

What's the Message – Lesson 72

Our lesson today leads us into four of the often neglected Minor Prophets.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Lord, we ask that you open our ears to hear and understand the words of your prophets, words that point us to Jesus. Amen.

Last time we dug a bit into the great Gospel chapter of Isaiah. It is a chapter that deserves frequent re-reading and greater study, but today we must move forward to four minor prophets that are often neglected. The first of these is Jonah. Although Jonah is best remembered for being swallowed by the big fish, that is not the focus or purpose of this short little book. Jonah ministered at the height of the glory days of Jeroboam II, when Assyria was at its dominant peak of military power. God told him to go to – of all places – Nineveh, the capital of feared Assyria. Their reputation for brutality and cruelty was rightly earned, and Jonah was afraid to walk into the middle of that great city and proclaim the judgment of God upon it.

Although at first he tried to run away from God, Jonah finally did what God had commanded and preached to Nineveh. Astoundingly, from top to bottom, from king to lowest peasant, they all repented, and God spared Nineveh from His announced punishment.

During the next 100 years, though, the Assyrians reverted to their brutal pagan ways, conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel, dispersed them throughout the empire, and made them the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel. Now God sent a second prophet to Nineveh, this time not to preach repentance, but to pronounce judgment. This prophet was Nahum, and his message was simple, and straight to the point.

It can be briefly summarized in these selected verses from chapter one:
The Lord is slow to anger and great in power; the Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished . . . Who can withstand His indignation? Who can endure His fierce anger? . . . The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in Him, but with an overwhelming flood He will make an end of Nineveh . . . The Lord has given a command concerning you, Nineveh; You will have no descendants to bear your name. I will

destroy the carved images and cast idols that are in the temple of your gods. I will prepare your grave, for you are vile.

This prophecy was fulfilled in the year 612 BC, when the Babylonians crushed the Assyrian military power and destroyed Nineveh.

Within a few years it was clear to the prophets that Babylon was to be the instrument of God's punishment on Judah. Habakkuk was one of the prophets serving during the reign of Jehoiakim, and he wrestled with God – not about whether Judah should be punished or not – but about using an evil nation to afflict that judgment.

The introductory notes in the Concordia Self-Study Bible express it this way: “Habakkuk was perplexed that wickedness, strife and oppression were rampant in Judah but God seemingly did nothing. When told that the Lord was about to do something about it through the “ruthless” Babylonians, his perplexity only intensified. How could God, who is “too pure to look on evil” appoint such a nation “to execute judgment” on a people “more righteous than themselves.”

But when all his wrestling with God is finished, Habakkuk concludes with these verses: *Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign Lord is my strength.*

Our fourth prophet is Zephaniah, a fourth-generation descendant of the good king, Hezekiah. Verse one tells us that he ministered during the reign of Josiah, which makes him a contemporary of Nahum and Habakkuk, as well as Jeremiah. As you would expect, Zephaniah echoes the warnings and pronouncements of judgment on Judah, but he also elaborates on the concept of “The Day of The Lord” that we first heard from Amos. But instead of it being only a day of judgment for the gentiles, and a day of rejoicing by the Israelites, it will also be a day of wrath on God's chosen people because of their repeated sin and rejection of the Lord.

And with that, Teacher, we have a summary of these four minor prophets. But the style of writing is so unfamiliar to us, often in poetic style, that it is hard to see even the major points. So what does all this have to do with us? What's the message for us?

Step back and look again. Do you see a common thread here? On the one hand there is the unfaithfulness of God's chosen people. On the other hand there are agents of violence and destruction aimed at Israel and Judah. When these vile and cruel nations destroy Israel and Judah, is that an indication that Yahweh is weaker than their pagan gods? Who is in control here? Yahweh is telling His people, through the prophets, what will happen before it happens, and why. He is the One in charge, as He always is. And the fulfillment of His pronouncements is validation that what He speaks is true. He can be trusted.

Jonah was to witness the forgiveness of God for Nineveh, for people regarded as the enemy of Israel. He could not understand how this could be. Nahum would see the limitations of God's patience, and how Nineveh would ultimately be destroyed for their sin. Habakkuk would see Babylon coming to punish Judah, but could not comprehend how God could use an evil nation for this purpose. Zephaniah would see both the justice of God's Law enforced, and the establishment of God's forgiveness for a new purified remnant. In all these cases God was working through the activities of history to accomplish His purposes.

And for those who truly repent, whether Jew or Gentile, God is ready to receive them, just as Jesus proclaimed. Luther regarded the third chapter of Zephaniah as one that gloriously and clearly speaks to the happy and blessed kingdom of Christ, spread throughout the world. We close with these verses from chapter three of Zephaniah: *Then will I purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve Him with one accord. . . . Sing aloud O daughter of Zion; shout O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, He has cast out your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear evil no more.*

This prophecy would be fulfilled with the coming of Jesus.

Next time we shall begin our study of the books of Jeremiah.