

## **Bible Overview 17 – The Minor Prophets**

'Minor Prophets' is the collective name for the 12 books from Hosea – Malachi in our bibles. They are 'minor' in terms of length only! And not in terms of importance, inspiration or relevance!

The job(s) of a prophet: Proclamation (forth-telling), prediction (foretelling), warning, comforting, giving hope, calling to repentance, rebuking...

Most prophets had a predominantly verbal ministry. Their books may have been composed by themselves, or their students. They give a snapshot of the prophet's ministry, not an exhaustive collection of everything they ever said. We have in our bibles what the Holy Spirit intended us to have.

### **What difficulties might we face in reading or understanding the Minor Prophets?**

- Unfamiliarity – we don't know them so well.
- Historical – when does this prophet live in relation to the OT timeline?
- Geographical – where are all the places, and what's their significance?
- Length – they're so short it's sometimes hard to get a grip on.

### **Some things to help us:**

- Read them so they become more familiar.
- Read the history in Kings and Chronicles.
- Resources – ESV study bible (or equivalent).
- It takes time, but if we get some of the big events, and places, of the OT into our heads, then they start to make more sense. All the 'writing' prophets (those with a book named after them) minister within about 300 years during the decline of Israel, decline of Judah, exile, and return.

We need to handle different parts of the prophets differently, for example: sometimes we will find statements about God, or how we should live, that can be directly applied to us as NT Christians. Other passages are affected by historical events, especially the cross, and the establishment of the church as the NT people of God. Other passages are used in the NT to apply to Jesus by analogy.

## Table of Prophets

*Dates are for the approximate start of ministry, taken from ESV Study Bible, p1232*

Prophet to Judah (Southern Kingdom)	Historical Events	Prophet to Israel (Northern Kingdom)
		Amos (c. 760)
		Jonah (c. 760)
		Hosea (c. 755)
Micah (c. 742) directed to Judah and Israel		
Isaiah (c. 740)	Fall of Samaria (capital of Israel) to Assyrians 722	
Nahum (c. 660-630)		
Zephaniah (c. 640-609)	Fall of Nineveh (capital of Assyria) to Babylonians 612	
Habakkuk (c. 640-609)		
Jeremiah (c. 627)		
Daniel (c. 605)		
Ezekiel (c. 597)	Deportations to Babylon begin 597	
Joel (c. 597, uncertain)	Fall of Jerusalem (capital of Judah) to Babylonians 586	
Obadiah (after 586)		
Haggai (c. 520)	Fall of Babylon to Persia, 'Cyrus Edict': Exiles can return home, 539	
Zechariah (c. 520)	Temple Rebuilt 516/5	
Malachi (c. 460)		

## NAHUM

1:1 tells us this is a prophecy about Nineveh. Jonah preached to Nineveh around 100 years earlier (see table of prophets). Jonah didn't want to preach to Nineveh because he didn't want to give them a chance to repent (see Bible Overview 3). However, they did repent and God relented on bringing the judgment. Nahum is therefore a reminder that we can't rely on the faith on our parents.

### Group Discussion

1:12-13 Who has afflicted Judah? What does that tell us?

What accusations are brought against Nineveh? (e.g. 1:14, 3:1)

What is the sentence given against Nineveh? (e.g. 2:8-10, 3:3, 5-6)

What's your reaction when you read Nahum, in particular the sentence pronounced?  
1:15

What is the 'good news'? (see also 3:19)

This prophecy is fulfilled in 612BC when Nineveh falls. In what ways might it be relevant for us?

*One message from Nahum...*

### **Judgment on God's Enemies is Good News for God's People**

*<sup>9</sup>When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. <sup>10</sup>They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" Revelation 6:9-10*

*<sup>1</sup>After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting: "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, <sup>2</sup>for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants." <sup>3</sup>And again they shouted: "Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever." Revelation 19:1-3*

In the first of these passages, the believers in heaven are crying out for justice. They know that God is 'holy and true' and long for him to carry out justice on the earth.

In the second passage, the world in rebellion is pictured as both a prostitute and a city. The 'true and just' judgment of God has been delivered, and the people in heaven are celebrating the condemnation of the woman. Verse 3 pictures all that is opposed to God as a city left burning in ruins after an attack. The smoke rises forever indicating the eternal, final nature of this judgment.

In heaven, believers long for, and delight over, the destruction of God's enemies.

### **Why do we find this concept hard to grasp?**

→ The 'enemies' are harder to spot:

For Judah, it was very obvious that the Assyrians were the enemy. They were the ones taking heavy tribute, and constantly threatening a devastating military invasion. Like in WWII – very obvious that Hitler and the Nazis were the enemy, in Germany.

Today, God's people are no longer a political nation as they were in OT, therefore the enemies are integrated with Christians in everyday life. Like in Afghanistan – the Taliban are the enemy, but they are integrated with normal civilians.

→ We don't understand the seriousness of sin:

The biggest sin of humanity is not rape, terrorism or child abuse. Humanity's biggest is rebellion against the God who created us. As God is infinite, this is an infinite crime. What is the ultimate demonstration of seriousness of sin? The cross – salvation from sin required the death of the holy Son of God.

In heaven, where we can see the true beauty and holiness of God and the sinfulness of sin, we will celebrate judgment. Until then, we continue to find judgment a hard doctrine to think or hear about.

**BUT** remember (or download and listen to!) Mark's sermon, 'Living with the Enemy,' (22<sup>nd</sup> Feb): One way that Jesus defeats his enemies is by turning them into friends

*For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life?* (Romans 5:10).

## HABAKKUK

### Group discussion

What is Habakkuk's complaint as he looks around Judah? 1:2-4

What is the 'unbelievable' thing God says he is going to do, and why is it unbelievable?  
1:5-11

How does Habakkuk respond? 1:12-2:1 (esp v12-13)

What is God's answer to this second complaint? 2:2-20 (esp v6-8)

What is Habakkuk's conclusion to all that has been revealed to him? 3:16-19

How has Habakkuk been fulfilled? Is there anything that hasn't been fulfilled?

*One message from Habakkuk...*

### **God uses the wicked for his own purposes**

Habakkuk is shocked that God has chosen to punish the wayward Judahites with the even more evil Babylonians. God can use Babylon in this way, and yet it doesn't mean he approves of what they are doing. From the Babylonian perspective, Judah is just another nation they've destroyed, and Yahweh is just another god who was powerless to stop them. From God's perspective, Babylon is an instrument in his hand, and he will see they too are judged in accordance with his plan. This should reassure the Judahites as Babylon approaches that God is still in control.

Just because a nation, individual, or plan prospers, that doesn't mean God approves of it, or that he is powerless to stop it. It means it is part of his good purposes.

For example, Joseph's brother's plot to sell him into slavery led to a great rescue from famine, as he himself understood: *You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.* Genesis 50:20

This also helps us understand Judas' betrayal of Jesus. Jesus knew exactly what was happening, and was in total control at all times. But Judas is still responsible for his actions: *The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.* Matthew 26:24

Judas is an instrument in God's hands, and yet is still very much responsible for his crime of betrayal.

## Some Major Themes in the Minor Prophets

### 1. Repentance

A recurring theme through the prophets is the call to repentance. Urging the people to turn back to Yahweh, live under his law, and look forward to the covenant blessings.

<sup>12</sup> *"Even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning."* <sup>13</sup> *Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.* <sup>14</sup> *Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing— grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God.* Joel 2:12-14

What God wants from his people is a heartfelt sorrow for their sin and to come back to him. Genuine repentance means being cut to the core (rend their hearts), not merely showing outward signs of repentance (rend their garments).

The confidence to repent is the gracious character of God. But the result of repentance is unknown. Joel doesn't say that God will *certainly* relent, only that he *may* relent.

→ Amos 4:6-11 describes the lengths God has gone to, to get this repentance. He has sent famine, drought, failed crops, locusts, plagues, death, yet the constant refrain is: *yet you have not returned to me, declares the LORD.* Amos then pleads with the people in similar language to Joel, in Amos 5:14-15. Amos' message is: Don't simply assume God is on your side. Live rightly, and maybe he will have mercy on your sin.

### NT Repentance

John the Baptist, who is the last of the Old Testament prophets, summarises his message: *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near,"* Matthew 3:2. Today, we are called to turn back to God from our sin, just like the people of Israel and Judah were. This means we can take calls to repent in the prophets and apply them to our own sin, and need of repentance.

The coming judgment in Amos and Joel were invading armies, the coming judgment for us today is the final judgment of God. However, our repentance will *certainly* bring

forgiveness – we don't need to wonder if we will be or not. As Jesus says, "*whoever believes in the Son has eternal life,*" John 3:36.

## **2. The Day of the Lord**

The great day of the king in OT times was a slogan that pointed to how a powerful king could destroy all of his enemies in a single day. The day of the Lord was therefore the day when Yahweh would defeat all of his enemies. It was a day of judgment. The phrase is used throughout the prophets, in varying senses, but always meaning judgment, either for Israel, Judah or the foreign nations.

<sup>18</sup> *Woe to you who long for the day of the LORD! Why do you long for the day of the LORD? That day will be darkness, not light.* <sup>19</sup> *It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear, as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him.* Amos 5:18-19

The people expected a day of judgment for the foreign nations, and looked forward to it, but Amos says that it will involve judgment on Israel as well. There is no point longing for the day of the Lord unless you are in a right relationship with him.

## **NT Day of the Lord**

The NT reveals that the day of Lord is a 2 stage event. Jesus' first coming is to make atonement for our sin, his second coming is for judgement. So the NT picks up the language of 'the day of the Lord' to refer to the second coming of Christ (for example, 2 Thess 2:2, 2 Peter 3:12). This will be a day of judgment, and is to be feared by anyone who hasn't put their trust in Christ.

## **3. Restoration and Future Blessing**

Although much of what the prophets say refers to judgment, there are still signs of hope of restoration for the people of God. As you read the prophets you'll notice that there are promises of a restored remnant, living in the land again, with victory over their enemies. Some of these promises are clearly fulfilled, such as Micah 4:10b: *You will go to Babylon, there you will be rescued. There the Lord will redeem you out of the hand of your enemies.* Judah does indeed go to Babylon, but is brought back.

However, other prophecies speak of the future in much more glorious language, such as Habakkuk 2:14, *For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.*

→ Joel 3:17-21, Zephaniah 3:12-20, Amos 9:11-15, Zechariah 8:1-7, Obadiah 17-21

These, and similar, passages contain great promises of holiness, sinlessness, no more invasions, abundance of food and wine, victory over their enemies, restoration of the Davidic line, Jerusalem as the chief city of the world and so on. These blessings are never fully realised in the OT. The remnant is certainly restored to the land, but they certainly still sin, and they never have the majesty or power promised to them.

## NT Restoration

Everything in the OT is magnified in the NT. (For example, the Day of the Lord in the OT is a physical defeat of foreign nations, but in the NT it is the eternal judgment of God). We need to keep this in mind when we read the promises of a restored Israel. They are not scaled down, or forgotten, in the NT, but are magnified. For example, God's people, the church, are no longer just looking for the land of Canaan as an inheritance, but the meek will inherit the whole earth.

The promises of restoration of Israel find their final fulfilment in the new heavens and the new earth, where all the blessings are given to believers. *Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.* Rev 21:3-4

## Minor Prophets in a Nutshell

**Hosea** – Declares judgment on Israel, which came in 722. The book then served as a warning to Judah (see Bible Overview 13)

**Joel** – Ministers to Judah, telling the people to repent in the face of imminent invasion and look for God's future blessings.

**Amos** – In Israel, pronouncing judgment on the nations, and on Israel herself, and calling on them to repent.

**Obadiah** – announces judgment on Edom, an old foe of Judah. Fulfilled in 553 when Edom was attacked by Babylon. Restoration promised for God's covenant people

**Jonah** – A prophet in Israel, called to take a message of judgment to Nineveh, capital of Assyria. Unwilling to give the people of Nineveh a chance to repent, and angry at God for relenting on his judgment.

**Micah** – contemporary with Isaiah, preaching to Israel and Judah, judgment will come on them for their sin, but future blessings are promised.

**Nahum** – A prophet in Judah announcing the destruction of Nineveh, bringing relief to Judah.

**Habakkuk** – Distressed at sin in Judah, God promises Babylonians will invade Judah, but in turn Babylon will fall for her own sin.

**Zephaniah** – In Judah, declaring judgment coming on the nations, including Judah, but with a promise of restoration.

**Haggai** – A series of sermons all from 520 encouraging the returned exiles to rebuild the temple, and look for future blessings.

**Zechariah** – Contemporary of Haggai, encouraging the rebuilding work and speaking a ruler who will come to lead the people.

**Malachi** – Speaking to a despondent people who haven't seen the glorious restoration promised, Malachi condemns their dead orthodoxy, and points again to the day of the Lord, a day of judgment.