



## Editor's Note

According to Revelation 13, a fearful creature described by the apostle John as “the beast” will rise to prominence at some future time. John’s description includes these words: “all the world wondered after the beast” (v. 3). Throughout history, skeptics scoffed at the idea of all the world being able to be involved in anything. Limited communication just wouldn’t allow it. Then came TV, bringing the potential for all the world to have that involvement, if anything could ever get all the world’s attention. Suddenly, within a few short weeks, all the world is involved in a dreaded spreading disease.

The idea of a powerful world figure stepping forward and commanding the wonder of “all the world” isn’t so hard to imagine!

Should believers worry? Not if they know their Bibles! A few chapters later, we find this verse: “For God hath put in their hearts to fulfill His will, and to agree, and give their kingdom unto the beast, until the words of God shall be fulfilled.” (17:17) Thank God for translating us into a completely different kingdom, “the kingdom of His dear Son” (Col. 1:13). We may keep up on the news, but let us not be distracted by it. 

### Biblical Foundations

#### The Old Testament Prophets *by Robert Spender*

##### Eighth-Century BC Prophets of Judah

The Lord raised up messengers to bring powerful words of warning and deliverance to His people at various times and in various locations. Isaiah and Micah served as contemporaries in Judah around the time that Hosea and Amos were preaching in Israel. Joel is more difficult to date but being collected with the earlier canonical prophets he too may be classed as a pre-exilic prophet.

##### Isaiah, Prophet of Salvation

Ultimately, the message of Isaiah is one of hope. Called by the Lord in a dramatic Temple vision, the triple cry of holiness (ongoing, according to Rev. 4:8) set the tone for Isaiah’s whole ministry as accentuated by his favorite name for the Lord, “the Holy One of Israel.” Sadly, Isaiah was informed that his message would harden hearts and blind eyes in order to bring about Judah’s restoration. The citation of this passage by Jesus (Matt. 13:14-5) affirmed a similar situation in His day. Indeed, the rejection of Christ by Israel’s leaders brought about restoration for all of mankind (1 Cor. 2:8).

Isaiah’s opening messages blasted his nation for their empty ceremonialism and called for repentance, but their refusal illustrates a key truth of Scripture that those who reject the grace of God will miss it. These early oracles include a positive vision for the nations (2:3) providing context for the accountability and judgment as announced in chapters 13-23. In the first part of his book Isaiah worked with the eighth century kings of Judah especially evil Ahaz and good Hezekiah. The warnings he delivered and the woes pronounced (ch. 28-32) were seasoned with vistas of God’s coming grace, especially the earlier announcement

of the coming of Immanuel, “God with us” (7:14). However, Judah’s rebellion eventually brought the nation into exile. Even after their return to Jerusalem, hearts grew cold and blind to the Lord’s grace. By stumbling over the costly cornerstone (8:14, 28:16) they missed their Messiah (Rom. 9:32-33).

##### Isaiah’s Message

Many have noted (and supplied vastly different answers for) the three major sections of this book. Given that Isaiah was his own editor it is quite possible that these sections reflect stages of his ninety-year career. Isaiah’s initial ministry (ch. 1-39) seems to have given way to semi-retirement accompanied by greater revelation regarding Judah’s exile and deliverance by the true Servant of the Lord (ch. 40-55). Then, toward the final stages of his life the Lord gave Isaiah increasing insight into Israel’s future along with hints about God’s ultimate plans for humanity (ch. 56-66).

In chapter 40, Isaiah breaks away from years of direct encounter with leaders to enlarge key themes of his book. Themes like Israel’s idolatry, God’s Servant, and the road back to Jerusalem through Cyrus the Persian testified to God’s providential care for Israel. The three voices of Isaiah 40 set the stage for the coming of the incomparable God and creator of the universe. Isaiah also sharpened the comparison between God’s failed servant, Israel, blinded by idols (42:19), and the Servant of the Lord whose success (52:13) would bring light to the nations (49:6). Fulfillment of Isaiah’s many prophecies by Jesus Christ is one of the main reasons that Isaiah is the most frequently cited prophet in the NT. Eventually,

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## Problem Solving

### Keep Your Balance in the Quest for Fellowship, Part 4 (Conclusion) by Jack Spender

We come now to the concluding article in this short series on preserving balance in small groups that enhance fellowship within a local church. These thoughts may be helpful to those exploring the possibilities of small groups, but the primary goal has been to anticipate problems that can arise within already functioning groups.

In previous articles, we thought about the importance of good leadership and quality content for the groups. The third and final area for consideration will focus on the idea of *purpose*. Let me explain.

Usually, when groups of people meet together as part of a local church, there is some “felt need” that has drawn them together, which, by general agreement, would constitute the purpose. It might be to strengthen friendships, study the Bible, pursue outreach, provide supportive ministries, or work with a particular age group, etc. These are all expressions of “fellowship” as outlined in Acts 2:42. Perhaps a more accurate expression than *purpose* might be *group goals*.

Now fellowship (healthy relationships) is a wonderful part of church life, and small groups are a notable way to encourage it. But we have an adversary, and he is no friend of biblical fellowship and knows how to sow discord. What begins as a delight can become dull or unedifying because important things are neglected. Often, the problem is not overt evil but a lack of balance. We must not lose sight of the big picture, i.e., why we’re really meeting! This goes beyond group goals to the true purpose for meeting. How can we define “the big picture?”

#### Keeping the Big Picture In Focus

Elders are responsible to expound the Scriptures, teaching believers—especially those who work with people—what the church is supposed to be doing, that is, helping the saints toward spiritual maturity. Ephesians 4:11-16 provides a good outline of the basic principles.

In verse 11, Paul refers to the Lord’s provision of gifted men. That means good leadership, and we started there. In verse 12 he instructs concerning their function, which is, “the equipping of the saints.”

This emphasizes the need for quality meeting content. Next he describes the goals of equipped saints as they do “the work of the ministry.” How do we recognize edification in the body? To paraphrase verse 13: “Believers becoming one in doctrine, having a quality relationship with the Lord Jesus, and growing in personal maturity....” All this is what we mean by purpose. Whatever local and particular needs are being met, and whatever social benefits are being enjoyed by the group, we must never lose sight of the ultimate purpose for which all groups exist—to foster spiritual maturity.

#### Making it Practical: Reminders

When we come to the “how to do it” part, we are speaking now of application, and of course, this will vary with needs. The church has an amazing liberty to meet needs as they arise, as cultural demands surface (see Acts 6:1), as doors open, and so forth. Only we must not compromise the essentials as outlined above. Many local churches have faded out of existence rather than surrender methods and traditions that have served their purpose and need to be laid aside to make room for the life and vitality of biblical principles being applied in ways that are relevant to people-needs today.

A brief reminder to elders is in order here. The New Testament pattern for the church rejects the notion of “laymen” or laity (ordinary believers) being incapable of hearing from the Lord, and following His leadership. The church is a living organism, and despite some people’s discomfort with change, it cannot be denied or avoided. Life’s new challenges demand change. The freedom to identify and solve problems depends on the intimate involvement of believer-priests led by the Lord. They expect this involvement and they grow through it. We must insist that learning gracious communication skills, searching the Scriptures, praying together for guidance, being accountable for decisions, and so much more is NOT the private domain of the elders and group leaders. Rather, good leaders will encourage the involvement and interaction of those for whom they care. Their leadership will provide order

and encouragement for the flock as the Lord leads His people forward in these important matters.

#### Making it Practical: Things to Watch

The freedom to be flexible and the involvement of ordinary people in “the work of the ministry” can bring great blessing, but can also get off track at times, and helps us understand why one biblical word for church leaders is “overseers.” (Incidentally, it is for the very reason of things not being done “properly” that denominational churches require the work of the ministry to be limited primarily to “ordained” persons.) Areas that demand vigilance are many, but for now, I’ll mention four.

#### Spiritual Environment

Regardless of group enterprises, a healthy spiritual atmosphere is critical. The leader sets the tone of pastoral care through a spirit of acceptance, openness, loving-kindness and gentleness. Occasional reminders about courtesy and confidentiality are also important.

#### Relationships

Fellowship depends on healthy relationships, not only among group members, but between groups and within the whole church. A skillful leader can tactfully bring in discussions that help clarify the bigger picture—the importance of unity, submission to authority, dealing with conflicts, Christ-like relationships, including ideas on how a particular group contributes to the overall blessing of the assembly.

#### Discipleship

The growth in Christian character of each person is more important than any tasks undertaken by the group. We’re a family learning to work together, to be open, courteous, able to listen to one another, to accept correction, to give a compliment, and to actually enjoy all this. Scripture is our reference manual.

#### Warning Signs

Balance is endangered when good things are taken to extremes, and well-meaning servants need to be called back to the question, “What’s our purpose before the Lord?” If this is done early,

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## **Fellowship** (continued from page 2)

when needed adjustments are small, it will make things easier for all.

In conclusion, wise elders will keep check on the pulse of groups by occasional visits, by good questions to leaders on

subjects mentioned above, and by normal interaction with saints. This input will suggest relevant material for training in meetings with leaders, and protect the elders from micro-managing group details. May the Lord help us to keep our

balance as we strive for true fellowship! The greatest example in these things is our Lord Himself, Who led His disciples openly, steered them in daily activities, with His eye always on the purpose for which He had come. 

## **Prophets** (continued from page 1)

building upon the surety of God's plan, Isaiah imaged the free access to God's grace (55:1) and launched into the expansiveness of the Lord's salvation, including the new heavens and earth (65:17, 66:22), all the while challenging his own generation to return to the Lord.

In the final analysis, Isaiah's message provides great insight into how the Lord thinks and acts. God is sufficient for all needs to those who seek Him. Isaiah's warnings were real, but rejected by the nation. During the good times they forgot God and during the bad times they blamed God but God always desired their restoration. Each generation has access to God's provision of grace but it is either accepted by faith or spurned, and Isaiah testifies to the wisdom of God's plan of salvation to send His Son, the true Servant of the Lord.

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### **Micah, Prophet of the Lord's Coming**

Interestingly, Micah seems to have been better known by believers of biblical times than today. Cited in Jeremiah (26:18) and Matthew (2:5-6), his prophecies spoke to current and future generations. The book is nicely divided into three main sections, each beginning with the imperative, "hear" (1:2; 3:1, 6:1). Micah speaks a great deal about the coming of the Lord, and, like many OT prophets, merges present perspectives with future eschatological vistas. Micah's opening lament warned Judah about God's judgment from Assyria.

The leaders came under fire for crimes of gross injustice and their support of the false prophets who brought messages of peace to those who paid for them (3:5). By twisting the truth—a common event in our world—false prophets stood in contrast to Micah who preached

powerfully by the Spirit of the Lord (3:8). Only later does Micah hint at Judah's greater crisis, captivity by the Babylonians (4:10), underscored by his frequent mention of a coming remnant.

Prophetically, Micah also merged his warnings with a greater future by offering a vision of hope for Israel and the nations, paralleling Isaiah (4:1-3, Isa. 2:2-

4). While centered in Israel, lasting peace included the nations and envisioned the coming of a ruler from Bethlehem (5:2). Fulfilled at the birth of Christ, this prophecy illustrates the firmness of God's plan for humanity.

In the third message, Micah returned to his legal indictment (cf. 1:2) to again emphasize God's grace and to challenge the empty ritualism of the eighth century (6:6-8). That the Lord prioritizes our walk with Him above our work for Him becomes a clear application of Micah's climactic

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statement. Any job we can do for God He can do better for Himself. What He wants is our heart offered in humility and He has provided access by giving His only Son who fulfilled Micah's image of casting sins into the depths of the sea (7:19). So in the end, Micah's closing chapter reminds us that we too must wait on the Lord (7:7) in our affirmation that only by His coming can we find the best solution to our planet's ongoing crises.

### **Joel, Prophet of Devastation and Restoration**

Joel is an amazing prophet who was able to see great spiritual truths from a natural disaster facing the community. Locust plagues ravaged the ancient Near

East, as in Kenya today, and greatly threatened the social and economic structures of Israel during Joel's time. However, through the eye of the Spirit he was able to discern clear parallels to the coming day of the Lord and challenge his people to repent before it was too late. His plea for repentance seems to have been heard since the Lord turned the plague from Israel and sent it out to sea (2:20), reminding everyone of the importance of calling out to the Lord in any generation for His help during troubled times.

Unfortunately, repentance was short-lived. Judah was eventually overwhelmed by the armies of Babylon and carried into exile. Still, the Lord held the nations accountable for the way they treated Israel and included them in the coming day of the Lord, a time of cataclysmic global confusion and destruction (3:2, 12). Yet Joel's insightful call to "rend your

hearts and not your garments" (2:13) expanded to include all people who seek the Lord. As the turning point of his message, this truth

envisioned Israel's return to the Lord, God's merciful response, and the eventual outpouring of the Spirit upon all mankind (2:28). Beginning at Pentecost the door swings widely open to realize Joel's vision that "whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be delivered," (2:32).

All the troubles mentioned in Joel, the wonderful promises announced by this prophet for refuge (3:16), and deliverance to those who call upon the name of the Lord, provide context for the heart of the gospel message today to those who seek the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior: "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Rom. 10:13). 

## Wives' Corner

### The Journey of Faith: Manoah's wife: God's Call in Unrest *by Marti Miller*

Writing for ESN has been such an unexpected delight. I never imagined this to be something that I would do, or could do. At times, we need to step out from our ordinary routine into His holy call. I pondered this recently as I read of God's call to Manoah's wife in Judges 13.

God chose to tell us her condition and call, but not her name. "Indeed now, you are barren and have borne no children, but you shall conceive and bear a son" (Judges 13:3). He is about to take the womb that cannot bear and make the impossible possible. Many times God fulfilled His promises through the barren womb. He did it through Sarah in His provision of a people for His name; through Manoah's wife in His merciful relief from the enemy; through Hannah in His answer to a heart that prayed for a righteous man in the house of God; and eventually, through a virgin, to provide a Savior for the world. In a time of worldly barrenness, God is able to initiate life and produce fruit according to His will. Never despair, always trust in His abounding mercies.

The Angel of the Lord told Manoah's wife not to drink wine or strong drink and not to eat anything unclean. Her son was not to have his hair cut as he would be a Nazarite from birth. He would be the man of God's choice to begin to deliver Israel

out of the Philistines' hand. God knew Samson would never be able to completely deliver Israel, but that did not stop Him from using Samson to begin this work.

The word "Nazarite" comes from the root meaning "to separate," implying holiness to the Lord. It was a voluntary vow to God for a specific amount of time. For Samson, it was to be his whole lifetime. According to Numbers 6:1-8, a person became a Nazarite by choice. In Scripture, wine speaks of joy. A Nazarite would vow not to drink wine, for joy would be found apart from the world. He would not cut his hair, which implies taking a place of shame (1 Cor. 11:14). Finally, he would not be defiled by going near a dead body. There was to be joy in service, humility, and holiness apart from the world, lived out in Samson's life.

This Nazarite vow did not begin with Samson, but with his mother. She was told to abstain and essentially be a Nazarite herself. She did not volunteer to make this vow, but God required it of her for the sake of her son and God's work for him. Likewise, her son did not make this choice either. We have no reason to

believe that she had trouble with God's plan. In fact, she seems to be the one who fully understood this call and trusted the Angel of the Lord with no questions asked. Her son would become a Nazarite and a deliverer.

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Yet, Manoah, whose name means "rest," would ask, "What is Your name, that when Your words come to pass we may honor You?" And the angel of the Lord said to him, "Why do you ask My name, seeing it is wonderful?"

(Judges 13:17,18). As the Angel of the Lord ascended up in the flame of Manoah's offering, Manoah's first thought was fear. But his wife comforted him with sound reasoning. She called her son Samson, which means "like the sun", for she had seen the Angel of the Lord, the One called Wonderful, and lived. Life-giving power only comes from the Lord. She had confidence in the Wonderful One, with a heart to seek holiness in humility and stand by faith in the Lord.

What is God's call for you in these days of unrest? Like Manoah's wife, we can believe God and step out of our comfort zone and into His faith zone because He is Wonderful!



#### THE SMALL PRINT

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Note: All words referring to God have the initial letter capitalized. While the original languages of the Bible do not use capitalization, this is the convention in some translations but not in others. So at times there may be inconsistencies in usage in ESN articles.