



# MINUTES WITH MESSIAH

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## IT'S NOT FAIR

Children, and sometimes adults, frequently say, "It's not fair." The "it" can be anything. Perhaps older sister had to wait until a certain age to be allowed to wear makeup, but younger sister got to do it at a younger age. Maybe a man gets paid a higher salary than a woman for the same job. The possibilities are endless, but the response is the same. The fairness of the situation is called into question by the person who feels they did not get what the other person got.

The common response to this complaint is to point out, "Life is not fair." As far as it goes, that is an accurate assessment, but that really does not take in all factors.

Sometimes the perceived lack of fairness is because of a lack of information. That same job that pays differently for the man and the woman may be in a different industry, or even a different company that pays everyone less. A sibling may be allowed to do something because they are more, or less, mature regardless of calendar age. When we complain that life isn't fair, it is often because we don't know all the details. The prophet Habakkuk told God that it wasn't fair for Babylon to be the nation to punish Judah for her sins; after all, Babylon was worse than Judah.

Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity: wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he? (Hab 1:13)

God's answer was that the prophet could not see the big picture. Babylon was indeed more wicked than Judah, but Judah *was* wicked and in need of punishment. Babylon, though, would be punished for their sins. What Habakkuk could not see was that Israel would be reestablished, but Babylon would not.

At other times our concept of fairness is faulty. We want what is fair for us, but not for others. The people to whom Ezekiel wrote (shortly after Habakkuk) complained that God was not fair because he did not punish the children for the sins of the parents, or *vice versa*. God chided them for their selfish concept of fairness.

Yet ye say, The way of the Lord is not fair. Hear now, O house of Israel; Is not my way equal? are not

your ways unequal? When a righteous man turneth away from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, and dieth in them; for his iniquity that he hath done shall he die. Again, when the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness that he hath committed, and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul alive. Because he considereth, and turneth away from all his transgressions that he hath committed, he shall surely live, he shall not die. Yet saith the house of Israel, The way of the Lord is not equal. O house of Israel, are not my ways fair? are not your ways unfair? (Ezek 18:25-29)

Finally, most people don't want fairness. Even those who say that it is not fair would not want God to treat them by their concept of fairness. After all, what would you say about someone who makes the rules and says if you break them you suffer; and then he says that doesn't apply to certain people. Essentially, that is what God has done. He made the rules. Then (or even before then) he decided that he would punish someone else for breaking the rules. That is like your parents punishing the next-door neighbor because you stayed out past curfew. It's not fair, but if the neighbor volunteered to take the punishment, it is merciful. It's not fair, but we don't really want God to be fair; we want him to be forgiving, and forgiving is not fair.

For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous. Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound: That as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord. (Rom 5:19-21)

### CONTENTS

It's Not Fair	1
What Do You See?	2
Our Pets	4

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# WHAT DO YOU SEE?

Painters and photographers are visually different from most of the rest of us. In what we see as a field of flowers, Georgia O’Keeffe might find a perfectly pleasing single bloom, and paint it hugely. We drive through Iowa and see farmhouses; Grant Wood sees a stained glass window and puts a farmer and his wife in front of it. The result is the iconic “American Gothic,” which has been imitated by artists and cartoonists since. Driving down an empty street after dark, we see a way home; Edward Hopper sees a brightly lit coffee shop that becomes the classic “Nighthawks.” I see a stream; my friend Katie Spear sees a photo of stones creating small rapids. Their perception is different than ours.

The prophets were apparently artists in their own right, or at least God expected them to be. He would give them a visual and use it to teach a lesson. Ezekiel was adept at recognizing the lesson. With at least three prophets, however, God had to do a little prompting.

## Jeremiah

Three times God asked Jeremiah, “What do you see?” Jeremiah sees the picture, but God has to explain the meaning.

“The word of the LORD came unto me, saying, Jeremiah, what seest thou? And I said, I see a rod of an

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almond tree.” (Jer 1:11) Some of us would commend Jeremiah for just recognizing the kind of tree, since some wouldn’t know an almond from an ash. God, though, wants Jeremiah to see more than just an almond tree. He wants his prophet to see the message. “Then said the LORD unto me, Thou hast well seen: for I will hasten my word to perform it.” (verse 12) Literally, this last phrase is “I will watch my word work.” So, what does an almond tree have to do with the message God is giving Jeremiah?

After the dead winter months, the almond tree is the first whose white blossoms bloom. The Hebrew word for the almond is (שקד) *shaqed*. The word for “to keep watch” is *shaqad*, spelled the same in ancient Hebrew (which had no vowels). Context, until the invention of vowel points, and an aural knowledge of the text, determined pronunciation. Thus, God is here giving Jeremiah a pun. You see an almond rod, and just as the almond blooms early, I will watch my word be fulfilled

early (quickly). Such puns are not infrequent in the writings of the prophets.

“And the word of the LORD came unto me the second time, saying, What seest thou? And I said, I see a seething pot; and the face thereof is toward the north.” (Jer 1:14) This picture is not as hard for us to follow, if we can understand what is the “face” of a boiling pot. Judging from the meaning God gives, what Jeremiah saw was a cauldron sitting in a fire, tilted so that the boiling water spilled out southward; thus the face of the pot is the part that is closest to the flame.

Given this vision, Jeremiah could no doubt have some idea as to its meaning. God, however, makes sure he understands. Invaders from the north are going to boil into the land of Judah, scalding the inhabitants thereof. Invaders, in the Israelite mind, come from only two directions. From the south come the Egyptians and possibly what we would call Ethiopians. Nobody comes from the east, because that is virtually impassable desert. To the west is the Mediterranean, and nobody to this time had ever amassed a conquering navy. If the invaders were not Egyptian, they came from the north. This would include the Hittites (Turkey), Scythians (Russia/Ukraine), Syrians, Assyrians, and (even though they were actually east of Israel) the Chaldeans/Babylonians. God is telling Jeremiah that the Babylonians are coming, and rather than using lanterns (“one if by land and two if by sea”) he uses the picture of a pot.

“Then said the LORD unto me, What seest thou, Jeremiah? And I said, Figs; the good figs, very good; and the evil, very evil, that cannot be eaten, they are so evil.” (Jer 24:3) Now even Jeremiah could figure this one out. There are good figs and bad figs, good people and bad people, or at least blessed people and ruined people. And that is exactly what God said it meant. The good figs were those who had gone to Babylon in the first wave of the captivity, when Daniel and his friends were taken. They would be blessed with an eventual return to Jerusalem. The bad figs are those that resisted Babylon and remained in Jerusalem. They would be killed or scattered in captivity. Unlike those taken directly to Babylon, they and their descendants would never see their homeland again. Because they were evil of mind, they were compared to very bad figs. This is similar to Jesus’ picture of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25.

## Amos

“And the LORD said unto me, Amos, what seest thou? And I said, A plumbline.” (Amos 7:8) What he actually saw was God standing on a wall with a plumbline in his hands. Even though Amos was a farmer, he

probably knew the purpose of a plumbline. Perhaps he had even built walls around his orchards, and used one. A plumbline is essential for building walls that will not fall. With it one determines whether the wall is truly vertical or whether it leans insecurely. It is essentially a weight on a string. When the weight is suspended the string hangs absolutely vertically. If the distance from the string to the wall is consistent, the wall is also vertical. If the top or bottom of the wall, doorframe, or whatever is being measured, is farther from the string than the other point of measurement, the item is not vertical. If it is a wall, it is likely to fall. If it is the opening for a door, the door will not close properly.

God then tells Amos he is about to put a plumbline in the middle of Israel. He is going to measure them in comparison to the Law. If they are abiding by the Law of Moses, all will be well. If, as he knows, they are not, then destruction will follow as surely as an unplumbed wall will fall.

“And he said, Amos, what seest thou? And I said, A basket of summer fruit.” (Amos 8:2) Amos knew fruit. Fruit was his business. To Amos a basket of summer fruit could only mean one thing; the harvest season was over. There is spring fruit; there is summer fruit; and there is the dead of winter. If the summer fruit is in the basket, winter is close at hand. In this case, the winter was to be the end of Israel. God says, “I will pass them by no more.” (verse 2) In other words, the harvest is so completely over that there is no need to look on the trees for more fruit. “The winter of our discontent” has come upon Israel. The good have been harvested, and only death and destruction remains. All this, from a vision of a basket of fruit.

## Zechariah

And the angel that talked with me came again, and waked me, as a man that is wakened out of his sleep, And said unto me, What seest thou? And I said, I have looked, and behold a candlestick all of gold, with a bowl upon the top of it, and his seven lamps thereon, and seven pipes to the seven lamps, which are upon the top thereof: And two olive trees by it, one upon the right side of the bowl, and the other upon the left side thereof. (Zech 4:1-3)

This is a little more complex a vision. Even Zechariah had to ask what it meant. After one explanation, he even had to ask again.

Contrary to modern popular belief, God says the vision has a specific meaning for Zechariah’s time. The candlestick is Zerubbabel, the Prince of Israel, supported by “the eyes of Jehovah, which run to and fro through the whole earth.” Zerubbabel is the light of the Jewish nation, the restorer of Temple worship. The olive trees that supply fuel for the lamp are “the two anointed ones, that stand by the Lord of the whole earth.” This is what makes the vision complex, because the two anointed ones are Joshua

the Priest and Zerubbabel himself. Essentially it is a vision of the restored power of Israel, supplied by the spiritual (priest) and legal (prince) rulers of the people. No wonder Zechariah had to ask twice about the meaning.

“And he said unto me, What seest thou? And I answered, I see a flying scroll; the length thereof is twenty cubits, and the breadth thereof ten cubits.” (Zech 5:2) Although there were other scrolls in existence, to a prophet of God a scroll generally represented the Law of Moses. This one was flying. God explains that it moves through Judah, condemning the thief and the perjurer. Nobody could hide from the Law.

## Lessons for us

Zechariah was shown other visions. These are just the ones for which he was specifically asked, “What do you see?” These visions of Zechariah, and those of Amos and Jeremiah are sufficient to teach us a few lessons.

Sometimes God reveals himself in ways that only those who know him will understand. Jesus spoke in parables. This was so that only the ones who wanted to

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understand would understand. (Matt 13:11) Those who do not possess the mind of God, who do not have the Holy Spirit (God’s word) dwelling in them, will not understand even the most obvious spiritual things. Those who are of a mind to follow God will have no problem seeing what he wants them to see.

Things are not always as they seem. A basket of figs is not necessarily a basket of figs. Sometimes we need to look more closely to find God’s will for us. The beggar on the street corner may not just be a beggar. “Inasmuch as ye have done unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done unto me.” (Matt 25:40) The people of Sodom saw men traveling through as objects of desire; Lot saw them as men needing shelter; Abraham saw them, eventually, as messengers of God. We need to look upon every situation as an opportunity to do good and to teach about God. Who knows but that the person you help today might not be the next great teacher in the church.

Sometimes we need to have things called to our attention. In our normal existence we may not be looking for the wondrous. Photographers may see the wonder of the world, but we see the routine. Before we can “stop and smell the roses,” sometimes we need someone to point out that there are roses to stop for.

# OUR PETS

They say pets are good for you. People with pets are supposed to live longer, happier lives than those without. Cats, birds, fish, and even (I shudder to say it) dogs are generally beneficial to mental, and even physical, health. There is a program at one health care organization in Albuquerque, based on work at Johns Hopkins, called hospital at home. People with certain conditions who live within a given distance of an emergency room belonging to that hospital can elect to spend their three to five day hospital stay at home, with daily visits by nurses and a doctor. One of the advantages of this program is that people who are very sick don't have to worry about who is taking care of their pets, because they can oversee their care themselves. Pets are supposed to be good for you.

There are, however, three pets that almost everyone owns that are not so beneficial. These three pets are hazardous to mental and spiritual health. In some cases they can even kill their owners. And yet we won't let them go. They are, after all, our pets.

One of these is our pet peeve. We all have one. This is that one thing that always sets you off. No matter how innocuous it appears to someone else, this is the issue that you just cannot stand. Sometimes our pet peeves may seem ridiculous to someone else, like the preacher who could not stand to have someone whistle in the church building. Sometimes our pet peeves may even be innocent in themselves, such as the one that gets angry whenever someone is seen talking on a cell phone while driving. Such behavior is dangerous, and often illegal, so it is good to be upset when you see it. When it becomes your pet peeve, though, it gets out of hand. You see such behavior and you start honking at the other car, yelling at the driver, and maybe even driving erratically. What is otherwise an annoyance now becomes an obsession that endangers your life.

Paul advocated keeping pet peeves on a leash. "Be angry, and sin not. Don't let the sun go down on your wrath." (Eph 4:26) If you must keep a pet peeve, keep it under control.

The other two pets most people have are actually twins. They are the pet sins. One is the pet sin that they oppose. Any sin is wrong, and any sin will separate a person from God if that person does not avail themselves of God's forgiveness. Some people, though, let this pet grow out of proportion. It is not a new phenomenon. Remember the abolitionists and the prohibitionists? It seems that we are seeing these overgrown pet sins more often today: anti-abortionists who bomb clinics, anti-homosexuals who assault or even kill people, anti-Muslims who burn the Qur'an. It is good to oppose sin, but when they let one sin grow fatter than others, they are opening the door for others to discredit God.

The twin to the pet anti-sin is the pet sin we justify. We oppose sin in general, and even some sins specifically, but we have to keep our own little sin. We may hide our pet so that nobody but God knows we have it. As often we try to justify our sin. "It is not really a sin." "Where does the Bible clearly and specifically say, thou shalt not?" "His sin is worse than mine." Sometimes the twins are identical; the owner goes overboard letting people know he opposes a sin, just so he can hide it in his own life. Perhaps pet sins are the most dangerous. They can kill more easily. "Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" (Rom 6:1-2) "Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us" (Heb 12:1)

Pets are good, as long as they are good pets. But who in his right mind keeps an alligator for a pet? These three pets can be even more deadly.

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