

HELPFUL THOUGHTS

Christmas can get very 2-dimensional. In our culture, there's a push to neutralize Christmas and make it all about some ambiguous, sentimental, smarmy spirit of generosity and giving. It's no wonder consumerism runs rampant – the hunt for that elusive 'it' toy of the season often seems like the only way to inject some life into an otherwise impotent holiday season.

In Micah 5:1-4, we see that Christmas could be a truly vibrant season if we would only leave Christ in it. Micah wrote his book roughly 700 years before Jesus was born and yet he was able to foretell the birthplace of the Messiah – Bethlehem. Now, Bethlehem was about as non-outstanding as you could get. It wasn't any sort of governmental or cultural center. It was just a town among thousands of other towns. It would be like saying the Messiah is going to come from Belle Plaine, Iowa. It's a bold detail to include in a prophecy because there's an enormous chance that you'll be wrong. That's what makes Advent, the celebration that Jesus came and will come again, so worthy of capturing our hearts. Jesus was boldly predicted hundreds of years before His birth, even in obscure detail, so that we could know for sure that He was indeed the Son of God sent to 'shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.' When we celebrate Christmas with Christ, we celebrate the fact that we have seen what the God of the universe wanted us to see. That's the kind of depth and weight that Christmastime can have, which sure beats some little robot hamster.

ABOUT THE COVER IMAGE

"Destruction, Salvation" by Robin Tillman, a Sojourner

I took this photograph in Guangzhou, China.

It's an alley deep in a beautiful old part of the city. As I was reading through this week's scriptures (Obadiah – Zephaniah), verses about God's heart toward the destruction and salvation of cities stood out to me and this photo came to my mind.

Obadiah verse 4 is particularly poignant, *"Though you soar like the eagle and make your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down," declares the Lord.* The Lord's declaration here is a judgment toward the prideful city of Edom and this verse reminds us that God has power over all of the world's great cities.

And yet, Obadiah's message is ultimately one of Hope for God's people and reminds us that we cannot forget the Greatness of God.

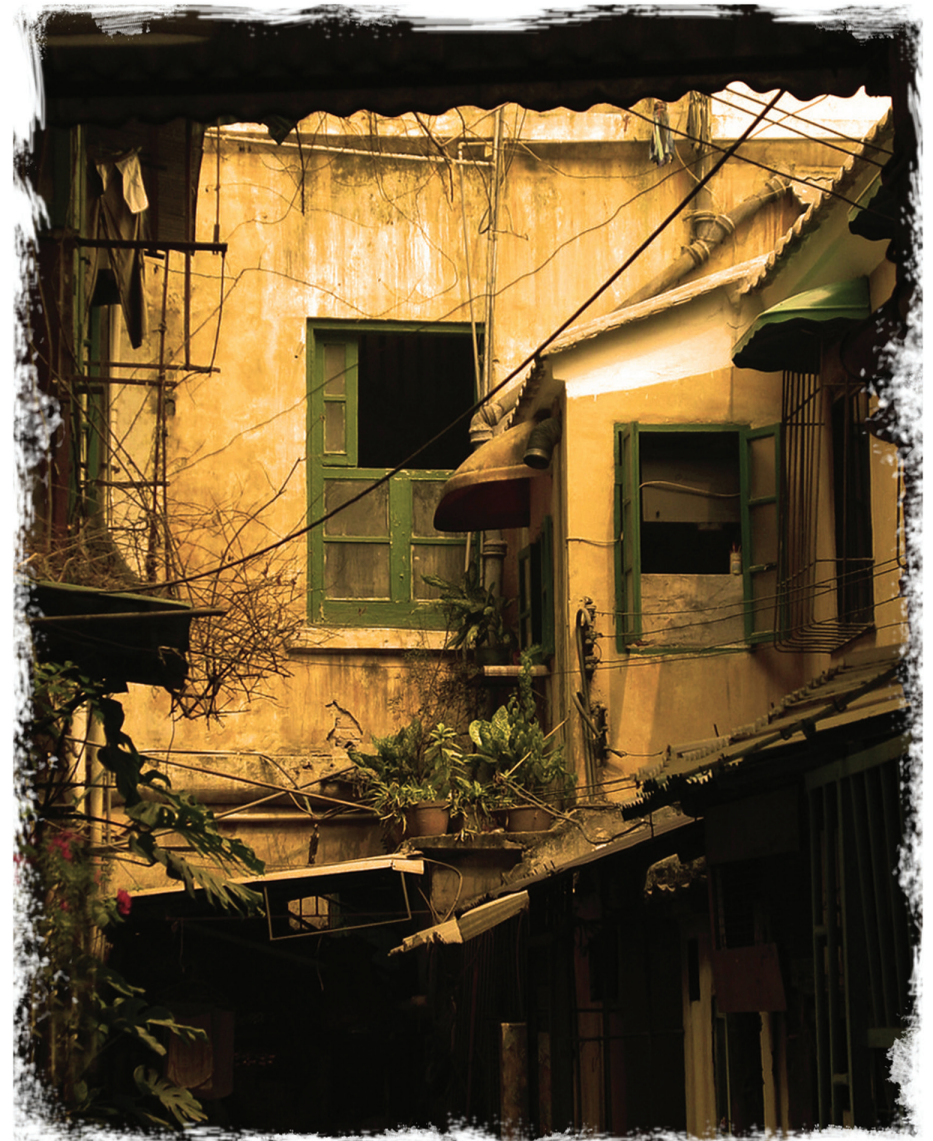
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DAILY BIBLE READING AND DEVOTIONAL



BC +

FROM CREATION TO THE CROSS

December 14-20, 2009

SCRIPTURAL PRAYER

Lord, my God, I cannot flee from you – everywhere I could go, you would be there. So I ask that you would search me, O God, and know my heart and my anxious thoughts. Show me my sin and lead me to everlasting life in your Son. Amen.
from Psalm 139

DAILY SCRIPTURE READING AND PRAYER

Monday Obadiah; Psalm 133; Proverbs 29:26-27
Obadiah vv. 8-9

Where do you seek security – in your financial stability? your health? your family harmony? your job? What is the one thing that, if lost, would leave you vulnerable and afraid? Today, be comforted that God is higher than even that thing and will hold you securely in his hand even if all else fails.

Tuesday Jonah; Psalm 134; Proverbs 30:1-4
Jonah 4:10

Jonah struggled with anger, which, considering that he was swallowed by a fish in the middle of a huge storm at sea as he fled God's mission, coughed up onto a hostile shore and commanded to tell the people that God's judgment was coming, and that he had to endure the ultimate annoyance of having his shade tree die, we might call it justified. We must notice, though, that God rightly rebukes Jonah for his anger – specifically about that withering shade-tree in today's verse. Jonah did nothing to earn the vine that brought him comfort yet he was angry when it died. We tend to get angry when our 'rights' are violated as the things that comfort us wither, even though they are gifts from God and we didn't earn them. Meditate on this today: a key distinctive of being a Christian is thankfulness to God even in discomfort, because we know that God has given us himself, and that's far better than any 'shade-tree'.

Wednesday Micah 1-4; Psalm 135; Proverbs 30:5-6
Micah 2:6-7

In rejecting God's word, people often point to the 'vengeful' God of the Old Testament and say, 'Don't tell me about that God. I could never worship a God who kills people,' – as though the Scriptures themselves were evil. Against this attitude, God declares that his words do good to the upright. The point of God's word is not the judgment that people long to avoid; the point of God's word is Jesus Christ, and all the judgment should point us to Him for refuge. Our challenge is to hear God's whole counsel in the Scriptures: to receive his words of judgment as spoken to us without despairing and rejecting them, rather letting them awaken us to our need for a savior and following God's word all the way to Christ.

Thursday Micah 5-7; Psalm 136; Proverbs 30:7-9
Micah 6:6-8

It's in our nature to want to save ourselves and to think that we can do so by offering some kind of sacrifice, by saying and doing the

right things, by finding the right fruit in our own body to cover the sin of our soul. What an impossible task. God does not require that we make the right sacrifice in order to draw near to him, God requires that we act justly, love mercy and walk humbly – and the key to walking humbly is acknowledging that we can't save ourselves and accept Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf (fruit of God made flesh for the sin of our soul). The Scriptures promise that a living faith in Jesus will change your heart and you will actually be able act justly and love mercy where before your sin had made that impossible (Romans 8:5-6). Today, wake up to God's promise that you can live a just, merciful life by humbly accepting Jesus – all that God asks, he has provided.

Friday Nahum; Psalm 137; Proverbs 30:10
Nahum 1:5

Reading that the world and all that live in it quake in the Lord's presence raises two questions: why was Nineveh not quaking and why do we not quake? Either God is not always present or we are blind. The Scriptures affirm that God is always present (Psalm 139:1-12) so we must be blind (Ephesians 4:17-19). We so easily fall prey to the false yet utterly convincing reality that we have no reason to fear God or be struck with awe in his presence. Today, spend time meditating on all of the things you can think of about God that are so beyond you, so good, so powerful that anyone in their right mind would be fearful and amazed at the same time.

Saturday Habakkuk; Psalm 138; Proverbs 30:11-14
Habakkuk 2:2-3

If you have ever looked at the world and simply wondered, 'why?' then Habakkuk speaks directly to you. Where is God in all the violence, the war, the trampling of the poor? Does he care? Is he even there? God speaks through Habakkuk to tell us that though he seems absent, he is at work; though he seems to linger, wait for him. Today, let your faith be tested – wait for the Lord, who has promised to come and restore all things.

Sunday Zephaniah; Psalm 139; Proverbs 30:15-16
Zephaniah 2:13-15

In all their vision of the future, the prophets also give us the invaluable gift of hindsight. The city of Nineveh was a powerhouse in its day, and probably thought the good times would never stop, yet Zephaniah looks back and sees it desolate, filled with screech owls and rubble where it once teemed with people and wealth. What a precious check on our perspective, what a good reminder that this world, and all its power, draws to an end. Today, consider what it would truly be like to live as if everything around you were only temporary and the spiritual Kingdom of God, that you can't see or touch, will someday replace this world that you can.

BENEDICTION

Hallelujah, the Lord of life has come to reconcile the nations to their God. Hallelujah, He's coming back again to finish what began in Bethlehem.

