

CHAPTER 16: Habakkuk, Zephaniah and Three Odd Prophets

The two prophets we are going to look at next are Habakkuk and Zephaniah. They reside in the southern kingdom of Judah. Their ministries take place about 60 years after Isaiah's. This is long after the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians. These two men prophesy in the final years leading up to the fall of Jerusalem and Judah. Let's hear what they have to say.

HABAKKUK

Habakkuk focuses on the spiritual depravity in his own nation of Judah. He observes idolatry and injustice throughout the land. God's people are neglecting the Law. Unlike the other prophets Habakkuk does not directly address God's people. He does not speak on God's behalf to accuse the nation of anything or even to call them to repentance. Rather, Habakkuk's words are addressed personally to God. In fact the book opens with him having this conversation with God...

“How long, O Lord, must I cry for help? But You do not listen! I call out to You, ‘Violence!’ But You do not intervene! Why do You force me to witness injustice? Why do You put up with wrongdoing? Destruction and violence confront me; conflict is present and one must endure strife.” (Habakkuk 1:2-3)

God responds by telling Habakkuk that He is fully aware of the sinful condition of His own people and that He's about to act. God says... **“Look, I am about to empower the Babylonians, that ruthless and greedy nation. They sweep across the surface of the earth, seizing dwelling places that do not belong to them. They are frightening and terrifying; they decide for themselves what is right.”** (Habakkuk 1:6-7) God informs Habakkuk of His plan to use the Babylonians as His instrument of judgment on Judah. This is similar to the messages delivered by Isaiah and Micah years before.

Habakkuk does not like God's answer at all! He tells God that as corrupt as Judah is, the Babylonians are far worse! Habakkuk just cannot understand how a holy, righteous God, could use a wicked nation like Babylon to destroy His own people. He demands an explanation.

Habakkuk sees himself as a watchman on the city walls – **“I will stand at my watch post; I will remain stationed on the city wall. I will keep watching, so I can see what He says to me and can know how I should answer when He counters my argument.”** (Habakkuk 2:1)

God responds. He tells Habakkuk to write down what he sees and hears. He says to “wait patiently.” Everything God is telling him WILL eventually come to pass. Habakkuk just needs to exercise a little faith. **“The righteous shall live by his faith”** (Habakkuk 2:4)

God adds that He will bring Babylon down. They are **“as good as dead!”** (Habakkuk 2:6,9,12 and 15) God issues a series of five woes, judgments, on the Babylonians for their evil behavior. He condemns them for a whole host of sins including extortion, stealing, illegal gain, violence, drunkenness, shameful behavior, and idolatry.

After hearing God’s plan, Habakkuk offers up a prayer. He accepts what God is about to do. He makes a request on behalf of the people... **“But when You cause turmoil, remember to show us mercy!”** (Habakkuk 3:2)

Habakkuk then describes God’s great glory and power – **[God’s] splendor covers the skies, His glory fills the earth. He is as bright as lightning; a two pronged lightning bolt flashes from His hand. This is the outward display of His power.** Habakkuk connects the future acts of God back to acts of the past, where God dealt mightily with Israel’s enemies.

Right in the middle of all this judgment Habakkuk sees God’s future salvation. **“You march out to deliver your people, to deliver Your special servant.”** (Habakkuk 3:13) This “special servant” refers to the promised messianic king spoken of by the prophet Isaiah and others we have heard from.

Habakkuk’s struggle, his journey of faith, leads him to make this great declaration of faith in God at the end of the book (which sounds very much like the words of God’s faithful servant Job that we heard earlier in the story)...

When the fig tree does not bud, and there are no grapes on the vines; when the olive trees do not produce, and the fields yield no crops; when the sheep disappear from the pen, and there are no cattle in the stalls, I will rejoice because of the Lord; I will be happy because of the God who delivers me! The sovereign Lord is my source of strength. He gives me the agility of a deer; He enables me to negotiate the rugged terrain. (Habakkuk 3:17-19)

ZEPHANIAH

The prophet Zephaniah is the great-great grandson of King Hezekiah. He is a contemporary of Habakkuk. Zephaniah's words are directed at the disobedient nation of Judah during the early days of King Josiah. He does not mention any of the religious reforms led by King Josiah (2 Kings 22-23 and 2 Chron 34-35). So, more than likely, Zephaniah's message predates those reforms.

The book of Zephaniah starts right in with God declaring judgment... **"I will destroy everything from the face of the earth," says the Lord. "I will destroy people and animals; I will destroy birds in the sky and fish in the sea."** (Zephaniah 1:2-3a) This sounds very much like God's flood judgment on the world at the time of Noah. But God clarifies exactly who THIS judgment is for...

(The idolatrous images of these creatures will be destroyed along with evil people.) "I will remove humanity from the face of the earth," says the Lord. "I will attack Judah and all who live in Jerusalem. I will remove from this place every trace of Baal worship, as well as the very memory of the pagan priests." (Zephaniah 1:3b-4) This severe judgment will be for idolatry. The animals mentioned are the idolatrous images and the people are those who worship these images.

God narrows His words of judgment by focusing squarely on the idolatry in the nation of Judah. **Be silent before the Lord God, for the Lord's day of judgment is almost here.** (Zephaniah 1:7) God says that He will punish Judah's kings and royal family. He will remove their wealth. All their merchants will disappear. Their houses will be ruined and their goods plundered. The citizens of Jerusalem will wail loudly.

That day will be a day of God's anger, a day of distress and hardship, a day of devastation and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and dark skies, a day of trumpet blasts and battle cries. Judgment will fall on the fortified cities and the high corner towers. (Zephaniah 1:15-16) Zephaniah's words paint an awful apocalyptic image of the fate that awaits Judah and Jerusalem. Zephaniah does not mention which army it is that is coming to destroy Jerusalem. But we know from 2 Kings 25 and 2 Chronicles 36 and from the prophets Micah and Habakkuk that it will be the Babylonians.

Zephaniah urges the people of Judah to repent. **Seek the Lord's favor, all you humble people of the land who have obeyed His commands! Strive to do what is right! Strive to be humble! Maybe you will be protected on the day of the Lord's angry judgment.** (Zephaniah 2:3) Zephaniah hopes that the faithful remnant of God's people will escape God's wrath. But that will only happen if they humble themselves and turn to Him.

Zephaniah next, in Chapter 2, focuses his attention on God's judgment of the nations around Judah who are all enemies of God's people – the Philistines to the west, the Moabites and Ammonites to the east, the Cushites (Egypt) to the south, and the Assyrians to the north.

But it is not just the enemies of Judah who have sinned against God and made Him angry. So has Jerusalem! **The filthy, stained city is as good as dead; the city filled with oppressors is finished! She is disobedient; she refuses correction. She does not trust the Lord; she does not seek the advice of her God... Her prophets are proud; they are deceitful men. Her priests defile what is holy; they break God's laws.** (Zephaniah 3:1-2, 4)

Though sin is rampant in Judah, there is a faithful group of God's people – a **humble and meek group of people** (Zephaniah 3:12). To them God gives this exhortation...

"Therefore you must wait patiently for Me," says the Lord, "for the day when I attack and take plunder. I have decided to gather nations together and assemble kingdoms, so I can pour out My fury on them – all My raging anger. For the whole earth will be consumed by My fiery anger." (Zephaniah 3:8) So yes, while a small remnant of Judah may be spared, God's judgment IS coming upon sin which includes most of the nation of Judah. So Zephaniah has a lot of bad news here.

But then, surprisingly, in the very next verse God adds this...

"Know for sure that I will enable the nations to give Me acceptable praise. All of them will invoke the Lord's name when they pray, and will worship Him in unison." (Zephaniah 3:9) God loves all people. His fiery anger is not aimed at annihilating everybody. It is intended ultimately to purify the nations, which includes Judah and Jerusalem. Again we see that God's judgment will ultimately lead to God's blessing.

The book of Zephaniah closes with a beautiful picture of a restored Jerusalem where all the nations are gathering together as one. Zephaniah tells Judah, **"The Lord your God is in your midst; He is a warrior who can deliver. He takes great delight in you; He renews you by His love; He shouts for joy over you... Be sure of this! I will make all the nations of the earth respect and admire you when you see Me restore you," says the Lord.** (Zephaniah 3:17 and 20)

In the end all who have been saved will join together with God's covenant people Israel to worship God. The joy of their salvation is so amazing that God Himself participates in their happy celebration. So the book ends on a high note with words of hope.

In the title for this lesson I refer to the next prophets we are going to look at – Obadiah, Jonah and Nahum – as “three odd prophets.” Let me explain. It’s not that these prophets themselves are odd. It’s that their messages are completely different from any of the other prophets we have seen so far. Not one of these three prophets directs their messages to either Israel or Judah. Obadiah preaches against Edom; Jonah and Nahum preach against Nineveh (Assyria).

OBADIAH

This is the shortest book in the whole Old Testament, just 21 verses. Obadiah is a prophet from Judah. He issues a series of divine judgments against the nation of Edom shortly after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. So then, his prophetic ministry occurs about 30-50 years after Habakkuk and Zephaniah.

Edom is Judah’s neighbor to the south and east, located on the other side of the Dead Sea. Recall from Genesis that the Edomites have a shared ancestry with the Israelites. They both belong to Abraham’s family. Abraham’s son Isaac had twin sons, Jacob and Esau (Genesis 25). These twins were polar opposites and often clashed. Key events: Esau sold his birthright to Jacob for a pot of stew; Jacob tricked their father Isaac into giving him the family blessing; this angered Esau so much that he wanted to kill Jacob; Jacob fled for his life north to Mesopotamia where he lived with his uncle for 20 years. The two brothers reunited at one point, but for the most part they had very little contact with each other. Jacob and Esau later received the names Israel and Edom, respectively. These became the names their descendants would take. Despite the family bond, the people of Israel and Judah maintained a tumultuous, sometimes even hostile relationship with the people of Edom.

When Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and Judah was conquered, the Edomites did not step in and help their brothers. Instead they turned on Judah and plundered many of its cities (2 Kings 24-25 and 2 Chronicles 36). In the book of Obadiah, God holds Edom accountable for what they did to Judah at this time.

Edom is well known for their strong fortresses built into the rocks of the rugged desert mountain range associated with Mount Seir. This gives Edom a strong sense of security. **“Your presumptuous heart has deceived you – you who reside in the safety in the rocky cliffs, whose home is high in the mountains. You think to yourself, ‘No one can bring me down to the ground!’”** (Obadiah 1:3)

God’s response to Edom is... **“Because you violently slaughtered your relatives, the people of Jacob, shame will cover you, and you will be destroyed forever. You stood aloof while strangers took his army captive, and foreigners advanced to his gates... You should not have gloated when your relatives suffered calamity. You should not have rejoiced over the people of Judah when**

they were destroyed. You should not have boasted when they suffered adversity.”
(Obadiah 1:10-12)

“For the day of the Lord is approaching for all the nations! Just as you have done, so it will be done to you.” (Obadiah 1:15) Here Obadiah expands the scope of God’s judgment. He says that ALL prideful nations that act the way Edom did will likewise face God’s judgment. But as in all the prophets, God’s judgment is never His final word. And so the book concludes with a future hope.

God says that He is going to restore His kingdom in Jerusalem. **“The exiles of this fortress of the people of Israel will take possession of what belongs to the people of Canaan... Those who have been delivered will go up on Mount Zion in order to rule over Esau’s mountain. Then the Lord will reign as King!”** (Obadiah 1:20-2).

The Promised Land will one day be repopulated with a faithful remnant of Israel and Judah. God’s kingdom will be expanded to include all the territory of the nations that surrounded them – from the Mediterranean coast all the way to the mountains of Edom. Obadiah expands upon the vision we have seen of God’s future kingdom – God’s salvation will be extended from Israel to ALL the nations.

JONAH

The book of Jonah is unique among the prophets because, rather than contain a collection of God's words spoken by Jonah, it tells a story about him. Jonah is the main character along with God. All the human characters in this story do the exact opposite of what we might expect them to do. Jonah is God's messenger, but he rebels against God and tries to run away. He is hateful and unloving and does not like the fact that God loves His enemies. The old salty sailors are actually men with soft hearts who fear God. The pagan king of Nineveh is a wealthy and powerful ruler. As soon as Jonah delivers his message of judgment, the king humbly repents. He even calls on his own wicked people to repent. So, this is a fascinating story.

[Note: the story of Jonah takes place prior to the Assyrian conquest of Israel. However, the timeframe is irrelevant because the focus of the story is NOT on Israel].

The story begins when God calls Jonah, a prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel. God tells him... **“Go immediately to Nineveh, that large capital city, and announce judgment against its people because their wickedness has come to My attention.”** (Jonah 1:2) Nineveh is the capital of the Assyrian Empire, which is Israel's bitter enemy. But Jonah refuses to go. Instead of traveling up toward Nineveh, Jonah heads west – the opposite direction. He goes to Joppa and finds a merchant ship bound for Tarshish. He pays the fare and climbs aboard.

Not long after setting sail God sends a storm. **But the Lord hurled a powerful wind on the sea. Such a violent tempest arose on the sea that the ship threatened to break up!** (Jonah 1:4) Jonah is oblivious to all of this because he is sound asleep down in the ship's cargo hold. Meanwhile the pagan sailors up on deck are afraid for their lives. They know that this storm is an act of divine wrath and cry out to their gods to save them. They even begin to jettison the ship's cargo to lighten the ship, but to no avail.

They find Jonah sleeping, wake him up and bring him up on deck. To determine whose fault it is that this storm was sent the sailors throw the dice (casting lots). They find out that Jonah is the one to blame. The lots fall on him. They ask Jonah to explain himself. **[Jonah] said to them, “I am a Hebrew! And I worship the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.”** (Jonah 1:9) He proceeds to tell them the story about how he tried to run away from God.

The sailors ask Jonah what they should do to make this storm go away. Jonah tells them to throw him into the sea. Of course they are reluctant to do this because it would basically be murder. But at some point they realize they have no other option and so they pick Jonah up and throw him into the sea. They repent to God even as they toss

Jonah overboard. As soon as they do this the storm subsides. The sailors, upon witnessing this, fear God greatly and worship Him.

As Jonah is sinking down into the sea, God rescues him. **The Lord sent a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.** (Jonah 1:17)

Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the stomach of the fish...“Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and You heard my voice.” (Jonah 2:1-2)

“Water engulfed me up to my neck; the deep ocean surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. I went down to the very bottoms of the mountains; the gates of the netherworld barred me in forever; but You brought me up from the Pit, O Lord my God. When my life was ebbing away, I called out to the Lord, and my prayer came to Your holy temple... I promise to offer a sacrifice to You with a public declaration of praise; I will surely do what I have promised. Salvation belongs to the Lord!” (Jonah 2:5-9)

God responds to Jonah’s prayer by having the fish vomit Jonah out onto dry land. Once again God tells Jonah to go and preach in Nineveh. This time, lessons learned, Jonah complies.

So Jonah went immediately to Nineveh, as the Lord has said. (Now Nineveh was an enormous city – it required three days to walk around it!) When Jonah began to enter the city one day’s walk, he announced, “At the end of forty days, Nineveh will be overthrown!” (Jonah 3:3-4) There is no mention of God. Jonah does not say what the Ninevites have done wrong; or who it is that is going to overthrow them. Despite all of this the king of Nineveh and the entire city, including all of its animals, repent. For a second time in this story evil pagans demonstrate a more appropriate response to God than does His own prophet.

As was pointed out earlier in the introduction to the prophets, the repentance here of the godless Ninevites (with limited revelation about God) stands in stark contrast to the stubborn lack of repentance by God’s own covenant people Israel.

When God saw their actions – they turned from their evil way of living! – God relented concerning the judgment He had threatened them with and He did not destroy them. (Jonah 3:10)

What is Jonah’s reaction to this amazing revival among the Ninevites? He gets very angry! Jonah basically tells God, “I knew this would happen! That’s why I ran away in the first place.” He says...**“I knew that You are gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in mercy, and One who relents concerning threatened**

judgment. So now, Lord, kill me instead, because I would rather die than live!” (Jonah 4:3-4) But God doesn't kill Jonah. Instead He asks Jonah a simple question, “Why are you so angry?” Jonah ignores the question and goes outside the city to sit and sulk.

God provides a little plant that rises up and shades Jonah from the hot sun. Of course this makes Jonah very happy. But then the next day God sends a worm to kill the plant and so Jonah loses his shade. Poor Jonah! Suffering once again in the heat of the sun Jonah asks God to kill him. **God said to Jonah, “Are you really so very angry about the little plant?” And [Jonah] said, “I am as angry as I could possibly be!”** (Jonah 4:9) These are Jonah's last words in the story.

In this story God gets the final word. He says that the whole plant and worm incident was His attempt to try and get through to Jonah. Here Jonah got all concerned over a little plant that he only enjoyed for a day. So, God asks Jonah... **“Should I not be even more concerned about Nineveh, this enormous city? There are more than one hundred and twenty thousand people in it who do not know right from wrong, as well as many animals!”** (Jonah 4:11)

The point of the story contained here in the book of Jonah is to profoundly impact us, the readers. God's questions to Jonah are actually addressed to us. “How does it make you feel that God loves YOUR enemies and is willing to spare them what they deserve for sins they have committed? Does that make you angry or are you grateful for it?”

Remember, as a member of the human race you and I were enemies of God at some point. But God casts a wide net of mercy over all those who repent and turn to Him – no matter who they might be. Yes, even those wicked, pagan, undeserving Ninevites!

NAHUM

The prophet Nahum is from the town of Elkosh, in the southern kingdom of Judah. His short prophecy is directed neither against Israel or Judah but is **an oracle against Nineveh** (Nahum 1:1). This is the same Nineveh we just saw in Jonah. It is the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. Nahum writes after the Assyrians have conquered the northern kingdom of Israel, but prior to the fall of the southern kingdom of Judah.

The people of Judah are concerned (and rightfully so) about the Assyrian threat to them, especially after what happened to their neighbor Israel to the north. They have seen the Assyrian army destroy their homes, burn their crops and kill many of their people. They are a constant threat to the peace and security of Jerusalem and Judah. Nahum's name means "comfort." And so it is that Nahum writes his words to comfort the concerned citizens of Judah.

To give some historical context – it's been over 100 years since Jonah preached in Nineveh. And we know that those people repented and God did not destroy the city. But the Ninevites' spiritual revival was short-lived. The Ninevites of Jonah's day have become the powerful, aggressive Assyrian Empire of Nahum's day. The Assyrians are constantly expanding their territory which has extended as far south as Egypt. And while God did use the Assyrians to judge the nation of Israel, God now announces that He will judge Nineveh and the Assyrian Empire.

The book of Nahum opens by underscoring God's patience and His wrath. Nahum quotes God's description of Himself from Exodus 34 after the golden calf incident; and from Numbers 14 after the people refused to go in and possess the Promised Land: **The Lord is slow to anger but great in power; the Lord will certainly not allow the wicked to go unpunished.** (Nahum 1:3)

Nahum sees God coming in all of His glory – to confront the nations and pour out His wrath on evil. Nahum contrasts God's harsh judgment on the Ninevites with God's joy-filled deliverance of the Israelites.

Nahum describes the downfall of Nineveh and Assyria in an epic battle scene. Though these events are yet future for Nahum, he describes the battle vividly in the present tense as though he is witnessing it firsthand... The enemy is approaching the city of Nineveh. **The watchmen of Nineveh shout: "An enemy who will scatter you is marching out to attack you!"** (Nahum 2:1) We then see soldiers dressed in scarlet, shining chariots, spears brandished, and chariots racing through the streets. There is mass chaos in the city. We watch as the city walls are breached, people are slaughtered and the city is plundered. **Destruction, devastation, and desolation! Their hearts faint, their knees tremble, each stomach churns, each face turns pale!** (Nahum 2:10)

Nahum announces a woe to Nineveh – **Woe to the city guilty of bloodshed! She is full of lies; she is filled with plunder; she has hoarded her spoil!** (Nahum 3:1) The city built with innocent blood is doomed. Her violence and greed have sown the seeds of her destruction. A taunt goes out against Nineveh. Nobody cries for her or comforts her. Instead they clap their hands for joy.

Nahum never says who the enemy is that destroys Nineveh and Assyria. History tells us that it will be King Nabopolassar and the Babylonians several decades later.

The book of Nahum shows us that God cares about the innocent and that He grieves injustice. We see from the example of Nineveh and Assyria here and from other example throughout human history that God orchestrates the downfall of oppressive nations. We take hope and comfort from the most famous line in this book... **The Lord is good – indeed He is a fortress in time of distress, and He protects those who seek refuge in Him.** (Nahum 1:7)

As we have listened to God’s prophets in these last few chapters there has been a lot said concerning a coming judgment – upon Israel, Judah and the nations. But those harsh messages of judgment and wrath have very often been followed by words of comfort and hope. And not just hope for Israel and Judah, but hope for ALL people groups. God loves all people! Consider just a few words from His prophets...

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord [the God of Israel], will be delivered. (Joel 2:32)

I [the God of Israel] will make you [Israel] a light to the nations, so you can bring My deliverance to the remote regions of the earth. (Isaiah 49:6)

Many nations will come saying, “Come on! Let’s go up to the Lord’s mountain, to the temple of Jacob’s God, so He can teach us His commands and we can live by His laws. (Micah 4:2)

So, yes, the theme that “God is not finished with Israel yet” resonates with the Old Testament prophets. This message certainly provides God’s covenant people with much-needed hope during their long period of exile. But a profound truth is beginning to come into clearer focus. And here it is – God’s whole purpose in restoring Israel will NOT be for Israel’s sake alone. God intends to save the world, to restore fallen humanity, to deliver them THRU Israel. It’s all part of God’s grandiose plan. The nation of Israel is going to be the conduit of God’s blessing to ALL the nations of the earth! How and when will all of this unfold? The answer to that is right around the corner. So stay tuned!