

ZEPHANIAH HAGGAI ZECHARIAH MALACHI



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ZEPHANIAH

With this lesson we come to the last four writings in the Book of the Twelve. The first of these books is Zephaniah. In the opening verse of the book, we learn two things about Zephaniah. First of all the verse traces his family line back four generations. No other prophet receives such a pedigree. Why is Zephaniah an exception? Perhaps the identity of one of his ancestors is important. He is said to be a descendant of Hezekiah—maybe the king of that name who ruled about a century before Zephaniah. Thus Zephaniah would be a relative

of the reigning king of Judah at the time of his prophetic activity.

A second thing we learn about Zephaniah in this opening verse is that the word of the Lord that he proclaims comes to him during the reign of King Josiah. Josiah ruled from 640 to 609 B.C. We also know that Jeremiah was active during this same period. So Jeremiah and Zephaniah were contemporaries, although neither mentions the other.

We can divide the Book of Zephaniah into three parts. These three parts do not correspond to the present chapter divisions. In Zephaniah 1:2–2:3 Zephaniah prophesies

against Judah. In Zephaniah 2:1–3:8 he prophesies against foreign nations. In the remainder of Chapter 3 Zephaniah tells of the good time coming in the future.

As we have seen, many of the prophetic books have a similar outline—judgment against the chosen people, followed by judgment against foreign nations, followed by predictions of a promising future.

In Zephaniah’s preaching against Judah the central theme is the coming day of the Lord, the coming day of judgment. On this day God will punish the officials, the king’s sons, those who worship other gods, those who deny that God can bring judgment, and those guilty of amassing wealth and trusting in possessions. Read Zephaniah 1:14-16. These verses describe the day of the Lord.

At the end of his sermon to Judah on the coming judgment, Zephaniah issues a call for repentance and conversion. Read Zephaniah 2:1-3.

In the second part of the book the prophet proclaims judgment upon the nations of the region: the Philistines and the seacoast, Moab and Ammon, Ethiopia and Assyria. In Zephaniah 3:8 we read about God’s indignation and anger toward these nations. God’s jealous wrath will consume the earth.

The final part of Zephaniah describes the new conditions that will exist for the “humble and lowly” who survive the purifying judgment of the day of the Lord. Arrogant sinners will be gone, the remnant will live in obedience, God will be king, and the exiles will return home.

The Book of Zephaniah, which starts with a prophecy of judgment, ends with predictions of a promising future. Read the last verse, 3:20, and write down what God will eventually do for the people.

a.

b.

c.

HAGGAI

Haggai is the second of our books. This short work of only two chapters contains four dated addresses by the prophet. The dates in the book all come from the second year of the reign of Darius, the Persian king—the year 520 B.C. By this time, the Jews had returned to Jerusalem from exile. They had begun to rebuild the Temple, but work had ceased as we recall from the Book of Ezra.

Most of the prophetic work of Haggai centers on attempts to get the Temple reconstruction under way. In his first speech in Chapter 1 the prophet chides the people for being overly concerned for their own welfare to the complete disregard of rebuilding the Temple. Haggai encourages Zerubbabel, who is in charge of the rebuilding work. This encouragement is the theme of Haggai’s second speech in Haggai 2:1-9.

In the third speech of the prophet—Haggai 2:10-19—Haggai reminds the people that their living conditions improved after they laid the foundation of the Temple. His final oracle in Haggai 2:20-23 predicts that God is about to shake the earth and overthrow nations. When God does this, Zerubbabel will be God’s chosen. Read Haggai 2:20-23.

Read Haggai 1:1-11, and answer these questions.

a. What excuse did the people give for not rebuilding the Temple yet? (1:2)

b. Why had the people expected much and received little? (1:4)

ZECHARIAH 1:1-6:8

The third book in this lesson is the Book of Zechariah. According to the date given in the opening verse, Zechariah was a contemporary of Haggai. However, the Book of Zechariah is as difficult to understand as Haggai is easy. Much of the content of Zechariah is made up of symbolic visions and apocalyptic imagery that make it difficult for us to understand. The images and visions of the book probably made good sense to the prophet's first audience; but for us today, the references are not very clear.

In the first six chapters of the book, Zechariah reports eight visions. The first of these, in Zechariah 1:7-17, is that of the four horsemen. The second vision (1:18-21) is of four horns and four smiths. The third (2:1-5) is of the man with a measuring line. The fourth (3:1-10) is the accusation of Joshua, the high priest. The fifth vision, in 4:1-14, is of two olive trees standing beside a golden lampstand. The sixth vision (5:1-4) is of a flying scroll with curses written upon it. In 5:5-11 we read about the seventh vision, which is a woman in a basket. The final vision, in 6:1-8, is of four chariots.

What can we make of these eight visions? The visions have to do with the coming new age for the Jewish community, which involves God's judgment of the world. The prophet stresses several points as characteristic of the new age. First, the nations who have oppressed Judah will be oppressed. Second, Jerusalem will be

restored. Third, two men in the Jewish community will play significant roles and are described as the two anointed ones of God. These men are Zerubbabel, the prince, and Joshua, the high priest.

To become familiar with Zechariah's visions, read the passages below. Then describe each vision in a short phrase.

a. (1:8)

b. (1:18)

c. (2:1)

d. (3:1)

e. (4:2-3)

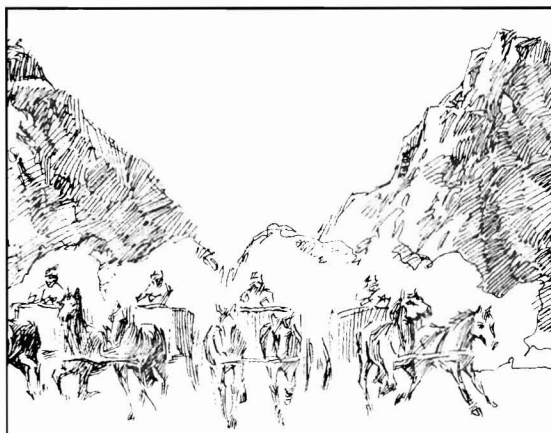
f. (5:1)

g. (5:7)

h. (6:1-3)

ZECHARIAH 6:9-14:21

Zechariah 6:9-15 gives an account of the crowning of Joshua. Scholars have long wondered why Zerubbabel is not also mentioned in this text. One explanation suggests that Zerubbabel, as a member of the house of David and a potential claimant to



Zechariah 6:1-8

the throne, was removed from authority or perhaps even killed by the Persians.

After the visions in the first six chapters, we have two chapters of preaching about the restoration of Judah and Jerusalem. Read Zechariah 8:4-8.

When we turn to Chapter 9 of Zechariah, we seem to begin reading a new book. Notice that this chapter is entitled "An Oracle." Also, Chapter 9 is in poetry form while the earlier chapters are in prose. Another section begins with Chapter 12 where we find another title. The name of the prophet Zechariah does not appear in Chapters 9 to 14. These facts possibly suggest that the present Book of Zechariah was originally three books, which have now been combined.

Much of Chapters 9 to 14 deals with expectations about coming times. Here let us single out only two passages for attention. In Chapter 13 the writer condemns prophets and prophecy. In the future people will be ashamed of either being called a prophet or of having a child who is a prophet. Read Zechariah 13:2-6. We do not know why the community became so suspicious of prophecy and prophets.

Chapter 9 describes future events. One passage speaks of a king of peace who comes to Jerusalem. Many Christians are familiar with this passage because the New Testament uses it to speak about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Read Zechariah 9:9-10.

Some Christians believe that the personal return of Christ in glory is depicted in Chapter 14 of Zechariah. Read 14:3-5, and answer the following questions.

- a. Where will God stand on that day?
- b. What will happen to the Mount of Olives?
- c. On that day, who is coming with the Lord God?

MALACHI

Malachi, the final book for this lesson, is also the final book of the Old Testament. We know little about the prophet named Malachi whose name means "my servant." We do know he prophesied around 500 to 450 B.C. In his prophecy, Malachi makes a plea for sincere worship.

Throughout its four chapters, the book reflects what might be called a dialogue form. Malachi makes a statement, the hearers protest, and then Malachi answers or refutes their protest. The writer of the book stresses obedience to God and the Law by all members of the community. He calls upon priests to offer pure sacrifices. He condemns divorce and stresses the offering of tithes. Read Malachi 2:13-16.

The book also speaks of the messenger of God who will come in the future. The last two verses of Malachi identify this messenger as Elijah. These verses, and an understanding of John the Baptist as the new Elijah, provide one point of connection between the Old and New Testaments.

Malachi 3:6-12 speaks of the principle of tithing. Read this passage, and answer the following questions.

- a. How are the children of Jacob robbing God?
- b. What type of test does God invite?
- c. What does God promise to do for those who will bring the full tithe to God?

SUMMARY

Like the last lesson, this study includes some of the lesser-known Old Testament literature. Try to remember at least one fact about each of these four prophetic books.

- (1) Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of King Josiah in Judah.
- (2) Haggai encouraged the people who had returned from Exile to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple.
- (3) Zechariah was a contemporary of Haggai whose prophecy was mainly in the form of visions.
- (4) Malachi spoke of God's judgment using a question-and-answer method.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. God acts to eradicate idolatry in Israel and Judah because the promise to bless all nations through Abraham's seed is threatened. Also, God is holy, and sin deserves and demands just punishment. So judgment appears predominant and primary in prophecy. The instruments of that judg-

ment are the foreign nations, yet they too are guilty before God. So the oracles against the nations appear.

God's mercy and commitment to the covenant with the people of Israel, however, require a future for the people. Thus, the restoration of a purified remnant completes the pattern. Discuss how this pattern may reflect on the justice and mercy of God.

2. Twice in Zephaniah humility is emphasized (Zephaniah 2:3 and 3:11-13). Similar ideas are expressed in Psalm 138:6, Isaiah 57:15, Proverbs 3:34, James 4:6, and elsewhere in the Bible. Why is humility such an important characteristic? Discuss also its opposite: pride and haughtiness. Give examples from your own experience or reading that illustrate these two human characteristics. Do you find it more difficult to be proud or to be humble? Why?

3. Malachi 3:1 and 4:5-6 express ideas about the coming of the day of the Lord. These verses were a prophetic warning and encouragement to Malachi's audience. Later these words were recognized as a messianic prophecy. Elijah, who had been dead for centuries when Malachi wrote, was depicted as the forerunner of the Messiah. Jesus identified John the Baptist as the fulfillment of this prophecy. (See Matthew 11:14.) Using this example discuss the problem of interpreting prophecies too literally. How can we decide which interpretation of any passage is correct?

DAILY READINGS FOR MATTHEW, MARK, AND LUKE

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| Day 1: | Matthew 1:1-17 |
| Day 2: | Matthew 5:1-12 |
| Day 3: | Matthew 13:1-17 |
| Day 4: | Mark 4:1-20 |
| Day 5: | Mark 16:1-8 |
| Day 6: | Luke 2:1-20 |
| Day 7: | Luke 24:36-53 |