

Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

The Bible consists of 39 books in the Old Testament and 27 in the New. The O.T. traces the meanderings of the Hebrew nation that God founded through Abraham for the purpose of bringing to earth the Messiah (His only Son Jesus Christ, the second member of the Trinity -- Father, Son and Holy Ghost). Through Messiah all the world would be blessed; that's the story of the New Testament. The Old contains the often gory record of human sin. The New holds out the hope of having a personal, guilt-free relationship with God.

NAHUM

Little is known of Nahum whose prediction of the fall of Assyria's capital, Nineveh, came true in 612 B.C when Babylon conquered the cruel Assyrians. He was probably from Galilee in the north of today's Israel, where seven centuries later Jesus spent much of His brief teaching career.

Scholars believe Nahum left home when Assyria took Israel's northern kingdom captive. Moving to Jerusalem, he wrote this book soon after 709 B.C. There he witnessed the invasion by the Assyrian juggernaut of 200,000 soldiers led by cruel, cowardly King Senaccherib. This bloodthirsty monarch wrote, "I took forty-six of (King Hezekiah's) strong, fenced cities; and of the smaller towns which were scattered about, I took and plundered a countless number. From these places I carried off 200,156 persons ...; and Hezekiah himself I shut up in Jerusalem, his capital city, like a bird in a cage...."

When Senaccherib's envoys failed to persuade Hezekiah to surrender, the prophet Isaiah sent a message to the Judean king (2 Kings 19:20-37). That night the angel of the Lord "offed" the entire Assyrian army of 185,000 troops. Ironically, Senaccherib did not log *this* in his diary. Twenty years later two of his own sons murdered him.

Last month we met Jonah, the reluctant prophet, who, rather than heed God's initial charge to him to go preach in Assyria's capital, Nineveh, opted to flee in the other direction. After a whale of an about-face, Jonah reconsidered and signed on for a hitch in Nineveh where his message brought that vile metropolis literally to its knees in repentance to God.

Acknowledging the Assyrians' change of heart, God delayed their destruction by a century, as historians and Nahum have recorded for us.

Nineveh was the queen city of a vast, flourishing and feared empire. It sat at the nexus of civilization's commerce and culture, plundering and trading in the wealth of the world. A virtually impenetrable fortress, it was apparently destroyed by fire and water as God, after many warnings via His prophets, finally punished Assyria for its vaunted wickedness, ending an era as Babylonia and Media divided the spoils of that former, 300-year superpower, forever changing the face of Asia.

More profound than his revelation of Nineveh's impending -- and this time irreversible -- doom was Nahum's disclosure in 1:7 that "(The Lord) knows everyone who trusts in Him." Since God sits in judgment of sin, Nahum's message is clear: "Trust in the Lord!"

Because Nineveh clearly had flipped off the God to whom they'd quickly turned under Jonah's preaching, Nahum reintroduces them in chapter one to the Sovereign of the universe. God is jealous over those He loves and unleashes His awesome wrath on those who mess with His people

In chapter two the prophet sounds the alarm of war and paints the terrors which Nineveh's invaders will unleash against her. It was prophecy *then; today* it's history. Ninevites run for their lives as the Tigris washes away most of the wall that was presumably impregnable. Its leaders had been under the impression that they'd been jabbing only their neighbors when, in truth, they'd been offending God. And when God's ready to play the vengeance game, no fortress of any size has a prayer.

In chapter three Nineveh is arraigned, indicted and sentenced to be under siege. God's law of the harvest, i.e., sowing and reaping, is on the way again. Complying with His plans, the Medes attack in 633 B.C., breaching a moat 140 feet wide and 60 feet deep, scaling and crumbling walls 100 feet high which for 80 miles circled this cocky stronghold. Eight years later they're joined by the Babylonians who stomp that mighty city flat.

Centuries passed before even a scintilla of Nineveh was found. Not until 1845 were the ruins of its lavish palaces with their revealing inscriptions and huge libraries discovered, verifying that there was such a time and a place as heretofore had only been chronicled in the Old Testament.

Nineveh symbolizes the destiny of all who turn their back on God. Neither great wealth nor military muscle will stay His judgment. As Nahum would say, 's best to trust God.

Let's read all three chapters of Nahum.

HABAKKUK

Little is known of Habakkuk, #8 of twelve minor prophets. We think he sang in a Jewish temple choir and was a contemporary of prophets Jeremiah and Zephaniah during King Manasseh's reign, a violent time in Judah's history.

He probably wrote this book just before the Assyrian empire fell in 625 B.C. It contains this prophet's questions to God on behalf of his people -- and God's answers on the brink of the Chaldean invasion of Judah.

Prophecying to Judah, Habakkuk said God would use Babylon to ravage wicked Judah, then God would crush Babylon for its tortuous ways.

Like many, Habakkuk struggled with *why* God, who loathes sins, would allow mayhem and misery, *why* He didn't prevent or, at least, explain disasters, *why* the wicked often prosper, etc. By faith, Habakkuk made up his mind simply to trust in God's love and faithfulness which never fail.

Wrestling with these age-old enigmas, he scaled his watchtower (2:1) and waited for God's replies. Often his waiting turned into joy (3:18, 19).

On the nightly news Habakkuk learned that Assyria had collapsed just as Jonah and Nahum foresaw. Vying to become the world's new top dog were Egypt's King Pharaoh-necho and Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar. In 605 B.C. they faced off in Carchemish on the Euphrates in today's northern Iraq. Babylon prevailed and merged its great kingdom with that of the fearless, nomadic Chaldeans whose chief city (in today's southern Iraq) was Ur, roots-home of Abraham, the first Jew off God's assembly line.

Habakkuk was no dummy. Hey, you put two big cats like Babylon and Chaldea together, and Judah has a major league threat just a few hundred miles to the east. What's more, Habakkuk knew that, because of its sinful ways, Judah had an "account receivable" called "God's coming wrath."

So it was that God *used* a vile enemy like Babylon to correct His chosen people in Judah. Ah, but, drunk with the blood of its victims, Babylon's comeuppance was nigh also when she would be snuffed. Long-term, however, God would someday -- yet to come -- set up His people in an earthly kingdom where His own Son Jesus Christ will sit on the throne.

As we read Habakkuk, we'll see him down in the mouth because God seems to be asleep at the wheel as mankind, lawless and tyrannical, was circling the drain. Instead of forming a coalition, starting a PAC, doing his own talk show or writing letters to the editor, Habakkuk took his beef straight to God. God's reply blew him away. It seems God would be temporarily siding with Judah's enemies in an alliance of strange bedfellows.

As surely as new ownership brings "rightsizing," so pride and cruelty result in destruction. Sometimes it takes awhile to arrive (2 Peter 3:8), but since God's Swatch keeps EST (Eternal Standard Time), He often appears to us to be in no hurry whatsoever. But His rule of thumb is always, "Evil will perish. Only righteousness will remain before God."

What dawns on Habakkuk is this hard-to-accept-for-some-of-us proposition: God runs this universe *how* and *when* He wants. And we can trust Him even when we don't have all the answers. Years ago Robert Young starred in a venerable radio, then TV series, "Father Knows Best." With that in mind, **let's read that old chestnut, Romans 8:28.**

The best-known sentence from Habakkuk's quill (2:4) was the one that lit a spark in a young monk named Martin Luther who paid the price of excommunication so that the Bible could be translated into German for all the people to read for themselves. That short fuse, penned 2,100 years earlier, is -- "The just (the righteous) shall live by faith." History's first, most successful missionary, Paul, quoted it in the opening chapter of his letter to the Christians in Rome. **Let's read Romans 1:14-18, also Galatians 3:11 and Hebrews 10:38.**

Let's now check out the words of eternal optimist Habakkuk.

ZEPHANIAH

Peering into murky antiquity, we know almost zip about this prophet, save that he was most likely a prince, a great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah, Judah's sitting monarch when it was carted off by Babylon. As an aristocrat, Z-man had direct access to the rich and famous of 641-610 B.C.

Between Kings Hezekiah and Josiah had been two foul, idolatrous kings who'd pulled off every kind of social injustice and moral corruption a Lexis-Nexis search could turn up. The rich had soaked the poor in a political campaign consultant's dream -- "Yes!! Class warfare on a grand scale! It'll play in Peoria."

Into this cauldron of contempt came good King Josiah who took the throne at the tender age of sixteen. Inspired by Zephaniah (and perhaps his fellow prophet Jeremiah), boy-king Josiah called his country to repentance, encouraging them to forsake their manmade idols and worship Jehovah, the one, true God.

Like any prophet worth his salt and sandals, "Z" told his audiences about God's love as well as His severe justice. Like Jonah and Nahum before him, he predicted the fall of Nineveh which, as we've seen, came true in 612 B.C. He also told of the coming "Day of the Lord" when God would punish Judah and all nations before fulling restoring Israel.

The early part of this book is not, as they say, a page-turner. But it closes on three upbeat grace notes: (1) God will deliver the faithful Jewish survivors from their Babylonian captors, (2) the godless will turn to God and (3) in a future day man will actually be able to worship God *anywhere*, not just in His holy temple in Jerusalem! (John 4:21)

The very first of ten commandments, Job One, given to Moses on Mt. Sinai was, "Let's get this straight, you people. I am God. Don't even think about putting anybody else in My place." To prove it, God was about to destroy the land of Judah which had been littered by all manner of idols.

Five times here we see the phrase, "Day of the Lord." That was God's way of saying D-Day, destruction day. It hinted of a time when God would punish His Jewish people for their sins by allowing their most dreaded enemy to haul them off as slaves. The *future* Day of the Lord refers to a period yet to come on earth, the Great Tribulation, to be followed by the Millennium (Revelation 6:1-17).

Zephaniah pulled no punches, warning rich and poor and in-between that only genuine repentance could save their land from wipe-out. He directed verbal volleys at five heathen nations (Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Ethiopia and Assyria), declaring their demise because in their consummate pride they'd scorned both God and the Jews. All these oracles came true, check it out in the history books. Meanwhile, the destruction of the Jews' enemies around the world is, like balancing the federal budget, still to materialize.

Religions all have their signature cities, i.e., Mecca for the Muslims, Benares in India for the Hindus, Rome for the Catholics, Jerusalem for the Jews, Santa Ana for the Trinity Broadcasting Network. But Zephaniah shocked his people by saying that true spiritual worship does not depend on a place but solely on the presence of God.

Because God dealt with every man's and every woman's sin problem once and for all when His Son Jesus Christ was crucified and miraculously came back to life, He has pardoned all of humanity. To cash in on this divine forgiveness, we have only to believe that this is true, just as the Bible states, and to ask God to enter our lives and to accept us as a member of His eternal family. Too simple? Maybe, but God *knew* that this is the only way we'd ever "get it." Get it?

There's nothing to earn, nothing to hide, no price to pay, no church to join. The Bible refers to this moment as a free gift of faith. Were it anything else, we'd have the right to brag about it as just one more accomplishment of ours. But it's purely a gift. God paid the full price of sacrificing His Son so that each of us could have it. It costs us nothing. It cost Jesus His life.

At the close of his book Zephaniah sees happier days ahead when the Jews' will be released from Babylon, return to Jerusalem, worship God and become a beacon of hope among all nations. Since this sunny forecast has not yet totally come true, it must refer to the thousand year period known as the Millennium when Christ Himself will sit on the throne of David in Jerusalem. Then those who love and worship Him will gather from all continents and isles, and the world will be free of pride and prejudice and perversion. Honk if you love peace. Film at 11.

Let's read Zephaniah together.

His Deal

July 15, 1997

www.HisDeal.org

george@HisDeal.org

Copyright © 2019. George Toles. All Rights Reserved.