

# **BIBLE SURVEY, PART II**

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**Grades 7-8  
Year 1  
Quarter 2**



# **JOB**

## **Lesson Aim**

To help students learn to trust God through times of trial without demanding explanations for what is happening to them.

## **Memory Verse**

**Hebrews 11:20** - "By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future."

## **Lesson Background**

We begin our new quarter with a consideration of the poetic books of the Old Testament, the first of which is the book of Job. This book is considered by some to be the oldest book in the Bible, and that is certainly true if it was written when the events described in the book took place. Because the book contains no mention of God's law and shows the father performing the duties of the priest for his family, the events of the book could not have occurred any later than the patriarchal period. In fact, the extremely long life lived by Job (see 42:16) possibly even points to a time prior to the Flood. This does not mean, of course, that the book was written at this time. In fact, many believe, based largely on the evidence provided by the style of writing found in the book, that it was written during the United Monarchy period. Whenever it was written, it is a legitimate historical account, as the Bible elsewhere affirms (Ezekiel 14:14; James 5:11). The fact that it is poetic does not mean it is mythical, as many critics seem to assume. The book is not only a source of profound truth about the problem of human suffering, but also gives us incidental information about Satan and how he operates.

The purpose of the book is not, as is often asserted, to explain human suffering. In fact, the main thrust of the book is that we have no right to demand an explanation for the suffering we and others experience. The life of faith means being willing to trust God without knowing why, which in the end defines Job's righteousness. As your students will see today, Job was better off not knowing the cause of his suffering. What God accomplished in his life through it would never have happened had he been able to roll back the curtains of heaven and listen in on the conversation between God and Satan.

The book of Job can easily be divided into three main sections - the Prologue (chapters 1-2), the Dialogue (3:1-42:6), and the Epilogue (42:7-17). The main body of the book consists of three rounds of stylized conversation between Job and his friends, followed by an interruption by Elihu, a younger man, and finally the speech of God Himself, which serves to silence all of the foolishness that had gone before. The fact that the speeches that make up the bulk of the book are condemned as foolish by God should make us very cautious about drawing any theological conclusions from verses recording the speech of Job's friends. These verses are accurately recorded, but their content is often far from the truth.

The main application of today's lesson for your students will be the importance of not questioning the providence of God. Middle school students are often dissatisfied with themselves. They wonder why God made them the way they are, with certain peculiarities in their appearance (which they always tend to magnify), or with the lack of certain abilities, or with certain environmental disadvantages. They must learn that God does all things for the good of His people, and often part of the benefit comes from not knowing why. Those who seek (or try to invent) explanations for all that God does are only defeating God's purpose in the process. The Christian life is a life of faith.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin class by having each of your students write on a piece of paper a brief description of some tragic event that has happened, either in their lives or in the life of someone close to them. At their age, your students may be reluctant to share these things verbally, so writing may help them to express their thoughts more freely. Without discussing the particular incidents recorded by your students, ask them to talk about why they think such things happen. What does God have to do with such occurrences? The answers they give should reveal quite a bit about their understanding of the topic before us today. They will probably have numerous misconceptions about the reasons for suffering and God's role in it, and you as a teacher should be able to build off these misconceptions in order to convey the lesson's application more forcefully.

Turn your students' attention now to the book of Job. Give them a little background information about the book, being sure to mention that the story described takes place long before the time of Moses. Note also the basic structure of the book, which will serve as our lesson outline for today.

### **1. Prologue (Job 1-2)**

The historical prologue is probably the most familiar section of the book of Job to most of your students. In it we find the real reason for the suffering of Job and learn something about the tactics used by Satan. Several points from the prologue should be emphasized for the benefit of your students.

The first is that Job was a genuinely righteous man, and that God was genuinely proud of his efforts. This does not mean, of course, that Job was perfect. But the fact of the matter is that God does appreciate the wholehearted efforts of those who try to live obedient lives. He is not a mean and angry dictator, waiting to pounce on the least fault and ignoring as falling far short any attempts we make to do good. God loves His children, and, like a father, is pleased with their efforts, no matter how weak, to do what is right.

The second is that Satan is completely subject to the will of God. He is neither omnipotent, omnipresent, nor omniscient, and interferes with the lives of Christians only as God allows him to do so. Is it any wonder, then, that the New Testament speaks in such glowing terms of the victory that Christians can have in their spiritual warfare?

The third is the same lesson that Jesus taught the disciples in John 9 - that suffering is not always caused by sin in the life of the person concerned. Job did nothing to deserve what happened to him. In fact, it was his righteousness that brought on his suffering. But God used Satan's worst efforts to bring about good in the life of His servant Job.

Fourthly, we can benefit from Job's example in not blaming God for what happened to him. Unlike many people who have suffered, Job did not become angry at God, nor did he lose faith in Him. Suffering is intended to strengthen our faith, not destroy it.

## **2. Dialogue (Job 3:1-42:6)**

When word began to circulate about the calamities experienced by Job, his friends gathered to comfort him in his suffering. With such friends, who needs enemies! From chapter three through chapter thirty-seven, they do little but blame Job for what has happened. In different ways, they all say the same thing - God is just, so only the evil suffer; you, Job, are suffering, therefore you must be evil! Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar are like three notes of the same chord - they all harmonize to tell Job that he is to blame for what has happened to him and if he refuses to admit it, he is also a hypocrite. A younger man, Elihu, interrupts their dismal conversation when he can stand no more of this foolishness. He also blames Job, but not because of past sins. Instead, he asserts that Job's fault is in the way he is reacting to the suffering. His demand for an explanation is presumptuous; he is demonstrating pride by refusing to submit meekly to the will of God.

In many ways, Elihu is right. But the last word in the dialogue belongs not to him, but to God Himself. In chapters thirty-eight through forty-one, God speaks to Job after silencing the ineffectual comforters. He batters Job with question after question until Job can finally do nothing but admit his own total ignorance of the ways of God and the nature of His universe. God never tells Job the reasons for his suffering, but makes it clear by His questions that Job is not intended to know those reasons. Job finishes the dialogue by responding in the only way he can - repentance for his pride in demanding an answer and silence before the God of the universe.

Make sure your students understand why Job needed to repent. His suffering was not caused by sin on his part, but his expectation that God owed him an explanation for the events of his life was sin, and required repentance. We have no right to question what God brings into our lives, either in the circumstances of our birth and personal makeup or in the events that happen later. If your students really love God, they will trust Him to do what is right without requiring an explanation.

## **3. Epilogue (Job 42:7-17)**

The prosperity with which God blesses Job at the end of the book underlines the message we have just discussed. God was pleased with Job's repentance and silence and disgusted with the phony explanations put forward by his friends. They, too, needed to repent, and God required them to humble themselves before Job by asking him to pray for them so that God would forgive them. The life of unquestioning faith is one that God honors, though not always with the material prosperity that He gave to Job.

## **Conclusion**

Conclude the lesson by raising the question of the benefits of Job's ignorance. What did Job gain by not knowing about the conversation between God and Satan or about the prosperity he would eventually regain? Had he known these things, he would not have had to take his suffering as seriously. Knowing that everything would be restored in the end, and that he was helping to defeat Satan in his battle against God, would have allowed him to suffer serenely with full knowledge of the outcome. It would have been painful, true, but not as painful as going through it without knowing why it was happening or where it was heading. Christians today, of course, know no more of the specific causes and results of our trials than Job did. But, like Job, we know the ultimate end - the defeat of Satan and the glorification of believers in the presence of God (Job 19:25-27).

## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## JOB

1. When did the story told in the book of Job probably happen? How do we know?
2. Why did God allow Satan to do the things to Job that he did?
3. In what ways did Job respond righteously to his suffering? In what ways did he respond wrongly?
4. Why did Job's friends think Job was suffering? Were they right or wrong?
5. Did God ever tell Job why he was forced to suffer? Why or why not?
6. Why did Job repent at the end of the book? Why did Job's friends need to repent?
7. What should be our attitude toward the suffering that enters our lives and the lives of those close to us?



# PSALMS

## Lesson Aim

To teach students about the general content of the book of Psalms and to encourage them in their personal worship of God.

## Memory Verse

**Hebrews 11:21** - "By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff."

## Lesson Background

The book of Psalms obviously does not lend itself to a survey in the normal sense of that word. Unlike most of the books of Scripture, the book of Psalms has no continuity from one chapter to the next, nor any clearly discernible outline. The only organization to be found is in the division of the 150 psalms into five books, which seems to relate very little to their content anyway. It is important, however, that your students learn some background information about the Psalms, so some of our time today will be spent in doing just that. We will talk about authorship, dates, and some of the purposes for which the psalms were written. We will also spend some time talking about how the Jews wrote poetry, so your students can understand how the poetic expression in the psalms is supposed to work (this will also be helpful as we look at the writings of Solomon next week). Though much of this material has little more than curiosity value for your students, it will give them a better understanding of the book.

We must also deal with content and seek some personal application, however, and these are not easy to do in a broad survey of the book of Psalms. An overview of the content of the book is impossible except

in the most general of terms. Consequently, the best approach is to take a small sampling of psalms for specific consideration in order to give students a chance to get into the text, and give you as a teacher an opportunity to make some personal application to the lives of your students. The sampling we will be using today is Psalms 22-24, a familiar section that not only illustrates many of the general characteristics of the book of Psalms, but is also Messianic, in that it speaks clearly of the ministry of Jesus Christ. In applying the content of these psalms to your students, you will have the opportunity to challenge those who are not Christians and encourage those who are with these descriptions of the death and resurrection of Christ (Psalm 22), along with His shepherdly care (Psalm 23) and kingly rule (Psalm 24) over His people.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Open the class today by asking your students who wrote the book of Psalms. They will almost invariably respond by saying that the book was written by David. Then ask them what a psalm is. You may get a variety of answers, many of which could be correct. In the process, your students may begin to realize that there is quite a bit about the book of Psalms that they do not know. At that point, move into the first section of the lesson, dealing with the background of the book.

### **1. Background Information on the Book of Psalms**

#### **A. Outline**

Point out to your students that the book of Psalms is divided into five books. These divisions seem to have little major significance, though general comments can be made about each section. Book One (Psalms 1-41) and Book Two (Psalms 42-72) are largely the work of David, and many concern David's personal experiences. Book Three (Psalms 73-89) is largely the work of Asaph, one of the Temple musicians during the United Monarchy. Book Four (Psalms 90-106) is mostly anonymous, while Book Five (Psalms 107-150) is made up mostly of hymns for public worship. We do not know the source of these divisions, but they are very old, originating before the time of Christ.

#### **B. Authorship**

Though most people think of the book of Psalms as having been written by David, he actually wrote less than half of the poems found in the book (73 appear under his name). An additional twelve were written by Asaph, and twelve more by the Sons of Korah (a group of Levites involved with music for worship in the Temple). Heman, Ethan, and Moses are each given credit for writing one psalm. The other fifty are anonymous.

#### **C. Date**

As can be seen from the list of authors, the Psalms were written over a long span of time. Though most date from the United Monarchy period, at least one (Psalm 90, and many believe also Psalm 91) dates from the time of Moses, while others were written during or even after the Babylonian Captivity (Psalm 137, for instance, dates from this later period). Thus the poems in the book were written over a period of about a thousand years. They were probably compiled in their present form after the Restoration Temple was built, though many were obviously in use in the Temple built by Solomon.

## **D. Purpose**

The poems in the book of Psalms were written for a wide variety of purposes. Many were personal expressions of prayer or praise to God in specific historical situations (David's famous prayer of repentance, Psalm 51, is a good example of this). Others were written for specific state occasions, such as the coronation of a new king. Many others were written specifically for public worship (Psalms 146-150 are good examples of these). Much like the hymns in hymnbooks today, these varied expressions of praise and prayer were gradually gathered together and incorporated into the worship of God's people. The book of Psalms thus became the hymnbook of Israel.

The Psalms also contain much teaching, of course. One cannot worship without saying something. Not only do the poems found in this book teach us much about God, but many also have a prophetic character, pointing forward to the ministry of Christ. The book of Psalms is quoted more often than any other Old Testament book by the writers of the New Testament. It is filled with truth about the Savior, both in the references to the character of the God who is to be worshiped and in the comments about the king of Israel, who is seen by the New Testament writers as foreshadowing the King of Kings.

## **E. Inscriptions**

The inscriptions found above many of the psalms probably are not as old as the poems themselves, but certainly are very ancient. They may have been added when the book was first compiled, possibly at the same time that the division into five books was made. While most of the inscriptions indicate the authorship of the psalm, some also classify the poem that follows (prayer, praise, teaching, etc.), indicate the historical event with which it is associated, or give musical directions (tunes to be used or instruments needed for accompaniment, though these are of little use to us today). Have your students quickly page through the book to find examples of each kind of inscription.

## **F. Hebrew Poetry**

If your students look at the Psalms, they will not look like the poems they are used to reading in English classes at school. That is because Hebrew poetry is not like English poetry. English poetry, at least in its classical form, is based on a similarity of sound and rhythm; in other words, the lines of the poem have a standard number of syllables, and the words at the ends of designated lines rhyme with each other.

Hebrew poetry, however, is not based on similarity of sounds, but rather on similarity of meaning. Hebrew poetry uses something called parallelism. Lines of the poem are taken in pairs, and each pair of lines deals with a basic thought. There are three major kinds of parallelism. Synonymous parallelism is where the two lines of the couplet each say the same thing in different words (Psalm 24:1 is a good example of this). Antithetical parallelism is where the second line gives the other side of the coin, expressing a contrast to the first line (Psalm 1:6, for instance). Synthetic parallelism occurs when the second line builds upon the first, adding further information on the same subject (Psalm 2:6 is one of many instances of this form). The same types of poetry also occur in the writings of Solomon, at which we will be looking next week.

One other interesting aspect of Hebrew poetry should be noted. Some Hebrew poems are acrostics, in which each verse begins with a new letter of the Hebrew alphabet until the entire alphabet has been completed. The most famous of these is Psalm 119; your students probably do not realize that the Hebrew letters above each section indicate that all the verses in that section begin with that Hebrew letter in the original. Other acrostics are Psalms 25, 34, 111-112, and 9-10 (which is not a perfect acrostic), along with the famous passage on the godly woman in Proverbs 31:10-31 and each chapter of the book of Lamentations.

## **2. Specific Psalms - A Small Sampling of the Book**

Have your students turn now in their Bibles to Psalms 22-24. Divide the class into three groups and assign one psalm to each group. Have the group answer the following questions:

Who wrote the psalm?

Does the inscription give any historical information or musical directions?

What kinds of poetic parallelism are used in the psalm?

In what way does the psalm picture the ministry of Jesus Christ?

When the students have completed their work, have each group report their findings to the class as a whole. Then spend some time discussing the Messianic significance of these three psalms, giving your students a personal challenge derived from what the psalms teach about Christ. Be sure to address both believers and unbelievers, encouraging the former with the promise Christ gives of care and eventual glory for His people, while pointing out to the unbelievers in your class that the comfort of Psalm 23 is only for those who are Christ's sheep.

If time allows, you may want to close your session by doing the take-home assignment together in class. Poetry is a marvelous medium for expressing personal feelings of prayer and praise, and some of your students may find this outlet helpful for thinking through their own spiritual condition.

## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## PSALMS

The book of Psalms consists of poetry that often expresses the emotions of the poet in very intense ways. The poems in the book express praise, thanksgiving, joy, sorrow, fear, anger, and many other emotions. Take some time to write your own psalm, a poem of praise or prayer to God. Do the following:

1. Choose a single emotion that best expresses how you feel toward God right now.
2. Write a sentence of about eight or ten words expressing that emotion.
3. Expand that sentence into a couplet using synonymous, antithetical, or synthetic parallelism; say the same thing using different words, write a contrast that shows the other side of the picture, or add another statement that gives more information about the same theme.
4. Add other couplets expressing the same emotion until you have a poem of six to eight verses.
5. Use your poem as the basis of your own praise or prayer to God. Tell Him how you feel, and worship Him with the words you have written.



# **THE WRITINGS OF SOLOMON: PROVERBS, ECCLESIASTES, AND THE SONG OF SOLOMON**

## **Lesson Aim**

To motivate students to live wisely in every aspect of their lives, and to understand that true wisdom is only found in the fear of the Lord.

## **Memory Verse**

**Hebrews 11:22** - "By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones."

## **Lesson Background**

The writings of Solomon - Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon - are sometimes referred to as wisdom literature. Though this term is generally intended to describe the literary genre to which the books belong, it also is appropriate for their content. The book of Proverbs spends much of its time contrasting the wise man and the foolish man. The book of Ecclesiastes works out that contrast in terms of competing philosophies of life. The Song of Solomon, meanwhile, applies the concept of wisdom to the area of marital relationships. All three books are intended for the young, and can thus be enormously beneficial to your students. In our survey today, we must point them in the direction of the divine wisdom taught by these writings.

The three books written by Solomon fit very easily into what we know about his life. The love poem preserved in the Song of Solomon was probably written in his early years, before marriage became a matter of political expediency. At the height of his career, when people were flocking to his court from far and wide

to hear his wisdom, he compiled most of the wise sayings that are recorded in the book of Proverbs. As an old man, broken and disappointed at the failures of the reign that had begun in such a promising manner, he penned the retrospective found in Ecclesiastes, which speaks from bitter experience of the hollowness and futility of all this world has to offer - wealth, pleasure, knowledge, possessions - and recommends to the young that they give themselves entirely to following God.

In teaching this week's lesson, we will pursue the material to be covered in three parts. The lesson begins with a summary of the life of Solomon, showing how these writings fit into his career. Next we will talk about the concept of wisdom, defining it for the students and helping them to see how it differs from the wisdom of this world. Lastly, we will briefly survey the books themselves, noting key aspects of the writings of Solomon. The application of the lesson should be an encouragement to wisdom rather than folly. Solomon tells us that foolishness is natural, but wisdom is supernatural. The only way that your students will be able to live wisely is to live in the power of the Holy Spirit, who teaches the wisdom of Christ to His people.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Start the class by asking your students what they think makes a person wise. Is it being early to bed and early to rise? Is it having a Ph.D.? Is it sitting on a mountaintop in a long beard and white robe? Is it age, or suffering, or vast experience? After discussing the matter for a while, tell the class that today you are going to look at the writings of the wisest man who ever lived - Solomon.

### **1. The Life of Solomon as the Context for His Writings**

Review with your students the material covered last quarter about the reign of Solomon. Remind them of the key aspects of his life, particularly his request for wisdom from God, his reputation for wisdom as displayed in the incident involving the Queen of Sheba, and the eventual failure of his reign because of his many wives and concubines. Then use the material from the Lesson Background to tie his writings into the history of his life, showing your students how these three books of the Bible grew out of Solomon's experiences. Be sure your students see from this that both success and failure can be sources of wisdom. God can teach us as much, if not more, from our failures as He can from our successes.

### **2. The Meaning of Wisdom**

When I asked my son (then age 11) what wisdom was, he said it was "uncommon common sense." That's not a bad definition, but Solomon comes at the subject from another direction entirely. In Proverbs 1:2-4, Solomon uses words and phrases like "insight," "a disciplined and prudent life," "doing what is right and just and fair," and "discretion" to describe the wisdom he hopes to impart to the young through the proverbs he has compiled. We see from this that the wisdom of the Bible is intensely practical. It is not merely knowing what to do; it is putting that knowledge into practice in the everyday decisions of life.

More importantly, Solomon tells us in Proverbs 1:7 that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." The word "fear" here does not mean terror, but reverence and awe. Only when one has a healthy respect for God that leads to obedience may one truly be called wise by biblical standards. Thus none of the ways of attaining wisdom suggested in the introduction to the lesson leads to the kind of wisdom taught by Solomon in his writings. This kind of wisdom comes only from God Himself, and sets the wise man apart from the wisdom of this world (see the distinction made by Paul in I Corinthians 1, for instance).

Your students are often told by their peers and the media that wisdom comes from experience. They must try certain things if they are really to grow up wise in the ways of the world. They will be told that they must experience drugs and sex in order to know what life is really all about. Such lures are exactly what Solomon warns against in his writings. The wise man knows that certain experiences are better avoided. Your students must learn the wisdom of saying “no” to the temptations that would lure them into folly.

### **3. The Writings of Solomon**

We turn now to a brief survey of the writings of Solomon. Like the book of Psalms, the writings of Solomon are poetic in nature, and this makes them more difficult to summarize than other types of literature, but you should be able to communicate certain basic facts about these three books that will help your students to understand them better.

#### **A. Proverbs**

This collection of short, pithy sayings was compiled by Solomon, who composed many, but not all, of the proverbs found in the book. The book begins with a section of praise for wisdom (chapters 1-9), followed by the main body of the book, which is largely a list of wise sayings with no overt arrangement or sequence (chapters 10-24). Most of these follow the poetic form of antithetic parallelism (review from last week for those who may have been absent or forgotten what was said about Hebrew poetry). The book concludes with a collection of proverbs already in existence at the time of Solomon, including sayings ascribed to Agur and Lemuel, men of whom we know nothing, and the closing acrostic on the virtuous woman.

One of the most fruitful ways of studying the book of Proverbs is with the use of a concordance. Proverbs gives us many interesting character studies - of the wise man, the fool, the lazy man, the immoral woman, the mocker, etc. You may want to assign specific members of your class to do some of those studies during the week and share the results with the class next Sunday (see the take-home paper for instructions).

#### **B. Ecclesiastes**

What do you give to the man who has everything? As has been demonstrated from the time of Solomon to our own time, such a person usually lacks what is most important in life - contentment and peace of mind. Solomon was an old man when he wrote this book, and he had enjoyed everything the world had to offer. Everything he tried had left him empty; his wealth, his possessions, his women, his vast knowledge, the variety of entertainment available to him, all had left him with a hollow feeling inside. Ask your students why it is that, when the old tell the young that riches and power and pleasure are unfulfilling, the young rarely listen, but want for themselves what millions before them have found to be empty? The young often think that the old are nothing but spoilsports, trying to rob others of the fun they are too old to enjoy. Solomon tried to warn others before they wasted their lives the way he had done to a large extent. Ecclesiastes 12 gives the conclusion of the matter - remember God, fear God, and keep His commandments, since death will render meaningless all these things that men value so highly.

In short, the wise man not only learns from his own experience, but also from the experience of others. The wisest teenager is the one who gives himself or herself to God and feels no need to experience the things that the world says are so important. Your students need to learn the lesson taught by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount - that those who put the Kingdom of God first will not have to worry about their material needs.

## **C. Song of Solomon**

One of the biggest problems with the Song of Solomon is defining exactly what it is supposed to be. Some have seen it as an erotic love poem with no spiritual content apart from its picture of the beauty of marital love. Others have seen it as an allegory of the relationship between God and His people or Christ and the Church. Still others have tried to combine the two by drawing spiritual significance from the images used in the book to describe the love of Solomon and his beloved. Even the form of the book has been hotly debated. It is essentially a poetic drama, with speaking parts for Solomon, his beloved, and various other minor characters. Some have suggested that the book contains three main characters instead of two, with Solomon playing the role of the villain who tries to separate a young shepherd and his beloved. Most, however, prefer the two-character approach to the book.

It is best to understand the book as a description of the joys of marital love. Though marital love is said by Paul in Ephesians 5 to illustrate the relationship between Christ and the church, this cannot be the primary significance of the book. The descriptions found in the book are highly graphic, though often couched in lyrical symbolism. The book fits well into the wisdom literature because the same wisdom that is needed in order to follow the proverbs and avoid the pitfalls described in Ecclesiastes is needed to practice the marital love described in the Song of Solomon. Such love, though romantic in character, is not natural because it is unselfish. Only God can allow a man and his wife to show the kind of love described in this book. The alternative is the snare of the adulterous woman described in Proverbs 6.

Your students obviously will soon face the temptation to misuse their sexuality, if they have not done so already. They must understand that ideal sexual love can only be found in the context of the wisdom of God. Anything else is pure foolishness and will bring about nothing but pain and destruction.

## **Conclusion**

Conclude the lesson by reminding your students that true wisdom comes only from God, and that, if they want to be wise, they will learn from God's Word and not have to learn the sad lessons of experience that Solomon passed on to succeeding generations following his failure.

## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT      WRITINGS OF SOLOMON

1.      What is wisdom? How does the wisdom taught by the writings of Solomon differ from the popular concept of what makes one wise?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2.      How do the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon fit into the career of the third king of Israel?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3.      Choose a character or key word from the book of Proverbs (for instance: fool, tongue, lazy, wicked, diligent, proud, etc.). Using a concordance that goes with the version of the Bible you have, look up this key word and find all the verses in Proverbs that use it. Look up and read the verses, then summarize the teaching of the book of Proverbs on the subject.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4.      Why does Solomon, at the end of the book of Ecclesiastes, tell his readers to remember God when they are young and not to try all the things he had experienced in his life?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5.      Why is the love poem called the Song of Solomon considered part of the Wisdom Literature? Why is wisdom essential for true marital love?



# ISAIAH

## Lesson Aim

To familiarize students with the general content of the book of Isaiah and show them how the prophet pointed forward to the work of Christ.

## Memory Verse

**Hebrews 11:23** - "By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict."

## Lesson Background

Starting this week, we embark on a five-week segment of the course in which we study the books of the prophets of the Divided Monarchy, starting with the "Major Prophets" Isaiah and Jeremiah followed by the nine pre-exilic "Minor Prophets" taken three at a time. Our treatment of these books is neither strictly chronological nor strictly in canonical order; the combination is intended to retain some of the advantages of each. Consequently, though we are beginning with Isaiah, he was actually preceded by Obadiah (though scholars differ on this), Joel, and Amos, and was a contemporary of Hosea and Micah. The chart on the Divided Monarchy given out last quarter will be very useful to you and your students for keeping the chronology straight during these next five weeks.

Isaiah tells us in the first verse of his prophecy that he ministered during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah in Judah. We know that his Temple vision occurred in the year of Uzziah's death (6:1), thus his ministry began in the year 740 B.C. According to Jewish tradition, he was executed by Manasseh at the beginning of his reign by being sawn in two (cf. Hebrews 11:37), though this surely would

have occurred after the death of Hezekiah. His death may thus be placed about the year 685 B.C., meaning that his prophetic ministry spanned approximately 55 years. These years were very eventful ones, including Judah's struggle for survival against the Assyrian Empire that destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. Isaiah played an important role in the events of those years, serving as court prophet and advisor to the kings of Judah. His confrontation with Ahaz and the help he gave to Hezekiah will both be brought out in today's lesson.

Though the book of Isaiah does contain a few brief historical narratives (chapters 6-8 and 36-39), the bulk of the book is taken up with prophetic utterances. The early chapters are prophetic condemnations of idolatry, both in Israel and Judah, and of the wickedness of the surrounding nations. The later chapters address the Jews of the exile, comforting them with the fact that God will restore them to their land, renew their love for Him, and send His Messiah to be their Deliverer (many have noted the coincidence that the condemnatory prophecies occupy the first thirty-nine chapters, while the comforting words of grace take up the last twenty-seven, like the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and twenty-seven books of the New Testament). The book contains some of the greatest Messianic prophecies found in the Old Testament, including the prophecy of the Virgin Birth in Isaiah 7:14 and the description of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53. Because of this, the book of Isaiah is second only to the book of Psalms in the number of times it is quoted in the New Testament.

The fact that the last part of the book is addressed to a group of people a century after Isaiah's death has caused many liberal critics to deny that Isaiah wrote those chapters. They refer to "Second Isaiah" and claim that this portion of the book was written by some unknown prophet during or after the exile. The main motivation for such a denial, however, is the belief of such critics that predictive prophecy is impossible (the mention of Cyrus by name in 44:28 is for them the proof of a late date). For us, however, this should not be a problem. We know that God is able to give a man's name long before his birth (cf. I Kings 13:2); the difference in content of the second part of the book easily accounts for the differences in the style of the writing; Zephaniah and Nahum, both pre-exilic prophets, quote from or allude to verses in "Second Isaiah" (Zephaniah 2:15 alludes to Isaiah 47:8-11 and Nahum 1:15 quotes Isaiah 52:7); and finally, John 12:38-40 quotes from Isaiah 6 and Isaiah 53 and ascribes both verses to the same author, the prophet Isaiah.

In today's lesson, we will try to give students a sampling of the book's content by looking briefly at chapters 6, 7, 14, 37, and 53. By looking at these chapters, our aim is to give the students some idea of what the ministry of a prophet involved - he condemned the people, both his own and those of the surrounding nations, for their sin, and brought promises of God's help in times of danger. He also spoke of future judgment and deliverance. Though he spoke of future events, he spent most of his time dealing with the present and preaching God's Word to the people of his day. The two applications that should be brought to your students today are that God holds a person accountable for how he responds to the Word (Ahaz and Hezekiah provide negative and positive examples), and that Christ is the focus of God's work in history, both in matters of judgment and deliverance.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin the lesson by giving your students background material on the prophet Isaiah. Use the information from the Lesson Background and refer to the chronological charts of the period given out last quarter. Then discuss briefly the structure of the book, with its two divisions corresponding to the Old and New Testaments both in size and content (if nothing else, this is a good memory aid). There is no need to go into the authorship controversy with middle school students.

## **1. The Call of the Prophet (Isaiah 6)**

Isaiah was a young priest serving in the Temple when the Lord appeared to him and called him to the work of a prophet. Isaiah felt himself to be unworthy of such a work, but was willing to do whatever God wanted him to do. Isaiah's acute awareness of his own sin contrasts sharply with the smugness and complacency of so many Christians today. Do we take the holiness of God seriously? Isaiah is an example to your students here both in the way he acknowledges his sin and in the way he volunteers for whatever service God would have him do. Be sure to point out that Isaiah's commission was not at all encouraging. God told him that nobody would listen to his message and that, by the time he was done, the land would be a smoldering ruin. Your students need to realize that God does not require perfection of one who would serve Him, only a willing heart and total commitment. Also, they need to know that the work to which God calls His people is not always "fulfilling" in the modern sense of that word. Success is not measured by number of converts or the amount of money donated to the ministry, but by faithfulness to God.

## **2. The Confrontation with Ahaz (Isaiah 7)**

Ahaz, an idolater of the worst sort, was being threatened with an invasion from the north consisting of a coalition of Israel and Syria. He was scared to death. Isaiah came to him and encouraged him to stand firm, offering a sign from God. Ahaz hypocritically refused to ask for a sign, but Isaiah gave it to him anyway. The sign was the birth of a child. Isaiah said that before this child was old enough to know right from wrong, the northern coalition would be destroyed. II Kings 16 tells us that Ahaz foolishly refused to take the promise seriously and sent for help to Assyria. Assyria gladly responded, and after wiping Syria and Israel off the map, continued right on down into Judah, threatening Jerusalem with destruction (we will see what happened then when we consider chapter 37).

The promise of a child that Isaiah gave in this situation, of course, is the famous prophecy of the Virgin Birth of Jesus. This incident is a useful illustration of how prophecy works. Isaiah's prophecy was not simply a look into the distant future - an old reprobate like Ahaz would care little about a Deliverer to be born over 700 years later. The comfort he offered Ahaz was real; in fact, Isaiah 8:1-4 indicates that Isaiah's own son, Mahershalalhashbaz, was the immediate fulfillment of the prophecy - before he was old enough to speak, Israel and Syria were history, and his birth really did show that God was with His people. Of course, the greater significance of the prophecy related to the birth of Christ, who was Immanuel in the fullest sense of the word. Too often, we look at prophecy as though it were meant only for us, as a sort of key to future events. We must realize that the messages of the prophets were directed toward the people of their own day and had immediate as well as long-range significance.

## **3. The Prophecy Against Babylon (Isaiah 14:3-23)**

This prophecy is an example of the words of condemnation spoken by Isaiah to the surrounding nations, and another instance of the frequent misuse of the prophetic scriptures. Here Isaiah speaks of the eventual destruction of Babylon (which in his day had not yet risen to power). The words remind us of what happened to Nebuchadnezzar when his pride became too much for God to stomach and he was driven into the countryside to live like an animal in his madness. The fate of all nations is in the hand of God.

The most familiar verses of this prophecy are verses 12-15, which are often cited as a description of the fall of Satan from heaven (when the king of Babylon is called "morning star" in verse 12, the Greek translation of the Hebrew word is "Lucifer"). Though Isaiah may be alluding to the fall of Satan as an illustration, we must never forget that he is speaking of the king of Babylon, not Satan. These words should not be misused as mainly a description of Satan's fall, about which the Bible gives no concrete teaching.

#### **4. The Victory Over Assyria (Isaiah 37)**

Because of the foolishness of Ahaz, Assyria did invade Judah, but turned back after extracting heavy tribute. After Ahaz died, Hezekiah stopped the tribute and joined an anti-Assyrian coalition. Assyria immediately invaded, and after destroying Tyre, the leader of the coalition, headed south and laid siege to Jerusalem. Isaiah went to Hezekiah and promised that God would deliver the city. Unlike his father, Hezekiah believed the word of God and patiently waited for God's salvation. In one night, God destroyed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers and broke the siege of Jerusalem. The example of Hezekiah and Ahaz shows that God delivers those who trust Him, but that those who trust in human strength will fall short.

#### **5. The Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53)**

This is probably the most familiar chapter in the entire book of Isaiah. In it we find a description of the sufferings of Christ on the cross, not in the same graphic detail shown in Psalm 22, but in terms of its purpose. We are told clearly in this passage that the Messiah is to suffer as a substitute for His people. In no passage of the Old Testament is the message of salvation explained more clearly.

This lesson has had a lot to say about the misuse of Old Testament prophecy that fails to relate it to the audience to which it was spoken. We cannot lose sight, however, of the fact that the words of the Old Testament prophets, like the rest of Scripture, are ultimately intended to point to Christ. When Jesus was walking down the road to Emmaus with two of His followers after His resurrection, He showed them all of the Old Testament Scriptures that spoke of His work. When the Ethiopian eunuch was riding in his chariot reading Isaiah 53, Philip was able to explain the Gospel from the passage. The entire plan of God, as it is worked out in the events of history, is focused in Jesus Christ.

### **Conclusion**

Conclude the lesson by reminding the students of the lesson of Ahaz and Hezekiah. When God speaks, we are required to respond. Do we respond in obedient service like Isaiah himself? In confident faith like Hezekiah? Or with pious mouthings followed by dependence on human effort, like the foolish Ahaz?

## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## ISAIAH

1. During the reigns of what kings did Isaiah prophecy? Who was the chief enemy of Judah during these years?
2. Where was Isaiah when God called him to be a prophet? How did Isaiah respond to God's call?
3. What does the book of Isaiah teach us about the nature of prophecy? Is it directed toward the people of the time in which the words were spoken, or toward some future time?
4. Ahaz and Hezekiah were both given messages of deliverance from God. How did they respond? What resulted from their different responses?
5. Why may Isaiah 53 legitimately be called the clearest Old Testament explanation of the Gospel?



# **THE WRITINGS OF JEREMIAH: JEREMIAH AND LAMENTATIONS**

## **Lesson Aim**

To show students that God's servants often must suffer misunderstanding and abuse when they faithfully do what God has told them to do.

## **Memory Verse**

**Hebrews 11:24** - "By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter."

## **Lesson Background**

Jeremiah was a priest who served as God's prophet to the court of Judah during the final years of collapse in the Southern Kingdom. He prophesied from the thirteenth year of Josiah (627 B.C.) until the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar (586 B.C.). His message was largely a negative one of doom and destruction. Because of their idolatry, the captivity of Judah was by that time inevitable, and the reform under Josiah only served to postpone it briefly. Jeremiah's message was understandably an unpopular one, and there was no shortage of court prophets willing to tell the kings and the people what they wanted to hear. As a result, Jeremiah was vilified, persecuted, and several times imprisoned. When he told the people that the only way to safety was surrender to Babylon, they called him a traitor.

Though he undoubtedly played a significant role in the reforms during the reign of Josiah, he gained no thanks from the three sons and one grandson of Josiah who succeeded him. They repeatedly ignored Jeremiah's words and suffered for their ignorance and lack of faith. Finally, when the Babylonians did

conquer Judah and destroy Jerusalem, Jeremiah was given the choice of remaining in the land or being honorably escorted to Babylon. His enemies were now sure he was a traitor. When he chose to remain in the land, his enemies kidnaped him and spirited him off to Egypt, with whom they were allied. In Egypt, according to Jewish tradition, he was murdered by those who had been trying to get rid of him throughout the forty years of his prophetic ministry. One other bit of legend survives about Jeremiah. As a priest, he had access to the Temple, and according to Jewish tradition, he entered the Temple shortly before it was destroyed by the Babylonians and removed the Ark of the Covenant, which he then proceeded to hide in a cave in the Judean wilderness. It has never been found, of course, but this legend has raised all sorts of speculation about it (including the popular movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*).

Like most of the prophets, Jeremiah was given a message of hope along with his message of judgment. While he repeatedly told the people and their rulers about the captivity God was about to send, he also spoke of a coming day when God would make a new covenant with His people, in which the law would be written on their hearts instead of on stone tablets. With the coming of Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit, that new covenant has been inaugurated and is now bearing fruit.

The book of Lamentations consists of five acrostic dirges, poems of mourning written by Jeremiah after the destruction of Jerusalem. Each acrostic is designed so that each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet except for chapter three, where each letter is represented by three consecutive verses. Though the tone of these is mostly one of sorrow, even in the midst of such grief there is hope, along with confidence in the faithfulness of God (see 3:22-26, which provides the basis for the hymn *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*).

Jeremiah is a terrific example to your students because of his ability to resist peer pressure. Despite the fact that nobody believed him, that they called him a traitor, that they threw him in prison and eventually murdered him, Jeremiah trusted God and did what God told him to do no matter what others thought or said. Your students need to cultivate that same type of steadfastness. Secondly, the writings of Jeremiah give us a good look at the faithfulness of God. The fact that God is faithful does not always mean that His people will be delivered from trouble. Sometimes they will be mocked, imprisoned, taken into captivity, or even killed. But the important thing is that God sustains them through whatever trial He sends their way. Your students need to have that same kind of confidence in God's sustaining grace.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin the lesson by having your students read Psalm 1. After noting the contrasts that the psalm makes between the wicked and the righteous, ask them if this means that the righteous will never suffer and that everything they do will work out well. Your students should quickly recognize that this psalm is not promising a smooth and easy life to God's people. Once they have acknowledged this, ask them for examples from Scripture to support their contention that the righteous do not always live lives of uninterrupted prosperity and peace. One obvious example is a man they studied only a few weeks ago - Job, who suffered terribly for something that was not his fault in the least. Other examples include Joseph, Paul, and Jesus Himself. Another example of a godly man who suffered because of his obedience to God was Jeremiah, who is the subject of today's study.

### **1. The Life of Jeremiah**

Review for your students the events of the last forty years of the Southern Kingdom, from the reign of Josiah until the destruction of Jerusalem, and incorporate into that narrative information about the life of Jeremiah from the Lesson Background. Also include the call of Jeremiah from Jeremiah 1 (during the reign

of Josiah, right near the beginning of the reforms), the death threat by Jehoiakim (Jeremiah 26), the burning of his scroll by king Jehoiakim (Jeremiah 36), being put into the stocks by order of the chief priest during the reign of Zedekiah (Jeremiah 20), and being thrown into a cistern and later rescued (Jeremiah 38). [Note that the prophecies in the book of Jeremiah are not in chronological order.] Is it any wonder he was called the Weeping Prophet?

## **2. The Writings of Jeremiah**

The two books written by the prophet Jeremiah are the book that bears his name and the short book of Lamentations. The former is made up of prophecies with brief historical accounts interspersed, while the latter is five acrostic dirges composed after the destruction of Jerusalem. It is impossible to survey the content of these books in one lesson, but we do want to look at two important passages, one from each book, and both illustrating the faithfulness of God to His people in times of distress.

### **A. Praise in the Midst of Tragedy (Lamentations 3:19-33)**

Explain briefly the structure of Lamentations, then have the class read these verses from the middle of the third chapter. Ask them what is the basis for Jeremiah's confidence in this time of tragedy. How can he find something good in such a terrible disaster? How is Jeremiah's response here like that of Job in Job 42:1-6?

### **B. Promise of a Glorious Future (Jeremiah 31:31-34)**

God is a God who shows His mercy even in the midst of the harshest judgment. His people had gone so far into idolatry that punishment was inevitable. Yet even then He promised to restore them and keep the covenant He had made with Abraham, making it even stronger by putting it in the hearts of the people, not just on stone tablets. How did God accomplish this? Hebrews 8:8-12 quotes these same verses from Jeremiah and applies them to what Christ did on the cross and is continuing to do as the High Priest of His people. How is the law written on the hearts of God's people today? Your students should recognize that this is accomplished by the work of the Holy Spirit. What does God mean when He says that in such a time people will no longer need to teach one another? If that is true, why do your students have to sit in Sunday School and learn about God? Why are sermons preached in church? Make sure they understand that God is here saying that those who have the law in their hearts do not need to be evangelized because they already know the Lord. They still need instruction, however, in order to come to know the Lord better.

## **3. Lessons from Jeremiah**

There are a number of lessons that can be derived from the life and writings of Jeremiah. The one that probably has the greatest relevance to your students is Jeremiah's ability to stand alone in the face of enormous pressure to conform. The leaders of his day, along with his fellow priests and prophets, put intense pressure on him to say the same things they were saying. They were able to come up with all sorts of good reasons, not the least of which was that it was his patriotic duty to support the nation in its time of trial rather than undermining the will of the people by his prophecies of doom, while at the same time encouraging the Babylonians in their drive to conquer Judah. It is hard to be different when everyone around you is saying and doing the same things; it is even harder when they put pressure on you to join them, and mock and threaten physical harm if you don't go along. God gave Jeremiah the grace to do what was right in the face of enormous pressure, and can do the same for your students.

The second lesson is that trouble does not mean that God has deserted His people. Jeremiah saw clearly the love and faithfulness of God in the harshest of circumstances. His home had just been destroyed, the Temple had been demolished, and many of his friends and relatives had either been killed or taken off into captivity. Yet he did not blame God or turn against him, but saw even in these terrible events the loving hand of his heavenly Father.

The third lesson to be learned has to do with the new covenant that God promised through Jeremiah. Christians today are enjoying the benefits of that covenant, having seen the work of Christ on the cross and experiencing the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Such benefits should not be taken lightly. Christians today enjoy what Jeremiah himself could only talk about, but never got to experience. Be sure to note also, for the benefit of the unbelieving students in your class, that this covenant is made with all who believe, and that they may also participate in its blessings if they repent and trust Christ, so that they too may receive the Holy Spirit.





# **MINOR PROPHETS I**

## **HOSEA, JOEL, AND AMOS**

### **Lesson Aim**

To give students a basic understanding of the message of these three prophets and place them in the context of the history studied earlier.

### **Memory Verse**

**Hebrews 11:25** - “He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time.”

### **Lesson Background**

The last twelve books of the Old Testament, referred to simply as “The Twelve” in the Jewish Bible, are called the Minor Prophets, not because they or their messages were somehow less important than the Major Prophets, but simply because their books are shorter. The study of the Minor Prophets is often a venture into uncharted waters for middle school students (as well as for many adults). The best strategy for studying these books could be debated on many fronts. We could study them chronologically, which I would favor if we were looking at them in greater depth. But covering them in their canonical sequence makes it easier for students getting their first exposure to these books to remember what they have learned.

As we go through the books of the Minor Prophets, we will relate each one to its historical background by reminding students of appropriate events from the Divided Monarchy period that serve as the backdrop for the prophetic messages. We will also talk somewhat about the prophets themselves, though we know little about many of the writers of these books. We will also summarize the prophets’ messages and try to make some sort of application to the lives of your students.

This week, we consider the first three Minor Prophets, Hosea, Joel, and Amos. By looking at your chart of the Divided Monarchy, you can see that Amos and Hosea were the last two writing prophets to minister in the Northern Kingdom, while Joel preached in the Southern Kingdom almost a century earlier. Like most of the Minor Prophets, the three share a common theme - God's judgment against sin and His mercy to those who do not deserve it.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Start by asking your students why the Minor Prophets are called the Minor Prophets. You will probably have someone in your class who knows; if not, tell them. Next, ask when the Minor Prophets lived. You won't have as many takers on this one, and you will probably need to explain that nine of the twelve lived during the Divided Monarchy, while the last three lived after the Babylonian Captivity. We already saw that the greatest sin of the Divided Monarchy period was idolatry. The Minor Prophets speak out against idolatry, not only on the individual level, but also on the level of social abuses that stem from ignoring God. Many of the social abuses against which the prophets speak are common to our own day as well, and their messages help us understand that God cares about those who are being abused and oppressed by the wealthy and powerful. Today, we will be looking at the first three Minor Prophets: Hosea, Joel, and Amos.

### **1. Hosea**

#### **A. The Man**

Aside from the fact that he was the son of Beerai, we know nothing of the man. He was a northerner who preached to his own people during the time in which the Northern Kingdom was falling apart. Though he only mentions Jeroboam II among the northern kings during his ministry, that may be because those who followed were hardly worthy of the name of king. He prophesied from about 755-715 B.C., and probably was among those from Israel who fled to Judah at the time of the Assyrian invasion.

#### **B. His Times**

The prosperity enjoyed by Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II collapsed quickly after his death. Ruler followed ruler in quick succession, often by assassination or coup. With the threat of Assyria on the horizon, the people were so steeped in idolatry that they still did not turn to the Lord.

#### **C. His Message**

Hosea directs his message against the idolatry of Israel. The poignant illustration of the first three chapters is what the message of the book is all about. Make sure your students understand the story of Hosea 1-3. God often asked His prophets to perform symbolic acts to underscore the messages they were told to preach. Hosea is told by God to marry a cult prostitute by the name of Gomer. They have three children, but Hosea is convinced that the last two aren't his (note the names he gives them) because he knows his wife has been unfaithful. She finally leaves him to return to her old life and suffers terribly when her lovers reject her. One day, Hosea is passing a slave market, and who should he see there but Gomer, on sale to the highest bidder. He not only buys her, but restores her as his wife. There are few more beautiful pictures in the Old Testament of God's love for His wayward people.

This is not simply a picture of God's salvation of individuals, however. Hosea was giving a message to the idolaters of the Northern Kingdom. God loved them and would restore a remnant of His people after a time of great suffering.

## **D. Lessons for Today**

The message of Hosea needs to be applied to your students on an individual level. They certainly do not picture themselves in the same category as Gomer, but they need to recognize that their sins against God have hurt Him just as deeply. If they are Christians, they need to be aware of the depth of God's love and mercy. If they are not, they need to know that the God who told Hosea to forgive Gomer, and who Himself forgave Israel, will also forgive them if they repent.

## **2. Joel**

### **A. The Man**

Again we have little personal information. He was the son of Pethuel and preached in Judah around 830 B.C., probably during the reign of Joash.

### **B. His Times**

The book gives no direct indication of its date, but the indirect evidence is considerable. The book is quoted by Amos and Isaiah, mentions the practice of Temple sacrifice, and has nothing to say about Syria as an enemy of God's people. It thus seems to have been written during a time of outward godliness in Judah and before Syria became a significant threat. The early part of the reign of Joash, during which, with the help of the priest Jehoiada, the king cleaned up the mess left by his wicked grandmother Athaliah, is a probable setting for this prophecy.

### **C. His Message**

Joash was a weak king who depended on his advisors. He did well as long as he had good advisors, but his reign was a disaster after Jehoiada died. The people, after the years of idolatry during the reigns of Jehoram, Ahaziah, and Athaliah, turned to God under Joash, but their repentance was more external than internal. They did the right things outwardly, but their hearts were not really right with God. God therefore sent them a warning in the form of a locust plague. In the Middle East, locusts periodically sweep across the land in great swarms without warning, eating everything in sight. A swarm of locusts can destroy a year's crop in a matter of days. When such a plague struck Judah, God sent Joel to warn them that this disaster was only a physical taste of the judgment that would come if they didn't get their hearts straightened out. Joel told them to rend their hearts instead of their garments (2:13); true repentance is a matter of the heart, not of outward display. If they did so, God would restore what the locusts had destroyed (2:25). The greatest promise of the prophecy is the promise of the Holy Spirit (2:28-32), which was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost, as Peter indicated in his sermon in Acts 2.

### **D. Lessons for Today**

The lesson of Joel for your students is that the outward form of worship is not enough. Many of your students have been raised in Christian homes and have learned to do and say all the right things. The worship that pleases God, however, comes from the heart, and is motivated by the presence of the Holy Spirit. Your

students need to turn to Christ before the locusts eat away too many of their good years, years that could be used in the service of God.

### **3. Amos**

#### **A. The Man**

Amos himself tells us that he is neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet. He was not one of those men who spent their entire lives traveling around and preaching, nor was he one of the “sons of the prophets,” those young men who were under the instruction of a full-time prophet. By profession he was a herdsman and a tender of sycamore figs. He was from Tekoa, a village on the edge of the Judean wilderness, but was sent by God to preach to the Northern Kingdom of Israel in its years of corruption.

#### **B. His Times**

He preached during the reign of Jeroboam II, years of great prosperity in Israel. The kingdom was expanding, the people were rich, and the aristocracy lived lives of leisure. Amos appeared to these wealthy aristocrats to be a country bumpkin from the South, and they mocked his harsh messages. While Hosea, who ministered a little later than did Amos, focused on the idolatry of the people, Amos aimed at the social abuses of the rich in Samaria.

#### **C. His Message**

He begins his message with great subtlety. In the first two chapters of the book, he announces God’s judgment against the surrounding nations, beginning with the pagan nations of Syria to the northeast, Philistia to the southwest, Tyre to the northwest, and Edom to the southeast. These words of condemnation no doubt brought rousing cheers and instant celebrity status to this uncouth layman from Judah. He then moves in closer, speaking God’s words of judgment against Israel’s two neighbors immediately to the east, Ammon and Moab. Much to the amazement of his audience, he then condemned his own people, the nation of Judah, directly to the south. At that point, however, he stopped preaching and started meddling. He spoke harsh words against the people of Israel themselves, calling the rich women of Samaria “fat cows of Bashan” and warning them they smelled like rotten fruit in the nostrils of God. He told them that God had measured them and found them to be crooked, and that if they didn’t repent, they would be like a lamb who, after being eaten by a lion, left nothing behind but a piece of its ear. Needless to say, Amos’ Nielsen ratings plummeted and the Israelites began to plot against him. He continued to warn them, however, aiming mostly at the social abuses of the rich, who cared nothing for the poor in their midst and thought nothing of trampling on them in order to enhance their own comfort.

#### **D. Lessons for Today**

Amos strikes at the heart of the assumption that prosperity is a mark of God’s blessing. These people, like the church in Laodicea in Revelation 3, thought they were rich and were totally unaware of their own spiritual poverty. We live in a culture that is materially rich, and it can very easily make us forget God. It can also make us forget our neighbors. Jesus made clear that those who would love like God loves must reach out to those who are poor and needy.

## **FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT**

## **MINOR PROPHETS I HOSEA, JOEL, AND AMOS**

1. Why were the Minor Prophets given that name?
2. During what period in Old Testament history did most of the Minor Prophets live?
3. Did Hosea, Joel, and Amos minister to the Northern Kingdom of Israel or the Southern Kingdom of Judah?
4. Why did God tell Hosea to marry a prostitute?
5. What lesson did Joel draw from the plague of locusts God had sent to destroy the people's crops?
6. Why did Amos criticize the luxury of the inhabitants of Samaria?



# **MINOR PROPHETS II**

## **OBADIAH, JONAH, AND MICAH**

### **Lesson Aim**

To give students a basic understanding of the message of these three prophets and place them in the context of the history studied earlier.

### **Memory Verse**

**Hebrews 11:26** - “He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.”

### **Lesson Background**

Today’s lesson includes the most familiar of the Minor Prophets along with two of the most obscure. Your students will know the story of Jonah very well, though they probably will not be familiar with its background. On the other hand, they probably know nothing about Obadiah except that it is the shortest book in the Old Testament, and know nothing about Micah except that he prophesied the birthplace of Jesus. It is your task today to remedy those gaps in your students’ understanding and at the same time to apply the messages of these prophets to their lives. We will follow the same basic approach used last week in covering these three books.

### **Lesson Procedure**

Begin the lesson by reviewing the prophets studied last week. Then indicate that today we are covering three more of the Minor Prophets: Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah.

## **1. Obadiah**

### **A. The Man**

Like many of the Minor Prophets, this is a man of whom we know nothing. His name means “Servant of the Lord.”

### **B. His Times**

There is considerable debate about the time of Obadiah’s prophecy, which is not given in the book itself. Many scholars favor the Babylonian Captivity, but the Edomites suffered just as much at the hand of Nebuchadnezzar as did the people of Judah. A better date would be about 845 B.C. During the reign of Jehoram in Judah, the Philistines and Arabians invaded Jerusalem and carried off the king’s entire harem and most of his children, along with a sizeable part of the population (II Chronicles 21). The Edomites, who had successfully thrown off the domination of Judah just before this invasion, no doubt were enjoying the spectacle thoroughly and did all they could to encourage and help the invaders.

### **C. His Message**

Though this was a time when Judah was falling into idolatry (Jehoram was the one who married Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel), Obadiah has nothing to say against Judah. His target is Edom, the descendants of Esau who had plagued the sons of Jacob ever since the rift between the two brothers. Obadiah criticizes Edom for their pride, especially in their capital city of Petra, hidden in a rock-walled valley that could only be reached by a narrow passageway, and thought to be impregnable (the temple scene at the end of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* was filmed in the remains of Petra). Obadiah warns them that they will be defeated by those they think are their friends and will eventually be subject to the Jews at whom they had scoffed so recently. Both prophecies came true, of course, the former when Edom was defeated by the Nabatean Arabs around 500 B.C. and was forced to leave Petra and resettle south of the Judean wilderness, and the latter when the Edomites were conquered by the Jewish ruler John Hyrcanus about 100 B.C. and forcibly converted to Judaism (it was this action that led to the rule of the Herod family over Palestine in the days of Jesus; Herod was an Idumaeon, or Edomite).

### **D. Lessons for Today**

The lesson of Obadiah is that God protects His people. Those who mock and insult God’s children may seem to be getting away with it, but God remembers and always has the last word. The students in your class who are Christians should keep in mind that God knows what they are going through with their friends at school and in the neighborhood and cares about what is happening to them. For your non-Christian students, be sure to point out that God did punish Edom for their mockery of His children, even though that punishment was a while in coming.

## **2. Jonah**

### **A. The Man**

Jonah, the son of Amittai, was from Gath-hepher in the Northern Kingdom and was the first of the writing prophets in the North. Before the incidents recorded in the book, Jonah had already established a reputation as a prophet among his own people (II Kings 14:25).

## **B. His Times**

Jonah lived during the reign of Jeroboam II, a strong ruler who brought expansion and prosperity to his nation. One of the reasons he was so successful was that the Assyrian Empire, the great power in the Middle East of that day, was in a period of decline and weakness from which they would soon emerge. The low point of Assyrian power occurred during the reign of Ashur-dan III (773-754 B.C.), when a serious plague in 765 was followed by a solar eclipse, thought to be a portent of evil, in 763. The superstitious inhabitants of Nineveh, one of the chief cities of Assyria, would have been expecting disaster, and the message of Jonah, delivered by a man who looked like he had returned from the grave, would have been just enough to push them over the edge. (Can you imagine what Jonah must have looked like after being half-digested by the stomach juices of a whale? Some commentators, in fact, think he did die and was raised from the dead by God.)

## **C. His Message**

The message of Jonah was a simple one - "Repent or Nineveh will be gone in less than two months!" He was reluctant to deliver this message simply because he had no desire to see Nineveh repent. He knew from the words of the prophet Joel that Assyria would one day destroy Israel, and he wanted nothing more than to see God destroy them first. As a result, he tried to resign his prophetic commission and leave the country. God stopped him and gave him another chance, and Jonah, still reluctant, delivered the message. Just as Jonah expected, Nineveh repented, and God, true to His nature, pardoned them and agreed not to destroy the city. Jonah was furious and wanted to die. Not only was he angry that Nineveh had been spared, but he probably thought that his life was over anyway (How would you like to return to a pagan court as the prophet who had caused God to spare their worst enemy?).

## **D. Lessons for Today**

The main lessons to be learned from the book of Jonah involve obedience to God's call and concern for one's enemies. God told Jonah to do something he had no desire to do. We often face the same situation, though God's commands often come through some authority figure, like parents or teachers. But, as Jonah learned, God expects us to obey Him whether we like it or not and whether it makes sense to us or not. Secondly, the book of Jonah teaches the same lesson as the parable of the Good Samaritan, except from the opposite perspective. Jonah, unlike the Good Samaritan, never learned to love his enemies, which God expects His people to do, even as He Himself has done (Romans 5:8).

## **3. Micah**

### **A. The Man**

Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah in the Southern Kingdom, from the town of Moresheth. He was probably from the lower classes and ministered to the common people at the same time that Isaiah was advising the kings at court. He prophesied from about 735-705 B.C., during the time immediately preceding the Assyrian invasion of Judah.

### **B. His Times**

Micah prophesied during the reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah. The former was an idolater about whom we spoke during our study of Isaiah, while the latter was a sincere man of God who did his best to purge the

land of idolatry. While Hezekiah succeeded in removing most of the idols from the land, he did not succeed in removing them from the hearts of the people. It is that persistent attitude of depending on other gods that Micah preaches against.

### **C. His Message**

Micah begins by describing the devastation that the Assyrian invasion would bring to Judah. Jerusalem was spared by miraculous divine intervention, but many of the towns of Judah were burned to the ground during the invasion. Micah tells them that this punishment from God is coming because of their idolatry and oppression of the poor. He also promises eventual restoration and speaks of the Deliverer that God will send, who is to be born in the town of Bethlehem, a small town of little significance except that it was the birthplace of David. But Micah warns that this deliverance will not come until their wickedness has been purged through invasion and eventually captivity. He ends his prophetic message with a plea to his people to repent and turn to God.

### **D. Lessons for Today**

Micah 6:6-8 is a passage quoted often by those who wish to see the requirements of God as no more than social justice. We often quickly remind them that these verses are in the context of a condemnation of false worship, and that good deeds mean nothing apart from a heart that is right with God. We need to be reminded, on the other hand, that a person who goes through all the motions of external religion but cares nothing for his neighbor, like the Pharisees of Jesus' day, cannot claim to be at peace with God.





# **MINOR PROPHETS III**

## **NAHUM, HABAKKUK, AND ZEPHANIAH**

### **Lesson Aim**

To give students a basic understanding of the message of these three prophets and place them in the context of the history studied earlier.

### **Memory Verse**

**Hebrews 11:27** - "By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible."

### **Lesson Background**

This week we have three of the most obscure in an obscure group. Your students would probably be hard-pressed to tell you anything about any of these people. While the messages of these three prophets are very different, they all play variations on the major theme of the Minor Prophets, that of judgment and restoration. All three of these prophets ministered in Judah in the last seventy-five years before the Babylonian Captivity. They saw in Judah mainly gross idolatry, interrupted only temporarily by the reform under Josiah. We will follow the same procedure we have been using for the last two weeks to study these books. For your lesson application, the book of Habakkuk will probably be most meaningful to your students, with its emphasis on trusting God even while suffering through the judgment He sends against sinners.

## Lesson Procedure

In the year 410, the Gothic chieftain Alaric looted the city of Rome, bringing defeat to a city that had known nothing but victory for a thousand years. Only thirty years earlier, Christianity had been made the official religion of the Roman Empire. Now people were beginning to complain that the sack of Rome had been the fault of the Christians. The pagan gods were angry because their statues had been torn down and their temples closed, and had brought this disaster on Rome to gain revenge. A stream of refugees began flooding into the North African town of Hippo, and many were asking the same question in another form: Why did God allow the city that was now championing His church to fall before the rampaging hordes of paganism? The bishop of Hippo, a man named Augustine, answered these questions in a book called *The City of God*, in which he explained that the work of God in the world is not dependent on any political power or human organization. Even if the Roman Empire were to crumble into dust, the Kingdom of God would continue to advance.

After using this opening illustration, ask your students how they would feel if the United States were to be conquered by a godless enemy nation. After all, the United States has done more to spread the Gospel than any other country on earth, sending missionaries throughout the world and giving Christians an amount of freedom that is practically unprecedented in human history. Would God really allow this great nation to fall to an atheistic power? Point out that the same dilemma expressed in this example was faced by the godly inhabitants of Judah in the years immediately preceding the Babylonian Captivity. Judah was not perfect by any means, but it was at that time the most godly nation on earth; no other nation even pretended to acknowledge God as their King. Yet here God was sending the godless Babylonians to judge His own people! How could it be? While this question was the major concern of the prophet Habakkuk, we will also be looking today at the books of Nahum and Zephaniah.

### 1. Nahum

#### A. The Man

Of Nahum himself we know nothing except that he was from the town of Elkosh. The only problem here is that we have no idea where the town of Elkosh was located. Knowledge of it has not survived, either in ancient records or from archaeological digs. For no other reason than because he occasionally mentions the situation in Judah, most commentators assume he was from the Southern Kingdom.

#### B. His Times

Nahum's prophecy must be dated between the fall of Thebes in 663 B.C., which he mentions as having already occurred, and the fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C., which he predicts. Since he fails to mention the king of Judah, most commentators assume he prophesied during the reign of the wicked Manasseh or Amon rather than the godly Josiah. Thus his prophecy probably was given sometime during the years 660-640 B.C. As noted before, this was a period of gross idolatry in Judah, yet the message of Nahum is one of blessing, not judgment - at least for Judah.

#### C. His Message

Over one hundred years earlier, Nineveh had repented because of the reluctant preaching of Jonah. The repentance had been short-lived, however, and when Assyrian power had reasserted itself, so did their idolatry and cruelty. The intervening century had seen the destruction of Samaria and the siege of Jerusalem,

and the Assyrian menace was by no means gone from the horizon. The message of Nahum is one of God's judgment against Nineveh, largely because of the way Assyria had treated Judah during the invasion and siege fifty years before. Nineveh eventually was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians in 612 B.C., and the destruction was so thorough that the location of the city remained unknown for over a thousand years. Nahum sees his message as one of comfort to God's people because God is punishing their enemies for their cruelty.

## **D. Lessons for Today**

God may use cruel, godless people to punish the sins of His children, but He holds them accountable for their actions. The fact that they are tools in the hands of God does not absolve them of responsibility for what they do. God will punish evil, even if He has used that evil to accomplish His purposes. As Paul says in Romans 9, the Potter makes the clay into any shape He desires, and is certainly free to destroy the pot when it has served its purpose. God is sovereign over the men and nations of this world.

## **2. Habakkuk**

### **A. The Man**

Again, we know nothing about the man Habakkuk. We assume that he was a man of Judah, and the final sentence of the book suggests that he might have been a Levite, though it was not necessary for a person to be a Levite in order to write hymns for public worship.

### **B. His Times**

Habakkuk's prophecy was given in the years immediately following the death of Josiah in 609 B.C. Babylon had supplanted Assyria as the leading world power with the destruction of Nineveh in 612, and Josiah was killed in battle against Egypt in 609. The prophecy was given between the death of Josiah and Nebuchadnezzar's first expedition to Judah in 605. During this time, Josiah's young son Jehoahaz reigned for three months as the representative of the pro-Babylonian Judean aristocracy. He was then supplanted by his older brother Eliakim, placed in power and renamed Jehoiakim by Pharaoh Necho of Egypt. We have already seen that Jehoiakim repeatedly ignored the warnings of the prophet Jeremiah. Instead, he trusted in the power of Egypt to deliver them from the threat posed by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. God made it clear, however, that captivity was coming, both through Jeremiah and through the next of our prophets, Zephaniah. Habakkuk believed this message of judgment, and it is his response that makes up the book he has left for us.

### **C. His Message**

The book of Habakkuk is not a typical prophetic book because it was not a message preached to the people of Judah. It consists of two chapters of dialogue between the prophet and God and a psalm of praise. Habakkuk begins by asking God why He is standing by and doing nothing against the terrible wickedness of Judah. God responds by saying that He is planning to do something - the Babylonian Captivity. Habakkuk then responds in puzzlement: How could God punish the wickedness of His people by using a people even more wicked than they? God answers that the Babylonians, too, will be judged for their wickedness. God's people must live by faith, trusting God to do what is right (Habakkuk 2:4 is quoted by Paul in his argument for salvation by faith in Romans 1:17).

The book closes with a psalm of praise. Habakkuk prays that God would be merciful in the midst of judgment and sees the wrath of God as a manifestation of His glory. Verses 17-19 show that Habakkuk has learned the lesson of living by faith. Peace and security come from the Lord, not from circumstances.

#### **D. Lessons for Today**

Habakkuk contains two very important lessons for your students. The first is that Christians can take no comfort in relative righteousness. Judah was better than Babylon, but still deserved God's judgment for their wickedness. America may be better than Iran, Bosnia, Rwanda, ISIS, or whoever the current villain on the international scene may be, but that does not mean that we do not deserve God's wrath for our sin. On an individual level, Christians can take no comfort from the fact that they are holier than their neighbors. The standard of righteousness is God Himself (Matthew 5:48), not the low morals of those around us. It is far too easy for us to excuse our sins by saying that the sins of others are far worse.

The second lesson is that peace and contentment are found in God, not in circumstances. Habakkuk concluded that even if the whole country were destroyed, the crops were gone, and there were no source of food, he could still praise God for His goodness. Can we say the same? To what extent does our happiness depend on the material things we possess and the comforts we enjoy?

### **3. Zephaniah**

#### **A. The Man**

Zephaniah tells us that he was the great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah and prophesied during the reign of Josiah. Being of royal blood, he probably lived in Jerusalem.

#### **B. His Times**

Josiah came to the throne at age eight and upon reaching adulthood initiated a great revival. Since Zephaniah does not mention this revival, but pictures the people as irredeemably steeped in idolatry, it is likely that he prophesied in the early years of Josiah's reign, while the king was still a child and had not yet had the opportunity to reform the land. This book thus reflects the situation produced by the wicked reigns of Manasseh and Amon and speaks of the condition in which Josiah found the nation when he grew old enough to assume complete rule over Judah.

#### **C. His Message**

The main message of Zephaniah is that Judah is going to be judged for her idolatry, and that this will occur at the hands of the Babylonians. He goes on to mention the other nations that Babylon will conquer, and closes with the promise that God will restore His people and will bring blessing to them through His presence in their midst.

#### **D. Lessons for Today**

Zephaniah reminds us that God's ultimate purpose for His people is always blessing. Even when He finds it necessary to punish, that chastisement is for the good of those He has chosen. Hebrews 12 underscores the same lesson, teaching us that God disciplines His children by punishing them for their sins, but that the end result is growth in grace.





# **EZEKIEL**

## **Lesson Aim**

To teach students that serving God might require a person to be different in order to be obedient to God's will.

## **Memory Verse**

**Hebrews 11:28** - "By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel."

## **Lesson Background**

In the years immediately prior to the Babylonian Captivity, competing factions in Judah were aligned with the two major powers in the region, Egypt and Babylon. Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah, had been placed on the throne by the Egyptian pharaoh. When Egypt was defeated by Nebuchadnezzar at Carchemish in 605 B.C., the Babylonian prince was ready to remove Jehoiakim, but before he could do so, he received a message from home that his father Nabopolassar had died and he was now the king of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar took the most promising young Jewish men to Babylon with him to be trained for the Babylonian civil service, but left Jehoiakim on the throne in Jerusalem. Ignoring the warnings of Jeremiah, Jehoiakim foolishly rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar and was killed in battle against a group of Babylon's allies. He was replaced on the throne by his son Jehoiachin. But Nebuchadnezzar himself soon came to Palestine to deal with the rebellion. Jehoiachin was arrested and deported to Babylon, and with him were taken the cream of Judean society - ten thousand capable men, including a young priest by the name of Ezekiel.

Ezekiel's group of captives was settled in a city called Tel Aviv near the Kebar Canal, which flowed into the Euphrates River. There Ezekiel became God's prophet to the Jews of the Captivity. At the same time that Daniel was ministering in the Babylonian court, Ezekiel was bringing God's Word to the discouraged Jews living in Babylon. Through visions, messages, and prophetic actions, he told them of the destruction of Jerusalem and prophesied the eventual restoration of God's people, not only to the land, but also to God Himself.

We will only have time today for a sampling of the material in the book of Ezekiel, as we did earlier with Isaiah and Jeremiah. We will look at Ezekiel's commission (Ezekiel 3), two symbolic actions (Ezekiel 4 and 24), and two visions (Ezekiel 37 and 40-48). These should not only give your students an idea of the kinds of things to be found in Ezekiel, but should also expose them to the major messages of the prophet.

As far as applications are concerned, your students should recognize that God's people have a responsibility to warn sinners of judgment, that being a follower of Christ might require a person to do things that to those around them might seem odd or different, and that God is merciful, bringing life from the dead and living in the midst of His people.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Start the class by asking your students to what extent a Christian must be different from those around him. They will probably respond that a Christian should be different, and indicate some ways in which this should be true, but not too different. After all, Christians aren't supposed to be weird! Then ask them to think again. Weren't there some people in the Bible whom God told to do things that were really strange? What about Gideon, going to war with torches, pitchers, and trumpets? What about Joshua, attacking a city by marching around the outside thirteen times? What about Naaman, dipping himself seven times in the Jordan River to cure leprosy? Or the blind man healed by Jesus, who washed mud out of his eyes in the Pool of Siloam? But God often asked His prophets to do things that were far worse. At one point, He told Isaiah to walk around for three years with no clothes on (Isaiah 20) in order to show the people what they would be left with if they trusted the Egyptians instead of God! No prophet engaged in more bizarre symbolic actions than Ezekiel, the subject of today's lesson. At this point, give the students some background information on Ezekiel from the Lesson Background.

### **1. Ezekiel's Commission (Ezekiel 3)**

Like other prophets, Ezekiel entered into his ministry knowing that the people would not listen to his message. Despite this discouraging start, God nonetheless gave Ezekiel much to strengthen him. By the act of eating a scroll, God assured Ezekiel that the words he was to speak would be God's words rather than his own. He also commissioned him to be a watchman. Ask your students why the image of the watchman was particularly appropriate for the task Ezekiel was given to do. They should recognize that, like the night watchman on guard over the city, his responsibility was to sound the warning. After that, his responsibility was finished. If the people heeded the warning, they would be saved, but if they didn't, their destruction was their own fault. If he failed to warn them, however, their destruction would be his responsibility.

Be sure your students understand that all Christians are in some sense like watchmen. They are to sound the warning of God's coming judgment. If sinners do not listen, they are at fault, but if the watchman does not sound the warning, he bears responsibility as well. [Note that this illustration, when applied to the evangelistic responsibility of the Christian, does not imply that those who do not hear are not responsible for their eventual condemnation by God. The Bible clearly teaches that all are sinners, guilty before God, and that whether they hear the Gospel or not does not change that fact.]

## **2. Two Symbolic Actions**

### **A. The Model City (Ezekiel 4)**

If possible, bring wooden blocks and toy soldiers to class with you. At this point in the lesson, without saying a word to your students, get out the blocks, dump them out on the floor, and start building a fort, surrounded by soldiers. Then lie down on your side on the floor, still saying nothing. By this time, of course, your students will be making all sorts of wisecracks. Get up and have them turn to Ezekiel 4 and read the first eight verses. What was the significance of this symbolic act on the part of Ezekiel? What was God trying to tell the people? Actions often speak louder than words, and in the same way that your students will go home from Sunday School today with your block-building foremost in their minds, so the people of Ezekiel's day would remember the message he had for them from God.

### **B. The Death of Ezekiel's Wife (Ezekiel 24:15-27)**

The symbolic message here was of an entirely different character. God told Ezekiel that he was going to take away his wife, but Ezekiel was not permitted to mourn or show any outward signs of grief. The point of the symbol was that God was about to destroy the Temple in Jerusalem, but that the people would be so callous in their sin that they would not even weep for it.

Ezekiel's symbolic actions show that God's people must communicate as much by their deeds as by their words. God will not often ask His children to do bizarre things, but they must be willing to do such things if God requires it. Often, what God requires will be hard. As in Ezekiel's case, however, what God demands He also supplies. If your students are truly committed to doing the will of God, He will give them the strength to follow through on that commitment, no matter how difficult the task may be. They must be willing, however, to stand alone, even in the face of mockery from those around them.

## **3. Two Visions**

### **A. The Valley of Dry Bones (Ezekiel 37)**

Now have your students read Ezekiel 37:1-14. This is probably the most famous portion of the book of Ezekiel, though your students probably know little more about it than "the leg bone's connected to the knee bone." What did Ezekiel see? What did the vision mean? What kind of restoration was God promising to His people? Was it a physical restoration only, or also a spiritual one? How can you tell?

Mercifully for us, the Spirit that God promised to Israel through Ezekiel was given to the Gentiles also, and that same new life is the experience of Christians today. Your students should realize that, prior to salvation, people are like those dry bones in the desert, incapable of life, and that only the work of God can bring the dead back to life.

### **B. The Temple (Ezekiel 40-48)**

The book of Ezekiel closes with the great Temple vision, in which Ezekiel sees a beautiful Temple, far more fabulous than that built by Solomon. The point of this glorious vision is that God is dwelling in the midst of His people, as the last verse of the book indicates. The greatest privilege God can give to His people is His presence. The Israelites may have been in captivity in Babylon, but if God was with them, they had all they needed. The promise God gives to the Jews through Ezekiel here is similar to that given by Jesus

to His disciples before His ascension, where He promised to be with them forever. The book of Revelation also uses the same imagery used by Ezekiel when it pictures a beautiful city in which God Himself dwells. To Christians, the greatest comfort they can have is the comfort of knowing that God is with them. More important by far than the circumstances they face or the advantages or disadvantages that characterize their lives is the issue of God's presence. Those who have it are privileged indeed, and those who lack it are hopelessly lost.

## **Conclusion**

Conclude the lesson by reviewing the major applications drawn from the book of Ezekiel. God has called His people to spread His Word in the world, and this is a serious responsibility. In fulfilling this responsibility, a Christian must often stand out from those around him. But whatever he must do or whatever circumstances he faces, the Christian has the great privilege of living in the presence of God, who is with him in the person of the Holy Spirit.

## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## EZEKIEL

1. Why was the job given to Ezekiel by God compared to that of a watchman on the wall of a city? In what sense are all Christians watchmen?
2. Why did God tell His prophets to do bizarre things like build model cities in the middle of the street and lie down beside them for days on end?
3. In what ways does God expect Christians today to be different? Is bizarre behavior necessary in order to communicate the Word of God effectively?
4. What was the meaning of Ezekiel's vision of the Valley of Dry Bones? What does this vision tell us about the nature of salvation?
5. Why was Ezekiel's Temple vision so comforting to the Jews in captivity in Babylon? In what way is the vision like the promise Jesus gave to His disciples in Matthew 28:18-20?



# **DANIEL**

## **Lesson Aim**

To teach students the importance of standing up boldly for their faith in the face of opposition and ridicule.

## **Memory Verse**

**Hebrews 11:29** - “By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.”

## **Lesson Background**

When Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Egyptians at Carchemish in 605 B.C., he swept down through Palestine to exact tribute from the nations there. When he got to Judah, he was prepared to depose the pro-Egyptian king, Jehoiakim, but was called home upon the death of his father. He left Jehoiakim on the throne, but took with him back to Babylon the most promising young men in the kingdom in order to train them for service in the Babylonian Empire. Among these young men was an aristocratic lad by the name of Daniel. He eventually rose through the Babylonian bureaucracy to become the Prime Minister, and when the Babylonians were overthrown by the Medo-Persians, he remained in power, finally becoming the supervisor of all the satraps in the province of Babylon.

Daniel lived through an enormous amount of political upheaval. Not only was he removed from his home as a teenager, but he also was trained in a foreign court, where he successfully adhered to his religious principles despite enormous pressure. He served with distinction under Nebuchadnezzar, gaining a position of influence through his God-given ability to interpret dreams. When Nebuchadnezzar died, he was

succeeded by his son Nabonidus, who had no interest in political intrigue. Nabonidus was a bit of a mystic, and as soon as his son Belshazzar became old enough, he retired to a desert monastery and left his son on the throne as regent. Belshazzar was a shameless profligate, and under his unsteady hand, the Babylonian Empire fell to the Medes and the Persians, led by Cyrus the Great. The Median general who had engineered the defeat of the city of Babylon, known to secular history as Gobryas or Gubaru, was left there as the ruler of the new Persian province; he is called Darius the Mede in the book of Daniel. It was he who was duped by his jealous advisors into throwing Daniel into the den of lions, despite the aged councilor's spotless reputation.

The second half of the book of Daniel consists of prophecies. The prophecy in chapter seven parallels Nebuchadnezzar's dream in chapter two and speaks of the four great world empires that were to dominate the Middle East over the next thousand years (Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome). The visions in chapters eight and eleven both chronicle in astounding detail the events of the Intertestamental Period, particularly during the Macedonian Empire built by Alexander the Great. Many details are given concerning the Maccabean Revolt, which we will be studying briefly next quarter (it is these details that cause most liberal critics to date the book long after the Babylonian Captivity, by the way). Chapter nine contains the famous prophecy of the seventy sevens, which, though scholars disagree strongly over the meaning of its details, gives a remarkably accurate prediction of the time of the coming of the Messiah.

It is difficult to know how to approach a book like Daniel for students of middle school age. The narratives in the history section are stories they have heard over and over again, and they could easily give the applications of those stories themselves. The prophetic portions of the book are a bit too complex to treat at this age level, especially in only one week. Consequently, we will be coming at the book from a slightly different angle than what your students may expect. The first part of our approach will consist of a review of the historical background. Most of your students will probably know little of this beside what is contained in the book itself. Secondly, we will look at Daniel as a godly man in an ungodly world. Your students live in an ungodly world - even those who attend Christian schools. By looking at the life of Daniel (we will avoid the prophecies at this point), they should be able to gain a better understanding of what it means to live as a Christian in a non-Christian world.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Many years ago in England there lived a young man named Patrick. When he was in his teens, an Irish raiding party crossed the Irish Sea and attacked his village, killing his parents and kidnaping him. They took him back to Ireland, where he became a servant to one of the leading Irish families. After many years of slavery, he managed to escape. He returned to England, and later studied in Italy to learn to preach the Gospel. Eventually he returned to Ireland, and was responsible for the conversion to Christianity of a large percentage of the barbarians who inhabited the island. He is known to us today as Saint Patrick, and despite the foolish legends that have grown up about him over the years, he was a great man of God.

Ask your students if they know of anyone in the Bible who had an experience like Patrick's. He was kidnaped as a teenager and sent to a distant country, there to serve foreigners whose language he didn't know. He served them faithfully, and eventually rose to become one of the leading rulers in the country, while at the same time maintaining an outstanding testimony for the Lord. If your students are sharp, they will realize that this description actually fits two people in the Bible - both Joseph and the subject of today's study, Daniel. Before embarking on today's study, ask your students to think about the kind of qualities such a person as Daniel would need to survive and prosper in such an alien environment. Those same qualities, which we will see in today's study, are what your students need to survive as Christians (if they are Christians) in their neighborhoods, schools, and eventually places of business.

Before getting involved in looking at specific incidents in Daniel's life, take some time to explain the historical background of the period. Use material from the Lesson Background, and give the students a context within which to understand the events of Daniel's life.

## **1. Knowing Where to Draw the Line (Daniel 1 and 3)**

Anyone who lives in an alien environment constantly faces the question of how far to go along with the ways of the surrounding world. Daniel faced that question and answered it wisely and well. Your students know the stories of Daniel's training and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, so ask them to think through those stories and list ways in which Daniel and his friends went along with the Babylonians and ways in which they refused to do so. They should be able to see that they submitted to Babylonian education and Babylonian names (despite the fact that their new names honored Babylonian gods, while their Jewish names honored the Lord), but refused to break God's laws (such as the dietary restrictions of the law of Moses), and would not for any reason bow down to the gods of the Babylonians. Thus cultural accommodation was acceptable as long as they didn't violate God's law, but idolatry was strictly forbidden.

What does this mean for your students? They may legitimately participate in the culture in which they live as long as what they do does not violate the law of God. But anything that involves the worship of false gods is ruled out. Of course, in our day, idolatry is a bit more subtle than it was in Daniel's day. We are not asked to bow down before a golden statue, but are often expected to worship gold in other forms. Be sure your students bring out specific examples of idolatry they need to avoid in their dealings with a non-Christian world.

## **2. Trusting God (Daniel 2 and 6)**

Again, the stories are familiar. Nebuchadnezzar's dream and the story of the lion's den will be well known to almost all of your students. The question to ask here is, "In what specific ways did Daniel show that he was trusting God rather than his considerable abilities or his exalted standing in a pagan world?" It would have been easy for Daniel to have trusted his influence in situations like this. He had been given extraordinary wisdom, and in such situations it is always a temptation to trust God's gifts rather than God Himself. But Daniel was a man of prayer, both in times of emergency (chapter two) and on a regular basis (chapter six). He knew that he was nothing without God, and turned to God for both regular sustenance and emergency aid.

Your students cannot survive in an alien world without the help of God. God's help is not something that can be presumed upon. He loves to help His children, but He also loves to have them ask for the help they need, thus acknowledging their dependence on Him. If your students are to cope with the pressures applied daily by an unbelieving world, they must find in God a daily source of strength.

## **3. Telling the Truth (Daniel 4 and 5)**

It is easy for Christians to get along in an alien world by telling unbelievers what they want to hear or by acting the way unbelievers expect them to act. If Daniel had done that, he would have made no impact at all on the Babylonian or Persian empires. God had given him the power to interpret dreams, and he used that power, even when it meant telling Nebuchadnezzar that he would roam the fields like a wild animal because of his pride and telling Belshazzar that he would die before the night was out, and his kingdom would be taken over by the Medo-Persians.

Your students do not have the power to interpret dreams, but they still face situations where it is easier to keep quiet, or to say what is expected, instead of telling the truth. If they are to make a difference for Jesus Christ in the world in which He has placed them, they must speak out for the truth even when what they have to say may not be popular. It is important to note that this is true even when what they have to say may seem like it will do no good. Certainly Daniel's explanation to Belshazzar of the handwriting on the wall was an exercise in futility. It was too late to change anything at that point, and all it accomplished was to let Belshazzar know that what was coming was from God. Daniel could easily have reasoned that it would do no good to get Belshazzar more upset than he already was, that since he was drunk it wouldn't matter what Daniel said, and that his life was over anyway and there was no point warning him about the inevitable. But Daniel refused to use those excuses and told the truth, no matter how much it hurt. Such boldness is a necessity if Christians are to have any impact on their world for good.

## **Conclusion**

Conclude the lesson by reviewing the character sketch of Daniel with which the lesson began. Now that the incidents of Daniel's life have been reviewed, your students should be able to see that Daniel was a man characterized by knowing where to go along with the world and where to say no, trusting God rather than his own ability or popularity, and telling the truth to those around him even when it hurt or seemed futile. All Christians should display these same characteristics in their lives.

## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## DANIEL

1. Who are the three kings who play a major role in the book of Daniel, and over what two empires did they rule?
2. What do the examples of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego teach us about when to say no to the world around us?
3. Why is prayer important to a Christian living in a non-Christian environment? What examples does the book of Daniel give to illustrate this truth?
4. Why should Christians tell the truth instead of saying what people want to hear, even if it seems like it will do no good?



# **THE RESTORATION - EZRA AND NEHEMIAH**

## **Lesson Aim**

To encourage students to live lives of persistence without compromise in the face of opposition and temptation.

## **Memory Verse**

**Hebrews 11:30** - "By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people had marched around them for seven days."

## **Lesson Background**

When the Babylonian Empire fell to the Medo-Persians, Cyrus issued a decree permitting all peoples conquered by the Babylonians to return to their homes and worship their own gods. For the Jews of the Captivity, it meant they were free to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. Many Jews, however, had become comfortable in captivity, and few were willing to pick up stakes and move to a land that had been left barren by war. Thus a relatively small number returned to Judah in 536 B.C. under the leadership of the Davidic prince Zerubbabel, who was appointed by Cyrus as the provincial governor. At first the returning exiles enthusiastically attacked the task of rebuilding the Temple, but soon the enormous task got bogged down as the people got discouraged and turned their attention to building homes for themselves and raising crops for their families. God then sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to stimulate the building effort, as we will see two weeks from now. When the Temple was built, it was so small and pathetic in comparison to Solomon's Temple, which some of the exiles still remembered, that they wept instead of rejoicing. It was this Temple, however, that was later to be remodeled by Herod the Great and was to witness the ministry of Jesus Himself.

About fifty years after the completion of the Temple, another contingent of settlers came to Judah in 456 B.C. under the leadership of Ezra. Though the Bible says little about him, Ezra was a very important figure in the development of the Jewish religion. He is said to have been the founder of the order of scribes, who were responsible for preserving the Scriptures, not only by copying them accurately, but also by teaching them to the people. He encouraged the spread of synagogues as places of Jewish worship and education, and is believed to have organized the Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, which in Jesus' day served as sort of a Supreme Court for religious affairs in the nation. Not only did Ezra write the book bearing his name, but he is also often believed to have compiled the books of I and II Chronicles from court records available at the time. The thing for which Ezra is best known in Scripture, however, is for his effort to purify the people and keep them from the kind of compromise that had produced so much idolatry during the Divided Monarchy period. Thus we find him warning the people against marriage with unbelievers and dissolving those newly-contracted foreign marriages where possible.

By this time the Persian king was a man named Artaxerxes. In his court was a Jewish man named Nehemiah, who served as the royal cupbearer. This was a position of great responsibility, since it involved supervising the food that was served to the king. In a day when poison was a common means of getting rid of unpopular rulers, kings only appointed as cupbearers men who had their complete confidence. Thus the cupbearer was not only a servant, but also a royal advisor and counselor. One day Nehemiah appeared distressed about something, and Artaxerxes asked the cause. Nehemiah explained that he had heard that Jerusalem still lay in ruins, despite the fact that the Temple had been rebuilt. Artaxerxes promptly (445 B.C.) commissioned Nehemiah himself to supervise the rebuilding of the city and its walls, giving him authority as royal governor of the province. The book of Nehemiah is a record of this rebuilding process and the struggles associated with it.

In looking at these books today, we will focus on two areas in addition to familiarizing your students with the historical background of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. In looking at the book of Ezra, the focus will be on purity (we will leave the rebuilding of the Temple for our study of Haggai and Zechariah in two weeks). Compromise and the idolatry that resulted had destroyed the nation during the Divided Monarchy. God's people must be pure if they are to serve Him faithfully. In Nehemiah, the emphasis will be on perseverance. One who would serve God cannot give up in the face of determined opposition, but must instead trust God to give the strength needed to complete the assigned task.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Ask your students if they have ever had to do anything that they knew was right, but that brought them open mockery and opposition from others. What did they do? Did they continue doing what was right, or did the mockery stop them or force them to change tactics? Today we will study two books about men who did what was right even though what they had to do was extremely unpopular. At this point give the historical background on Ezra and Nehemiah and their times, using the material from the Lesson Background.

### **1. Ezra - The Problem of Purity**

Remind your students of the problem that had led to the division of the kingdom of Israel after the reign of Solomon. They may recall that it was the idolatry introduced into the land by Solomon's pagan wives that caused God to split the kingdom and eventually led the people of the land into the worship of foreign gods. That idolatry in turn was the main reason for the Captivity in Babylon. Many commentators have noted that the Captivity fulfilled its function; while the returning exiles had many problems, idolatry was not one of them. That may not have been the case, however, except for the work of Ezra. In Ezra 9-10, we find the account of Ezra's dealing with the foreign marriages of those who had returned from exile.

While Ezra's actions seem to contradict the New Testament teaching about divorce, we must recognize that he was operating under the Old Testament teaching established in Deuteronomy 24. In the Old Testament, divorce was permitted with certain restrictions. The situation that Ezra faced was one where he deemed it necessary, not only because of the danger of idolatry generated by religiously mixed marriages, but also because the marriages themselves were in violation of Old Testament law.

What does this example mean for your students? It means that God takes purity seriously. The New Testament equivalent of this passage is Paul's teaching in II Corinthians 6:14-18. If Christians are to honor God, they cannot compromise with unbelievers, and one of the most serious compromises in which they could possibly engage is marriage. Your students probably are not dating yet, but they will be soon. They need to know that God demands purity in their relationships, and that from the very beginning of their dating experience, they should date only those who are Christians in order to ensure that any marriage into which they enter avoids the pitfall into which the Israelites of Ezra's day had fallen. If we are to honor God, we must form our most intimate relationships with God's people, or else unbelievers will draw us away from the truth.

## **2. Nehemiah - The Problem of Perseverance**

When Nehemiah got to Jerusalem with Artaxerxes' decree authorizing him to rebuild the city and its walls, he found a discouraged and disheartened people, but he was able to whip them into shape rather quickly. His real problem came, not from within, but from the surrounding peoples. Regional hatred and racial prejudice die hard, and Nehemiah soon found that the Samaritans in the north and the Arabs in the south were not at all happy about the prospect of a fortified and prosperous Jerusalem (the Samaritans were the result of intermarriage between the Jews of the Northern Kingdom and the other peoples of the Assyrian Empire with whom they had been mixed). The chief troublemaker was Sanballat, the satrap of the province of Samaria. He did everything he could to stop Nehemiah from rebuilding the wall. To discover his tactics, divide your class into four groups and have each group look up one of the following passages: 4:1-3; 4:11-16; 6:1-4; 6:5-8. Then have them report on how Sanballat and his cohorts tried to discourage Nehemiah and the builders of the wall. The tactics used here, including mockery (4:1-3), physical intimidation (4:11-16), delay (6:1-4), and false rumors (6:5-8), are the same kind of tactics Satan often uses today to try to hinder the work of God.

Now have the groups go back and see how Nehemiah met these attempts to slow him down. What did he do in each case to ensure that the work would go on? In response to the mockery, he prayed to God. It is useless to try to answer those who mock. They will only mock more mercilessly, and your sincere argument will accomplish nothing. The only way to fight mockery is through prayer. God is able to shut the mouths of those who oppose His work.

In response to physical intimidation, Nehemiah planned to defend himself and the people. He divided the people into two groups, one for defense and one for building. They worked with a sword in one hand and a trowel in the other, and though it slowed them down, the work went on. God does not expect His people to be helpless "wimps" in the face of intimidation from the world. Self-defense is permissible, though adequate preparation will often avoid the need for confrontation.

The efforts to delay the work were countered in the easiest way imaginable - Nehemiah simply refused to interrupt the work to attend Sanballat's phony conference. Mockers do not deserve a serious response, and those who would hinder God's work are not to be given the time that would allow them to do so. Christians should not allow the world to set the agenda for them and thus distract them from the work of God.

When false rumors were spread by Sanballat, Nehemiah again ignored them, knowing that they were false, and depended on God to preserve his reputation and on the king to recognize the truth when he heard it. After discussing Nehemiah's responses, ask your students what this book teaches us about the best way to keep unbelievers from interfering with the work of God. Three principles should emerge - prayer, perseverance, and preparation. Prayer is essential because God is not only the One who will empower the work, but also will deal with those who oppose it. Perseverance is necessary because God's work requires effort. Nothing worthwhile is accomplished easily. Preparation is the best way to drive off the enemy, both by preventing attacks and by being able to ignore the attempts by the opposition to sidetrack the work of God.

## **Conclusion**

Those students in your class who are Christians know what it means to face opposition. Whether they attend a public school or a Christian school, they must face every day the vocal and sometimes even physical opposition of those who care nothing about godly living and Christian principles. If they are to live effectively for God in school and in their neighborhoods, they must maintain their purity, not being unequally yoked together with unbelievers, and they must persevere in the face of opposition, learning to ignore those who would mock them, and trust God to deal with the offenders. The worst thing they can do is to fall into the trap that Nehemiah avoided and respond in kind to the cruelty and false accusations of their opponents. They must do something that is much harder; they must remain silent and bring their hurts and complaints to God.

## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## THE RESTORATION EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

1. Ezra is important because of many contributions he made to the Jewish religion. What were some of these contributions?
2. Why did Ezra force the Jews to divorce their foreign wives? Was he right to do this?
3. Why does God say that Christians should not marry non-Christians?
4. What was Nehemiah's job in the court of Artaxerxes? What did that job involve?
5. What were the tactics that Sanballat used to try to stop Nehemiah from rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem? How did Nehemiah respond to those tactics?
6. Why is it better for Christians to ignore those who mock them rather than fighting back or trying to argue with them?



# **ESTHER**

## **Lesson Aim**

To give students some understanding of Jewish life in the Persian Empire and show them how God works to put His people in the right places at the right times to accomplish His purposes.

## **Memory Verse**

**Hebrews 11:31** - "By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient."

## **Lesson Background**

For pure drama and suspense, there are few stories in the Bible that match the one contained in the book of Esther. As usual with such narratives, you are dealing with students who are familiar with the basic story, so in order to hold their interest, it will be necessary to fill in details of which they might not be aware, and of course to add practical application to the story.

The book of Esther is the only book in the Bible that does not mention God even once, but His presence is felt throughout the book as He providentially controls circumstances to deliver His people from a threat far greater than that of the Nazis. The story takes place during the reign of the Persian king Xerxes I (He was the father of Artaxerxes I, whose decree allowed Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem; in Hebrew, his name is spelled "Ahasueras" because the Hebrew alphabet has no letter equivalent to X). Xerxes was an ambitious man who, after putting down revolts among his nobles, spent most of his reign trying to conquer Greece. He failed when his navy was thoroughly defeated at the Battle of Salamis, and was later assassinated by a disgruntled nobleman. His volatile temper is obvious throughout the book of Esther,

first in his drunken order to depose Vashti, then in the caution that Esther must exercise in order to speak to him, and finally in the revenge he wreaks on Haman and his family.

Despite the mercurial nature of Xerxes, he was subject to the laws, even though he could make those laws by personal decree. The Medo-Persian Empire practiced rule by law. Kings could make laws, but they couldn't change them after they had been made. When Darius the Mede was tricked into making a law in which Daniel was caught, he could do nothing to change it. Similarly, when Xerxes realized that he had condemned Esther's people to death, he could not change the law, but added to it a decree that they would be able to defend themselves.

The book of Esther describes the incident that is the basis for the Jewish feast of Purim. The feast is celebrated in late winter (February or March), and is a time of great rejoicing and merriment. Jews go to the synagogue, where the book of Esther is read aloud. Children are encouraged to bring noisemakers, and loudly hiss and boo at every mention of Haman's name, meanwhile cheering every mention of Esther (much like an old-fashioned melodrama). Because the story makes such an effective dramatic presentation, you should have your students act out as much of the story as possible today during class. They will have fun, and will probably get a bit silly, but they should also learn some things about the story that they may not know. The dramatization should be interspersed with background information describing each scene and followed by a discussion to bring out the practical applications of the story. These applications concern God's providence. God does nothing without a reason, and He often puts people in unusual situations for the specific purpose of serving Him and bringing about His purposes in those situations. Esther did not think she would save her people when she went to Xerxes' palace, but God knew what was coming and put His person in the right place to do what needed to be done.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin the class by describing some of the background to the book of Esther, noting that it takes place in the Persian capital of Susa during the reign of Xerxes, the father of Artaxerxes, of whom we learned last week. The story describes the life of the Jews who did not return to Judea, but stayed in the land to which they had been taken captive many years before.

Then tell your students that you are going to act out the story as a class. There are four main parts - those of Esther, Xerxes, Haman, and Mordecai. You can either assign each one of the major parts to one student and use the others as extras, or take turns doing the major parts, changing with each scene. Since three of the major parts are male, you might at least want to rotate your girls in the part of Esther. Rather than following a written script, describe each scene ahead of time, then have your students improvise dialogue.

## **Prologue - The Big Party (Esther 1)**

The scene here is Xerxes' palace in Susa. After opening his royal vaults to visitors from far and wide to display his wealth and greatness, Xerxes throws a week-long party for all the VIP visitors. Meanwhile, the queen, Vashti, hosts a party for the women. This scene requires someone to play Xerxes, the royal courtier Memucan, and Queen Vashti, along with a cast of thousands. The men get drunk at their party, and decide that they want to see the most beautiful woman in the kingdom, Queen Vashti. She refuses to put herself on display in front of a mob of drunken men, and the king asks his advisors what he should do about this unreasonable stubbornness on the part of the queen. Memucan advises him to find another queen or else feminism will fill the land - women will refuse to obey their husbands, and the Persian Empire will soon collapse in chaos.

## **Scene One - The Beauty Contest (Esther 2:1-18).**

The setting is again the palace and its environs, especially the royal harem. The characters are Mordecai, Xerxes, Esther, and Hegai the harem-master. What goes on in this chapter is usually described as a beauty contest, at least when the story is told to children. In reality, it was more like a tryout camp (see verse 14). The king sends a royal decree throughout the land that all the most beautiful young virgins should be brought to the king's palace in Susa so that he could choose a new queen. The scene must have been something like the response to the announcement of the prince's ball in *Cinderella*, with every young girl in the kingdom fantasizing about being the next queen. We're not told whether Esther was simply seized by the king's commissioners or whether she went willingly, but she soon finds herself in Xerxes' harem with women from all over the empire. Before she is taken to the palace, Mordecai warns her not to reveal that she is Jewish; Haman is not the only anti-Semite in the land. Once there, she charms Hegai during her year of beauty treatments, and he advises her on how she can best please the king - with simplicity rather than something eye-catching or spectacular. You cannot act out her audition with the king, of course, but the result is another proclamation and another banquet - Esther becomes the new queen of Persia.

## **Scene Two - The Conspiracy (Esther 2:19-23)**

This brief scene involves Mordecai, Bigthan and Teresh (two of Xerxes' bodyguards), Esther, and Xerxes. Mordecai overhears Bigthan and Teresh plotting to assassinate the king and reports the conversation to Esther. She passes the word to Xerxes, who then uncovers the plot, hangs the perpetrators, and orders that the noble deed of Mordecai be recorded in the royal chronicle.

## **Scene Three - The Plot (Esther 3)**

The main characters here are Haman, Mordecai, and Xerxes. Haman rides through the streets, and all bow before him - all, that is, except for Mordecai. Haman is furious, and decides to maneuver to get all the Jews exterminated. He casts lots to determine when is the best time to carry out the extermination, and the lot falls on the month Adar (our February-March). Haman then goes to Xerxes, describes the troublesome Jews in the most negative terms imaginable, then sweetens the pot by offering to give the king 375 tons of silver if he will destroy them. Xerxes agrees (kings are always looking for ways to enrich their treasuries), and sends out a proclamation ordering the annihilation of the Jews.

## **Scene Four - The Plan (Esther 4)**

This scene involves only Esther and Mordecai (they actually spoke through an intermediary, but that would make the scene somewhat cumbersome). Mordecai informs Esther of the edict against the Jews (the fact that she was unaware of it shows the status of the queen in Persia; in reality, she had not seen the king for a month). He insists that she has to go to the king and plead for mercy for her people. She reminds him of the law against entering the king's inner court uninvited, but he urges her on, and she agrees to go despite the danger. She asks Mordecai to gather all his friends and relatives together to fast and pray for her as she goes.

## **Scene Five - The Brave Queen (Esther 5)**

The characters in this scene are Esther, Xerxes, Haman, and his wife Zeresh. The scene begins with Esther entering the king's inner court, where he extends the royal scepter, giving her permission to approach (had he not done so, she would have been arrested and executed). She, in the oblique manner characteristic of doing business in the Middle East, then invites Xerxes and Haman to a banquet without revealing her real

request. They come to the banquet, but Esther still delays, inviting them to another banquet the next day. Haman then goes home to his wife in high spirits, convinced that his position of power and influence is growing daily. He complains to his wife about the continued refusal of Mordecai to bow before him, and she advises him to have a gallows built on which to hang him. This cheers Haman up immensely.

## **Scene Six - The Humiliation of Haman (Esther 6)**

This scene involves Xerxes, Haman, and Mordecai, and begins with the king in bed late at night, unable to sleep. He orders the royal chronicle to be brought to him (What better way to cure insomnia?), and while reading it is reminded of the way that Mordecai had saved his life by revealing the plot hatched by his bodyguards. Upon asking what had been done to honor Mordecai, he finds that nothing had ever been done. The next day, he calls Haman and asks him what should be done for someone the king wishes to honor. Haman, thinking the king has him in mind, describes the most ego-fulfilling scene he can come up with. Much to his surprise, Xerxes then says that all those things should be done to Mordecai, Haman's sworn enemy. Worse yet, Haman is to be the one to lead Mordecai through the city and announce his honor.

## **Scene Seven - The Confrontation (Esther 7)**

This scene involves Haman, Esther, and Xerxes. By this time, Haman realizes that he is in trouble. When he arrives at the queen's banquet, he has none of the confidence that had marked his behavior the day before. Esther then reveals the plot against her people and tells the king that Haman was the man responsible. Xerxes leaves the room in a rage, and Haman kneels down before Esther (who would have been reclining on a couch) to beg for his life. When Xerxes returns, he sees Haman leaning over Esther and thinks he is trying to molest her. He is immediately arrested and hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai.

## **Epilogue - Deliverance and Celebration (Esther 8-10)**

The conclusion of the book is not something that can really be acted out. Xerxes could not rescind the order he had given, but he did add to it an order that permitted the Jews to defend themselves when they were attacked. As a result, the Jews won a resounding victory over any who dared to attack them, and the people were spared. To commemorate this great event, the feast of Purim was instituted (the word Purim means "lots" and refers to the lots cast by Haman to determine the day on which the Jews would be destroyed).

## **Conclusion**

Conclude your lesson with a discussion of the story, focusing on God's providential control of the circumstances of our lives. Esther did not know why she had been made queen, but it was all part of God's plan to preserve His people from the threat of destruction. God's will cannot be seen far into the future. We must believe that God puts each of us in circumstances for a good reason, even though we may not know the reason. Like Esther, we must be willing to trust God when the opportunity does arise to make a difference, and act rather than sitting back timidly and doing nothing. Esther had no specific instructions from God as to what she should do, but she used the mind God had given her to deliver her people from certain death. Your students should realize that the will of God rarely comes with specific, detailed instructions, like those given by the prophets. Most of the time, God simply wants us to be people of godly character and use the minds He has given us to serve Him in whatever circumstances He places us.

## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## ESTHER

1. During the time of what empire did the story of Esther occur? In what city?
2. Who was the king in the story? What kind of man was he?
3. How did Esther become the queen?
4. What did Mordecai do to earn the gratitude of the king?
5. Why did Haman want to exterminate the Jews?
6. What is the feast of Purim? When is it held?
7. The key verse of the book is Esther 4:14. What can we learn from this story about how God works in the lives of His people?
8. The book of Esther never mentions God. In what way are His presence and activity obvious throughout the book?



# **MINOR PROPHETS IV**

## **HAGGAI, ZECHARIAH, AND MALACHI**

### **Lesson Aim**

To show the role played by these prophets in the Restoration period and encourage your students to maintain a high level of commitment to the work of God in times of peace and prosperity.

### **Memory Verse**

**Hebrews 11:39-40** - "These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect."

### **Lesson Background**

We complete our survey of the Old Testament this week by studying the writings of the post-exilic Minor Prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. The first two were directly involved in the effort to rebuild the Temple under the leadership of Zerubbabel and their messages are directed specifically toward that end, though the Messianic prophecies at the end of Zechariah could have come from a period later in his ministry. Though the prophecy of Malachi is undated, the problems addressed in the book are so similar to those faced by Nehemiah that most commentators place Malachi's work during the governorship of Nehemiah, somewhere around 440 B.C. He is thus the last of the Old Testament prophets, both canonically and chronologically.

All three of these prophets addressed a society in which most of us would feel quite at home. The people professed to be believers, but their enthusiasm for their religion was nominal at best. They were much more concerned with accumulating wealth and possessions than they were with serving God and were

content to give God no more than outward ritual. Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi thus faced the task of rousing a sleeping people to wholehearted commitment to the work of God. To the American church, this situation should sound familiar. For far too many professing Christians, religion is little more than going through the motions of a ritual learned in childhood, meanwhile giving primary attention to the affairs of this life. These last three Minor Prophets call us to faithfulness in the midst of a sleeping professing church.

The procedure for studying these prophets will be the same as used in the earlier lessons on the Minor Prophets. For each of the three, we will look at The Man, His Times, His Message, and Lessons for Today.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin the lesson by reviewing the history of the post-exilic period studied in class two weeks ago. Remind them especially of the difficulty faced by Zerubbabel in building the Temple because of the lack of enthusiasm shown by the people. Tell your students that today's lesson, which finishes our Old Testament survey, concerns three prophets who were active during the time described in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

### **1. Haggai**

#### **A. The Man**

Haggai is a man of whom we know nothing except that he was one of those few who returned to Judea in 536 B.C. under the leadership of Zerubbabel after Cyrus issued a decree allowing all captives in Babylon to return to their homes.

#### **B. His Times**

When the returnees arrived in Jerusalem, they immediately restored the altar and laid the foundation for a new Temple, but after that the work lagged, as people turned to building houses for themselves and raising crops for their families. They simply couldn't find the time to devote to working on the Temple, and they were discouraged with the immensity of the task. For sixteen years, nothing happened. It was at that point, in 520 B.C., that God told Haggai and Zechariah to light a fire under the people so that the Temple could be completed. Haggai's prophecies are the most explicitly dated of all the writings in Scripture; all were given in 520 B.C., the second year of Darius (this was not the Darius the Mede mentioned in Daniel, but Darius the Great, the king of the Persian Empire and successor of Cyrus' son, Cambyses).

#### **C. His Message**

The message of the book is neatly summarized in Haggai 1:2-3 - "Get that Temple built!" God through Haggai rebukes the people because their priorities are distorted. In chapter one, the people insist that they cannot work on the Temple because all their time is needed to support their families. God responds by telling them that if they put time into the rebuilding of the Temple, their crops wouldn't fail and it would take less of their time to support their families.

In chapter two, considerable progress has been made on the Temple, and now those who remembered Solomon's Temple are discouraged because the new one simply does not measure up. It seems small and

plain by comparison. Haggai responds by reminding them that the Temple is great not because of what it looks like on the outside, but because of who indwells it - God Himself. Not only was this Temple to be the dwelling place of God, of course, but it was later to witness the ministry of Jesus Christ.

## **D. Lessons for Today**

Haggai's message is an extremely important one for your students as they live in the increasingly busy and demanding modern world. It is very easy for Christians to say that they simply do not have the time to read their Bibles, pray, or get involved in their churches. Others feel they are unable to give to the church because they are barely making ends meet financially. Whether the subject is time or money, the fact of the matter is that, when we give God what is due to Him, He sees that what we have left is sufficient for our needs. The most pertinent application of this principle to the lives of your students would be in relation to their schoolwork. Do they ever skip church to do their homework?

The second part of Haggai's message is that the church is made great by the presence of God, not by external appearance or other insignificant matters. What forms the attitudes of your students toward the church? Is it the kind of music used in worship or the way people dress? Remind them that the church, the people of God, is important because it is where God dwells, not because of its external or incidental trappings.

## **2. Zechariah**

### **A. The Man**

Zechariah was a contemporary of Haggai, and was the son of Iddo, a priest, meaning that Zechariah must have been a priest himself. He was quite young when he began his prophetic ministry.

### **B. His Times**

The background of the prophecies is the same as that for Haggai. The early chapters of the book are dated and correspond to the period of the rebuilding of the Temple. The later Messianic prophecies carry no dates and may have been given later in life.

### **C. His Message**

The major thrust of Zechariah's prophecies, at least in the early chapters, was like those of Haggai - to encourage the rebuilding of the Temple. His message is more positive than that of his compatriot, and consists largely of visions that focus in on the spiritual dimension of the problem. Zechariah emphasizes the fact that God's people are under His special care, that their enemies will be judged, and that God's presence among them will be felt through the activity of the Holy Spirit (see especially chapter 4).

Chapters seven and eight deal with the question of fasting. During the Captivity, the Jews had observed a fast in memory of the destruction of Jerusalem. When asked by the people if this fast should continue, Zechariah replied that the fast had been instituted by man, not by God, and that to obey was better than to fast.

The last six chapters contain Messianic prophecies, speaking of the blessing associated with the coming of the Messiah, as well as His suffering and the judgment He will carry out against the enemies of

God's people. These chapters include verses quoted in the New Testament in association with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (9:9), His betrayal by Judas (11:13), and His death (12:10).

#### **D. Lessons for Today**

The lesson your students need to get from the prophecy of Zechariah is that God's work can only be done in the power of God's Spirit. Have them turn to chapter four and read the vision there. Don't dwell on the details of what Zechariah saw, but be sure they understand that the mountain to be overcome was the massive rebuilding project, and that God was here telling the leaders (Zerubbabel and the high priest Joshua) that the work required the Holy Spirit, not mere human effort. Your students can knock themselves out trying to do God's work, but it will come to nothing if it is not done in reliance upon the Holy Spirit.

### **3. Malachi**

#### **A. The Man**

Again, we know nothing of the man himself. Since his name means "My messenger," some even suggest that the book is anonymous and that Malachi is not a name, but a description of some unknown prophet.

#### **B. His Times**

As indicated in the Lesson Background, these prophecies are undated, but the problems with which Malachi deals are the same as those faced by Ezra and Nehemiah - spiritual and moral laxity. The Temple had now been built, but the people were beginning to intermarry with their pagan neighbors (stopped by Ezra). Later, those same pagan neighbors became a source of discouragement during the effort to rebuild the wall. As in the days of Haggai and Zechariah, formalism in worship was rampant.

#### **C. His Message**

Malachi condemned both the priests and the people for their dry formalism and moral laxity. The priests were simply going through the motions, bored by the sameness of it all. The people, meanwhile, were becoming increasingly like their pagan neighbors, especially in their views of marriage and the family. Not only was intermarriage with unbelievers a problem, but also divorce, which was destroying family after family.

Malachi also speaks twice of the ministry of John the Baptist (3:1 and 4:5-6). These words are spoken in the context of God's work of division, in which He separates those who are truly His from those who only put up a front. This was to be a major theme of the ministry of Jesus, as He fought against the same kind of hypocrisy faced by Malachi, though by the time of Jesus it had taken a much more extreme form.

#### **D. Lessons for Today**

The warnings of Malachi are again critical for the church today. We, too, face the danger of mere formalism in a society in which it is comfortable to be a Christian. It is too easy for us to go through the motions, knowing that nobody around us cares one way or the other. God, of course, does care, and He demands worship from the heart. We cannot insult God by giving Him less than our best.

The tendency to compromise family values to the society in which we live is also a major problem in the church today. As the divorce rate in society goes up, so does the divorce rate in the church. As illegitimate births mushroom in America, more and more professing Christians must deal with the problem of unwed pregnant women. We too easily follow the ways of the world. How does it start? Largely by the values absorbed from popular culture such as music and television. In such times of relative calm and ease, Christians must continually be reminded of the need to be different, because the great day of separation is coming. Christ, who knows His people, will separate them from those who only know how to play the game.



