

## The Minor Prophets: God Still Speaks Today



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## Introduction

# Introduction



Be honest. When did you last read a book like Obadiah? Or Nahum? Or perhaps the better question is “Have you *ever* read Obadiah?” or “Where do I find Haggai”? The Minor Prophets form the last 12 books of the Old Testament. We are generally unfamiliar with both the historical context and the overall spiritual message of these books. So ask your group to read the book you are discussing that week before they attend. Everyone will get a lot more out of it.

Today when we use a word like *prophecy*, or if someone is called a prophet, our usual understanding is that this refers to interpreting events that are still to come. However, this was not the primary purpose of the prophet in the Old Testament. Rather he explained or interpreted the present from God’s perspective. He was the one who spoke for God. Theologian James Montgomery Boice comments on how the Minor Prophets dramatize the character of God as few other books do: “They highlight God’s sovereignty... holiness...[and] love....In the Minor Prophets, we will hear the voice of God speaking to us in a fresh way. It will speak to us as individuals and as a spiritual fellowship in the Church.”



## How to use this resource for a group study

# How to use this resource for a group study

*This Bible study can be used for an individual or a group. If you intend to lead a group study, follow these simple suggestions.*



- 1** Make copies of the studies for everyone in your group.
- 2** Don't feel that you have to use all the material in the study. Almost all of our studies have more information than you can get through in one session, so feel free to pick and choose the teaching information and questions that will meet the needs of your group. Use the teaching content of the study in any of these ways: for your own background and information; to read aloud (or summarize) to the group; for the group to read silently.
- 3** Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting people to open up.
- 4** When working through the questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for your group to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.
- 5** Begin and end the session in prayer.



## Hosea

Introduction

# Hosea



### Why read this book?

This book tells a story as contemporary as today's talk shows—that of a man's love for his unfaithful spouse. But the story of the prophet Hosea and his wife Gomer illustrates another love story—that God loves us, even when our sins have broken his heart. Here is a picture of a God who longs to forgive us when we turn to him.

### Who wrote this book?

Hosea, a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel.

### To whom was it written?

Hosea originally delivered his prophecies to the northern kingdom of Israel. After Assyria conquered Israel, the words were transcribed to scrolls as a record of prophecy fulfilled and as a warning—possibly to the remnant left behind in Israel, or possibly to the people of Judah.

### When was it written?

Approximately 715 B.C. But Hosea first prophesied around 753 B.C. and continued to speak to the people until Samaria and the northern kingdom fell in 722 B.C.

### What was happening at this time?

Jeroboam II was a wicked king whose leadership had produced a materialistic, immoral, unjust society. Six kings ruled Israel within 25 years. *This* was the twilight of the northern kingdom.



## Hosea

### Introduction

## What to look for in Hosea:

Don't be shocked by the prostitution, unfaithfulness, and sorrow in this book. Notice the stark consequences of sin as God states his case against his people. But then, look beyond Hosea's suffering (and God's pain) to see an example of love that will not quit— first, in God's love for his people Israel, and second, in God's love for us. Look for ways that Hosea loved his undeserving wife and consider how God does the same for us.

—*From the Quest Study Bible (Zondervan)*



# Hosea

Leader's Guide

Leader's Guide

## Hosea



*The world's greatest love story*

*Hosea may be the strangest story of "one who speaks for God." Israel's desperate situation is encapsulated for the nation in the marriage of Hosea and Gomer. Hosea is told to go and buy his wife back from the state of prostitution she has entered. This becomes a parable of Israel's faithless relationship with God. Yet God is willing to love her back to a position of being faithful. God is not silent! He still speaks to us today. This study from the Book of Hosea will look at God's passionate love for his people.*

Scripture: **Hosea**

Based On: "The Minor Prophets: God Still Speaks to Us Today," by Tom Cowan



# Hosea

## Leader's Guide

### Part 1 Identify the Issue

Hosea had a long period of ministry, perhaps 50 or 60 years, which spanned the reigns of four successive kings in the southern kingdom and Jeroboam in the northern kingdom. Prior to Hosea's ministry, Israel had suffered defeat and humiliation. But under the strong leadership of several kings, such as Jehoash and then his son Jeroboam, Israel began to enjoy a period of recovery. Because of this, those of Hosea's time, living at the close of Jeroboam's reign and also following it, knew of oppression and defeat only through the memory of their fathers. They were beginning to enjoy a period of recovery and military peace, bringing economic prosperity.

Some signs of this: the land was again producing abundantly because farmers were able to work it in peace (2 Chron. 26:10); many people were becoming wealthy; luxuries were becoming common; new building and construction was taking place (Hos. 8:14).

This created a widespread feeling of pride. People were pleased with what was going on. Yet as is often the case, this did not create spiritual growth. Prosperity seldom produces spirituality. In fact, it often produces the opposite, and this is exactly what was happening in Israel.

The pagan cult of Baal had introduced many ideas that were counter to the kind of covenant relationship that Israel should have kept with Jehovah. Apparently sacred prostitution, which was common in the fertility rites of the Baal cult, was still being practiced (see Hosea 4:10–18). Amos had preached against this kind of practice, but it seems that few had paid attention to his word, so now it was the turn of Hosea to speak for God. He spoke out against the evils of his day.

**[Q]** What do you know of the Minor Prophets? What sticks out to you when you think of these 12 books?

**[Q]** Who speaks prophetically to us today?

### Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

#### Teaching Point One: God's love for his people is that of a faithful husband.

You will see that the first three chapters tell us how God asked Hosea to do a very difficult thing: "When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, '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.' So he married Gomer daughter of Diblaim . . ." (1:2–3). Read Hosea 1–3.



## Hosea

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**Leader's Note:** *Since that's a lot of reading, you may want to break the group into three smaller groups. Ask each group to read one chapter and summarize it for everyone else.*

This instruction from God to Hosea has created a lot of discussion. Are we to regard this as a real marriage, or was this just a parable?

**Leader's Note:** *There are four main lines of thought:*

**1) A Hypothetical Marriage:** *This takes the position that the marriage never really happened, but is more like an allegory, in which God describes how Israel has been unfaithful;*

**2) A Literal Marriage—Gomer Unchaste:** *This takes the position that this was a real marriage, and Gomer was already a temple prostitute. This seems to be the most natural way to understand 1:2. While priests were forbidden to marry someone who was unchaste, Hosea was a prophet, and so that law would not specifically apply to him;*

**3) Spiritual Infidelity:** *This view, not as widely held, sees the situation as one of spiritual rather than physical infidelity. It says that Gomer became unchaste because, like many of the Israelites in Hosea's day, she became a worshiper of false gods;*

**4) Literal Marriage—Gomer Chaste:** *This says that the marriage did occur, and that Gomer was faithful to Hosea before they were married. She later became adulterous, but Hosea was still committed to her and wanted to win her back.*

**[Q]** Why do you think Hosea was able to follow through with this instruction from God?

**[Q]** What do these chapters tell you about Hosea? Gomer?

**Optional Activity:** *If you would like to prepare for the next question, ask: Those of you who are parents, why did you choose your children's names? Or ask: Did you like the name your parents gave you? Why or why not?*

**[Q]** What message about Israel is being described in each child (1:3–10)?

**[Q]** What do these chapters tell you about the character of God?

**[Q]** Israel was charged with committing spiritual adultery. If Hosea were preaching today, what would he find as present day examples of spiritual adultery in the church? How have we as God's people repeated the mistake of Israel?





## Hosea

### Leader's Guide

#### Teaching Point Two: God is clear in what he demands from the people he loves.

Imagine yourself in a courtroom where God is the prosecuting attorney. Hosea 4:6 is a critical verse: “. . . my people are destroyed from lack of knowledge. ‘Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as my priests; because you have ignored the law of your God, I also will ignore your children.’”

Read chapters 4–7.

**[Q]** In 4:1–2, what is the charge or case that God brings against the people?

**[Q]** Hosea 4:6 says that the people are being destroyed because of a lack of knowledge. What knowledge were they lacking?

**Leader's Note:** *You can trace the theme of knowledge through the following verses: Hosea 6:3; 6:6; 13:4; Romans 1:18–21.*

**[Q]** Hosea 6:1–3 begins with a cry of repentance. Is it genuine? How does verse 4 reveal the quality of their repentance?

**[Q]** Hosea 7:4, 6–8, 11, and 16 give four images of Israel's less than genuine repentance. How is each image used?

**[Q]** What is God really looking for in the lives of his people (6:6; Ps. 51:16–17)?

**[Q]** Based on chapters 4–7, how would you summarize how God intends to judge the nation?

#### Teaching Point Three: God disciplines the people he loves.

It may help you to see the five movements of sin in Hosea 8: breaking of God's covenant (vv. 1–3); choosing kings and leaders without God's consent (v. 4); idolatry (vv. 4–6); forming alliances with the ungodly nation of Assyria (vv. 8–10); and building false altars (vv. 11–13). This is summed up in 8:14: “Israel has forgotten his Maker . . .”

Read Hosea 8–10.

**[Q]** How do Hosea 8:14 and Deuteronomy 8:11–18 relate to each other?

**[Q]** How would you summarize God's feelings in chapter 9?

**[Q]** What strikes you about the emotions of God so far in Hosea? What do they tell you about him?



## Hosea

### Leader's Guide

#### Teaching Point Four: God restores his beloved people.

You will see that in spite of God's anger, the story of Hosea is really a story about restorative love. Read Hosea 11.

**[Q]** How does this chapter describe what is in God's heart for his people?

In Hosea 14:1–7, we have another appeal to repentance. We must note how different this is from the false appeal that we saw in 6:1–3. The tone seems to be entirely different.

**[Q]** What do you think the difference is?

**[Q]** Does the difference lie with God, or with the people?

#### Optional Activity:

**Purpose:** *To worship the God who restores his beloved.*

**Activity:** *Reread Hosea 11. Write a letter to God in response to his emotional response to his people. Make it a letter of adoration, repentance, and thanksgiving. If you do this as a group, have each person write a line of the letter, folding it over so the next person can't see the previous entries. Pass the letter around the circle twice. Then, read the entire letter out loud to God as a prayer. You may be surprised that the sum is greater than its parts.*

## Part 3 Apply Your Findings

A key theme in Hosea is our need to know the loving God (6:3, 6). We need to know the God whose love is like that of a faithful husband, who is clear in what he demands of his people, who disciplines the ones he loves, and who restores his beloved in light of true repentance.

**[Q]** What is the main aspect of God's character that you find in Hosea?

**[Q]** What do you see as the main lesson from Hosea for the church today? How are we unfaithful and guilty of spiritual adultery?

**Action Point:** **What makes the difference in our spiritual lives between times when our repentance is shallow and short-lived, and times when there is a real and permanent change? Read 2 Corinthians 11:2. Take 30 minutes or more this week to meditate upon this verse and ask the Holy Spirit to bring any issues of repentance to the surface. Use your time for confession, renunciation of sin, and repentance.**

—Study by Tom Cowan, with Kyle White



## Joel

### Introduction

# Joel



## Why read this book?

If you long to personally experience God's work and power, you'll find Joel's prophecies right on target. His predictions, though frightening at times, will also inspire you. In fact, Joel prophesies the coming of the Holy Spirit, linking God's work in the Old Testament with the birth of the church in the New Testament (compare 2:28; Acts 2:17–21). Reading Joel will show you God's intense desire for intimacy with all his people.

## Who wrote this book?

Joel, a prophet of God.

## When was it written?

Some think Joel wrote during Jeremiah's lifetime, around 609 B.C. Others say he could have written later, after the Jews returned from exile in Babylon (538 B.C.). But because Joel mentions no king and speaks of elders as leaders (1:2), still others suggest a much earlier date—perhaps around 835 B.C., when Judah's king was a child (2 Kings 11:21).

## What was happening at this time?

Assuming the earlier date, seven-year-old Joash had just been crowned king over Judah, though Jehoiada, the high priest, was the power behind the throne. Under Joash's wicked father and grandmother, pagan idol worship had flourished in Judah (see 2 Kings 8:25–11:21).

## To whom was it written and why?

The prophet Joel urged the people of Judah to turn again to God. With Joash's wicked father and grandmother out of the way, Joel saw tremendous opportunity for renewal in the land. But he also warned Judah that judgment—in the form of an agricultural disaster of major consequence—would come if they did not repent.



## Joel

### Introduction

## What to look for in Joel:

Watch for God's double-barreled plan for his people: a specific plan of punishment for sin, but also a promise to defend his people zealously (2:1,18). In both modes, look for God's passionate concern for his people.

—*From the Quest Study Bible (Zondervan)*



# Joel

Leader's Guide

Leader's Guide

## Joel



### *A wake up call*

*We know very little about Joel as a person, but he was a prophet to the Southern Kingdom in the days of King Uzziah—days of unparalleled prosperity for Israel and Judah. The Book of Joel also speaks of a natural disaster that would foreshadow the ultimate Day of the Lord.*

Scripture: **Joel**

Based On: "The Minor Prophets: God Still Speaks to Us Today," by Tom Cowan



## Joel

## Leader's Guide

## Part 1 Identify the Issue

The May 1984 *National Geographic* showed in color photos and drawings the swift and terrible destruction that wiped out the Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum in A.D. 79. The explosion of Mount Vesuvius was so sudden that the residents were killed in the midst of their routines: men and women were at the market, the rich in their luxurious baths, slaves at toil. They died amid volcanic ash and superheated gasses. Even family pets suffered the same quick and final fate. It takes little imagination to picture the panic of that terrible day.

The saddest part is that these people did not have to die. Scientists confirm what ancient Roman writers recorded—weeks of rumblings and shakings preceded the actual explosion. An ominous plume of smoke from the mountain was clearly visible days before the eruption. If only they had been able to read and respond to Vesuvius's warning!

There are similar “rumblings” in our world: warfare, earthquakes, economic woes, breakdown of the family and moral standards. While not exactly new, these things do point to a coming day of judgment. People need not be caught unprepared. God warns and provides an escape to those who will heed the rumblings.

In Joel's day, a plague of locusts had descended upon the land, disrupting the basic economy of the country and affecting every level of society. In this event, Joel saw the judgment of God upon the nation, and the people's need for a repentant heart. Then God would come and move in a fresh way.

**[Q]** What's the closest you've come to a natural disaster? How did that event affect you?

**[Q]** When you hear the phrase “Day of the Lord,” what comes to mind?

**[Q]** How does the biblical promise of God's imminent judgment affect your day-to-day life?

## Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

### Teaching Point One: The Day of the Lord is foreshadowed by natural disaster.

Swarms, and swarms, and swarms of locusts. Like an invading nation. Like a lion attack. Disaster befalls Judah and all of its crops are wiped out. The prophet Joel takes the opportunity to tell of God's judgment on sin, and to point to the far more terrible judgment coming on the “Day of the Lord.”

Read Joel 1:1–20.



# Joel

## Leader's Guide

- [Q] What is Joel saying to the people in verses 1–3?
- [Q] Describe the scene he writes about in verses 4–12. What would this do to the economy of the land?
- [Q] Why does he address the priests and spiritual leaders in verse 13? What role and responsibility does he call on them to take?
- [Q] How is the coming Day of the Lord (v. 15) like the natural disaster that befell Judah?
- [Q] What “disasters” has God used to get your attention?
- [Q] What valid spiritual lessons can we draw from a natural disaster? What lessons should we not draw?
- [Q] Are disasters always the judgment of God?
- [Q] People today are not very interested in a message of judgment. Why do you think this is? What kind of God do they want to believe in?

### Teaching Point Two: The Day of the Lord is imminent.

Joel 2:1 repeats an important phrase for us: “the Day of the Lord.” Instead of arguing that things will get better, Joel argues that they will actually get worse. While the destruction caused by the locusts will be total, it will be nothing compared to the final judgment of God. God will destroy his enemies, but bring great blessings on the faithful. Read Joel 2:1–3:21.

- [Q] Summarize the picture of the advancing army in 2:1–11.
- [Q] In the face of this impending destruction, what does God call the people to do in verses 12–17?
- [Q] Verse 18 begins “then the LORD . . .” What three promises from God to the people do you see in verses 18–20?
- [Q] In what ways do verses 25–27 reverse the devastation that Israel was experiencing?
- [Q] Read 2:28–32, then go forward to Acts 2:14–21. What is the connection between these verses?
- [Q] Joel 3:1–8 gives God’s charge against the heathen nations. The point of concern is that they have attacked God’s people and divided the land. God is inviting the nations to come and do battle with him. Why does verse 10 tell us the opposite of what we read in Isaiah 2:4?
- [Q] Reread Joel 2:25. How has God restored something to you that you thought was lost?



## Joel

### Leader's Guide

#### Optional Activity:

**Purpose:** *To remember God's gift of his Spirit.*

**Activity:** *As a group, read Joel 2:28–29 and Acts 2:1–4. Thank God for his Holy Spirit poured out upon us! Give everyone an index card to write out Ephesians 5:15–21. Plan on memorizing these verses over the next few weeks.*

### Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Joel draws a very clear parallel between the natural disaster of the locust plague and the judgment of God coming upon the people. Of course, he had a direct word from the Lord that this was so. We cannot make such claims about recent natural disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina in the USA or the earthquake in Haiti, because God has not told us so.

**[Q]** How should we respond to those who claim that every natural disaster is punishment from God?

**[Q]** What aspects of the character and working of God do you see in a new light after studying the Book of Joel?

**[Q]** What lesson from Joel do we need to grasp and apply to the church today?

**Action Point:** **On your own this week, read Joel 2:12–13 again. It's a basic component of our faith, but we need to be reminded: Is there anything of which you need to repent after hearing about the discipline and judgment of God? Do you need to take a time of fasting and mourning over sin? If you do, follow it with a time of rejoicing before the God who restores us!**

—Study by Tom Cowan, with Kyle White





# Amos

Introduction

## Amos



### Why read this book?

This book gives us God's perspective on some volatile social issues. It takes a hard look at injustice and gives a call to righteousness. Amos tells us how God feels when the wealthy and the powerful exploit the poor and the defenseless. Whether you're well-off or struggling to make ends meet—or even if you're middle-class—you'll find these words hitting close to home.

### Who wrote this book and was it written?

Amos wrote this book between 760 and 750 B.C., a time of economic growth and prosperity. He was a shepherd from Judah with no known ministry credentials—except a word from God.

### What was happening at this time?

The leadership and military conquests of Jeroboam II had enabled Israel to flourish. But while everything appeared fine on the surface, the moral fiber of the nation was disintegrating.

### To whom was it written and why?

This message was for the people of Israel, the northern kingdom. Amos, from the southern kingdom, challenged their materialism and low morality, which they learned from their pagan neighbors. Many were exploiting the poor. Amos wrote to remind them that God has a special interest in the disadvantaged. His prophecy was God's last appeal to Israel, warning them to repent before it was too late.



# Amos

## Introduction

### What to look for in Amos:

With strong, poetic imagery, Amos speaks passionately about God's concern for the poor. He urges a return to righteousness and justice by returning to the Lord. Watch for parallels between Amos's time and ours. When he speaks of the poor, think of the homeless, racial minorities, single parents, the elderly and others who are often exploited.

—*From the Quest Study Bible (Zondervan)*



# Amos

Leader's Guide

Leader's Guide

## Amos



### *How God sees us today*

*In his commentary The Minor Prophets, James Montgomery Boice writes, "The Book of Amos is one of the most readable, relevant, and moving portions of the Word of God. But in much of church history (until very recent times) little or no attention has been paid to it. Why? It is because the book speaks powerfully against social injustices and religious formalism, and many who would otherwise read the book have been implicated in such sins and are condemned by it."*

*This study will explore the issues of social justice, spiritual poverty, and hypocrisy addressed in the Book of Amos.*

Scripture: **Amos**

Based On: "The Minor Prophets: God Still Speaks to Us Today," by Tom Cowan



# Amos

## Leader's Guide

### Part 1 Identify the Issue

Amos is the earliest of the writing prophets. His was a day of unusual prosperity in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. As wealth accumulated, people enjoyed leisure like never before. Most said that this was evidence of God's blessing. The only problem was that as the rich got richer, they did so at the expense of the poor. Religion was largely an outward show. It looked good on the surface, but it was internally bankrupt.

Amos was a man with an unusual moral conscience. He was perceptive and courageous. He was willing to speak for God whether that was popular or not. While the people were willing to hear about the sins of other nations, Amos was unpopular because he challenged Israel to see the poverty and hypocrisy of their own spiritual life.

**[Q]** What kind of response would the prophet Amos get in our society today?

**[Q]** Compare and contrast Amos's Israel with our modern culture.

**[Q]** What "prophets" are speaking like Amos today?

### Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

#### Teaching Point One: God despises social injustice.

The sermon of Amos begins in way that would have initially brought him the admiration of the people of Israel. What we need to know as we read these opening chapters is that they contain eight oracles, beginning with one against each of the six nations that surrounded Israel: Syria, Philistia, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab.

At the beginning of his talk, people would welcome the picture of judgment coming against these other nations. We might even imagine them cheering him on and applauding his words. But then the judgment of God begins to hit closer to home, because now Amos is speaking to the southern part of the nation. When we get to 2:6, the people of Israel begin to feel the sting of Amos's whip. In other words, he does not stop at challenging the other nations. He now turns his attention to the Israel herself. This would be the same as us criticizing secular culture, and then leaving the most powerful word of censure for the evangelical church. Ask the group to silently read Amos 1 and 2.

The common denominator in the oracles of judgment in these two chapters is that each involves a sin against basic human rights and rejecting God. So that you understand this,



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work through the judgment given against each nation, noting what they did according to the following passages:

**1:3–5**

**1:6–8**

**1:9–10**

**1:11–12**

**1:13–15**

**2:1–3**

**2:4–5**

**[Q]** People are willing to hear about the social injustices of other nations and are quick to condemn them. Give some examples of this today.

**[Q]** What are some issues we need to address in our own backyard?

### Optional Activity:

**Purpose:** *To consider poverty and injustice in our world.*

**Activity:** *Go to a local bank and pick up enough deposit slips for each person. Ask each person to write on the deposit slip where they have invested their lives (i.e. teaching school, leading a small group, children, music, etc.).*

*Ask them if they are happy with their investments, and remind them that they choose where to spend their time and energy. Maybe they will want to take time to reevaluate their priorities and to consider poverty and injustice around the world.*

### Teaching Point Two: God despises empty religion.

If the Book of Amos is a collection of sermons, it seems clear that chapter 3 is a new sermon. This chapter shows not only that Israel has a special relationship with God, but that this creates a higher obligation for holiness because of God's dealings with her. As a nation, she will face a more severe judgment for rebellion against God's law. This brings us to one of the universal laws of life—that is, that greater privilege means greater responsibility.



## Amos

### Leader's Guide

Divide the group into four smaller groups. Assign each of them a chapter from Amos 3–6 to read and summarize for the group.

**[Q]** What picture does this give you of the spiritual state of the nation?

**[Q]** How does 5:21–26 describe God's feelings about their religious practices?

One of the main ways in which God spoke through Amos was in a series of five visions. They comprise most of chapters 7 through 9. Read the following passages that describe each vision, then summarize what you think the message of these visions was:

**7:1–3      The vision of the locusts**

**7:4–6      The vision of fire**

**7:7–9      The vision of a plumb line**

**8:1–2      The vision of ripe fruit**

**9:1          The vision of God over the altar**

**[Q]** On a spiritual level, we are often quick to criticize another denomination or church for their shortcomings, until we have to take an honest look in the mirror and see ourselves. What would Amos say to our church culture today?

### **Teaching Point Three: God will restore the faithful.**

Despite an unrelenting parade of oracles, sermons, and visions of reckoning, the Book of Amos ends with God's promise to restore the land and people of Israel. Read Amos 9:11–15.

**[Q]** What does this passage tell you about God?

**[Q]** What encourages you here?

## **Part 3** Apply Your Findings

Amos prophesied to a prosperous country that had lived at the expense of the poor and embraced empty religious ritual. Sound familiar?

**[Q]** What is Amos's most important message for us today as Christians?



# Amos

## Leader's Guide

**Action Point:** As a small group, consider participating in World Vision's 30-Hour Famine ([30HourFamine.org](http://30HourFamine.org)) as a way to understand injustice in our world. As part of your group's activities, you may want to invite a local ministry leader to talk about social justice in your own community. Who knows what directions these activities may take your small group!

—Study by Tom Cowan, with Kyle White



## Obadiah

Introduction

# Obadiah



### Why read this book?

Has anyone ever taken advantage of you—and gotten away with it? Perhaps a friend or maybe even a family member turned on you when you needed them. Obadiah tells us that God will take care of such injustices.

### Who wrote this book?

Obadiah, an otherwise unknown prophet, whose name means *servant of the Lord*.

### When was it written?

Perhaps between 850 and 732 B.C., but more likely between 605 and 587 B.C.

### What was happening in the world at this time?

God's people had a longstanding feud with Edom, a neighboring nation of distant blood relatives. When Judah was invaded and conquered by Babylon, Edom not only cheered and gloated, they also looted Judah in the aftermath. They even captured those who tried to escape and turned them over to the enemy.

### Why was it written?

To condemn the Edomites' treachery and arrogance and declare God's eventual punishment for their crimes against his people.

### What to look for in Obadiah:

Watch for God's loyalty to his people—evidenced by the judgment he pronounces against those who defy him by opposing his people.

—*From the Quest Study Bible (Zondervan)*





# Obadiah

Leader's Guide

Leader's Guide

## Obadiah



### *How God deals with pride*

*In the introduction to this study series on the Minor Prophets we asked, "When did you last read Obadiah?" Sometimes we think, What message could we possibly find for today in a book like Obadiah? The Book of Obadiah has only 21 verses, and the theme of the book is the denunciation of Edom. In this study, we'll see why that matters to us.*

Scripture: **Obadiah**

Based On: "The Minor Prophets: God Still Speaks to Us Today," by Tom Cowan



# Obadiah

## Leader's Guide

### Part 1 Identify the Issue

James Montgomery Boice says of Obadiah:

Of the twelve books of the Minor Prophets the most “minor” of all is Obadiah. Minor does not mean unimportant, of course; it refers only to length. But by this standard . . . Obadiah is noteworthy, for it is by far the shortest book not only of the twelve Minor Prophets but of the whole Old Testament. It has one chapter, and that contains only twenty-one verses. Moreover, we know very little about it. Although the Old Testament mentions at least twelve individuals called Obadiah, none is to be identified with the prophet. There is also uncertainty regarding when the book was written.

The book is “minor” in another way as well: in terms of most people’s knowledge of it. Who knows what is in Obadiah? Very few, even among conscientious Bible students. Yet the book has a major message for our and every other age.<sup>1</sup>

The theme of this short book is the denunciation and downfall of a nation as a result of pride. It bears out Proverbs 16:18: “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.”

**[Q]** Think about recent news stories. How has Proverbs 16:18 played itself out?

**[Q]** Have you ever experienced this proverb in your own life? If so, how?

### Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

#### Teaching Point One: Edom had a lot to be proud of.

It is important for us to know about Edom if we are going to understand the message of this book. The name “Edom” means red. It was the name given to Jacob’s brother, Esau, because he sold his birthright for Jacob’s meal of red stew (see Genesis 25:30). This struggle between twin brothers trickled down to their descendants. Obadiah condemns the Edomites for not coming to the aid of, or acting like a brother to, Israel.

Edom is also known in the Bible as Seir, Hor, and Esau. The real importance of Edom was due to two factors. First of all, it was situated along the great trade routes between Egypt and Syria, and would bring in much profit from this trade. People grew rich on the tolls extracted from caravans. The second factor was Edom’s natural strength and security, which was due to its location. Red sandstone cliffs rose more than 5,000 feet above sea level. They could be

<sup>1</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets* (Baker Books, 2006).



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easily fortified. As a result, the people of Edom found it easy to become rich, wage war on other nations, and feel relatively secure. Their setting was a response to a time when the city of Jerusalem was overrun by foreign armies, a defeat in which the Edomites collaborated. As is often the case with human nature, they were feeling proud and smug, especially in the security of their own situation. But remember what the old proverb says: “Pride comes before a fall.”

Read Obadiah.

**[Q]** Verses 1–9 record Edom’s fall. What is the root of their sin (v. 3)?

**[Q]** How does verse 3 describe their physical setting? What kind of attitude would this create in the people?

**[Q]** What is the significance of the reference to a brother (v. 12)?

**[Q]** In verse 15 we read again this phrase that is so characteristic of the prophets: “The Day of the Lord.” What does this phrase mean?

**Leader’s Note:** *In both the Old and New Testaments, the Day of the Lord refers to God’s final judgment of nations and individuals.*

### Teaching Point Two: Pride comes before judgment and a fall.

The root of pride often lies in the idea that we can do without God. Boice says, “On the personal level we can imagine that we can do without God in our family life, our business, or in regard to our health, or in a dozen other areas. On the national level, pride often expresses itself in the characteristic boasts of Edom.”

As you read through Obadiah, you will find at least three different areas of the Edomites’ pride:

- 1) Their physical setting and the safety it afforded them (v. 3)
- 2) Their allies and the help that they expected to get from them (v. 7)
- 3) Their wisdom (v. 8).

In the Book of Job, one of Job’s friends and the chief representative of wisdom in the dialogue was a man called Eliphaz. He came from Edom.

**[Q]** How would you summarize what verses 15 and 16 say?

**[Q]** What will happen to the house of Esau (v. 18)?



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**[Q]** The book opened with Edom feeling proud and secure. How has this changed (vv. 19–21)?

**[Q]** What are we proud of today? What are some of the ways in which pride is expressed today at both a national level and a personal level?

### Optional Activity:

**Purpose:** *To reinforce the truth that pride comes before a fall.*

**Activity:** *As a group, page through a few copies of last week's newspapers or news magazines. Cut out headlines or stories that reflect the proverb "Pride comes before a fall." Paste or pin them to a poster board. Discuss: What contributed to the pride in these situations? What makes us immune to these kinds of consequences? Read Proverbs 16:18 and 1 Corinthians 10:12. Take a moment, individually, to write down personal issues of pride on index cards. Use it as a time of confession before the Lord.*

## Part 3 Apply Your Findings

We need to see the essential message of the book, which is a warning against an attitude of pride. Pride *does* come before a fall. In his commentary on Obadiah, Boice writes:

Today on television and in the newspapers we hear and read much about the ability of this country and its leaders to handle the political and other problems of this world. The thought is that we are able. We are adequate for whatever circumstances history may bring. But we are not able. We cannot solve this world's problems.<sup>2</sup>

**[Q]** What about our country? Will God judge us? If so, what do you think he will judge?

**[Q]** What spiritual lessons do you find in Obadiah that can be applied to us today?

**Action Point:** **On your own this week, read Romans 13 to gain perspective on praying for those who lead our country and for instruction on what God expects of us. This is the antidote to pride: a spirit of repentance and humility. What difference would it make to individuals and our country if we acted on the instruction in this chapter? Take time alone this week to pray and repent before the Lord.**

—Study by Tom Cowan, with Kyle White

<sup>2</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets* (Baker Books, 2006).



# Jonah

Introduction

## Jonah



### Why read this book?

If you've ever thought that some people are beyond hope—so evil that they are incapable of change—the book of Jonah may upset your thinking. Consider serial killers, rapists, drug kingpins or terrorists; it's not unnatural to wish such violent, hate-filled individuals would be punished. But this book shows us that God wants to extend his grace and mercy to even the worst of people. It also challenges us to see that God may want to use us to reach out to the very people we tend to despise and see as beyond redemption.

### Who wrote this book?

Most likely the prophet Jonah wrote autobiographically about what had happened to him.

### When was it written?

Probably sometime between 785 and 750 B.C. during the reign of Jeroboam II, the king of Israel (see 2 Kings 14:25).

### What was happening at this time?

Israel's northern kingdom regained its influence and was restored by Jeroboam II. But the Assyrians, whose capital city was Nineveh, were asserting themselves in increasingly menacing ways. Why was it written? To tell the story of God's concern even for the enemies of his people. This book also shows how God used a reluctant prophet as a vehicle of his grace.

### What to look for in Jonah:

God's compassion for all people, his desire for earnest repentance regardless of what someone has done, and the extraordinary lengths to which he will sometimes go to get our attention.

—*From the Quest Study Bible (Zondervan)*



# Jonah

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## Jonah



### *One man's struggle with God*

*The Book of Jonah is a story about the mercy of God to a people who did not deserve his mercy. It's about someone's struggle to understand how God could care for and love people who did not know him in any way. On a human level, we may want to limit God's grace to those whom we think really deserve it. But God's love is wider than that. It is universal, and even includes people we may not like.*

*The book also teaches us about God's sovereignty and our obedience. When we try to go in the opposite direction from God's way, then God may go to extraordinary lengths to get our attention.*

Scripture: [Jonah](#)

Based On: ["The Minor Prophets: God Still Speaks to Us Today,"](#) by Tom Cowan



## Jonah

## Leader's Guide

## Part 1 Identify the Issue

*The Sun* carried this story:

Andrew Cheate thought his [mobile phone] had been lost at sea after it slipped from his pocket. But a week later his girlfriend's mobile rang and it was fisherman Glen Kerley saying he'd found the phone in a 25-pound fish.

Andrew, 45, said, "I was messing about with my dog and my phone must have fallen out and been swept out in the swell. I kept calling it but I gave up hope after a couple of days." He was shopping for a new phone with girlfriend Rita Smith, 33, when her mobile went off. She told him, "Your old mobile number is calling my phone."

Andrew continued: 'She said some guy was going on about my phone and a cod so she handed it over to me . . . I thought he was winding me up but he assured me he had caught a cod that morning and was gutting it . . . and that my [phone] was inside it—a bit worse for wear. I didn't believe him but went to meet him and found it was my phone—a bit smelly and battered—but incredibly it still worked . . .'

Hard to believe, but replace the phone with a man, and the cod with a bigger fish, and you'll have the story of Jonah and the lengths a gracious God will go to in order to make sure his call gets through. This study looks at the strange story of Jonah, and God's grace, mercy, and sovereignty. And at how it is in our best interest to be obedient to him.

- [Q]** What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think about the story of Jonah?
- [Q]** Do you struggle with the idea of a man being swallowed by a big fish? Why or why not?
- [Q]** Who do you or would you have trouble reaching out to because of their offenses or differences with you?

## Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

### Teaching Point One: We can't run from a sovereign God.

Verses 1–3 open the story for us:

"The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.' But Jonah ran away



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from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.”

**[Q]** Using a Bible atlas (such as at [Biblos.org](http://Biblos.org)), find out what direction Tarshish is in compared to Nineveh. What do you think made Jonah so resistant to God's instructions?

**[Q]** How does 4:2 help us to understand what was in Jonah's mind?

**[Q]** Read Matthew 12:39–41. How does Jesus use the story of Jonah in his teaching?

**[Q]** Does the fact that Jesus refers to this incident add any weight to its authenticity?

**[Q]** What does this story tell you about God?

### Optional Activity:

**Purpose:** *To reveal any hesitation to go where God wants us to go.*

**Activity:** *Using a Bible atlas, make copies of a map that shows Tarshish in relation to Nineveh. Distribute one to each person in the group. Reread Jonah 1:1–3. On the maps, have each person write a list of things God is calling him or her to do. Maybe it's sharing the gospel with someone in particular. Or forgiving someone. Or speaking the truth in love. Or reaching out to someone in need. As a group, discuss each other's lists and why they might be avoiding God's call. Swap map-lists and have members pray for each other during the week.*

### Teaching Point Two: Obedience to God is in our best interest.

It is important that we understand what Jonah is going through. Jonah felt like he was abandoned by God. Someone once commented that they had become so obsessed with what was happening inside the great fish that they failed to see the real turning point of the story, namely what was happening inside Jonah! Read chapter 2, Jonah's prayer.

**[Q]** What would you be praying and thinking inside the great fish?

**[Q]** How does this prayer help us to understand what was taking place inside Jonah?

**[Q]** Look at all that could have been avoided here! What does this chapter tell you about God? About our response to him?

**[Q]** Jonah comes to his senses in verse 9. What crisis have you experienced in your life that made you cry out to God?





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### Teaching Point Three: God is gracious and merciful even to those we deem undeserving.

God repeats his instruction to Jonah in 3:1–2. This time, Jonah is ready to listen! This chapter is the high point of the book, because it records one of the greatest and most thorough revivals that has ever taken place. It came as a result of Jonah obeying God's call upon his life instead of running in the opposite direction. Read chapter 3.

[Q] What about the Ninevites' repentance do you find amazing?

[Q] What part did the king play in the revival?

[Q] What would be a similar situation today?

### Teaching Point Four: God will change us as we help to change others.

We would think that Jonah would be delighted and ecstatic about this revival. Yet read chapter 4.

[Q] Describe Jonah's attitude. Why does he have this attitude?

One of God's ways of getting us to examine our hearts is to ask us questions. We are forced to see the state of our own hearts. Notice the three questions God asks Jonah:

“Have you any right to be angry?” (v. 4)

“Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?” (v. 9)

“Should I not be concerned about that great city?” (v. 11)

[Q] What do you think God is trying to get Jonah to face in his life?

[Q] In what ways are we often like Jonah and reflect his attitude?

## Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Notice that the Book of Jonah ends with a question: “Should I not be concerned about that great city?” There is no written answer to that. It ends with a question that has to be asked of each one of us. Are we ready to share and dispense the great mercy of God, or are we holding on to it as though we were the only people good enough to receive his blessings?



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## Leader's Guide

**[Q]** How do you answer these questions?

**[Q]** What do you think is the major lesson in the Book of Jonah for us today?

**Action Point:** Is there a time or incident in your life when God really got your attention and turned your life in a whole new direction? Plan on sharing that with a friend and/or someone in this group in the coming week as an encouragement to respond obediently to God's call.

—Study by Tom Cowan, with Kyle White



## Micah

Introduction



# Micah

## Why read this book?

If you've ever wondered how faith fits in an increasingly corrupt and violent society, you'll be able to identify with the message in this book. When God seems distant and uninvolved, Micah reminds us that he still cares and offers hope for those who choose to remain faithful to him. Reading this book reminds us that God is still active in this world, and will not allow sin to hinder his purposes.

## Who wrote this book and was it written?

The prophet Micah, whose name means *Who is like the Lord?*, wrote it during the reigns of Jotham (750–735 B.C.), Ahaz (735–715 B.C.) and Hezekiah (715–686 B.C.), kings of Judah.

## What was happening in the world at this time?

The powerful Assyrian empire was expanding westward, demanding surrender and tribute. When the northern kingdom of Israel rebelled, the Assyrians destroyed its capital city of Samaria and took many Israelites into exile. Later King Hezekiah of Judah, the southern kingdom, rebelled. The Assyrians invaded Palestine in 701 B.C., devastated Judah and carried many into captivity. Though they besieged Jerusalem, God delivered the city in answer to Hezekiah's prayer.

## To whom was it written and why?

Micah wrote to the people of Judah to warn them that God's judgment was approaching because they had rejected God and his law. Micah also encouraged the godly few, assuring them that judgment would not permanently destroy Israel. The nation would eventually be restored.

## What to look for in Micah:

Pay close attention to how Micah portrays God, balancing his divine attributes of justice and mercy. Remember that Micah uses poetry. Many figures of speech make his messages more vivid and create a profound emotional impact.

—From the Quest Study Bible (Zondervan)



# Micah

Leader's Guide

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## Micah



### *What God expects of us*

*Micah 5:2 is perhaps one of the few verses we know from the Book of Micah. It appears in the prophecies of the Christmas story as told by Matthew (Matt. 2:6). However, there is a lot more to Micah than just this one verse. This study will look at Micah's message to Israel about God's judgment, hope, and repentance.*

Scripture: **Micah**

Based On: "The Minor Prophets: God Still Speaks to Us Today," by Tom Cowan



# Micah

## Leader's Guide

### Part 1 Identify the Issue

Micah was a prophet sometime between 750 and 686 B.C., and was a contemporary of Isaiah. As a nation, Israel was experiencing the heights of economic prosperity, but was wallowing in the depths of spiritual decadence.

While the nation appeared to be strong externally, internal decay was sapping the strength of the nation and threatening to destroy the social fabric of the country. The problem lay in more than social wrongs. Canaanite religion had influenced many of God's people.

Micah spoke out strongly against the social injustices of the ruling classes against those who were poor and vulnerable in society. Micah did not come from a distinguished family, as the better-known Isaiah seems to have done. He came from a small country village called Moresheth (see 1:1). Micah was a rural person who came to the city to bring a word from the Lord. In this way he is like Amos.

It is sometimes hard to create outlines for the prophets, since their writings are often a series of loosely connected speeches given as prophecies. One helpful way to see the book of Micah is to follow the three main oracles. The following outline may help you in your reading and study.

**First Oracle:** Israel's impending judgment and her future restoration (1:1–2:13).

**Second Oracle:** The prophet's indictment of the leaders of the house of Israel and Israel's future hope (3:1–5:15).

**Third Oracle:** God's case against Israel and the ultimate triumph of the kingdom of God (6:1–7:20).

#### Optional Activity:

**Purpose:** *To get a better handle on the Book of Micah, form pairs. Give each pair a chapter to read. Ask them to write a one-sentence summary of what that chapter says to them (main themes, emphasis, etc.).*

**[Q]** What did you know about the Book of Micah before today?

**[Q]** Why does God often work through seemingly insignificant people?



## Micah

## Leader's Guide

## Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

### Teaching Point One: This is not how it was meant to be; God will judge injustice.

Treacherous neighbors. Treacherous religious leaders. Treacherous politicians. Micah the prophet pronounces God's judgment on Israel and Judah. Read Micah 1–3.

**[Q]** How is the Lord described in 1:2–4 as coming out of his holy place to address what is going on?

**[Q]** As you reflect on the book, how does Micah describe the ways in which the rich have exploited those who are poor and therefore vulnerable?

**[Q]** In what ways are people who have influence through money or power today able to use that influence over those who are less powerful?

**[Q]** Put Micah into a contemporary setting. What setting do you imagine that to be? What would Micah say if he were living today?

### Teaching Point Two: There is a new kingdom to come; God gives hope.

Read Micah 4:1–5. You may recognize a chorus in these words.

**[Q]** What kind of picture does this create in your mind?

**[Q]** Read 5:2–5. This prophecy about the Messiah was made 700 years before Christ's birth. What will his reign be like?

**[Q]** How does the prophecy encourage you in your present circumstance?

### Optional Activity:

**Purpose:** *To encourage others with the hope God gives.*

**Activity:** *Distribute note paper and envelopes, or postcards, to the members of your small group. Have each person write a note of encouragement to someone who could use it. Use verses from chapter 5 as the basis for the encouraging notes.*

### Teaching Point Three: There is an opportunity; God pleads for repentance.

Despite every reason to be so, God is not through with his people yet. Read Micah 6–7.



## Micah

### Leader's Guide

[Q] How does Micah describe what is happening in society?

[Q] How does Micah describe the heart of God in 7:18–20?

[Q] What does this say to us about the nature of God?

[Q] How do God's promises here motivate you?

### Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Micah is describing a monumental breakdown in society. There is a breakdown in morality. Political and spiritual leadership is bankrupt. There is a breakdown in the family. Human relationships are failing.

[Q] How does Micah encourage us to press on when we are tempted give up in the face of the breakdown of society?

[Q] How are you encouraged by this book?

**Action Point:** We live in an unjust world. Memorize the following verse this week, and share it with someone you know who is struggling under the burden of a corrupt culture: "But as for me, I watch in hope for the LORD, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me" (Micah 7:7).

—Study by Tom Cowan, with Kyle White



# Nahum

Introduction



# Nahum

## Why read this book?

Have you ever been angry? Not just annoyed, but deeply angry? Perhaps a friend has been victimized by gang cruelty. Perhaps you've worked for a boss who puts people down to make himself look good. Perhaps you've been the victim of racial slurs. Nahum reminds us that God is in control of history and will not allow evil to persist forever.

## Who wrote this book?

Nahum, an otherwise unknown prophet, whose name means *comfort*.

## To whom was it written?

Although the book seems to be addressed to the Assyrians, Nahum's message is actually for God's people, the nation of Judah.

## When was it written?

Between 663 B.C., when Assyria conquered Egypt, and 609 B.C., when Assyria was defeated by Babylon. This was perhaps 100 years after Jonah had delivered God's message to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria.

## What was happening in the world at this time?

In 722 B.C. Assyria defeated the northern kingdom of Israel. Now, almost 100 years later, the southern kingdom of Judah was ruled by Manasseh, a puppet king of the Assyrians.

## Why was it written?

To assure people that evil does not endure forever and that God will one day fulfill his plan to restore good permanently.





## Nahum

### Introduction

## What to look for in Nahum:

Mercy and judgment, both of which reveal the character of God (see 1:2, 7). Look for ways these seemingly opposite traits actually reflect God's consistent stance toward his people.

—*From the Quest Study Bible (Zondervan)*



# Nahum

Leader's Guide

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## Nahum



### *What hurts the heart of God?*

*The Assyrians had already destroyed Samaria in 721 B.C., which resulted in the captivity of the Northern Kingdom. This meant that Judah and its capital Jerusalem were now threatened. The Assyrians had a reputation for terrible cruelty in war, especially when they conquered a city.*

*About 700 B.C., Nineveh had been made the capital city in the Assyrian empire. While Jonah had pronounced its destruction, the people had repented and the judgment on the city was suspended. However, eventually Nineveh returned to its wicked ways and brutality. The focal point of the message of Nahum is God's judgment on Nineveh.*

Scripture: **Nahum**

Based On: "The Minor Prophets: God Still Speaks to Us Today," by Tom Cowan



# Nahum

## Leader's Guide

### Part 1 Identify the Issue

Have you heard about Pocket God? It's one of the top-selling video game applications for Apple's iPhone. Here's the game description found on iTunes:

*What kind of god would you be? Benevolent or vengeful? Play Pocket God and discover the answer within yourself. On a remote island, you are the all-powerful god that rules over the primitive islanders. You can bring new life, and then take it away just as quickly.*

Seeing that game options include throwing islanders into volcanoes, using islanders as shark bait, bowling for islanders with a large rock, or creating earthquakes to destroy the islanders' villages, designers seem to think players will only want to play the role of a vengeful god—which must mean they think that's the only kind of god players can imagine being real. As believers we know that God is merciful and gracious and slow to anger. But there are times in Scripture—oh, there are times—when God *is* vengeful. What do we do with this side of God, like in the Book of Nahum?

- [Q] What makes God angry?
- [Q] What do you say to those who see God as only angry and vengeful?
- [Q] Is there an end to God's grace and patience? If so, at what point?
- [Q] Do you think God would punish a nation this way today?

### Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

#### Teaching Point One: God does not endure wickedness forever.

What happens when God's patience runs out? "Nineveh had been given the privilege of knowing the one true God. Under Jonah's preaching this great Gentile city had repented, and God had graciously stayed his judgment. However, a hundred years later, Nahum declares the downfall of this same city. The Assyrians forgot their revival and returned to their habits of violence, idolatry, and arrogance." The result is vengeful destruction by God. Read Nahum 1–3.

- [Q] How is God described in 1:2–6?
- [Q] How do we reconcile this picture and description of God with what follows in verse 7?
- [Q] How are we to reconcile what God brings upon a city like Nineveh with our understanding that he is a God of love and compassion?



# Nahum

## Leader's Guide

### Teaching Point Two: A righteous God sometimes demonstrates wrath.

It's hard for us to understand what life was like then. Perhaps those who live in a country that has been overrun by another might have an idea of how evil Nineveh was. We can't really understand God's wrath unless we understand how wicked something is. To help wrap your mind around it, think of something you see as utterly despicable. Can you picture God's wrath against that thing? Perhaps it would be the injustice of people being tortured for their faith, or a child being sold into slavery.<sup>1</sup>

Chapter 2 describes the actual fall of Nineveh. It is a graphic portrayal of a military assault. Note the following movements:

- Nineveh's preparation for the coming assault.
- The first sighting of the approaching army.
- The overrunning of the city by enemy chariots.
- The defense of the walls.
- The use of the river to undermine the city's foundations.
- The plunder of the city.
- The conclusion comes in 2:13: "I am against you," declares the LORD Almighty. "I will burn up your chariots in smoke, and the sword will devour your young lions. I will leave you no prey on the earth. The voices of your messengers will no longer be heard."

**[Q]** Read chapter 3. What do you see happening? Describe the scene.

**[Q]** Nahum 3:19 says that when people hear about what is happening, they will applaud. Does this seem right? Why would this be their reaction?

**[Q]** God reveals himself in Nahum as a God of righteousness and wrath. Could you write a worship song based on this part of God's character? Why or why not?

**[Q]** What comfort can you find in a God who exacts revenge upon his enemies?

### Optional Activity:

**Purpose:** *To worship God as he describes himself.*

**Activity:** *A key passage in Nahum is 1:7–8. Read these verses and write a psalm encompassing these attributes of God. Have members share their work with the rest of the group.*

<sup>1</sup> *Walk Through the Old Testament*, Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa (Thomas Nelson, 1983), p. 267.



## Nahum

Leader's Guide

### Part 3 Apply Your Findings

What lessons should we learn from the fact that when Nineveh repented under Jonah's ministry, it received God's mercy, but even so its repentance didn't last?

**[Q]** How might God today display his judgment to those who consistently reject his truth, as did those in Nineveh?

**Action Point:** Set aside 30 minutes this week to reread Nahum 1:2–8 and to compare this description of God to that of Christ at his second coming. Consider: How do these images affect your worship? Your prayer? Your mission?

—Study by Tom Cowan, with Kyle White



## Habakkuk

Introduction



# Habakkuk

## Why read this book?

Have you ever wanted to ask God, “If you’re in control, why does evil so often win?” If so, you’ll identify with Habakkuk, who entered into a great debate with God. Habakkuk, whose name may mean *wrestler*, grappled with God about questions still relevant today: How can a just God ignore injustice? Why does God allow the wicked to prosper? And how can a good God use evil to accomplish his purposes? Habakkuk struggled to understand how God works, but in the end he became convinced that he could trust God no matter how bleak or confusing the present circumstances appeared to be.

## Who wrote this book?

Habakkuk, a prophet in the nation of Judah.

## When was it written?

Around 610 to 605 B.C.

## What was happening during this time?

Sin was rampant in Judah. The people worshiped idols, sacrificed their children to pagan gods and ignored God. The wicked King Jehoiakim not only refused to listen to God’s prophets, but he also burned their writings, arrested several of them and even murdered one. Jehoiakim foolishly aligned Judah between two warring superpowers—the declining Assyrian empire and the rising Babylonian empire. The historical background to the book of Habakkuk is found in 2 Kings 23:31–24:7 and 2 Chronicles 36:1–8.

## What to look for in Habakkuk:

Most prophets speak to the people on God’s behalf. Habakkuk was unique in that he spoke to God on behalf of the people. As you read, notice his complaints to God, God’s unexpected (and unwelcome!) answer, and the hope Habakkuk finally discovered.

—From the Quest Study Bible (Zondervan)



# Habakkuk

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## Habakkuk



*Dear God, I have a question . . .*

*"If you don't have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving," wrote author and pastor Frederick Buechner. If you have ever thought or asked, "Why does God do this?" or, "That is not fair," then you must read the Book of Habakkuk. This prophet goes to God with his doubts and faith struggles. For a book that was written in Judah more than 2,500 years ago, Habakkuk has a contemporary message that addresses modern problems.*

Scripture: **Habakkuk**

Based On: *"The Minor Prophets: God Still Speaks to Us Today,"* by Tom Cowan



## Habakkuk

### Leader's Guide

### Part 1 Identify the Issue

Little is known about Habakkuk except that he was a contemporary of Jeremiah, and that he was a man of deep faith. Unlike all the other prophets who had a message for Israel or Judah, Habakkuk wrote about a dialogue between God and himself.

Habakkuk presents God with several questions that trouble him. As he looks at life, it seems that what God does is not always fair. Habakkuk loves justice and can't reconcile the many inequities which he sees in life. His questions to God are also our questions.

Habakkuk is a profound book, one that delves into the heart of God. It gives us answers to some of the most puzzling questions in life.

**[Q]** What questions do the people you know have for God?

**[Q]** What kinds of issues or questions still remain unanswered for you? Do you think they ever can or will be answered? Explain.

**[Q]** Is it okay to question God? Why or why not?

### Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

#### **Teaching Point One: The all-wise and all-powerful God can handle our doubts.**

There are two main questions about life which Habakkuk brings to God. They are the perennial questions of humankind. The first question is: Why does evil go unpunished?

Read Habakkuk 1:1–11.

**[Q]** What are some of the other ways in which we may ask the same question?

**[Q]** How does God answer Habakkuk in 1:5–11?

Habakkuk's second question to God is: How can a just God use wicked Babylon to accomplish his judgment and punish a people more righteous than they are?

Read Habakkuk 1:12–2:20.





## Habakkuk

### Leader's Guide

**[Q]** Have you ever said, “Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people? Life is not fair!” If so, what caused you to say this?

**[Q]** How does God answer Habakkuk in 2:2–20?

Habakkuk 2:4 is a vital verse for the New Testament teaching on faith. It became a rallying cry for the Protestant Reformation. Read Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11. How does Paul use it in these verses?

**[Q]** God doesn't promise that life will be fair, but he does assure us that he is love. What is the difference?

### Optional Activity:

**Purpose:** *To bring our doubts and faith struggles before God.*

**Activity:** *Give your group members index cards and pencils and ask them to write down their honest questions to God. Collect and read them without naming names. If your group is mature enough to discuss the questions without being condescending to the authors, then go for it! Otherwise, it may be encouraging enough just to know that others have similar doubts and questions, so simply ask God for enlightenment and say a prayer of praise to the all-powerful, all-wise God.*

### Teaching Point Two: The all-wise, all-powerful God is to be trusted and praised.

Habakkuk begins his book with questions, but concludes it with a psalm of praise to God. He realizes God's wisdom and power and places his trust in him. We can do the same in a conflicted world. Read Habakkuk 3.

**[Q]** What attitude does Habakkuk display at the start of his prayer?

**[Q]** What does Habakkuk pray for?

**[Q]** Comparing the first question he presented to God and the end of this prayer, in what ways do you sense Habakkuk has changed?

**[Q]** How does what Habakkuk learned challenge a popular emphasis today—that God will give us health, wealth, etc. because we are his children?



## Habakkuk

Leader's Guide

### Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Theologian James Montgomery Boice comments on the last section of Habakkuk 3 in his *Minor Prophets* commentary:

The last section of this chapter contains some of the most moving verses in all the Bible. On one occasion it was used by Benjamin Franklin, who was not a Christian, to confound some of the sophisticated, cultured despisers of the Bible whom he met in Paris when he was serving as United States Plenipotentiary to that country. The skeptics were mocking him for his admiration of the Bible. So he decided to find out how well they knew the book they professed to scorn. One evening he entered their company with a manuscript that contained an ancient poem he said he had been reading. He said that he had been impressed with its stately beauty. They asked to hear it. He held it out and read this great third chapter of Habakkuk ending with: "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights" (vv. 17–19).

The reading was received with exclamations of extravagant admiration. "What a magnificent piece of verse!" they cried. Where had Franklin found it? How could they get copies? They were astonished when he informed them that it was the third chapter of Habakkuk's prophecy.

What is it that makes this chapter, and particularly the final verses, so forceful? In my judgment it is the courageous way in which Habakkuk embraces all the calamities he can imagine and nevertheless triumphs over them in the knowledge and love of his Savior.

**[Q]** What does the Book of Habakkuk tell you about God?

**[Q]** How does it address faith struggles you may be having?

**Action Point:** Habakkuk had some questions that troubled him deeply. What troubles you about how life works? How have you brought that to God? Search the Scriptures and bring these deep questions of the soul to prayer this week.

—Study by Tom Cowan, with Kyle White



## Zephaniah

Introduction



# Zephaniah

### Why read this book?

To reinforce your confidence that God will make everything right. When justice is distorted, when the line between right and wrong is blurred, when leaders become corrupt, it's easy to become discouraged. And when religious leaders fail, discouragement can turn to cynicism. Zephaniah reassures us that we can still trust God—that even in dark times our faith can still burn brightly.

### Who wrote this book?

Zephaniah, whose name may mean *the Lord hides* or *the Lord protects*.

### When was it written?

During the reign of King Josiah of Judah (640–609 B.C.), but before the city of Nineveh was destroyed (612 B.C.).

### What was happening at this time?

Despite King Josiah's well-intended civil and religious reforms, leaders were corrupt and idolatry was widespread. The Assyrian empire, the superpower which had ruled over Judah for more than a century, was disintegrating. Shortly after Josiah's death and Zephaniah's ministry, the Babylonians conquered Judah, destroyed the temple and took many into exile.

### To whom was it written and why?

Zephaniah wrote to the people of Judah, warning them of impending judgment for their sins. He hoped to stir them to repentance before it was too late. But he also assured them that God's judgment would pave the way for a new society in which justice would prevail and all humankind would worship the Lord.



## Zephaniah

### Introduction

### What to look for in Zephaniah:

The balance between judgment and salvation, between God's anger and his compassion. Like most prophets, Zephaniah writes in a poetic form marked by vivid figures of speech and emotionally charged language.

—*From the Quest Study Bible (Zondervan)*



# Zephaniah

Leader's Guide

Leader's Guide

## Zephaniah



### *How God works in our lives*

*What's that old campfire song that goes, "[Next] verse same as the first, a little bit louder and a whole lot worse"? Maybe it's part of the Minor Prophet training manual. Zephaniah summarizes the preceding prophets and keeps bringing the message of the Day of the Lord.*

Scripture: **Zephaniah**

Based On: "The Minor Prophets: God Still Speaks to Us Today," by Tom Cowan



# Zephaniah

## Leader's Guide

### Part 1 Identify the Issue

Zephaniah appears to have been a person of social standing, and was probably related to the royal line (see 1:1). Zephaniah was ministering during the reign of King Josiah (640–609 B.C.), which would make him a contemporary of Jeremiah. His prophecy probably came before the reforms which were instituted by King Josiah. The primary purpose of his writings is to announce God's approaching judgment to Judah.

Zephaniah's main theme is the coming of the Day of the Lord (see the Book of Joel), when God will punish the nations, including Judah. In many ways, his writings are a summary of the writings of the prophets who preceded him.

You will get the historical context and background of Zephaniah by reading 2 Kings 21–23. This gives us a picture of the social, moral, and religious conditions in Judah at that time. The reforms of Josiah certainly included a purge of many of the foreign cults and their practices. Zephaniah uses the phrase “the Day of the Lord” more than any other prophet.

The Book of Zephaniah can be divided into a number of clearly defined parts.

- 1:2–2:3** An opening prophecy focusing on the coming Day of the Lord.
- 2:4–3:8** A series of judgments against the surrounding nations, ending with an oracle against Jerusalem.
- 3:9–20** A closing that anticipates a bright new day of God's blessing.

**[Q]** Any message of judgment is unpopular today. Why is this?

**[Q]** What parts of the world might welcome a message of judgment?

**[Q]** How do you imagine the Day of the Lord?

**[Q]** How do you imagine the rule of the Messiah?

### Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

#### Teaching Point One: The Day of the Lord is imminent.

“Zephaniah's forceful prophecy may be a factor in the reform that occurs during Josiah's reign—a ‘revival’ that produces outward change, but does not fully remove the inward heart of corruption



## Zephaniah

### Leader's Guide

. . . [But] Judgment day is coming when the malignancy of sin will be dealt with . . . after the chastening process is complete, blessing will come in the person of Messiah.”<sup>1</sup>

Read Zephaniah 1:2–2:3.

**[Q]** This section has a strong description of God sweeping away everything. Why do you think the language is so strong?

**[Q]** Why is the wrath of God ready to come against the nations with such force?

**[Q]** Notice how this section ends (2:3). Where will we find spiritual safety?

### **Teaching Point Two: On the Day of the Lord, all nations will answer to God.**

Read the second section of the book, 2:4–3:8.

This section contains an announcement of God's rule over the entire world and a warning that all nations are answerable to him. This truth runs counter to everything in secular thinking. In a format similar to the other prophets, Zephaniah lists how the judgment of God will come upon other nations, then slowly closes the circle around Jerusalem. Note how 3:2 lists four faults of the people.

1. They obeyed no one.
2. They would not accept correction.
3. They did not trust in the Lord.
4. They did not draw near to God.

Yet as God's people, they should have been doing precisely the opposite of these things.

**[Q]** How is this central idea of judgment echoed in the following passages?

- Acts 17:29–31
- 1 Peter 4:17–19

**[Q]** Many people today want to find comfort in the statement that “we are all God's children” no matter what we believe. How should we respond to this?

### **Teaching Point Three: The Day of the Lord will usher in a “day of blessing.”**

<sup>1</sup> Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa, *Talk Thru the Bible* (Thomas Nelson, 1983).



# Zephaniah

## Leader's Guide

In the final section of Zephaniah, we come to an idea that is woven into many of the prophetic writings. While we cannot miss the emphasis on judgment, this is never the final word. Many of the prophecies contain strong words of censure and rebuke, but they often finish with an appeal for repentance and humility. We are invited to come and seek the Lord. Destruction is threatened only if people will not repent.

In Zephaniah, this word of encouragement comes in the last 12 verses. This promise probably refers to a literal re-gathering of the people in their own land. Yet it also looks forward to a future time of blessing from God. There is a new day to come for the people of God, a day marked by peace, joy, and security. But it is only for those who really are God's children. Read Zephaniah 3:9–20.

**[Q]** What is the end of this story for the remnant of Israel, as described in these verses?

**[Q]** What does the Lord promise the remnant? Make a list.

**[Q]** What will be the response of the people?

**[Q]** Do you see Christ in this passage? How does that encourage you?

### Optional Activity:

**Purpose:** *To remember God's righteousness and restoration.*

**Activity:** *Give everyone in the group index cards. On them write Zephaniah 2:3:*

*Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land,  
you who do what he commands.  
Seek righteousness, seek humility;  
perhaps you will be sheltered  
on the day of the LORD's anger.*

*Memorize the verse this coming week, and at your next meeting discuss how the verse shaped your faith walks.*

## Part 3 Apply Your Findings

The Day of the Lord is coming soon. Everyone will answer to God, but in the end, God's faithful will experience real rejoicing and blessing!





## Zephaniah

### Leader's Guide

**[Q]** How does the message of this book help and encourage us as God's people today?

**[Q]** How will it affect your daily interactions this coming week?

**Action Point:** On your own, read Zephaniah 1:14–15 and 2:3. Who in your world needs to hear the good news of the Day of the Lord? The bad news? When and how will you take that news to him or her? Pray for the Holy Spirit to go before you.

—Study by Tom Cowan, with Kyle White



# Haggai

Introduction



## Haggai

### Why read this book?

Read Haggai to escape—or, better yet, to avoid—the spiritual doldrums. If you’ve ever felt discouraged or complacent about your spiritual life, Haggai has encouraging words for you. Though aimed at correcting a particular situation long ago, the lessons of this prophetic book remain relevant for today. When spiritual vitality seems to be ebbing away, Haggai meets the problem head-on.

### Who wrote this book?

The prophet Haggai. His name means *my feast*, suggesting that he may have been born during a temple feast.

### When was it written?

Haggai delivered his messages in 520 B.C.

### What was happening at this time?

Eighteen years before Haggai’s prophecy, the Persian king Cyrus had allowed thousands of Jews to return from Babylon to Judah (538 B.C.). Though the Jews had begun rebuilding the temple 16 years earlier, the opposition of neighboring peoples had intimidated them and caused them to abandon their work on the temple.

### To whom was it written and why?

Haggai directed his messages specifically to Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah, and to Joshua, the high priest. But since they were the civil and religious leaders, they represented all the Jews who had returned from exile and needed Haggai’s message. His purpose was simple and direct: he wanted them to see that they had deprived themselves of God’s blessings by allowing the temple building project to lie dormant.



## Haggai

### Introduction

### What to look for in Haggai:

Look for the ways in which God rebukes, challenges and encourages his people. Also note how closely connected obedience and blessing are. You will also find prophecies regarding God's coming Messianic kingdom.

—*From the Quest Study Bible (Zondervan)*



# Haggai

Leader's Guide

Leader's Guide

## Haggai



*How to finish the job when enthusiasm fades*

*Next to Obadiah, Haggai is the shortest book in the Old Testament, but its brevity does not mean that its message should be ignored. Haggai clearly shows what happens when we disobey God, and what can happen when we turn back to an attitude of obedience.*

Scripture: **Haggai**

Based On: "The Minor Prophets: God Still Speaks to Us Today," by Tom Cowan



# Haggai

## Leader's Guide

### Part 1 Identify the Issue

It was the year 536 B.C., and King Cyrus of Persia had written a decree that said that those who had been taken in the exile which began in 586 B.C. would be able to return home to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple if they wished. Many did just that, going back to their homeland with great enthusiasm. However, their initial zeal to rebuild the temple as the center of spiritual life soon faded.

Haggai spoke over a four month period in 520 B.C. His message was a challenge to the people to set their spiritual priorities in place and to see the house of God as the center of their life. A key phrase in Haggai is “consider your ways.”

**[Q]** What programs or initiatives have you been involved in that started strong but then petered out? Why did they fizzle, in your opinion?

**[Q]** Do you believe blessing always follows obedience? Why or why not?

### Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

#### Teaching Point One: Worshiping God is our central priority.

*Get your priorities straight! Pay attention! Stop dragging your feet!* God's message through Haggai to his returning people was cut and dried. Their job was to complete the temple, and then the blessings of God would come. No sooner. No later.

Read Haggai 1.

**[Q]** What excuses do you think the people would give for not setting God's house as a priority (v. 2)?

**[Q]** What happened to the people when they put their own needs first, and left God's house unfinished (vv. 3–12)?

**[Q]** How does verse 6 describe what it is like today when we have to make ends meet?

**[Q]** How does Haggai get the people back on track?

**[Q]** Relate Haggai 1:3–12 to Matthew 6:25–34, where Jesus says that the kingdom of God is to be our priority. What does he mean by the kingdom of God? How does setting the kingdom of God as a spiritual priority meet our daily physical needs?

**[Q]** Read Haggai 2:1–5. How does Haggai challenge the people?



## Haggai

### Leader's Guide

**[Q]** What do you think God means in Haggai 2:9?

**[Q]** There are times when it can be helpful to reflect back on “the good old days.” How can this be encouraging to us? How can this become a hindrance to moving ahead?

**[Q]** Sometimes we begin some new ministry with great enthusiasm and zeal. However, that quickly fades, and we find ourselves in the same emotional and spiritual slump that the people did in Haggai's day. What steps can we take to prevent this happening?

### Teaching Point Two: We face life's winter as a committed gospel community.

We always seem to forget, but blessing really does follow obedience to God! When his remnant finally builds the temple, God promises to bless them.

**[Q]** Read Haggai 2:10–19. What is the main point in this passage? What is God saying?

**[Q]** What does the message of Haggai say to us about giving God the first place in our lives?

**[Q]** Share an incident in your life when you did *not* do this. What happened? Now talk about a time you did do this, and God provided for your needs.

**[Q]** What does it mean for God to bless us? What does that look like?

### Optional Activity:

**Purpose:** *To put God at the center.*

**Activity:** *Spend some time as a group worshiping God. Bring out the guitar and the chorus booklets, or the piano and the hymnal. Praise him for his faithfulness and blessings. Center yourself on God!*

## Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Did you forget? Worship of God is our central priority! And God-centered obedience leads to his blessings being poured out on us! Is God calling you to renew your attention to these truths?

**Action Point:** *Get your priorities straight! Pay attention! Stop dragging your feet! Where in your life is God sending you these messages? Take some time soon for repentance, and then make an action plan for obedience.*

—Study by Tom Cowan, with Kyle White



## Zechariah

Introduction

# Zechariah



### Why read this book?

This book offers spiritual strength and encouragement. Have you ever struggled with your own significance? Perhaps you've felt unappreciated or that your efforts weren't worth much. At times you may have been tempted to quit. Zechariah found a city full of people who felt like this. So he spoke words of encouragement and motivation to them and they picked up the pieces and kept on going. Zechariah's words can do the same for us today.

### Who wrote this book?

Zechariah, whose name means *Yahweh remembers*, was a prophet and a priest. He was born in exile; as a young man he returned from Babylon to Jerusalem . . .

### When was it written?

In the eighth month of the second year of Darius (1:1), that is, in October/November, 520 B.C.

### What was happening at this time?

God's people had been in captivity in Babylon for 70 years. But when Cyrus came to power he gave permission for people to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. Many chose to stay, but those who returned set about their task with great enthusiasm. They soon encountered many obstacles, however, and became discouraged. Zechariah not only motivated them to finish what they had begun, but he also gave them a vision of God's purposes beyond the restored temple.

### What to look for in Zechariah:

Notice the brief history lesson Zechariah gave. It showed the people how God had been working in their lives even when they hadn't realized it. Also watch for Zechariah's insights into what God intended to do for and through the Jews. Though many words and phrases in Zechariah seem obscure, be on the lookout for its many predictions concerning the coming Messiah.

—*From the Quest Study Bible (Zondervan)*



# Zechariah

Leader's Guide

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## Zechariah



*Being God's people in today's world*

*James Montgomery Boice says that Zechariah is one of the most difficult Old Testament books to study. Yet Zechariah's message and ministry should encourage anyone who is trying to do a work for Christ in any age.*

Scripture: **Zechariah**

Based On: "The Minor Prophets: God Still Speaks to Us Today," by Tom Cowan





# Zechariah

## Leader's Guide

### Part 1 Identify the Issue

There is a story often attributed to Christopher Wren, the architect appointed to rebuild St. Paul's Cathedral after the Great Fire of 1666 that leveled London. The story goes that when Wren was visiting the worksite for St. Paul's, he came across a bricklayer working away and asked him what he was doing. The worker replied, "What does it look like I'm doing? I'm laying bricks." A little later, Wren came across a second bricklayer and asked him what he was doing, and he replied, "I'm earning a living." Finally, he came across a third bricklayer and asked him what he was doing, and the bricklayer replied, with a gleam in his eye, "I'm building a great cathedral for Almighty God!"

Whether true or not, this story is usually good for temporarily changing a few attitudes at the office. But in Zechariah's day, that's exactly what they were doing—constructing a temple for the coming Messiah. And we are constructing a temple that will never be destroyed. The prophet Zechariah is charged to encourage God's remnant to complete the rebuilding of the temple.

- [Q] What motivates you to get out of bed each day?
- [Q] What makes you not want to get out of bed in the morning?
- [Q] Have you ever experienced burn-out? What was the remedy?
- [Q] How is your day-to-day life influenced by the reality of the coming Messiah?

### Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

#### Teaching Point One: Zechariah lived and worked in preparation for the coming Messiah.

Zechariah is one of the longest of the Minor Prophets. Because of this, we will not attempt to study the entire book this week. You are encouraged to read the Book of Zechariah through on your own as part of your personal study.

The Book of Zechariah is like a multimedia presentation. A major section of Zechariah deals with eight visions (1:7–6:8); there are also four sermons and two burdens to communicate God's future for his people. The Lord said that if Judah would return to him, then he would return to them. His Word would continue to be fulfilled. This book is a mixture of exhortation, prophetic visions, judgment, and salvation oracles. The central theme of the book is a message of encouragement to the people to complete the rebuilding of the temple.



## Zechariah

### Leader's Guide

Use this chart to summarize the theme of each of the 8 night visions Zechariah experiences in 1:7–6:8.

**Leader's Note:** Ask someone to read each passage, then together come up with a summary and record it on the right.

Vision	Summary
1:7–17	
1:18–21	
2	
3	
4	
5:1–4	
5:5–11	
6:1–8	

### Teaching Point Two: We live and work in preparation for the return of the Messiah.

Zechariah was a contemporary of Haggai and the setting was the same. But his ministry continued much longer than Haggai's did—and is still influencing us today.

**[Q]** As we have seen, a major part of the message of Zechariah came through visions. What place do visions have today for communicating spiritual truth?

- How can we test the reliability of visions?



## Zechariah

### Leader's Guide

- How do we respond to someone who says they had a vision that they allow to direct their life?

**[Q]** Looking again at 1:1–6, what should the people have learned from their experience in exile?

**Leader's Note:** *You may want to review some of the important dates and events in the history of Israel, especially the fall of Jerusalem and the period of the exile, to help answer this question.*

**[Q]** Verse 6 describes the experience of the former generation. What is the spirit that Zechariah wants to see in the remnant that returned from exile?

**[Q]** One of the best known verses in this book is 4:6. Read this verse in the context of the vision. What truth is being taught in this verse?

**[Q]** In 7:4–10, we find that God is calling people to a faith that is practiced rather than one which is mere words. How did they respond (see verses 11ff)?

- What is God's command to practitioners of empty religion?
- How does that apply to the church today?

**[Q]** How might the images in 9:9–17 have motivated God's returning remnant to complete their task?

- How do these words of advent motivate you right now?

**[Q]** As you read through Zechariah, what is one message that comes to you from this prophet?

### Optional Activity:

**Purpose:** *To renew ourselves by God's promises.*

**Activity:** *Allow time for group members to share ways they may be experiencing going-through-the-motions spirituality or even ministry burnout. Pray for one another. Use the promises of Zechariah as the basis for your prayers.*

## Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Zechariah motivated God's remnant to live and work fully with visions of a coming Messiah. These same promises of the first and second advent should motivate our worship and ministry as well.



## Zechariah

### Leader's Guide

**[Q]** How do we move people (and ourselves) from mere religious ceremony to a living faith that is evidenced in the way in which we live each day?

**[Q]** How easy is it for us to do things in our own strength and power and not in the power of the Spirit? What is the difference?

**[Q]** Do you know when you are operating in your own strength and when you are working in the power of God's Spirit? How?

**Action Point:** Set aside time this week to reread Zechariah 9:9–17. How do these images renew your vision for worship? For ministry? Pray for God's vision and renewing in your life.

—Study by Tom Cowan, with Kyle White



## Malachi

Introduction



# Malachi

### Why read this book?

Malachi holds a mirror before us, helping us assess our relationship with the living God. Do we believe he loves us? Does he have our wholehearted love and obedience? Or are we only going through the motions? God's questions to Israel sneak behind our defenses, and shake us out of mere routine, igniting new affection for him.

### Who wrote this book?

The name Malachi means *my message*. It is uncertain whether this was actually the author's name, or whether it was used as a title, since prophets in general were called messengers of the Lord. Either way, this prophet clearly sensed God was speaking through him.

### When was it written?

Sometime after 460 B.C., after Israel returned from captivity in Babylon, after the temple in Jerusalem had been rebuilt (516 B.C.) and after worship there had lapsed into mere routine.

### Why was it written?

To confront the spirit of complacency and indifference that so easily overcomes the people of God.

### What to look for in Malachi:

Malachi presents a word from God, followed by a complaint from the people, followed in turn by an answer from God. Look for God's passion in this exchange. God loves us with a passionate love and wants us to return that love by faithfulness in human relationships, integrity, purity, and justice for the powerless of society.

—*From the Quest Study Bible (Zondervan)*



## Malachi

Leader's Guide

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# Malachi



*Giving God nothing less than our best*

*Not for another 400 years. After the prophet Malachi speaks, there is no word from God. For 400 years. The silence would be deafening. The next time Israel would hear from God? "Behold! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world," John the Baptist proclaims (John 1:29).*

*This is the final book in the Old Testament, and it is also the last study in this series on the Minor Prophets. One of the interesting themes that we find woven into the book is a series of statements made by God, and each one is responded to by a question that begins "How . . . ?" These express a challenge to God's statements, almost demanding that he give an account of himself and his activity.*

Scripture: **Malachi**

Based On: "The Minor Prophets: God Still Speaks to Us Today," by Tom Cowan



# Malachi

## Leader's Guide

### Part 1 Identify the Issue

The meaning of the name “Malachi” is “My Messenger.” Although the Jews had returned from exile and had rebuilt the temple, there were still several serious discouragements: their land was still a small province; the glorious future that the prophets had foreseen had still not been realized; God had not yet come to dwell in glory in the midst of the temple. The result of this was that the people began to lose hope, and their worship degenerated into an empty, meaningless ritual. Malachi has a word for every generation that needs to be challenged to turn religious ritual into spiritual reality.

**[Q]** In what ways does Malachi describe the church today?

**[Q]** How do we prevent the secularization of the church?

### Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

#### Teaching Point One: We rob God when we give him less than our best.

The audacity! Who would cheat God? Who would rob him? Can you imagine? It happens when we slip into religious ritual. Outside, things look on the up-and-up, but inside, our focus has switched to building our own kingdoms and lining our own nests.

**[Q]** When we rob God, how do we rob ourselves in the process?

The following verses in Malachi outline God's statements or affirmations, followed by the challenges. Read each one of them in its context. Write down the question and then summarize God's response:

• 1:2

• 1:6

• 1:7

• 2:17



## Malachi

### Leader's Guide

- 3:7

- 3:8

- 3:13

[Q] What do these verses mean for our own walk with God?

### Teaching Point Two: The New Testament reinforces the same message as Malachi.

Each of the four Gospel writers in some way quotes Malachi 3:1. But much of what Malachi is talking about is reflected throughout the New Testament.

[Q] How does the message of Malachi relate to 2 Timothy 3:1–5, with emphasis on verse 5?

[Q] What does Malachi 2:15–16 teach us about God's attitude toward divorce? How does this relate to what Jesus says in Mark 10:1–12?

[Q] What will be exposed in us when the Lord himself comes (3:1–5)?

[Q] Malachi 3:8–12 is often used in the context of giving and tithing. How does Malachi say we rob God? What does he want people to do in regard to giving?

[Q] What do you think this passage means for the Christian today with regard to stewardship and giving?

### Optional Activity:

**Purpose:** *To consider giving our best to God.*

**Activity:** *Hand out slips of paper. Have each person write down ways they may be robbing God—this may be in finances, but it could also be in other offerings of service and sacrifice. If your group is mature, have members share their thoughts. If not, keep them anonymous, but read them out loud to the group. Read Malachi 3:8–12. Pray prayers of repentance.*





## Malachi

### Leader's Guide

### Part 3 Apply Your Findings

This series on the Minor Prophets has probably directed you into sections of God's Word that you may not have looked at for many years—or perhaps you are reading some parts of Scripture for the first time. That's great! We need to remember that we are called to read the whole counsel of God, not just the parts we like and are familiar with.

**Action Point:** As we come to the end of this series, think back through the books you have read and studied. Share with the group:

- [Q] What aspect of God did you become newly aware of in this study?
- [Q] What new truth has the Spirit of God taught you?
- [Q] What actions may change in your life as a result of this study?

—Study by Tom Cowan, with Kyle White





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