

Proclaim

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THE PASTOR'S JOURNAL FOR BIBLICAL PREACHING



◆ FEATURES

- 3 **Family Violence: Forcing the Monster into the Daylight**
Raymond Clubb
- 6 **A Theology of Sickness**
Jeff Iorg
- 8 **What America Needs Most**
Tom Adams

◆ SERMON WORKSHOP

- 10 **Sermon Summaries**
Humpty Dumpty • The Three Little Pigs and the Big Bad Wolf • The Little Red Hen • New Testament Stories with Homiletical Value (Gospels)
- 16 **Sermon Illustrations**
Appreciation • Awareness of God • Battle, Losing • Church, Organized • Church's Witness • Companionship • Compliment • Cross, Christ's • Dedication • Deeds, Testimony of • Evangelism • Jesus' D-Day • Losses • New Birth • New Name • Peacemakers • Preaching • Priorities • Sin's Effects • Sin's Sweet Poison • Testimony • Trials
- 20 **Children's Sermons**
Ernest Beevers
- 22 **Resources for Special Occasions**
Gilgal's Place in Biblical History
Bryan Beyer
Word Studies in Amos 3-4
Fred Wood
The Calling of a Servant
Ron Vaughan

◆ WORSHIP WORKSHOP

- 27 **Using Your Hymnal More Effectively**
Lee Hinson
- 31 **Cast Thy Stone (One Act Play)**
Rosemary Maddox Scott

◆ PULPIT PERFORMANCE

- 36 **A Critical Analysis of Contemporary Preaching**
Mitch Martin
- 38 **A Paradigm for Persuasive Preaching**
Ed Rowell
- 40 **Preaching from a Firm Foundation**
Bill O'Connor
- 42 **Story Writing for Sermons**
Raymond Clubb

45 **Cumulative Index**

50 **Electronic Publishing Survey**



RESOURCES FOR SPECIAL OCCASIONS

GILGAL'S PLACE IN BIBLICAL HISTORY (Resource for Winter Bible Study)

Bryan Beyer

Gilgal played a prominent role in biblical history. The name comes from the Hebrew verb "galal" (ga-LAL), which means "to roll" or "to roll away" (Josh. 5:9). Gilgal was located a short distance from the Jordan River near Jericho's eastern edge (Josh. 4:19).

A precise identification of Gilgal's location must remain tentative, since little archeological evidence remains. Scholars have suggested the modern sites of Jiljiliah (seven miles north of Bethel), Khirbet el-Mefjir (a little over a mile northeast of Jericho), and Khirbet en-Nitleh (three miles southeast of Jericho) as the most likely possibilities. Some Bible interpreters have suggested more than one site may have possessed the name Gilgal, though this is uncertain.¹

Gilgal served as the Israelites' first resting place after they crossed the Jordan. After God parted the water and Israel crossed on dry ground, the people established a pile of 12 stones at Gilgal to commemorate the miracle (Josh. 4:20). At Gilgal, the Lord commanded to circumcise all Israelite males, since the people had discontinued the practice as they wandered in the wilderness (Josh. 5:7). Israel also celebrated the Passover there for the first time in the promised land (Josh. 5:10).

Gilgal remained Israel's base camp during the conquest of Canaan (Josh. 10:15,43), and division of the land (Josh. 14:6). There the Gibeonites met God's people and tricked them into making a covenant under false pretenses (Josh. 9:6). Later, Israel completed the division of the land at Shiloh (Josh. 18:1).

Gilgal remained an important site during the prophet Samuel's ministry. Samuel regularly visited Gilgal, along with Bethel and Mizpah, to judge the people (1 Sam. 7:16).

After Saul, Israel's first king, won a victory over the

Ammonites early in his reign, the people confirmed him as king at Gilgal (1 Sam. 11:15). Saul also showed his lack of faith on two different occasions at Gilgal. First, the king assumed the priestly role and offered a sacrifice instead of waiting for Samuel to come and offer it (1 Sam. 13:8-9). Second, Saul failed to carry out God's command to destroy the Amalekites and all they had. Instead, he spared Agag the king and kept some of the choice animals to sacrifice to the Lord. Samuel rebuked Saul for these sins, telling him God would take away the kingdom and choose another person to rule Israel (1 Sam. 13:13-14; 15:28). That person was David (1 Sam. 16:13).

Late in David's reign, his son Absalom tried to take the kingdom from his father. After David defeated Absalom in battle east of the Jordan, David crossed the Jordan and met his countrymen at Gilgal (2 Sam. 19:15,40).

Gilgal also witnessed the ministries of the prophets Elijah and Elisha in the ninth century B.C. Elijah apparently stayed at Gilgal just before God took him to heaven (2 Kings 2:1). Elisha later performed a miracle there, cleansing a pot of poisoned stew (2 Kings 4:38-41). Gilgal also may have been the site where Elisha fed 100 men with a small amount of food and cleansed Naaman the Syrian from leprosy (2 Kings 4:42-5:14).

Even though God did many great wonders at Gilgal, it became a place of idol worship. By the early 13th century B.C.,² Ehud, Israel's famous left-handed judge, encountered idols there (Judg. 3:19). How tragic that within such a short time after Israel had affirmed its loyalty to God at Gilgal, idolatry became commonplace!

About 930 B.C., after King Solomon died, Israel divided into two kingdoms. The Northern Kingdom retained the name *Israel*; the Southern Kingdom was called Judah after its major tribe.

Israel's first king, Jeroboam I (926-909 B.C.),³ promptly took steps to insure Israel would remain a separate kingdom (1 Kings 12:26-32). He created his own priesthood,

and established separate festival days for Israel. He also founded rival worship centers at Dan and Bethel. Jeroboam or one of his successors may have organized a worship center at Gilgal.

By the time of the prophets Hosea and Amos in the mid-eighth century B.C., Gilgal had become a prominent center of idolatry. Hosea sternly warned the people—"Do not go to Gilgal, or go up to Beth-aven, And take the oath: 'As the Lord lives!'" (Hos. 4:15, NASB).⁴ The prophet's reference to the oath suggests the people were worshipping the true God by means of idolatrous practices. They established their own system of worship in direct violation of God's command (Deut. 12:29-32).

Hosea further described Israel's evil at Gilgal. The Lord hated it, and promised to drive the people into exile (Hos. 9:15). All their leaders had rebelled against Him. Jacob, Israel's ancestor, had contended with God and prevailed, but the Israelites shared no such fervor. Furthermore, as an act of grace, the Lord had sent them prophets, but the people refused to heed their warnings. Rather, the Israelites continued to offer sacrificial bulls in Gilgal on altars of their own design (Hos. 12:11).

Amos condemned Gilgal's wickedness. He sarcastically mocked the Israelites—"Enter Bethel and transgress; In Gilgal multiply transgression! Bring your sacrifices every morning, Your tithes every three days . . . For so you love to do, you sons of Israel" (Amos 4:4-5, NASB). The prophet's hearers knew all the proper religious rituals, but they did not possess a living relationship with their Lord.

Amos proclaimed Gilgal's awful fate. He warned the people, "Do not resort to Bethel, and do not come to Gilgal . . . for Gilgal will certainly go into captivity, and Bethel will come to trouble" (Amos 5:5, NASB). The people needed to abandon their idolatrous worship centers and turn back to the Lord in deep repentance.

In 721 B.C., God brought judgment on His people through the Assyrian empire. The Assyrians conquered Israel and scattered the Israelites in foreign lands. The people paid a high price for their sin (2 Kings 17:7-18).

The biblical record concerning Gilgal sounds a sobering warning for Christians today. God's blessing on a city or land in one generation does not guarantee His blessing forever. Gilgal, a place that saw so many of God's amazing works, became a center of idolatry because the people turned from God who had given them all they had.

¹Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 2, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 725-26.

²John H. Walton, *Chronological Charts of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 48.

³Trent Butler, ed., *Holman Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), 764.

⁴All scripture quotations marked (NASB) are from the *New American Standard Bible*. © The Lockman Foundation, 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977. Used by permission.

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WORD STUDIES IN AMOS 3-4 (Resource for Winter Bible Study)

Fred Wood

3:1 Hear this word.—Chapters 4 and 5 of Amos begin with this exact expression. Some suggest they contain three separate, compressed messages from Amos. Others contend one connected message with three parts. The wording suggests the serious and urgent nature of the words which were to follow.

The entire family.—Amos targeted his message to the Northern Kingdom, but he included Judah in his warnings. Two other prophets (Mic. 2:3; Jer. 8:3) used *family* to include the larger group of Israelites. In the final analysis, the term *Israel* always included all twelve tribes. God never gave up on the concept of the nation's unity.

3:2 You only have I chosen.—The word translated *chosen* usually is rendered "known," which is its primary meaning. It contains the idea of personal, intimate knowledge and is used in such expressions as "the man knew his wife and she conceived."

The Lord had a special relationship with Israel unlike any other nation. He chose Abraham's descendants as the earthly channel through whom He would send the Savior.

Families of the earth.—The word *earth* literally meant "ground." Some scholars contend Amos chose the word deliberately to emphasize the people's littleness, meanness, and mortality.

Therefore, I will punish you.—The word translated *punish* meant "to visit." Usually, this was in order to punish. In several cases, however, the same Hebrew word meant "to visit" in a good sense (Gen. 21:1; 50:23; Ex. 4:31; Ruth 1:6; 1 Sam. 2:21).

3:3 Walk together...made an appointment.—This is the first in a series of cause and effect statements. They extend through verse 6. Amos used them as a way of strongly defending his preaching. He had received a call from God to declare His divine word.

Walk together indicated a common interest and goal. That they had *made an appointment* suggests that God and Israel had agreed on a time and place to meet and begin their journey. In the uninhabited desert, people did not accidentally come upon one another and suddenly begin a journey. Our spiritual pilgrimage begins with a definite commitment to walk with God.

In Ashdod and...the land of Egypt.—A few students prefer the Septuagint which reads "Assyria and Egypt" as both were empires and thus more comparable. Most, however, accept the Hebrew text and contend Ashdod was a mightily fortified city worthy of being linked with mighty Egypt and also geographically nearer.

The mountains of Samaria.—Few have accepted the Septuagint reading of *mountain*. A number of even higher hills surrounded the one on which Samaria, the capital, stood. From them, the people could look into the city as though in a large amphitheater.