as we usually think of it – being suspicious all the time and looking for expected violations of love. It simply means that God loves so thoroughly, so completely, that he cannot brook a rival to his love. God will destroy anything which hurts his loved one. This is why he is sometimes so ruthless with us. When he sees us loving and clinging to things which are damaging and hurting us, God’s jealousy comes in and says, “No, you can’t have them.” We plead with him and say, “Lord, let me keep them. Why, this friend I have – I enjoy him so, or love her so! Let me keep her; let me have him.” And God says, “No, you can’t.” So we have to give these things up.

This book sets forth the jealousy of God. There could be no love on God’s part if there were not the ultimate exercise of wrath. You say you can’t accept a God of wrath? Then you can’t believe in a God of love, because a God who can’t get angry at what injures the person he loves is not ca-

pable of love. Zephaniah is the great prophet of God’s jealousy.

The last three books of the Old Testament are those of the prophets who wrote after the Babylonian captivity. All the others prophesied before Israel and Judah went into captivity. The last three were the prophets after the exile – Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi – interestingly enough, these three prophets prophesied at the same time as Ezra and Nehemiah, so we have the historical section closing during the same time as the prophetic section.

The book of **Haggai** is the promise of material blessing. It reveals the link between the physical and the spiritual. Haggai was the prophet to the people who had forgotten God. They had abandoned the building of the Temple while they had been busy building their own houses and fixing up everything for themselves. Haggai was sent to remind them that men who do this are like the foolish people who killed the goose that laid the golden egg. All their material prosperity was directly related to their willingness to have God be central in their affairs. If they didn’t begin to put God first, all their material prosperity would fade. This is the promise, then, of God’s essentiality: We must have him in the center of our life, because our physical and material well-being can never be fully realized apart from God.

Zechariah is one of the most interesting books of the Old Testament. It is sometimes called *the apocalypse* of the Old Testament. “The Apocalypse” is another name for the book of “The Revelation.” Zechariah is ‘The Revelation’ of the Old Testament, because it has very much the same features. It begins with a vision of horsemen riding out to patrol the earth, and it ends with a magnificent vision of the coming of the glory of God – the second coming of Jesus Christ. We get the specific, literal prediction in this book that the Lord’s feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, and that the mountain shall be split in half and a great valley formed. This is where the judgment of the nations will take place. So it is a book which is very closely related to the book of The Revelation. Its message is the promise of encouragement – of the comfort of God. This is the book for dark days. If you are wondering how things are going to turn

out, if it looks as though God is being defeated, read the book of Zechariah. There is mighty reassurance here.

The last book of the Old Testament is **Malachi**. These four brief chapters give the promise of God's responsibility. Again, this is an encouraging book, because it reveals God's answer to man's failure due to his blindness. It begins with God's asking Israel a number of questions. To each one Israel responds, "What? Why? Who – us? What are you talking about?" They are utterly blind to what God is saying:

- He says, "You have robbed me." They say, "Wherein?"
- "You have failed to honor me." "Wherein?"

This is probably one of the most discouraging conditions of mankind. Have you ever gotten into this state?

- Has it ever struck you that it seems as if you are made responsible for your own spiritual welfare?
- And have you ever come to the place where you have felt tremendously depressed and have said, "Well, if it depends on me, I'll never make it. I am so blind that I don't even know when I am wrong. How can I possibly make it if I don't even see the things in my life which are wrong?"

Malachi is a great book for that condition, because it shows God's answer to the blindness of the heart. It shows that ultimately it is God's responsibility to break through that blindness and dark-

ness and indifference, and to bring us again to the light.

The book closes with a magnificent view of the first coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, preceded by John the Baptist, and of what that coming would mean. Then it skips over to his second coming – the dawning of the Sun of righteousness, who comes with healing in his wings finally to bring God's vision of glory to the earth.

In the New Testament, in First Thessalonians 5, the Apostle Paul prays (Verse 23b):

... may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. {1 Th 5:23b RSV}

And you say, "How can it be?" The answer is in the next verse:

He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. {1 Th 5:24 RSV}

This is the message of Malachi.

Prayer

Our Heavenly Father, we pray that our eyes may be opened to see great and mighty truths in this living Word. Teach our hearts to be hungry for it. Help us to know that it is very essential to life: that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. The reason some of us have not really been living, but merely existing, is that we haven't been willing to listen to your Word. Give us that willingness, Father. Break through our indifference and bring us to a vital, living, trusting faith which lays hold of you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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