



Vision

Prophets of the Old Testament

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Chapter 1

Isaiah

The events of Isaiah 1-39 occurred during Isaiah's ministry, so they were written about 700 B.C. Chapters 40-66, however, may have been written near the end of his life, about 681 B.C.

Isaiah is speaking and writing in Jerusalem

The key verse is found in Isaiah 53:5. "But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds, we are healed."

The "office" of prophet was instituted during the days of Samuel, the last of the judges. Prophets stood with the priests as God's special representatives. The prophet's role was to speak for God, confronting the people and their leaders with God's commands and promises. Because of this confrontational stance, and the continuing tendency of people to disobey God, true prophets usually were not very popular. Though their message often went unheeded, they faithfully, and forcefully proclaimed the truth.

The book of Isaiah is the first of the writings of the Prophets in the Bible. Isaiah, the author, is considered to be the greatest prophet. He was reared in an aristocratic home. He married a prophetess. At the beginning of his ministry, he was well-liked. However, like most prophets, he soon became unpopular because his messages were so difficult to hear. He called the people to turn from their lives of sin and warned them of God's judgment and punishment. Isaiah had an active ministry for 60 years before he was executed during Manasseh's reign (according to tradition). As God's special messenger to Judah, Isaiah prophesied during the reigns of several of its rulers. Many of those messages are recorded in his book. The kings who heard his message include Uzziah and Jotham, (Isaiah 1-6), Ahaz (Isaiah 7-14), and Hezekiah (Isaiah 15-39).

The first half of the book of Isaiah (Isaiah 1-39) contains scathing denunciations and pronouncements as he calls Judah, Israel, and the surrounding nations to repent of their sins. However, the last 27 chapters (Isaiah 40-66) are filled with consolation and hope as Isaiah unfolds God's promise of future blessings through the Messiah.

The 39 chapters in the first half of Isaiah carry the message of judgment for sin. Isaiah brings the message of judgment to Judah, Israel, and the surrounding pagan nations. Judah had a form of godliness, but in their hearts, they were corrupt. Isaiah's warnings were intended to purify the people by helping them understand God's true nature and message. However, they ignored the repeated warnings Isaiah brought. We need not repeat their error; rather, we should heed the prophetic voice.

The 27 chapters in the second half of Isaiah bring a message of forgiveness, comfort, and hope. This message of hope looks forward to the coming of the Messiah. Isaiah speaks more about the Messiah than does any other Old Testament prophet. He describes the Messiah as both a suffering servant and a sovereign Lord. The fact that the Messiah was to be both a suffering servant and a sovereign Lord could not be understood clearly until New Testament times. Based on what Jesus Christ has done, God freely offers forgiveness to all who turn to him in faith. This is God's message of comfort to us because those who heed it find eternal peace and fellowship with him.

Isaiah's commission: Isaiah describes how the Lord appeared to him with six angelic seraphs when King Uzziah died and commissioned him to minister to the "never understanding" people until "the cities lie ruined 6:11 ...and the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken."

Immanuel: Isaiah prophesies to King Ahaz, "The Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel ["God with us"; Jesus?]. But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste. 7:16"

The Messiah: "In the future [the Lord] will honor Galilee of the Gentiles... The people walking in darkness have seen a great light... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace 9:6... He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever... A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The

Spirit of the Lord will rest on him--the Spirit of wisdom and understanding.... and he will delight in the fear of the Lord ^{11:3}... The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat... and a little child will lead them....^{11:6}"

The new order: "Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind... I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy... Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years... My chosen will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the Lord....^{65:23}"

Salvation for all peoples: "Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.' Foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord...these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer.^{56:7}"

Isaiah was a prophet during the time when the original nation of Israel had been divided into two kingdoms, Israel in the north, and Judah in the south. The northern kingdom had sinned against God, and the southern kingdom was headed in the same direction by perverting justice, oppressing the poor, turning from God to idols, and looking for military aid from pagan nations rather than from God. Isaiah came primarily as a prophet to Judah, but his message was also for the northern kingdom. Sometimes, Israel refers to both kingdoms. Isaiah lived to see the destruction and captivity of the northern kingdom (known as Israel) in 722 B.C.; thus, his ministry began by warning the northern kingdom (Judah).

Isaiah was active as a prophet during the reigns of five kings, but he did not set out to be a prophet. By the time King Uzziah died, Isaiah may have been established as a scribe in the royal palace in Jerusalem. It was a respectable career, but God had other plans for his servant. Isaiah's account of God's call leaves little doubt about what motivated the prophet for the next half-century. His vision of God was unforgettable.

The encounter with God permanently affected Isaiah's character. He reflected the God he represented. Isaiah's messages—some comforting, some confronting—are so distinct, that some guessed they came from different authors. Isaiah's testimony was that the messages came from the only One capable of being perfect in justice as well as in mercy—God himself.

When Isaiah was called as a prophet, God did not encourage him with predictions of immense success. God told Isaiah the people would not listen. God told Isaiah, he was to speak and write his messages anyway, because eventually, some *would* listen. God compared his people to a tree that would have to be cut down so that a new tree could grow from the old stump (Isaiah 6:13).

We who are part of that future can see that many of the promises God gave through Isaiah have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. We also gain the hope of knowing that God is active in all of history, including our own.

Chapter 2

Jeremiah

Jeremiah was called by God to be a prophet to Judah (the southern kingdom). He faithfully confronted the leaders and the people with their sin, prophesied both their 70-year captivity in Babylon and their eventual return from exile. After surviving the fall of Jerusalem, Jeremiah was forcefully taken to Egypt. Yet Jeremiah remained faithful despite Jerusalem's destruction. Years of obedience had made him strong and courageous. May we be able to stand through tough times as did Jeremiah.

After King Solomon's death, the United Kingdom of Israel had split into rival northern and southern kingdoms. The northern kingdom was called Israel; the southern, Judah. Jeremiah was from Anathoth, four miles north of Jerusalem in the southern kingdom. He lived and prophesied during the reigns of the last five kings of Judah. This was a chaotic time politically, morally, and spiritually. As Babylon, Egypt, and Assyria battled for world supremacy, Judah found itself caught in the middle of the triangle. Although Jeremiah prophesied for 40 years, he never saw his people heed his words and turn from their sins.

Jeremiah's ministry extended from c. 626 to c. 586. He was a prophet of doom who upon God's command never married. His words were written down by his secretary Baruch and are characterized by self-analysis and self-criticism. His denunciatory tirades against his enemies seeking redress and his long complaints give us the word "jeremiad".

He is justly termed the "weeping prophet". He prophesied in Judah during the troubled reigns of Josiah (640 - 609; a kindred spirit who died fighting the Egyptians), Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim (who persecuted him and ruled during the siege of Jerusalem in 605 by Nebuchadnezzar after the defeat of the Egyptians at Carcamesh), Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah (597 - 586), fleeing to Egypt at the end of his life. He denounced the sins of his countrymen and prophesied the judgment and destruction of Judah to come (as well as the wrath to fall on Babylon, Moab, the Philistines, etc.). He also emphasized the value of repentance, the importance of "individual responsibility," and the restoration and renewal that would later follow. The oracles in the book are not arranged in chronological order.

His call: "Before I formed you in the womb...I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.^{1:4} You must not marry and have sons or daughters in this place ^{16:1}..."

His suffering: "O, my anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain. Oh, the agony of my heart!^{4:19} Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me. Is there no balm in Gilead?... Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people.^{9:1}"

His enemies: "I had been like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter; I did not realize that they had plotted against me ^{11:19}... Let me see your vengeance upon them, for to you I have committed my cause.^{20:12} "King Jehoiakim cuts up Jeremiah's prophetic scroll. Zedekiah's men imprison him in a cistern because he counsels surrender to Babylon.

The Messiah: "The days are coming...when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely... In his days Judah will be saved.^{23:6}"
His complaints to the Lord: "O Lord, you deceived me....^{20:7}"

His advice to those in exile: "Build houses and settle down... Marry and have sons and daughters... Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile.^{29:7} 'A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children [the exiles] and refusing to be comforted because her children are no more...
They will return from the land of the enemy.^{31:15} '"

The return from exile: "I will restore them to the land I gave their forefathers.^{16:15} ' "Day of judgment: "How awful that day will be None will be like it... I am with you and will save you... Though I completely destroy all the nations among which I scatter you, I will not completely destroy you.^{30:11}"

The new covenant: "In those days the people will no longer say, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' Instead, everyone will die for his own sin; whoever eats sour grapes--his own teeth will be set on edge... 'I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel...and Judah. It will be like the covenant I made with their forefathers... I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts 31:33....'"

“Successful” people enjoy the good life—being financially and emotionally secure, being surrounded by admirers, and enjoying the fruits of their labors. They are leaders, opinion makers, and trendsetters. Their example is emulated; their accomplishments are noticed. They know who they are and where they are going, and they stride confidently to meet their goals.

By these standards, Jeremiah was a miserable failure. For 40 years he served as God’s spokesman to Judah; but when Jeremiah spoke, nobody listened.

Consistently and passionately he urged them to act, but nobody moved. And he certainly did not attain material success. He was poor and underwent severe deprivation to deliver his prophecies. He was thrown into prison (Jeremiah 37) and into a cistern (Jeremiah 38), and he was taken to Egypt against his will (Jeremiah 43). His neighbors rejected him. Jeremiah 11:19-21). His family (Jeremiah 12:6), the false priests and prophets (Jeremiah 20:1-2; Jeremiah 28:1-17), friends (Jeremiah 20:10), his audience (Jeremiah 26:8), and the kings (Jeremiah 36:23).

Throughout his life, Jeremiah stood alone, declaring God’s messages of doom, announcing the new covenant, and weeping over the fate of his beloved country. In the eyes of the world, Jeremiah was not a success.

But in God’s eyes, Jeremiah was one of the most successful people in all of history. Success, as measured by God, involves obedience and faithfulness. Regardless of opposition and personal cost, Jeremiah courageously and faithfully proclaimed the word of God. He was obedient to his calling. Jeremiah’s book begins with his call to be a prophet. The next 38 chapters are prophecies about Israel (the nation united) and Judah (the southern kingdom). Jeremiah 2-20 is general and not dated, and Jeremiah 21-39 are particular and dated. The basic theme of Jeremiah’s message is simple: “Repent and turn to God, or he will punish.” But then, because the people rejected this warning, Jeremiah moved to predict specifically the destruction of Jerusalem. This terrible event is described in Jeremiah 39. Jeremiah 40-45 describe events following Jerusalem’s fall. The book

concludes with prophecies concerning a variety of nations (Jeremiah 46-52).

As you read Jeremiah, feel with him as he agonizes over the message he must deliver, pray with him for those who refuse to respond to the truth and watch his example of faith and courage. Then commit yourself to be successful in God's eyes.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. GOD'S JUDGMENT ON JUDAH (Jeremiah 1:1-45:5)

Jeremiah confronts many people with their sins: kings, false prophets, those at the temples, and those at the gates. A lack of response made Jeremiah wonder if he was doing any good at all. He often felt discouraged and sometimes bitter. To bring such gloomy messages to these people was a challenging task. We too have a responsibility to bring this news to a fallen world: those who continue in their sinful ways are eternally doomed. Although we may feel discouraged at the lack of response, we must press on to tell others about the consequences of sin and the hope that God offers. Those who tell people only what they want to hear are being unfaithful to God's message.

Jeremiah lived to see many of his prophecies come true—most notably the fall of Jerusalem. The fulfillment of this and other prophecies against the foreign nations came because of sin. Those who refuse to confess their sin bring judgment upon themselves.

Judah's deterioration and disaster came from their callous disregard and disobedience of God. When we ignore sin and refuse to listen to God's warning, we invite disaster. Don't settle for half measures in removing sin.

Because of sin, Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple was ruined, and the people were captured and carried off to Babylon. The people were responsible for their destruction and captivity because they refused to listen to God's message.

Unconfessed sin brings God's full punishment. It is useless to blame anyone else for our sin—we are accountable to God before anyone else. We must answer to him for how we live. God is Lord of all

God is the righteous Creator. He is accountable to only himself. He wisely and lovingly directs all creation to fulfill his plans. He brings events to pass according to his timetable. He is Lord over all the world.

Chapter 3

Ezekiel

Ezekiel prophesied to the exiles in Babylon. He had to dispel the false hope that Israel's captivity would be short, explain the reasons for the severe judgments on their nation, and bring a message of future hope. Although the people did not respond positively, they heard the messages and knew the truth. God's people were not without explanation and direction, and neither are we.

Ezekiel, born and raised in the land of Judah, was preparing to become a priest in God's temple when the Babylonians attacked in 597 B.C. and carried him away along with 10,000 other captives (2 Kings 24:10-14). The nation was on the brink of complete destruction. Four to five years later, when Ezekiel was 30 (the normal age for becoming a priest), God called him to be a prophet. During the first six years when Ezekiel ministered in Babylonia (Ezekiel 1:3), Jeremiah was preaching to the Jews still in Judah, and Daniel was serving in Nebuchadnezzar's court. The Kebar River connected to the Euphrates in Babylonia and was the location of a Jewish settlement of exiles.

Why did the Jewish exiles in Babylonia need a prophet? God wanted Ezekiel to:

- (1) help the exiles understand why they had been taken captive,
- (2) dispel the false hope that the captivity was going to be short,
- (3) bring a new message of hope, and
- (4) call the people to a new awareness of their dependence upon God.

According to this book, Ezekiel was a priest-prophet who received his call from God in 593 in Babylon and ministered there seven years before and fifteen years after the downfall of Jerusalem in 586. He was exiled by Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon in 597 (along with 10,000 other Jews). He writes in prose, in an often-detached style. He emphasizes God's sovereignty over all things. Like Isaiah and Jeremiah, his messages consist of oracles against Israel, oracles against the nations, and consolation for Israel. He focuses on Israel as the holy people of the holy temple, the holy city, and the holy land. The message is about God's past and future purposes in the history of the world.

At the age of thirty (in 593), Ezekiel sees in a vision a windstorm coming

from the north, a fiery cloud with lightning and containing four winged creatures (cherubim) each with four faces (man, lion, ox, and eagle), and each having a wheel. God's voice speaks to him from above the cherubim: "Son of man [a title used by Jesus], I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation 2:3... Do not be afraid, though briars and thorns are all around you and you live among scorpions. 2:6 " ' God gives him a scroll to eat and charges him to declare God's displeasure with the Israelite exiles, holding him responsible for their actions. He prophesies the siege of Jerusalem and the atrocities and destruction that will follow: Therefore, in your midst fathers will eat their children, and children will eat their fathers. I will inflict punishment on you and will scatter all your survivors to the winds.5:10 Wherever you live the towns will be laid waste... Doom has burst forth... I will turn my face away from them... The teaching of the law by the priest will be lost 7:26.... ' "

Ezekiel recounts an allegory from God about Jerusalem as a beautiful bride. From Jerusalem's profane parents (the Amorites and Hittites), God raised Jerusalem as the most beautiful of jewels and enters into a marital contract--yet Jerusalem becomes a prostitute. As punishment, she will be stripped naked, stoned, and hacked to pieces. But God promises to remember his covenant and to establish an "everlasting covenant" with her after her punishment ends.

God tells another prophetic allegory through Ezekiel about the attack by the Babylonians and the capture of Jehoiachin (the topmost shoot of a cedar). But he also prophesies: "I myself will take a shoot [the Messiah] from the very top of a cedar and plant it... It will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar.' "17:23

Ezekiel stresses the Lord's justice and, like Jeremiah, teaches God's intention that the guilt for sins will not be inherited. Moreover, a wicked man who repents will be forgiven. God says, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked but rather that they turn from their ways and live." 33:11

He recounts a negative view of Israel's rebellious history and prophesies against Judah: "O profane and wicked prince of Israel [Zedekiah], whose day has come, whose time of punishment has reached its climax, this is what the sovereign Lord says: Take off the turban, remove the crown... The lowly will be exalted and the exalted will be brought low... It will not be restored until he [the Messiah]

comes to whom it rightfully belongs; to him, I will give it.' "

In the allegory of the adulterous sisters Oholah (Samaria) and Oholibah (Jerusalem), Ezekiel describes in the graphic symbolism of lust and prostitution the forming of political alliances by the Israelites with Egypt, Assyria (Samaria) and Babylon (Judah) and their defilement as punishment.

God appears to Ezekiel and tells him that his wife will die but that he is not to mourn, as an example to his followers in exile. They are not to mourn the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem which occurs on the day his wife dies.

He prophesies against Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre, Sidon, Egypt, and Gog and gives laments for Tyre and Egypt. He compares Egypt to Assyria as a cedar of Lebanon which was cut down by the Babylonians. He describes the pharaoh as a monster in the sea that is caught and killed by the Babylonians.

God will punish the leaders of Israel who were like shepherds that neglected their sheep and allowed them to be scattered. God promises that "I myself will search for my sheep and look after them... I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered... I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel... I will judge between one sheep and another... Is it not enough for you feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of the pasture with your feet?... I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them... I will make a covenant of peace with them and rid the land of wild beasts... The people will be secure in their land.^{34:27} For I will take you out of the nations... I will cleanse you from all impurities... I will remove from you your heart of stone. You will live in the land I gave your forefathers" ^{36:28}

Ezekiel is led in a vision to a valley full of dry bones [symbolizing the exiled]. The bones come together, flesh appears, and they come to life. The Lord promises a national resurrection and reunification: "These bones are the whole house of Israel... I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them ^{37:12}... I will make one nation in the land... There will be one king over all of them and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms... My servant David will be king ^{37:24}... I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant" ^{37:26}...

Ezekiel describes a vision from God of the new temple to be built on Mount Zion [a design that is never realized]. The glory of the Lord fills the temple. The Levites (in particular the Zadokites) are restored to the temple. He describes

offerings and holy days [which differ from the Pentateuch], boundaries of the land and the division among the twelve tribes. Jerusalem will be called "The Lord is There [Yahweh-Shammah]".

Israel had sinned, and God's punishment came. The fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile were used by God to correct the rebels and draw them back from their sinful way of life. Ezekiel warned them that not only was the nation responsible for sin, but everyone was also accountable to God.

We cannot excuse ourselves from our responsibilities before God. We are accountable to God for our choices. Rather than neglect him, we must recognize sin for what it is—rebellion against God—and choose to follow him instead.

EXPLANATION: Ezekiel consoles the people by telling them that the day will come when God will restore those who turn from sin. God will be their King and Shepherd. He will give his people a new heart to worship him, and he will establish a new government and a new temple.

- The certainty of future restoration encourages believers in times of trial. But we must be faithful to God because we love him, not merely for what he can do for us. Is our faith in him or merely in our future benefits?

Chapter 4

Daniel

While Ezekiel was ministering to the captives in Babylon, Daniel was drafted as a counselor to King Nebuchadnezzar. With God's help, Daniel interpreted two of the king's dreams, Daniel's three friends were rescued from certain death in the fiery furnace, and Daniel was rescued from a lions' den. Daniel's life is a picture of the triumph of faith. May God grant us this type of faith so that we may also live courageously each day.

Twenty-five centuries ago, Daniel could have despaired. He and thousands of his countrymen had been deported to a foreign land after Judah was conquered. Daniel found himself facing an egocentric despot and surrounded by idolaters. Instead of giving in or giving up, this courageous young man held fast to his faith in his God. Daniel knew that despite the circumstances, God was sovereign and was working out his plan for nations and individuals. The book of Daniel centers around this profound truth—the sovereignty of God.

After a brief account of Nebuchadnezzar's siege and the defeat of Jerusalem, the scene quickly shifts to Daniel and his three friends, Hananiah, Misha-el, and Azariah (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego). These men held prominent positions within the Babylonian government. Daniel, in particular, held such a position because of his ability to interpret the king's dreams that tell of God's unfolding plan (Daniel 2 and Daniel 4). Sandwiched between the dreams is the fascinating account of Daniel's three friends and the furnace (Daniel 3). Because they refused to bow down to an image of gold, they were condemned to a fiery death. But God intervened and spared their lives.

Daniel is the author of this book, according to Jesus, and therefore this book was written c. 530 after the capture of Babylon by Cyrus.

Daniel, exiled from Judah in 605, is recruited by Nebuchadnezzar to serve in his court. Daniel succeeds in avoiding the defilement that would arise from eating the royal food. He masters the Babylonian literature on astrology and divination from dreams. Nebuchadnezzar wants his dream interpreted and threatens to kill all

the astrologers, who cannot explain it, but Daniel volunteers to do so. After receiving a revelatory vision during the night, Daniel explains the dream. The king had seen a statue with a gold head [Nebuchadnezzar and the Neo-Babylonians], chest and arms of silver [Medo-Persians], belly and thighs of bronze [Greeks], legs of iron [Romans], and feet partly of clay and partly of iron [? who]. A rock strikes the feet and the statue falls. Each symbolic kingdom is made of a metal which is strong but of lesser value, and in the end will be an eternal kingdom of God that will crush all worldly kingdoms. Daniel is rewarded for his interpretation.

Daniel's Jewish colleagues Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego are thrown into a furnace in punishment but are rescued by a guardian angel.

Nebuchadnezzar dreams of a great tree that is cut down. Daniel says Nebuchadnezzar is the tree and that he should renounce his sins and wickedness to continue his prosperity, which he does.

In 539, the son [?] of Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, gives a great banquet when suddenly the fingers of a human hand appear and write on the wall the words "Mene, Mede, Tekel, Parsin". Daniel interprets this to mean that the Babylonian reign will come to an end and that the Medes and the Persians will take over. Soon "Darius the Mede [? Cyrus]" indeed takes Babylon.

Darius' men conspire against Daniel and he is thrown into a lion's den. But he is protected by God's guardian angel. The conspirators are punished instead and are eaten by the lions, after which Darius exalts Daniel's God.

In 553, Daniel has a dream which he interprets. Four great beasts come from the sea: a lion with eagle's wings [a cherub, symbolizing the Neo-Babylonians], a bear [Medo-Persians], a leopard with four wings [Greeks], and a fourth with iron teeth and ten horns [Romans?], which will "be different from all the other kingdoms and will devour the whole earth, trampling it down and crushing it.^{7:23}" Another horn, with eyes of a man, appears to him [the antichrist?]; he will "speak against the most high and oppress the saints... but his power will be taken away and completely destroyed forever.^{7:26}" Daniel sees God sitting on his throne and "there before me was one like a son of man [the Messiah], coming with the clouds of heaven... He was given authority, glory, and sovereign power; all peoples, nations, and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.^{7:14}"

Daniel has another dream, involving a ram with two horns (Medo-Persia) which is attacked by a goat with one horn (Greece). The angel Gabriel explains it to him: it prophesies the division of the Greek empire into four parts and the rise of another king [Antiochus IV on the Seleucid throne].

The angel Gabriel appears to Daniel in answer to his prayers and prophesies that Jerusalem will be rebuilt, the Anointed One will come [in 483 years?] and later be cut off [crucified], the city and sanctuary will be destroyed, and [the antichrist?] "will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed by God is poured out on him."^{9:27}

In 539, an angel appears to Daniel and prophesies additional Persian kings; [Alexander] and the division of his kingdom into Ptolemaic, Seleucid, and two other parts; [Antiochus Epiphanes, who set up an altar to Zeus]; and [the rise of the antichrist?], eventually to come to an end. "At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress, such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people--everyone whose name is found written in the book--will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt." ^{12:2} [This is the first clear reference in the Bible to a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.]

Although nations vie for world control now, Christ's kingdom will replace and surpass the kingdoms of this world. Our faith is sure because our future is secure in Christ. We must have the courage and put our faith in God who controls everything.

Daniel and his three friends are examples of dedication and commitment. They determined to serve God regardless of the consequences. They did not give in to pressures from an ungodly society because they had a clear purpose in life.

It is wise to make trusting and obeying God alone for our true purpose in life. This will give us direction and peace despite the circumstances or consequences. We should disobey anyone who asks us to disobey God. Our first allegiance must be to God.

Daniel served for 70 years in a foreign land that was hostile to God, yet he did not compromise his faith in God. He was truthful, persistent in prayer, and disinterested in power for personal glory.

To fulfill your life's purpose, you need staying power. Don't let your Christian values become blurred. Be relentless in your prayers, stay firm in your integrity, and be content to serve God wherever he puts you.

God was faithful in Daniel's life. He delivered him from prison, from a den of lions, and from enemies who hated him. God cares for his people and deals patiently with them.

We can trust God to be with us through any trial because he promises to be there. Since he has been faithful to us, we should remain faithful to him.

Chapter 5

Hosea

Hosea began his ministry during the end of the prosperous but morally declining reign of Jeroboam II of Israel (the upper classes were doing well, but they were oppressing the poor). He prophesied until shortly after the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C.

The key verse is: “The LORD said to me, ‘Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes.’” (Hosea 3:1).

Hosea employs many images from daily life God is depicted as a husband, father, lion, leopard, bear, dew, rain, moth, etc. Israel is pictured as wife, sick person, vine, grapes, early fruit, olive tree, a woman in childbirth, oven, morning mist, chaff, and smoke, etc.

God told Hosea to find a wife and told him ahead of time that she would be unfaithful to him. Although she would bear many children, some of these offspring would be fathered by others. In obedience to God, Hosea married Gomer. His relationship with her, her adultery, and their children became living, prophetic examples to Israel.

The book of Hosea is a love story, really tragic, and true. Transcending the tale of a young man and wife, it tells of God’s love for his people and the response of his “bride.” A covenant had been made and God had been faithful. His love was steadfast and his commitment unbroken. But Israel, like Gomer, was adulterous and unfaithful, spurning God’s love and turning instead to false gods. After warning of judgment, God reaffirmed his love and offered reconciliation. His love and mercy were overflowing, but justice would be served.

The book begins with God’s marriage instructions to Hosea. After Hosea’s marriage, children were born, and each given a name signifying a divine message

(Hosea 1). As predicted, Gomer left Hosea to pursue her lusts (Hosea 2). Hosea (whose name means “salvation”) found her, redeemed her, and brought her home again, fully reconciled (Hosea 3). Images of God’s love, judgment, grace, and mercy were woven into their relationship.

Next, God outlined his case against the people of Israel. Their sins would cause their destruction (Hosea 4; Hosea 6; Hosea 7; Hosea 12) and would rouse his anger, resulting in punishment (Hosea 5; Hosea 8-10; Hosea 12- 13). Even during Israel’s immorality, God was merciful and offered hope, expressing his infinite love for his people (Hosea 11) and the fact that their repentance would bring about blessing (Hosea 14).

The book of Hosea dramatically portrays our God’s constant and persistent love. As you read this book, watch the prophet submit himself willingly to his Lord’s direction; grieve with him over the unfaithfulness of his wife and his people; and hear the clear warning of judgment. Then reaffirm your commitment to being God’s person, faithful in your love and true to your vows.

Just as Gomer lost interest in Hosea and ran after other lovers, we too can easily lose appreciation for our special relationship with God and pursue dreams and goals that do not include him. When we compromise our Christian lifestyles and adopt the ways of the world, we are being unfaithful.

God wanted the people in the northern kingdom to turn from their sin and return to worshipping him alone, but they persisted in their wickedness. Throughout the book, Israel is described as ignorant of God, with no desire to please him. Israel did not understand God at all, just as Gomer did not understand Hosea. Like a loving husband or patient father, God wants people to know him and to turn to him daily.

Just as Hosea’s wife, Gomer, was unfaithful to him, so the nation of Israel had been unfaithful to God. Israel’s idolatry was like adultery. They sought illicit relationships with Assyria and Egypt in pursuit of military might. They mixed Baal worship with the worship of God.

Like Gomer, we can chase after other loves, love of power, pleasure, money, or recognition. The temptations in this world can be very seductive. Are we loyal to God, remaining completely faithful, or have other loves taken his rightful place?

God's judgment is sure. Hosea solemnly warned Judah against following Israel's example. Because Judah broke the covenant, turned away from God, and forgot her Maker. Judah experienced a devastating invasion and exile. Sin has terrible consequences.

Disaster surely follows ingratitude toward God and rebellion. The Lord is our only true refuge. If we harden our hearts against him, there is no safety or security anywhere else. We cannot escape God's judgment.

Just as Hosea went after his unfaithful wife to bring her back, so the Lord pursues us with his love. His love is tender, loyal, unchanging, and undying. No matter what, God still loves us. Have you forgotten God and become disloyal to him?

Don't let prosperity diminish your love for him or let success blind you to your need for his love.

God longs for restoration. Although God will discipline his people for sin, he encourages and restores those who have repented. True repentance opens the way to a new beginning. God forgives and restores.

There is still hope for those who turn back to God. No loyalty, achievement, or honor can be compared to loving him. Turn to the Lord while the offer is still good. No matter how far you have strayed, God is willing to bring you back.

TIMELINE

Jeroboam II becomes king of Israel 793 B.C.

Amos becomes a prophet 760 B.C.

Hosea becomes a prophet

King Zechariah of Israel is killed 753 B.C.

King Shallum of Israel is killed 752 B.C.

Tiglath-Pileser III invades Israel 743 B.C.

Micah becomes a prophet to Judah 742 B.C.

Isaiah becomes a prophet to Judah 740 B.C.

Israel (the northern kingdom) falls 722 B.C.

Hosea's ministry ends 715 B.C.

Chapter 6

Joel

Joel was a prophet to the nation of Judah, also known as the southern kingdom.

The book does not mention when Joel lived, but many believe he prophesied during the reign of King Joash (835-796 B.C.). The date of Joel's book is not so important as its timeless message: sin brings God's judgment, yet with God's justice there is also great mercy.

The author Joel is mentioned only in this book and the book of Acts. It may have been written in the ninth century B.C. but as late as the postexilic period. He sees a locust plague and drought in Judah as a harbinger of a day of judgment and punishment to come which calls for repentance. Restoration and blessing will come only after judgment and repentance, even for Israel.

"... A nation [The locusts] has invaded my land, powerful and without number... The vine is dried up and the fig tree is withered... Surely the joy of mankind is withered away 1:12" Joel calls for repentance, "for the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty". 1:15.

A key verse is: "'Even now,' declares the LORD 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.' Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and relents from sending calamity" Joel 2:12-13.

"The Lord will reply... `I will drive the northern army [locusts] from you... I will repay you for the years the locusts have an eaten...my great army that I sent among you. You will have plenty to eat... Never again will my people be shamed.'"2:27 The Lord promises to gather all nations and punish them for their deeds against Israel which includes selling their children into slavery, Egypt and Edom desolate, etc. "Jerusalem will be holy; never again will foreigners invade her."3:17

It is about this day that the prophet Joel speaks, and it is the theme of his book. On this day God will judge all unrighteousness and disobedience—all accounts will be settled and the crooked made straight.

We know little about Joel—only that he was a prophet and the son of Pethuel. He may have lived in Jerusalem because his audience was Judah, the southern kingdom. Whoever he was, Joel speaks forthrightly and forcefully in this short and powerful book. His message is one of foreboding and warning, but it is also filled with hope. Joel says our Creator, the omnipotent Judge, is also merciful, and he wants to bless all those who trust him.

Joel begins by describing a terrible plague of locusts that covers the land and devours the crops. The devastation wrought by these creatures is but a foretaste of the coming judgment of God, the “day of the LORD.” Joel, therefore, urges the people to turn from their sin and turn back to God. Woven into this message of judgment and the need for repentance is an affirmation of God’s kindness and the blessings he promises for all who follow him. In fact, “everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved” (Joel 2:32).

As you read Joel, catch his vision of the power and might of God and of God’s ultimate judgment of sin. Choose to follow, obey, and worship God alone as your sovereign Lord.

The locust plague was only a foretaste of the judgment to come in the day of the Lord. This is a timeless call to repentance with the promise of blessing. Just as the people faced the tragedy of their crops being destroyed, we too face tragic judgment if we live in sin. But God’s grace is available to us both now and in that coming day.

God would send punishment. Like a destroying army of locusts, God’s punishment for sin is overwhelming, dreadful, and unavoidable. When it comes, there will be no food, no water, no protection, and no escape. The day for settling accounts with God for how we have lived is fast approaching.

God is the one with whom we all must reckon—not nature, the economy, or

a foreign invader. We can't ignore or offend God forever. We must pay attention to his message now, or we will face his anger later.

Forgiveness was available. God stood ready to forgive and restore all those who would come to him and turn away from sin. God wanted to shower his people with his love and restore them to a proper relationship with him.

Forgiveness comes by turning from sin and turning toward God. It is not too late to receive God's forgiveness. God's greatest desire is for you to come to him.

He gives a promise of the Holy Spirit. Joel predicts the time when God will pour out his Holy Spirit on all people. It will be the beginning of new and fresh worship of God by those who believe in him, but also the beginning of judgment on all who reject him.

God is in control. Justice and restoration are in his hands. The Holy Spirit confirms God's love for us just as he did for the first Christians (Acts 2). We must be faithful to God and place our lives under the guidance and power of his Holy Spirit.

TIMELINE

King Ahab dies in battle 853 B.C.

Elisha becomes a prophet 848 B.C.

Jehu becomes king of Israel; Athaliah seizes Judah's throne 841 B.C.

Joel becomes a prophet?

Joash becomes king of Judah 835 B.C.

Jehoahaz becomes king of Israel 814 B.C.

Jehoash becomes king of Israel 798 B.C.

Joel's ministry ends 796 B.C.?

Chapter 7

Amos

Amos was a shepherd and fig grower from the southern kingdom (Judah), but he prophesied to the northern kingdom (Israel). Israel was politically at the height of its power with a prosperous economy, but the nation was spiritually corrupt. Idols were worshiped throughout the land, and especially at Bethel, which was supposed to be the nation's religious center. Like Hosea, Amos was sent by God to denounce this social and religious corruption. About 30 or 40 years after Amos prophesied, Assyria destroyed the capital city, Samaria, and conquered Israel (722 B.C.).

Uzziah reigned in Judah from 792-740; Jeroboam II reigned in Israel from 793- 753.

God calls for repentance, modest living, and social justice: " `Seek me and live... You trample on the poor and force them to give you grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them.^{5:11} You deprive the poor of justice in the courts... Seek good, not evil, that you may live ^{5:14} Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-falling stream ^{5:24}.... '"

God decries those who make a practice of skimping on the measure of goods for sale to the poor, " `cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat ^{8:6}...!'" .

Amos warns that the coming day of judgment will not just be against other nations: "Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord... That day will be darkness, not light.^{5:18} I will send you into exile... Woe to you who are complacent in Zion ^{6:1}... I abhor the pride of Jacob "

But God also promises restoration to come: " `In that day I will restore David's fallen tent... I will bring back my exiled people Israel; they will rebuild the ruined cities... I will plant Israel in their own land, never again to be uprooted.^{9:15}' "

Amos' message has had an impact on God's people throughout the centuries, and it needs to be heard today, by individuals and nations. Although they were divided from their southern brothers and sisters in Judah, the northern Israelites were still God's people. But they were living beneath a pious veneer of religion, worshiping idols, and oppressing the poor. Amos, a fiery, fearless, and honest shepherd from the south, confronted them with their sin and warned them of the impending judgment.

The book of Amos opens with this humble shepherd watching his sheep. God then gave him a vision of what was about to happen to the nation of Israel. God condemned all the nations who have sinned against him and harmed his people.

Beginning with Aram, he moved quickly through Philistia, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab. All were condemned, and we can almost hear the Israelites shouting, "Amen!"

And then, even Judah, Amos's homeland, was included in God's scathing denunciation (Amos 2:4-5). How Amos's listeners must have enjoyed hearing those words! Suddenly, however, Amos turned to the people of Israel and pronounced God's judgment on *them*. The next four chapters enumerate and describe their sins. It is no wonder that Amaziah the priest intervened and tried to stop the preaching (Amos 7:10-13). Fearlessly, Amos continued to relate the visions of future judgment that God gave to him (Amos 8-9). After all the chapters on judgment, the book concludes with a message of hope. Eventually, God will restore his people and make them great again (Amos 9:8-15).

As you read Amos's book, put yourself in the place of those Israelites and listen to God's message. Have you grown complacent? Have other concerns taken God's place in your life? Do you ignore those in need or oppress the poor? Picture yourself as Amos, faithfully doing what God calls you to do. You, too, can be God's person. Listen for his clear call and do what he says, wherever it leads.

Amos speaks with brutal frankness in denouncing sin. He collided with the false religious leaders of his day and was not intimidated by priest or king. He continued to speak his message boldly. God requires truth and goodness, justice,

and righteousness, from all people and nations today as well. Many of the conditions in Israel during Amos's time are evident in today's societies. We need Amos's courage to ignore danger and stand against sin.

Everyone answers to God, Amos pronounced judgment from God on all the surrounding nations. Then he included Judah and Israel. God is in supreme control of all the nations. Everyone is accountable to him. All people will have to account for their sin. When those who reject God seem to get ahead, don't envy their prosperity, or feel sorry for yourself. Remember that we all must answer to God for how we live.

THEME: Complacency

Everyone was optimistic, business was booming, and people were happy (except for the poor and oppressed). With all the comfort and luxury came self-sufficiency and a false sense of security. But prosperity brought corruption and destruction.

Complacency began to take the place of their dependency on God

A complacent present lead to a disastrous future. Don't congratulate yourself for the blessings and benefits you now enjoy. They are from God. If you are more satisfied with yourself than with God, remember that everything is meaningless without him. A self-sufficient attitude may be your downfall.

The poor were being oppressed. The wealthy and powerful people of Samaria, the capital of Israel, had become prosperous, greedy, and unjust. Illegal and immoral slavery came as the result of over-taxation and land-grabbing. There was also cruelty and indifference towards the poor. God is weary of greed and will not tolerate injustice.

God made all people; therefore, to ignore the poor is to ignore those whom God loves and whom Christ came to save. We must go beyond feeling bad for the poor and oppressed. We must act compassionately to stop injustice and to help care for those in need.

Superficial religion was present. Although many people had abandoned real

faith in God, they still pretended to be religious. They were carrying on nominal religious performances instead of having spiritual integrity and practicing heartfelt obedience toward God.

Merely participating in ceremony or ritual falls short of true religion. God wants simple trust in him, not showy external actions. Don't settle for impressing others with external rituals when God wants heartfelt obedience and commitment.

TIMELINE

Jeroboam II becomes king of Israel 793 B.C.

Amos becomes a prophet to Israel 760 B.C.

Hosea becomes a prophet to Israel 753 B.C.

King Shallum of Israel is assassinated 752 B.C.

Amos's ministry ends 750 B.C.

Isaiah becomes a prophet to Judah 740 B.C.

Chapter 8

Obadiah

Like Jeremiah (his contemporary), he prophesies against Edom and predicts the restoration of the house of Jacob.

"I [The Lord] will make you] small among the nations... The day of the Lord is near for all nations. As you have done, it will be done to you... But on Mount Zion Obadiah was a prophet from Judah who told of God's judgment against the nation of Edom. Two accepted dates for this prophecy are (1) between 853 B.C. and 841 B.C., when King Jehoram and Jerusalem were attacked by a Philistine/Arab coalition (2 Chronicles 21:16ff), or (2) 586 B.C., when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians (2 Kings 25; 2 Chronicles 36). Edom had rejoiced over the misfortunes of both Israel and Judah, and yet the Edomites and Jews descended from two brothers—Esau and Jacob (Genesis 25:19-26). Just as these two brothers were constantly fighting, so were Israel and Edom. God pronounced judgment on Edom for their callous and malicious actions toward his people.

The purpose of this book is to show that God judges those who have harmed his people.

AUTHOR: Obadiah. Little is known about this man, whose name means “servant (or worshiper) of the LORD.”

This prophecy was written to the Edomites, the Jews in Judah, and God's people everywhere.

Historically, Edom had constantly harassed the Jews. Prior to the time, this book was written, they had participated in attacks against Judah. Given the dates above, this prophecy came after the division of Israel into the northern and southern kingdoms and before the conquering of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C.

“The day of the LORD is near for all nations. As you have done, it will be

done to you; your deeds will return upon your own head.” (Obadiah 1:15).

The book of Obadiah uses vigorous poetic language and is written in the form of a dirge of doom.

God too has children—men and women whom he has chosen as his very own. There have always been individuals marked as his, but with Abraham, he promised to build a nation. Israel was to be God’s country, and her people, the Jews, his very own sons, and daughters. Through the following centuries, there was discipline and punishment, but also always love and mercy. God, the eternal Father, protected and cared for his children.

Obadiah, the shortest book in the Old Testament, is a dramatic example of God’s response to anyone who would harm his children. Edom was a mountainous nation, occupying the region southeast of the Dead Sea including Petra, the spectacular city discovered by archaeologists a few decades ago. As descendants of Esau (Genesis 25:19-27:45), the Edomites were blood relatives of Israel and, like their father, they were rugged, fierce, and proud warriors with an invincible mountain home. Of all people, they should have rushed to the aid of their northern brothers. Instead, however, they gloated over Israel’s problems, captured, and delivered fugitives to the enemy, and even looted Israel’s countryside.

Obadiah gave God’s message to Edom. Because of their indifference to and defiance of God, their cowardice and pride, and their treachery toward their brothers in Judah, they stood condemned and would be destroyed. The book begins with the announcement that disaster was coming to Edom (Obadiah 1:1-9). Despite their “impregnable” cliffs and mountains, they would not be able to escape God’s judgment. Obadiah then gave the reasons for their destruction (Obadiah 1:10-14)—their blatant arrogance toward God and their persecution of God’s children. This concise prophecy ends with a description of the “day of the LORD,” when judgment will fall on all who have harmed God’s people (Obadiah 1:15-21).

Today, God’s holy bride is his church—all who have trusted Christ for their salvation and have given their lives to him. These men and women are God’s born again and adopted children. As you read Obadiah, catch a glimpse of what it means

to be God's child, under his love and protection. See how the heavenly Father responds to all who would attack those whom he loves.

The book of Obadiah shows the outcome of the ancient feud between Edom and Israel. Edom was proud of its prominent position, but God would bring her down. Those who are high and powerful today should not be overconfident in themselves, whether they are a nation, a corporation, a church, or a family. Just as Edom was destroyed for its pride, so will anyone who lives in defiance of God.

1. Edom's destruction (Obadiah 1:1-16)
2. Israel's restoration (Obadiah 1:17-21) God's justice will prevail.

Obadiah predicted that God would destroy Edom as punishment for standing by when Babylon invaded Judah. Because of their treachery, Edom's land would be given to Judah in the day when God rights the wrongs against his people.

God will judge and fiercely punish all who harm his people. We can be confident in God's final victory. He is our champion, and we can trust him to bring about true justice.

Pride, because of their invincible rock fortress, was the downfall of the Edomites. The Edomites were proud and self-confident. God humbled them, and their nation disappeared from the face of the earth.

All those who defy God will meet their doom as Edom did. Any nation who trusts in its power, wealth, technology, or wisdom more than in God will be brought low. All who are proud will one day be shocked to discover that no one is exempt from God's justice.

Chapter 9

Jonah

The author is not named but the book may have originated in the eighth century B.C. Others feel it is post-exilic or at least written after the destruction of Nineveh in 612B.C., in part because of the theme of preaching to the Gentiles.

Jonah ministered in 800 B.C. - 750 B.C. during King Jeroboam II's reign in Israel and was a contemporary of Amos. It describes a single mission in highly compressed form and depicts the larger scope of God's purpose for Israel.

Jonah is called by the Lord to go to and preach against the wicked enemy city of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria [representing the Gentiles]. But instead, Jonah flees west for Tarshish [Spain?] by ship. The ship is threatened in a storm and the sailors throw him overboard.

He is swallowed by a great fish where he stays for three days and nights. He offers to God a prayer of thanksgiving for his deliverance and acknowledged that "Salvation comes from the Lord." The Lord commands the fish to vomit him onto dry land. He goes to Nineveh where, because of his preaching, the people and their king repent and turn from their evil ways. Jonah is angry with God for having compassion for Israel's enemy. God answers Jonah must also be concerned about that great city.

Jonah is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25. He prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II, the king of Israel from 793 B.C.-753 B.C. He may have been a member of the company of prophets mentioned in connection with Elisha's ministry (2 Kings 2:3). God told Jonah to preach to Nineveh, the most important city in Assyria, the rising world power of Jonah's day.

Within 50 years, Nineveh would become the capital of the vast Assyrian empire. Jonah doesn't say much about Nineveh's wickedness, but the prophet Nahum gives us more insight. Nahum says Nineveh was guilty of (1) evil plots against God (Nahum 1:9), (2) exploitation of the helpless (Nahum 2:12), (3) cruelty in war (Nahum 2:12-13), (4) idolatry, prostitution, and witchcraft (Nahum 3:4). God told Jonah to go to Nineveh, about 500 miles northeast of Israel, to warn of judgment and to declare that the people could receive mercy and forgiveness if

they repented.

Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?” (Jonah 4:11).

This book is different from the other prophetic books because it tells the story of the prophet and does not center on his prophecies. In fact, only one verse summarizes his message to the people of Nineveh (Jonah 3:4). Jonah is a historical narrative. It is also mentioned by Jesus as a picture of his death and resurrection. (Matthew 12:38-42)

Jonah was given such a task. Assyria—a great but evil empire—was Israel’s most dreaded enemy. The Assyrians flaunted their power before God and the world through numerous acts of heartless cruelty. When Jonah heard God tell him to go to Assyria and call the people to repentance, he ran in the opposite direction.

The book of Jonah tells the story of this prophet’s flight and how God stopped him and turned him around. However, it is much more than a story of a man and a great fish—Jonah’s story is a profound illustration of God’s mercy and grace. No one deserved God’s favor less than the people of Nineveh, Assyria’s capital.

Jonah knew this. But he knew that God would forgive and bless them if they would turn from their sin and worship him. Jonah also knew the power of God’s message, even though Jonah's own weak preaching, the people of Nineveh would respond and be spared God’s judgment. Jonah hated the Assyrians, and he wanted vengeance, not mercy. So, he ran. Eventually, Jonah obeyed and preached in the streets of Nineveh, and the people repented and were delivered from judgment.

Jonah then sulked and complained to God, “I knew you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity” (Jonah 4:2). In the end, God confronted Jonah about his self-centered values and lack of compassion, saying, “Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and

many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?” (Jonah 4:11).

As you read Jonah, see the full picture of God’s love and compassion, and realize that no one is beyond redemption. The gospel is for all who will repent and believe. Begin to pray for those who are furthest from the kingdom and look for ways to tell them about God. Learn from the story of this reluctant prophet and determine to obey God, doing whatever he asks and going wherever he leads.

Jonah was a reluctant prophet given a mission he found distasteful. He chose to run away from God rather than obey him. Like Jonah, we may have to do things in life that we don’t want to do. Sometimes we find ourselves wanting to turn and run.

But it is better to obey God than to defy him or run away. Often, despite our defiance, God in his mercy will give us another chance to serve him when we return to him.

1. Jonah forsakes his mission (Jonah 1:1-2:10)
2. Jonah fulfills his mission (Jonah 3:1-4:11)

Here, we see God’s sovereignty. Although the prophet Jonah tried to run away from God, God was in control. By controlling the stormy seas and a great fish, God displayed his absolute, yet loving guidance.

Rather than running from God, trust him with your past, present, and future. Saying no to God quickly leads to disaster. Saying yes brings a new understanding of God and his purpose in the world.

God’s wishes to send his message to all the world. God had given Jonah a purpose—to preach to the great Assyrian city of Nineveh. Jonah hated Nineveh, and so he responded with anger and indifference. Jonah had yet to learn that God loves all people. Through Jonah, God reminded Israel of their missionary purpose.

We must not limit our focus to our own people. God wants his people to proclaim his love in words and actions to the entire world. He wants us to be his missionaries wherever we are, wherever he sends us.

When the reluctant preacher went to Nineveh, there was a great response.

The people repented and turned to God. This was a powerful rebuke to Israel, who thought themselves better, and yet refused to respond to God's message. God will forgive all those who turn from their sin.

God doesn't honor sham or pretense. He wants the sincere devotion of each person. It is not enough to share the privileges of Christianity; we must ask God to forgive us and to remove our sin. Refusing to repent is the same as loving our sin.

God's message of love and forgiveness was not for the Jews alone. God loves all the people of the world. The Assyrians didn't deserve it, but God spared them when they repented. In his mercy, God did not reject Jonah for aborting his mission. God has great love, patience, and forgiveness.

God loves each of us, even when we fail him. But he also loves other people, including those not of our group, background, race, or denomination. When we accept his love, we must also learn to accept all those whom he loves. We will find it much easier to love others when we genuinely love God.

Chapter 10

Micah

Micah prophesied sometime between 750 B.C. and 686 B.C. during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and of Hezekiah and was a contemporary of Isaiah. He was from a village in Judah. Micah was concerned about the social conditions prior to the religious reforms of Hezekiah. He predicts the downfall of Samaria and the eventual desolation of Judea. He alternates between oracles of doom and of hope. Micah's theme is the judgment, and deliverance of God.

" `... I will make Samaria a heap of rubble...since she gathered her gifts from the wages of prostitutes'... For her wound is incurable; it has come to Judah.^{1:9} Shave your heads in mourning for the children in whom you delight...for they will go from you into exile.^{1:16}"

Social ills: "Woe to those who plan iniquity... They covet fields and seize them. They defraud a man of his home, a fellowman of his inheritance.^{2:2} Listen, you leaders of Jacob... Should you not know justice, you who hate good and love evil?^{3:1} Hear this you leaders of the house of Jacob...who build Zion with bloodshed and Jerusalem with wickedness. Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money.^{3:11} "

prophecies of deliverance and the Lord's coming: " `I will surely gather all of you, O Jacob; I will surely bring together the remnant of Israel...like sheep in a pen... One who breaks open the way will go up before them... Their king will pass through before them, the Lord at their head.^{2:13} In the last days, the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains 4:1... They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks^{4:3}...

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel ^{5:2}... He will stand and shepherd his flock... And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace.^{5:5}"

The words of the prophets stand in stark contrast to such misconceptions.

God's hatred is real—burning, consuming, and destroying. He hates sin, and he stands as the righteous judge, ready to mete out just punishment to all who defy his rule.

God's love is also real. So real that he sent his Son, the Messiah, to save and accept judgment in the sinner's place. Love and hate are together—both unending, irresistible, and unfathomable.

In seven short chapters, Micah presents this true picture of God—the almighty Lord who hates sin and loves the sinner. Much of the book is devoted to describing God's judgment on Israel (the northern kingdom), on Judah (the southern kingdom), and on all the earth. This judgment will come “because of Jacob's transgression, because of the sins of the house of Israel” (Micah 1:5). And the prophet lists their despicable sins, including fraud (Micah 2:2), theft (Micah 2:8), greed (Micah 2:9), debauchery (Micah 2:11), oppression (Micah 3:3), hypocrisy (Micah 3:4), heresy (Micah 3:5), injustice (Micah 3:9), extortion and lying (Micah 6:12), murder (Micah 7:2), and other offenses. God's judgment will come.

During this overwhelming prediction of destruction, Micah gives hope and consolation because he also describes God's love. The truth is that judgment comes only after countless opportunities to repent, to turn back to true worship and obedience— “to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). But even amid judgment, God promises to deliver the small minority who have continued to follow him. He states, “Their king will pass through before them, the LORD at their head” (Micah 2:13). The king, of course, is Jesus; and we read in Micah 5:2 the Messiah will be born as a baby in Bethlehem, an obscure Judean village.

As you read Micah, catch a glimpse of God's anger in action as he judges and punishes sin. See God's love in action as he offers eternal life to all who repent and believe. Then, determine to join the faithful remnant of God's people who live according to his will.

Micah emphasized the need for justice and peace. Like a lawyer, he set forth God's case against Israel and Judah, their leaders, and their people. Throughout the

book are prophecies about Jesus, the Messiah, who will gather the people into one nation. He will be their king and ruler, acting mercifully toward them. Micah makes it clear that God hates unkindness, idolatry, injustice, and empty ritual—and he still hates these today. But God is very willing to pardon the sins of any who repent.

1. The trial of the capitals (Micah 1:1-2:13)
2. The trial of the leaders (Micah 3:1-5:15)
3. The trial of the people (Micah 6:1-7:20)

When faith is perverted, God will judge the false prophets, dishonest leaders, and selfish priests in Israel and Judah. While they publicly carried out religious ceremonies, they were privately seeking to gain money and influence. Mixing selfish motives with an empty display of religion is a perversion of faith.

Never try to mix your own selfish desires with true faith in God. One day, God will reveal how foolish it is to substitute anything for loyalty to him. Coming up with your own private blend of religion will pervert your faith.

Micah predicted ruin for all nations and leaders who were oppressive toward others. The upper classes oppressed and exploited the poor. Yet no one was speaking against them or doing anything to stop them. God will not put up with such injustice.

We dare not ask God to help us while we ignore those who are needy and oppressed, or while we silently condone the actions of those who oppress them.

God promised to provide a new king to bring strength and peace to his people. Hundreds of years before Christ's birth, God promised that the eternal king would be born in Bethlehem. It was God's great plan to restore his people through the Messiah.

Christ our king leads us just as God promised. But until his final judgment, his leadership is only visible among those who welcome his authority. We can have God's peace now by giving up our sins and welcoming him as king.

Micah preached that God's greatest desire was not the offering of sacrifices at the temple. God delights in faith that produces justice, love for others, and obedience to him.

True faith in God generates kindness, compassion, justice, and humility. We can please God by seeking these results in our work, our family, our church, and our neighborhood.

TIMELINE

Hosea becomes a prophet 753 B.C.

Jotham becomes king of Judah 750 B.C.

Tiglath-Pileser III invades Israel 743 B.C.

Micah becomes a prophet;

Pekahiah becomes king 742 B.C.

Isaiah becomes a prophet 740 B.C.

Ahaz becomes king of Judah 735 B.C.

Israel (the northern kingdom) falls 722 B.C.

Hosea's ministry ends;

Hezekiah becomes king of Judah 715 B.C.

Sennacherib surrounds Jerusalem 701 B.C.

Micah's ministry ends 687 B.C.

Chapter 11

Nahum

Nahum, like Jonah, was a prophet to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire, and he prophesied between 663 B.C. and 612 B.C. Jonah had seen Nineveh repent a century earlier (see the book of Jonah), but the city had fallen back into wickedness. Assyria, the world power controlling the Fertile Crescent, seemed unstoppable. Its ruthless and savage warriors had already conquered Israel, the northern kingdom, and were causing great suffering in Judah. So, Nahum proclaimed God's anger against Assyria's evil. Within a few decades, the mighty Assyrian empire would be toppled by Babylon.

Nahum prophesies sometime between the fall of Thebes in 663 B.C. > and of Nineveh in 612 B.C., in the reign of Josiah and therefore a contemporary of Zephaniah and the young Jeremiah. Assyria has already destroyed the northern kingdom. It is addressed to Nineveh, prophesying its fall.

"[The Lord] will make an end of Nineveh; he will pursue his foes into darkness.^{1:8} The Lord will restore the splendor of Jacob like the splendor of Israel ^{2:2}... Woe to the city of blood... Bodies without number...all because of the wanton lust of a harlot...who enslaved nations by her prostitution and peoples by her witchcraft.^{3:4} Nothing can heal your wound; your injury is fatal.... for who has not felt your endless cruelty.^{3:19}"

The purpose of this book is to pronounce God's judgment on Assyria and to comfort Judah with this truth.

It was written to the people of Nineveh and Judah

This prophecy took place after the fall of Thebes in 663 B.C. (see Nahum 3:8-10)

The theme of this prophecy is found in Nahum 17:7-9: "The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him, but with an

overwhelming flood he will make an end of Nineveh; he will pursue his foes into darkness. Whatever they plot against the LORD he will end; trouble will not come a second time”

There are laws in the world as well—boundaries and rules for living established by God. But men and women regularly flaunt these regulations, hiding their infractions or overpowering others and declaring that might will make right. God calls this sin—willful disobedience, rebellion against his control, or apathy. And at times the violators succeed—no whistles blow, no fouls are called, and individual dictators’ rule. The truth is, however, that even though justice will be served in the world. God will settle all accounts.

Assyria was the most powerful nation on earth. Proud in their self-sufficiency and military might. They plundered, oppressed, and slaughtered their victims. One hundred years earlier, Jonah had preached in the streets of the great city of Nineveh; the people had heard God’s message and had turned from their evil. But generations later, evil was again reigning, and the prophet Nahum pronounced judgment on this wicked nation.

Nineveh is called a “city of blood” (Nahum 3:1), a city of cruelty (Nahum 3:19), and the Assyrians are judged for their arrogance (Nahum 1:11), idolatry (Nahum 1:14), murder, lies, treachery, and social injustice (Nahum 3:1-19). Because of their sins, Nahum predicted that this proud and powerful nation would be destroyed. The end came within 50 years.

In this judgment of Assyria and its capital city, Nineveh, God is judging a sinful world. And the message is clear—disobedience, rebellion, and injustice will not prevail but will be punished severely by a righteous and holy God who rules over all the earth.

As you read the prophecies of Nahum, sense God’s wrath as he avenges sin and brings about justice. Then, decide to live under his guidance and within his rules, commands, and guidelines for life.

Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire, is the subject of Nahum's prophecy. The news of its coming destruction was a relief for Judah, who was subject to Assyrian domination. No longer would Judah be forced to pay tribute as insurance against invasions. Judah was comforted to know that God was still in control.

Nineveh is an example to all rulers and nations of the world today. God is sovereign over even those who are invincible. We can be confident that God's power and justice will one day conquer all evil.

Remember: "God judges."

Assyria was the leading military power in the world, God would destroy this "invincible" nation. God allows no person or power to usurp or scoff at his authority.

Anyone who remains arrogant and resists God's authority will face his anger. No ruler or nation will get away with rejecting him. No individual will be able to hide from his judgment. Yet those who keep trusting God will be kept safe forever.

Remember: "God rules."

God rules over all the earth, even over those who don't acknowledge him. God is all-powerful, and no one can thwart his plans. God will overcome any who attempt to defy him. Human power is futile against God.

If you are impressed by or afraid of any weapons, armies, or powerful people, remember that God alone can truly rescue you from fear or oppression. We must place our confidence in God because he alone rules all of history, all the earth, and our lives.

TIMELINE

Manasseh becomes king of Judah 697 B.C.
Ashurbanipal becomes king of Assyria 669 B.C.
The fall of Thebes;
Nahum becomes a prophet 663 B.C.
Josiah becomes king of Judah;
Zephaniah becomes a prophet 640 B.C.
Jeremiah becomes a prophet 627 B.C.
Nineveh falls 612 B.C.
Assyria completely conquered 609 B.C.
Babylonians win the battle of Carchemish 605 B.C.
Judah falls to Babylon in 586 B.C.

Chapter 12

Habakkuk

Habakkuk lived in Judah during the reign of Jehoiakim (2 Kings 23:36-24:5). He prophesied between the fall of Nineveh (the capital of Assyria) in 612 B.C. and the Babylonian invasion of Judah in 588 B.C. With Assyria in disarray, Babylon was becoming the dominant world power. This book records the prophet's dialogue with God concerning the questions, "Why does God often seem indifferent in the face of evil? Why do evil people go unpunished?" While other prophetic books brought God's word to people, this brought people's questions to God. An "oracle" is a message from God.

He was a contemporary of Jeremiah. He predicts the coming Babylonian invasion, writing toward the end of Josiah's reign (609 B.C.) or the beginning of Jehoiakim's. Habakkuk struggles to comprehend the ways of God and why He does nothing about the rampant wickedness, strife, and oppression in Judah.

Habakkuk calls to the Lord, "How long, O Lord, must I call for help but you do not listen?... Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? 1:3 Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves? 1:13"

God responds, "I am raising up the Babylonians...who sweep across the whole earth 1:6... See, he [the Babylonian king] is puffed up; his desires are not upright-- but the righteous will live by his faith... Because you [Babylonia] have plundered many nations, the people who are left will plunder you.2:8 For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord.2:13 But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before hi.2:20 "

Habakkuk gives praise to the Lord.

Habakkuk was a man who sought answers. Troubled by what he observed, he asked puzzling questions. These questions were not merely intellectual exercises or bitter complaints. Habakkuk saw a dying world, and it broke his heart. Why is there evil in the world? Why do the wicked seem to be winning? He boldly and confidently took his complaints directly to God. And God answered with an

avalanche of proof and prediction.

The prophet's questions and God's answers are recorded in this book. As we turn the pages, we are immediately confronted with his urgent cries, "How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save?" (Habakkuk 1:2).

In fact, most of the first chapter is devoted to his questions. As chapter two begins, Habakkuk declares he will wait to hear God's answers to his complaints. Then God begins to speak, telling the prophet to write his answer plainly so that all will see and understand. It may seem, God says, as though the wicked triumph, but eventually they will be judged, and righteousness will prevail. Judgment may not come quickly, but it *will* come. God's answers fill chapter two. Then Habakkuk concludes his book with a prayer of triumph. With questions answered and a new understanding of God's power and love, Habakkuk rejoices in who God is and in what he will do. "Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights." (Habakkuk 3:18-19).

Listen to the profound questions that Habakkuk boldly brings to God and realize that you can also bring your complaints and inquiries to him. Listen to God's answers and rejoice that he is at work in the world and in your life.

When Habakkuk was troubled, he brought his concerns directly to God. After receiving God's answers, he responded with a prayer of faith. Habakkuk's example is one that should encourage us as we struggle to move from doubt to faith. We don't have to be afraid to ask questions of God. The problem is not with God and his ways, but with our limited understanding of him.

1. Habakkuk's complaints (Habakkuk 1:1-2:20)
2. Habakkuk's prayer (Habakkuk 3:1-19)

Habakkuk deals with struggle and doubt. He asked God why the wicked in Judah were not being punished for their sin. He couldn't understand why a just God would allow such evil to exist. God promised to use the Babylonians to punish

Judah. When Habakkuk cried out for answers in his time of struggle, God answered him with words of hope.

God wants us to come to him with our struggles and doubts. But his answers may not be what we expect. God sustains us by revealing himself to us. Trusting him leads to quiet hope, not bitter resignation.

Habakkuk deals with God's sovereignty. He asked God why he would use the wicked Babylonians to punish his people. God said he would also punish the Babylonians after they had fulfilled his purpose.

IMPORTANCE: God is still in control of this world despite the apparent triumph of evil. God doesn't overlook sin. One day he will rule the whole earth with perfect justice.

Habakkuk also deals with hope. He explains that God is the Creator; he is all- powerful. He has a plan, and he will carry it out. He will punish sin. He is our strength and our place of safety. We can have confidence that he will love us and guard our relationship with him forever.

TIMELINE

Jeremiah becomes a prophet 627 B.C.

Habakkuk becomes a prophet 612 B.C.

King Josiah dies in battle 609 B.C.

Daniel taken captive to Babylon 605 B.C.

Ezekiel a captive in Babylon;

Zedekiah becomes king 597 B.C.

Habakkuk's ministry ends 588 B.C.

Fall of Judah;

Jerusalem destroyed 586 B.C.

Chapter 13

Haggai

This book was written to the people living in Jerusalem and those who had returned from exile.

DATE WRITTEN: 520 B.C.

The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed in 586 B.C. Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild their temple in 538 B.C. They began the work but were unable to complete it. Through the ministry of Haggai and Zechariah, the temple was completed (520 B.C.-515 B.C.).

KEY VERSE: “Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?” (Haggai 1:4).

The key people in this book are Haggai, Zerubbabel, and Joshua. Haggai prophesied in Jerusalem.

Haggai was the first of the post-exilic prophets. The other two were Zechariah and Malachi. The literary style of this book is simple and direct.

Our values and priorities are reflected in how we use our resources—time, money, strength, and talent. Often our actions belie our words. We say God is number one, but then we relegate him to a lesser number on our “to do” lists.

Twenty-five centuries ago, a voice was heard, calling men and women to the right priorities. Haggai knew what was important, and what had to be done. He challenged God’s people to respond.

In 586 B.C., the armies of Babylon had destroyed the temple in Jerusalem—God’s house, the symbol of his presence with them. In 538 B.C. King Cyrus decreed that Jews could return to their beloved city and rebuild the temple. They traveled to Jerusalem and began the work. After doing a little work on the temple, they forgot their purpose and lost their priorities. Opposition and apathy brought the work to a standstill (Ezra 4:4-5).

Then Haggai spoke, calling them back to God’s values. “Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?” (Haggai 1:4). The people were more concerned with their own needs than with doing God’s will, and, as a result, they suffered. Then Haggai called them to action: "This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,’ says the LORD.” (Haggai 1:7-8). God’s message, through his servant Haggai, became the catalyst for finishing the work.

Although Haggai is a small book, it is filled with challenge and promise, reminding us of God’s claim on our lives and our priorities. As you study the life of Haggai, imagine him walking the streets and alleys of Jerusalem, urging the people to get back to doing God’s work. And listen to Haggai speaking to you, urging you to reorder your priorities in accordance with God’s will. What has God told you to do? Put all aside and obey him

CHART: HAGGAI

Haggai served as a prophet to Judah about 520 B.C., after the return from exile.

<i>Climate of the times</i>	The people of Judah had been exiled to Babylon in 586 B.C., and Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed. Under Cyrus king of Persia, the Jews could return to Judah and rebuild their temple.
<i>Main message</i>	The people returned to Jerusalem to begin rebuilding the temple, but they didn’t finish. Haggai’s message encouraged the people to finish rebuilding God’s temple.
<i>Importance of message</i>	The temple lay half-finished while the people lived in beautiful homes. Haggai warned them against putting their possessions and jobs ahead of God. We must put God first in our lives.
<i>Contemporary prophet</i>	Zechariah (520-480)

Chapter 14

Zechariah

Zechariah was born in Babylonia and returned with Zerubbabel to Jerusalem in 538 B.C. He was a contemporary of Haggai. Like Haggai, he rebukes the people for delaying in the rebuilding of the temple. He gives apocalyptic visions that give encouragement to the people.

Zechariah begins writing this book by describing eight visions that came to him at night. Next, he gives a collection of messages about the crowning of Joshua, answers to questions of feasting and fasting, and encouragement to continue rebuilding the temple. We, too, can be inspired to continue following God in faithfulness throughout our lives.

Zechariah and Haggai were among the first to leave Babylonia. Zechariah, a prophet, and a priest began ministering at the same time as the prophet Haggai (520-518 B.C.). His first prophecy was delivered two months after Haggai's first prophecy.

Like Haggai, Zechariah encouraged the people to continue rebuilding the temple, whose reconstruction had been halted for 15 years. Zechariah combated the people's spiritual apathy, despair over pressures from their enemies, and discouragement about the smaller scale of the new temple foundation. Neglect of our spiritual priorities can be just as devastating today to fulfilling God's purpose

In a vision, Zechariah describes God's plan to have the temple rebuilt. Four horns (oppressing nations) will be defeated by four craftsmen. A man with a measuring line measures Jerusalem [for the temple]. The Lord is coming to be with Judah.

Joshua [the high priest, representing sinful Israel] is dressed in new clothes "symbolic of things to come:" "I am going to bring my servant, the Branch.... and I will remove the sin of this land in a single day."^{3:9}

A golden lampstand symbolizes the light and abundance of oil from God. The two

olive trees symbolize Joshua and Zerubbabel, who will work to rebuild the temple. A flying scroll banishes thieves and those who bear false witness. Wickedness is personified as a woman in a basket, who is sent to Babylonia. Four chariots, each with different colored horses, go throughout the earth [as spirits of divine judgment like the four horsemen.]. Joshua receives a crown. He will be a priest on the throne, the two roles united [as they will be with the Messiah].

The Lord calls for true social justice, mercy, and compassion rather than just insincere fasting. He promises to bless Jerusalem and make it prosper. He makes oracles against Hadrach, Hamath, Tyre, Gaza, etc.

He prophesies to the messianic kingdom. "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion!... See your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey... He will proclaim peace to the nations... His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.^{9:10} 'The people of the northern and southern kingdoms will be reunited.' "

Chapter 11 may prophesy the destruction of Syro-Palestine that will follow the rejection of the Messianic Good Shepherd. " `And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced [the Messiah?], and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child.^{12:9} Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered' ^{13:7}... A day of the Lord is coming when...[Jerusalem] will be captured, the houses ransacked, and the women raped... On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives... The Lord will be king over the whole earth... Jerusalem will be raised up... Never again will it be destroyed. Jerusalem will be secure... Every pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy.^{14:21}"

Zechariah shows the future as a vast uncharted sea of the unknown, holding joy or terror, comfort or pain, love, or loneliness. Some people fear the days to come, wondering what evils lurk in the shadows; others consult seers and future-telling charlatans, trying desperately to discover its secrets. But tomorrow's story is known only to God and to those special messengers, called prophets, to whom God has revealed his plan.

A prophet's primary task was to proclaim the word of the Lord, pointing out

sin, explaining its consequences, and calling men and women to repentance and obedience. Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, and Amos stand with scores of others who faithfully delivered God’s message despite rejection, ridicule, and persecution. And at times they were given prophetic visions foretelling coming events.

Nestled near the end of the Old Testament, among what are known as “minor prophets,” is the book of Zechariah. As one of three postexilic prophets, along with Haggai and Malachi, Zechariah ministered to the small remnant of Jews who had returned to Judah to rebuild the temple and their nation. Like Haggai, he encouraged the people to finish rebuilding the temple, but his message went far beyond those physical walls and contemporary issues.

With spectacular apocalyptic imagery and graphic detail, Zechariah told of the Messiah, the One whom God would send to rescue his people and to reign over all the earth. Zechariah is one of our most important prophetic books, giving detailed Messianic references that were clearly fulfilled in the life of Jesus Christ. The rebuilding of the temple, he says, was just the first act in the drama of the end and the ushering in of the Messianic age. Zechariah proclaimed a stirring message of hope to these ex-captives and exiles—their King was coming!

Jesus is Messiah, the promised “great deliverer” of Israel. Unlike Zechariah’s listeners, we can look back at Christ’s ministry and mission. As you study Zechariah’s prophecy, you will see details of Christ’s life that were written 500 years before their fulfillment. Read and stand in awe of our God who keeps his promises. But there is also a future message that has not yet been fulfilled—the return of Christ at the end of the age. As you read Zechariah, therefore, think through the implications of this promised event. *Your King is coming*, and he will reign forever and ever.

God knows and controls the future. We may never see more than a moment ahead, but we can be secure if we trust in him. Read the book of Zechariah and strengthen your faith in God—he alone is your hope and security.

Chapter 15

Zephaniah

Zephaniah is a descendant of Hezekiah prophesying in Josiah's reign and therefore a contemporary of Jeremiah, Nahum, and Habbakuk. He prophesies the approaching judgment when God will punish the nations including Judah.

“I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth... The wicked will have only heaps of rubble 1:3... I will stretch out my hand against Judah... The great day of the Lord is near 1:14... But I will leave within you the meek and humble, which trust in the name of the Lord. The remnant of Israel will do no wrong.3:12 He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.’ “3:17 He also prophesies against Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Cush, and Assyria.

King Josiah of Judah was attempting to reverse the evil trends set by the two previous kings of Judah—Manasseh and Amon. Josiah was able to extend his influence because there wasn’t a strong superpower dominating the world at that time (Assyria was declining rapidly). Zephaniah’s prophecy may have been the motivating factor in Josiah’s reform. Zephaniah was a contemporary of Jeremiah.

His prophecies included: “Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the LORD’S anger.” (Zephaniah 2:3)

The ministry of Zephaniah occurred in Jerusalem.

Overwhelming grief, prolonged distress, incessant abuse, continual persecution, and imminent punishment breed hopelessness and despair. “If only,” we cry as we search our minds for a way out and look to the skies for rescue. With just a glimmer of hope, we would take courage and carry on, enduring until the end.

As God’s prophet, Zephaniah was bound to speak the truth—this he did

clearly, thundering certain judgment and horrible punishment for all who would defy the Lord. God's awful wrath would sweep away everything in the land and destroy it. "I will sweep away both men and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. The wicked will have only heaps of rubble when I cut off man from the face of the earth," declares the LORD." (Zephaniah 1:3) No living thing in the land would escape. That terrible day was coming soon: "The wonderful day of the LORD is near—near and coming quickly. Listen! The cry on the day of the LORD will be bitter, the shouting of the warrior there. That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness." (Zephaniah 1:14-15) We can sense the oppression and depression his listeners must have felt. They were judged guilty, and they were doomed.

But during this terrible pronouncement, there is hope. The first chapter of Zephaniah's prophecy is filled with terror. In chapter two, however, a whispered promise appears. "Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the LORD'S anger." Zephaniah 2:3) A few verses later we read of a "remnant of the house of Judah" (Zephaniah 2:7) that will be restored.

Finally, in chapter three, the quiet refrain grows to a crescendo as God's salvation and deliverance for those who are faithful to him is declared. "Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away your punishment; he has turned back your enemy. The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm." (Zephaniah 3:14-15 this is true hope, grounded in the knowledge of God's justice, and in his love for his people.

As you read Zephaniah, listen carefully to the words of judgment. God does not take sin lightly, and it will be punished. But be encouraged by the words of hope— our God reigns, and he will rescue his own. Decide to be part of that faithful remnant of souls who humbly worship and obey the living Lord.

Zephaniah warned the people of Judah if they refused to repent, the entire nation, including the beloved city of Jerusalem, would be lost. The people knew God would eventually bless them, but Zephaniah made it clear there would be

judgment first, then a blessing. This judgment would not be merely punishment for sin, but also a process of purifying the people. Though we live in a fallen world surrounded by evil, we can hope in the perfect kingdom of God to come and we can allow any punishment that touches us now to purify us from sin.

Destruction was coming because Judah had forsaken the Lord. The people worshiped Baal, Molech, and the starry hosts. Even the priests mixed pagan practices with faith in God. God's punishment for sin was on the way.

To escape God's judgment, we must listen to him, accept his correction, trust him, and seek his guidance. If we accept him as our Lord, we can escape his condemnation.

The theme of the message shows the indifference to God

Although there had been occasional attempts at renewal, Judah had no sorrow for her sins. The people were prosperous, and they no longer cared about God. God's demands for righteous living seemed irrelevant to Judah, whose security and wealth made her complacent.

IMPORTANCE: Don't let material comfort be a barrier to your commitment to God. Prosperity can produce an attitude of proud self-sufficiency. The only antidote is to admit that money won't save us and that we cannot save ourselves. Only God can save us and cure our indifference to spiritual matters.

For a time, line, we consider:

Zephaniah becomes a prophet;

Josiah becomes king of Judah 640 B.C.

Jeremiah becomes a prophet 627 B.C.

Book of the Law found in the temple 622 B.C.

Zephaniah's ministry ends 621 B.C.

Habakkuk becomes a prophet 612 B.C.

Josiah dies in battle 609 B.C.

First captives were taken to Babylon 605 B.C.

Babylon's second attack on Judah 597 B.C.

Judah (the southern kingdom) falls 586 B.C.

Chapter 16

Malachi

God assures Israel of his love. The priests have shown contempt for God, offering blind animals in sacrifice etc. The people have intermarried with foreigners and committed other sins.

Malachi means "messenger" and may not have been a proper name. Like Nehemiah, the author condemns the sins of Israel which arose while Nehemiah had returned to serve the Persian king. The people of the restored community had begun to lose hope. The author wrote c. 430 and may be the last Old Testament prophet.

The Lord says, " `See, I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me [John the Baptist?]. Then, suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple... But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap... He will purify the Levites 3:3... But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. Then you will trample down the wicked 4:3... I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers...' " 4:6

Malachi writes to the Jews in Jerusalem and God's people everywhere about 430 B.C.

Malachi, Haggai, and Zechariah were post-exilic prophets to Judah (the southern kingdom). Haggai and Zechariah rebuked the people for their failure to rebuild the temple. Malachi confronted them with their neglect of the temple and their false and profane worship.

He declares, "Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. . . . But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall." (Malachi

4:1-2).

Malachi's literary style employs a dramatic use of questions asked by God and his people (for example, see Malachi 3:7-8).

God loves perfectly and completely. His love is a love of action: giving, guiding, and guarding. He is altogether faithful, true to his promises to his chosen people. Consistently they spurn their loving God, breaking the covenant, following other gods, and living for themselves causing the relationship to shatter.

But the breach is not irreparable; all hope is not lost. God can heal and mend and reweave the fabric. Forgiveness is available, and that is grace.

Malachi gives his message to the members of the nation of Judah. Malachi is God's prophet in Jerusalem. His words reminded the Jews, God's chosen nation, of their willful disobedience, beginning with the priests (Malachi 1:1-2:9), and then including every person (Malachi 2:10-3:15). They had shown contempt for God's name (Malachi 1:6), offered false worship (Malachi 1:7-14), led others into sin (Malachi 2:7-9), broken God's laws (Malachi 2:11-16), called evil "good" (Malachi 2:17), kept God's tithes and offerings for themselves (Malachi 3:8-12), and became arrogant (Malachi 3:13-15).

The relationship was broken, and judgment and punishment would be theirs. During this wickedness, however, there were a faithful few—the remnant—who loved and honored God. God would shower his blessings upon these men and women (Malachi 3:16-18).

In this stunning picture of Israel's unfaithfulness, Malachi clearly shows them to be worthy of punishment, but woven throughout this message is hope—the possibility of forgiveness. This is beautifully expressed in Malachi 4:2— "But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall."

The book of Malachi forms a bridge between the Old Testament and the

New Testament. As you read Malachi, see yourself as the recipient of this word of God to his people. Evaluate the depth of your commitment, the sincerity of your worship, and the direction of your life. Then allow God to restore your relationship with him through his love and forgiveness.

God loves his people even when they ignore or disobey him. He has great blessings to bestow on those who are faithful to him. His love never ends.

Malachi singled out the priests for condemnation. They knew what God required, yet their sacrifices were unworthy, and their service was insincere; they were lazy, arrogant, and insensitive. They had a casual attitude toward the worship of God and observance of God's standards.

If religious leaders go wrong, how will the people be led? We are all leaders in some capacity. Don't neglect your responsibilities or be ruled by what is convenient. Neglect and insensitivity are acts of disobedience. God wants leaders who are faithful and sincere.

The people had not learned the lesson of the exile, nor had they listened to the prophets. Men were callously divorcing their faithful wives to marry younger pagan women. This was against God's law because it disobeyed his commands about marriage and threatened the religious training of the children. But pride had hardened the hearts of the people.

God deserves our absolute best honor, respect, and faithfulness. Sin hardens our hearts to our true condition. Pride is unwarranted self-esteem. It is setting your own judgment above God's and looking down on others. Don't let pride keep you from giving God your devotion, money, marriage, and family.

One of the themes of Malachi's message is "The Lord's coming."

God's love for the Messiah demonstrates his faithful people's coming. The Messiah will lead the people to the realization of all their fondest hopes. The day of the Lord's coming will be a day of comfort and healing for a faithful few, and a day of judgment for those who reject him.

Christ's first coming refined and purified all those who believe in him. His return will expose and condemn those who are proud, insensitive, or unprepared. Yet, God can heal and mend. Forgiveness is available to all who come to him.