

MINOR PROPHETS

Leader's Guide

editor: Gord Penner

series editor: Don Thiessen



STEINBACH BIBLE COLLEGE

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LESSON PREPARATION GUIDE

PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE STUDY

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." 2 Tim. 3:16-17, NIV

The Bible is God's Word to us. It is the final authority when it comes to faith and practice. That is, what you believe and what you do is to be governed by the Bible. It is the touchstone for truth and error. Therefore it is important that any person teaching the Bible or leading a Bible study has an understanding of the key principles that undergird the interpretation of the Bible.

In 2 Tim. 2:15 Paul says, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth." This implies that there is a correct and an incorrect way of handling the Word of God. The following guides should help you the teacher "to handle the Word of God correctly."

1. Get two or three translations. Some good translations include, NIV, RSV, and NASB. Since most of us do not know the original languages we are dependent on translations. Any translation has its weaknesses and strengths. Consequently it is helpful to use several translations.
2. Read the text and supporting Scriptures over several times in several translations. This starts the process of getting into the text to be studied and taught.
3. Determine the literary form of the passage. e.g. poetry, parable, prophecy, prose, allegory, etc. Apply the principles governing the respective literary form in your interpretation. For example: a parable usually teaches one primary lesson. Seek that lesson and do not force the parable to say things the writer did not intend to say.
4. Develop an outline of the text to determine the thought pattern or development of the writer. The writers of Scripture, as a rule, wrote systematically and orderly. It is the task of the interpreter to discover the thought pattern. Ask yourself, "Why is the author

saying what he is saying?" A pencil and piece of paper are necessary to do a good job of discovering the outline.

5. As you work at the text look for key words that are pivotal to understanding the passage. Determine the meaning of these words in the context where they are found. Do not assume that because the word is a familiar, you know what the writer meant with it. Ask, "With what meaning is the writer using this word."
6. Seek to understand the circumstances in which the passage was written as well as the circumstances of the people to whom it was written.
7. If you run into a difficulty, compare other Scriptures that address the same subject. Sometimes cross-references noted in the Bible may be helpful.
8. Now put the whole thing together and summarize what the passage is saying to the ones who originally received them.
9. Now it's time to ask, "What is the lesson for today?" Remember that the Scriptures were written to specific situations. Therefore the lessons of Scriptures are the principles that are taught in the passage. Determine what the principles are and apply them to today. Some passages are applied literally. However, literal passages also teach principles that need to be applied. It is the principles that are binding for us not the particular circumstances.
10. It is important to have some resources to help in your study. Resources should include: a Bible or two, a Bible dictionary, a commentary or two on the book being studied, a concordance, and an atlas. A book on principles of Bible interpretation would also be helpful.

Harvey Plett
Professor of Bible
Steinbach Bible College



How to Teach the Minor Prophets – and ENJOY it!

If the prospect of teaching the Minor Prophets has you sweating, don't panic! While the Prophetic books of the Old Testament are often the most controversial, they are also some of the most enjoyable books of the Bible to study.

These lessons on the Minor Prophets are a result of a brainwave by our academic dean, Dr. Don Thiessen. Looking for ways to make learning both practical and enjoyable, he suggested that we allow our classes to write lessons that would form a Bible Study series for use in churches. The Minor Prophets class at Steinbach Bible College was both fearful and excited about the challenge. No longer could they merely "cough up" an assignment in order to meet requirements for a course, but their stamp of ownership would be on their lessons for many to see. As you will see from the lessons, much work has gone into this project. I want to thank the students for their contribution to this cause.

So you see, people like you and me have written these lessons. Questions that will help us to better understand the message of the prophets are included. If you have feedback on how to improve these lessons or a series that we may produce in the future, please don't hesitate to call or write us. (You may even want to volunteer to contribute in the next series!)

We hope that you will enjoy teaching the Minor Prophets as much as we have enjoyed working on the lessons.

Gord Penner
Professor of Old Testament
Steinbach Bible College

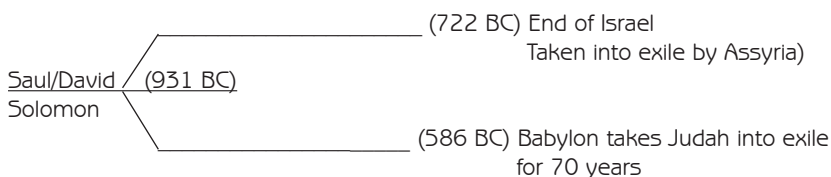


Studying Old Testament Prophecy

By using the following 4-step approach to prophecy, the teacher and student will be able to capture the message of the book. It is by vaulting to step 4 (by skipping the others) that misinterpretation often comes into the text.

1. Discover the context for the book.¹
2. Discover the message that the prophet intended for the original audience.
3. Discover how that message applies to our situation today (begin by applying it to yourself personally – once the lesson has impacted you, you will be better prepared to help the students apply it to their situation).
4. Discover how the message should affect how we think and live (again, remember to let the lesson impact your own life first as you prepare).

Understanding the Life and Times of the Minor Prophets



Israel divides

In 931 BC, Solomon died and the kingdom split. Jeroboam rebelled against Solomon's son Rehoboam (who tried to raise taxes even higher than his father Solomon had). When Jeroboam rebelled, he took the northern 10 tribes with him, dividing the land into Israel (10 northern tribes) and Judah (two tribes in the south).

¹ In order to understand the message of the Old Testament prophets, we need to understand what is happening at the time of the message. Much of the debate going on today regarding interpretation of the Minor Prophets is caused by an approach to the books which ignores the context of the message.

This Bible Study series seeks to understand the message spoken by the prophet, assuming he was a real person speaking a message that his audience needed to hear. After we understand this message, we can apply the truths to our current situation. However, when we read the prophetic books assuming that the message relates only to the future (even for us today), we begin to search for answers to questions which the Prophet wasn't trying to address.

Life in Northern Israel

When Jeroboam took over the kingship of the northern ten tribes, he had a problem to solve. His citizens were heading to Jerusalem on a yearly basis to worship in the temple there. Wanting to selfishly guard their allegiance to northern Israel, he set up places of worship in the north at Bethel and Dan. Here they worshipped the golden calves that he set up. During the reigns of the following kings, none had the courage to remove these detestable places of worship. The lowest point of the spiritual life of northern Israel came when Ahab took the throne. He married wicked queen Jezebel, who was known for her enthusiastic persecution of the prophets. You may recall the contest Elijah had with the Baal prophets on Mt. Carmel. Following the contest, Jezebel wants Elijah killed. He flees, claiming to be the only prophet remaining whom Jezebel hasn't killed.

It was during this time that Assyria was rising in power. It had been prophesied much earlier (during the time of Jeroboam) that Israel was going to pay for her idolatry by being sent into exile (I Kings 14:15 "He will uproot Israel from this good land that he gave to their forefathers and scatter them beyond the River, because they provoked the LORD to anger...") Nineveh was a large city in Assyria, and was the capital when Assyria exiled Israel in 722 B.C. It is no surprise, then, that Jonah (being from Northern Israel) was not interested in God sparing Israel's enemy, choosing to run away instead. Other prophets who spoke to the north include Amos, and Hosea.

Not only do they rebuke Israel & Judah for their sins, but Nineveh (Jonah & Nahum) and Edom (Obadiah) also receive warnings about the consequences of their sinful ways.

Life in Southern Judah

When the 10 northern tribes in Israel left, Judah continued to have Solomon's son Rehoboam on the throne. In fact, David was promised that he would continue to have a descendent on the throne forever (2 Sam. 7:11-16)². While in the north, kings and their entire families are killed and replaced with another king, Judah is different, keeping a descendant of David on the throne until their exile to Babylon in 586 B.C. When Assyria takes Israel captive, Judah is spared.

² The promises in the Bible appear to be conditional, whether they are negative (like the judgement of Nineveh) or positive (like the promise to Joshua of victory if the people would obey God's commands). Promised destruction is averted by repentance, while blessings are lost by disobedience. The promise to David of an eternal reign ends when Judah persists in her sin, receiving the punishment of exile in 586 B.C. However, Matthew records the lineage of Jesus, the King of Kings, pointing out that he is the eternal line of David which reigns to this day and will forever.



While in part it may be because the idolatry was not as widespread, she was not innocent. In fact, in order to escape being conquered along with Israel, Judah relies on Assyria for protection, failing to trust God. After Israel is taken captive, Babylon begins to increase in power, finally overtaking Assyria by the early 600's B.C. Many of the prophets in Judah speak of the "Day of the LORD", warning Judah of the coming punishment which would come on them for being unfaithful to God.

Summary

When we understand the spiritual condition of Israel and Judah, it is not surprising that God would allow them to be punished by their neighbors to the north (Assyria and Babylon). The prophets rebuke them for the sins of pride and idolatry. Rather than responding to the prophets warnings, they looked to other countries for help in avoiding the inevitable disaster.

As we look at the Minor Prophets, we should look to find the sins that the prophet was rebuking. Understanding this, we will find that their times are not unlike ours, in which we rely on ourselves to solve problems in life, and look elsewhere than to God for relief or answers.

Lesson Hints

Lesson 1— Hosea

The message of Hosea comes during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and during the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel (Hosea 1:1). Since Jeroboam II died ca. 753 and Hezekiah ascended the throne ca. 715, we know that Hosea's ministry spanned a minimum of about forty years. His ministry began near the end of Jeroboam's reign (some 30 years before the end of northern Israel and continued for some time past the end.

Jeroboam II's reign had seen relative peace and prosperity in the life of Israel. Because of this, complacency set in, and the people developed a sense of self-reliance. The country deteriorated spiritually. It is to this condition that Hosea addresses his message.

The book of Hosea provides us with an interesting object lesson. Hosea is asked to marry Gomer, an adulteress, and love her children of unfaithfulness.

"Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD." Hosea 1:2

No doubt, many Israelites turned their heads to see this strange prophet! An effective teaching method—yes!—but at quite a cost for Hosea personally!

The message God was trying to communicate through Hosea's life was that just as he continued to be faithful to Gomer, God continues to love unfaithful Israel, even though Israel was adulterating herself spiritually by following other gods. The compassion of God is easily understood as one hears it from a prophet who demonstrated that same compassion to his unfaithful wife. Another reason for the compassion of Hosea in the book is that the prophet associates closely with the people to whom he was speaking. They were his people. He was one of them. Hosea spoke out of concern for his fellow countrymen. Although at times he appears to speak out harshly, he was never detached from them, speaking out of a cold and uncaring heart. Because of the circumstances in his own life, Hosea was able to feel the compassion and love that God felt for his people.

Teacher's hints

1. As you prepare your lesson, think of people with whom you can easily associate, and understand how easy it is to empathize with them as you move alongside to rebuke them.
2. Be sure to help the students to understand the love and compassion that God had for the people. It is only in the context of this love that God chooses to allow punishment to come on his people.
3. Try to help the class to realize the many chances the people of Israel had. God continued to love. How easy is it for us to "count to three" and then WHAM! – let 'em have the consequences. How would Hosea minister if he were living out his message in our church? What can we learn from Hosea's object lesson that will help us be more effective in our "prophetic" ministry.

Lesson 2— Joel

The date of Joel's writing is uncertain, and perhaps not that important in order to understand the message of the book. Joel speaks of a coming locust plague that represents God's punishment on Judah. From the introduction, we recall that Judah had several kings, especially Hezekiah and Josiah, who attempted to reform religious life. However, the motivation for reform was often selfish, based on the positive benefits rather than a desire to serve God whole-heartedly. As a result, it is not surprising that God asks Joel to warn the people of the coming punishment for sin.

The book can be divided into two parts. The first part (1:1-2:17) contains the words of Joel, warning of the locust plague and the day of the Lord. Chapter one clearly warns of literal locusts coming to destroy the crops. It is not clear whether the message in chapter two is one of impending destruction for Judah, or a continuation of the locust plague of chapter one. Whatever the case, it is clear that Joel's warnings refer to an imminent punishment that will come on Judah for the sins they have committed. Judah did in fact see the "Day of the LORD" fulfilled when the nation was taken into captivity by Babylon in 586 BC. While the message has already been fulfilled as it relates to Judah, it is relevant today as a warning of judgment for rebellion against God.

The transition from warning to promised deliverance comes in 2:12-17, the pivotal point of the book. Although God has warned of coming punishment (referred to repeatedly as the "day of the LORD", he calls on Judah to repent. The people are invited to "Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness, and relenting of evil." Joel was well aware of the history of God's people, remembering the many times where God relented in the past as a result of confession. He is confident that God is not one who wishes to punish, but His FIRST desire is ALWAYS to show compassion. It is on this basis that Joel appeals to the people to call on this gracious and compassionate God.

In the second part of the book (2:18-3:21), the LORD responds to the repentance of the people, bringing deliverance. Most of the Minor Prophets' messages, although filled with warnings of impending judgment for sin, include a message of hope, once the punishment has been completed. Because of the greatness of the LORD, joy will return (3:21-24). Isn't that how sin is? It is a "joy stealer". Chapter three reminds us that although God uses the nations to punish Judah, their day of accountability is coming as well. This serves as a

good reminder for us today that while it may appear that the sinful world around us has it better than we do (with our “obligation” to follow God’s laws), it will not always be so. Ultimately, all peoples of the earth are judged. However, “the LORD is a refuge for His people and a stronghold to the sons of Israel. (Joel 3:16)” What is to be learned when we see God’s judgement meted out on those who deserve it? “Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, dwelling in Zion My holy mountain. (Joel 3:17)” While we are concerned for what happens to us, we often forget that of far more significance is the fact that the world needs to recognize who God is.

An additional note regarding interpretation: Some people prefer to interpret the book as referring to the “end times”. While the principles laid down are true for every generation, Joel’s message to Judah and to us is that the coming “Day of the LORD” should result in a transformed life.

Teacher’s hints:

1. Joel is only 3 chapters long. Read it in one sitting. Take note of the difference in tone from the warnings before 2:12 and the promises after 2:17. Reread 2:12-17 to understand the heart of the prophet’s message.
2. Be sure to recognize that the coming destruction warned about in the beginning of the book was well deserved. This will help us understand that Judah really needed a gracious and compassionate God (as we do today!).
3. Begin the Bible Study by relating a time when you didn’t deserve God’s goodness, but nevertheless He showered it on you (Just ‘cuz he loved you!). Get the class to recall their stories.
4. Keep the focus of the lesson on our need to recognize God’s goodness in our lives and our need to be faithful to him. It is easy to get caught up on whether or not God should be punishing someone else for what they’re doing. It may take some effort to keep the group focused on the application as it relates to us.

Lesson 3— Amos

Amos' spoke during the days of Uzziah king of Judah and Jeroboam II king of Israel (1:1). The time of overlap between these two kings is from 767-753 (remember that Israel's exile takes place in 722 B.C.). Assyria had defeated Syria (located just north of Israel) and the Jews were enjoying a period of peace and prosperity. During Uzziah and Jeroboam's reigns, Israel and Judah were able to expand their boundaries almost to those of David and Solomon.

These successes gave Israel a sense of national pride, and the people were convinced that Yahweh was favoring them. Because their energy was not being spent on defending their borders, they shifted their focus to international trade, becoming very rich. Along with this wealth came injustice and greed. The poor were neglected. Complacency set in, and religion became merely a necessary formality, devoid of meaning. The rich dominated society, extending their influence on prophets, priests, and judges. With the corruption of the judicial system, the poor were oppressed. While the poor got poorer, the rich got richer.

While these conditions were unfolding in northern Israel, Amos was busy tending sheep in the hills of Tekoa, about 6 miles south of Bethlehem. He was a shepherd from Judah, eking out a meager existence in the countryside when God calls him to prophesy. He is asked to travel north to Israel to deliver the message: "Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land" (7:11). Small wonder that this southern neighbor with a doomsday message didn't receive a warm reception in Israel!

The central thrust of Amos' message can be found in 5:4-15. In this section, Amos repeats the call for the house of Israel to "Seek the LORD that you may live" (5:6a). Again we see that in the midst of warnings about impending judgment, God is calling out for the salvation of Israel. At the centre of this small section (end of v.8) are 5 words: "The LORD⁵ (Yahweh) is His name."

In the previous chapter (4:12), Israel was warned "Prepare to meet your God." In the verses following 5:4-15, the LORD warns, "I shall pass through the midst of you." (5:17) There are some times in life when you don't want to meet God, and this was just such a time for Israel.

⁵ Take note that in most translations, whenever the name LORD (all capitals) is used, it is a translation of the name YHWH (usually pronounced YAHweh). This was the name of the covenant God of Israel.

In the interlude in 7:10-17, Amaziah (the priest of Bethel), takes up the defense on behalf of king Jeroboam. He tells Amos to “go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there.” (7:12) Amos must have had a difficult time not taking the rejection personally, being told to “go home”. However, they were responding to the message, not the messenger as such. Amos replies by telling them “I didn’t want the job!” He lets them know that he was quite content with shepherding when God took him from following the flock and said “Go, prophesy to my people Israel (7:15b).

Teacher’s hints:

1. Begin studying the book of Amos by reading 5:4-15. Then work your way forward and backward from there. Notice how the structure of the book is balanced around this central message.
2. Don’t get too caught up on all the places listed in chapters 1 and the first part of ch. 2. They are warnings that God will punish the nations to the north, south, east, and west of Israel. The punishment that all the nations around Israel will receive for their sins sets the scene for the LORD to tell them that they also will be punished.
3. Try to assist your group in understanding how the times of complacency that Amos responds to are not much unlike ours. In our society, we have bought into the idea that we can get practically anything we want. That develops an attitude of self-sufficiency, which doesn’t need God. What would be our response if Amos were to tell us “prepare to meet your God” (4:12) because he is about to “pass through the midst of you” (5:17)?
4. Think of ways in which the rich oppress the poor, or corrupt justice today. Would Amos’ message be a welcome message for people we rub shoulders with today?

Lesson 4— Obadiah

This is the shortest book of the Old Testament. It contains a vision concerning Edom. Little is known about the time nor the author Obadiah, but God's message is no less applicable to our lives.

Understanding a little about history and geography supplies an important context for understanding the message of the book. The land of Edom is located southeast of the Dead Sea (a neighbor to Judah). The people living in Edom were the descendants of Esau. Interesting enough, Genesis 25:29-30 explains how Edom got its name: "Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. He said to Jacob, 'Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished!' (That is why he was also called Edom.)" The Hebrew word that the NIV translates as "red stew" is *adom*. Verse 30 gives this as the explanation for how Edom got its name. What an insult! Who would want to be named after a mistake made by one's forefathers! This begins to help us understand the relationship between Edom and Judah, and some of the "baggage" which Edom was carrying.

Relationships between Jacob and Esau's descendents were further strained in Numbers 20:14-22 when the Edomites twice refuse Moses' messengers permission to travel through their land on their way from Egypt to Canaan.

Obadiah's message begins by warning Edom of her coming judgment. Verses 3-4 condemn the Edomites for their arrogance. Edom bases her security on the ease with which she could defend her cities, built high in the mountains (Mt. Esau is one of the highest mountains southeast of the Dead Sea). However, God warns that "from there I will bring you down" (v.4). Obadiah describes the completeness of the coming destruction in vss. 5-9. He tells them that even thieves and robbers leave something behind when they steal; however, Esau will be totally ransacked because of her pride.

Obadiah continues by condemning the Edomites for their unbrotherliness. It is interesting to note the offenses which are mentioned. They "stood aloof" (v.11) while other countries carried off Judah's wealth. Edom is also accused of rejoicing over Judah's misfortune. It appears that one of Edom's biggest wrongs was not what they did, but what they failed to do. They didn't raise a finger to help out their brother in distress. After describing the attacks that the enemies of Jerusalem experienced while Edom stood idly by, Obadiah accuses: "You too were as one of them." (v.11c). Edom is then given the reverse version of the verse "Do to others what you would have them do to you" (Mt. 7:12) Obadiah states that "As you have done, it will be done to you. Your dealings will return on your own head. (v.15b)" Edom has received a reprimand for her haughtiness as well as her

unwillingness to show love to her brother Judah. Long before Christ came to show a new way of returning good for evil, Obadiah demonstrates the need to forgive the sins of the past, choosing to respond with love.

This lesson is as relevant today as it was for Edom. It should not be difficult to get the students to relate to Obadiah's message. Whether it is in business, sports, politics, or within family, it is easy to think of examples that apply to our lives. When bad things happen to those who we think "deserve it", are we being like Edom?

Teacher's hints:

1. Be sure to help the students understand the context for the message. It is such a short book, and yet so easy to relate to when I can see how much Edom represents me!
2. Think of ways to help your group grasp how we are like Edom. Be prepared to give examples of times when you personally or as a church/group have rejoiced in another's failure.
3. Help your group to capture the gravity of the sin of passivity (doing nothing when you see someone else getting picked on). Often we feel that sins are only actions done, not the failures to act.

Lesson 5 – Jonah

Jonah is a prophet from Israel who is asked to prophesy to Nineveh. Instead of heading toward Nineveh (a northeasterly direction), Jonah heads west (or southwest) in response to God’s call. Why?

Two reasons can be suggested. First, the Jews were God’s people, and quite proud of the fact. While God intended that they be a witness for Him, Israel too often selfishly guarded their faith. Jonah belonged to a people who wanted to remain “God’s favorite nation”. Thus, he would have had a difficult time going to proclaim any message in order to save another nation.

Second, during the reign of Jeroboam, the first ruler of the northern kingdom, Israel was warned that the sin of worshiping idols would be punished. They were told that God would “uproot Israel from this good land that he gave to their forefathers and scatter them beyond the River, because they provoked the LORD to anger...” (I Kings 14:15). “Beyond the River” referred to Assyria, located in the area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Nineveh was a large city (requiring three days to walk through according to Jonah 3:3). In time, Nineveh would become its capital. Thus, it makes sense that Jonah (an Israelite) might be hesitant to warn the enemy Assyria that they would be destroyed.

Looking for repetition helps us understand the message of the book. A quick skim of the book will reveal four examples of people crying out in their distress:

Subjects	Response to LORD	LORD’s response	Subject’s response
Sailors (storm)	-do not let us die -don’t hold us accountable for throwing Jonah overboard, for you have done as you pleased	-sea grew calm	-sailors fear the LORD, offer sacrifices to Him and make vows
Jonah (In belly of fish)	-I will sacrifice to you -I will do what I have vowed	-fish vomits Jonah onto dry land	-Jonah obeys the Lord and goes to Nineveh
Ninevites (about to be destroyed)	-every man and beast repents (covered with sackcloth & call urgently on God)	-God had compassion and didn’t destroy them	(none stated)
Jonah (vine withers, scorching heat)	-angry at God -“it would be better for me to die than to live.”	-"Do you have a right to be angry when I show compassion?"	

What lesson is there to be learned? While there are four examples of God's compassion in the book, Jonah seems to think that he deserves it but that nobody else does! In fact, the reason that Jonah states for not wanting to go to Nineveh is that he recognizes that God is compassionate. While God's compassion was a wonderful thing when it related to his personal need, he couldn't stand it when others received it. Jonah responds to God's compassion to Nineveh in 4:2 - "Oh LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity." We now have the answer as to why Jonah fled for Tarshish. He couldn't stand the thought of God being compassionate on the evil enemy city of Nineveh. (Note: Nineveh is described as having "120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left" (4:11). Unlike Israel, who was leaving God after having had relationship with him for many years, the greatest part of the population in Nineveh was unschooled in regards to the worship of Yahweh. Jonah, having willfully disobeyed God, felt he deserved His compassion while the Ninevites who disobeyed did not.)

Teacher's hints:

1. Begin preparing for the lesson by reading the book, noting the cycles of God's compassion in the book. Especially notice Jonah's explanation for his anger at the end of the book. See what God is telling Jonah about his right to be angry with God.
2. Be sure to communicate the context of the book in order to understand why Jonah would be reluctant to speak to Nineveh (it wasn't just any city).
3. Look for people or groups of people that our church tends to think "deserve it" when we hear they are receiving punishment. Help the class to recognize how often we rely on God's compassion in our own lives, and how it is also undeserved.
4. Think of times in your life when God has been "gracious and compassionate", "slow to anger and abounding in love" and "a God who relents concerning calamity." (Jonah 4:2)

Lesson 6— Micah

Micah's name is the abbreviated form of Mikayahu, meaning "who is like Yahweh?" Like Amos, his contemporary, Micah came from a rural setting in Judah known as Moresheth, located some 20 miles southwest of Jerusalem. His writing describes him as a country man, perhaps a peasant farmer. He addresses his message to the citizens of Judah, especially Jerusalem, and for a while to Israel in the north.

He prophesies just before and after the fall of northern Israel in 722 B.C.. Micah 1:1 states that his vision concerning Samaria and Jerusalem came during the reigns of Judah's kings Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah (knowing that Jotham's reign ends c.754 B.C. and Hezekiah's reign begins c.715 B.C., He must have prophesied from 734-715 B.C. and likely for a few years on either side).

Micah sees beneath the outward appearance of religion, and attacks the corruption in the land. He addresses the exploitation of the poor, the injustice of the courts, and the failure of rulers and religious leaders to fulfill their responsibilities. Micah recognized that "going through the motions" of worship only added to the problem, giving the people a false sense of being right with God, promoting a life of hypocrisy.

Micah's message is a wake-up call to the nation, telling them that a righteous God cannot tolerate such unrighteousness. He warns that their punishment is coming sooner, rather than later. Speaking during the fall of Israel will have added a sense of urgency to his message, as Judah watched in horror as their sister received her punishment for unfaithfulness. To many in Judah, the message will have seemed ridiculous, not imagining that Yahweh would permit His people to be punished by a heathen nation. Judah continued to base their hope on the temple, insisting that the LORD would never allow His temple to be destroyed. Micah warns them that the only assurance of God's presence is to "act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). Really this verse is another reminder of the great commandment to "Love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Deut. 6:5; Mt. 22:37) and "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18; Mt. 22:39). The "justice and mercy" in Micah speaks of our relationship to others, while to "walk humbly with your God" speaks of our relationship with the LORD. The two reasons given for the coming judgment of the people come from these two dimensions of relationships. They pervert the worship practices (1:7; 3:5-7, 11; 5:12-14) and show injustice toward others (2:1-2, 8-9; 3:2-3, 9-11; 7:2-6).

The book is filled with the double message of judgment and grace. A simple outline sees two parts of the book, each representing a message of doom and hope.

Part One

- ◆ Messages of doom (ch. 1-3)
- ◆ Messages of hope (ch. 4-5)

Part Two

- ◆ Messages of doom (ch. 6-7:7)
- ◆ Messages of hope (7:8-20)

Teacher's hints:

1. Chapter 6 contains the heart of Micah's message. Read Micah 6 as a court case in which the mountains and hills act as a jury (having been around a long time witnessing God's dealings with Israel). The LORD brings the charge in 6:1-5, and the people offer their defense in 6:6-7. The prophet offers his rebuttal in v.8, suggesting that it is clear what was expected of the people (not sacrifices but right relationships with God and others). The reasons for the lawsuit are stated in 6:9-12, with the sentence being handed out in vss. 13-16.
2. Look for ways in which we exchange "right living" for a right relationship with God and others.
3. For a discussion starter, think of people whom we would associate with the word "righteous". What is it about these people which make them seem genuine.

Lesson 7 – Nahum

The book of Nahum can be dated somewhere between the fall of the Egyptian city of Thebes in 663 B.C. (3:8-10) and the destruction of Nineveh in 612 (1:1; 2:8; 3:7). The sense of urgency in the book suggests that the book was written shortly before the fall of the Assyrian capital, placing it about 615 B.C. Although the people turned from their wicked ways in response to Jonah's message some years earlier, the conversion did not last long. Nahum's warning comes only a few years before the LORD punishes them by allowing Babylon to rise up and destroy Nineveh in 612 B.C. and the land of Assyria by c.609 B.C.. Israel's exile to Assyria had happened over 100 years earlier (in 722 B.C.) and Judah was enjoying a time of great religious reform under good King Josiah.

Nahum's real message is to stress the sovereignty of God over history and the world. God is good and just. Therefore He is the champion of the outraged and helpless and "will by no means justify the guilty" (1:3). While God could use a wicked nation like Assyria to punish unfaithful Israel, He also held them accountable for their actions.

The book can be divided into two sections. Chapter one speaks of the nature and purposes of God toward those who oppose and those who trust him. Chapters two and three contain songs or oracles about the siege and fall of Nineveh.

Chapter one begins with a beautiful psalm of praise in the first eight verses. The rest of the chapter contains warnings to Assyria/Nineveh and promises of deliverance to Judah.

Chapters two and three contain Nahum's words of mocking and taunting Nineveh. A more general question could be asked. Deeply imbedded in Hebrew thought was the concept of retribution. Christ addressed this when he was on earth, referring to their law of retribution limiting it to "an eye for an eye". (The concept of retribution finds its true interpretation and explanation in the New Testament. Christ goes beyond this law, saying that you should "turn the other cheek" and forgive as you have been forgiven.) Nahum's call for punishment on Nineveh comes from a deep understanding of the righteousness of God. 100 years earlier, God referred to Assyria as His "hired razor" (Is. 7:20) whose duty was to punish Israel. God, in his sovereignty, used an unrighteous nation to punish the sin in Israel. Was he condoning their unrighteousness by doing this? God is not condoning evil by using evil to punish evil. Rather than attempt to justify the evil that he uses, we need to see the wrong that he is

allowing to be punished. God is a God of grace and compassion. He demonstrated this before to Nineveh by sending Jonah to summon them to turn from their wicked ways or face destruction. If this was merely a matter of God's retribution for evil, he needn't have warned them about its imminence. In his compassion, he allows sinners the opportunity to come to him. For that, each of us can be personally grateful.

That Assyria was ruthless was common knowledge in those days. Their policy of deporting masses of their victims (as they did with Israel), and their genocidal treatment of nations were well known. It is to this nation that Nahum brings his message of coming destruction.

Teacher's Hints:

1. Make sure the students understand the context within which Nahum fits. It is important to note that God had used them to punish Israel in 722 B.C., and that they had already been warned by Jonah some years earlier.
2. Note the recurring theme in the Old Testament of God using evil to punish evil. Note the many ways which God does this today as well.
3. While the message of Nahum may seem like a negative one, don't lose the focus of who God is in the book. Nahum describes Him as a sovereign God who is righteous.

Lesson 8 – Habakkuk

Not much is known about Habakkuk nor the times in which he lived. Throughout the Old Testament, God is viewed as one who blesses righteousness and punishes evil. When this isn't the case, people start asking questions. Habakkuk asks two pressing questions on behalf of his people. Both are relevant to any generation, and most people ask them at some point in their life.

Question #1

The first question which Habakkuk presents to God in 1:2-4 can be simplified as: "Why do you allow the wicked to prosper?" The argument used is that if even the wicked prosper, what benefit is there to living a righteous life? Habakkuk is troubled by the evil that is happening all around him, seemingly unchecked.

Answer #1

God responds to Habakkuk's first question in 1:5-11. He says, in essence, "I'll take care of it!" He points out that He is raising up the Babylonians to punish evil. God's answer is that "I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told" (1:5). At the height of Assyria's dominance, nobody would have imagined that within their lifetime, Assyria would be defeated and Babylon would be on their doorstep. Babylon's attack and capturing of Judah was going to be God's punishment on the wickedness of the nation. So God's answer to the question "Why do you allow the wicked to prosper?" is that "While I may tolerate evil for a while, in time a wicked nation will receive its fair punishment."

Question #2

Habakkuk continues the questioning process in 1:12-2:1. He doesn't understand how God could use a wicked nation like Babylon to punish His chosen people Judah. His second question can be summed up in 1:13b, "Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?" Babylon is by no means righteous, and it doesn't make sense that God would use an evil nation to punish His own people.

Answer #2

God replies with five "woes", addressing how different sins will be punished. It's interesting to note how the consequences are related to the crimes.

Woe to:	Consequence:
(2:6-8) robber, thief, the embezzler (the dishonest person, the one who appropriates for himself that which belongs to another)	a man will reap what he sows (v.8)
(2:9-11) exploiters and extortioners (term "to get evil gain" comes from a weaver's term "to cut off the threads" cf. "To make one's cut" which is still used today)	Feel a need for security (build their nest on high in some secluded spot guarded by every security device available). But, the stone in the walls of the house and the wood in the beams will cry out against them —v.11
(2:12-14) evil and violence the tyrant builds his society the bulldozer way, running roughshod over anyone who gets in his way.	Consumed in the flames (but a kingdom built on the glory of God will cover the whole earth)—v.14
(2:15-17) debauchery (those who ruin their fellow men by strong drink in order to gaze on their shame (cf. Noah Gen. 9:20-25)	the one who makes his neighbor drunk will himself drink the cup of the wrath of God
(2:18-20) idolatry (what use is an idol? It has no power. It is man-made. An idol is as silent as the stone out of which it is made. It may look expensive but it is not alive.)	Yahweh is in his holy temple, let all the earth bow in hushed silence before him. (All the forces that oppose God will ultimately be silenced)

Chapter 3

Habakkuk concludes with a song of praise. In it, he repeats the answer to question #1: "Why does God allow the wicked to go unpunished?" Habakkuk responds "He doesn't! God is still on the throne. He has acted in the past to overcome his enemies (32a) and he will do it again at the request of his prophet (3:2b)." The closing verses of the chapter contain a declaration of faith. In it, Habakkuk declares that even though the conditions haven't changed, he has joy as he waits patiently for God's deliverance and the day of judgment for his enemies. His acknowledgment in 2:20 "But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him" gives him the peace he needs regarding the present conditions.

Teacher's Hints:

1. Help "bait the hook" by allowing students to relate times when God didn't seem fair (regarding blessing righteous and punishing evil). Habakkuk's answers then can be answers to their own questions.

Lesson 9– Zephaniah

The message of Zephaniah is given during the reign of Josiah, king of Judah (1:1). Be sure to understand the general introduction in this guide to see where Josiah fits into the bigger picture. A lot of the context has already been given in other lessons. We will simply summarize and point out a few new issues which Zephaniah and Josiah faced.

As a whole, the nation of Judah is drawing nearer to its judgment day. They will soon pay for their continued sin. The reign of Josiah is a light in a dark place, a glimmer of hope. He established reforms to religious observance in Judah, turning people back to God. However, it is clear from the reigns of Josiah's sons that the reform did not happen in the heart. They plunged right back into sin. There are questions about whether Zephaniah's message was preached before, during, or after the reform. Remember that whether or not the reform happened, the judgment had to happen because of the sins of the fathers. Josiah's reform was a temporary respite, a glimpse of hope, but not a change of heart.

The question might be raised, "How could the same prophet preach the two messages of judgment and hope to the same audience at the same time?" This is an important question; a key to understanding the message of Zephaniah and all of the prophets. The answer is found in God's long range purpose. From the beginning of creation, God wanted a being in His own image to worship Him in truth. Adam failed. Noah failed. So God made a covenant with a "set-apart" people whom He could call His own. Now they too have failed Him, yet God has a promise to fulfil. Rather than beginning with a new group, He intends to purify the people with whom He has begun. This purification is the purpose for the judgment. Ultimately, God will perfect the people with a perfect covenant and a perfect King (Jer. 31), Jesus the Messiah. The hope expressed in ch. 3 looks forward to the return from exile and further to the eternal universal messianic kingdom of God.

Remember as you read that the day of the Lord will be a day of light for some and a day of darkness for others depending on their relationship with God. Also keep in mind the call to repentance in 2:1-3.

Our focus in the Old Testament is usually on the nation of Israel. Zephaniah, and probably all of the prophets remind us that God is God, not only of Israel, but of all the nations of the earth. Notice that the judgment on all of the nations is for a purpose. God has in mind that all peoples of the earth should serve Him (3:9). All the earth is

His. While God does have a special covenant relationship with Israel, He is still concerned with every nation and person on the earth.

Teacher's Hints

1. Pay particular attention to the references to "the day of the Lord". You might want to see what some of the other prophets have to say about the day of the Lord; it is a common theme in the prophets. Also check a Bible Encyclopedia on the day of the Lord.
2. Notice the references to "the remnant". Try to understand the character of the remnant, especially in contrast to the character of those being judged. Does the description of the remnant in Zephaniah in any way remind you of what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7)?
3. Be careful as you deal with the judgment and the hope in the book to keep in mind the purpose for judgment — to purify a people unto God (see the key verse). Let this be the focus of the study. When you are dealing with judgment of Judah (ch. 1), the judgment of the nations (ch. 2), or the section on hope (ch. 3), do not lose touch with the purpose of the book as a whole.

Written by Dave Reimer, Pastor Callsbeck Fellowship Chapel,
Winnipeg, MB.

Lesson 10— Haggai

The last three books of the Minor Prophets jump forward in time to the end of the exile and the return of the Jews to Canaan. During the exile, Daniel and Ezekiel addressed the Jews, and as their time of punishment comes to an end, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are called by God to speak His message.

Other than the book which bears his name, and two brief mentions in the book of Ezra, the prophet Haggai is an unknown and mysterious figure. His name is related to the Hebrew root word for 'feast' or 'religious festival'. This fact, along with Haggai's emphasis on the importance of the Temple, is sometimes used as evidence that Haggai was a priest (see 2:11). While possible, it must be admitted that the case is far from certain. We have in front of us a very short book written by a largely unknown figure.

When we look at the historical circumstances, the situation is more enlightening. Between the years 605 and 586 B.C., the people of Israel are taken into captivity. This event, known as the "Babylonian exile" took place in three stages, culminating with the abortive and misguided rebellion of the puppet king Zedekiah in 586. In angry response, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon sets fire to both the Temple and the royal palace and takes the remainder of the people back to Babylon. With Solomon's temple in ruins, Israel's humiliation is complete.

Not long after this Babylon itself falls before the might of the Persian empire. In 539 B.C.E, the Persian King Cyrus issues a decree that allows the exiled Israelites to return. This event also takes place in three stages beginning with the return of a "remnant" of only 50,000. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah were part of this first group. At first this number might seem small. Why would so many Jews choose to remain behind in Babylon if the door was open for their return to the homeland? Apparently, many of them had become so settled in Babylon that it became 'home' for them and they did not wish to tear up roots once again. There was even scriptural warrant for their decision. After all Jeremiah had encouraged such an outlook (Jer 29:5-6). At any rate, most of the Jewish people chose to hang onto the financial security and comfort of Babylon rather than give it up for the uncertainty of a ravished Jerusalem.

The 50,000 might have wished to think again when they saw what waited for them. There were several difficulties. To begin with, the land had lain fallow for years and would need much work to be productive again. Ancestral homes had either been destroyed or

had imploded due to neglect. The city which had once teemed with 100,00 inhabitants now contained only 30,000 and was a shadow of its former self. As if that weren't enough, the lower classes of Judeans (the 'undesirable elements' of their society) had taken over the holdings which had once belonged to these returnees (CF Jer 52:15-16, Ezek 11:3, 15). Not surprisingly, this led to internal tension between the Jewish people who had remained in the land and those who were now returning to the land after the Exile. Added to the mix was external tension. Neighboring peoples and local Persian officials were not very keen on Israel rebuilding.

According to Ezra 3-4, this remnant tried to rebuild the Temple upon their return but faced much discouragement and opposition. The result was that "work on the house of the Lord came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia" (Ezra 4:24). This fallow period lasted about 15 years, after which time the prophet Haggai renews the call to rebuild the Temple which serves as an external sign of the covenant.

539 B.C.—Cyrus' decree allowing the exiles to return
(work on the Temple begins under much opposition)



536 B.C.—Temple work is stopped



520 B.C.—Haggai/Zechariah



516 B.C.—Temple completed

This sketch of the historical context and its concomitant pressures helps us to understand how the priorities of the people had become misfocused. (It seems that there are some parallels between this situation and the experience of residents of the former East Germany and West Germany after the walls came down and they were permitted to reunify.)

In regards to the theological message of the book, Haggai's focus was exceptionally clear. His message had two centers: the rebuilding of the temple, and the restoration of the Davidic rule. Unlike many other minor prophets, his message focused less on social justice and reform and more on the actions of Yahweh which would usher in a future glory which would outshine that of David's rule and Solomon's temple. This is the focus of our key verse.

Teacher's hints:

1. Be sure to help the students understand the historical context and social situation of the book. This information helps us to empathize with the people and see more clearly how their life situation had warped their priorities. I wonder if we would have reacted much differently if placed in such a situation?
2. To supplement your study of Haggai, read through the book of Ezra.
3. When exploring and challenging the priorities represented in your class, try to look beyond the surface behavior and choices. Focus on the underlying world view which seems to motivate your students. Is there a difference between the theology we speak and the theology which is actually reflected in our priorities and the way we live our lives?

Written by corey Herlevsen, Pastor, Mitchell community Fellowship, Mitchell, MB.

Lesson 11– Zechariah

The opening verse of Zechariah gives us the date of his message. It is given in the eighth month of the second year of Darius (522-486). Thus, the book is written c.520 B.C., near the end of Judah's exile in Babylon (see notes on Haggai who prophesied at the same time). The book begins by addressing the question "How long will you withhold mercy from Jerusalem and the towns of Judah, which you have been angry with these seventy years?" (1:12). The name Zechariah means "Yahweh has remembered", and he assures the people that God has not forgotten them even though he has allowed them to be exiled as punishment for their unfaithfulness.

In 539 B.C., Cyrus king of Persia issued a decree which allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. Approximately 50,000 Jews returned to rebuild the temple. On their return, they began the rebuilding process. The Samaritans, and other neighboring nations, felt threatened by the potential of a renewed Jewish state, and resisted the project with great opposition, managing to halt the rebuilding work. When Darius the Great became king of Persia in 522, he supported the Jews building venture, and offered his support. The work on the temple was completed and dedicated to God in 516 B.C.

While Haggai focused more on the practical mission of restoring the temple, Zechariah stressed the larger theological significance of the practical activities in which he was engaged. His material focuses on the need for a Messiah who would bring deliverance, which would be deeper and longer lasting than that which their return from exile brought.

The book is divided into two sections, and the lesson questions focus on the first section (chapters 1-8). This section contains nine visions and concludes by addressing the topics of fasting and morality. The last section of the book (chapters 9-14) deals with two oracles; the first oracle regards the nations surrounding Israel and the second talks about Jerusalem.

Teacher Hints:

1. The visions contained in chapters one through six include much figurative language, typical of apocalyptic writings. In the lesson these visions are discussed, helping us capture the messages each one contains. Do not feel threatened if you don't understand all of the imagery in these visions. Remain focused on the essential truths that are highlighted in the lesson questions.
2. For further reading, look at the article "Apocalyptic" in the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. (The New Bible Dictionary has a shorter article under the same name.)

Lessons 12 & 13– Malachi

The book placed at the end of the Old Testament is also most likely the last to be written before the time of Christ. The time between Malachi and Christ is often referred to as the “400 silent years”.

The name Malachi means “my messenger”, and he writes, once the temple had been rebuilt (completed in 516 B.C.). It appears lethargy had already set in, and worship had already become wearisome and tiresome for the Jews (1:10,13; 3:1,10). Although the people had returned to the land, life never did return to the state it had been in the “glory days” when David and Solomon ruled. The physical return to the land was never accompanied by a complete revival and whole-hearted willingness to serve Yahweh. Although they had rebuilt the temple, it paled in comparison to the grand temple that Solomon built. Haggai 2:3 and Ezra 3:11 reveal the disappointment demonstrated by those who had seen Solomon’s temple and recalled the “glory days”. While some wept, others became skeptical. This led to a departure from true worship, the condition that Malachi addresses in his book.

Malachi’s message is one of judgment, testifying against “sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear (Yahweh)” (3:5). This sounds strikingly similar to the message delivered by the prophets before Judah was sent into exile.

Malachi uses the question and answer method to rebuke the people for their neglect of the true worship of the LORD and calls them to true repentance. Malachi begins with an accusation (1:2a, 6, 7a,13; 2:13; 3:7, 8a,13a), to which the people usually respond with a “Who Me?” question in an attempt to defend themselves (1:2b,7b;3:8b,13b). Malachi seizes the opportunity to explain how they had sinned against the LORD. Malachi’s teaching method is effective, as he walks his “class” through the wrong actions and attitudes that the people have displayed. Malachi also addresses the heart attitude of the people, as they attempt to defend themselves against Yahweh’s accusations.

As we reach the end of the book of Malachi, and simultaneously the conclusion of the Old Testament, one message cries out from the pages: Unfinished! Israel was sent into exile in Babylon in order to punish them and bring them back to a covenant relationship with Yahweh. Its purpose was not fully accomplished, and shortly after her return, Israel reverted to her sin of unfaithfulness to God. As a

result, the end of the exile did not mark the beginning of a new age, but rather a sad reminder that things were still not as they used to be (and as God wanted them to be).

This sets the scene for a new way, in which Christ would come and "Israel" would become those not born into the faith physically, but those born into Israel through the new birth (recall Jesus' conversation in John 3 with Nicodemus regarding the need to be "reborn"). A new covenant begins; one which is not outward (imposed by birth), but one which is an inner covenant and results in changed living. It would be a covenant which would not focus on whether one had religious "standing", was short, tall, rich, poor, young, old, male, female, prisoner or free. It didn't matter whether one was born Jew, Samaritan, or even a Roman soldier. It was a matter of the heart. Christ referred to actions as evidences of the heart. He came up with the radical concept that sin was what came from the heart, before the outward action ever became visible. He even suggested that while one may "appear" clean, he may indeed be "filthy as rags".

Malachi addresses this need for inner renewal, accusing the Jews of participating in meaningless outer worship. Malachi's message seemed to fall on deaf ears, and continues to beckon to us today.

Teacher's Hints:

1. The returned exiles appear to have learned little from their punishment. How often do we experience "radical change" from some catastrophe, only to return to "normal" a short time later?
2. Help the class to see where we offer lip service and "go through the motions" of fulfilling our religious duties. When Malachi speaks of not daring to offer blemished animals for the government tax, we ask ourselves how different it is today as we faithfully pay our income tax, yet our "temple tax" goes unpaid with hardly a tinge of guilt.
3. Is Jesus' message in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7) really that different from Malachi's message? Didn't both concern themselves with the condition of the heart?