

# **THE MINOR PROPHETS**

**by Robert C. Walton**

**Grades 9-12  
Year 2  
Quarter 4**



# **THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE MINOR PROPHETS**

## **Lesson Aim**

To provide for students an overview of the period in Israel's history during which the authors of the last twelve books of the Old Testament lived and prophesied.

## **Memory Verse**

**Obadiah 3** - "The pride of your heart has deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rocks and make your home on the heights, you who say, to yourself, 'Who can bring me down to the ground?'"

## **Lesson Background**

The Minor Prophets, of course, are not called "minor" because they are unimportant, but because their books are shorter than those written by the Major Prophets. Nonetheless, many Christians know nothing from these twelve short books beyond the story of Jonah and the whale. It will be the function of these lessons to remedy that lack of knowledge among your students. As the content of these books is being mastered, they will also see the many applications, both to individual Christians and to society at large, that are found in the writings of these prophets.

This general introduction is designed to provide an historical framework apart from which the Minor Prophets cannot be properly understood. As we survey the history of Israel from the division of the monarchy to the end of the Old Testament, we will place each prophet (major, minor, and non-writing) in the proper location in that history. Students also will be given a simple handout outlining a few basic facts about each of the Minor Prophets.

The major application of this first lesson is a general one, namely that God is faithful to His Word and faithful to His people. He does what He said He would do, preserves those who honor Him, and judges those who forsake Him.

## **Lesson Procedure**

This quarter deals with the Minor Prophets, a group of twelve little-known books from a little-known period in Israel's history. The Minor Prophets wrote and preached in a time of spiritual decline, when the people around them were blatantly worshipping idols. The idol worship brought with it numerous social abuses, and the prophets spoke out boldly against these, proclaiming the judgment of God and calling the people to repentance. In some ways, these prophetic books could have been written by our contemporaries. Many of the conditions they describe (and condemn) prevail today also. As we study these books, we will see God encouraging His people to faithfulness in a pagan world and promising to send judgment against the wicked. These messages are much needed today.

Our first lesson will provide an overview of the historical background against which these prophets wrote. We must know the history of the period if we are to understand the messages of the prophets. The Minor Prophets fall within a 400-year period, from about 840 - 440 B.C. This time span includes the last half of Israel's Divided Monarchy, the last years of Judah before the Babylonian Captivity, the Captivity itself, and the first hundred years after the return from Babylon. At this point, distribute the handout on the Minor Prophets.

### **1. The Divided Monarchy (931-722 B.C.)**

Solomon had set the stage for the division of the kingdom with his numerous marriages. He contracted so many marriage alliances with surrounding nations that he eventually accumulated seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. He then built pagan temples to accommodate these foreign wives, and the presence of these temples enticed the people into idolatry. God told Solomon that the result of this idolatry would be the division of the kingdom.

When Solomon died in 931 B.C., his headstrong son Rehoboam inherited the throne. The people asked him to lower taxes, but he raised them instead, and the ten northern tribes revolted under the leadership of Jeroboam, who had been an official in Solomon's court, leaving Rehoboam to rule the southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The Northern Kingdom came to be known as Israel and the Southern Kingdom as Judah. The Northern Kingdom lasted for 209 years and was ruled by nineteen kings from nine dynasties. All nineteen kings were idolaters, following the example of Jeroboam, who erected golden calves at Bethel and Dan to prevent the people from going to Jerusalem to worship (later kings were worse, of course, worshipping Baal and other obnoxious idols). The Southern Kingdom lasted for 345 years and was ruled by nineteen kings (and one queen), all from the house of David. Eight of these nineteen kings are said by Scripture to have been godly men, while the other eleven (plus Athaliah, the queen) were idolaters.

In the first fifty years of the Divided Monarchy, Judah had three kings, two wicked and one good (Asa). The Northern Kingdom, meanwhile, went through three dynasties, which included a total of five wicked kings. In 885 B.C. the dynasty of Omri began in Israel, and lasted until 841 B.C. The major king in the dynasty of Omri was Ahab (874-853 B.C.), while during the same period good king Jehoshaphat (873-848 B.C.) ruled in Judah. During the reign of Ahab Elijah began his ministry, which was largely directed against the Baal worship of the Northern Kingdom. In the south, Jehoshaphat was succeeded by his son Jehoram. In 845 B.C., during Jehoram's reign, the Edomites rebelled against Judah and gained their

freedom. Their mocking treatment of the Jews brought forth the first written prophetic message from the pen of Obadiah.

Ahab's dynasty was ended in the north by Jehu, who was used by God to judge wickedness but then became wicked himself. Meanwhile, in the south, after a bloody interval of rule by the Queen Mother Athaliah (daughter of Ahab and Jezebel), the boy king Joash assumed the throne. During this period, Elisha carried on his ministry in the north, while Joel spoke of God's judgment to the ever more idolatrous inhabitants of Judah.

During the reigns of Ahab and Jehoshaphat and beyond, Syria (also called Arameans) had been the major outside military threat faced by Israel and Judah. But as the eighth century dawned, a new power was emerging on the horizon - the brutal Assyrian Empire. During the prosperous reign of Jeroboam II in the north (793-753), God sent Jonah to proclaim judgment against Nineveh, the chief city of Assyria. Meanwhile, Amos was sent from Judah to Israel to preach against the social abuses and luxurious living of the Northern Kingdom and to warn them of God's impending judgment.

As the specter of an Assyrian invasion loomed on the horizon, Hosea spoke out against the idolatry of Israel, telling of God's certain judgment and ultimate restoration of His unfaithful people. At the same time, Isaiah and Micah were warning Judah against complacency, even as God was providing a miraculous victory over the Assyrians during the reign of Hezekiah over Judah.

Finally, in 722 B.C., the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians, as God's warnings through the mouths of His prophets came to fruition.

## **2. The Last Years of Judah (722-586 B.C.)**

After the fall of the Northern Kingdom, Judah prospered under the revival instituted by Hezekiah, but fell into gross idolatry during the long reign of his son Manasseh (695-642 B.C.). Toward the end of Manasseh's reign, Nahum, a displaced northerner, pronounced the doom of the vicious Assyrians because of their treatment of God's people.

As the Assyrian Empire began to decline, a new power was beginning to arise in the region of Mesopotamia - the Chaldeans, also known as the Neo-Babylonian Empire. While Judah was being ruled by their last good king, Josiah (640-609 B.C.), Zephaniah and Habakkuk warned of the judgment to come, though Habakkuk could not understand how God could judge the sins of His people by using a people far more wicked than those of Judah. Jeremiah, meanwhile, wept over a godless nation while he proclaimed the inevitability of the destruction to come. That destruction began to arrive in 605 B.C., when Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem and took the most important and promising citizens back to Babylon as captives. Another group was taken in 597 B.C., and the city of Jerusalem was finally destroyed in 586 B.C. along with the Temple, and most of the surviving population was deported to Babylon.

## **3. The Captivity and Beyond (586-440 B.C.)**

During the Captivity, Daniel, who had been taken in the first group of captives, represented God in the Babylonian court, while Ezekiel, who was sent into exile at the time of the second invasion, ministered among the captives. The Captivity ended with the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus, king of the Medo-Persian Empire, in 539 B.C. Very few returned to Jerusalem from their settled homes throughout Babylon. Those who did return began to rebuild the Temple, but soon turned their attention to other things. At this point, God sent Haggai and Zechariah to spur them on in the work of rebuilding. The Temple was rebuilt, but the

people soon fell into formalized hypocrisy, which was castigated by Malachi, the last of the prophets before the 400 years of silence between the Testaments.

## THE MINOR PROPHETS

PROPHET	DATES OF MINISTRY	HOME	RECIPIENTS OF MESSAGE
Obadiah	c. 845	Judah	Edom
Joel	c. 830	Judah	Judah
Jonah	c. 760	Gath-Hepher (Israel)	Nineveh
Amos	c. 755	Tekoa (Judah)	Israel
Hosea	c. 755 - 715	Israel	Israel
Micah	c. 735 - 705	Moreseth (Judah)	Judah
Nahum	c. 645	Elkosh (Judah)	Nineveh
Zephaniah	c. 625	Jerusalem (Judah)	Judah
Habakkuk	c. 607	Judah	Judah
Haggai	520	Jerusalem	Returnees from Babylon
Zechariah	c. 520 - 480	Jerusalem	Returnees from Babylon
Malachi	c. 440	Judah	Judah





## **FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE MINOR PROPHETS**

1. In general terms, what is the period of time in Israel's history during which the Minor Prophets were active?
2. In what ways was the time of the Minor Prophets like our own?
3. Look at the opening verses of each of the books of the Minor Prophets. From those verses, collect as much information as you can about each man. Include information about their families, home towns, occupations, and the kings during whose reigns they prophesied.



# **OBADIAH**

## **Lesson Aim**

Through the words of the prophet Obadiah, to impress upon students the danger of a prideful response to the judgment of others.

## **Memory Verse**

**Obadiah 10** - "Because of the violence against your brother Jacob, you will be covered with shame; you will be destroyed forever."

## **Lesson Background**

Considerable scholarly debate exists concerning the occasion that prompted the prophecy of Obadiah. Many see verses 10-11 as referring to the Babylonian Captivity, in which case Obadiah would have been writing somewhere in the neighborhood of 600 B.C. Two factors argue against this dating, however. The first is that Jeremiah seems to allude to Obadiah's prophecy in his own condemnation of Edom (Jeremiah 49:7-22), but gives no reason for the judgment. This would make more sense if Jeremiah were quoting a well-known prophetic writing from the past rather than the words of a contemporary. Secondly, Edom was given as much trouble by Nebuchadnezzar as Judah was. Why would Edom scoff at Judah or help the Babylonians?

A better context for the prophecy, in my opinion, is the Philistine-Arabian invasion of Judah in 845 B.C. Edom had been subject to Israel since the reign of David (II Samuel 8:14), but revolted successfully during the reign of Jehoshaphat's wicked son, Jehoram (II Chronicles 21:8-10). Shortly after the Edomite revolt, the Philistines and Arabians invaded (II Chronicles 21:16-17), carrying off Jehoram's harem and all of his children (except for his wife, Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, and his youngest son

Jehoahaz, also known as Ahaziah). There can be little question that at this point Edom would have been more than willing both to help the invaders and to gloat over Judah's misfortune.

The major application of the lesson should be in terms of the danger of pride, particularly as expressed through pleasure at the downfall of others (cf. I Corinthians 10:12).

## **Lesson Procedure**

Start the class by asking your students how they would feel if someone who had been giving them a hard time got in trouble in school and was given a detention or suspension. Most will probably respond with some sense of vindication, suggesting that the person simply got what he or she deserved. Then have them turn to Romans 12:17-21. What does this passage indicate one's attitude in such a situation should be?

Today we will be studying the prophecy of Obadiah, which gives us an example of God's attitude toward those who seek vengeance on their enemies. It is a prophecy directed against the Edomites, who sought revenge against the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

### **1. Who were the Edomites?**

The Edomites were the descendants of Esau, the son of Isaac and brother of Jacob. After losing his birthright and blessing, Esau and his family settled in Mount Seir, the mountainous wilderness south of the Dead Sea. When Israel came out of Egypt, they requested passage through Edomite territory but were refused (Numbers 20:14-21). Edom later was subjugated by Israel in the time of David.

### **2. What was the historical context of the prophecy?**

Go over the information from the Lesson Background concerning the Philistine-Arabian invasion of Judah in 845 B.C. during the reign of Jehoram, son of Jehoshaphat.

### **3. Who was the author of the prophecy?**

Of the man Obadiah we know nothing. He is not mentioned anywhere else in Scripture (it is extremely doubtful that the prophet was the Obadiah of I Kings 18:1-16, since, had that palace official been a prophet, he surely would have been one of Jezebel's first targets), nor does the book of Obadiah tell us anything about its author. His name means "servant of Yahweh."

### **4. What are the contents of the prophecy?**

This short book can be divided into three segments, consisting of verses 1-7, 8-14, and 15-21. Divide your class into three groups, assign one portion of the book to each group, and have the group make up a title that summarizes the basic thrust of their section. Hopefully the titles will be at least somewhat similar to those given below. After the groups have devised their titles, go over each section verse by verse, noting the following:

## **A. God Will Destroy Edom (verses 1-7)**

The first section is a declaration of judgment. The main reason for this judgment is pride (verse 3). Edom's pride lay mainly in her supposedly impregnable fortress, the city of Petra (verse 3 - "you who live in the clefts of Petra"), which was carved out of solid rock in the middle of the desert and was accessible only by a narrow passage through a rock cliff. The destruction is to be total, not partial, and accomplished through the deceit of allies. Around 500 B.C., the Edomites were driven out by their allies, the Nabatean Arabs, and forced to migrate to the Negev on the western side of the Dead Sea. Petra was left desolate, and the entrance was so well concealed that the city of rock lay undiscovered until the nineteenth century. [NOTE: The rock face of the temple ruins in Petra and the narrow passage through which those ruins are accessed served as the setting for the climactic scene in the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.]

## **B. Why God Judged Edom (verses 8-14)**

Edom's "violence against Jacob" was not an assault, but rather a mocking aloofness that rejoiced in Judah's calamity. Edom had not only enjoyed Judah's defeat immensely, but had also taken plunder and cut off the escape of fugitives (part of Jehoram's family?), thus aiding the enemy.

## **C. Contrasting Futures of Edom and Judah (verses 15-21)**

After a general statement of God's judgment against the nations, the prophet speaks of God's blessing upon Israel. The closing verses of the book speak of Israel's conquest of Edom. This occurred around 100 B.C. The Edomites, now settled in the Negev south of Jerusalem, were conquered and forcibly converted to Judaism by the Hasmonean king John Hyrcanus. By then known as Idumaeans, it was from among them that the Herod family arose. After the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., however, the Edomites pass from the pages of history.

## **5. Applications**

### **A. God Hates Pride**

Self-sufficiency is the root of all sin, a failure to acknowledge utter dependence on God.

### **B. God Will Punish Pride**

His judgment against the Edomites was worked out over a period of about 900 years, but it did come to pass. No one should think he can escape God.

### **C. God Will Deal With Those Who Abuse His People**

No Christian should ever think that God does not know or does not care about his suffering.

Close by challenging the students concerning their attitudes toward the misfortune of others, even if that misfortune is deserved.



## **FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT**

## **OBADIAH**

1. Who were the Edomites? What was their relationship to the Israelites?
2. What was the historical situation that prompted the prophecy of Obadiah?
3. What two conquests of the Edomites fulfilled the prophecies of Obadiah?
4. In preparation for next week, read the book of Joel.





# JOEL

## Lesson Aim

To impress upon the students that outward conformity to the law of God is not enough to deliver a person from God's judgment, but that there must also be a change in the heart.

## Memory Verse

**Joel 2:28-29** - "And afterward I will pour out My Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out My Spirit in those days."

## Lesson Background

During most of the Divided Monarchy period, the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah were enemies. There was one brief period, however, during which they were allies, and that was during the reigns of Jehoshaphat and his son in Judah and Ahab and his sons in Israel. This alliance was cemented by the marriage of Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, to Jehoram, the son of Jehoshaphat. Athaliah was every bit as wicked as her mother, and after the murder of her son Ahaziah by the Israelite general Jehu, she proceeded to put all claimants to the throne (her grandchildren!) to death and seize the throne for herself. Only one grandson escaped, a year-old baby named Joash. He was hidden in the Temple and raised by his uncle, Jehoiada the priest, and his aunt Jehoshabeath, who had rescued him. When Joash reached the age of seven, he was publicly crowned king, and Athaliah was killed by an angry mob. Joash, under the influence of Jehoiada, ruled well and cleansed the land of idolatry. When Jehoiada died, however, Joash turned away from God under the influence of wicked advisors. God sent prophets to warn him to repent (II Chronicles 24:19), one of whom was probably the prophet Joel.

What makes us think that Joel prophesied at this time? The book of Joel gives no direct evidence as to its date, but indirect evidence is considerable. The assumption of a functioning system of worship, including Temple sacrifices, places it in the Southern Kingdom in a time of religious observance. Furthermore, the fact that Joel's prophecy is referred to by both Amos and Isaiah means that it could not have been written much later than the time of Joash (Uzziah, grandson of Joash, was on the throne when Amos and Isaiah prophesied), while the two "good" kings before Joash (Asa and Jehoshaphat) were far too early. Thus the most likely context for the prophecy of Joel is the reign of Joash in Judah, shortly following a devastating plague of locusts.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Ask the students to imagine a church where people believed the Bible, worshiped God on the Lord's Day, and supported God's work with their offerings. Suddenly one Sunday, a man walks into the church and tells the people that God will bring judgment upon them if they don't repent. How would they feel? Why would God do something like that? Hopefully, the students will be able to arrive at the conclusion that outward conformity does not guarantee a heart that is right before God.

### **1. The Historical Background of the Book of Joel**

Go over with the class the material from the Lesson Background.

### **2. The Plague of Locusts (chapter 1)**

#### **A. The Results of the Plague (1:1-12)**

Have the students read these verses and list the different results of the locust plague. The list should include the various crops that were destroyed and make note of the fact that the devastation was so complete that nothing was left to offer to the Lord.

#### **B. The Response to the Plague (1:13-20)**

Joel indicates that the suffering of man and beast and the destruction of the land should cause repentance among the people. Stop at this point and ask your students to consider if this is always God's intention. Are all natural disasters intended as calls to repentance (not always - some are works of judgment, others are trials of faith)?

### **3. The Symbolism of the Locust Plague (chapter 2)**

#### **A. The Day of the Lord (2:1-11)**

Joel now uses the locust plague as a symbol for the Day of the Lord, a time of devastating judgment. A relentless army that overruns the land is pictured as being an army of locusts. The closing verses of the section indicate that God has brought this army against His sinful people.

Interpretations of this section vary from the historical to the eschatological. Are the locusts the Assyrian army that was to ravage the land 100 years after the time of Joel, yet be miraculously destroyed outside Jerusalem (cf. verse 20), or does it refer to some future invasion of Israel, or to the efforts of Satan

to destroy the church? Whatever specific interpretation you choose to follow, the fact remains that God is threatening His people with judgment.

### **B. The Required Response (2:12-17)**

God requires repentance. Outward observance is not sufficient (verse 13). Those who honor God outwardly, but not from the heart, should not think that they can avoid the judgment of God. Note that it is not just the leaders, but all of the people who are called to repentance.

### **C. The Mercy of God (2:18-32)**

Because God is a merciful God, He here promises that Judah will not be utterly destroyed, but will be restored both physically and spiritually. Have the class list the blessings promised in this section and indicate whether they are material or spiritual in nature. There may be debate among commentators as to the significance of the material blessings promised in this section, but the spiritual blessings of verses 28-29 clearly find their fulfillment on the Day of Pentecost, as recorded in Acts 2.

## **4. The Wicked and the Righteous (chapter 3)**

### **A. God's Judgment of the Wicked (3:1-16)**

God had punished His people for their sin, but now He turns upon the enemies of His people and destroys them. God may use human instruments to carry out His judgments, but those men are still accountable for what they have done, and God may justly punish them for it. Joel here pictures the complete triumph of God and His people over their enemies.

### **B. God's Blessings on the Righteous (3:17-21)**

The picture here is one of perfect peace, prosperity, and protection. God's people will know ultimate and final security.

## **Conclusion**

Two messages from the book of Joel should be brought home to your students at this point. The first involves the judgment threatened by God against any who conform outwardly to His law, yet don't obey from the heart. The second concerns the promise of deliverance from judgment that He gives to those who are truly His, who have been sealed by His Spirit.



## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## JOEL

1. What are the circumstances in which Joel prophesied? Who was probably the king of Judah, and what was his reign like?
2. What spiritual application did Joel bring out of the plague of locusts that had devastated Judah?
3. Why did God threaten to bring judgment against the people of Judah? In what ways are we today in danger of doing the same things?
4. How were the words of Joel 2:28-29 fulfilled?
5. In preparation for next week's lesson, read the book of Jonah.



# **JONAH**

## **Lesson Aim**

To encourage your Christian students to be obedient servants of God and to place before the unbelievers in your class God's great grace toward sinners.

## **Memory Verse**

**Jonah 2:7-9** - "When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord."

## **Lesson Background**

Jonah was a prophet from Gath-hepher, a town in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. He prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II, the most prosperous of the northern kings. Jeroboam II expanded the territory of Israel until, when combined with the land ruled by Uzziah, king of Judah, it approached the extent of Solomon's empire. But this wealth and expansion in Israel were possible only because of the temporary decline of the real power in the Middle East at that time - the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians had threatened Israel years earlier under Shalmaneser III, but a series of weak kings had brought them low. During the reign of Ashur-dan III (773-754 B.C.), Assyria reached an all-time low, enhanced by a serious plague in 765 and a solar eclipse (always viewed as ominous by the ancients) in 763.

Three prophets were active during the reign of Jeroboam II. Amos and Hosea prophesied in Israel, while Jonah, after being the bearer of good tidings to Israel (II Kings 14:25), was sent to Nineveh, the chief city of Assyria. It should surprise us not at all that, when faced with a word of judgment from God, Nineveh,

wicked but in a depressed state, repented, while Israel, wicked but prosperous, scorned the prophetic message.

Commentators have long debated the reason for Jonah's flight. I am convinced that, as a patriotic citizen of Israel, he did not want to see Nineveh spared. He would rather sacrifice his own life and ministry than see the Assyrian Empire survive to plunder Israel again (as, of course, it did, about 40 years after Jonah's visit). Several lessons can be drawn from the book for your students:

1. The necessity of obedience on the part of God's servants - disobedience is futile, since God's purposes will be accomplished.
2. The importance of compassion on the part of God's servants - one cannot serve others mechanically, apart from genuine love.
3. The conflicts that often arise between God and country - God's will is not always to be equated with victory for America and defeat for her enemies.
4. The incredible mercy of God - if God spared Nineveh in response to what appears to be a rather shallow repentance, will He refuse a sinner who turns to Him?

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin by asking the students what they would do if God told them that, within a month, the city of Moscow would be destroyed, but that He wanted them to go to Moscow and warn the people about the coming judgment. Why might they be reluctant to go? They should be able to come up with at least two reasons. The first involves self-preservation - Moscow is not the world's safest place to proclaim divine judgment - while the second might be a notion that the world in general and the United States in particular might be better off if Moscow were destroyed. At this point, read the first chapter of the book of Jonah. [How quickly the world changes! You'll need to substitute Tehran or some other current source of world conflict for Moscow in this introduction, since the Cold War, which was still in force when this material was first written, will be a dim memory for many of your students.]

### **1. The Patriotic Prophet (chapter 1)**

As the chapter is being read, make note of the fact that Joppa was Israel's chief Mediterranean seaport, while Tarshish was most likely a Phoenician trading colony on the coast of Spain - the edge of the known world, and in exactly the opposite direction from Nineveh.

After the reading is done, ask the students why Jonah left. After the introduction, they should realize that Jonah wanted Nineveh destroyed (fear wasn't the problem - he fell asleep in the boat with a clear conscience and was prepared to die when God sent the storm). At this point, fill students in on the background to the story - the reign of Jeroboam II, Jonah's earlier prophecy, and the relationship of Assyria to the nation of Israel (i.e., public enemy #1). [NOTE: Nothing is gained by spending time on the fish. Only those who deny the supernatural would doubt it. The real miracle of the book comes in chapter three, with Nineveh's repentance.]



## **2. The Penitent Prayer (chapter 2)**

It is possible that Jonah actually died and was revived. What indications in his prayer support that notion? He finally repents, and God graciously accepts his repentance and gives him another chance.

## **3. The Productive Preacher (chapter 3)**

Before reading chapter three, give the students the information from the Lesson Background about how God had prepared the Ninevites for Jonah's visit through political and military decline, plague, and even the solar eclipse. Add the fact that Jonah, returned from death and after three days in the fish's digestive juices, must have been a frightful sight! The fierce people of Nineveh miraculously repented, and God graciously spared them - just as Jonah had feared He would.

## **4. The Provoked Preacher (chapter 4)**

Read the fourth chapter, and ask the students why Jonah wanted to die. If they need a hint or two, ask them to imagine the response Jonah would have gotten upon returning to Israel. "The Man Who Saved Nineveh" would hardly have been given a ticker-tape parade through the streets of Samaria!

Jonah, as was true with so many of the Jews, and has sadly been true of many Christians as well, lacked compassion for all but his own people. He could not distinguish between the people of Israel and the people of God. God finally had to teach him a lesson in compassion by producing in turn the vine, the worm, and the wind.

## **Conclusion**

Close the lesson by emphasizing, and if time permits discussing, the four areas of application set forth at the end of the Lesson Background.



## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## JONAH

1. What was the country like in which Jonah lived and preached? In what ways was it like our own?
2. Why did Jonah run in the other direction when God told him to go to Nineveh?
3. How did God prepare the Ninevites to respond to Jonah's message?
4. In what ways do Christians today face the danger of identifying God's will with what is good for the United States of America?
5. What significance does Jesus ascribe to the story of Jonah in Matthew 12:38-42?
6. Read the book of Amos in preparation for next week's lesson.



# AMOS

## Lesson Aim

To emphasize for students the attitude of God toward materialism, as expressed in the prophecy of Amos.

## Memory Verse

**Amos 5:24** - "But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream."

## Lesson Background

We noted last week that it was during the prosperous reign of Jeroboam II, a period of Assyrian weakness, that God sent Jonah to preach against Nineveh. Amos was Jonah's contemporary, and there are some striking comparisons and contrasts that can be made between them. Jonah was from Israel, Amos from Judah (Tekoa was a small town at the edge of the Judean wilderness); Jonah was a respected prophet, while Amos had no training and no experience to prepare him for prophetic work; both were sent to people other than their own; both would normally have been scorned (the Israelite Jonah by the proud Assyrians, the provincial Amos by the aristocratic Samaritans); both were given messages of judgment; Jonah went to a nation in weakness, Amos went to a nation enjoying prosperity; Jonah's message was heeded by the godless Ninevites, while Amos was rejected by the materialistic Israelites.

Israel under Jeroboam II had expanded territorially and prospered materially. Though God had given them this success, they refused to acknowledge Him and became fat and complacent. Amos, a shepherd and tender of sycamore fig trees, was sent by God north from Judah to proclaim God's judgment on the wealthy aristocrats of Samaria, the capital of Israel. He used graphic figures of speech to communicate his message.

It certainly requires a message no less graphic to communicate God's displeasure with the materialism of our own day. This should be the main thrust of today's lesson for your students.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin the lesson by asking each of your students to imagine himself in a situation where he had to speak before an audience that looked down on him and had little respect for him as a person. How could he hope to communicate with such a group? After some discussion, your students may come to the conclusion that the best way for such a person to gain a hearing is to tell the audience what they want to hear. Once he gets them on his side, he would then be free to speak his mind (Is this why guest speakers often begin a sermon with a joke?). At this point, have the students read the first two chapters of Amos. Then, either using a map or sketching a rough one on the chalkboard, trace the geographical progression of Amos' message in those early chapters (Damascus is Syria, to the northeast; Gaza is Philistia, to the southwest; Tyre is Phoenicia, to the northwest; Edom on the southeast; Ammon east of Judah; Moab east of Israel; Judah south of Israel; and finally Israel itself). To whom is Amos speaking these words? How would the Samaritans react to this message as Amos progressed from nation to nation?

Having established something of the difficulty Amos was facing in proclaiming his message, set the context by using material from the Lesson Background. The historical proximity of Jonah's prophecy, along with the areas of comparison and contrast, will serve as a review of last week's lesson, while at the same time preparing the students for the study of Amos.

After the introductory judgments of chapters one and two, the book of Amos consists largely of three sermons and five visions. With the background established, today's study will be largely inductive. For this purpose, divide the class into three groups.

### **1. The Sermons**

Assign chapter three to the first group, chapter four to the second, and chapters five and six to the third. Have each group answer the questions on the worksheet for their assigned passage. Suggest that each group appoint a recorder to write down their information as they find it. Give the groups about fifteen minutes to work. After they finish, have each group share their findings with the others. As they do, overall themes should begin to emerge. Be sure to point these out to the class after the groups have reported. Major reasons for judgment include materialism, complacency, and empty religiosity. All three sermons make it clear that God's judgment will be total. At this point in the lesson, ask the students whether these same causes of judgment can be found in our country. Does this mean God is about to judge America? Such a question misses the point. Amos 3:2 makes it clear that it is because they are God's people that Israel is being judged so harshly. A more pertinent question would be whether or not these sins are present among the people of God in the church. If they are, we have no right to expect that God's judgment will be avoided. Be sure that, in this part of the lesson, you zero in on your students and their peers - don't let them get away with vague generalizations about "the church."

### **2. The Visions**

Assign the visions as follows: to group one, the three visions in 7:1-9; to group two, chapter 8; and to group three, 9:1-10. Have each group fill in its portion of the chart on the worksheet. After the groups share their findings (since these are shorter passages, the groups shouldn't need as much time as before), make note of the fact that Amos' message seems to be getting a bit monotonous. Sermon after sermon, vision

after vision, speaks of nothing but judgment, either that which has been narrowly averted in the past or that which is sure to come. Is there no hope or possibility of repentance? The picture appears so bleak that, in 8:11-12, even the very word of God, that prophetic word by which the verdict of judgment was spoken, was to be taken away (this was fulfilled during the 400 “silent years” of the Intertestamental Period, the time between Malachi and John the Baptist). Yet God does not permit despair. The book ends with the promise of 9:11-15 - a promise of final restoration and blessing. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was destroyed, never to be seen again - but a remnant was preserved to receive God’s blessing. In fact, this very promise provided the basis for the decision of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:14-17, permitting Gentiles to enter the church without first converting to Judaism. God’s blessing upon the remnant of Israel was to include union with many nations (Gentiles) that bear the name of God! God’s nature is such that He will time and again temper deserved judgment with undeserved mercy. Remind your students that, unlike the materialistic “fat cows” of Samaria, there is still the opportunity for repentance for those who put their trust in material things today.







## THE PROPHECY OF AMOS

### The Visions:

VISION	REFERENCE	MAJOR IMAGES	MEANING OF IMAGES	MEANING OF VISION
Locusts	7:1-3			
Fire	7:4-6			
Plumbline	7:7-9			
Basket of Fruit	8:1-14			
The Lord by the Altar	9:1-10			

## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## AMOS

1. Give a brief description of the people to whom Amos was told by God to speak.
2. What were the chief sins for which the people of Samaria were being judged by God?
3. What do the following symbols represent in the book of Amos: locusts, a plumb line, ripe fruit?
4. In preparation for next week's lesson, read over the book of Hosea, reading two chapters each day. After you finish reading, write a sentence summarizing the content of each chapter.



# HOSEA

## Lesson Aim

That students may learn of God's great love for sinners and His judgment of the wicked.

## Memory Verse

**Hosea 8:7** - "They sow the wind and reap the whirlwind. The stalk has no head; it will produce no flour. Were it to yield grain, foreigners would swallow it up."

## Lesson Background

Hosea was a contemporary of Amos, but their ministries were very different. Though both prophesied during the prosperous reign of Jeroboam II, Amos spoke against Israel's materialism, while Hosea denounced her idolatry. Amos was a southerner who prophesied against the north, while Hosea was a northerner who eventually was forced to flee to the south. (Note at this point that the kings mentioned in Hosea 1:1 ruled beyond the end of the eighth century in Judah - Hezekiah died in 686 - but that Jeroboam II died in 752 B.C. This would seem to indicate that, after the death of Jeroboam II, Hosea fled southward to avoid the political chaos that followed. In support of this, it should be noted that, after chapter 3, Judah plays a more and more prominent role in Hosea's messages.)

Hosea saw his prophecies fulfilled before his eyes. The false gods worshiped in Israel, whether golden calves or Baals, were unable to save them from the destruction administered by the Assyrians. The picture painted in the first three chapters broadly illustrates the idolatry of her entire history, but graphically pictures the chaos of her final thirty years.

The core of Hosea's message contains two seemingly contrary thrusts - the unavoidable nature of God's judgment and the unconditional nature of God's love. May your students come to see the holy, gracious God both known and pictured by the prophet Hosea.

## Lesson Procedure

This session needs to begin with a history lesson. Summarize from II Kings the reigns of the last seven kings of the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

- **Jeroboam II (792-752 B.C.; II Kings 14:23-29)** - His long rule saw Israel become strong, prosperous, and self-satisfied. During his reign, Jonah went to Nineveh, Amos preached against Israel's materialism, and Hosea began his long prophetic career.
- **Zechariah (752 B.C.; II Kings 15:8-12)** - Son of Jeroboam II, he was assassinated after six months on the throne, thus ending the dynasty of Jehu, which at five generations was the Northern Kingdom's longest.
- **Shallum (752 B.C.; II Kings 15:13-15)** - Murderer of Zechariah, he brutally eliminated all who opposed him, but was murdered after only one month on the throne.
- **Menahem (752-742 B.C.; II Kings 15:16-22)** - Murderer of Shallum, he reigned ten years, but became a vassal of Tiglath-pileser of Assyria (alluded to in Hosea 5:13), paying heavy tribute in the process.
- **Pekahiah (742-740 B.C.; II Kings 15:23-26)** - The son of Menahem lasted only two years before being assassinated by one of his captains, Pekah.
- **Pekah (752-732 B.C.; II Kings 15:27-31)** - Pekah ruled Transjordan under Menahem, then murdered his weaker son. His anti-Assyrian stance brought a devastating invasion from Tiglath-pileser, and he was eventually assassinated as well.
- **Hoshea (732-722 B.C.; II Kings 17)** - He foolishly refused to pay the Assyrian tribute and sought help from Egypt (cf. Hosea 7:11), resulting in the destruction of Samaria by Sargon, the new Assyrian king.

Having given the historical background against which Hosea prophesied, turn now to the story of Hosea himself, as narrated in the first three chapters of this book. The story will require some explanation on the part of the teacher. Most students will have difficulty making the connections in these chapters without some help.

### 1. The Story of Hosea's Marriage

Hosea is instructed by God to marry a young woman who has been set aside for service as a cult prostitute in the fertility cults prevalent in the Northern Kingdom. After their marriage, Gomer bears three children. The first, a son, is named Jezreel (Jezreel was where Jehu, the founder of the dynasty of which Jeroboam II was the greatest member, had slaughtered all who remained of the wicked house of Ahab). The second child is a daughter named Lo-ruhamah ("she has not obtained compassion"). Though the first child is specifically said to be Hosea's, the name given to the second indicates that Hosea is not at all sure of her

parentage. The third is a son named Lo-ammi (“not my people”), and this time Hosea has no doubt that the child does not belong to him. Shortly thereafter, Gomer runs away and returns to her life of prostitution. After being severely abused, she finds herself in a slave market, where Hosea buys her back and restores her to her former status as his wife.

## **2. The Symbolism of Hosea’s Marriage**

At this point, have your students read through Hosea 1-3. Then ask them the following questions:

- What is Hosea’s marriage intended to symbolize?
- Whom does Hosea represent?
- Whom does Gomer represent?
- What are the names given to the children supposed to mean?
- Who are the lovers to whom Gomer returns?
- When Hosea buys Gomer out of slavery, what message does God intend his action to convey?

## **3. The Significance of Hosea’s Marriage**

The message of Hosea’s marriage was not for the Northern Kingdom of Israel alone. In this section of the lesson, your students need to make personal applications of Hosea’s prophetic action. Divide the class into three groups and give each group one of the following sets of questions.

### **A. Group One - The Character of God**

- What do these chapters tell us about God’s attitude toward sin?
- How does this story illustrate God’s holiness, His patience, His mercy, and His faithfulness?
- What response to God should this story produce from a Christian? From an unbeliever?

### **B. Group Two - The Nature of Sin**

- We don’t worship Baal any more. What forms of idolatry are popular in America today?
- How may the idolatry of the world seduce those in the church?
- What does the story suggest about the effectiveness of turning a person from a life of sin through acts of kindness alone?

### **C. Group Three - The Redemptive Work of Christ**

- How can the story of Hosea and Gomer be seen as illustrating the saving work of Christ?
- “To redeem” means “to buy back.” How does Hosea’s “redemption” of Gomer provide an illustration of what Jesus did for sinners on the cross?
- All analogies break down if stretched too far. What particular aspects of the story of Hosea and Gomer do not fit the pattern of Christ’s work on behalf of sinners?

After about ten minutes, bring the groups back and have them share their findings. Be sure to bring out any applications your students may miss. Emphasize those applications particularly appropriate to your students, whether they be Christians or non-Christians.





## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## HOSEA

1. How is the marriage of Hosea and Gomer a picture of the redemptive work of Christ?
2. How does the marriage of Hosea and Gomer illustrate the final thirty years of the Northern Kingdom?
3. Reread the book of Hosea and pick out all references made by the prophet to Judah. How are the messages to Judah different from those to Israel? How are they the same? What do these prophecies tell you about the condition in which Hosea found the Southern Kingdom when he went there?
4. In preparation for next week, read the book of Micah, a chapter each day. What ideas appear in Micah that have already been brought out by Amos and Hosea?



# MICAH

## Lesson Aim

To teach students that God chastises those whom He loves, and that those who do not live up to the faith they profess can expect God's punishment.

## Memory Verse

**Micah 6:8** - "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

## Lesson Background

Micah was a later contemporary of both Hosea and Isaiah and came from the hill country of Judah. His message is directed largely to the Southern Kingdom, though the destruction of Samaria is mentioned in chapter one.

Micah prophesied during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. Jotham was a good king who was dominated by his father (Uzziah) in his early years and his son in his latter ones. Ahaz was a wicked king who brought all sorts of gross idolatry (including human sacrifice) into Judah, all the while maintaining a pious facade (cf. Isaiah 7). Hezekiah was among the most godly kings of Judah, and his faithfulness and trust in God prevented the destruction of the south by Assyria shortly after Sargon had conquered Israel.

Micah thus addressed a nation with a profession to which they were not true. While Isaiah spoke God's Word to the kings, Micah warned the people about their inconsistencies. His emphases are remarkably similar to those of Amos in some ways - the materialism and oppression that stemmed from the idolatry of Israel was now seen in Judah, despite the Southern Kingdom's profession of true religion. Micah warns them

of the destruction that will accompany the Assyrian invasion, promises God's deliverance, and speaks of the Babylonian Captivity to come if the call to repentance is not heeded. No doubt his message played a role in the reform during the reign of Hezekiah. May his message also fall on listening ears among your students.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin the session by giving the historical background on the book of Micah. Include the comparison with Amos. Then lead your students into a study of the book itself. The book of Micah can be viewed as a rather unusual courtroom scene. In this courtroom scene, two verdicts are given - the "guilty" verdict in the first three chapters, then the "not guilty" verdict in chapters four and five. Finally, the last two chapters present the trial itself, including the testimony of both prosecution and defense. We will be looking at each section today in the order presented by Micah.

### **1. The Judgment of God (chapters 1-3)**

#### **A. The Fact of God's Judgment (chapter 1)**

Note that here judgment falls on both Israel and Judah. In both cases, it comes from the same source - the Assyrian Empire. Samaria was destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. Later, in 701 B.C., the Assyrian king Sennacherib invaded Judah, devastating the towns listed in Micah 1:10-16 (note that these verses contain Hebrew puns - the judgments described are plays on words using the names of the towns).

#### **B. The Reasons for God's Judgment (chapters 2-3)**

In the same way that Amos condemned Israel for social abuses and Hosea condemned her for spiritual apostasy, Micah finds these same faults in Judah. Have each student take a piece of paper and divide it into two columns, marking one "Social Abuse" and the other "Spiritual Apostasy." Then have each one read through chapters two and three and list the appropriate reasons for God's judgment in each column, along with the references. When the students have finished, combine their lists on the blackboard, then examine the results. Judah claimed to be godly, but was she really that different from Israel? Your students claim to be godly, but how different are they from the world around them?

### **2. The Blessing of God (chapters 4-5)**

While the judgment of chapters one through three is described in concrete and immediate terms and was carried out during the lifetime of the prophet (with the exception of the allusion to the Babylonian Captivity in 3:12), the blessing described in chapters four and five is clearly eschatological in character. The following aspects of this blessing are to be noted:

- It is said to take place in the "last days" (4:1)
- It is a blessing upon all nations, not just Judah (4:2)
- It involves both social and spiritual renewal (4:3-5)
- It occurs after the Babylonian Captivity (4:10)
- It is brought by a Deliverer who comes from Bethlehem (5:2)
- It occurs after sin has been rooted out (5:10-15)

What are we to say concerning this blessing? Some scholars see it as describing a future earthly Millennium of peace and prosperity under divine rule, while others see it as speaking in figurative terms of the blessing of God upon His Church in the present. Whichever view is taken, we must conclude that this blessing is brought upon all of God's people through Christ, the Deliverer from Bethlehem, and that it entails the purging of sin from those people.

### **3. The Trial of God's People (chapters 6-7)**

#### **A. The Testimony for the Prosecution (chapter 6)**

The trial begins with the empaneling of the jury. In 6:1-2, the mountains are called to bear witness and hear the testimony that is to be given. Then God Himself takes the stand, and in 6:3-8 testifies first to His faithfulness to His people, then to the reasonableness of His requirements. Finally, the prosecution brings out its evidence (6:9-16):

- Exhibit A - unfair weights and measures (verses 10-11)
- Exhibit B - lying (verse 12)
- Exhibit C - idolatry (verse 16)

#### **B. The Testimony for the Defense (chapter 7)**

Faced with this evidence, the defendant takes the stand. What can she say? How can she defend herself against this overwhelming evidence? The defendant does the only thing possible under such circumstances - she breaks down and confesses. In 7:1-8, she mourns over her miserable condition. She then confesses her guilt and acknowledges that the judgment of the court is deserved (7:9-13). Lastly, she throws herself on the mercy of the court, begging, not for pardon, but for restoration when the sentence has run its course.

### **Conclusion**

How can the parts of this prophecy be put together in a coherent whole? We know, in fact, that the majority of the people of Judah did not respond like Micah's hypothetical defendant in chapter seven. Most hardened their hearts, convinced that their external religious observances would guarantee God's favor. They, as Micah predicted, were cut off by Babylon and never knew the blessings of restoration. A remnant, however, did humble themselves before God and were preserved. What does all of this mean for your students? Two things:

- Formal religious observance does not compensate for social injustice and apostasy of the heart. Those students who profess Christianity but fail to live it can take no comfort from Micah. The rule of the Messiah brings with it not their blessing, but their destruction. Only repentance - throwing themselves on the mercy of the court - will suffice.
- God's people may look at suffering with the eye of hope. God punishes those He loves, and the end result will be a purging from sin. God is working now to fit His people for heaven.

Thus both verdicts that Micah presents are appropriate depending on whether or not the defendant follows the scenario given in chapter seven - repentance in the presence of God.



## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## MICAH

1. To whom did Micah prophesy? What were the historical circumstances under which he worked?
2. Why did Micah say that God was going to judge the people to whom he was speaking?
3. Your memory verse is Micah 6:8, which describes what the Lord requires of His people. In what ways were the people of Micah's day violating this verse? In what ways do people violate it today?
4. In preparation for next week's lesson, read the book of Nahum. Against whom is Nahum prophesying?





# NAHUM

## Lesson Aim

To show that God does not allow evil to go unpunished, but deals with it in His own way and in His own time.

## Memory Verse

**Nahum 3:19** - “Nothing can heal your wound; your injury is fatal. Everyone who hears the news about you claps his hands at your fall, for who has not felt your endless cruelty?”

## Lesson Background

The prophecy of Nahum is directed against the Assyrian Empire, and particularly against the city of Nineveh. The Assyrians had long been a source of trouble to Israel. As far back as the time of Ahab, the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III had made his presence felt in the region of Palestine, particularly with raids against Syria. He later forced the submission of the Israelite king Jehu. During the reign of Jeroboam II over Israel, Assyria was in a period of weakness. During that time Jonah was sent to Nineveh, and the city repented. A generation later, Tiglath-pileser of Assyria and his successors, Shalmaneser V and Sargon II, dominated and finally destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Twenty years later, Sennacherib invaded Judah in the time of Hezekiah, but his army was wiped out by an act of God. Sennacherib’s son, Esarhaddon, continued his domination of Palestine, including the imprisonment in Babylon of Hezekiah’s wicked son, Manasseh. While in prison in Babylon, Manasseh repented and turned to God, was released, and in his final years sought to undo the damage he had done in Judah.

Nahum's prophecy is generally thought to have been given during these last years of Manasseh (c.645 B.C.). Nahum calls himself "the Elkoshite," and while the location of Elkosh is unknown, it is assumed to have been in Judah somewhere. Nahum speaks of God's wrath against Nineveh, and indeed, that wrath was soon to come. Esarhaddon was succeeded by the mighty Ashurbanipal, but his successors were weak and the empire declined rapidly. In 614, the city of Asshur was destroyed by the Babylonians, and in 612 Nineveh itself was taken. Its destruction was so thorough that even its location was unknown until the nineteenth century.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin class by describing the following incident: "Suppose you had a student in your school who did everything he could possibly do to make you miserable. He would knock your books off your desk, kick them down the hallway, crumple up your homework papers, steal your lunch money, punch holes in your milk cartons, write obscenities on your book covers, lie about you to teachers and other students, and do anything else he could think of. Worst of all, he got away with all of these dirty tricks! He never seemed to get caught, and teachers kept telling you they couldn't help unless they actually saw him doing something. Then one day, a friend of yours who sometimes helped out in the office overheard a conversation between two administrators in which they mentioned that your tormentor was soon to be expelled. What would be your reaction to this news?"

You may get a few "pious" responses, but, realistically speaking, your students should readily acknowledge that they would be delighted. This, of course, is precisely how the people of Judah would have felt upon receiving the message contained in Nahum's prophecy. Take some time at this point to go over with your class the material from the Lesson Background. We will not be spending a great deal of time in the actual text this week, but rather will concentrate on some of the key concepts related to the book.

### **1. Justice**

On occasion the President of the United States employs a tactic known as "jawboning." He attempts to influence American citizens, businesses, or foreign countries by speaking out in favor of or against something, hoping that the weight of his office alone will encourage others to conform to his point of view.

The words of the prophets consisted of more than "jawboning." God was doing more than simply haranguing when He spoke through His appointed spokesmen. The judgments proclaimed by the prophets always came to pass. God judged Nineveh by giving the Assyrians a taste of their own medicine. The Babylonians did to Nineveh what the Assyrians had done to Samaria, Thebes, and countless other cities, and had tried to do to Jerusalem.

We must realize, of course, that the fall of Nineveh occurred approximately thirty years after Nahum's prophecy. God's judgment is sure, but it is not always swift. It is possible that under these circumstances unbelievers could grow hard, and even scoff against the word God has spoken (cf. II Peter 3:3-10). This hardness and scoffing only set the stage for God to bring glory to Himself by destroying His enemies.

### **2. Comfort**

Divide your class into three groups and assign to each group a chapter from the book of Nahum. Have each group search out all references to Judah in the chapter assigned to them, either direct or indirect.

The prophecy of Nahum concerned Nineveh, but was spoken in the Southern Kingdom of Judah (unlike Jonah, Nahum was not sent to Nineveh). We may assume, therefore, that God had already decided to judge Nineveh and that the message was sent for the benefit of God's people, not to warn those whom God would soon destroy. Have each group try to figure out what God was communicating to His people through Nahum's message.

The following should be noted in the ensuing discussion:

**1:7** - God's judgment of Nineveh is an act of faithfulness to His people. He is caring for those who trust in Him by destroying their enemies.

**1:12-13** - Assyria has been a tool in God's hand. Their oppression of Israel has been part of God's purpose, as is their coming destruction.

**1:15** - Peace is a blessing from God, along with freedom of worship. Such gifts should be appreciated and acknowledged.

**2:2** - The destruction of God's enemies is accompanied by the lifting up of His people. Thus prophecies of judgment for the wicked are simultaneously promises of comfort for the righteous.

**3:12** - Chapter three really says nothing about Judah, but this verse sounds very much like Amos' vision of Israel as a basket of overripe fruit. God has judged Israel, and now He judges the ones by whom He judged them. They, too, are ripe for the plucking.

### **3. Warning**

Nahum's description of Nineveh as a shamed and befouled woman in 3:5-7 is strikingly similar to the more extensive description of Judah found in Ezekiel 16. Though God's judgment of the wicked provided comfort and encouragement for His people, it should also serve as a warning to them. God will not hesitate to follow through against those who are the objects of His wrath.

### **Conclusion**

We already noted in II Peter 3 that God has proclaimed judgment against the ungodly world, as He did against Nineveh through Nahum. Though that judgment has been a long time in coming, and may yet be far off, we must remember that God keeps His promises. Like the bully in the opening example, the wicked world in which we live is on the way out - there is hope for those suffering for the sake of Christ.

On the other hand, too many Christians are strongly attracted to that same condemned world. How can we love that which hates God and has been condemned by Him? II Peter 3:11-13 provides the proper approach for God's people.

Lastly, be sure to point out that your class may contain some of those very ones who scoff against God's judgment. Remind them of what ultimately happened to Nineveh.



## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## NAHUM

1. What was the situation in Judah at the time Nahum was prophesying? What had been their most recent dealings with Assyria?
2. How did the prophecy of Nahum come to pass?
3. What encouragement can a Christian gain from the prophecies found in Scripture against the wicked?
4. In preparation for next week, read the book of Zephaniah through several times.



# ZEPHANIAH

## Lesson Aim

To help students see that compromised worship is an abomination in the sight of God.

## Memory Verse

**Zephaniah 3:11-12** - “On that day you will not be put to shame for all the wrongs you have done to me, because I will remove from this city those who rejoice in their pride. Never again will you be haughty on my holy hill. But I will leave within you the meek and humble, who trust in the name of the Lord.”

## Lesson Background

The reign of Josiah was one of energetic, thorough reform in Judah. Josiah’s grandfather Manasseh had been wicked, introducing all sorts of crass idolatry into the Southern Kingdom, and in the process undoing much of the good that had been done by his father Hezekiah. His change of heart during his imprisonment in Babylon led to the removal of the idols, but produced no significant change in the attitude of the people, especially since his son Amon (Josiah’s father) imitated Manasseh’s early years rather than his late ones. Amon was assassinated after only two years on the throne, however, and Josiah became king at the age of eight. His reforms, which did not begin immediately, were motivated by a genuine heart for the things of God. What for Josiah was real transformation, however, turned out to be no more than shallow external conformity on the part of most of the people.

The prophecy of Zephaniah was delivered against this background of shallow, compromised worship. The prophecy probably was spoken in the early portion of Josiah’s reign (c. 625 B.C.), when the reforms had begun but had not yet totally cleansed the idols from the land. Zephaniah was a member of the royal family, a distant cousin of Josiah. His prophecy was doubtless used by God to spur the reform movement on to

greater heights. At the same time, Zephaniah speaks of certain judgment - no amount of reform could hold off the wrath of God against Judah.

In today's lesson, students need to feel the force of God's anger against those who try to worship Him formally while maintaining allegiance to idols at the same time.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin the lesson by reading Zephaniah 1:2-3 without telling your students what you are reading. Then ask them what they think the writer of those words could have been talking about. They will probably conclude that the words are referring either to the Great Deluge or the Last Judgment. Then explain that the prophecy refers to the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. Why would the prophet Zephaniah use such apocalyptic language to refer to a limited, albeit severe, punishment? As is always the case when Scripture makes use of hyperbole, the reason is emphasis. God wants Zephaniah to communicate to the people of Judah the extent of God's anger with their sin.

At this point go over the material from the Lesson Background, then indicate that the book of Zephaniah can be divided into three parts.

### **1. The Description of the Wrath of God (1:1-2:3)**

In this section of the lesson, have your students outline Zephaniah 1:4-2:3, dividing it into three or four sections and giving a title or heading to each. They should work on this individually, then compare results. The class should wind up with something like the following:

- I. The Reason for God's Wrath - Idolatry (1:4-9)
- II. The Extent of God's Wrath - Unavoidable (1:10-13)
- III. The Terror of God's Wrath - Incomparable (1:14-18)
- IV. A Call for Repentance (2:1-3)

The following points should be noted as the passage is discussed:

- Many in Jerusalem thought they could worship God and worship idols at the same time (1:5). How do people try to do the same today? What is God's attitude toward this practice?
- The "sacrifice" spoken of in 1:7 is the people of Judah, and the "invited" guests are the Babylonians.
- For the meaning of "all who avoid stepping on the threshold" (1:9), see I Samuel 5:5.
- God's wrath will strike all places and all kinds of people (1:10-11), but not every single individual (2:3) - some may escape through repentance.
- Those to be judged do not really believe God works in the world, either for good or evil (1:12). Their religion is purely formal.



## **2. The Precedents for the Wrath of God (2:4-3:7)**

God sends warnings to His people in other ways in addition to the messages of the prophets. As Amos did with the Northern Kingdom, Zephaniah uses God's wrath against surrounding nations to show Judah that God means business. Five pagan nations are mentioned - Philistia (2:4-7), Moab and Ammon (2:8-11), Cush (2:12), and Assyria (2:13-15). Note that the gods of the Philistines (1:4,9) and Ammonites (1:5) were the ones that Judah was condemned for worshiping. The reference to Cush (Ethiopia) is made because the ruling dynasty in Egypt was of Ethiopian descent at this time. The Egyptians were crushed by Nebuchadnezzar at Carchemish in 605 B.C. Nineveh, the leading city of Assyria, was destroyed (in fulfillment of Nahum's prophecy) in 612 B.C.

All of these precedents were to serve as warnings to Judah (3:1-7). How did the people of Judah interpret these warnings? They saw them as signs of God's favor upon Jerusalem, taking no notice of the fact that these nations were being punished for the same sins being committed in Judah. Spend some time here talking about ways in which pride can lead people to misinterpret the circumstances around them, reading into their circumstances the things they want to be true and ignoring warnings given by God. Are we able to learn today from the punishment God administers to others?

## **3. The Deliverance from the Wrath of God (3:8-20)**

Many people wish they could sweep the passages of Scripture dealing with the wrath of God under the carpet. They think it is somehow degrading to God to speak of Him as slaughtering His enemies. Yet the passage before us shows clearly that the wrath of God brings glory to God. This can be seen in at least two ways:

- The wrath of God purifies by removing the wicked along with their works. Those who formerly defied God are crushed and forced to praise Him (3:8-11).
- The wrath of God delivers the righteous from fear and oppression, allowing them to serve God freely and openly (3:12-20).

## **Conclusion**

Summarize the lesson by going over the key points of application that have been made in going through the book of Zephaniah.



## **FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT**

## **ZEPHANIAH**

1. Who was the king of Judah during the ministry of Zephaniah? What was his reign like?
2. Why was God going to judge the people of Jerusalem? What are some “idols” that compete with the worship of God in our own day?
3. What are some ways in which the wrath of God can glorify Him?
4. In preparation for next week’s lesson, read the book of Habakkuk through several times.



# **HABAKKUK**

## **Lesson Aim**

To impress upon students the truth that “the righteous will live by his faith,” trusting God to do what is right, even when they don’t understand His ways.

## **Memory Verse**

**Habakkuk 2:20** - “But the Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth be silent before Him.”

## **Lesson Background**

Nahum prophesied toward the end of the reign of the wicked Manasseh. The king’s repentance and reform were too little and too late, and upon his death he was succeeded by his wicked son Amon, who was assassinated after only two years. Amon was followed by Josiah, one of Judah’s greatest kings, who swept the land clean of idolatry, but was not able to remove it from the hearts of the people. During this time, the decline of the Assyrian Empire continued, while a new world power was rising - the Neo-Babylonian or Chaldean Empire, under the leadership of Nabopolassar. Egypt, unwilling to allow Babylon to dominate the Near East, went to the aid of Assyria against Babylon in 609 B.C. Josiah tried to intercept the Egyptian army at the Plain of Megiddo and was killed in the battle.

Josiah was succeeded by his son Jehoahaz, an idolater, who was replaced with his brother Jehoiakim after three months of rule (by Necho, the Egyptian pharaoh, who now controlled Palestine). Jehoiakim was thus virtually an Egyptian puppet. Egypt’s control was short-lived, however. In 605 B.C., Pharaoh Necho was defeated by Nabopolassar’s son Nebuchadnezzar at the Battle of Carchemish on the Euphrates River.

Nebuchadnezzar then asserted control over Palestine, sweeping down through the region and taking his first group of captives to Babylon (which included Daniel).

Habakkuk prophesied during the period between 609 and 605, during the reign of the wicked Jehoiakim but before Nebuchadnezzar's great victory. His book poses two questions: How can God allow the wickedness of Judah to go unpunished? How can God punish Judah using the Babylonians, who are far more wicked? God's answers to these questions and Habakkuk's response to God's answers make up the contents of this book. Unlike most of the other Minor Prophets, the book of Habakkuk is not a public address, but a private conversation between God and His prophet.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin the lesson by asking the students if anything has ever happened in their lives that made them think God was unfair. Rather than asking for a verbal response, since many students may have had this feeling but could be reluctant to express it, have each student write a paragraph describing such an incident. Once the students have finished writing, have them share their thoughts with one another (it might loosen the group up a little if you started with a time in your life when you may have felt this way). Indicate to the students that many people have questioned God's fairness at various times. The Israelites questioned God in the wilderness; Asaph complained because the wicked prospered while he suffered (Psalm 73); many question God for ending lives without warning for no apparent reason (Luke 13:1-9); many charge God with unfairness for His sovereign election of some to salvation (Romans 9). How are we to deal with these questions and challenges, whether they are our own or are posed by others?

The prophet in today's lesson was faced with just such a problem. Give the class the material from the Lesson Background and explain Habakkuk's dilemma. Then indicate to the students that a study of Habakkuk will help us to deal with such issues in our own lives.

### **1. Habakkuk's First Dilemma (1:1-11)**

#### **A. The Question (verses 1-4)**

Habakkuk looks at the Southern Kingdom of Judah and sees nothing but wickedness and corruption. Josiah had only been dead a few years, but the people had already reverted to idolatry. How could God look on and do nothing?

#### **B. The Answer (verses 5-11)**

God's response is essentially the same as we saw given through Nahum two weeks ago. God will indeed judge - delay is not to be mistaken for apathy or neglect on God's part. In the same way that God sent the Babylonians to destroy Nineveh, He will also send them to destroy Jerusalem.

### **2. Habakkuk's Second Dilemma (1:12-2:20)**

#### **A. The Question (1:12-17)**

The last phrase of verse 11 triggered another question in Habakkuk's mind. The Babylonians were a godless people, glorying in their military prowess. How could God punish idolatrous Judah by means of

godless Babylon? If wickedness merited judgment, surely Babylon deserved it even more than Judah. Besides, what would become of the honor of God if He gave the Babylonians victory over His people, then they credited their military might (their “net”) for what God had enabled them to accomplish?

## **B. The Answer (chapter 2)**

God did answer Habakkuk’s question, but at the beginning and end of chapter 2 He indicates that He was under no compulsion to do so. In 2:4, Habakkuk is told that “the righteous will live by his faith”; in 2:20, all the earth is to maintain a reverential silence in God’s presence. The point is that God is under no obligation to justify His ways before any man. The righteous man trusts God and does not require explanations to do so. The wicked man has no right to ask, only the obligation to tremble.

When God does answer Habakkuk, He explains that He does not necessarily condone or excuse the behavior of those He uses. Those who sin will be punished, even if the sin is used by God to carry out His purposes. Thus Babylon, every bit as wicked as Habakkuk claimed, will surely be destroyed.

## **3. Habakkuk’s Psalm of Praise (chapter 3)**

Habakkuk’s prayer clearly indicates that he has understood the lessons of chapter 2. The prayer reflects two basic principles:

- The recognition of God’s sovereign hand controlling the events of the world - The major part of the chapter describes God as an invading army. In the same way that Israel’s initial victories on entering Canaan were accomplished by God, so was Babylon’s victory over Judah. All that comes to pass is in the hand of God.
- Patient submission to the will of God, whether known or unknown - The beginning and end of the prayer reflect Habakkuk’s submission to God’s will. In verse 2 he pleads for wrath to be tempered by mercy. Then in verses 17-19, he determines that he will rejoice in the Lord, even in the midst of utter devastation.

## **Conclusion**

How, then, do we deal with accusations that God is unfair, whether they come from ourselves or others? Habakkuk teaches us several important lessons:

- The Christian should neither demand nor expect answers to the dilemmas raised at the beginning of the lesson. God’s ways are higher than our ways, and He is accountable to no one.
- The Christian must live by faith, not by sight. We don’t trust God because He gives satisfactory explanations for our questions. We trust Him to deal righteously and wisely with those matters we are unable to fathom.
- The Christian’s faith in God should not be diminished by adversity. The Christian’s joy is founded in his salvation and his God, not his circumstances. Habakkuk learned to rejoice in devastating circumstances. God can enable all Christians to do the same.





## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## HABAKKUK

1. What are the two questions asked by the prophet in the book of Habakkuk?
2. What was the situation about which Habakkuk was so upset?
3. What lessons about faith can be learned from the book of Habakkuk?
4. In preparation for next week, read the book of Haggai through several times.



# HAGGAI

## Lesson Aim

To emphasize to students that material blessings cannot be found by seeking them, but are byproducts of putting God first.

## Memory Verse

**Haggai 1:6** - “You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.”

## Lesson Background

We now make a leap in time of about a century, to the period following the Babylonian Captivity prophesied by Zephaniah and Habakkuk. Nebuchadnezzar had carried the people of Judah into captivity in Babylon in three waves - in 605 (an elite group of young men, including Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah), 597 (nobles, warriors, craftsmen, and priests, including Ezekiel), and 586 (everyone but the poorest of the people; at this time Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed). After Judah spent almost seventy years in captivity, the Babylonians were overthrown by Cyrus and the Medo-Persians in 539 B.C. Cyrus promptly issued an edict allowing all peoples captured by the Babylonians to return to their homelands, rebuild their cities and temples, and pray for the prosperity of the Medo-Persian Empire. In 536 a small group of Jews returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel, a prince of the Davidic line who had been appointed as governor by Cyrus. They immediately restored the altar and laid the foundation for rebuilding the Temple, but the work soon came to a halt as the people became discouraged by the magnitude of the project and began to turn their attention to matters of their own comfort. Nothing happened for sixteen years.

Meanwhile, Cyrus had died in 530 and was succeeded by his son Cambyses, who reigned until 522 B.C. After the death of Cambyses, a power struggle ensued, and a nobleman emerged to seize power and reign as Darius the Great. Haggai's prophecies are dated in the second year of Darius' reign (520 B.C.).

The book of Haggai contains four prophecies, each one carefully dated within the second year of Darius, making the date of composition of Haggai the easiest to calculate among all the books of Scripture. The main thrust of the prophecy is one of encouragement to get to work on rebuilding the Temple. The main lesson for your students to learn is that material things for the Christian are a blessing bestowed by God in response to faithful service, not an end to be sought in themselves. Students should see that God withholds material goods from those who seek them rather than Him (cf. Matthew 6:33).

## **Lesson Procedure**

Open the class by asking your students the following question: "What can never be found by seeking it, but only comes to those who aren't looking for it?" There are, of course, several legitimate answers to this paradox. Jesus said that life comes only to one who gives it up (Matthew 10:39). Humility is not to be an object of concentration, or it easily becomes a source of pride. Happiness may be sought forever without finding it, but comes as a byproduct to those who relinquish selfish desires in order to serve God. If your students don't pick it up, tell them that the same is true of material blessings - they are not to be sought, but come to those who put God first (Matthew 6:25-34).

At this point, give the background of the book of Haggai. Note that the book consists of four prophecies, all given in the same year within a span of less than four months. Like any good motivator, Haggai uses both the carrot and the stick - he both encourages and criticizes the people in the process of getting them to rebuild the Temple.

### **1. The First Stick (1:1-15)**

Ask the class to answer the following questions:

#### **A. To whom was the prophecy spoken?**

Zerubbabel, the governor, and Joshua, the high priest, were the recipients of the prophecy. As the representatives of the people, they received a message intended for all. God spoke to both the civil and religious leaders. This was a theocracy, where both were to work together to serve God.

#### **B. For what was Haggai criticizing the people?**

Largely for putting their own comfort ahead of the worship of God. (How do people do this today?) The building was not the key issue, but the worship in the building. God's presence, which the Temple symbolized, obviously was not very important to these people.

#### **C. What did God say resulted from their mixed-up priorities?**

The very things to which they gave priority were being taken away.

#### **D. How did the leaders and people respond to Haggai's message?**

The leaders and people responded enthusiastically, and in less than a month the work was under way again.

### **2. The First Carrot (2:1-9)**

Slightly less than a month after the work had been resumed, God sent another message through Haggai.

#### **A. To whom is the message directed this time?**

To both the leaders and the people - both were in need of encouragement.

#### **B. How did those who had seen Solomon's Temple feel about the new one being built?**

They were discouraged because it was far smaller and less glorious than the one they remembered. Things just weren't like they used to be in the old days . . . .

#### **C. Why did God say the second Temple would be greater than the first?**

The main reason is because it was in that Temple that Jesus would walk. The references to "peace" (verse 9) and "the desired of all nations" (verse 7) are surely Messianic. The Temple that saw the Son of God in the flesh is surely greater than that which merely symbolized God's presence.

### **3. The Second Stick (2:10-19)**

The third message came about two months after the second.

#### **A. To whom are these words specifically addressed?**

A question is directed to the priests, but the impact of the message is intended for all the people.

#### **B. What question does Haggai ask the priests, and how do they answer?**

He asks two questions, really. First, he asks whether common food is consecrated by contact with consecrated meat. They answer that it is not. He then asks if consecrated meat is defiled by contact with someone who is ceremonially unclean. They respond that it is indeed defiled.

### **C. What does Haggai's question have to do with the building of the Temple?**

Because of their impure motives, all of their work has been defiled. God had not blessed their land or their crops. Now that they were giving priority to His work, they were laboring with clean hands, and God would bless their labors.

### **4. The Second Carrot (2:20-23)**

The final prophecy of Haggai came on the same day as the previous word.

#### **A. To whom is the last prophecy directed?**

Zerubbabel, the governor.

#### **B. How does God encourage Zerubbabel?**

The first area of encouragement is in terms of God's sovereignty over earthly powers. The people were being harassed from without, and God assured him this would stop. Secondly, Zerubbabel is called a signet - a mark of kingly authority. The significance of this is that Zerubbabel was to be in the line of the Messiah (Matthew 1:12), that one "desired of all nations" who was to come.

### **Conclusion**

Conclude the lesson by reviewing the applications made throughout the lesson, concentrating on the importance of not following the society in which we live in giving priority to material things.

## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## HAGGAI

1. What were the circumstances in Jerusalem at the time of Haggai's prophecy?
2. Why was God so anxious for the Temple to be built? What could be so important about a mere building?
3. Why did Haggai say the second Temple would be greater than the first?
4. In preparation for next week's lesson, read the book of Zechariah, two chapters per day. Look for references to Christ and prophecies fulfilled by Him.





# **ZECHARIAH**

## **Lesson Aim**

To impress upon students the necessity of the cleansing God gives through His Son and the power He bestows by His Spirit.

## **Memory Verse**

**Zechariah 4:6** - “So he said to me, ‘This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel. Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the Lord Almighty.”

## **Lesson Background**

Zechariah was a contemporary of Haggai, though his ministry probably extended over a longer period of time (perhaps 520-480 B.C.). He thus prophesied in the same historical context during which the burning issue was the reconstruction of the Temple. Though Haggai and Zechariah deal with the same problem, they speak to different aspects of it. Haggai focused on the materialism of the people and the worldly orientation that led them to give low priority to God’s work. Zechariah, on the other hand, concentrates on the spiritual features of the problem and is more uniformly encouraging than Haggai. He emphasizes the way in which God will cleanse and empower His people, through His Spirit and the Messiah who was to come.

The book falls rather neatly into three parts. The first six chapters contain eight visions received by Zechariah in 520 B.C., and thus are contemporary with the book of Haggai. They speak to the spiritual issues behind the rebuilding of the Temple. Chapters seven and eight are a response to a question asked by messengers from Bethel about a fast that had been instituted to commemorate the fall of Jerusalem. The prophecy, given in 518 B.C., indicated that the fast was man-made and had no merit as far as God was

concerned. The last six chapters consist of Messianic prophecies, and probably are to be dated considerably later than the first part of the book.

It is unrealistic to attempt to cover the entire book of Zechariah in a single session. We will therefore concentrate on chapters three and four, which bring out the work of the Son and the Spirit in the historical context in which Zechariah prophesied.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin the lesson today with a review of the message of the prophet Haggai from last week's lesson. Then ask the students to evaluate the spiritual condition of a person who is living like those to whom Haggai prophesied. What is the state of a person who is a professing Christian, but gives priority to his own material well-being instead of the work of God? Only two conclusions are possible. Either this person is not truly a Christian and has never been cleansed by the blood of Christ, or else the person is not living in the power of the Holy Spirit. These two themes are ones we will find treated in the prophecy of Zechariah today.

Give the background information on Zechariah from the Lesson Background section to your students. Help them to see that Zechariah was dealing, through his eight visions, with the spiritual problems underlying the apathy fought by Haggai.

### **1. The Cleansing of the Son (chapter 3)**

#### **A. The Content of the Vision**

Zechariah is shown in a vision Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the Lord. Joshua is dressed in dirty clothes, and Satan is accusing him before the Lord. The Angel then silences Satan and replaces the dirty clothes of Joshua with clean ones. Joshua is then given a promise of blessing in response to obedience and is told of the Branch who is to remove sin in a single day.

#### **B. The Meaning of the Vision for Zechariah's Hearers**

The apathy of the people had its source in self-satisfaction. They did not recognize their true condition before God. They needed to recognize their own sinfulness (Joshua is pictured because, as the high priest, he represents the people before God), and to note that only God could take that sin away. It is only those who have been cleansed who are able to obey.

#### **C. The Significance of the Vision for your Students**

The vision gives a beautiful picture of salvation. Those who are the chosen of God bring nothing before Him but filthy garments - their sin. Satan accuses them, trying to deny them access to God's Kingdom. Satan is silenced by Christ (the Angel of the Lord is generally considered to be a pre-incarnate form of the Son of God), who describes His people as "burning sticks snatched from the fire." (Do your Christian students realize how narrow their escape was from the fires of hell?) The Christian has his sin removed and he is clothed with the perfect righteousness of Christ. The Branch of whom the passage speaks is the Messiah, who took away sin once and for all by the sacrifice of Himself. Your non-Christian students should be told, of course, that they, too, stand before God in filthy garments, but have no defense, either from the accusations of Satan or from the wrath of God.

## **2. The Power of the Spirit (chapter 4)**

### **A. The Content of the Vision**

Translators and commentators alike have struggled with this one. Have your students try to sketch what they think Zechariah saw. Following the NIV (other translations differ), it appears that Zechariah saw a seven-branched lampstand (menorah) similar to that in the Holy Place of the Temple. The oil for the menorah came from a receptacle (“bowl”) from which emerged seven tubes, one to each branch. The receptacle in turn was kept filled by two olive trees that produced a perpetual supply of oil.

### **B. The Meaning of the Vision for Zechariah’s Hearers**

Joshua and Zerubbabel faced a seemingly overwhelming task - motivating an apathetic nation to return to God’s work. They were unquestionably insufficient for the task. But God here reassures them, indicating that the work of the Temple will be completed, and that it will be done in the power of the Holy Spirit, not by human strength or ingenuity. The oil represents the never-ending supply of the Spirit; the olive trees are God’s anointed ones, Joshua and Zerubbabel. The Spirit has been given to them to empower them for God’s work.

### **C. The Significance of the Vision for your Students**

Like Joshua and Zerubbabel, those seeking to do God’s work face nothing but frustration if they seek to do so in their own strength. Only the Spirit of God can empower one for the work of God.

If a Christian cannot do God’s work apart from the Spirit, how much more impossible is it for one who does not even have the Spirit to maintain a credible profession of faith? Many people who claim to be Christians live lives of anger and frustration. They do so because they are trying to live as Christians without Christ or His Spirit. Such a preposterous effort can produce nothing but negative results. The only solution, of course, is to quit trying. Only one who acknowledges the impossibility of fulfilling God’s requirements and throws himself on the mercy of Christ can know the freely-flowing grace and power of the Spirit of God.



## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## ZECHARIAH

1. How does Zechariah's approach to the problem of the stalled Temple rebuilding project differ from that of Haggai?
2. What are the three phrases used to describe the Messiah in Zechariah 3-4?
3. Why was Satan unable to accuse Joshua successfully?
4. What is the importance of the oil in Zechariah 4?
5. In preparation for next week, read through the book of Malachi several times.



# MALACHI

## Lesson Aim

To impress upon students God's hatred for a religion that adheres to a form of godliness, but lacks power.

## Memory Verse

**Malachi 3:8** - "Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, 'How do we rob You?' In tithes and offerings."

## Lesson Background

The prophets whose books we have examined in the last two weeks, Haggai and Zechariah, were successful in encouraging the Jews who had returned from exile to rebuild the Temple. The work was finished in 516 B.C. After the completion of the Temple, however, the people lapsed back into apathy. When Ezra arrived with a new group of settlers in 458, he found that the people were both spiritually and morally lax. He saw as his primary duty the reestablishment of the law as the standard for the life and worship of the people. In order to accomplish this, he organized two important groups - the scribes, who were to preserve the law by copying and teaching it, and the Great Sanhedrin, a group of seventy men who served as a sort of religious Supreme Court and were responsible for enforcing the law. Later, in 445, Nehemiah was appointed provincial governor by the Persian king Artaxerxes. He found the inhabitants of Jerusalem sadly demoralized because of opposition from their neighbors (mostly the Samaritans in the north). They also had begun to intermarry with neighboring peoples, a development that seriously threatened the existence of the Jews as an identifiable people. Nehemiah motivated the people to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and put an end to the mixed marriages.

Malachi prophesied during Nehemiah's term as governor. He is a man about whom we know nothing (some have even suggested that the book is anonymous because Malachi means "my messenger," and may not be a name when it appears in 1:1). Though the Babylonian Captivity had cured the Jewish people once and for all of idolatry, Malachi is speaking to a group of people whose practice of Judaism is purely formal. Concern about this lifeless formalism occupies the bulk of the book, and is certainly as much of a problem today as it was then.

## **Lesson Procedure**

The last words spoken by a person take on a special significance after that person has gone. Last words can reflect strength and courage (Hugh Latimer: "Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England as I trust shall never be put out!"; Polycarp: "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He did me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King, that saved me?"), or folly and weakness (Nero: "Oh, what an artist dies in me!").

The book of Malachi represents God's last words to Israel. These are not last words prior to death, but last words prior to four hundred years of silence. In the same way that a babysitter needs to pay special attention to the instructions of the parents before they leave, so did the Jews need to give special heed to God's words through Malachi. At this point, the teacher should give to students the information found in the Lesson Background.

### **1. A Discouraged Attitude**

A survey of the background material should help students to understand why the people were discouraged. Continual attacks, both verbal and physical, from their neighbors had worn them down. Their discouragement is reflected in 1:2; 2:17; 3:13-15. They think God has turned His back on them because the wicked prosper while they suffer.

The people, of course, were "barking up the wrong tree." Instead of questioning God's love as they struggled, they should have looked at themselves, asking two questions: "Is God putting me through this trial to strengthen me?" "Is God sending hard times as a punishment for my unfaithfulness?"

How many times do Christians today make the same mistake? They whine and complain against God instead of examining their own lives. As God made clear to the Jews through Malachi that their lives and worship were lacking, so can He do in the experience of His people today.

### **2. A Lifeless Worship**

The idolatry that had once infested Israel was gone, but in its place was an outwardly correct but lifeless ritual. Read together Malachi 1:6-2:9; 3:6-12, then list on the board, with input from the students, what the people to whom Malachi preached were doing right and what they were doing wrong. The following points should be noted:

- 1:6 - The religious leaders were the worst offenders.
- 1:7-9 - Offerings were being brought to God, but they were the leftovers rather than the best (How often do we today give God the leftover bits of our time, energy, and resources?).



- 1:10 - Second-best is not good enough for God, who prefers no offerings to polluted offerings.
- 1:12-13 - God is worshiped, but that worship is seen as a burden (Is coming to church a burden for your students?).
- 1:14 - God is given formal worship, but no respect - He is not really taken seriously.
- 2:8-9 - The religious leaders, much like the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day, were teaching the law, but were leading people into sin by the way they did it.
- 3:8-10 - They gave offerings to God but short-changed Him, giving less than the required tithe (Can anyone really think that he enriches himself by holding back what rightly belongs to God?).

### **3. A Compromised Lifestyle**

Next read Malachi 2:10-16. Note that Judah was surrounded by godless nations, and the pressure to compromise was always present. Apparently many had divorced their Israelite wives to marry pagan wives. God objected to both the divorces and the interreligious marriages. As a result of these marriages, the worship of the people was being ignored by God.

Ask your students to list some ways in which compromise is a serious temptation for God's people today. Certainly the area of sexual attitudes and practices should be high on the list. Once some suggestions have been compiled, ask how such compromises could prove to be hindrances to the worship of God.

### **4. An Encouraging Promise**

Compromised or not, Malachi's hearers still are God's people. Because of this, He not only punishes them for their sins, but also gives them an encouraging promise. Read Malachi 3:1-5; 4:1-6 in closing. There will come a day of cleansing and restoration. Ask your students to identify the following people: "my messenger" (3:1); "the messenger of the covenant" (3:1); "sun of righteousness" (4:2); "the prophet Elijah" (4:5). If they fail to do so, point out that the first and fourth references are to John the Baptist, while the second and third are to Christ Himself.

## **Conclusion**

Conclude the lesson by warning the students about lifeless worship and compromised living - both will be purged from God's people and are sufficient cause for the destruction of the wicked at the return of the Sun of Righteousness.



## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## MALACHI

1. What were the people like to whom Malachi was preaching? What did they have in common with Christians today?
2. How were the religious leaders of Malachi's day like those in the time of Christ?
3. After Malachi spoke, God gave no revelation of His Word to the world for more than 400 years. How were His "last words" a message of hope?
4. In order to review the lessons of this quarter, summarize in one sentence the basic message of each of the twelve Minor Prophets.