

Reflections on the Minor Prophets

It's easy to ignore this section of the Old Testament. Zephaniah? What did he write? Micah? What's Micah all about? Obadiah? Is that in the Bible? Nahum? Is what he wrote important? Certain of these books are probably familiar to American church-goers, Jonah, for example, and perhaps Hosea's first few chapters. But the rest are probably lost to oblivion. And that's too bad, because these prophets have a wealth of precious Scripture for us. Even though some of their burdens are for specific issues in the ancient world, God's Word spoken thru them is eternal. So we need to be aware of this portion of Scripture too. What follows are reflections on certain passages in these prophecies, offered in the hope of inciting my readers' interest to read these prophets afresh and think seriously about what they say. (I will not include Jonah and Zechariah here because I did those verse-by-verse in previous Sunday School sessions.)

Before beginning, there's an objection we need to dispose of. Why bother with the Old Testament? And the answer is, Because it's the Word of the eternal God, so O.T. texts are eternally true. When Paul wrote, "the holy Scriptures are able to make you wise for salvation" (2 Tim 3:15), he was referring, of course, to the O.T. So now, let's jump in.

"[T]he Israelites will live many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred stones, without ephod or idol. Afterward the Israelites will return and seek the Lord their God and David their king. They will come trembling to the Lord and to his blessings in the last days" (Hosea 3:4-5). Also, **"[T]hey will be wanderers among the nations"** (9:17).

Hosea is a prophet of the living God. The anguish Hosea experienced with his adulterous wife is the anguish God experienced – though probably at a greatly heightened level – because of Israel's idolatries. In Chapters 4 to 14, Hosea, speaking for God, mixes accusations of sin with announcements of judgment. In the Chapters 3 and 9 verses, the prophet anticipates the future of Israel: no national or political independence and no God-ordained worship. This will be the "times of the Gentiles," a period of Exile, until the end of the era when national repentance will occur and they will return to the Lord they'd rejected. Hosea wouldn't have known of Jesus, but the ultimate son of David must be in view here. This prophecy is being – and soon will be fully – fulfilled. (Zechariah will add details to this prophecy later in time.)

"They sow the wind and reap the whirlwind" (Hosea 8:7). The law of sowing and reaping is heightened by referring to a tornado, because tornados are exceedingly destructive. The prophet's trenchant message is, "Don't play with God! His judgments for disobedience – even upon His own people whom He loves – are ghastly. *This message applies to us.*

"[W]hen they came to Baal Peor, they consecrated themselves to that shameful idol and became as vile as the thing they loved" (Hosea 9:10). The reference is to Numbers 25. Church, beware! We become like what we love. This is a spiritual Law, and no one's exempt. If we love the world, we become like Satan. If we love Jesus, we become like Him. There are these two options, and we are obliged to satisfy one or the other. Don't suppose that Sunday morning church attendance means we love Jesus. Love of Jesus means we trust His words to the point of obeying His words, and we serve Him as He commanded us. It means loyalty to Him even if we have to die because of it. It means we study the Gospels to know what Jesus is like, and we deliberately change ourselves to be like Him. The rest of the New Testament helps us to do that.

"The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Joel 2:31-32). This prophet was the first to proclaim a coming day of terrible judgment upon the earth, a reprise of the Genesis Flood but not by means of water. But it will also be a time of salvation. Other prophets picked up on this later in time and expanded on it, and the Book of Revelation is an extended exposition of this Day of the Lord. It's the focal point of all history. It's when Christ returns as a Lion to wreak vengeance on His enemies and to set up His Kingdom. This Day should be continually in the minds of every Christian, keeping our service to Christ sharply focused.

"I will send fire upon Judah that will consume the fortresses of Jerusalem" (Amos 2:5). Amos confirms what Hosea prophesied: God will judge even His own elect people! Fire destroys. It kills people. The Nation of Israel cannot rebel against their God with impunity. This warning is to extract repentance. It was offered in love; it's because of God's love He sends advance warning. (The Covid outbreak is advance warning of coming terrible judgment. Although we have to suffer from the infection, it was sent in love.) The people of Israel ignored the warning, so God in sovereignty carried out His threat. To the Church: do not presume upon God! His love doesn't over-ride His justice. The Church has vastly more light than Israel did, which means the Church has greater accountability.

“[A]nd because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, o Israel” (Amos 4:12). “Prepare to meet God” doesn’t mean be sure to have a valid will drawn up. This is a dreadful warning. It means be prepared to be confronted by an offended God *in judgment*, not in loving kindness. How does one “prepare”? By repenting, by turning from whatever it was that merited judgment to obedience and loyalty. The Church too has been warned about being confronted, by Christ at the *bema* judgment. The judgment seat of Christ is not only to reward believers; Paul writes that “fire” will test the quality of our works. Let’s make sure our works survive the fiery test!

“In that day I will restore David’s fallen tent . . . ” (Amos 9:11). This prophecy refers to the coming Day of the Lord. Israel rejected her Messiah and King, but in the future (perhaps really soon!) there will be national repentance and a glorious reception of Jesus when He returns to rescue them from annihilation. Israel is today threatened, but in the future she will be the chief of all nations, obedient to Christ and, filled with the Spirit, serving Him as originally intended. All people in the Kingdom era will be wonderfully blessed by Christ the King and by His faithful servants the Jews.

“The day of the Lord is near for all nations. As you have done, it will be done to you; your deeds will return upon your own head” (Obadiah 15). This prophet’s burden was directed against the Edomites, who repeatedly attacked Judah. The message is the law of sowing and reaping: as they were violent and cruel, so violence and cruelty will be administered to them. God’s wisdom and justice are consistent with His goodness. People today who are anti-Semitic are playing with lethal fire. All Gentiles need to be careful of their attitude toward Israel, toward the Jews. God loves His chosen people even though they are disobedient, and He will vindicate them. It is disastrous to have God against you personally.

“Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! At morning’s light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it” (Micah 2:1). God is holy, which means that those made in His image must reflect His moral perfections. To do evil is to slap God in the face, or shake a fist at Him. This prophet (a contemporary of Isaiah) is warning the people of Judah that they’re not independent, they are not little gods. They are not free to do whatever pops into their heads to do. Rather, whatever they do – and whatever we do – must conform to God’s holy standards. For them, it was the Mosaic law. For us, it’s the law of Christ, that is, everything that Christ taught and commanded when He was here as well as thru His Apostles’ writings. God allows us a measure of freedom to live and do as we please, but what too easily escapes us is that we’re responsible to Him for how we exercise that freedom.

“Hear this, you leaders of the house of Jacob . . . who despise justice and distort all that is right . . . Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money. Yet they lean upon the Lord and say, ‘Is not the Lord among us? No disaster will come upon us.’” (Micah 3:9-11). The easiest people to deceive are ourselves. Micah’s complaint with the leaders of Judah is just as valid today. Leaders in our churches teach that because God loves us, we have the forgiveness of sins and we’re all going to be in heaven one day if we “just believe in Christ.” Without studying the Scriptures to see if this is so, without understanding what “believe” means or involves, without questioning the motives and authority of our leaders, we gladly accept this assurance and proceed to live our lives as we please. The prophet clarifies: God will certainly send judgment, “Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble” (v. 12). Jerusalem was indeed reduced to rubble. Those people back then presumed upon God and didn’t get away with it. Neither will we.

“But you Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times” (Micah 5:2). Here is one of the most compelling evidences for the divine origin of Scripture. The Bible is self-attesting! The prophets were enabled by God to predict the future, and the most wonderful future event that had to be foretold was the coming and work of Israel’s Messiah. Thus this prophesy. There were two Bethlehem’s, one in Zebulun in the north, and this one in the south, and the prophet makes it clear which he refers to. It’s these details that assure us God is speaking. Something else not to be missed is, this Person who is to come is unique: He is a pre-existent Being. In sovereignty, God arranged a census that required Miriam to be in Bethlehem to deliver her child. God can (and does) also sovereignly arrange circumstances in our lives to fulfill His holy will.

“He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). What “sacrifice” does God ask of us? How do we worship God? Micah here states plainly and clearly what God expects: It’s how we live. He wants (1) for us to live righteously, which means we need to know Scripture, because it’s there (and not in our imaginations or in our culture) that God spells out what righteousness is. It’s how we interact with others and meet the needs of others. And, (2) He wants for us to “walk humbly with God,” which means a life of serving Christ, interceding for others, doing everything to glorify God. We keep

God continually in our thoughts and we love everything about Him. Let me paraphrase Micah: we obey Scripture out of love for God, not to try to impress God or manipulate Him. The Apostle Paul walked humbly with God, and we should imitate him – as he repeatedly invites us to do. Do not miss the importance of this verse! *“Worship” is how we live all day every day.* See Romans 12, where Paul expounds on this truth for the Church.

“The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The Lord takes vengeance on his foes and maintains his wrath against his enemies. The Lord is slow to anger and great in power; the Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished. His way is in the whirlwind and the storm . . . ” (Nahum 1:1-3). A contemporary of Jeremiah, Nahum’s burden focused on Ninevah. The repentance brought by Jonah was history. This prophecy deals with theodicy: How could Jehovah permit Assyrians, an exceedingly cruel and wicked people, to crush Israel (the Northern Kingdom), God’s own people, and then go on prospering, unpunished? And the answer is, Ninevah will indeed fall because God had declared it guilty. Thus, *“the fire will devour you, the sword will cut you down”* (3:15). God controls the destiny of all nations and peoples, and He holds all accountable to Him. In perfect justice, He will right all wrongs. In this prophecy, there’s no call to repentance. No mercy is extended to the Assyrians. All they get is judgment, horrible judgment. What happened to Assyria long ago is about to happen to all the Gentile nations on earth when the Day of the Lord arrives. The Book of Revelation fills in the details. *“It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God”* (Hebrews 10:31). This verse should compel us to evangelize our neighbors, indeed, our city. Don’t we care?

“How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?” (Habakkuk 1:2). This prophet was contemporaneous with Nahum. And again, the issue here is, Is God just? The prophet is a man of faith, but he also sees the menacing advance of formidable Babylon upon Judah. There’s confusion bordering on despair at the outset, but the Book ends with hope because the God of Israel is more majestic and more powerful. The message is, God ultimately will right all wrongs, but His people must wait patiently for that to happen. We are not to fear powerful human forces! God may use them as His agents of judgment, but He is ultimately in control. And those human agents then will be judged for the wrongs that they do. This truth applies to us, and it should control how we respond to daily news reports.

“Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous?” (Habakkuk 1:13). The context of this verse has just been discussed (above). But let’s also keep in mind that God is infinitely holy, morally perfect. He is good, and he abhors every form of evil. If we’re in fellowship with Him, we need to be continually seeking to be holy also and refuse to practice sin. This is called in theology sanctification (and mortification). *“It is God’s will that you be sanctified”* (1 Thessalonians 4:1) means the Christian life isn’t just believing in Jesus and going to church. And we have to work at it. Habakkuk’s concern was the wickedness of Babylon; our concern should be the wickedness our sin nature expresses and the wickedness of the world that corrupts us.

“For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (Habakkuk 2:14). Here is one of the most wonderful verses in all Scripture. In the context of the Book of Habakkuk, the prophet is pronouncing woe on Babylon, because when God is finished judging her, God’s glory will fill the earth. Babylon (and indeed all the proud Gentile nations on earth) may boast of their might, but . . . too bad, God is greater. And God is determined that *His* glory – not that of China, or Russia or America – will fill the earth. Babylon represented all the ungodly Gentile powers of earth, and God will see to it that they all are humbled before Him. The God of Israel is the Creator and the sovereign Ruler of all. This verse will be fulfilled in the future Millennium when Jesus returns to establish His Kingdom; we should be filled with anticipation and delight at all that God is going to do.

“Though the fig tree does not bud, and there are no grapes on the vines . . . yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior” (Habakkuk 3:17-18). Even in the midst of total devastation and famine (which actually happened when Babylon invaded Judah), the prophet is so filled with trust in God that he finds himself rejoicing. We too, if we’re in fellowship with God, can have peace in our hearts and minds despite what’s going on in our surroundings. Happiness isn’t in prosperity, nor having our Constitutional rights, nor living in a godly culture. Paul was singing while in a dungeon at Philippi. *Shalom* is a gift from God. And may we all have it!

“At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps and punish those who are complacent, who . . . think, ‘The Lord will do nothing, either good or bad’” (Zephaniah 1:12). This prophet also anticipates the Day of the Lord, when judgment will come to both the Gentile nations and to Israel, but salvation will come too. Here, the prophet calls on Judah to repent and to wait on the Lord to save them. Although the nation was thrust into Exile because of disobedience, idolatry and rebellion, in the future God would re-gather them and restore them in their land. Central to the prophecy is repentance (2:1-3). I find interesting the prophet’s concern here over *“complacency.”* What is this? Isn’t it the attitude

that “Everything is OK with me; I don’t need to repent about anything, or to change or do anything different.” It’s hard-heartedness. It’s being smug and indifferent about one’s spiritual state. It’s thinking, “God must be pleased with how I am, and anyway He won’t do anything about it.” So the offense of spiritual apathy is compounded by attributing complacency to God as well. I suspect most church-goers in America unwittingly harbor this complacent attitude. May God have mercy on us.

“Therefore wait for me,’ declares the Lord, ‘for the day I will stand up to testify. I have decided to assemble the nations, to gather the kingdoms and to pour out my wrath on them – all my fierce anger. The whole world will be consumed by the fire of my jealous anger . . . At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home. I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes,’ says the Lord” (Zephaniah 3:8). The prophet concludes with this promise from God. The Day of the Lord, with all the horror and the salvation that come with it, will indeed come. Just as Israel was to wait for it, we’re to wait for it too. Yet in a proleptic way, it has already come. The cross! God’s judgment on sin was poured out on Christ in our stead on that terrible day. The Return of Christ will complete what was begun at the cross. Let’s understand something exceedingly important: Sin is hideous. And we’re all corrupted by it. Yet, in the most superlative demonstration of love, the Son, himself deity, gave His life in the most horrible way to rescue us from deserved wrath. Such is the worth each of us has to God *in spite of* our sins. Christ bore the dreadful curse that God had pronounced on sin, death, to spare us from eternal death. The Day of the Lord is actually therefore all about love. God’s amazing, glorious love. All that remains for those who spurn such love is – wrath. God’s wrath is the inescapable default judgment (see John 3:36). This unique era, the Church Age, is the opportunity God, in grace, has made available for all to repent and flee to Christ for deliverance.

“This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,’ says the Lord Almighty” (Haggai 2:6-7). God had great plans for the 2nd Temple in the future. It was to that house that the Son would come. Haggai explained that obedience, building the Temple, results in blessing and God’s favor – even if the blessing isn’t realized until some time in the future. Israel had things backwards. They thought their own circumstances, their own personal situations, had priority in their lives. Wrong! This prophecy makes clear that if we obey God, if we make *His* priorities our priorities, God would change our personal circumstances. Prosperity and blessing are a result or a consequence of obedience to God’s revealed will. We today need to heed this message. If we serve Christ by reaching out to others with the Gospel, and make that a priority in our lives, God will be pleased and bless. If our own personal lives instead are our priority, we’re telling God, “Sorry, I’m more important than You.” Our nation enjoyed blessings from God for centuries because the first colonists put God first. Today, our nation has no interest in God. So the blessings are being revoked, before our very eyes.

“I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not set your heart to honor me” (Malachi 2:2). This prophet wrote to secular, spiritually dead people. They were bored with God. They didn’t know the love that God has and what that love requires of us. The 2nd Temple was built, but the people were bringing deformed animals to it to sacrifice to the Lord. In disgust, God had Malachi deliver this verse. Let’s understand the spiritual law that’s here: We honor God by the value of what we sacrifice for Him. (Read that sentence again, it’s so important.) If the only sacrifice we make is attending church on Sunday mornings, we’re essentially saying to God, “You’re not worth much to me.” Look at Revelation 12:11, “They overcame [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death” (this is arguably the climactic verse in the whole book). Overcomers share the Gospel despite any risk to their lives, and overcomers do it even if it means death could result. The sacrifice that honors God is giving *ourselves* to Him, as Jesus did.

“Return to me, and I will return to you,’ says the Lord Almighty” (Malachi 3:6). In love, God always welcomes repentant people. “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you” says James (4:8). We need to take the initiative if we wish to be in fellowship with the living and eternal God. We have to want to be close to God – and it would have to be on His terms, viz, obedience to His Word. But if we don’t care, well, why should God care about us?

“And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not” (Malachi 3:18). A future separation is coming to Israel, based on serving God. Note the parallels here, to serve God is righteousness; to not serve Him is wickedness. Every Christian is to be serving God in some already revealed way. There can be nothing passive about following Christ. *Believing the Gospel brings responsibilities.*

We’ve looked at the Words of God here. It makes great demands of us. Let’s commit to being and doing all God expects.