

The Minor Prophets: Part 4

This is Month #11 of our sightseeing cruise through the Bible. Being a member-in-good-standing of the rat race, you may have missed some of these nooners. Notes for those sessions are available. Just ask.

Someone defined *wisdom* as the child of knowledge and reliable counsel. In this techno-hip world, knowledge is a click away. Ah, but reliable counsel continues in short supply.

Sir Frances Bacon wrote, "People prefer to believe what they prefer to be true." In other words, they're content to be their *own* counsel.

"Jailhouse lawyers" act as their own legal advisors. But few people do their own electrical wiring or mix their own prescriptions. Then why do so many refuse to seek reliable counsel when it comes to eternity and faith?

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said, "If I were called upon to identify the principal trait of the entire 20th century, I would be unable to find anything more precise and pithy than this: Men have forgotten God."

King Solomon says, "The fear of (or profound respect for) the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline." (Proverbs 1:7) **Giving God His rightful, first place in our lives is Knowledge Job #1**, says reputedly the wisest man who ever lived.

Wisdom is seeing things from God's perspective, knowing Him on a personal level, trusting Him with your life. His is the *only* truly reliable counsel, and it's only found in the Bible. Which is why we're here today.

The Bible is a *library* of 66 books of action-packed stories, bios, history, law, letters, love poems and predictions. **It reveals to us what God is like.** Centuries old, it's totally relevant today because God doesn't change, and people don't change. He's just as much God as He was before Creation. And people still laugh, cry, fret, love, marry, hate and hurt each other.

More than 35 people wrote the 39 books in the Old Testament and 27 in the New. Coming from different backgrounds, they all loved, believed in and listened to God.

Moses wrote the first five books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. They cover Creation, Noah's ark and the Flood, and the Ten Commandments downloaded on Mt. Sinai.

The Books of History "bio" David, Solomon, other Jewish kings and famous prophets like Elijah and Elisha. They are Joshua, Judges, Ruth, I & II Samuel, I & II Kings, I & II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther.

The Books of Poetry are Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon, featuring wise sayings, romance poetry and literature's most reliable white paper on human suffering.

The O.T. concludes with Books of Prophecy, the first five being the longest, thus referred to as Major Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel and Daniel. Prophets were God's spokesmen du jour. Since the Bible was not yet complete, they relayed God's messages to man, free of media bias.

They spoke of the future earth-visit by God's only Son, Jesus Christ the Messiah. They warned of punishment if the Jews failed to worship God. They pictured a time when God will forever banish sin from earth in a place the Bible calls hell. In a place called "the new heavens and the new earth" those who had in this life, by repentance and faith, trusted in God through Christ will live forever in sinless peace and joy.

HAGGAI

Today we wrap up the Bible's "back nine" with the last three Minor Prophets which, like the M's' "bottom of the order," are potent.

Haggai may have been one of the captives taken to Babylon by King Nebuchanezzar whose armies crushed Jerusalem in 586 B.C. Haggai's was the first voice to be heard 18 years after the first group of Jews returned in 538 B.C. from their 70-year exile in Babylon following their release by good King Cyrus of Persia. His prophetic career lasted four months, roughly the life expectancy of an Apple CEO.

Haggai's book was written in "the second year of the reign of King Darius (third of the Persian kings)." That would be 520 B.C. during the heyday of Chinese philosopher Confucius. This was only 20 years before Indian surgeon Susrata performed the first cataract surgery in 500.

Haggai, assisted by fellow prophet Zechariah, focused on motivating the Jews to finish rebuilding their temple in Jerusalem, promising that God would once again be worshipped there as in the days of King Solomon. Armed with his Zig Zigar tapes, he succeeded. Restoring the temple had been on hold for 15 years, stalled by unfriendly Samaritans and procrastinating, selfish Jews -- shades of the Christians in Greece to whom missionary Paul wrote, "Everyone else seems to be worrying about his own plans and not those of Jesus Christ." (Philippians 2:21):

Haggai's authenticity is attested by the *Scroll of the Twelve* from the caves of Murabba'at, the earliest Hebrew manuscript around.

Haggai fingers the Jews' lethargy. After 70 years of servitude in an enemy land, they were home free. They should've been grateful to God for their liberty; should've been worshipping Him in the temple, as was their custom. **Yet they were self-centered,**

fixated on personal comforts, working hard but finding no genuine joy -- more proof that this ancient Book is still relevant today!

Haggai's wake-up call to Jerusalem's Gov. Zerubbabel and its priest Joshua worked. Three weeks later "Under Reconstruction" signs popped up.

Stripped of their wealth by Babylon, the Jews were too poor to recreate Solomon's temple's former golden, glittering splendor. This was a bummer. Even if they *had* the dough, UPS was on strike and couldn't ship.

And they were hacked because the temple had been totally desecrated by the heathens who destroyed it. But as they began to honor God by obeying His prophet Haggai, God began reversing their fortunes. The point is, when we do God's work in God's way, He'll provide the necessary resources.

Haggai speaks to the mega-issues of unprofitable lives, unproductive labor, unprovided livelihood and unpredictable losses. His charge to those people -- and to us today -- is to consider what God *has* done, what He *can* do and what He *will* do.

Let's read both chapters of Haggai.

ZECHARIAH

A contemporary of Haggai, Zechariah is part futurist, part cheerleader, encouraging the Jews as they rebuild the temple, assuring them that Israel would one day flourish as the hub of the planet when their Messiah would arrive to claim ultimate and permanent victory.

Once a powerful nation under kings Saul, David and Solomon, the Jews are home again, liberated by a foreign ruler. It was humbling for this proud people. But instead of ragging on them as Haggai did, Zech assured them that God's strength would bolster their weakness. He soothes them, saying Messiah will come and restore His people to their earlier glory, rising to an unimaginable pinnacle of global power.

Zechariah was born in Babylon in captivity. This priest/prophet, whose name means "Jehovah remembers," prophesied for three years. More than any other prophet, he forecast the coming to earth of God's Son, picturing the humiliation and suffering the Saviour would endure during His first 33 years on earth. And he foretold the spectacle of His second coming when He'll set up His kingdom on earth.

With incredible detail, Zech foresaw Christ riding into Jerusalem on a donkey's colt (9:9). He even predicted that the Son of God would be betrayed for the price of a slave, thirty pieces of silver (11:12-13). Zech envisions the (still future to us) siege of Jerusalem (ch. 12) by the Antichrist and his armies in "the last days." Messiah returns then, arriving on the Mount of Olives which will be shattered by an earthquake (14:4). The Jews living then will realize that He is, for sure, their Messiah, and He will become

a mighty Sovereign (14:8-11), overseeing a worldwide kingdom as Prince of Peace (14:9-20).

Perhaps the key passage (4:6-7) of this wide-screen book-for-the-ages comes when God is speaking through Zechariah to Gov. Zerubbabel whose formidable task is to mobilize his citizens to rebuild the temple. Seeking to assure Zerubbabel that although it seemed like a mission impossible, it *would* be accomplished, Zech said, "This is what the Lord says to Zerubbabel, 'It is not by force nor by strength, but by my Spirit, says the Lord Almighty. Nothing, not even a mighty mountain, will stand in Zerubbabel's way; it will flatten out before him!'"

Sorry, Tony Robbins, but God says you and I are powerless to accomplish *anything*. But when *God* gives us a job to do, His strength is available to do *anything*!

Let's graze Zechariah as follows:

1:1-17

All of ch. 8

9:1-10

All of ch. 10

12:1-9

14:1-17

MALACHI

While this is the final book in the Old Testament, Esther was the last to be *written* (as recently as 350 B.C). Malachi prophesied from 440-430 B.C., in the century following Haggai and Zechariah.

None of God's prophets spoke -- nor was none of the Bible written -- during the next four centuries, up through Christ's life on earth. What happened during this "period of silence" is fascinating.

Macedonia's king Alexander the Great, for whom at age 32 there were no more worlds to conquer, like many NBA insta-millionaires, died Elvis-style due to his unbridled appetites and passions. A year before his death, Alex founded Alexandria, Egypt. For 200 years it was home to Egypt's kings and was, prior to Rome's rise to the top, the greatest city on earth.

Just before Alex-the-Great's death, having no heirs, he divided his kingdom among four top generals. Ptolemy got Egypt and Palestine. Some 10,000 Jews then relocated south to Alexandria, taking their love for God and hope for their soon-coming Messiah.

About 285 B.C. the Old Testament began to be translated into Greek in a version called the Septuagint, meaning "seventy," because 70 Hebrew scholars, living in Alexandria, were involved.

In 175 B.C. Antiochus Epiphanes became Syria's king. In his rage to conquer Egypt he seized Palestine on the way. Described in the book of Daniel as "a vile person," this marauder destroyed Jerusalem yet again (Wonder why Jews are so paranoid about their homeland?), killing multitudes in barbaric ways. Antiochus forbade them to worship in their rebuilt temple and forced them to disobey God's laws. Many refused and were martyred.

In response, a patriotic Jewish party known as the Maccabees revolted, Antiochus was slain, and this rag-tag band of courageous, God-fearing revolutionaries emerged victorious!

In 63 B.C. Rome acquired Palestine, creating pseudo-peace and freedom for the Jews who were now required to pay taxes to the Roman government. This sets the stage for the birth of Christ some 60 years later.

While the Bible is silent during those four centuries, life along the eastern Mediterranean was jumping. Malachi bridges the Old and New Testaments. His mission is two-fold: to verbally spank the Jews for losing their zeal to worship God, and to tell them that their Messiah was coming soon.

Tradition says Malachi, meaning "my messenger," died young as a member of the Jewish tribe of Zebulun. He was the last to speak for God in Israel until 400 years later -- after "The Dark Ages" -- when Jesus' advance guy, John the Baptist, arrives as a voice in the wilderness, saying, "Get ready for the Lord." (Luke 3:4) Malachi predicts that self-same, coming Messiah.

Malachi first tackles the religious leaders who had become irreverent and consumed with the almighty shekel. Trickle-down religion made their followers skeptical, alleging that God didn't love 'em anyway. After all, look where worshipping Him had gotten them! **Their apathy toward God bred social sins of all kinds**, further proof that the Bible speaks to the 90s.

Even in their sorry, sinful state, Malachi reminds the people that God loves them, stands ready to forgive them and is eager for them to return to Him. Today, 2,500 years later, God offers each of us His eternal, unconditional forgiveness for our sins, erasing our debt that was paid in full by Jesus who died for you and me on a Roman cross outside occupied Jerusalem.

Malachi encouraged the Jews to give themselves entirely to God and obey His law. They were to show tangible proof of the fact that God owns *everything* by giving Him a tithe, or tenth, of their income. Many skeptics get hung up here, grouching that God just wants their dough. But, hey, after our stroll through the Old Testament, it's a no-brainer to see that if God is after your money, He can take it *all* anytime He chooses. Fact is, God's wants *all* of you -- your loyalty, faithfulness and obedience -- the hallmarks of His followers.

The key verse of this curtain-closer is (1:2) when the Lord reminds Israel through Malachi, "I have loved you very deeply." **Let's read all of Malachi.**

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www.HisDeal.org

george@HisDeal.org

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