

Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk

Listed Scriptures

Nah 1; Zeph 1, 3; Hab 3

Lesson Aim

- 1) To enable students to understand that God repays each person according to his/her deeds.
- 2) To know that God is in full control.
- 3) To learn to trust God no matter in good or bad times.

Memory Verse

"Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; though the labor of the olive may fail, and the fields yield no food; though the flock may be cut off from the fold, and there be no herd in the stalls. Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in the God of my salvation." (Hab 3:17-18)

Bible Reading For This Week (for students and teachers)

Nah 1; Zeph 1, 3; Hab 3

B I B L E B A C K G R O U N D

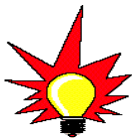


Nineveh

The subject of Nahum's prophecy was Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire. Nineveh is first mentioned in the Bible in Genesis 10:11-12. Nimrod built several cities in southern Mesopotamia and then "went to Assyria where he built Nineveh." Nineveh is situated on the east bank of the Tigris River and is over 250 miles from Babylon. According to history, Assyria was noted as being one of the cruelest, vilest, and most powerful and most idolatrous empires in the world. Gross idolatry was practiced in Nineveh and throughout the Assyrian Empire. The religion of Assyria was Babylonian in origin but in Assyria the national god was Assur, whose high priest and representative was the king. Historical writings show the

pride and brutality that characterized the city. After one of his conquests Ashurnasirpal II (883-859) boasted, "I stormed the mountain peaks and took them. In the midst of the mighty mountain I slaughtered them; with their blood I dyed the mountain red like wool... The heads of their warriors I cut off and I formed them into a pillar over against their city; their young men and their maidens and burned in the fire (Luckenbill, ancient records of Assyria and Babylonia 1:148). Little wonder why God sent his prophet to proclaim destruction upon the city. The fall of Assyria is also mentioned in several other Old Testament passages (Is 10:12-19; 14:24-25; 30:31-33; 31:8-9; Ezek 32:22-23; Zeph 2:13-15; Zech 10:11).

W A R M U P



Different Answers

They're almost unbelievable –
some prayers' answers

You sent so fast
they took my breath away
And made me laugh.

I thank You.

I thank You there were other times
it seemed

You've left me
way out

in the dark
to wait.....

Until You became
more important
than any answer
I was looking for.

B I B L E S T U D Y



Part 1

The Book of Nahum



A. Author

The name "Nahum" means "Comfort" or "Consolation." His message of doom for Nineveh was doubtless a source of comfort to the inhabitants of Judah who had suffered under the cruelty of the Assyrians. According to Nahum 1:1, the prophet was called the "Elkoshite." Although the precise location of Elkosh is unknown, many scholars believe that Elkosh was a town in southern Judah between Jerusalem and Gaza. This would make Nahum a prophet of the southern kingdom and may explain his interest in the triumph of Judah.



B. Date

Like Jonah, Nahum's message speaks of the destruction of the city of Nineveh. Nahum's message was delivered some one hundred years after Jonah, some time before 612 B.C. when the city was destroyed by the Babylonians.



C. Themes

In contrast to his predecessor Jonah whose ministry resulted in the repentance of the Ninevites, the prophet Nahum proclaims the ultimate downfall of the great Assyrian city of Nineveh. An end is to be made of this boasting, pagan citadel. The Ninevites had forgotten their revival and had returned to their habits of violence, idolatry, bloody cruelty and arrogance. As a result, the Babylonians would destroy the city and no trace of it will remain. Besides the message of Assyrian destruction, a note of comfort rings for God's people. The rod of Assyrian oppression will be broken; Judah can celebrate her solemn feasts and perform her sacred vows, for the wicked one shall no longer pass through her.



D. Teachings from the Book of Nahum

a. God is just and avenging

A hundred years earlier, when the prophet Jonah preached in the streets

concerning God's impending wrath, the people of Nineveh turned from their evil ways and God turned from what He said He would do to them. In the book of Nahum however, God is determined to bring destruction upon Nineveh. Why is God set on destroying Nineveh? It was because the Ninevites had failed to learn from past lessons. They had forgotten about their revival and God's mercy and instead had allowed evil to reign again. Because of their sins, Nahum predicted that this proud and powerful nation would be utterly destroyed. The end came within 50 years. God is slow to anger, but He will not allow sin to go unchecked forever. God's tolerance and grace is only for a while (Heb 6:4-8). In 2 Corinthians 6:2, apostle Paul reminds us, "In an acceptable time I have heard you, and in the day of salvation I have helped you. Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation." Let us therefore, repent and return God while we have the chance, before it is too late.

b. The destruction and shame of Nineveh

Assyria was one of the great civilizations of ancient times and had dominated the world for three centuries destroying anyone in her path. Nineveh the capital city of Assyria was considered impregnable, but the Lord prophesied that it would become a barren wilderness, a place of wild beasts. To predict the destruction of Nineveh would be equivalent to predicting the destruction of great cities such as Tokyo, London or New York. Nineveh was the Middle Eastern center for culture, technology and beauty. It had great libraries, buildings and a vast irrigation system that created lush gardens in the city. The city was 60 miles long, 100 feet high and over 30 feet wide and was fortified with 1,500 towers. Yet, despite the beautiful exterior, the prophet likens Nineveh to a beautiful harlot full of sins and wickedness (3:4). Her harlotries and charms were her gods, her fortified and prosperous cities, her armies and strength. History also tells us that Nineveh was a one of the cruelest, vilest and most powerful empires in the world. Assyria conquered and destroyed many nations. "The horsemen charging, flashing sword, glittering spear, hosts of slain, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end ..." (Nah 3:3) depicts how the Assyrians used callousness and brutality to establish their nation. She also used her beauty, prestige and power to seduce other nations. Like a prostitute she enticed them into false friendships. When the nations put down their guard, thinking Assyria a friend, Assyria destroyed and plundered them. For these reasons, God will punish the "bloody city, all full of lies and booty." He will cause shame to fall upon it and it shall never rise again. Indeed, God's word never fails. The entire city was destroyed so completely that its very existence was questioned until it was discovered with great difficulty, by 19th cen-

ture archaeologists. The area where it reigned in splendor had indeed become a wasteland. Today's world is likened to the city of Nineveh. It is like a harlot that is beautiful and impressive on the outside but is full of seduction and death. Let us not be deceived by it or lay our confidence on it, for God will cause it to come to utter ruin.



Part 2

The Book of Zephaniah



A. Author

The author of this book is the prophet Zephaniah. His name means, "He whom God hides." He was the fourth generation grandson of King Hezekiah (Zeph 1:1) and a distant relative of King Josiah. Ordinarily, the genealogy of the prophet is traced back no further than his father. Zephaniah however, traces his ancestry back four generations to demonstrate that he was the great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah (1:1). Zephaniah worked during the reign of King Josiah. During this time, the nation of Israel had long been destroyed by the Assyrians. Zephaniah came to preach the judgment of the Lord to the nation of Judah. When Hezekiah's son Manasseh and grandson Amnon were king, the country worshiped idols, defiled the temple, and were socially and religiously corrupt (2 Chron 33:1-11). When King Josiah reigned, Zephaniah counseled the young King Josiah to seek after God and his message greatly impacted the reforms that took place at the time (2 Kings 23:2-3).



B. Date

Zephaniah fixes the time of his prophecy on the days of Josiah son of Amon, king of Judah who reigned from 640 to 609 B.C. Since the destruction of Nineveh had still to occur (612 B.C.), the book of Zephaniah can be dated between 640 and 612 B.C.



C. Themes

On the whole, Zephaniah is a grim book of warning about the coming day of the Lord. Because of their sins, the wrath of God will sweep over them. Desolation, darkness and ruin will strike Judah that even its silver or gold will not be able to

deliver it (1:18). Zephaniah also speaks of the judgment upon surrounding nations for the violence done to Jerusalem. Amidst this terrible pronouncement, there is hope – God will restore His people from captivity and show mercy to the faithful.



D. Teachings from the Book of Zephaniah

a. The day of the Lord is at hand

The prophet Zephaniah describes the terror of the disasters that will befall the city of Jerusalem on the day of the Lord. It was the day that the Babylonians would come and destroy Jerusalem. Zephaniah portrays the “great day of the Lord” as one of bitterness and wrath. “It is a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements.”

The day of the Lord is also near us. God promises a final judgment, a day of worldwide destruction and judgment upon each person (Is 13:9; Ezek 7:19; Joel 2:2; Rev 18:14-19). However, the Lord also offers a means of escape – we need to depart from sin and turn back to God to avoid impending disaster. From the book of Zephaniah, who are those that will be judged on the day of the Lord?

1. Those who will be judged (1:4-13):

i. Those who worshiped God and all the other gods of the land. Such people bowed down to God while swearing to Milcom, the national god of the Ammonites, and to other gods such as Baal (1:4-5). Maybe we too have been guilty of loving God and loving the world at the same time.

ii. The officials and the king’s sons and “those who clothe themselves in foreign apparel” will be punished for their sins. Those who wore heathen clothing represents those who desired foreign gods, foreign ways and who submitted to foreign corrupt practices. The leaders were adopting these practices and showed contempt to the Lord by ignoring His commands. Have we, like the Israelites, adopted the values, trends and ways of the world?

iii. Those who use violence and fraud to fill their master’s house.

iv. Those who say in their hearts “The Lord will not do good, nor will He do evil.” Because the Lord did not take immediate reaction, the people became indifferent to God and did as they pleased. They became complacent in their sins and no longer cared about the consequences. Have we allowed sin to harden our hearts to the point that we no longer care? We need to turn back. Otherwise God’s chastisement may come down on us, each time a little more severely.

2. Those who can avoid punishment:

Although God’s judgment is imminent, He calls the people of Judah to repent before the day of the Lord comes. Who are those whom the Lord will hide on the day of the Lord?

i. The humble (2:1-3)

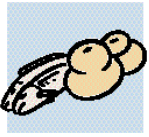
ii. Those who seek the Lord

iii. Those who obey His commands

iv. Those who seek righteousness

b. An invitation to repentance and restoration

As with most of the other prophetic messages, imbedded in the announcement of judgment lies God’s invitation for repentance. Before the coming of the terrible day when the wrath of God was to sweep everything away, the people of Israel were told to seek the Lord while He can be found and to turn from their rebellious ways. Although Zephaniah opens with a message of doom, he does not end on a dark note. He moves beyond the dark clouds of divine judgment to portray scenes where God will “gather those who have been scattered” to “bring them home” (Zeph 3:19,20). God’s love and compassion is unfathomable. He desires that we return to Him. If we do, He will restore us. Manasseh was a king who did just that. Although he initially provoked the Lord to anger with his idolatry and rebellion, God later forgave and restored him when he saw that Manasseh truly repented and humbled himself (2 Chron 33). Manasseh showed his repentance by bearing fruits that befit repentance. Have we witnessed God restoring us after true repentance?



Part 3

The Book of Habakkuk

A. Author

The author of this book is the prophet Habakkuk. His name is derived from the Hebrew word which mean, “embrace” or “embracer.” No other reference is made to Habakkuk’s family background. Habakkuk worked when the Babylonian invasion was an imminent event. His work spanned from 625-610 B.C. during the reigns of King Jehoahaz and Jehoiakim. His contemporaries were Zephaniah and Jeremiah.

B. Date

Although the book of Habakkuk includes no reference to the reign of a king, internal evidence indicates a date between the death of King Josiah (609 B.C.) and the beginning of the Babylonian captivity. The only explicit time reference in Habakkuk is the warning of God’s approaching judgment through the Babylonians. This prophecy was fulfilled in 605 B.C. when Nebuchadnezzar deported ten thousand of Jerusalem’s prominent citizens to Babylon.

C. Themes

While other prophetic books brought God’s words to men, the book of Habakkuk is unique in that it is a dialogue between God and the prophet. Habakkuk is perplexed over the corruption he sees around him. In his dialogue with God, Habakkuk first asks: “Why does God often seem indifferent in the face of evil? Why does evil people seem to go unpunished?” When Habakkuk learned that Judah’s punishment would come at the hands of the Babylonians, Habakkuk was appalled and asked a second question: “How can God employ the Babylonians, a nation more wicked, to chastise His children?” God revealed to him that the Chaldeans will in turn face punishment and be destroyed. God’s message to Habakkuk is twofold:

- a. everyone will face judgment and justice will surely come.
- b. God is in absolute control even when it seems evil and injustice triumph.

D. Teachings from the Book of Habakkuk

a. Habakkuk’s perplexity

Have you ever experienced a time in your life when things just didn’t make sense – when things didn’t happen as the Bible says it would? Maybe we’ve questioned: “If we are the true church, why do the believers sin and do not behave any better than non-believers? If God is in charge of this universe, why does He allow the world to continue on its course of self-destruction? Why doesn’t He put an end to all the cruel and bizarre things happening in our society? Why does God allow the wicked to prosper?”

Habakkuk was a prophet who asked God the same kinds of questions. Habakkuk asked God a question: “Why did you do nothing with the wickedness, violence and injustice that prevailed among your people?” Not only did the wicked go unpunished, they lived in prosperity. God’s response to Habakkuk’s first question was that He was going to use the Babylonians as a tool to punish the sins of His chosen people. Upon hearing God’s answer, Habakkuk posed a second question to God: “Why do you use such wicked people to punish your chosen people? Is this not allowing the Chaldeans to continue in their cruelty?” Habakkuk must have agreed that the people needed to be disciplined and punished, but what perplexed him was why God would use the Babylonians who were more evil and ungodly than the Jews.

b. Habakkuk deals with the problem

When Habakkuk was overwhelmed and confused by what he saw, how did he resolve his problems?

1. He brought his problems before God
Habakkuk’s name means “one who embraces.” When Habakkuk felt anguish over the sins and iniquity of the people and over God’s seeming silence, he acted true to his name—Habakkuk embraced God. He did not bury his frustration or conceal his feelings or questions under a cloak of spirituality. Rather he dealt with his problems in the right way – he brought them to God. He continued to pray till he received an answer from God. In the Old Testament, another prophet who was perplexed about God’s doings was Jonah. He did not understand why God wanted him to preach to the Ninevites. Rather than bringing his struggles before God, Jonah tried to evade his problems. A man named Asaph also had many

questions regarding the justice of allowing the wicked to thrive while the righteous endured hardship (Ps 73). When he saw the injustice, Asaph was tempted to walk on the path of the wicked, until he entered the temple and found the answer (Ps 73:16-17). How have we dealt with the doubts and queries of life? The Lord Jesus openly invites those of us who are weary and burdened to come before Him and He will give us rest (Mt 11:28).

2. He waited for God in silence
"I will wait for you, like silence waits for sound, darkness for light, I will wait for you."

Simple as these words may seem, it conveys an all-important lesson of waiting for God. After Habakkuk presented his struggles to God, he went up to the watchtower to wait for God's answers (2:1). The watchtower was often used by the prophets to show an attitude of expectation (cf Is 21:8; Jer 6:17; Ezek 3:17). These stone towers were built on city walls or ramparts so the watchmen could see people (enemies or messengers) approaching the city while at a distance. For Habakkuk, the watchtower was the best position to receive God's message while he waited and watched. While we wait for God's answers to our inquiries, we need to keep silent. In the process of waiting, we will discover that through prayers, our attitudes change and we have the inner strength to face the difficulties and the challenges before us. Oftentimes, God's good will is not manifested until an appointed time (2 Cor 4:5). Meanwhile God's answer to Habakkuk is the same answer He gives to us, "Be patient! God will work out His plans." We need to fully trust God even when it seems nothing is happening.

2. He kept on believing
When things happen to us we need to have trust and faith in the almighty God. King Solomon spent much time seeking for answers but at the end he discovered that there are things that are incomprehensible (Eccl 8:16-17). In Ecclesiastes 3:11, Solomon reveals, "God has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end." And in Deuteronomy 29:29 it says, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law." When things seemed unfair and unfathomable, Habakkuk still maintained his faith in God. Even when he did not understand, he believed

that God knew what He was doing. In times when our limited understanding restricts us from really understanding God's ways and thoughts (Is 55:8-9), let us continue to trust and believe that God is in absolute control and is working things out for His eternal purpose.

c. God Answers Habakkuk

1. The good and evil shall be repaid
God answers Habakkuk by revealing to him that the Chaldeans will suffer for their offenses. Although Habakkuk could not comprehend why God used the Chaldeans as his instruments, he knew that God had His reasons (Prov 16:4). But one thing is certain; no cruelty, no crime, no injustice escapes the attention of God. He will punish the Babylonians as well as His own people for their wickedness. Hence we need not fret when we see the wicked prosper or when we face injustice because ultimately God will repay every man for what he has done (Ps 37:1; 44:21; Jer 29:23; Is 59:18; Mt 16:27; Rev 22:12).
2. The righteous shall live by faith
After Habakkuk received the revelations of God, the situation had not changed. God was still going to send the Babylonians to destroy His people, and deliverance from the enemy was not going to come. At the thought of this, Habakkuk says, "When I heard, my body trembled; My lips quivered at the voice; Rottenness entered my bones; And I trembled in myself, That I might rest in the day of trouble" (Hab 3:16). But God gave Habakkuk an important message – "the righteous shall live by faith" (Hab 2:4). This verse has inspired countless Christians. The apostle Paul refers to it in Romans 1:17 and quotes it in Galatians 3:11. The writer of Hebrews quotes it in 10:38. With these very words, Habakkuk was able to rise from despair to rejoicing. In the final chapter of Habakkuk, the prophet raises a prayer of thanksgiving to God. He concludes, "Though the fig tree do not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fails, the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in the God of my salvation" (Hab 3:17-18). Here, the prophet was able to go beyond the present circumstances and see the sovereignty and greatness of God. Perhaps he still didn't know God's purpose for using the Babylonians, but his faith enabled him to see that God was in full control. God was still on the throne as the Lord of history and the Ruler of the nations. Can we hold onto God in good times as well as bad? Can we

still experience peace of heart even if things don't go smoothly? In difficult times, God may not change our circumstances or remove our burdens, but through faith in His word, God can bring us to the point where we can rejoice in Him and we find that His grace is sufficient for us.

E. Questions to Think About

1. How do you deal with injustice in your life?
2. Are there situations or problems in your life that cause you to be confused and question God's almightiness and control of the situation?
3. Do we feel a sense of injustice towards those who do evil? Do we feel injustice because of our own personal benefits, or because of the sake of God's law and righteousness?
4. Share an experience where you trusted in God although you did not understand at the time. What lessons did you learn?

C H E C K F O R U N D E R S T A N D I N G



There are no questions for this lesson.

L I F E A P P L I C A T I O N



Life is Not Fair!

Injustices happen the world over. It happened in the Bible, it happens around us each day. We see events that go contrary to biblical principles, our ideals, and our expectations of life. Do we become angry because we have no control over it? Are there times when we feel angry even at God? Why does God allow such things to happen? What should we do in situations like these? How should we handle our feelings? Christians are not exempt from such feelings and even the spiritually mature can encounter such experiences.

Look up the passages to see how the people in the Bible dealt with similar situa-

tions.

Case 1

1. Read 1 Kgs 21:1-19 and 2 Kgs 9:30-36 to see what we should do.
2. What would you do when faced with such injustice?

Case 2

1. Read Gen 26:17-25 to see how the Bible speaks about a similar issue.
2. Write down how you would respond to such an injustice.

Case 3

1. Read Ps 73 to find out how the psalmist dealt with this.
2. How would you respond in such a situation?

Case 4

1. Read Gen 37:21-28 and 44:1-8 to see what the Bible says.
2. How would you respond to see someone you cherish suffer helplessly?

Case 5

1. Read James 1:1 to see how we should handle such a situation.
2. How would you react to such a situation?

R E F L E C T I O N & P R A Y E R



Dear Lord,

We are not good at resting in the hollow of Your hand. Nothing in our experience has taught us this resting. We have been taught how to take charge and to be in control but not how to rest and trust. You have set us an example to submit everything to Your will and control. Help us to walk as You have walked. When things are not going right, or when things are not going our way, help us to see what You see. At times when we see the schemes of the wicked succeed and their ways prosper while the way of the righteous is a thorny and perilous one, help us to live by faith. For those who remain still and trust in You will not be put to shame. You never fail and we wait for Your appointed time.