

## II. *Introduction to the 7<sup>th</sup> Century Prophets*

09-Mar-03 Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

*Theme:* *The message of the 7<sup>th</sup> Century prophets is that God's justice leads to judgment on the wicked and salvation of the righteous.*

*Key Verses:* Nahum 1:15 "Behold, on the mountains the feed of him who brings good tidings, who proclaims peace! O Judah, keep your appointed feasts, perform your vows. For the wicked one shall no more pass through you; he is utterly cut off."

Habakkuk 3:16-17 "Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; though the labor of the olive may fail, and the fields yield no food; though the flock may be cut off from the fold, and there be no herd in the stalls—yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation."

Zephaniah 3:17 "The LORD your God in your midst, the Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing."

### Review

Last week, we saw how God raised up and destroyed nations by His sovereign will for His own glory. During most of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, **Assyria was the dominant power in the Near East.** Under Tiglath-pileser and Shalmaneser, the northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed. Under a policy of forced deportation, the inhabitants of Samaria were mixed with foreigners, and a syncretized religion arose through intermarriage. This is the origin of the Samaritans, those hated by the Jews of Jesus' day.

God was more gracious to the southern kingdom of Judah, ruled by the line of David. **God spared Jerusalem from Sennacherib while Hezekiah was king of Judah.** However, following the reign of good king Hezekiah, the long reign of Manasseh was a disaster. Manasseh oversaw a huge return to the pagan practices of his grandfather Ahaz, doing evil in the sight of the Lord. Even though **Manasseh** repented of his evil at the end of his 55 year reign, the damage was done. **The people of God were too thoroughly compromised with idolatry to recover.** Even the reforms of Manasseh's grandson Josiah were not enough to spare Judah from God's judgment. The Titanic had hit the iceberg; it was now just a matter of time before she sank.

Judah was not the only nation going down at this time. After the death of Ashurbanipal, Assyria's last great king, the demise of this wicked and cruel nation came quickly. Within 15 years of Ashurbanipal's death, **Nineveh the great, the capital of the empire, was destroyed in 612 BC.** The nation of Egypt tried to prop up the dying empire, but they were unable to do so. By 605 BC, Nebuchadnezzar had become king of Babylon, defeated the Egyptians at Carchemish, and dominated the Near East. Assyria was no more.

Less than 20 years later, the same happened to Judah. Jerusalem **was destroyed in 587 BC along with the Temple,** and many of the Jews were deported to Babylon, including Daniel and Ezekiel. The prophet Jeremiah was carried by Jewish refugees to Egypt. But the power of Babylon did not last long either. In 539 BC, that great city in turn fell to the power of the Medes and Persians. Cyrus the Persian allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple.

## Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

And so the story goes. **God raised up Assyria and Babylon for His purposes, and He brought them down, also for His purposes.** And His purposes centered on the tiny nation of Judah – His own people. Let us never think that God is not concerned about what His people are doing. The same is true for us today. God calls us to lead holy lives in obedience to His word. As the Church does so, she will be blessed; as the Church errs from the truth, she will be disciplined. That is **the clear message of redemptive history.**

### Introduction

Today, we will do a 30,000 foot aerial overview of all three 7<sup>th</sup> Century prophets, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah. [Note: although Jeremiah and Daniel also began their ministry in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, Jeremiah extended well into the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, and Daniel was primarily a 6<sup>th</sup> Century prophet. So, I'll be using the term 7<sup>th</sup> Century prophets to refer to only Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah.] **We'll look at the date, author, and message of each of the three books.** Then I'll try to summarize the overarching themes contained in these books: the themes of God's justice, judgment, and salvation. Hopefully, this introduction will give you the big picture view of these three small books. While they may have dealt with particular historical situations 2600 years ago, their message is still as pertinent today for us: ***God's justice leads to judgment on the wicked and salvation of the righteous.***

### Exposition

#### **A. Nahum**

##### *1. Date*

A half century of prophetic silence corresponded to the apostate decline under Manasseh, so far as the production of canonical material is concerned. This vacuum, this famine of the word of God, may be seen as a judgment of the Lord on Judah for their consent to Manasseh's depravity. Perhaps God's servants the prophets were silenced and suppressed during this time by official resistance to the word of the Lord. Quite possibly Nahum was the man who broke this silence.

It is generally agreed that his **prophecy dates between the fall of Thebes of Egypt (described in 3:8-13) about 663 BC and the fall of Nineveh in 612.** A precise date between these brackets is more difficult to locate. But the time should combine at least the following two features: (1) Ashurbanipal would probably still be reigning, since Nahum characterizes Nineveh as being in "full strength" (Nah. 1:12). His rule ended in 627. (2) Judah may be in a period of reform, since Nahum says little to denounce their sin. This circumstance would fit the last years of Manasseh in which he made an effort at reform (**ca. 645-642**) or the time of Josiah's reforms (ca. 628-609). **The last days of Manasseh appear to be the most likely time for the prophecy of Nahum,** although this date cannot be affirmed with certainty.

##### *2. Author*

Nothing is known about the person of Nahum, except that he must have been a **very bold prophet** to deliver this scathing denunciation of the Assyrians while they were still in full strength. **His name means "comforter,"** but no evidence exists to link the meaning of his name with his character. The title of the book declares him to be the "Elkoshite," which generally is taken to refer to the village in which he lived.

3. *Message*

**Nahum declares Nineveh's fall even while Assyria is at full strength.** This is the single theme and message of Nahum. Each of the three chapters in this short prophecy describe God's impending judgment on Nineveh. Unlike most of the other writing prophets, **Nahum says nothing about the guilt of God's own people.** The entire force of his message is directed toward the enemy of God's people. This prophecy was probably given to encourage Judah to believe that the tyranny under which she lived would have an end.

Another part of the Scriptures where we can read considerable detail about Nineveh is the prophecy of Jonah. By the time Jonah was sent to Nineveh, it had been a center of wickedness for many years, and yet the people apparently changed their ways and repented of their sin. Sadly, it appears that the turning away from sin on the part of the people of Nineveh was short-lived, otherwise we would not read of Nahum telling the people of Israel that this great and powerful city would be utterly destroyed.

The destruction of Nineveh was probably greater than that of any other city in the entire history of the world. Genesis 10:11 assigns the building of the city to Nimrod, the first "mighty warrior on the earth" (Gen. 10:8). Nimrod was the despot responsible for the first world empire, its principalities being Babylon, Erech, Akkad, Calneh, Nineveh, Rehoboth-Ir, and Resen. **Babylon and Nineveh were sister cities. Babylon emerged as the archetypal secular city. Nineveh became the embodiment of human violence and conquest. Babylon stands for the warfare of man against God. Nineveh stands for the warfare of man against his fellow human beings.**

The invasion of Judah by Sennacherib in 701 BC may have been checked by God, but these were still great days for **Nineveh**. Sennacherib more than doubled the city's size, making it the **world's largest city** for that time. The inner city was surrounded by a wall eight miles in circumference. It was one hundred feet high and so wide that three chariots could race around it abreast. It had twelve hundred towers and fourteen gates. Beyond this was a much longer, outer wall. There was an inner city, an outer city, and what we would call extensive suburbs beyond that. In Jonah this wide expanse was termed a "three days" journey (Jon. 3:3). What a magnificent city this was! Yes, but what a wicked city! Nineveh grew rich at the expense of the nations she had plundered.

When Nahum calls Nineveh a "city of blood" (3:1), his words are a massive understatement. In all the ancient world, **no single city had matched the Assyrian capital for its calculated cruelty.** Indeed, none had boasted about it as the rulers of Assyria had done. On a monument commemorating the first eighteen years of his reign, Ashurnasirpal II (885-860 B.C.) declared:

"Great number of them in the land of Kirhi I slew . . . 260 of their fighting men I cut down with the sword. I cut off their heads, and I formed them into pillars. . . . Bubo, son of Buba, I flayed in the city of Arbela and I spread his skin upon the city wall.

City of Suru: I flayed all the chief men who had revolted, and I covered the pillar with their skins; some I walled up within the pillar, some I impaled upon the pillar on stakes, and others I bound to stakes round about the pillar; many within the border of my own land I flayed, and I spread their skins upon the walls; and I cut off the limbs of the officers, of the royal officers who had rebelled. Ahiababa I took to Nineveh, I flayed him, I spread his skin upon the wall of Nineveh.

## Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

City of Hulai: 600 of their warriors I put to the sword; 3,000 captives I burned with fire; I did not leave a single one among them alive to serve as a hostage. . . . Their corpses I formed into pillars; their young men and maidens I burned in the fire.

City of Tela: 3,000 of their warriors I put to the sword. Many captives from among them I burned with fire. From some I cut off their hands and their fingers, and from others I cut off their noses, their ears, and their fingers, of many I put out the eyes. I made one pillar of the living, and another of heads, and I bound their heads to posts (tree trunks) round about the city.”

Here’s a sample of what Ashurbanipal (669-627) – two hundred years later – commemorated:

They suspended their corpses from poles, tore their skin off, and affixed it to the city walls. . . . I let dogs, swine, wolves, vultures, the birds of the heavens, and the sweet-water fish devour their cut-off limbs. . . . The people who lived in the city and had not come out and had not acknowledged my rule, I slew. I chopped off their heads and cut off their lips. . . I bored through his jaw with my cutting dagger, pulled a rope through his cheek and the sides of his face, and attached a dog chain to him, and let him guard the cage at the east gate of Nineveh.

This great city had existed almost from the beginning of time. Under Sennacherib it rose to unparalleled strength and splendor. But it was to end. Within ninety years of Sennacherib’s encampment before Jerusalem’s walls, Nineveh, the largest city in the world, was overthrown—never to be inhabited again.

**In the year 612 BC the doom of the city arrived.** Combined armies of Babylonians and Scythians marched up the left bank of the Tigris River and surrounded the city. It happened in early spring at the time of the annual rainfalls. According to secular accounts, during the final siege of Nineveh by the rebel army unusually heavy rains caused the Tigris and other rivers to flood and undermine the city’s walls, which then collapsed over a length of twenty-one furlongs. The invading armies entered the city through this breach in its defenses. At this point, the king, remembering an oracle to the effect that Nineveh would only fall when the river itself declared war against it, believed that the oracle was fulfilled and abandoned any hope of saving himself. He built a gigantic funeral pyre in the royal precincts, gathered up much treasure in the midst of the pyre, and then burned himself, his family, his concubines and eunuchs, and the palace. There was terrible slaughter and unparalleled looting. After the city was overrun, due to the destruction of part of the wall by flood, the armies burned the city thoroughly.

**The message of Nahum concerns God’s character and His relationship to the world,** not only to His own people, but also to those who do not even acknowledge Him. Yahweh applies His universal standard against evil, no matter who is responsible. **This message of God through Nahum was to encourage God’s people.** The church, also faced with the threats of powers or ideologies, can only stand in the same place as Israel, in reliance on God who is “great in power” (1:3).

### **B. Habakkuk**

#### *1. Date*

A firm starting point for the historical context of Habakkuk is supplied by the reference to the “Kasdim” in the first chapter (Hab. 1:6). This term occurs about 70 times in Scripture, always in reference to the “Chaldeans” (Babylonians). The “Kasdim” are the Neo-Babylonians, whose empire began with the accession of Nabopolassar in 626 BC. The reference to God’s “raising

## Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

up” this fierce nation (Hab. 1:6) indicates that at the **time of this prophecy the Babylonians had not yet realized their zenith of power**, which came after the battle of Carchemish in 605.

The book may be more precisely dated by considering the “wicked” of Judah in Hab. 1:4. The original complaint of Habakkuk concerning prevailing injustice in Judah would not appear very apropos during the time that the social reforms of Josiah were in effect (628-609). For these reasons, it would appear most appropriate to date Habakkuk’s prophecy after the period of Josiah’s reign which ended in 609. The early years of Jehoiakim, in which he led a return to the corrupt practices of Manasseh’s day, would fit the circumstances of Habakkuk’s succession of complaints. This places the prophecy of Habakkuk in the days of **the reign of Jehoiakim, probably between the years of 608 and 605 BC.**

### 2. Author

Less is stated in the Bible about Habakkuk than almost any other prophet. Not even his father, tribe, or hometown are mentioned. **His name is apparently not Hebrew but comes from the Akkadian word for some plant or fruit tree.** His book indicates that he was a prophet with a heart that interceded for God’s people. His opening “How long?” reveals that for some time he had been pleading with the Lord over this crisis (1:2).

### 3. Message

Habakkuk loved God, but he was prepared, as few others would be, to engage Him in a **probing dialogue about the rightness of His actions.** One of the roles of a prophet as an intermediary between God and man was to indicate when God’s people had strayed from the covenant and urge them to return to it. Habakkuk takes it upon himself to work in the other direction, calling God to account when His actions did not seem to correspond to those demanded by the covenant.

The structure of the book is straightforward, with **two questions put to God by Habakkuk, each of which is followed by God’s response.** The first concerns Yahweh’s apparent toleration of sin, especially injustice (1:2-4), and is followed by the assurance that it will be dealt with by God using the Chaldean or Neo-Babylonian Empire as His instrument (1:5-11). This first answer thus appears to be directed towards the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC. But this raises a yet greater moral problem for Habakkuk. How can He use as instruments of judgment a people who are much more cruel and inhumane than those who are being punished (1:12-17)? Habakkuk expectantly awaits a response (2:1), which comes when Yahweh promises judgment for Babylonia (2:2-20). God’s second answer thus relates to the conquest of Babylonia by the Persians in 539 BC. **Habakkuk responds to this assurance of God’s justice and love in a psalm of worship (3:1-19).**

This questioning of God as to whether He is indeed in control of the world is similar to that of Job. He too was faced by a **situation where his “systematic theology” of God did not correspond to his actual experience of God’s ways** (cf. Job 6:28-30; 7:11, 20-21; 9:21). Unlike Job, Habakkuk is given a direct answer (1:5-11). This raises yet further theological and moral problems for the prophet, since the “cure” of a Babylonian invasion is worse than the “illness” of Judean sin. In one of the Old Testament statements which has had a profound influence on the history of the church, **Judah is told that wrongdoers will be punished for their deeds, but that “the just shall live by his faith” (2:4).** If Judah, or any of God’s covenant people, abides by the stipulations of God’s covenant, whether old or new, the One in whom they believe and whom they serve will see that they will live.

**C. Zephaniah**

1. Date

Of the three books under consideration, only Zephaniah dates his own prophecy by connecting his ministry with the times of the kings of Judah. Zephaniah dates his prophecy **during the reign of the last good king of Israel, King Josiah (640-609 BC)**. One factor having some significance is the oracle against Assyria in 2:13-15. Because these words would have little significance if Assyria already had fallen, they should be dated at least before Nineveh’s collapse in 612 BC.

Recent opinion generally favors a date for Zephaniah before the discovery of the law book in 622 BC. This conclusion is based largely on the corrupt conditions presumed in 1:4-6, 8-9; 3:1-4. However, a dating after the discovery of the law book has been defended by older works. It is rather unrealistic to suppose that the corrupt traditions engraved in Israel’s life-style over the previous fifty years of Manasseh’s reign could have been eliminated overnight. More probably a prolonged contest would have developed out of the study of the law book. In such a circumstance, **the ministry of a prophet like Zephaniah would have been invaluable as an aid to young King Josiah**. The most convincing factor that points to the period immediately after the discovery of the law book is the **parallelism between the phraseology of Zephaniah’s prophecy and the phraseology of the book of Deuteronomy**. This material is so extensive and so similar that it virtually requires that Zephaniah had access to the “book of the law” as the basis for much of his prophecy.

<b>Zephaniah</b>	<b>Deuteronomy</b>
“And they shall build houses, and they shall not dwell (in them)” (Zeph. 1:13)	“And a house you shall build, but you shall not dwell in it” (Deut. 28:30)
“And they shall plant vineyards, but they shall not drink their wine” (Zeph. 1:13)	“Vineyards you shall plant and you shall serve, but (their) wine you shall not drink, and not shall you glean” (Deut. 28:39)
“A day of constraint and distress” (Zeph. 1:15)	“In the constraint and in the distress by which your enemy will distress you” (Deut. 28:53, 55, 57)
“A day of darkness and thick darkness, a day of cloud and thick cloud” (Zeph. 1:15)	“(The mountain). . . (with) darkness, cloud, and thick cloud” (Deut. 4:11)
“And they shall walk as blind men” (Zeph. 1:17)	“And you shall be groping. . . as a blind man gropes” (Deut. 28:29)
“And in the fire of His jealousy all the earth shall be consumed” (Zeph. 1:18)	“They have provoked Me to jealousy. . . fire is kindled in My wrath, and it shall consume the earth and its produce” (Deut. 32:21-22)
“Yahweh (is) righteous. . . He will not do iniquity” (Zeph. 3:5)	“A God ... who does no iniquity, righteous and just (is) he” (Deut. 32:4)

## Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

<p>”He will rejoice over you with singing” (Zeph. 3:17)</p>	<p>”As He rejoiced over you to do you good ... Yahweh will rejoice over you to destroy you” (Deut. 28:63)</p> <p>”Yahweh will return to rejoice over you for good” (Deut. 30:9)</p>
<p>”And I shall set them for a praise and for a name” (Zeph. 3:19)</p> <p>”For I shall set you for a name and for praise among all the peoples of the earth” (Zeph. 3:20)</p>	<p>”And to set you high above all the nations which He has made for a praise and for a name” (Deut. 26:19)</p>

Other comparisons between Zephaniah and Deuteronomy deserve attention. Note the reference to God’s threat that He will “bring distress” on Israel (Zeph. 1:17; cf. Deut. 28:29); the concentration on God’s inspiring “fear” in Israel, often by the manifestation of his righteous judgments (Zeph. 3:7; cf. Deut. 4:10-11, 13; 5:29; 6:2, 13; 13:11; 14:23; 17:13, 19; 19:20; 21:21; 31:9-13); the description of the exiles as the “scattered ones” (Zeph. 3:10; cf. Deut. 4:27; 28:64; 30:3); the distinctive concentration on the “love” of God for Israel (Zeph. 3:17; cf. Deut. 4:37; 7:8, 13; 10:14—15; 23:5); and the **representation of God as the King, the Lord, a Mighty Hero** (Zeph. 3:17; cf. Deut. 10:17).

An explanation for the parallels of phraseology between Zephaniah and Deuteronomy may be found in the supposition that Zephaniah prophesied after the discovery in 622 BC of the book of the covenant that promoted Josiah’s reform. Zephaniah appears as a prophetic helper to advance the reform instituted by Josiah. Such a perspective offers a much more realistic picture of the progress of reform under the young king. A people committed to the worship of idolatrous gods would not give up their practices very easily. Judah’s return to its former habits within the brief three-month reign of Josiah’s successor establishes that fact rather definitively (cf. 2 Kgs 23:32-33). Josiah’s reforms would have needed the strong supporting confirmation of a contemporary word from the Lord to make his policies even remotely acceptable to the public. Very possibly this supporting word came from Zephaniah the prophet. **Incorporating into his message the very phrases of the recently discovered book of the covenant, he addressed the people as God’s contemporary mouthpiece, applying God’s ancient word to the current situation.** So it may be proposed that Zephaniah prophesied in the days of Josiah, and more specifically in the days immediately following the discovery of the book of the covenant **approximately in 622 BC**. The discovery of the law book coincided with the one hundredth anniversary of the captivity of the northern kingdom. Judah had survived. But the rediscovery of the law book must have forced them to ask whether they might expect continued survival.

### 2. Author

**Zephaniah means “he whom Yahweh hides” or “hidden of Yahweh.”** Although other “Zephaniahs” are mentioned in Scripture, none can be identified with this prophet. The superscription traces Zephaniah’s lineage back to the prophet’s great-great-grandfather. The recording of this extensive genealogy is unique in the prophetic books. Most probably this genealogical tracing reaches back to the fourth generation because of an intention to focus on the last-named individual: **Hezekiah**. **Very possibly Zephaniah’s genealogy intends to indicate his royal origins.** This relationship of the prophet with the monarchy in Israel could have

## Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

**provided him with ready access to the royal court**, as well as offering some position by which he could lend additional weight to the radical reforms promoted by young King Josiah. Zephaniah's knowledge of the geography and demography of Jerusalem (1:10-13; 3:1-4) implies that he was a long-time resident, if not a native, of the capital city.

But as in the cases of Nahum and Habakkuk, this man Zephaniah also **appears as little more than a "voice."** In an era when mighty nations clash, the divine response comes in the form of words from men unknown among the nations of the world. Mightier than human armies is the prophetic word of God.

### 3. *Message*

The center of Zephaniah's prophecies—uniting the book not only structurally but theologically—is the **concept of the Day of Yahweh**. While not the first nor the last of the prophets to write on this subject, such devotion to a single theme is not found in any other. **The two facets of the same Day of the Lord are judgment and blessing.** Because of universal provocation, Yahweh will be moved to universal judgment. The sovereign of all the earth will exercise his sovereignty globally and punish all who oppose him. This judgment, while universal, is not permanent, since there is still another facet to the Day of the Lord. The second aspect of the day involves blessing. This is not the result of any external impulse, but rather rises from Yahweh's character as a covenant-keeping God. He offers hope to His own people (3:11-20). Those who will be blessed are the remnant (2:3, 9; 3:12-13), those who humbly trust in him as able to do good, rather than relying on their own pride (cf. 1:12; 2:3). Hope is also extended to the nations (3:9-10). **Both facets of the Day of Yahweh share two time-frames.** The immediate message to Judah is that she and the nations will be punished in **the very near future** (1:4-18), but that hope is also a possibility in the short term (2:3). The message is expanded, however, in that both aspects leave the realm of historical proximity and move towards **eschatological fulfillment**. In the unspecified future both Judah and the nations will face not only judgment (3:11, 8 respectively), but also enjoy benefit (3:13-17, 9 respectively). It is the day when Yahweh will act in all of His justice and righteousness, judgment and loving mercy; He alone is at the center of the stage, and therefore it is His day.

**Zephaniah's purpose is to warn the nation of approaching doom. He depicts the day of wrath but also points forward to the coming deliverance.** The book falls in three main divisions. 1) The Day of the Lord (1:1-2:3). The general theme is set forth in 1:2, namely that God will consume all things from off the land. After a vivid description of the coming punishment Zephaniah announces that **the Day of the Lord is near**. This terrible day he describes in agonizing terms of great force, a description which has furnished the basis for the medieval hymn *Dies Irae* (1:14-18). In 2:1-3 the Lord's mercy is set forth in the appeal to repent and seek the Lord. 2) Prophecies against the heathen nations (2:4-15). Zephaniah reproves these nations for their sins, thus leaving them without plea when wrath comes. He also reveals to them that the sovereign disposition of the destinies of nations lies in the hands of the Lord and that He will surely punish those who have ill-treated His chosen people. 3) The sin of Jerusalem and the future salvation (3:1-20). In the first seven verses, Zephaniah pronounces a woe upon Jerusalem and characterizes her sin. He then proceeds (3:8-20) to announce the coming deliverance.

In addition to the extensive references to Deuteronomy, Zephaniah also depends on some of the earlier writings and specifically alludes to a number of them. The statement that the Lord had prepared a sacrifice to be made up of His own people (1:7) seems drawn from Isaiah 13:3 and

## Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

34:6. Most notable are the descriptions of the coming day of the Lord in Zephaniah 1:14-18. They echo the language of Joel 2:1, 2 and Amos 5:18-20. The opening verses seem reminiscent of the account of the Flood. **This is the key to understanding Zephaniah: to see that his book is a summary of the prophets who have preceded him.** The Minor Prophets belong to two main divisions: (1) the first nine, ending with Zephaniah, who prophesied before the exile to Babylon, and (2) the last three, who prophesied after the return of the Jews to Judah. Habakkuk and Zephaniah were the latest of the first group. Habakkuk actually wrote later than Zephaniah, so the fact that Zephaniah is put last in the grouping of the first nine prophets probably indicates that he is to be understood as summarizing them.

### Conclusion

Simply put, the central message of these three prophets is theocentric. God Himself occupies their every thought and provides the framework by which they perceive all reality. For the seventh-century prophets, there is no other but God alone. In closing, we will look at the justice of God, the judgment of God, and the salvation of God.

#### *1. The Justice of God*

One aspect of God's justice becomes plain as the messages of these three prophets are considered together. **God's justice is marvelously impartial. He will in no wise clear the guilty, whoever they may be.** He sees Nineveh and all the atrocities it has committed (Nah. 1; 3). He sees also all the nations surrounding Judah—to the west, the east, the south, and the north (Zeph. 2). All of these peoples will have to give account, both corporately and individually, of their violations of the law of God. But the Lord also sees Judah. When Habakkuk gives expression to his complaint over the sin of Judah, God announces the awful reality of the judgment coming on his own people. They shall be subjected to the brutalities of the Babylonian instrument just as any other heathen nation (Hab. 1). God is righteous within Judah, and so pronounces a woe over their rebelliousness (Zeph. 3). **The timing of God's institution of justice may remain a mystery beyond human wisdom. But the message is clear. Eventually He shall bring every work into judgment whether it be good or evil. This message is sorely needed in the world today. The long-suffering of God, far from leading to repentance, leads them to presumption. Unrepentant sinners, beware!**

#### *2. The Judgment of God*

**God at times may bring judgment as a way of chastening human beings to bring them to Himself. But in the end, His judgment has a character of rightness that has no further end beyond expressing the reality that a person or a nation shall receive from God's hand exactly what he deserves. Yet the balance must be maintained. Chastening judgments from which recovery is possible will not go on forever. The time must come for the end, and it comes on some nations and peoples in every generation.** With the ministry of Jonah in the 8th century, Nineveh repented and was restored to the favor of God, much to the chagrin of the prophet himself. But one hundred years later, the iniquity of the Ninevites had become full, and Nahum offers them no message of hope. The same may be said of Habakkuk's message for Babylon (Hab. 2:5-20). The meaning of the Day of the Lord in Zephaniah relates closely to this same principle. No hint of restoration is found in this imagery (Zeph. 1:2-18). No message could be more repulsive to the modern mind than the idea of retributive justice. But this truth finds open exposition in the messages of these seventh-century prophets.

## Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

### 3. The Salvation of God

Judgment and salvation are closely linked in the theology of these prophets. **Salvation for God's people comes directly in association with the judgment of God's enemies.** Nahum's "glad tidings" may be published in Judah only because Nineveh has been destroyed (Nah. 1:15). Habakkuk's sober joy (Hab. 3:16-19) emerges as a matured fruit of his contemplation on the series of judgments that shall fall first on God's own people and then on the heathen nations. Zephaniah too must "wait" while the Lord's indignation is poured out, for then He shall purify his people (Zeph. 3:8-9). Salvation for him also comes through judgment.

**The salvation of God ultimately shall include Gentiles as well as Jews.** Between the judgment executed on the people of Israel and the judgment executed on the heathen nations, the justified by faith shall live by faith (Hab. 2:4). Echoing the original message to Abraham the "father of nations," this word of acceptance by faith alone has international implications. The love of God for a sinful people functions as the key factor in the salvation activity of God.

In sum, the salvation message of these prophets who must witness the breakup of nations centers on **the possession of God Himself.** Since every thing else has been taken from them, they must look to Him alone. All other blessings may be removed; yet they still will possess the ultimate blessing. **All other things can have meaning only as they possess God himself and are possessed by Him.**

God's justice leads to judgment on the wicked and salvation of the righteous. This is the message of the 7<sup>th</sup> Century prophets. It is a message for their time, for our time, for all time. It is a message for us. God judges the wicked and saves the righteous. Remember, "The righteous will live by his faith." Let us live in faith before our great God.

Next week: Lesson 3 – Nahum 1 – "A Stronghold in the Day of Trouble"

Close in Prayer.