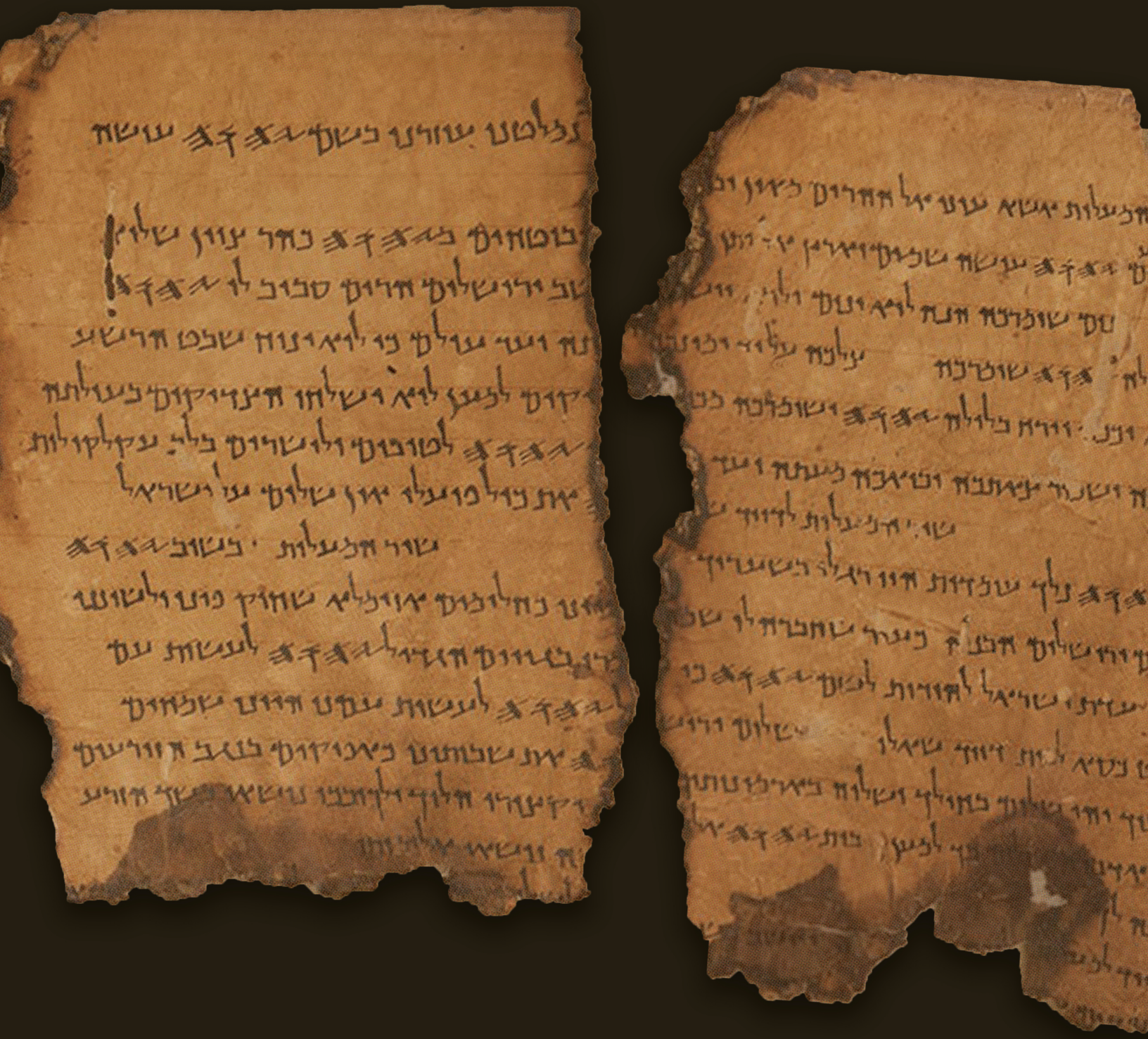


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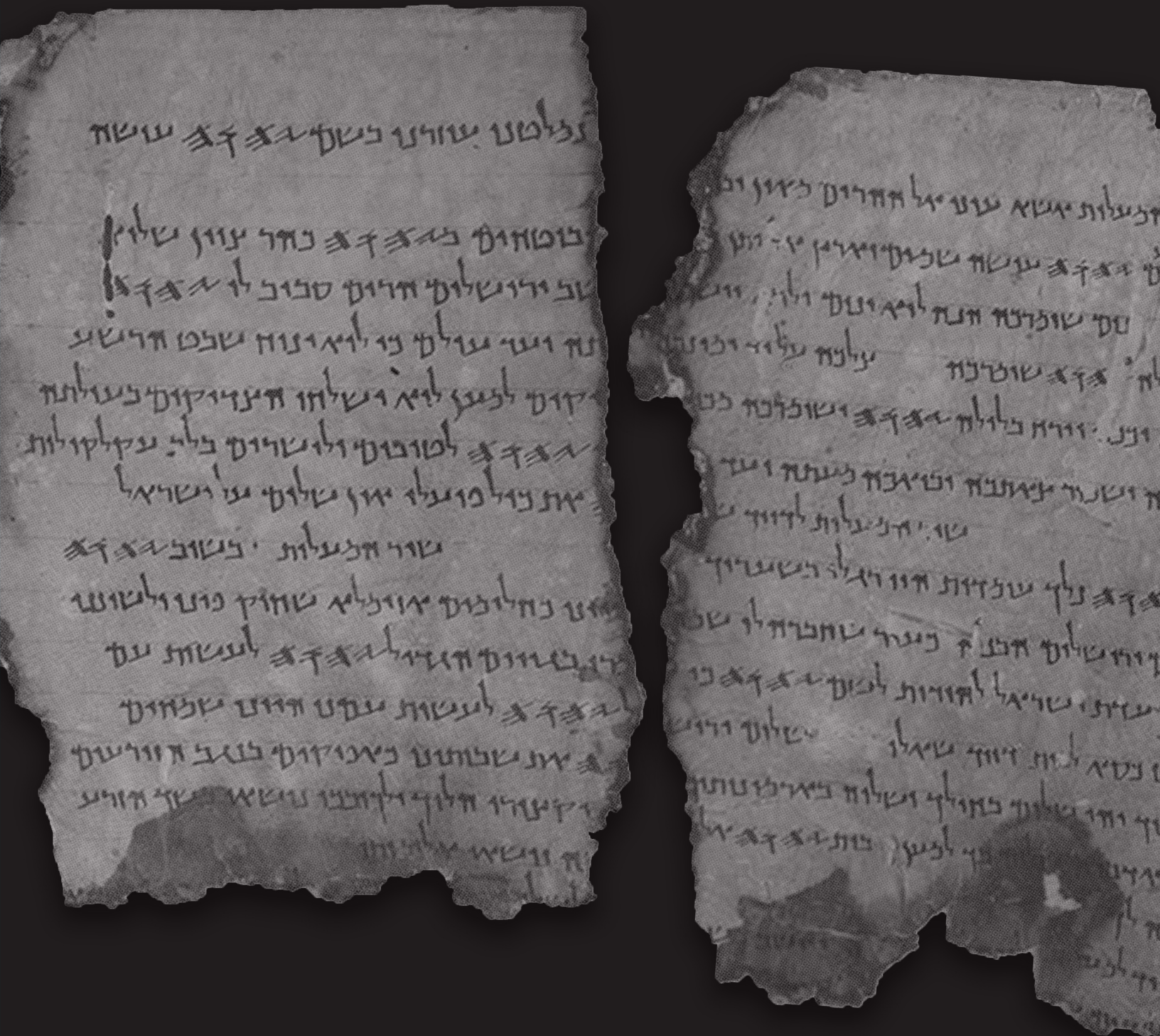
Hearing the voice of the minor prophets



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Hearing the voice of the minor prophets





BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

In the Bible, God reveals His truth about how to have eternal life by becoming a believer in the finished work of Jesus Christ. The believer is a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, a true child of God, and one who has been saved by God according to God's grace (undeserved favor). "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

How does one become a Christian?

- The Bible, God's word, says that eternal life (salvation) is a free gift of God which cannot be earned or deserved (Romans 6:23; Ephesians 2:8-9).
- However, we also find in God's word that all people are born sinners and cannot save themselves from the penalty of sin, which is eternal death and separation from God. God's requirement is perfection and no one is perfect (Isaiah 53:6; Romans 3:3-23; Ephesians 2:1-4).
- God tells us in His word that He is holy, meaning that He is perfect and that He is also just, meaning that He gives to sinners what is deserved, and because of His holiness and justice He must punish sinners. But thankfully, the Bible also says that God is loving and merciful and does not take pleasure in punishing sinners (Exodus 34:6-7; Ephesians 2:4-5).
- God has mercy on sinners by not giving them what they deserve. This is only possible because He gave His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, the God-man, to be the substitute for sinners bearing the penalty for their sin and satisfying God's justice (John 1:1,14; Isaiah 53:6; Romans 5:8).
- Jesus said that in order for anyone to have eternal life there must be repentance of sins and faith placed in His substitutionary death on the cross to pay for the penalty of one's sins. This faith must be in Jesus Christ alone, not depending on anything else including "good works" (Mark 1:15b; Acts 20:21; Ephesians 2:8-9).

What then is the response to these things if one desires to have eternal life and become a Christian?

1. Pray and ask God to forgive you. The Bible says that you must repent of your sins, being ashamed of them, genuinely regretting and grieving over them, and firmly deciding to make an about-face and turn away from sin and your old lifestyle (Acts 3:19-20).
2. Pray and tell God that you place your faith in Jesus Christ alone to save you. The Bible says that for you to become a Christian, you must place your faith and trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ who died on the cross to become your substitute and who took the penalty for your sin upon Himself once and for all (John 3:36).

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ANCIENT WORDS FOR MODERN DISCIPLES

September 11, 2022 | Rejoicing in the Justice of God [Nahum]

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

In what ways do you see God's judgment today? How does this differ from His final judgment?

Read Nahum.

Ask God to give you discernment concerning what to believe and how to respond to His judgment.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

God's judgment of evil will be terrible and complete.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

We can rejoice when we see God holding evil deeds accountable. We can rejoice even more in the salvation we have in Christ.

MEDITATE

"Horsemen charging, flashing sword and glittering spear, host of slain, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end—they stumble over the bodies!" (Nahum 3:3).

GETTING STARTED

+This section will introduce the main theme of Nahum.

❓: *How could God's judgment be a comfort to those who follow Him?*

❓: *Why would a book devoted to the judgment of a city be included in the Bible?*

We know almost nothing of the prophet Nahum. The only occurrence of this name is in the opening line of his book. Elkosh is identified as his home, but no one knows where it was. We are able to date his prophecy within a relatively small window. The destruction of Thebes, which occurred in the year 663 B.C., is referenced in Nahum 3:8. Assyria quickly declined after the year 626 B.C., so it appears Nahum delivered this prophecy sometime during this forty-seven-year window.

Nahum targeted Nineveh specifically in his prophecy, but Nineveh was the chief city of the Assyrian empire. While Assyria may not have been the most notorious adversary of the people of God, they had a long and brutal stint as a superpower in the ancient Near East.

Typically, prophecies of judgment are intended to bring dread, but Nahum's prophecy seems to have served a different purpose. This oracle of judgment upon the city of Nineveh was likely delivered within Judea instead of the city to which it was directed. The prophet intended to encourage the people of God by describing the judgment approaching their enemy. Nahum's name means "comfort," and his book would have comforted the people of God who had greatly suffered by at the hands of this cruel nation.

❓: *Would it be challenging for you to find satisfaction in God's judgment?*

❓: *How does the gospel influence how we understand and apply the book of Nahum?*

APPLICATION POINT – Nahum's audience would have found satisfaction in his prediction of Nineveh's brutal demise. This may make us uncomfortable today. We typically see it as a flaw in character if someone finds satisfaction in the misfortunes of others. There are several mitigating issues, however. First, Nineveh's demise was not just a stroke of bad luck but the judgment of God. The people of God should always be able to find satisfaction in His actions. Second, we cannot have the same certainty concerning God's judgment that Nahum had. God revealed to Nahum that Nineveh's time for destruction was approaching. There would be no averting

it this time, as in the day of Jonah. Therefore, it was right for Nahum to anticipate that the people of God would find satisfaction in His judgment of evil. We cannot have Nahum's certainty, so any satisfaction we have when it appears that God has judged the wicked must be conditional. We would rather see those who oppose God repent and receive His mercy instead. Apart from God's grace shown to us in the gospel of Jesus Christ, we would all be on the same path as Nineveh.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Nahum contains three short chapters. The first chapter is a psalm revealing the certainty of God's judgment. Chapters 2 and 3 center on Nahum's pronouncement of woe.

1. THE CERTAINTY OF GOD'S JUDGMENT

2. 2. THE HORROR OF GOD'S JUDGMENT

GOING DEEPER

+This section will overview the key themes from Nahum and offer personal applications. The first chapter of Nahum reveals the certainty of God's judgment. Chapters 2 and 3 form a chiastic structure highlighting the great despair Nineveh would find in God's judgment. A chiasm (also called a chiasmus, chiastic structure) is a literary device in which a sequence of ideas is presented and then repeated in reverse order. The result is a "mirror" effect as the ideas are "reflected" back in a passage.

1. THE CERTAINTY OF GOD'S JUDGMENT

■ NAHUM 1

Q: How does Nahum 1:3 use Exodus 34:6-7?

Q: How did Nahum describe God's judgment?

Nahum had a singular purpose. His message was to proclaim God's coming judgment. He spent no time identifying sins or detailing accusations. In the first chapter, the prophet did not even pause to tell us who was receiving God's

judgment. We only know it is Nineveh from the prologue (Nahum 1:1) and from later in the prophecy (Nahum 2:8). Nahum's only concern was to declare the certainty of God's coming judgment.

Like several other Minor Prophets, Nahum alluded to Exodus 34:6–7 to make his message, but instead of focusing on God's grace to repentant sinners as Jonah and Micah did, Nahum celebrated God's determination to condemn the guilty (Nahum 1:3). God may be slow to anger, but His judgment against evil is certain.

Nahum utilized several images to describe God's coming judgment—the quaking mountains, the melting hills, the heaving earth (Nahum 1:5). It is as if creation itself was coming undone in the act of judgment. Nahum also compared God's judgment to a flood (Nahum 1:8). As in the days of Noah, the wicked would be overcome by the waters of God's judgment. .

Q: *Why should God's punishment of evil provide believers with hope and expectation?*

Q: *What comfort do you have in the face of God's certain judgment?*

APPLICATION POINT – Our sense of justice demands that every wicked deed be held accountable, but this world fails to fulfill our sense of justice. People do the wrong thing and get away with it all the time. One of the more challenging aspects of Nahum 1 is recognizing that the prophet expected his hearers to find comfort in the demise of those God was judging. Israel would be freed from the yoke and bonds of Nineveh (Nahum 1:13). Nahum 1:15 says “Behold, upon the mountains, the feet of him who brings good news.” The good news referred to here is God's judgment against Nineveh. Nahum believed Israel should rejoice at the destruction of Nineveh! Finding satisfaction in the sorrow of others feels counter to our general sense of right and wrong, but Nahum was appealing to our desire to see wickedness held accountable. Nineveh had committed unbelievable atrocities, and Nahum recognized that God was holding them accountable with His judgment. In the same way, when it appears today that people get away with doing the wrong thing, we can find some measure of solace in knowing that God will hold every deed accountable at His final judgment.

Q: *What is the answer to the rhetorical questions in Nahum 1:6?*

Q: *Who is the worthless counselor who plotted evil against the Lord? [Nahum 1:11]*

Nahum declared that God would completely consume those who stand against Him. No one will be able to stand against His judgment (Nahum 1:6). Even an army at its fullest strength will be cut down by God's affliction (Nahum 1:12). Not even their names will remain after God's judgment (Nahum 1:14).

Nahum alluded to an event from Assyria and Israel's past to illustrate how God would cut the wicked down even when it seemed they could not be stopped. In Nahum 1:11, the prophet referred to a worthless counselor who plotted evil against the Lord. Where most of the prophecy is generic in that it does not address anyone specific, Nahum 1:11 seems to have someone particular in mind. Although we cannot be certain, the best candidate is an Assyrian governor who accompanied the Assyrian army as they besieged Jerusalem in 701 B.C. This man was known as the Rabshakeh, and his story is recounted in 2 Kings 18:13–37. He taunted king Hezekiah and his men by declaring that since the gods of the other nations were unable to save them against Assyria, the God of Judah would likewise be unable to stand against them. God did in fact save Jerusalem on this occasion by sending his angel to strike down 185,000 Assyrian soldiers (2 Kings 19:35). Nahum also alluded to the fate of the Assyrian king, Sennacherib. In Nahum 1:14, the prophet declared “from the house of your gods ... I will make your grave, for you are vile.” After failing to overthrow Jerusalem and Hezekiah, Sennacherib was murdered in the house of Nisroch his god, which was in Nineveh (2 Kings 19:35–37).

Thus, Nahum looked to a significant moment from Assyria's past to frame the judgment he foresaw for the city. Just as the previous leaders were brought to nothing by the wrath of God, so Nineveh would be brought to nothing in the days of Nahum.

Q: *Nahum said the Lord is a stronghold to those who take refuge in him. How is Christ a better stronghold than anything we could provide ourselves?*

Q: *Rabshakeh and Sennacherib looked to their wealth and power as their strongholds. What strongholds do you see people relying upon today?*

APPLICATION POINT –Nahum 1 is a sobering reminder of what our predicament would be apart from the grace we have in Jesus Christ. Nahum said, “The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble” (Nahum 1:7). Believers recognize that Christ is our ultimate stronghold. Human beings often like to think of themselves as their own stronghold. This is what Rabshakeh and Sennacherib thought. We like to think we can overcome every problem with science, love, money, or hard work, but none of this provides the protection we need from God's wrath. Only Christ can do that.

2. THE HORROR OF GOD'S JUDGMENT

NAHUM 2-3

Q: *Why would a siege be frightening for an ancient city?*

Q: *How does Nahum's use of locusts compare to Joel's (Joel 1:4, 7; Nahum 3:15)?*

Nahum 2-3 can be structured as an extended chiasm, which is when lines form parallel units that extend from a center.

A. The prophet's vision (2:1-10)

B. The prophet's taunt (2:11-12)

C. The declaration of Yahweh (2:13)

D. Woe oracle (3:1-4)

C. The declaration of Yahweh (3:5-7)

B. The prophet's taunt (3:8-13)

A. The prophet's vision (3:14-17)

The center of the chiasm is the focal point. The prophet was announcing complete and utter woe upon Nineveh. This section will examine each set of parallel lines before concluding with the woe section.

The first set of parallel lines describes a people preparing for a deadly siege. A siege was one of the worst possible scenarios in the ancient Near East. The sieged city was overmatched. Otherwise, the inhabitants would meet their enemies in battle. Taking cover within the walls would offer some immediate protection but only with the knowledge that everything left outside would be destroyed. Furthermore, conditions within the sieged city would quickly deteriorate. Food and water would grow scarce. Nothing could be done with the bodies of those who died from starvation or skirmishes with the opposing army.

There is little wonder that Nahum foresaw panic in Nineveh as the army approached (Nahum 2:4-5). In describing the turmoil, Nahum utilized a literary device known as staccato repetition in which each line of a poem is short and unattached to the others. As you read, the rhythm is quick. This helps the reader gain a sense of the panic and flurry

of actions as the invading army drew closer and everyone scrambled to get within the city walls.

Those within the sieged city would be like insects before the invading army (Nahum 3:16–17). In Joel, the prophet described a locust invasion as the judgment of God and then described an approaching army in similar terms. In Nahum, the imagery is reversed. The Assyrians were the locusts, but they would be scattered as the invading army approaches. Nahum may have been alluding to Assyria's widespread military conquest in these verses. Formerly, they were the locust army invading other nations, but now the locusts themselves would be scattered. In the same way, the prosperity secured from militaristic conquest made Nineveh a central hub for merchants in the Middle East. Now, those merchants would scatterer as well (Nahum 3:16).

Q: *Nineveh found pride and security in its merchants and princes, but these came to nothing as God's judgment approached the city. What are you trusting in for fulfillment that will come to nothing when God arrives in judgment?*

Q: *These verses hint at the reversal of fortunes Nineveh would encounter when God arrived in judgment. Does the idea of reversal at the day of judgment worry you or give you hope? Why?*

APPLICATION POINT – Assyria had developed one of the vastest empires known in the history of the world making it the worldwide center of commerce and culture. But it would all come to nothing when God appeared in judgment. In the same way, people today seek fulfillment in all sorts of things that will come to nothing when God arrives in judgment. No matter what you seek fulfillment in—entertainment, money, power, drugs, sex, even a quiet family life—it will all come to nothing when God arrives in judgment. Nineveh warns us that we can have the world at our feet one moment and have it all taken away the next. Seeking God through a relationship with Jesus Christ is the only sure way to find fulfillment that will never be taken away.

Q: *he Assyrian kings were frequently associated with lions. How does this inform the interpretation of Nahum 2:11–12?*

Q: *How is Thebes [Nahum 3:8] comparable to Nineveh? What link did Nahum see?*

Understanding Nahum 2:11–12 requires us to know some history about the Assyrians and read between the lines a bit. The Minor Prophets frequently utilized the imagery of lions in their prophecies. In these passages, God is typically the lion who devours His prey in judgment. Something else is going on in Nahum. The Assyrians kings frequently spoke of themselves and compared themselves to lions as a symbol of the strength and viciousness they wished to embody. So, Nahum was likely referring to the Assyrian kings in these verses. In verse 11, he asked where these lions (the Assyrian kings) would reside once their den (Nineveh) had been destroyed. In verse 12, he was recalling the former viciousness of the Assyrian kings. They tore their prey apart and filled their dens with their victims. Now what would these Assyrian kings do when their city was destroyed? Where did their strength go?

The city of Thebes was perhaps the most renowned city in ancient Egypt, but it was conquered by the Assyrians in 663 B.C. Nahum told Nineveh that they would end up in the same predicament (Nahum 3:8–13).

❖: *In what areas of life do you depend upon your own strength or capabilities?*

❖: *How can you learn from seeing others deal with the consequences of their sins?*

APPLICATION POINT – In forecasting Nineveh’s fall, Nahum pointed them to the city of Thebes (Nahum 3:8). The Assyrians would have been very familiar with the downfall of Thebes. They had caused it. Now, God would bring their downfall as well. These were the most powerful cities in the ancient Near East, but neither stood a chance when God determined to bring His judgment upon them. There is no worldly power beyond God’s judgment. No matter how invincible they seemed, God would bring them down when He determined it was time.

❖: *How do the two declarations [Nahum 2:13 and 3:5] begin?*

❖: *How do they differ in focus?*

The parallel declarations in Nahum 2:13 and 3:5 are the two key points for recognizing the chiastic structure of Nahum 2–3. These declarations begin in the exact same manner—“Behold, I am against you, declares the Lord of hosts.” From here, each declaration has its own emphasis. Nahum 2:13 focuses upon God’s destruction of

Nineveh. God would burn their chariots and devour their “young lions,” probably a metaphor for their young princes. God’s judgment would leave these lions without prey and without hope.

Nahum 3:5–7 focuses upon Nineveh’s shame. God would expose Nineveh to the rest of the world. He would even throw filth at them. The result is much the same as the original declaration. Nineveh would have no hope and no comfort (Nahum 3:7).

Q: *Why was shame added as an extra dimension of Nineveh’s punishment?*

Q: *What would cause God to be against a people or a city?*

APPLICATION POINT – The biggest question Nahum’s declarations pose to us is what would cause God to be against a people or a city? The answer is unrepentant sin. It is clear from Nahum 1:3 that God will not excuse the guilty of their sin. He will hold them accountable. The rest of Nahum essentially works out this concept. We must never think God takes our sins lightly, and since that is the case, we must never take our sins lightly either. Doing so will only illustrate the callousness of our hearts and make us more like Nineveh than we would ever want.

Q: *Since the subject of this woe is Nineveh, how is this woe speech different than most other woe speeches in the Bible?*

Q: *This woe stresses the extent and brutality of Nineveh’s devastation. Why is this appropriate?*

Introducing Nahum 3:1–4 with the word “woe” designates it as a special type of literary unit. Announcements of woe are perhaps the most emotional passages in the Bible. Woe is reserved for those who have experienced sorrow to the most extreme degree, usually as a result of God’s judgment. Typically, woe oracles coincide with lament, but due to Nahum’s unique situation, Nineveh’s woe was Judah’s joy. The actions of this great enemy against the people of God would not go unpunished. In fact, their evil deeds would be met by a punishment equally brutal. Nahum utilized a staccato style of verse to quickly summarize the extent of the nation’s devastation.

Q: *How is this passage surprising when considered against the backdrop of Jonah?*

Q: *Why is humanity so often blind to the grace and mercy of God?*

APPLICATION POINT – In Jonah, God threatened to destroy Nineveh but relented when the city repented of its sin. A little more than 100 years later, the city would see the devastation predicted by Nahum. The word used in Jonah to describe God relenting from His judgment is from the same root Nahum’s name is taken from. Intentional or not, it gives us a clear message concerning the wickedness of the human heart and how quickly we are able to forget God’s grace in our lives. When we forget His grace or assume we will receive it, we underline how unworthy we were to receive it in the first place and call into question whether we actually have it.

NEXT STEPS

Nineveh brutally tormented the ancient Near East for more than 200 years. If ever a nation deserved God’s judgment, it was them, and as Nahum predicted, God did eventually destroy them. Yet Nineveh’s history with God was not one-sided because, as revealed in Jonah, they received God’s grace, if only for a short time. God’s dealings with Nineveh instruct us in how we should respond to an offense. We need never respond with retaliation. God intends to hold the offense accountable or to reveal His mercy within it. Either way, if we retaliate, we are only usurping God’s actions. This week, allow God’s grace to be revealed in how you respond to offenses, regardless of whether they occur at home or at work, whether they are of a personal nature or not.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God’s Word this week.

-Father, I praise you for your grace and for your judgment. You perfectly adjudicate every evil deed in this world.

-Jesus, I thank you for the forgiveness I have in you. Apart from you, I would have no hope in the face of God’s wrath.

-God, help me never forget your grace or take it for granted. Allow your mercy to deeply influence my heart so that I may respond with authentic worship.

-Father, help me to show my trust in you by how I respond to offenses.

ANCIENT WORDS FOR MODERN DISCIPLES

September 18, 2022 | The Day of Judgment—The Day of Salvation (Zephaniah)

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Zephaniah called Judah to wait for God's salvation. Why is waiting for something we yearn for so challenging?

Read Zephaniah.

Ask God to give you insight for ways you need to apply the warnings within Zephaniah.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

The day of the Lord will be terrible for those who will receive God's wrath but wonderful for those who wait for His salvation.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

-There is no room for half-hearted obedience to God. You are either committed to following God with your whole life or you are not committed to following Him at all.

MEDITATE

"The Lord has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil" (Zephaniah 3:15).

GETTING STARTED

+This section will introduce Zephaniah and the main theme of his prophecy.

Q: *Zephaniah ministered during the reign of Josiah. What do you know of Josiah's reign [2 Kings 22:1-23:30]?*

Q: *Given what you know of Josiah's reign, is the content of Zephaniah surprising? Why or why not?*

Zephaniah ministered during the reign of King Josiah (640–609 B.C.), and he may possibly have been a descendent of King Hezekiah. The genealogy at the beginning of book includes a Hezekiah, but we cannot be sure if this individual was the king known by that name. He is not identified as the king, but Zephaniah is the only prophet whose ancestry is traced back four generations. His genealogy may have been extended to reveal his connection to the king.

Josiah was regarded as one of the most godly kings in the Old Testament. He remodeled and restored Jerusalem's temple. During this process, the builders discovered a book of God's laws which prompted Josiah to conduct a religious reform with the intent of reviving the nation's spiritual life. Second Kings 23 shows that Josiah's reforms were wide-ranging and supported by many. But Zephaniah reveals that Josiah's reforms must have had only a limited influence on the people. Outside of Josiah's direct influence, the people were still spiritually rebellious.

Zephaniah's message contains two emphases—judgment and salvation. Zephaniah is notable for the way he changed emphases while maintaining the same theme, which is the day of the Lord. As with most of the other prophets, the day of the Lord is synonymous with God's judgment (Zephaniah 1:7–10; 14–16). Nevertheless, when Zephaniah turned to salvation, he continued to speak of the “day” in a similar fashion (Zephaniah 3:11, 16). Likewise, Zephaniah presented God as the divine warrior who wars against His people in judgment, yet when Zephaniah turned to salvation, he still presented God in valiant and warrior-like terms (Zephaniah 3:12, 3:17).

Q: *What does Zephaniah's emphasis on judgment and salvation teach us about half-hearted obedience?*

Q: *Why could Zephaniah use the same themes when speaking of judgment and salvation?*

APPLICATION POINT – An overly simplistic summary of the prophets is “things are going really bad, but they

will get a lot better in the future.” But in Zephaniah it is easy to see this dynamic at work. He talked about the judgment approaching disobedient Judah and the salvation awaiting those who trust God in the future. His two-pronged emphasis reveals the nonsensical outlook many of us maintain about our obedience and commitment to God. Many of us want just enough God in our lives to feel good about ourselves and to be saved from any judgment awaiting us in the future, but we stop well short of the absolute obedience the Bible requires. Zephaniah doesn’t leave this option open for us. We will know God in judgment, or we will know Him in salvation. There is no in-between.

▣ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+The structure of Zephaniah is fairly straight-forward. The first chapter of Zephaniah is an oracle condemning Judah. Zephaniah 2:1–3:8 is a little harder to understand. These verses begin with a call to repentance. Then the judgment of the nations is revealed as a warning of what is to come if repentance is refused. These verses conclude with judgment because repentance was rejected. Zephaniah 3:9–20 looks forward to the salvation of a remnant from exile.

1. JUDGMENT

2. REPENTANCE

3. RESTORATION

GOING DEEPER

+This section will investigate each part of Zephaniah in more detail and offer personal applications.

1. JUDGMENT

▣ ZEPHANIAH 1

Q: *What specific groups can you identify who are addressed in Zephaniah 1?*

Q: *How did Zephaniah bracket this oracle against Judah [Zephaniah 1:2-3; 17-18]?*

Zephaniah begins with an oracle announcing the coming destruction of Judah. The prophet did not outline a case against the people. Instead, he proclaimed God's coming judgment. Although we are left to infer the reason for judgment, it should be obvious by this point in our study of the Minor Prophets. The people who received Zephaniah's oracle did not need an explanation. Judah had become increasingly unfaithful in its relationship with God to the point of rejecting Him.

Zephaniah identified at least three distinct groups within this oracle of judgment. The priests and other leaders of Judea would be cut down by God's judgment. Zephaniah mentioned idolatrous priests and non-idolatrous priests. These non-idolatrous priests were presumably the priests of the Lord, but notice that they received the same condemnation as the idolatrous priests (Zephaniah 1:4). They had failed so badly in their duties that they were on the same plane as those who taught the people to follow other gods. Zephaniah also condemned the officials and king's sons. They wore foreign attire. This could allude to idolatrous religious attire or simply mean they wanted to be like the leaders of foreign countries. Zephaniah also condemned Judah's merchants. They appear to have traded in idolatrous ideas as much as they did in goods and produce (Zephaniah 1:10–13).

The depth of Judah's fall can be observed by the interplay between Judah and the nations in this oracle. Zephaniah framed the oracle by announcing God's coming judgment on all of humanity (Zephaniah 1:2–3; 17–18). Judah had become indistinguishable from the other nations and would be judged along with everyone else who opposed God. Their covenant relationship with God no longer significantly set them apart from the other nations.

❏: *Zephaniah identified different groups who failed to keep Judah's covenant with God. What kind of "group" are you in within society (business workers, teachers, service industry, students, stay-at-home mothers, etc.)? How could you get caught up in what the group is doing and neglect your prior commitment to God?*

❏: *Zephaniah referred to complacent men in Jerusalem [Zephaniah 1:12]. Is complacency in your relationship to God something you struggle with? Why or why not?*

APPLICATION POINT – Zephaniah believed the men in Jerusalem had become complacent (Zephaniah 1:12). They did not think God would do anything, good or ill. They had made God a non-factor in their daily lives. For them, God was something nice if you were into that sort of thing and had time, but they were not going to worry about organizing their lives around His righteousness. How easy it is for us to adopt the same mindset, even if we would not admit it or put it into those terms! Many of us think we would prioritize God more if He were more

active in the world. Because we see so many examples of God working on behalf of His people in the Bible, we think they must have had an easier time anticipating His activity in their world. Zephaniah 1:12 tells us this was not the case. People during Bible times also struggled to see God working in their lives, but this did not excuse their outlook! Zephaniah condemned their faithlessness.

2. REPENTANCE

■ ZEPHANIAH 2:1–3:8

Q: *Was Zephaniah's call to repentance corporate or individual?*

Q: *What quality did Zephaniah emphasize was needed for repentance (Zephaniah 2:3)? Why is this quality needed for repentance?*

Although God's judgment was coming, there remained a small window for repentance. Zephaniah summoned the entire nation to gather for repentance in order to avert the judgment of God. The repetition of the word "before" (Zephaniah 2:2) adds to the sense of urgency. The nation had to act quickly. This does not necessarily mean God's judgment was imminent but that the people's repentance must be. They were in harm's way. The quicker they repented, the safer they would be. More importantly, the quicker they repented, the sooner they would be walking in accordance with the will of God.

Although Zephaniah summoned the entire nation to repent, he did not necessarily hold out hope that most people would respond to his summons. He knew that repentance demands humility. It takes humility to see how you have deviated from God's will. To admit you have deviated from God's will. To repent for failing to follow God's will. Zephaniah knew his call to repentance would likely fall on many deaf ears because they did not have the humility needed to repent.

Q: *Is humility something you struggle with? If so, can you see the challenges that a lack of humility creates for repentance?*

Q: *In seeking humility, how can you protect yourself from false humility?*

APPLICATION POINT – Humility is challenging for everyone. Ironically, the very act of recognizing your own humility put your humility in danger. People are susceptible to a wide range of sins and temptations. The sins one person struggles with may not be an issue for another person at all. But everyone seems to struggle with pride to some extent. We naturally think more of ourselves than we ought, and self-righteous pride makes the repentance Zephaniah called for nearly impossible. Confession is one practice Christians should consistently follow that also helps ingrain humility and our need for repentance. Consistently acknowledging specific sins in private prayer helps us recognize how far we fall short of God’s will and how much we need His grace.

Q: *Why did Zephaniah follow this call to repentance with oracles of judgment against the nations?*

Q: *Why did Zephaniah not call the nations to repentance?*

Immediately after calling Judah to repentance, Zephaniah announced judgment on several nations (Zephaniah 2:4–15). This may feel somewhat disjointed for modern readers, but the juxtaposition of repentance and judgment accomplishes a rhetorical effect. As was the case in Nahum, the judgment of the other nations would be for the benefit of a repentant Judah. Judah would not have to worry about the nations that constantly antagonized them. Furthermore, in at least one instance, the judgment of the nations would mean an enlargement of Judah’s territories (Zephaniah 2:7). If Judah would repent, God would restore their former power. Since territories in the ancient Near East often changed hands based on who held the most power, it is likely that the judgment of the other nations would have also enlarged Judah’s territory even though this is not explicitly stated.

On the other hand, if Judah failed to repent, the judgment of the other nations would function as a warning. The judgment of the nations was Judah’s future if they persisted in disobedience. The meaning of these oracles is tied to Judah’s response to Zephaniah’s call to repentance.

Q: *In what ways do you see God active in the world today? How is He continuing to bring judgment on the unrighteousness?*

Q: *How should Christians respond when they experience calamity today?*

APPLICATION POINT – Zephaniah indicated that God would bring the downfall of these other nations. Unlike the reigning sentiment of his time (Zephaniah 1:12), God does intercede into the course of human events. The same is true today even though we should be cautious of overestimating our ability to determine God’s purposes in what He does. Like the nation of Judah, Christians should see the inherent warning when disaster strikes the nations. But for the grace of God mediated to repentant sinners, this would be us. Furthermore, even though we are covered from God’s wrath by the blood of Jesus, God may still discipline us when we are disobedient to His will. We should see God’s hand behind the events unfolding within our world and be warned of what it will be like to endure His discipline.

Q: *How did Judah respond to Zephaniah’s call for repentance [Zephaniah 3:1–7]?*

Q: *Why didn’t Zephaniah describe Judah’s judgment independent of the nations [Zephaniah 3:6]?*

Zephaniah 2:1–3:8 is not written in a narrative form, but it feels like a saga as we move from Zephaniah’s call to repentance to Judah’s refusal. Zephaniah began this announcement of judgment with the word “woe,” which is reserved for the deepest lament over one’s predicament. Not only had the people refused to repent, but their hearts had become even more perverse (Zephaniah 3:3–5).

Surprisingly, Zephaniah did not announce Judah’s judgment directly. Instead, he announced the judgment of the nations (Zephaniah 3:6), but he did it in a way that indicated that Judah was included. He alluded to the special relationship God had with Judah (Zephaniah 3:7). The point is clear. Judah had become one of the “other nations.” They would suffer God’s wrath just as the rest.

Q: *How does the gospel influence how we apply Zephaniah 3:1-8?*

Q: *Why do believers have hope even when they have persisted in unrepentant sin far too long?*

APPLICATION POINT – Zephaniah 3:1–7 reveals how central repentance is for the people of God. Everyone sins and deserves the wrath and punishment of God. Apart from repentance and faith in Christ, this is what everyone will receive. Believers should never assume they have no further need of repentance after an initial response of faith in the gospel. Although receiving Christ as Savior does initiate sanctification, we will never reach a state of sinless perfection in this life. So, we must always be ready for repentance lest Zephaniah 3:1–7 apply to us.

4. RESTORATION

■ ZEPHANIAH 3:9–20

Q: *How are pure speech and the gathering of peoples [Zephaniah 3:9-10] related to the tower of Babel narrative [Genesis 11:1-9]?*

Q: *How is Zephaniah 3:11 related to the call to repentance in Zephaniah 2:1-3?*

Zephaniah 3:9 is the turning point in the book. Up to that point, the book is about judgment and pleading for repentance. But Zephaniah 3:9 transports us to an unspecified time in the future after repentance was refused and judgment had come. The land and cities had been conquered by foreign armies and the people had been exiled. Now, God's judgment was over, and He was prepared to restore humanity to Himself. As was the case earlier in Zephaniah, the fate of Judah was wrapped up in the fate of the nations. What God did to the nations was happening to Judah. What God did for Judah the rest of the nations benefit from as well.

Zephaniah 3:9 is remarkable for the way it alludes to the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9). At Babel, the people opposed God by building a tower they intended to reach into the heavens. In response, God confused their language and scattered them over the face of the earth. In Zephaniah 3:9, God declared that He would give the people a pure

speech. But now the people would use their speech not to oppose God but to serve Him. This theme anticipates Pentecost, when the linguistic challenges created at Babel were overcome, and the great multitude in heaven cry out in a single voice (Revelation 19).

Q: *What does the reversal of Babel reveal about the nature of God's restoration?*

Q: *What do these connections between Genesis, Zephaniah, Acts, and Revelation reveal about the nature of God's Word?*

APPLICATION POINT – Ever since sin entered creation, it has marred everything it touches. At Babel, the people's sin resulted in God confusing their language and scattering them across the earth. When God restores His creation from the effects of sin, He will undo these things. This should provide believers with immense comfort. No matter how badly sin has marred your life or the lives around you, God can restore through faith in Jesus Christ. The gospel can heal broken relationships. The gospel can heal broken bodies. The gospel can give hope where there is none.

Q: *What did Zephaniah command in Zephaniah 3:14? Why did he do this?*

Q: *How does Zephaniah 3:16-17 compare with Zephaniah 1:18 and 3:8?*

Zephaniah concludes with song! Despite all the disobedience and judgment, the prophet was able to point the people toward hope for the future. The people could rejoice knowing that God will one day restore a remnant of humanity to Himself. God will take away His judgment. There will be no more enemies or evil (Zephaniah 3:15). God will exult in His people. Every pain and anxiety will be quieted by God's love (Zephaniah 3:17).

Q: *In what ways have you already seen God's restoration in your life? How can you make your joy known to God?*

Q: *Why is it important that the sorrows of the past are forgotten in the midst of praise?*

APPLICATION POINT – One of the centers of Christian worship is the celebration of what God has restored through Christ. Zephaniah's command to sing shows why worship is so vital in the Christian life. We worship because of what Christ has accomplished for us. Unfortunately, the worship practice of many Christians is a pale reflection of what Christ has accomplished. Zephaniah 3:14–17 encourages us to make our worship more thoughtful and less restrained.

NEXT STEPS

Zephaniah takes us through the horrors of God's judgment and the wonder of His restoration. There are times in the Christian life when one of these themes is more relevant for us than the other. There are times when we are caught up in sin and need to be aware of God's discipline through judgment. There are other times when we feel the brokenness of the world around us and need to be reassured of God's ability to restore all things to Himself. Read through Zephaniah one final time this week and underline specific verses that will speak to you 1) during the times you need to hear Zephaniah's warning and 2) the times when you need to hear Zephaniah's hope. You may want to use different color pens.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

God, forgive me for living half-heartedly. You are worthy of my whole commitment. Your judgment will bring complete turmoil. There is no room for an inconsistent faith in you.

Lord Jesus, Zephaniah's hope of restoration was made possible by your sacrifice. Thank you for the hope I have in the cross.

God, during the times when I am caught up in sin, lead me to genuine, heart-felt repentance. Help me to never treat sin as if it were not a big deal.

Father, I look forward to the day Zephaniah foresaw when you will completely restore all things to yourself. I praise you for the work of the gospel and that your restoration is already being made evident in my life.



ANCIENT WORDS FOR MODERN DISCIPLES

October 2, 2022 | When God Doesn't Do What You Want or Expect (Habakkuk)

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Can you think of a time when God did not do what you wanted or expected? How did you respond?

Read Habakkuk.

Ask God to use Habakkuk to help you respond in faith when He does not do what you want or expect.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

God sometimes works in ways we do not expect or want. We must respond in faith.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

Be prepared to not understand what God is doing in every situation in your life.

MEDITATE

“Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith” (Habakkuk 2:4).

GETTING STARTED

+This section will introduce the prophet Habakkuk and his prophetic book.

Q: *Habakkuk's initial addresses to God are sometimes referred to as complaints,*

which in this context has a more formal meaning than we typically use today. What is the difference?

Q: *How is Habakkuk different from the other Minor Prophets we have looked at so far? How does this book address the people of God in the Old Testament?*

Although the superscription lacks any historical details, we can be sure that Habakkuk ministered in the nation of Judah some time during the late 7th century, primarily because of how the book depicts the Chaldeans (Babylonians). In Habakkuk's prophecy, the Chaldeans were a recognized power in the ancient Near East but not yet a direct threat to Judah (Habakkuk 1:6). This describes only a short period at the end of the 7th century, sometime during the reign of Josiah, Jehoahaz, or Jehoiakim. During this time, Judah was caught in the crossfire of the superpowers in the ancient Near East. More importantly, as Habakkuk makes clear, the people sharply declined morally and were unfaithful to their covenant with God.

Habakkuk is a mixture of expected and unexpected. He mentioned Judah's moral decline and unfaithfulness (Habakkuk 1:2–4) and prophesies the destruction of a foreign nation (Habakkuk 2:6–20). These things are common themes with prophetic literature. But Habakkuk was not confronting Judah with its wickedness or passing along a message from God. He was begging God to judge the nation. The injustice he saw could not be allowed to continue. Furthermore, when God responded to his formal complaint, Habakkuk questioned how God would hold Judah accountable. So, Habakkuk had a different purpose than the other prophets, even though there is some overlap in themes. His book addresses the nature of God and His interactions with the peoples of the earth. It feels more philosophical in nature because he was more concerned with addressing questions about God rather than simply relaying God's message. Habakkuk wanted to know why God did not act. When God committed to acting in the future, Habakkuk questioned His plans.

Q: *In what ways have you questioned God?*

Q: *How can you maintain faith in God even when you question His actions or nature?*

APPLICATION POINT – Questioning God is something most of us can relate to. God sometimes, perhaps oftentimes, works in ways we simply would not work ourselves. Habakkuk shows us that it is okay to question what God is doing. Our questions do not amount to disobedience, but we must remember to question God from the standpoint of faith. Just because we do not understand Him does not mean we should abandon our faith. Furthermore, questioning Him does not mean He must answer our questions or answer them in a way we find satisfying. When we question God, we cannot forget He is still God, and we are still His creatures.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+The structure of Habakkuk is straightforward. It begins with Habakkuk questioning God and then God's response (Habakkuk 1:1–11). This pattern is then repeated (Habakkuk 1:12–2:20). The book concludes with a prayer and a song rejoicing in God.

1. FIRST COMPLIANT
2. SECOND COMPLIANT
3. HABAKKUK'S RESPONSE

GOING DEEPER

+This section will examine each part of Habakkuk and draw personal applications from the prophet's message.

1. FIRST COMPLIANT

■ HABAKKUK 1:1–11

Q: What was the cause of Habakkuk's discouragement?

Q: What did Habakkuk want God to do?

Habakkuk's first complaint concerns why God allowed the wicked to pervert justice and do violence to the righteous. Habakkuk's complaint does not include great detail. The use of "I" and "me" suggests that a personal matter had spurred his questions, but if this was the case, he concluded by framing this personal matter within the larger

pattern of violence and injustice he saw within his society (Habakkuk 1:4). In doing so, Habakkuk called for the right exercise of the law and the success of justice. Thus, Habakkuk's question was the opposite of Job's. Job wanted to know why the righteous suffered. Habakkuk wants to know why God did not respond on behalf of the righteous when they suffer the violence of the wicked. Didn't God care what happened to the righteous?

The unexpected element of Habakkuk's complaint is that God's own people were the perpetrators of violence, not the surrounding nations. They were the recipients of the Torah. Therefore, Habakkuk was calling for judgment on his own people. Habakkuk also appears to be indicting God to some degree. God had refused to hear his cry for help (Habakkuk 1:2). God did not respond to wrong (Habakkuk 1:3). His law was ineffective at achieving justice (Habakkuk 1:4). We know, and Habakkuk knew, this was not the case, even if this is where the evidence led. We must wait for God to respond.

❓: *What limits must you place on yourself when you question why God allows evil things to happen?*

❓: *How can questioning God in response to injustice be an act of faithfulness?*

APPLICATION POINT – In many contexts, questioning an authority figure is taken as a sign of insubordination or disrespect. That could certainly be the case in some instances when we question God, but not necessarily so. In one respect, questioning God is the only appropriate response to the evil around us. Although Habakkuk suffered personal injustice, he did not think it was his responsibility to resolve the matter on his own, nor did he assume that God did not really care. Instead, by going to God, he recognized Him as the only true authority who can address evil and injustice in this world. In many cases, we would be far better off respectfully questioning God when we encounter evil rather than seeking to resolve the matter on our own.

❓: *How did God respond to Habakkuk's complaint?*

❓: *How did God use the Chaldeans' pride, brutality, and strength for His own purposes?*

God responded to Habakkuk's complaint by saying He was raising up the Chaldeans to judge the nations, including Judah. The Chaldeans would brutally conquer the lands of the ancient Near East, and in doing so,

would unwittingly be God instrument of judgment on evil nations. What was remarkable about God's plan is what we would consider to be the Chaldeans worst qualities—their fierceness, their strength, their violence—were used for God's purposes in dispensing His judgment. The worse the Chaldeans were, the harsher God's judgment on these evil nations became.

❓: *What does sending a nation in response to evil reveal about God's sovereignty?*

❓: *Was God unaware of what Habakkuk was complaining about?*

APPLICATION POINT – God was not unfamiliar with the evils and injustices Habakkuk addressed. In fact, God knew of them before and in greater detail than Habakkuk did. In His divine providence, He was already at work to address what Habakkuk was struggling with. This reveals God's goodness and justice, but it also reveals that He will act in His own timing. Even though raising up one nation to judge another is not quick, this is how God determined to hold the nations accountable. We have no choice but to concede that His timing is perfect, even when we do not understand.

3. SECOND COMPLAINT

■ HABAKKUK 1:12–2:20

❓: *Why was Habakkuk offended by God's first response?*

❓: *What accusations did Habakkuk make against the Chaldeans?*

As God predicted, His response astounded Habakkuk (Habakkuk 1:5). His response caused another moral dilemma for Habakkuk that was as bad or worse than the original. God's instrument for judgment was worse than what was being judged. As bad as Judah had become, they were nowhere near as wicked as the Chaldeans, who dragged captives away on hooks, worshipped their own brutality, and profited from the suffering of others (Habakkuk 1:16–17). Habakkuk's second complaint was that God could not possibly judge an evil nation by means of a nation even more evil. How could a holy God use such a vile tool (Habakkuk 1:13)? If the Chaldeans were God's tool for judgment,

would they be allowed to go on killing nations forever? Habakkuk could not fathom how God could act in this way.

Q: *What evidence is there in your life that God does not think like you do?*

Q: *Why do we think some people are more wicked or sinful than others?*

APPLICATION POINT – One of the ways we try to secure our own righteousness is by comparing ourselves with others, much as Habakkuk compared Judah and Babylon (Chaldea) here. Most people would be willing to admit they are not perfect but believe that compared to others, they would not seem that bad. God’s plan to judge Judah through the Chaldeans shows how empty this philosophy is. The wickedness of someone else cannot make you righteous. If you ever find yourself looking to other people to make yourself feel better about your own sin, you are not looking for your righteousness in Christ. This passage illustrates Romans 3:23, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Q: *What is the main point of God’s response to Habakkuk’s second complaint?*

Q: *In Habakkuk 1:6, it is revealed the Chaldeans were not even at the height of their powers, but now, Habakkuk learned they would also fall. What does this reveal about God and history?*

God responded to Habakkuk’s second rebuke by assuring him that the Chaldeans would also face judgment and be condemned for their brutal atrocities. God has frequently used people who do not believe in Him for His own purposes. The Assyrians and the Babylonians were wicked peoples who became God’s means of judging His people (Isaiah 8; Jeremiah 4:5–31; 6:1–30). God has even used wicked people as a means of saving His people, such as the Persian king, Cyrus (Isaiah 44:28–45:7). Furthermore, God would punish those nations who used excessive violence even if He had originally ordained them as an instrument of judgment (Isaiah 10:5–19; 14:4–23). So, Habakkuk could know that God was aware of the Chaldean’s wickedness, and He would bring an equally harsh judgment on them in the future.

Q: *God would judge the Babylonians but not immediately. How does waiting for God to act demonstrate righteousness (Habakkuk 2:4)?*

Q: *God condemns the Chaldeans for their greed. How does greed itself become a burden to the greedy?*

APPLICATION POINT – God called the righteous to wait patiently for the judgment of the wicked (Habakkuk 2:2–3). Habakkuk 2:4 says, “But the righteous shall live by his faith.” The author of Hebrews quoted this verse to encourage the faithful to persist in their faith (Hebrews 10:38). God rarely acts in our timing, so it is our task to demonstrate the righteousness we receive from God by faithfully waiting for Him to act on our behalf.

3. HABAKKUK’S RESPONSE

■ HABAKKUK 3

Q: *What idea is found at the beginning and in the middle of this prayer (Habakkuk 3:3, 16)?*

Q: *How does Habakkuk’s prayer compare to God’s speech to Job (Job 38:1–11)?*

Habakkuk concluded his book with a poetic prayer and a psalm of praise. The prayer begins with a superscription like we see in the Psalms. It also contains the word “Selah.” We are uncertain of this word’s meaning, but it is a kind of poetic notation. This prayer reveals that Habakkuk had become aware of the audacity of his complaints. Even though he did not understand, he should have been prepared to accept God’s actions and more cautious of making his complaints known.

The prayer begins and ends by recording Habakkuk’s fear at encountering the Lord (Habakkuk 3:2, 16). Within the prayer, Habakkuk alluded to several significant events in the nation’s past, such as the plagues of Egypt (Habakkuk 3:5), the parting of the Red Sea and the Jordan River (Habakkuk 3:8, 15), and the defeat of the nations in Canaan (Habakkuk 3:12–15). Who was Habakkuk to question the actions of such a powerful and wonderful God?

Q: *How does Habakkuk's prayer compare to Jesus's reception of Thomas (John 20:24–29)?*

Q: *How can you use God's past actions to give you confidence during times of questioning?*

APPLICATION POINT – Although Habakkuk appropriately responded in fear and trembling, it is wonderful to see that God did not respond to his questioning with anger. This shows us that it is okay to have questions about God, His nature, and His actions in the world, if we do so without suggesting He somehow answers to us. We see a similar situation play out in Thomas after the resurrection (John 20:24–29). Thomas would not believe in the resurrection apart from physical proof. Jesus appeared to him and gave him the proof he needed. Jesus did not chastise Thomas, even while commending the faith of those who would believe without seeing.

Q: *What was Habakkuk saying when he described the failure of nature and crops in Habakkuk 3:17?*

Q: *How does Habakkuk's declaration relate to his complaints?*

Habakkuk concluded with a song in which he made a marvelous profession of faith. Even in the absence of hope and provision, he would rejoice in God. He had come a long way since his opening complaints. He recognized that his faith in God must withstand times of challenge and sorrow. Furthermore, he had learned to treasure God even more than the necessities of survival. Nothing would shake his faith in God. God is a better source of strength than anything this world has to offer. Youth and food might fail, but God's salvation will persist.

Q: *Do you think your faith is contingent on material goods and provisions? If so, how can you strengthen your faith to reflect Habakkuk's confession? If not, how can you protect your faith to keep from sliding into periods of self-reliance?*

Q: *In a culture of relative abundance, how can we meaningfully make Habakkuk's declaration?*

APPLICATION POINT – Christians, especially in our culture, have a strong sense of God's provision. We trust that He will provide for our needs and help us in times of hardship. In the past, I have often struggled when I encountered this mindset. The phrases "God will provide" or "if God wills it, He will make it happen" at times have felt like platitudes that offer me little comfort. This has been a struggle because I know that many times in history Christians have met their demise in times of need or hardship. They have leapt out in faith and fallen on their faces. Faith in Christ does not give us a pass from encountering trials in life or in death. I know Christians have died during famines and plagues. I know Christians have made great sacrifices for the gospel that seem to have come to nothing. I also struggle with these platitudes because I know that until Christ returns, every person, including believers, must face death. A day will come when strength fails and God's provision for this life comes to an end. It seems to me that the things Christians often say to encourage one another lack the sentiment found in Habakkuk 3:17–19.

Even though all of this is true, in recent years I have come to recognize that it is important for Christians to maintain a strong sense of God's provision. Such a mindset helps preserve our faith and gives us confidence to make sacrifices for the sake of the gospel. But within the context of trusting in God's provision, we still must retain the message of Habakkuk's song. Even if every plan goes awry and hope is gone, we will continue to trust in God because He is worth more than anything we can find in this life. He will give us the strength we need to face both success and failure.

NEXT STEPS

Habakkuk shows us how to respond when our faith in God is challenged. There is a way to maintain faith even while questioning what God is doing. More importantly, Habakkuk shows us how to maintain and even strengthen our faith during times of doubt and questioning. He looked to Scripture to draw strength so he could move forward through his questions with faith. Oakwood began this year by emphasizing the importance of reading Scripture and doing daily devotions. This is the main way you build a solid foundation in Scripture from which you can faithfully question what is happening when God does things you do not understand. If your daily devotional routine has waned as the year has progressed or through summer vacations, now is the time to renew your commitment to encountering God daily in His Word.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

God, there have been times when I have not understood what you were doing or why you allowed certain things to happen. Forgive me if my faith faltered during those times.

Jesus, in you, God has provided a salvation that can never be taken away. No matter what I face, I will treasure you above anything that could be taken away from me.

Father, you are the creator of heaven and earth and all that is within them. I have no right to make demands of you or think you owe me answers.

God, even during times I do not understand your will, I will continue to praise your name. Your worth is not contingent upon my understanding.

ANCIENT WORDS FOR MODERN DISCIPLES

October 9, 2022 | Seeking God During the Daily Grind (Haggai)

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Have you ever or are you now experiencing a time when it feels like it takes all your energy just to get by day after day? Why is this a challenging way to live?

Read Haggai.

Ask God to use this lesson to reveal where you are “just getting by” spiritually.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

God desired for the returning exiles to flourish spiritually, but they were too caught up in their daily struggle.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

Spiritual growth requires an investment from you, but it will yield an unbelievable return.

MEDITATE

“The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the Lord of hosts” (Haggai 2:9).

GETTING STARTED

+This section will introduce the prophet Haggai, his era, and the central idea of his book.

Q: *Haggai ministered after the Jews returned from exile. How does this ministry context differ from the other prophets we have encountered thus far?*

Q: *What is meant by the phrase “daily grind”?*

The book of Haggai is the beginning of a significant shift in the Minor Prophets. Each of the previous prophets ministered before the people of Judah were taken into exile. But in 586 BC they were conquered by the Babylonians, and for forty-six years Jerusalem was uninhabited and lay in ruins. The temple was demolished. The city’s walls were reduced to rubble. In 538 BC, the Persian king, Cyrus, allowed a small number of Jews to return to Jerusalem and resume normal life there.

It was an extraordinary moment for the people of God, but it also included many hardships. Life back in the land was very challenging. The people had no military protection from opportunistic outsiders and very few resources. They were essentially starting from scratch. In 537 BC, they began laying the foundations of a new temple building, but they made little headway before abandoning the project due to internal and external opposition.

One matter that will become evident as we move through Haggai is that the people were so overwhelmed by their daily tasks and responsibilities that they struggled to maintain an adequate spiritual life. The temple project had stalled, and there never seemed to be enough of anything to go around. We often use the expression “the daily grind” to describe the day-after-day struggle just to maintain where we are in life with little to no hope of getting ahead. The Jews who had returned from exile faced a daily grind unlike anything we have ever experienced.

Q: *What are some legitimate and illegitimate causes of the daily grind?*

Q: *Why does the daily grind make it difficult to thrive spiritually?*

APPLICATION POINT – The Jews who returned from exile felt that securing their basic daily needs demanded all their energy. They didn’t have time to think about the temple or worry about their personal holiness. Even though we are not returning exiles, our lives can often feel much like the lives of the people Haggai addressed. We share two problems of the “daily grind” with the returning Jews. First, we often fail to appreciate how vital a healthy spiritual life is for our existence. We easily become so consumed with our material needs that we forget

we are spiritual as well as physical beings. Second, there are times when the daily grind does not stem from basic needs but from uncontrolled greed and materialism. We get so caught up in the things everyone else has that we push ourselves to the limit to have them too. In doing so, we reveal that our true love is not God but material things.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+The structure of Haggai is very easy to recognize. The prophet gives four oracles, each of which begins with a date.

1. PRIORITIZE GOD
2. LIVE SACRIFICIALLY
3. FIND BLESSINGS IN GOD
4. FOCUS ON GOD'S CALLING

GOING DEEPER

+The Jews who returned from exile faced a daily grind that alienated them from God. Haggai addressed their situation in a way that also instructs us when we face our own daily grind. This section will look at each of Haggai's oracles.

1. PRIORITIZE GOD

■ HAGGAI 1

Q: Why was the temple significant for the people of God in the Old Testament?

Q: How would the spiritual lives of the people be hampered by the absence of the temple?

When the Jews returned from exile, they almost immediately began rebuilding the temple that was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC. They had returned to the land God had promised to their ancestors and were enthusiastic about beginning again. Their zeal, however, quickly vanished as they became accustomed to life in their new home. The temple project was placed on the back burner and then essentially abandoned (Haggai 1:2).

The temple was of crucial importance for the people of God in the Old Testament. It represented God's presence with His people and the harmony between them (1 Kings 6:11–14; Psalm 132:12–16). If you want to understand the importance of the temple for the people of God in the Old Testament, look at Solomon's address and prayer of dedication on the day Israel celebrated the completion of the first temple (1 Kings 8). The temple showcased God's glory—for Israel and even for the other nations of the ancient world. Anyone who prayed to the God of this temple would receive His blessing. Furthermore, it was a sign of God's faithfulness to the promises He made to David (2 Samuel 7; 1 Kings 8:25–26). Solomon's temple was the center of Israel's culture, both spiritually and politically. There could be no higher priority for those returning from exile.

Q: *How is the idea of the temple developed in the New Testament?*

Q: *What are the implications of us being the temple of the Holy Spirit [1 Corinthians 6:19]?*

APPLICATION POINT –Haggai recognized the importance of the temple for the people of God. In the new covenant, there are several significant developments in the importance of the temple. First, the temple finds its ultimate fulfillment in Christ. The temple was the place where God's presence was found among man. In Christ, who is fully man and fully God, the presence of God dwells within a person (John 1:14; Colossians 1:19). Christ is the fullest expression of what the temple was meant to be. Second, when believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we become temples ourselves (1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19). Finally, the church is understood to be a temple in which God dwells. Peter referred to believers as living stones that have been built into a spiritual house or temple (1 Peter 2:4–6). All the promise and hope Haggai saw in the incomplete temple is fulfilled in multiple ways in the new covenant. In the new covenant, the different ways in which the temple is fulfilled prioritize God in more ways than a physical building ever could.

Q: *Why couldn't the returned exiles finish building the temple?*

Q: *Why couldn't they provide enough for themselves?*

The returnees from exile faced extreme challenges in their new home. Life was not easy or even safe. Of course, they would have struggled with a building project as significant as the temple, but Haggai did not point to those challenges as the reason they did not complete the temple. They did not complete the temple because they were more interested building their own homes (Haggai 1:4). “Paneled houses” likely refers to expensive wood paneling used in luxurious houses. They thought building God’s house was too difficult, but they were willing to make sacrifices to build their own homes.

The people’s mindset was the exact opposite of what we encounter in the heart of David. David recognized the incongruity of living in a house himself while the ark of God dwelled in a tent (2 Samuel 7:1–3). God had not chosen David to build the temple, but David at least understood that God was more worthy of a house than he was.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the first chapter of Haggai is that the prophet argued that the people never had enough because they prioritized themselves over God. They had sown much but harvested little, eaten but had not been filled, been clothed but were still cold, earned wages but didn’t know where their money went (Haggai 1:6). The reason they never had enough was not because they did not work hard but because they did not prioritize God over themselves. They could work as hard as they wanted and not be able to provide for themselves because their provision was ultimately found in God, not themselves. In fact, God was working against them. Although the people should have been able to expect much, God had blown it all away (Haggai 1:9).

Q: *Do you struggle in prioritizing God over yourself? Have you seen the principle He suggests in Haggai 1:6 at work in your life?*

Q: *How does God do more to sustain you than you even realize [Colossians 1:17]? What keeps you from trusting God to provide for your needs?*

APPLICATION POINT – Many people who face a daily grind not because they must but because their expectations of their lifestyle demand it. Their eyes always want more, and to get more, they must keep doing more. For many

people, this pattern repeats itself to the point that they cannot enjoy the things they wanted because they must spend all their time grinding away to get them or pay for them. Of course, such people have disregarded their spiritual lives long ago. They have failed to prioritize God because they want everything the world has to offer. Haggai believed no matter how much they gain it will never be enough. Their own behavior bears this out.

Q: *What instruction is repeated in Haggai 1:5 and 7?*

Q: *How did the people respond to Haggai's call to repentance?*

Haggai's call to the people was simple. "Consider your ways." If they took some time to practice self-reflection, they would quickly see how they were prioritizing themselves over God. They would easily see the sinfulness of their behavior and repent.

Repentance does not come often for the people of God in the Old Testament. The greatest repentance seen thus far in our study of the Minor Prophets was not found among the Israelites but among the Ninevites (Jonah 3:6–9). But the people, beginning with the leadership, responded to Haggai's message with repentance (Haggai 1:12). As they responded to Haggai's message, God responded to them by promising His presence with them. God's presence with the people did not depend on the temple but upon their hearts. The people lay aside their distractions and prioritized building God's house (Haggai 1:14).

Q: *How often do you set aside time to reflect on the sins that have ensnared you?*

Q: *What tools can you use to help you "consider your ways"?*

APPLICATION POINT –Sin really isn't that hard to spot if you are committed to repenting from it. If it has been some time since you have "considered your ways," commit some time to do that this week. Consider reading the "sin catalogue" passages from the New Testament (Mark 7:21–23; 1 Corinthians 6:9–10; Galatians 5:19–21; 2 Timothy 3:1–5). It may also be helpful to look over recent sermon notes to consider ways you may be rebelling against God's perfect will. Of course, considering your ways does not mean merely identifying sin. It also means repenting from it. Some people think examining yourself and coming to grips with your sin is a negative or depressing thing, but Haggai did not seem to think so if it was accompanied by repentance. Repentance is the key

to experiencing God's presence (Haggai 1:13).

2. LIVE SACRIFICIALLY

■ HAGGAI 2:1-9

Q: *How does Ezra 3:12-13 help us understand Haggai 2:3?*

Q: *Why did Zerubbabel, Joshua, and all the people of the land need to be strong [Haggai 2:4]?*

A little more than a month and a half after Haggai's first oracle, the prophet again needed to address a situation arising among the people. The people had resumed work on the temple (Haggai 1:14), but certain older men were overcome with grief as they saw the temple taking shape. Though they were just boys when the first temple was destroyed, the memory of that building still occupied a place in their minds and hearts. They could not help but lament at the sight of the new building because its glory paled in comparison to the temple they remembered (Haggai 2:3; Ezra 3:12-13). For them, the new temple was a sad reminder of the toll the exile had taken upon the land and people.

Their disappointment would have undoubtedly been discouraging for Zerubbabel and the others working on the temple. Haggai did not rebuke these older men for their emotions or mislead the workers concerning the nature of the temple. Instead, he pointed everyone to the mercy of God. Although this was a meager temple, Haggai could foresee a day when it would be filled with the glory of the Lord. God would "shake" the nations, and they would flow to Jerusalem with offerings of silver and gold.

The fulfillment of Haggai's prophecy occurred over several stages and several unexpected changes. Haggai's prophecy was partially fulfilled when the Persian king, Darius, soon provided funds for working on this temple (Ezra 6:8-10). Haggai's words were never completely fulfilled for the temple built by Zerubbabel, which was completed in 515 BC. On multiple occasions, it was severely damaged as invading armies overtook Jerusalem. Zerubbabel's temple was eventually torn down to make room for the temple Herod built beginning in 20 BC. (This was the Herod who was king at the time of Jesus's birth.) Herod's funding to build another temple was again a partial fulfillment of Haggai's prophecy. The ultimate fulfillment of Haggai's prophecy is eschatological and centered on Christ. The Old Testament anticipated a time when God's glory would return to dwell among

His people (Ezekiel 43:1–7; 44:4). This was fulfilled at the incarnation when the glory of God was found in the man, Christ Jesus. People from all nations will flow to His kingdom (Revelation 5:9–10). We might be troubled that Haggai's exact words were not fulfilled in the manner we would have anticipated, but Christian theology sees continuity and fulfillment between the temples and, ultimately, Christ. The fulfillment of Haggai's prophecy is greater than those who received it would have anticipated.

Q: *What comfort would Zerubbabel and the others have taken from Haggai's prophecy?*

Q: *Who did Haggai say would secure the glory of the temple?*

APPLICATION POINT – The people would have understandably been discouraged by how little their efforts amounted to, but Haggai showed them what God would do with it in the future. This shows us that the important thing to God is not the amount of money we give or the time we spend serving. What is important is the sacrifice we make for Him. God can take the sacrifices we make for Him and multiply them to display His glory. This was Jesus's message concerning the poor widow who sacrificed from her meager funds to give an offering in the temple (Luke 21:1–4). There could be no better news for someone facing the daily grind. If you don't have much to give, either of your time or money, God is able to take what you can sacrifice and multiply it for His glory. You only need to be faithful to make the sacrifice. At the same time, Haggai's prophecy encourages us to back away from the daily grind. You do not have to work yourself to death! You will never be able to solve every problem, no matter how hard you push, but God can take what you can do and multiply it for His glory and for your provision.

3. FINDING BLESSINGS IN GOD

■ HAGGAI 2:10–19

Q: *In Haggai's oracle, was holiness able to be transferred from one thing to the next? What is the significance of this for the people who were building the temple?*

Q: *What was happening to the people before they started building the temple?*

Haggai's first oracle is a bit enigmatic for modern readers. The prophet was making several important points concerning the temple, the people's disobedience, and God's blessing. One of the enigmatic elements of this passage is the idea of holiness versus uncleanness. These are priestly categories pertaining to a person's or object's suitability for coming near to God. You may be familiar with these categories from the book of Leviticus. Leviticus is also concerned with the implications a recently built sanctuary, in that case the tabernacle, had for God's people.

At the opening of Haggai, the people had given up rebuilding the temple. They believed it was too great a hardship, but their disobedience brought a greater hardship upon them from God (Haggai 1:6, 9; 2:15–17). Now that the people had resumed building the temple, God was ready to bless them again, but the people could not mistake the blessings they received as coming from the holiness of the temple. The temple could not make them holy and worthy of divine blessing. If anything, their uncleanness endangered the holiness of the temple. The act of building the temple is not what took away their hardships or secured their blessings. Instead, their blessings came from God as He responded to their obedience in resuming their work on the temple.

Q: *Why is it important to recognize that we cannot do anything to earn God's blessing?*

Q: *How does Haggai's message correspond to the gospel?*

APPLICATION POINT – Structures of works-based righteousness are heavily encoded into our nature. We naturally think we must do things to earn God's favor, but Haggai's oracles show us the foolishness of these thoughts. Just as something unclean cannot be made holy through contact with what is holy, we cannot earn God's blessing through good works. Our sin taints even our best deeds. We cannot earn God's blessings, but we can receive them as a gift of His grace. God may respond to our good works with blessing, but we should never think He does so because we have earned it.

This is soul-saving news for those who are oppressed by the burdens life has placed upon them. If you are in the midst of the daily grind, you don't have to do extra to receive God's blessing. In fact, the most important lesson you

could learn is that you can do nothing to earn God's favor. Following God is not another thing to add to your plate. Instead, you only need to learn to receive God's blessing through His grace. In doing so, you may find the freedom to let go of other burdens that are weighing heavily on your shoulders.

4. FOCUS ON GOD'S CALLING

■ HAGGAI 2:20–23

Q: *What is the meaning of the signet ring?*

Q: *What importance does Zerubbabel have in the New Testament [Matthew 1:1–17]?*

Zerubbabel was the leader of the first wave of Jews returning from exile to the promised land. He became the governor of the new settlement of Jews. At this point, the kingship over God's people would not be granted to an individual as it was from the days of the monarchy to the exile. Leaders such as Zerubbabel would arise, but no one was made king. Haggai, however, envisioned a day when God would “shake the heavens and the earth” (Haggai 2:21), when the thrones of the kings of the earth will be overthrown, and God would anoint His own king over His people. Haggai revealed that this king would come from Zerubbabel. Thus, Zerubbabel is like a signet ring. A signet ring is a royal ornament identifying the king. Although Zerubbabel was not the king, he functioned as the symbol identifying his line as the one from which the king would come. The New Testament reveals that Jesus was the descendent from Zerubbabel who would become king over God's people.

Q: *What duties would Zerubbabel have had as governor?*

Q: *In what ways are your commitments keeping you from following God's calling upon your life?*

As governor, Zerubbabel had many responsibilities. He was responsible for the leadership of God's people. He would have functioned as a judge and as head of state. He was the architect of the temple. Zerubbabel likely found it difficult to slow down. But none of this compared to what Haggai announced at the conclusion of his prophecy.

Zerubbabel represented God's king who would come to rule over all the nations of the earth. This was the preeminent role of Zerubbabel's life.

You will not be the representative of God's king, but God still has a significant mission for your life. Christians often refer to this as a "calling." The problem is that many people in churches are ignoring God's calling on their lives because they have taken on so many other responsibilities. They are caught up in the daily grind and pay little attention to what the Holy Spirit is prompting them to do for the sake of the gospel. Many of us recognize God's calling on our lives, but for some reason, we feel as though we must prioritize everything else that vies for our attention. We want to wait until we can focus on God's calling and give it more of our attention, but that day never comes. If your daily grind keeps you from following God's call on your life, you are robbing God of the dedication owed to Him.

NEXT STEPS

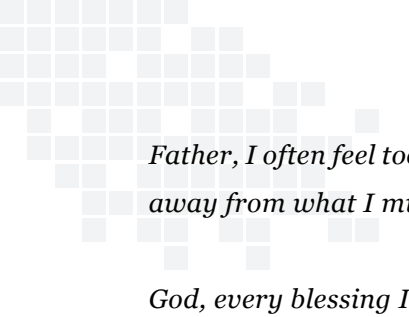
This lesson has drawn principles from Haggai to address Christians who are struggling to stay afloat spiritually amid their daily grind. Some of these principles are intended to help you prioritize God as you go through your daily grind. Other principles are intended to encourage you to step back from the things exhausting your physical, emotional, and spiritual energy. You must determine which these principles fits the path you need to take. For some, one of these paths may seem impossible, but that may be the clearest indication that it is the right one.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

God, forgive me for prioritizing myself, my comforts, and my desires over you. Help me keep you at the center of my life.

Lord Jesus, you are the king who will come to shake up the world! May I be found a faithful servant when you return.



Father, I often feel too worn down by life to think about my relationship with you. Give me the courage to step away from what I must to follow you as I should.

God, every blessing I have comes from you. I have done nothing to earn anything you have done for me. You have provided me with everything good in life. Help me to embrace the gospel of your grace so I may receive every good blessing from you.

ANCIENT WORDS FOR MODERN DISCIPLES

October 16, 2022 | Return and Restoration [Zechariah]

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Zechariah is primarily a forward-looking book. How will this alter how you think about application in this lesson?

Read Zechariah.

Pray that the renewal and restoration foreseen in Zechariah would characterize your life in Christ.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

God desires repentance from His people. In response, the blessings He has in store for the future will be realized.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

Focusing on our future hope can help us remain faithful in the present.

MEDITATE

“And the angel said to those who were standing before him, ‘Remove the filthy garments from him.’ And to him he said, ‘Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments’” (Zechariah 3:4).

GETTING STARTED

+This section will examine Zechariah 1:1–6. These verses create the framework in which the remainder of the book functions.

Q: *Have you ever remodeled a home or car? What challenges did you face?*

Q: *Why would a people returning from exile continue to struggle with sin?*

Like Haggai, Zechariah ministered among the earliest Jews who returned to Jerusalem following the exile. It was an exciting time for the people of God. After several decades, they had returned to their homeland. Homes were being rebuilt. Construction of a new temple began. This was all a sure sign that God had not completely abandoned them. But it was also a confusing time for the people of God. Although they recognized that God was working in their midst, there were still signs of stubbornness and sin among the people. Furthermore, their resolve to follow God's law did not run very deep. Their situation was like a remodeled home. Some things were new, but the vestiges of the old remained and caused problems.

Zechariah reminded the people they were following in the steps of their fathers (Zechariah 1:2). Unless the returned exiles wanted to repeat the pattern of their fathers, they needed to repent (Zechariah 1:3–6). Zechariah's ministry would help them see their need for repentance and give them a glorious vision of the future if they did.

Q: *How would hope in the future encourage you to remain faithful in the present?*

Q: *Zechariah pointed the returnees to their fathers. How does looking to the past encourage you to remain faithful in the present?*

APPLICATION POINT – The people had returned from exile, but things were still far from where they were supposed to be spiritually. The people were still caught in many sins and awaited a time when God would act decisively and remove sin from them. Like the exiles, we also live in a time of “already/not yet.” We have already received the blessings of Christ's resurrection, but we have not yet fully recognized them. Zechariah encourages us to remain faithful in the present based on our anticipation of all that God will do in the future.

▣▣ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Zechariah has a straightforward structure. After a short introduction, the book begins with a series of eight “night

visions.” The prophet then gave a short address to the exiles before concluding with two oracles of their future restoration.

1. ZECHARIAH’S NIGHT VISIONS
2. COMPASSION AND FUTURE BLESSING
3. FUTURE RESTORATION

GOING DEEPER

+This section will investigate Zechariah in more detail. It will overview each section and offer a personal application for each.

1. ZECHARIAH’S NIGHT VISIONS

■ ZECHARIAH 1:7–6:15

Q: *What connotations are sometimes associated with night? How might these influence our understanding of “night visions”?*

Q: *What do the visions in Zechariah 1:7–17 and 6:1–15 have in common?*

The first section of Zechariah is known as the night visions. This series of visions is introduced in Zechariah 1:8 with the phrase “I saw in the night.” The phrase “I lifted my eyes and saw” occurs multiple times throughout Zechariah 1:7–6:15, revealing the visionary nature of these episodes. The “night” element of these visions refers to their timing and may indicate these visions were dreams. There is nothing foreboding or sinister about the “night” or “darkness” aspect of these visions.

These visions follow a concentric pattern, meaning the centermost visions in the sequence share similar themes and the visions before and after, working outward from the center, also share themes:

A. Vision 1: The nations

B. Visions 2 and 3: Obstacles to rebuilding

C. Vision 4: Joshua and the temple

C. Vision 5: Joshua and the temple

B. Visions 6 and 7: Obstacles to rebuilding

A. Vision 8: The nations

The outer two visions in this group contain elements addressing the nations. They each begin with horses of various colors that “patrol the earth” (Zechariah 1:10) and go “out to the four winds of the heavens” (Zechariah 6:5). Both phrases refer to the entire world and all the nations within it.

In the first vision, an angel asked God if He would continue to be angry with the nation as has been the case for the seventy years of exile (Zechariah 1:12). God responded that He would have grace and mercy on the people (Zechariah 1:13, 16). Furthermore, He condemned the nations for bringing worse actions on His people than He had allotted them (Zechariah 1:15). The second vision contains an unexpected development. Joshua, the high priest, was given a crown and along with it the responsibility of rebuilding the temple (Zechariah 6:11–13). But he would not do so entirely on his own strength (Zechariah 6:15). Those who came from far off (gentile nations) would help in the completion of the temple.

❓: *What does God’s concern for the other nations reveal about His nature?*

❓: *How does the role of the nations in building the temple anticipate the church?*

APPLICATION POINT – Incorporating the nations into His plan to rebuild the temple reveals God’s sovereignty over the whole earth. There is no person or people over whom God does not reign and from whom God does not warrant praise. Ancient peoples believed every nation had their own god or gods, but the God of the Old Testament would not be pinned to one people group. Today, people like to speak of “your God,” meaning belief in God is fine for those who choose to do so, but if they do not choose God, then He has no authority over their lives. Zechariah’s prophecy does not allow for this. The God of the Bible is the God of all nations and over all people regardless of whether they believe in Him. This is one reason that evangelism and missions are so central to the Christian faith. Unbelief does not diminish God’s claim over all the earth. It only endangers the souls of those who refuse to believe.

Q: *What do the horns in Zechariah 1:18 represent?*

Q: *Who would come into the land in Zechariah 2? What exits the land in Zechariah 5? Why would these movements be significant for the building of the temple?*

It is important to remember that Zechariah's visions are apocalyptic in nature. Apocalyptic visions frequently use present realities to describe events that will come to pass in the future. Apocalyptic visions also make heavy use of symbolism. Each of these elements is observable throughout Zechariah.

The prevailing concern for those returning from exile was the rebuilding the temple and their homes, but there were many obstacles in their way. One difficulty was the extent to which the people had been scattered among the nations. Zechariah's second and third visions address this. Zechariah saw four horns, likely representing the four cardinal directions to which Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem had been scattered (Zechariah 1:18). In apocalyptic literature, horns often represent hostile enemy powers. In this case, the horns are the nations that had scattered God's people. Their work, however, would be undone by the four craftsmen (Zechariah 1:20–21). The four craftsmen simply correspond to the four horns and represent the work God would do to oppose the actions of the hostile nations. In Zechariah 2, God called His scattered people from among the exiles (Zechariah 2:6–13). They will fill the eschatological city described at the beginning of the third vision (Zechariah 2:1–5). The continuation of the exile and hostility of the nations were obstacles to rebuilding, but these visions reveal that God was working to overcome them. He would bring back the exiles to the land, and they would even be joined by many nations.

Zechariah 5 contains the sixth and seventh night visions. Both visions concern the removal of sin from the land. Sin was the cause of the exile. For rebuilding to take place, this sin had to be removed. The flying scroll is a curse that would come upon and remove all the thieves and liars in the land (Zechariah 5:1–4). The basket contained the sin and wickedness of the land (Zechariah 5:5–8). This basket was removed from the land and placed in the land of Shinar, which is Babylon (Zechariah 5:9–11). The removal of sin from the land would allow the rebuilding to begin.

Q: *What often impedes the spiritual growth of new believers?*

Q: *How can mature believers help newer believers grow in their faith?*

Those returning from exile hoped to rebuild their land, but merely returning did not make everything right. The people continued to struggle with spiritual sin that impeded the physical rebuilding. New believers often struggle to grow spiritually because many of the destructive sins that characterized their old life apart from Christ remain. Even people who have been Christians for a long time can find themselves caught up in sin that impedes their spiritual growth. Confessing Christ as Savior covers the guilt of sin with the blood of Christ, but sin does not automatically go away, and it can continue to subvert the spiritual growth of believers. These visions in Zechariah show us the importance of identifying and removing sin throughout the course of our Christian lives.

Q: *Why would Joshua's filthy garments be disastrous for the people [Zechariah 3:3-4]?*

Q: *How would Zerubbabel rebuild the temple [Zechariah 4:6]?*

The fourth and fifth night visions focus on two leaders. Zerubbabel led the returning exiles and functioned as their governor, and Joshua was the first high priest among them. These two men were crucial figures in the rebuilding of the nation and faced seemingly insurmountable difficulties in fulfilling their roles. In Zechariah's fourth vision, Joshua was found in filthy garments (Zechariah 3:3), accused before God by Satan. The high priest represented the people before God. It was his job to ceremonially cleanse the people and remove their sin, but if he were filthy from sin himself, the people had no hope. In response to Satan's accusations, God commanded for the filthy garments to be removed and replaced by clean ones (Zechariah 3:4-5), representing the removal of sin and the hope for restoration of the people.

The fifth night vision is one of the most enigmatic for modern readers and apparently for Zechariah too (Zechariah 4:5, 13). The main idea is that God would strengthen Joshua to fulfill the task of rebuilding the people (Zechariah 4:6). The olive tree was a symbol frequently used for fruitful and prominent leaders among God's people (Judges 9:9; Job 15:33; Hosea 14:6). The rebuilding of the temple was crucial for restoring God's presence among them.

Q: *Joshua was made clean by God's command, and Zerubbabel would restore the temple with God's power. How does this encourage modern believers seeking to grow in their faith?*

Q: *God has charged leaders in every church with the responsibility of building up the body of Christ. In what ways can you encourage the leadership of Oakwood?*

APPLICATION POINT – The gospel teaches that our salvation is accomplished not by our works but by God's work on our behalf. Zechariah's fourth and fifth night visions remind us of this. It also reminds us that our continued spiritual growth is also accomplished by God's strength. Zerubbabel was called to rebuild the temple, but the task would have been impossible in his strength alone. In the same way, God calls every believer to grow in sanctification, but this growth does not come from our strength; it comes from God's continued grace in our lives.

2. COMPASSION AND FUTURE BLESSING

■ ZECHARIAH 7–8

Q: *How did Zechariah respond to the men from Bethel regarding fasting?*

Q: *Zechariah 8 contains multiple indications of restoration for the people. What are some of the most prominent ones you notice?*

In Zechariah 7, a group from the northern town of Bethel arrived in Jerusalem and asked if they should continue mourning and fasting during the fifth month of the year (Zechariah 7:1–3). God spoke through Zechariah to reveal that He cared more about their compassion for others than their keeping a fast. This was a common sentiment among Israel's prophets (Isaiah 1:10–15; Jeremiah 7:5–7, 21–26; Amos 5:21–24; Micah 6:1–8). Anyone who had no compassion on others would not take part in the future restoration of God's people, regardless of how many fasts they practiced.

In Zechariah 8, God announced His plan to fully restore the people of God, bringing them out of the countries into which they had been exiled (Zechariah 8:7–8). In addition to God’s covenant people, the nations would also seek the Lord’s favor in Jerusalem. Zechariah 8 also includes a plea for compassion and justice among God’s people.

❧: *Why are justice and compassion essential in the restored community of God?*

❧: *In what ways are you able to show justice and compassion to others?*

APPLICATION POINT – These chapters anticipate the future full restoration of the people of God, partly by encouraging the people to practice now the justice and compassion that will characterize that future assembly. This is a lesson we dare not forget today. We can never become complacent about injustice in this life or think we can be unconcerned with the well-being of brothers and sisters in Christ as long as Christ has not yet returned. God desires to see the fruit of the restoration kingdom evident in our lives today.

3. FUTURE RESTORATION

❧ ZECHARIAH 9-14

❧: *The main point of Zechariah 9–11 is the restoration of the people. In Zechariah 9:1–13 what role does the judgment of Israel’s enemies play in the restoration of the people?*

❧: *Zechariah 10:3 and 11:1–17 condemn the shepherds of Israel. Why does the failure of the shepherds often coincide with the spiritual failure of the people?*

The final section of Zechariah contains two oracles, each beginning with the phrase “the oracle of the word of the Lord” (Zechariah 9:1; 12:1). The first oracle recounts the restoration of God’s people from exile. It begins by announcing God’s judgment on the surrounding nations. As seen previously in the Minor Prophets, the judgment

of these nations was viewed as a blessing for the people of God. One of the primary themes in this first oracle is the contrast created between the coming king who would bring peace to the people and the nations (Zechariah 9:9–13) and the failure of the previous leadership of the people of God (Zechariah 10:3 and 11:1–17). The unfaithful shepherds only led to the people’s destruction.

❓ *Who is the coming king who will lead the people out of exile and into restoration? Why was it odd for Zechariah to anticipate the people’s return and restoration from exile?*

❓ *Why is poor spiritual leadership so challenging to overcome?*

APPLICATION POINT – Zechariah anticipated the return and restoration of the people from exile when the people had already returned to the land. But there was a larger sense in which the exile was not over, coinciding with humanity’s exile from the presence of God. The king described in Zechariah 9:9–13 is fulfilled in Christ. He brings restoration to God’s people, which includes speaking peace to the nations (Zechariah 9:10).

❓ *How does the transformation in Zechariah 12:10–13:9 differ from that in 14:10–21? Who is transformed?*

❓ *What is the key to the transformations in Zechariah 12–14 [Zechariah 13:2–6]?*

The second oracle is divided into two parts that closely mirror each other. They both begin with a vicious assault upon Jerusalem (Zechariah 12:1–9; 14:1–9). Then, the people of God are rescued and transformed. This transformation would begin with the hearts of the people. They would forsake idolatry and false prophets (Zechariah 13:2–4), submitting to God’s will and worshipping Him (Zechariah 14:16). The first transformation is limited to the inhabitants of Jerusalem (Zechariah 13:1), but the second includes representatives from all nations (Zechariah 14:16). Again, this suggests continuity between what God was doing with the people specifically identified as His in the Old Testament and what He will do for His people gathered from among all the nations.

Q: *Zechariah foresaw horrific assaults upon God's people. How can you be prepared for escalating persecution as the return of Christ approaches?*

Q: *The conclusion of Zechariah emphasizes God's universal rule. How should this inform our understanding of nations and politics today? How does this vision give us hope for the future?*

APPLICATION POINT – Zechariah concludes with a vision of God's universal rule. Human history is replete with the horrors of war and conflict among the nations. These conflicts can be difficult for us to comprehend, both the violence used to carry them out and the depravity that often leads to them. All of this will come to an end when Christ returns in glory. The pain and turmoil brought on by human conflict will be gone, and all people will be united by their submission to God. As conflict and war come today, be reminded that it will not always be this way.

NEXT STEPS

Project planners frequently begin with the result they want and plan backward for what they need to do to get that result. Zechariah and other prophetic texts offer us an opportunity to do the same thing. God has given us a picture of what it will look like when He restores all things. What will it take for our lives to get there? Keep in mind that this restoration ultimately rests on the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit, but the Bible consistently calls us to be conformed to His image, which is what we will become when God's people are finally fully restored to Him. Make a list of areas in your life that you recognize are in need of Christ's transforming work.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

Father, thank you for restoring your creation to yourself, including me. I do not deserve your life-giving work in my life, but you have given it.

Jesus, Zechariah anticipates your coming. Help me to eagerly look forward to your return.

God, help me to see the idolatries in my life and get rid of them by the sanctifying power of your Holy Spirit.

Father, give me a vision, even a glimpse, of what life in your restored creation will be like. Help this vision to guide everything I do.



ANCIENT WORDS FOR MODERN DISCIPLES

October 23, 2022 | *Compromising Faith, Deceiving Ourselves (Malachi)*

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Describe a time you thought you were doing well spiritually only to discover some hidden issues were eroding your faith?

Read Malachi.

Ask God to help you identify which of the areas covered in Malachi are a struggle for you or pray that He will help you extend the logic of Malachi's message to something you struggle with.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

The people had deceived themselves into thinking they were walking according to God's statutes, but they had compromised the basics of their faith.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

We often live more morally compromised than we realize. We have surrendered so much moral ground that we often fail to see how things we find normal are offensive to God.

MEDITATE

"They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him" (Malachi 3:17).

GETTING STARTED

+This section introduces Malachi and his ministry context.

Q: *Although the people had returned to the land, they remained under foreign control. Why would this have been difficult for the people spiritually?*

Q: *Do you think it would have been more challenging to minister immediately after the return from exile (Haggai and Zechariah) or after some time had passed [Malachi]?*

Most scholars agree that Malachi ministered after the return from exile, during the mid- to late fifth century BC. The superscription to his book contains no historical or personal information (Malachi 1:1), but the use of the word “governor” (Malachi 1:8) is how provincial leaders were referred to during the Persian empire. Malachi’s concerns also overlap significantly with those in Ezra and Nehemiah. So, Malachi likely ministered one or two generations after the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, when the people had been returned from exile for some time.

Malachi ministered during a time of spiritual indifference and compromise. Throughout the book, it is evident that his audience believed themselves to be in good standing with God, but they failed to see how they had exchanged true faithfulness for comfortable religion. Their historical context was partly to blame. The exiles had big expectations when they returned to the land. Isaiah declared the desert would bloom (Isaiah 35); Jeremiah spoke of a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31–40); Ezekiel foresaw a new temple with flowing waters restoring the land (Ezekiel 47:1–12). But a generation after the return, the people had settled into a ho-hum existence. The pain of exile and the newness of the return had faded. They continued to live under the rule of foreign empires. They knew they were God’s covenant people, but they had grown accustomed to keeping Him on the margins of their existence. Malachi confronted their lackadaisical approach to God.

Q: *How does Malachi’s ministry context feel similar to today? How are you like his audience?*

Q: *What are the differences between Malachi’s religious context and ours?*

APPLICATION POINT – In many ways, Malachi’s audience seems like us. The promise of returning to the land was wonderful, but it fell short of their expectations. Perhaps there would be more to come, but in the meantime, the people had settled into the day-to-day monotony that characterized their lives. Christians today know Christ died for them, was raised again, and ascended into heaven while promising to return. And in the meantime, Christ’s followers are called to live faithfully for Him. But that was all a long time ago. We have been waiting for Christ to return for nearly two thousand years. The life we have in Christ is wonderful, but it is challenging to live

always in light of His imminent return. As with those returning from exile, it is easy to become wrapped up in our day-to-day existence and give a nod to God when it is convenient. If this feels familiar, Malachi was written for you.

▣ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Malachi has a unique prophetic style. He makes an accusation or state a claim and then anticipates an objection in return. Then he explains his original statement in further detail. In this way, he engages in a type of hypothetical dialogue with his audience. Even with this recognizable structure, there is some variation in how studies of Malachi are organized. This study will examine seven of Malachi's conversations.

CONVERSATION 1: HOW HAS GOD LOVED US?

CONVERSATION 2: HOW HAVE WE DESPISED GOD'S NAME?

CONVERSATION 3: WHY DOES GOD NOT REGARD OUR OFFERING?

CONVERSATION 4: HOW HAVE WE WEARIED GOD?

CONVERSATION 5: HOW CAN WE RETURN TO GOD?

CONVERSATION 6: HOW HAVE WE ROBBED GOD?

CONVERSATION 7: HOW HAVE WE SPOKEN AGAINST GOD?

GOING DEEPER

+This section will examine each of Malachi's conversations and draw applications from them for modern audiences.

CONVERSATION 1. HOW HAS GOD LOVED US?

▣ MALACHI 1:2–5

Q: *Who were Jacob and Esau?*

Q: *Why would the people have doubted God's love for them?*

The first conversation requires us to fill in some blanks. It begins with God declaring His love for Israel. Most of these initial declarations are accusations against the people. We cannot be certain whether this first declaration simply differs from the rest or if the declaration of God's love is made in response to the people's apathy toward Him. Whichever the case, the objection Malachi presupposed on behalf of the people was to question how God had loved them. They could not see it. They were disappointed in their lack of prosperity and the slow-moving promises of God.

God responded by pointing to His election of Jacob, Israel's patriarch, over his brother, Esau (Malachi 1:2). This references Genesis 25:19–26. God's election is the perfect demonstration of His love for Israel. Israel was allowed to return from exile and rebuild their land. Such an opportunity would not be given to the Edomites because God had not elected them to become His covenant people. Instead, God would only frustrate the Edomites' efforts to rebuild. God worked for Israel but against Esau. Rather than languishing in their own self-pity and doubting God's love for them, the people should have looked at what God had done for them and recognized the evidence of His love.

Q: *How is God's love evident in your life?*

Q: *Why is election a more certain indication of God's love than our current circumstances?*

APPLICATION POINT – Malachi's opening dialogue challenges some of our basic assumptions about life. We assume we are unbiased in evaluating how our current circumstances reflect God's attitude toward us. Compared to the Edomites, God's love for Israel should have been obvious, but they could not see it. Our tendency to self-pity and self-righteousness creates a sense of entitlement within us, and when that sense of entitlement is not met, we think God no longer loves us. Nothing could be further from the truth! We assume that our current circumstances are a better indication of God's love than His election. The Israelites looked at their situation and assumed God did not love them, but they were looking in the wrong place for His love. They should have looked to God's past commitment to them. The same is true for Christians today. We should never allow our current situation to make us question God's love for His elect people. Finally, we assume God cannot use discipline to transform us into what we are called to be. That is why challenges and difficulties in our lives can sometimes make us question God's love for us, even if these challenges emerge from our own sin. God can use the things we consider most unfortunate and undesirable to transform us into the image of His faithful Son (2 Corinthians 3:18; Hebrews 12:7–11).

CONVERSATION 2. HOW HAVE WE DESPISED GOD'S NAME?

■ MALACHI 1:6–2:9

Q: *What group is this second conversation focused upon?*

Q: *Why would offering unauthorized sacrifices jeopardize God's reputation among the nations [Malachi 1:11]?*

The second accusation and anticipated objection do not explicitly identify the spiritual issues Malachi addressed. He accused the people of despising God's name, and they objected by asking how (Malachi 1:6). Malachi then explained his reasoning, which focuses on the failure of the Levites to adhere to the sacrificial guidelines given in the Mosaic law. Rather than offering God an unblemished sacrifice, the priests sacrificed animals with obvious deformities, subverting the entire purpose of the sacrificial system. Sacrifices were intended to appease God's wrath by offering an animal as a substitute for sinful humanity. Sacrifices also revealed the esteem the one making the sacrifice held for God. By offering lame animals as sacrifices, the priests set the whole system in reverse. They did not esteem God much at all, so they offered a lame sacrifice. Their sacrifice revealed the lack of esteem they held for Him and incited His wrath even more. Instead of an act of worship securing the blessing of God, the sacrifices were an embarrassment and brought curses upon the Levites (Malachi 2:2–3). All of this was played out among the nations. Israel's sacrifices should have revealed God's glory among the nations. Instead, His glory would be revealed in His judgment against this wayward people.

Q: *Christians confess the centrality of God for all of reality. What causes us to treat Him as though He were peripheral in our lives?*

Q: *Christians do not offer sacrifices as in the Old Testament, but that does not mean our behavior has no parallel to theirs. How do we dishonor God by offering less of ourselves than He deserves?*

APPLICATION POINT – Paul commanded us to present our “bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (Romans 12:1). By “living sacrifice,” he meant living in complete submission and devotion to God's will. We give up living for ourselves. We allow God to define who we are and how we live. To the degree that we are

unsuccessful in carrying out Paul's command, we are like the Levites Malachi described. We are telling God to be satisfied with less than He is worthy of. We do this because we do not esteem God to the degree that we ought. We have pushed Him aside to make room for ourselves. We have failed to grasp the significance of living in His presence. We might think pushing Him aside is the only way to secure our happiness, but we are robbing God of His worship and thus robbing ourselves of true joy.

CONVERSATION 3. WHY DOES GOD NOT REGARD OUR OFFERING?

■ MALACHI 2:10–16

Q: *What did the people's relationship with God and the relationship between husbands and wives have in common?*

Q: *Why were foreign marriages a persistent problem for God's people in the Old Testament?*

In his third hypothetical dispute, Malachi declared that God would no longer accept offerings from the people (Malachi 2:13). His hypothetical opponents asked, “Why not?” in Malachi 2:14, but he had been building his case against them since 2:10. God would no longer accept their sacrifices because they had failed to maintain faithfulness to their covenant relationships. The people's common ancestry and mutual covenant with God meant they should have been committed to one another, but instead they had been faithless (Malachi 2:10). Their faithlessness to one another was matched by their faithlessness to God (Malachi 2:11). Malachi said they had married the daughter of a foreign god, a reference to their intermarriage with people who worshipped gods other than the God of Israel. Such action naturally compromised the people's faithfulness to God. Finally, Malachi accused them of being faithless to the “wife of your youth” (Malachi 2:14). Marriage is a covenant relationship between husband and wife. It parallels the relationship between God and His people. Certain men were divorcing their wives to marry foreign women. This final accusation ties all three together. These men were marrying foreign women, which introduced foreign gods among the people, which enticed everyone else to sin. How could God accept the offerings of a people so unfaithful to their covenant commitments?

Q: *How does your faithfulness to family testify to your faithfulness to God?*

Q: *What other relationships could reflect your covenant relationship with God?*

APPLICATION POINT – There are certain relationships that reflect our relationship with God. Paul utilized the same idea in Ephesians 5:22–6:9. If we are incapable of being faithful in these relationships, we will struggle to be faithful to God as well. If you struggle to love and remain faithful to your spouse, you will struggle to remain faithful to God. If parents and children cannot mirror the love between God and His covenant people, they will also struggle to retain a faithful relationship with God. The bondservant-master relationship is not exactly like a manager-worker relationship, but to the degree they are similar, they reflect your faithfulness to God. If you struggle to maintain your human relationships, you will struggle to maintain your relationship with God.

CONVERSATION 4. HOW HAVE WE WEARIED GOD?

■ MALACHI 2:17–3:5

Q: *Why would the people say, “Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord”?*

Q: *What is the implication of Malachi 3:1–5 for the second question in Malachi 2:17?*

Malachi’s fourth dialogue begins with an accusation that the people had wearied God. When his hypothetical opponents challenged this assertion, Malachi replied, “By saying, ‘Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them.’ Or by asking, ‘where is the God of justice?’” How does Malachi’s response pertain to the accusation? The key is found in the words Malachi put in the mouths of the people, which were excuses to disregard God’s commands. The people accused God of approving of those who did evil by allowing them to prosper. If He allowed the wicked to prosper, then “where is the God of justice?” The people’s misunderstanding of God became their license to disobey Him themselves. If God allowed the evildoer to prosper, why not do evil and prosper?

Malachi responded by saying the people were wrong to assume God would allow evildoers to continue in prosperity. God was preparing to send “the messenger of the covenant” (Malachi 3:1). This messenger was

coming in judgment. Like a refiner who removes impurities from metals, the messenger would remove evildoers from among God's people (Malachi 3:2–4).

Q: *What are the other logical flaws in the people's reasoning?*

Q: *How else do people try to excuse sin?*

APPLICATION POINT – People are often at their most creative when they attempt to justify their behavior. The people Malachi addressed are a perfect example. They blamed God for their sinful behavior and then questioned His commitment to justice! We can never rationalize sin by thinking that God is unjust or that He will let us get away with it. Such an excuse even reveals the problem with our obedience. If we take this attitude, when we obey, we are not doing it from a desire to please God but in an attempt to earn His favor. When you get one part of the gospel wrong, you will eventually get everything wrong.

CONVERSATION 5. HOW CAN WE RETURN TO GOD?

■ MALACHI 3:6–7

Q: *Why is God's unchanging nature crucial to understanding the people's repentance?*

Q: *Why would the people question whether they could return to God?*

Malachi's fifth conversation is the shortest. Many scholars do not treat these verses as a separate unit, but they do contain the assertion-hypothetical objection pattern evident in the other sections, even if the conversation is abbreviated. Malachi's call for the people to return to God sets this conversation in motion (Malachi 3:7). The people could not understand how they could return to God after all they had done. Malachi tied God's commitment to His people to His unchanging nature. If God changed, the people would have met their demise long ago, but God was committed to Judah. Nothing would change this. Not even the people's sin against Him.

Q: *How does God's faithfulness give you confidence to approach Him in repentance?*

Q: *Have you ever felt as though God would not forgive you?*

APPLICATION POINT – Our unfaithfulness does not change the faithfulness of God. Our forgiveness does not rest on us getting back to where we need to be. Forgiveness rests in God always remaining where He is. He is always ready to forgive repentant sinners. The people Malachi addressed were audacious sinners, but if they returned, God was ready to forgive even them. God has not moved. He is ready to receive you as well.

CONVERSATION 6. HOW HAVE WE ROBBED GOD?

■ MALACHI 3:8-12

Q: *How does Malachi use the word "rob" differently than its typical use? What effect does this have for his oracle?*

Q: *In withholding their tithes and contributions, how were the people actually robbing themselves as well as God?*

In his sixth conversation, Malachi declared that the people had robbed God (Malachi 3:8). His accusation was ingenious because it would naturally be regarded by the people as false. As bad as they were spiritually, they were not stealing money from the temple treasury. Malachi's accusation leads to the anticipated "how have we robbed God?", to which Malachi responded by arguing they had not robbed Him by taking money out of the temple treasury but by keeping out what should rightfully go into it. The people were failing to tithe and make offerings from their possessions. Although this is not technically robbing, the result is the same. They would be cursed by God just as if they had stolen money from the temple.

The worst thing about the people's unfaithfulness in giving to God is that they were only harming themselves. God's storehouses are infinite. If the people would be faithful to give, God would be faithful to provide abundantly for them (Malachi 3:10). He even invited the people to put His generosity to the test.

Q: *In what ways are you holding back your financial resources from God? What about your service? Your talents?*

Q: *How have you seen the principle in Malachi 3:10, that God will bless faithful givers abundantly, at work?*

APPLICATION POINT – Jesus taught that there is a direct link between what we spend our money on and what we treasure most (Matthew 13:44–46). Malachi exhorts us to invest our resources and talents in the things of God. It will not diminish our net worth, but it will clarify what we think is worth most. Furthermore, we cannot overlook Malachi’s claim that God will provide for those who give faithfully.

CONVERSATION 7. HOW HAVE WE SPOKEN AGAINST GOD?

■ MALACHI 3:13–4:3

Malachi’s final conversation is like the fourth. The people saw the arrogant and evildoers prospering and escaping God’s judgment. Rather than using this as an excuse to engage in sinful activity, as in the fourth conversation, the people were on the verge of giving up their faith. What was the point of being faithful to God if the wicked prospered? Malachi treated this as a word spoken against God (Malachi 3:13).

Malachi’s response is similar to what he declared in the fourth conversation. Although the wicked may prosper and get away with their sin for a time, a day is coming during which God will recognize the righteous and hold every evildoer accountable. Malachi referred to a “book of remembrance,” written of those who fear God and esteem His name (Malachi 3:16). The wicked will meet their judgment on the day of the Lord (Malachi 4:1–3)

APPLICATION POINT – It is often hard to maintain our faith when we struggle to see God at work while the wicked prosper. We are easily caught up by the monotony of our daily struggle and act as though God were not there. Our solution is the same one Malachi pointed to during His time. We have to look to the future and see what God will do for those who maintain their faith in Him. The key to understanding our present reality is to view it through the lens of the future God has prepared. When we do that, we will see that today’s monotony is in fact the ground upon which the battle for human souls is taking place. Will we be found faithful at the day of the Lord or not?

NEXT STEPS

The people addressed by Malachi struggled to see how God was active in their world. So, they were often spiritually indifferent and compromised their faith when convenience dictated. The same can often be true for us. We do not fully appreciate the things God is doing to restrain evil and hold the world together. We need a greater appreciation for how He is at work in the world today.

For the next month, commit to completing one of these prompts each day:

Today, God protected me when ...

Today, God gave me comfort when ...

Today, I was reminded of the importance of gospel when ...

Today, I was encouraged when ...

You may wish to develop additional prompts. The key is to see how God is at work in ways we often take for granted.

PRAY

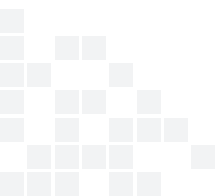
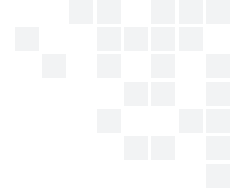
+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

God, forgive me for becoming accustomed to going through life with you in the margins. You are the center of my life and the rest of creation.

Jesus, may the wonder of the gospel never fade for me. Help me to always keep you at the forefront of my thoughts.

God, help me to live in light of Christ's return and His kingdom.

Father, I praise your unchanging nature. I have hope because you refused to give up on lost sinners.







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