

STUDIES IN THE MINOR PROPHETS: MICAH, HABAKKUK, HAGGAI, MALACHI

MICAH

Background:

The prophet Micah conducted his ministry during the reign of Kings Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah of Judah (750—686 B.C.) During this time wickedness and injustice were widespread. The people dabbled in idolatry (1:7). Their worship of the Lord was nothing but empty ritual which touched neither heart nor actions (6:6-8). Covetousness reigned among the rich and powerful who robbed and defrauded those less powerful of their land and possessions (2:1—2, 8—9). Dishonesty, violence and family strife ran rampant among the people. To such a situation Micah spoke.

Theme:

The name Micah means, “Who is like the Lord?” The meaning of this name points us to the fundamental question of the book of Micah: “What truly is the Lord like?” When things are going well we think that he is not really a God of justice with the desire and power to execute judgement. On the other hand, when judgement comes and we sink to the lowest, understanding the enormity of our sin, we think God will never forgive, he will never again turn his love toward us. But in fact God is a God of both justice and love. He will judge, meting out punishment equal to our sin. Yet he will also relent and forgive, for he delights to show mercy.

Study and Discussion:

1. Identify and describe the different wrongdoings God’s people were involved in in Micah’s day: 1:7; 2:1—2; 6:10—12; 7:6. Are these sorts of things evident today in our society? In the church?

2. How did the sinners of Micah’s day think they could please God? (6:6—7) What do you think was at the root of their misunderstanding? What does God really want from us? (6:8)

3. How well did the leaders of the day deal with wrongdoings and bring about justice? (3:1—3, 9—11)

4. Compare the message and motive of the false prophets of the day (2:6—7; 3:5,11) with those of Micah, the true prophet (3:8). What practical instruction does this give us today as to how we should communicate the Word of God?

5. Describe the false security spoken of in 2:6—7a and 3:11. In what ways might people today (both inside the church and outside) have a similar false security? Where do we find true security?

6. With what attitude does the righteous remnant of Israel endure the Lord’s judgement? (7:7—9) With what attitude should we endure the Lord’s discipline?

7. List the things Micah is confident God will do for his people according to 7:18—20. How does Micah expect his question of verse 18 to be answered “Who is a God like you?”

8. Explain how the death of the Lord Jesus reveals God to be both just and loving. (See Romans 3:21—26)

HABAKKUK

Background:

Habakkuk probably prophesied sometime around 605 B.C. during the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah. At this time (as at many others) there was much wickedness and injustice among God’s people, the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Judah. On the international scene, Babylon was the rising star among the nations. Her armies were marching irresistibly across the ancient Near East brutally destroying all the Kingdoms that got in the way and enslaving their inhabitants.

Outline and Theme:

Habakkuk’s prophecy is unique among the Old Testament prophets. Whereas most prophets addressed God’s people with messages from God of judgement and mercy, Habakkuk addressed God, dialoguing with him concerning the problem of evil.

Habakkuk, in fact, did not like the way God was doing things. He complained first that while the wicked in Judah were getting away with all sorts of evil, God was silent and inactive (1:1-4). God replied, announcing that he would judge Judah by sending the Babylonians to destroy her (1:5-11) but that left Habakkuk with an even greater problem. So he complains again : “Why would you use the wicked Babylonians to destroy those more righteous than they?” (1:12-17) The Lord replies a second time, comforting Habakkuk with the fact that the Babylonians too would be judged (2:2-17). In light of God’s reply, the book concludes with a hymn of praise to the power and justice of the Lord (Ch. 3).

The theme of Habakkuk is captured in the expression in 2:4: “The righteous will live by his faith,” faith that God will destroy the wicked and fill every place with the knowledge of his glory and grace (2:14).

Study and Discussion:

1. Notice how frank Habakkuk’s prayer of 1:2-4 is. Is there any evidence that God was displeased with the prophet for his’ frankness? How is Habakkuk’s forthrightness in prayer a good example for us?

2. Describe what the Babylonians are like according to 1:5-11.

3. How does Habakkuk respond to the Lord’s answer to his first question? (1:12-2:1)

4. What does God say will happen to the Babylonians (and all others who practice evil)? (2:2-17) Why will there be in the end no more room for evil in God’s universe? (2:14)

5. Consider 2:18-20. Who remains silent in verses 18-19? Who speaks? Who remains silent in verse 20? Why?

6. Of what does Habakkuk envision being deprived in 3:17—18. How can he still rejoice? How can we rejoice in similar circumstances?

7. What do you think are the heights Habakkuk speaks of in 3:19? How are we enabled to go on the heights?

HAGGAI

Background:

The events recorded in the book of Haggai take place between August and December 520 B. C., some time after the people returned from exile in Babylon. In 586 the final destruction of Jerusalem took place. At that time the Babylonians razed the temple and carried the people off in shame to Babylon. For many years God's people languished in captivity until Cyrus, King of Medo-Persia conquered Babylon and decreed that the Israelites could return to their native land and rebuild the temple. (Ezra 1) The people indeed returned, but when opposition to reconstruction arose, they gave it up (Ezra 4). Yet God's desire was that his temple in Jerusalem be rebuilt. So he raised up Haggai to call the people back to their appointed task. And four years later in 516 B.C., exactly 70 years after the destruction of the original temple, the work of building the new one was completed (Ezra 6:13—15).

Message:

In Haggai's day idolatry, injustice and oppression (so common at other periods) seem not to have been a problem. The exile, apparently, had done its purifying work. Yet the people had slipped into a form of selfish complacency. The gross sins were absent but so was zeal for what pleases and honours the Lord. Haggai's call was to shake God's people out of their lethargy and self-centeredness so that they would get busy in the work of God. "Do you know why you are feeling so empty, unproductive and unsatisfied?" Haggai asked. "Because you have neglected the house of God."

Study and Discussion:

1. What excuse did the people use so as not to rebuild the temple? (1:2) What do you think it was that really kept them from rebuilding the temple?

2. How were the people's priorities mixed up? (1:3-4) Did putting their own concerns before God's help them prosper in their private affairs? (1:5-11) What lesson do we learn from this?

3. How did the people respond to the Word of God that Haggai spoke? (1:12) How did the Lord help the people to work out their obedience when he saw their willingness to be obedient? (1:13-15) Do you think this is a pattern that is relevant for us today?

4. Consider 2:1-9. How did those who remembered the old temple respond when they saw the new being built? (See also Ezra 3:12) How does the Lord encourage them? Looking back on this passage from a New Testament perspective, in what way(s) did the glory of the second temple become greater than that of the first?
5. According to 2:10-14, is good or evil more contagious? How does this challenge us in our Christian lives?
6. What is God's temple today? (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:18-20) How practically do we make the building up of his temple a priority in our lives?
7. Explain how Matthew 6:33 could be considered the theme of the book of Haggai.

MALACHI

Background:

Malachi, the last minor prophet, is shrouded in mystery. We know virtually nothing about him. Where he was born, into what family, the time of his ministry, how effective he was - about all these questions the Bible is silent. However, by looking at the book he left us, it seems highly likely that he was a post-exilic prophet like Haggai. He must have prophesied sometime later than Haggai because he refers to the fact that animal sacrifices were being offered in the temple. Indeed Malachi probably ministered a good time after the rebuilding of the House of God since in his day the rituals associated with the Temple had grown stale and commonplace in the people's eyes. A likely date is 450-400 B.C.

Theme:

Some people have accused Malachi of having a shallow perspective. He seems, they say, to get bogged down in petty legalistic concerns: blemished animal sacrifices (1:6-14), divorce (2:10-16), tithing (3:6-12). Yet such a negative attitude misunderstands the depth of concern that underlies Malachi's utterances. When people offer marred sacrifices it reflects a fundamental lack of respect for the greatness of the Lord. When a man divorces his wife he breaks a sacred covenant, not only between the person and his spouse but between God and man. When people withhold their tithe it is equal to robbing God, which indicates a heart attitude of contempt for the Provider himself. Far from being unconcerned about the important issues, Malachi puts his finger on the heart of the issue which is that the people had a deep-seated disdain for God himself which was displayed by their day-to-day actions.

Study and Discussion:

1. Malachi's preaching consists largely of condemnation, yet what does he take up first? (1:2-5) Why do you think he does this?
2. Consider 1:6-14. How were the people dishonouring God? What sort of sacrifices do we today bring to God? How might they be blemished?
3. What attitude does God have toward divorce? (2:10-16) Why does he feel this way about divorce?

4. Consider 3:1-5. What attitude did the people have towards the Lord's coming? (vs. 1) What shock would they receive when he actually did come? (vs. 2-5; see also Amos 5:18) What does this teach us about the attitude we should take toward the Lord's second coming?

5. Why was it so hard, do you think, for people to give the whole tithe to God? (3:6-15) What would have resulted if they had tithed faithfully?

6. Consider 4:1-4. What did Malachi compare the day of the Lord to with regard to evildoers? What did he compare it to with regard to those who revere God's name? Compare and contrast these two images.

7. What fundamental aspect of God's nature did the people of Malachi's day neglect? (1:6, 1:11,14) How can we avoid the same problem?