

“Turning Point or Three to Four”
Pastor John Bronson

Amos 4:1-13

October 27, 2013

Order of Worship for 10/27/13, title, “Turning Point or Three to Four”, text, Amos 4:1-13
Opening Song:

Welcome and Invocation: Isaiah 40:10-18
Ministry Moment:

Message Theme: God’s patience in dealing with our sin is rooted or grounded in His irresistible power

Worship Theme: To rightly honor God we must remember and acknowledge His irresistible power over His creation.

Quarterly Congregational Business Meeting
4:00 p m
Church Sanctuary

(Sunday Evening in the Word is cancelled until Sunday Evening, November 11th)

Opening Song:

“How Majestic is Your Name” Song # 121

Welcome

Invocation: Isaiah 40:10-18

Special Music: “The Fruit that is Rooted in You”
Hosanna (solos: Rebekah Gentry, Raeanna State,
Jewel Gibson, Heidi Burnett)

Ministry Moment: Missions

Preparing the Heart in Song:

“Indescribable” Overhead
“For the Beauty of the Earth” Song # 793
“Behold Our God” Overhead

Offering & Offertory: “The Lord is My Shepherd”
Hosanna

Message: “Turning Point or Three to Four”
Amos 4:1-13 Pastor John Bronson

Response to the Word:

“Give Thanks” Song # 170

Parting Word of Grace and Invitation to Prayer

Congregational Business Meeting
4 pm in the church sanctuary—all are invited!

Sunday Evening in the Word:

“Turning Point or Three to Four”
Pastor John Bronson

Amos 4:1-13

October 27, 2013

5:30-7 pm in the Church Library
Effective and Fruitful Faith: 2 Peter 2:1-10

“The Prayer Closet”

September 15, 2013

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”

(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying that:

Vance and Carol Johnson: Evangelical Theological college of the Philippines: the Lord will add many to the new church plant in the Johnson home; the Spirit will enable the Philippine leadership of the Free Churches will to be effective in planting many new churches; the Lord will bless the Johnson family children as the transition to adulthood in many different countries of the world where they serve Him

President Obama: the Lord will instill in him the courage and humility needed for genuine leadership and for gaining the wisdom for effective governance; the Spirit will open his heart to the truth; the Father will guide his steps in the way of life

Children’s Ministries: the Lord will raise up all the volunteers needed for a great Fall Family Fun Festival; the teaching staff will be directed to the spiritual needs and susceptibilities of every child; the ministry will effectively draw new children and families into the life of the church

Military or Public Service Personnel of the Week: MSgt. Pete Gibson, Air Force Reserves (husband of Marjorie): that he pass his upcoming fitness test and find a good civilian job at Beale AFB.

Young Adult of the Week: Cynthia Kinnamont, Berea College, KY (daughter of Kent and Mami): Praise—All is going well right now! Please pray for God’s guidance for the future during her last year of college; for healing in her knee and decisions to be made about running sports

Please pray for the health and recovery of our church family: Bob Boettcher, Carol Bernerd, Carol Gray, Carole Lindsey, Dick & Jane Miller, Ellen McNabb, Joe Avery, Myrtle Fullmer, Phil Peterson, Randy Bowen, Ruth Delker

(please call the office to request updates)

I.

The title for today’s message is “From Three to Four”. You may recall from chapter 1:3 that Amos begins by saying “Not for three transgressions or for four will I relinquish the judgment...” The reason I chose this title is not only that it ties back to the beginning portion of the prophet’s message, but also to ask this question which I believe we have been asked by God: Where are we? How close are we as a nation from travelling beyond the third transgression to the fourth? The message is simple: we all know that God’s grace is our hope. We do not always keep clearly in mind that there comes a time when His waiting is over and His judgment will fall. We want to be alert to that. The reason for going through something like the Minor Prophet Amos is to hear with clarity once again the moral imperatives of God. One of the realities of contemporary Christianity is a loss of sight. So impressed have we become with grace and God’s forgiving that we have grown unclear regarding God’s righteous character and the demand that not only would we be His but we would be holy. His intention is that we would become holy, separated from sin and walking on the path of righteousness. So we need to hear what the prophet has to say to us, because the Word of God has not changed. With the coming of Christ the law of God still stands as the description of God’s holy character, to which we aspire.

As with the message last week, so this week there are three sections to this chapter. First section is verses 1-5 and it is Amos’s or God’s indictment, his statement of judgment against Israel, the northern ten tribes. The second section is verses 6-11, and this is a summary of God’s patient attempt to penetrate the hardened hearts of Israel. You and I might want to pay particular attention at that point, knowing that God is talking to us. Undoubtedly to some of us in this room who probably hardened hearts, and to the nation as a whole which definitely has a hardened heart, trying to penetrate, to break through the wall of resistance so that we will hear Him. Then the last section is verses 12-13, a brief statement reminding Israel the truth about God, the God who is speaking to them. Follow along as I read out of the English Standard Version.

(4:1) “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, ‘Bring that we may drink!’ (4:2) The Lord God has sworn by his holiness that, behold, the days are coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks. (4:3) And you shall go out through the breaches, each one straight ahead; and you shall be cast out into Harmon,’ declares the Lord. (4:4) ‘Come to Bethel, and transgress; to Gilgal, and multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days; (4:5) offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving of that which is leavened, and proclaim freewill offerings, publish them; for so you love to do, O people of Israel!’ declares the Lord God.

(4:6) “I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places, yet you did not return to me,’ declares the Lord. (4:7) ‘I also withheld the rain from you when there were yet three months to the harvest; I would send rain on one city, and send no rain on another city; one field would have rain, and the field on which it did not rain would wither; (4:8) so two or three cities would wander to another city to drink water, and would not be satisfied; yet you did not return to me,’ declares the Lord. (4:9) ‘I struck you with blight and mildew; your many gardens and your vineyards, your fig trees and your olive trees the locust devoured; yet you did not return to me,’ declares the Lord. (4:10) ‘I sent among you a pestilence after the manner of Egypt; I killed your young men with the sword, and carried away your horses, and I made the stench of your camp go up into your nostrils; yet you did not return to me,’ declares the Lord. (4:11) ‘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. (4:12) ‘Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel; because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel!’ (4:13) For behold, he who forms the mountains and creates the wind, and declares to man what is his thought, who makes the morning darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth—the Lord, the God of hosts, is his name!”

Thus the word of the Lord.

I hope you took note of the opening statement. Even in ancient Israel referring the wives of the wealthy, the aristocracy of the land as cows was not exactly flattering. “You cows of Bashan!” You have to know that the cows of Bashan were very special cows. The cows of Bashan referred to those privileged animals which grazed in the rich pasture lands east of the Jordan, in that day still watered. Those cows did nothing all day long except eat and sleep and bask in the sun, which is the best of all possible worlds for a cow, but it falls rather short of what is desired for a woman, especially a woman from the people of God enjoying every advantage in her world. What Amos says of these women has to be [understood] against the background of what he has already said about the conditions and practices in Israel. Go back and look at what he said in chapter 3:9. There he refers to the fact that in Israel the wealthy and powerful were oppressing the poor and the weak. Here there says that these are people who at this point in time no longer know how to do what is right. For so long have they been shut away from the compassions of God, for so long have they ceased to be concerned about the justice of God, so long have they shielded themselves from any questions regarding the righteousness [of God] that they are no longer responsive. In the midst of those who struggled to survive the sole concern of these women is their own pleasure. If you look again back to chapter 3 these are the ladies who live in the summer house, and in the change of season they lived in the winter house. These are the women who lived in the houses of ivory. These are the ladies of the great house far removed by design from the sorrows and struggles of those whose lives had little to no defense against the uncertainties of changing weather and the wars fought by kings, these who were the continual victims of the lords who brought these ladies their drinks and supplied them with multiple homes.

In response, God pronounces a horrific judgment on these ladies. That is verse 2. These women of affluent leisure, who spend their days self-focused, self-centered, self-indulgent shall experience the cruelest kind of exile. He says they will be dragged out by hooks. When he mentions the “breach” he means the breach in the city walls, the breach in the fortifications they may have built around their palatial homes. He says the walls will be broken, the enemy will break through and they will be hooked and dragged out, all pride stripped, all privilege gone, all comforts removed, all securities lost. The ladies would have known what Amos was talking about. If you recall, at the beginning of the book Amos describes the surrounding nations, and the sins of the surrounding nations included the conquest, capture and enslavement. Indeed, some of those slaves undoubtedly served in those lovely homes and they knew them personally.

The sins of Israel reached beyond the “cows of Bashan”. There was more than just luxurious self-indulgence without concern for the suffering of others. Remember I said last week that perhaps the most important thing you could have heard in that entire service was the opportunities we have to serve others who have less than [we do]. Some time ago as we were coming to the end of our study of Paul’s letter to the Philippians I made this observation in the course of that study: “If someone spends all their time simply enjoying their possessions and all that their resources bring their way, they have become slaves of those things. They may very well be thankful slaves and they may even be tithing slaves, but they are slaves. Their hearts are no longer devoted to God or the things of God, but their hearts are in fact devoted to themselves.” How easy it is for us to turn our religious activities – and it is necessary to have religious activities, which are called rituals: when we take up an offering it is a ritual. That is a good thing. – But it is very easy for us to take a ritual and instead of making it an avenue or an action by which we express our love and devotion and thanks to a gracious God, we instead use them as a means to buy Him off, so that we can then soothe our own conscience as we continue to pursue our unrighteous and self-indulgent personal choices. It is a subtle distinction perhaps in our minds, but it is distinction as the night and day standing before a Holy God.

The wealthy people, the powerful people of Samaria were trying to buy God off. Indeed we see that with clarity when you go on down to verse 4 in chapter 4. At first blush you might not grasp what is happening here, but it is easily clarified. *“Come to Bethel, and transgress; to Gilgal, and multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days; offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving of that which is leavened, and proclaim*

freewill offerings, publish them; for so you love to do, O people of Israel!” Hardened hearts engaged in a self-focused, self-indulgent lifestyle in which they consistently not only ignored the need of those who were in need and engaged in oppression, [but they were] religious people, very religious people. Their religion is a sham, a mockery of the God who had saved them from the iron furnace of Egypt and blessed them with every material blessing, with the unique covenant of protection and wisdom and the law for living well on the face of the earth as God’s chosen people. God intended that they would enjoy abundant crops; He intended that they would enjoy peace and security; He intended that they would not suffer the diseases of the world; He intended that they would be a show case of His grace in protecting them and sustaining them for the entirety of their lives upon the earth. But He intended that that would be the outward flowing of lives devoted to righteousness and justice and truth and compassion. But the people of Israel made grace license, they [felt] they had the “right” to live as they wanted and to enjoy things without concern either for God or for others.

Amos 4:4 from our vantage point is obviously “cheap grace”. That is the particular spiritual blindness of our day. But there is a different kind of spiritual sickness amongst them at that time and it is also at work amongst us though not as obviously. What Amos says is that these people are over the top in their religious behavior. What they do is they offer sacrifices and tithes beyond which the Law ever asked for. They were ever so thankful; in fact it appears that amongst them there had become something of a competition, which is the thrust behind “proclaim freewill offerings” and, notice what he says: “publish them”. What does that mean? What would be the effect of that? I do not think it is all that obscure if you think about it a little bit. What was happening is that they were making a public performance of what was supposed to be a private act of personal devotion. Therefore they were bringing powerful social pressure on one another to see who indeed could bring the most. Ah! Do we not have here, beloved, a foretaste of another group of people we meet in the Bible, the Pharisees. The Pharisees set out to make sure they were extremely good. The Law only asked Israelites to fast one day out of the year, but the Pharisees fasted at least once every week: Yes! Super religious. Really, really, really good!!! The Law asked for a reasonable observation of the Sabbath. The Pharisees surrounded Sabbath observance with a multitude of laws. What we don’t realize is that those laws made it almost impossible for a poor person to observe them. The laws were such that only if you had sufficient supplies and sufficient means could you possibly live within their tight constraints, so by definition by the laws added on top with statutes and regulations they simply let the poor and the oppressed know, “You do not make the mark.” The Pharisees were extremely careful to tithe. They even tithed their spices! Remember that it was of the Pharisees that Jesus said, you are lovers of money. The Pharisees responded with scoffing laughter. Behind and beneath all of that religiosity we had people who in fact had forgotten the issues of justice, mercy and faithfulness. Their hearts were as hard as stone, like iron. Beloved we tell ourselves that the life of the legalist is so very difficult, but compared with the issues of justice amongst men, mercy for those in need and faithfulness in all our dealings, tithing is an easy thing to do. It is far easier for me to take ten percent of whatever I have and give it away than it is to ensure that in all of my dealings I am just, fair and righteous and that I am consistent in responding in mercy and compassion for those in need. It is easy for me to close my door, to put the gate across my driveway, to hide within the safe and comfortable confines of my home and write a check; that is a lot easier than to walk out the door and into the needs of other peoples’ lives. That is exactly what the Pharisees were doing, hidden away inside their privilege and very impressed with their own remarkable religion.

The hearts of the Pharisees were revealed in their neglect of the hard things. But they also showed their true colors, Jesus tells us, when they had trumpets blown to announce their prayers and when they gave alms for the poor. “Look; everybody look!” Who has given the most? I am sure that was a topic of conversation around the pool as the ladies sipped their drinks, or perhaps it was a boast amongst the lordly men as they survey their ever expanding lands, admired their ever bigger barns and discussed the difficult problem of the poor and what to do about it.

There are two important lessons at least to learn here. Jesus himself, I think we would recognize gives the definitive teaching [in this area] in Matthew 6:1, *“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be*

seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your heavenly Father who is in heaven.” Jesus goes on immediately at that point to speak of giving gifts to the needy and of the discipline of prayer and fasting – it is that section of the Sermon of the Mount. Jesus says we should be so discrete in our giving that our left hand does not know what our right hand is doing. We are to pray in the secret place of our own room with the door shut so that we are not tempted to pray to the crowd, but only to the Lord. I suspect that most of us are at least somewhat familiar with that teaching by Jesus. There have been some sort of silly conclusions drawn from that. Please notice that we are right to hope for a reward from the things that we do; we are right to want that to be the case. But of course it makes all the difference in the world what kind of reward we are anticipating and desiring. The best rewards are relief and joy in the lives of those who receive our gifts. A number of men in this congregation serve at the Rescue Mission, one of the most difficult and thankless tasks you can imagine: extending the gospel to those who have undoubtedly have heard it many, many times. But what happens when in the eyes and on the countenance of one of those men there is sudden understanding, and the light of joy suddenly begins to flush over their face and you realize God in His grace has taken His word, penetrated a heart, enlightened a mind and taken a soul and brought it from death to life: hallelujah! So, do you want that reward? O yes, you want that reward. You should hunger for that reward. Perhaps it will be the case that will be Eric and Heidi’s experience in a number of lives they serve in Tanzania.

Secondly, Jesus should not be taken literally to the effect that we are not to pray in public places, as if it were wrong to pray in a Synagogue, or to pray here, or perhaps in a restaurant at a meal and so on. That is not the thrust of His insistence. Rather the thrust is simply this; it is a matter of the heart that our faith be directed to God and not to men, that we seek heaven’s blessings, not man’s. That is the counsel that we need to take home to ourselves and be certain that wherever we pray and whenever we pray that our prayers are directed to the Lord, they are full of faith, and they are given without respect to the response of those who might be around us, unless of course by God’s grace someone should hear our prayer and desire to know the God to whom we are praying. That would be a good thing indeed!

The second lesson we find in Deuteronomy 28:13-14. There as he is just about done with his recapturing or recapping of the Law, Moses makes this observation under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: *“...if only you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today, being careful to do them...”* Then [Moses] makes this additional observation: *“...and if you do not turn aside from any of the words that I command you today, to the right hand or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them.”* What both the very religious in Israel and the Pharisees in Jesus’ day had done was to add to what God had said. By adding to what God had said they exalted themselves over the Lord and made themselves little gods. We do this today. I don’t mean anybody particularly in this congregation, but in this age of ours. How often have we heard this: “I don’t think I can believe in a God that sends people to hell.” “Why [not]?” “Because it is not compassionate.” “O, I see; let me be sure I understand. You are more compassionate than God, because you have a higher standard of forgiveness and you are more ready to love and bless people than God is. Is that what you are trying to say?” [The answer is], yes, that is exactly what they are saying. There is a reason why we have received this revelation from God. It is because the truth can be very uncomfortable, and you and I are creatures who love comfort. The truth, Jesus warns us, pushes us away from some people who don’t want to hear it for they don’t want to live by it. We do not like to be separated from others; we like approval, we like acceptance, we like strokes of admiration, and so to have a gospel which includes the clarity of God’s righteous demands that a people be holy means at some point as we articulate the gospel and as we seek to live the gospel, someone is going to say to us, “You are nothing but a legalist!” “No, I was just trying to be obedient [to the Word].” “Well, yeah, that is what I just said, because a God of grace is a God of love and a God of love lets us all do whatever we want to. Right?” No. We all of us are familiar of course with how a person we are encountering recoils from our supposed righteousness. What I am speaking of right now is the recoil of our own hearts as we recognize that our message is not being well received. So what do I do now? What God says is stand fast on the Word.

When you come down to the next verses it is important for us to recognize that though Israel had turned away from God, God had not turned away from Israel. By her [religious] behavior Israel thought she could fence God in behind her lavish attention to ceremony and ritual, the outward show of her religiosity. But you don't contain God! God is not idle in the world. In particular God remains active in watching His people, over us. But God's presence is not always readily seen or understood especially by those who have lied to themselves about His character and how He deals with people. As is driven home to us in the Book of Hebrews, those whom God loves He disciplines for righteousness. He does so because only those who are righteous can dwell with God. This is driven home to us in the Book of Hebrews, 12:14, *“Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”* So how many unholy people will see God? None, zero! Notice here that he is not talking about people who know the right formula to confess; he is talking about people who have striven to be holy. What we need to hear in this statement in Hebrews, which is actually drawn up from Proverbs 3:11-12, and is the message that Amos is preaching to the Israelites, and it is the message that Isaiah is preaching to the Israelites, what we need to recognize and hear with clarity is that from God's point of view the eradication of sin and evil from our lives is mandatory if we are going to have fellowship with God. What we get stuck on is that through grace we are relieved of guilt, and we think that I don't feel guilty, then it must be ok with me. What God is saying is, no, getting rid of guilt is a first step; becoming holy is the next step! It is important that we be able to walk with God, for if you do not have fellowship with God, you are lost.

Picking up at verse 6, what God had done in communicating to Israel is recounted to us in verses 6-12 of chapter 4. This is God's calling: “Hello out there,” He is saying. “Can I get your attention!” “Here I am. Would you please turn around and look this way and not that way.” That is the nature of the call. This is a peculiarly powerful section if you pay attention to it as it was written. It might not be what we would expect; I suspect it was certainly not what the Israelites expected in terms of how God tried to get the attention. But He repeats it over and over. V. 6, He says, *“I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities and lack of bread in all your places, yet you did not return to me.”* Then He says it again in v. 8, *“...yet you did not return to me.”* He says it again in verse 9, *“...yet you did not return to me.”* He says it again in verse 10, *“...yet you did not return to me.”* And He says it again in verse 11, *“...yet you did not return to me.”* What does God want? He wants His children to return. That is what He wants. That is grace! This is nothing other than the story of the prodigal son. What did the prodigal son do? He received marvelous gifts from his father, a great deal of wealth. What did he do then? He ran off with it. What did he do then? He wasted it in immoral and stupid activity. What did he do then? He said, “I have been an idiot!” What did he do then? He said, “I will return to my father.” What did he do then? He said, “I don't deserve to be a son anymore, if I can just be a servant in my father's house, the lowest of servants I will be content. And what did the father do? “You've come back! Welcome. Here is a ring. Here's a robe. Here's a fatted calf. Celebrate!” But Israel would not go back.

Surely if God wants you to be with Him that is good news. But it was not good news to Israel. Maybe it was because they didn't like the way God talked to them; they did not like the way God made His overtures of love. Those same verses tell us how God spoke: lack of bread, drought, blessing here and cursing there; blight and mildew, locust swarms, pestilence, the death of young men. If you know your Bible – and it would be good if you did and you should work at studying it – you would know that everything that is described there as having been brought into the life of Samaria is exactly what God promised they wouldn't every have to experience when He gave them the covenant, unless, of course, they were disobedient. So that list of things is not just an arbitrary list: He is saying this: “Your misbehavior, your hardened heart, your rebellion, your stiff neck has cancelled out every provision of God's blessing given in the covenant. One of the commentators that I read said we should not assume that the Israelites were insincere in their religious activities. They are just wrong.

What about the United States? There is no point in talking about a bunch of Israelites who have been dead for about 2 and a half thousand years. Let's talk about us. Have we seen droughts: Texas, the central plains. Have we had floods: Colorado, Mexico, Arizona. Perhaps you recall the floods in Hurricane Sandy. Have we had fires? Nearly unprecedented fires [have burned] in the Rockies, in the Sierras, in Idaho, in Nevada, in Utah. Do we have cities and states and even a national government facing bankruptcy, staggering under an incalculable burden of debt even though we are [still] the richest and most highly productive economy in the world? Do we sense that the United States, by every measure the most powerful nation in the world, is curiously hollow and stumbling on the face of the earth? I said to my wife the other day that for the first time in my life I am embarrassed to say that I am an American.

What Amos lists in verses 6-II [is what] God has already done in the attempt to get the attention and turn the mind and heart of his people. He had done all this and it had failed of its purpose. All this had not succeeded in bringing God and His people face to face, as it were. So now God says this: you should take careful note of this; how we misunderstand this. “The acts of discipline having failed, it is time for Me to come and deal directly with you.” That is verse 12. *“Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel; because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel!”* How often do we glibly say that we long to have God here with us in our midst? What if He was? Not mediated through the blood of Christ, not shielding us with Christ's righteousness: what if He just walked in and we had to deal with Him according to who we are? I can give you the answer in one word: death. People in our culture today speak lightly about having a direct experience with God, unmediated, my soul to His. O beloved, only the most profound ignorance could ever say such a thing! Such words come from those who either do not know or also do not in fact believe in the righteous God of heaven. They certainly do not understand what the Bible is about. There is someone who had an experience of God. His name is Isaiah. As we saw last week and so again now: his response to that mediated experience of God's presence was, “Woe is me, for I am unclean!” Someone made this comment: the reason we tremble in the Lord's presence is not on account of His power, but on account of His goodness, His holiness. God's perfections render our imperfections unacceptable, shameful in His presence. Further we see that in the case of Isaiah, the direct meeting had the desired effect, for it prompted an intense consciousness of sin and a horror of it. But that is just what the people of Israel need.

But at the same time, as we see in verse 13, having an accurate knowledge of God magnifies the impact of His holiness. Notice how he is described in that thirteenth verse: *“Behold he who forms the mountains and creates the wind, and declares to man what is his thought, who makes the morning darkness, and reads on the heights of the earth—the Lord, the God of hosts, is his name!”* At the heart of all things is the perfect purity of a holy God. The power which called all things into being and sustains all things in being is the holy God. He is flawless in His goodness, His kindness, His justice and His faithfulness. But we should know that God's mercies never contradict His judgments. God is ever thwarted in his purposes for His power is unlimited and so too is His knowledge. If God were here right now, standing in our presence, not mediated through Christ, every thought in our hearts and minds would be fully exposed, and I for one would be terrified and humiliated and so covered with shame that I could not stand. That is the meaning of grace. Grace covers. An excellent commentary explains the meaning of this phrase, God is the searcher of the heart and reveals to men by prophets the state of their hearts since He judges not by the outward actions but the inmost emotions. Hebrews 4:12, *“The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division soul and spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”* Israel needed to know; so do we. This is our God. There is no other. If you are not reconciled to this God through the blood of Jesus Christ my plea to you is, be reconciled. Do not turn away. Remember that He said, all that I have done is an invitation. Please come! Please come to me, He says, and be saved.

Please pray with me: our Father in heaven, it is something else to get a clear view of who You are, the standards of truth because that reveals to us who we are and how greatly we need you and your love. O Father, without the Law,

without the righteousness that is Yours on Your heavenly throne the cross is a perplexity and Your grace a minor note. But oh when we begin to understand, then, Father, the cross is an absolute necessity and grace is our only hope. So may we be hope-filled through Your Holy Spirit because of Jesus. It is, Father, in His name that we pray. Amen.

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. Do you think American Christianity has added rules and expectation to what the Bible actually requires of believers in order to be rightly seen as “serious” about the faith? If so, what might some of those rules and expectations be?
2. As you see it, are there issues of justice, mercy or faithfulness which American Christianity tends to ignore? What might some of those be?
3. Under what circumstances or how are we tempted to substitute people’s admiration for heaven’s blessings in our spiritual disciplines?
4. What to you are the clearest evidences of God’s active presence in the world today?
5. How does the issue of personal holiness tend to affect you the most?
6. Have you known people who have openly declared they prefer to not have God active in their life? Though we may be reluctant to admit it, I think most people feel this way now and then. What are some times when people generally feel this way?
7. Do you think there is evidence that God is attempting to recapture the attention of our nation as a whole? What might some of those evidences be?
8. Many people express an interest in and some claim to have had a direct encounter with God. Why is this risky and what is the Biblical answer to this problem?
9. What most deeply affects you regarding God and how does this play out in your spiritual life?