



# FORETOLD

PROPHETS OF THE BIBLE



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# Welcome to the Old Testament Writing Prophets



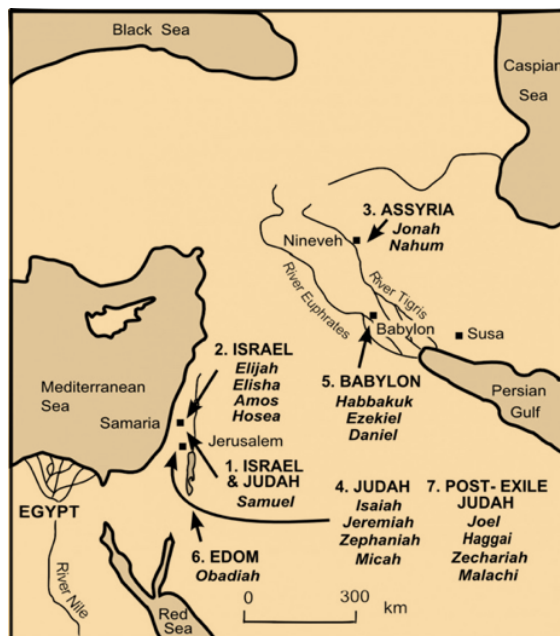
In the middle ground between the Old and New Testaments, between darkness, light and shadow, found somewhere between Heaven and Earth, lies the pit of all that mankind fears, and the summit of his hope and dreams. This is the dimension where truth meets imagination. It's an area which we call, *The Prophets' Zone*.

Well, maybe that was a bit too melodramatic! Do you remember the old 60's television show "The Twilight Zone?" Every week the host, Rod Serling, introduced two half-hour short stories that dealt with "contemporary" issues head on like: terrorism, racism, sexuality, gender roles, the corruption of power, even greed and self-indulgence. Although the show has become a cult classic, it was canceled after only four seasons. Isn't it ironic that these "contemporary issues" are the same struggles that still plague us today, in the 21st century A.D.? These were the same "contemporary issues" found in the 8th through the 5th centuries BC (that's almost 3000 years ago)! That's why a famous wise man (Solomon) once said, "There's nothing new under the sun."

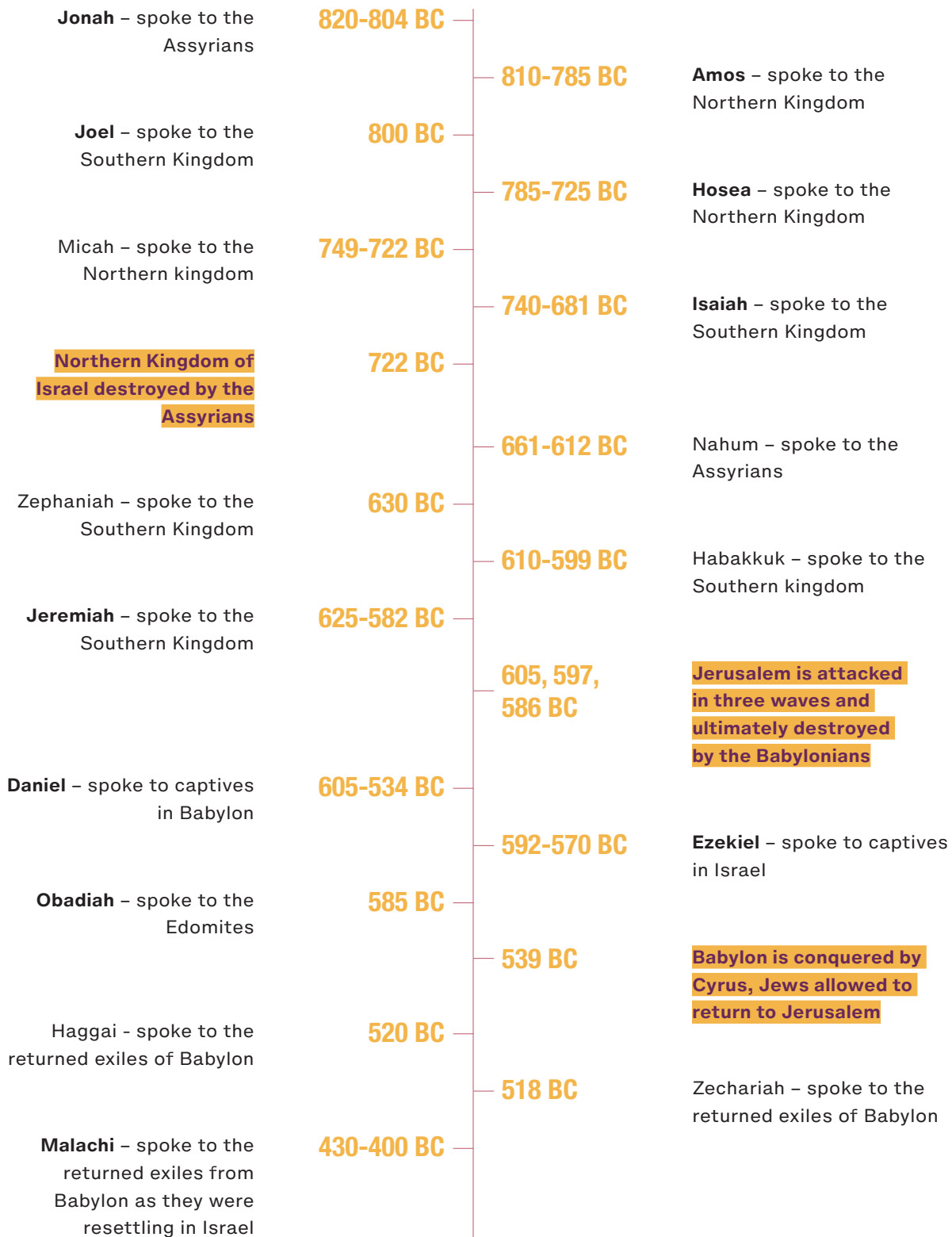
Brave readers who would dare to venture into the world of the writing prophets usually feel like they have been somehow teleported into the Twilight Zone. These prophets arose because the priests, who were tasked to be the spiritual and moral guide for the people, failed. They were to offer sacrifices to God on their behalf, yet their primary role was to teach God's people His Law. However, the priests became proud and corrupt and turned the people away from God and led the Israelites to worship idols. The judges and kings also failed to govern the people of Israel. Because the nation was on the brink of disaster, Yahweh tapped non-professionals who didn't "receive a paycheck" from the Temple's proceeds. Most of the prophets came from humble origins, and only a few came from nobility.

## Situating Individual Prophet's Ministries

For those who are new to the prophetic literature we wanted to provide some helpful tools to help orientate you to *The Prophets' Zone*. This map of the Middle East represents the time when the prophets "roamed the earth," and what countries they performed their ministries. On the following page, we have provided a timeline that puts the Old Testament prophets in chronological order. It's worth noting that while some prophets overlapped in time, they didn't overlap in territory. Or, in other words, God only designated one man to speak for Him at one place at a time. In the instances where the prophets overlap, they're speaking for God in different locations. The dates provided here are approximately when each prophet served, not necessarily when the book was written. Remember, Old Testament dates are in BC, so the years will decrease in number the further down the timeline. For this ten-week study we're only studying the Prophets which are in **bold**.



# A Chronological Timeline of the Writing Prophets in Israel



# Just a Brief Word from Your Sponsor... the Groups Team!



By now you might be thinking, “This study guide is rather large and many of the prophets, especially the major ones, have a lot of chapters. So, from week to week what’s going to be expected of me?” Well I’m so proud of your bravery to boldly ask! To make sure you get the most out of this study, it’s our suggestion that you read all the introductory material the first week, which includes:

- Welcome to the Old Testament Writing Prophets!
- A Chronological Timeline of the Writing Prophets in Israel
- Who were the Prophets and What was their Purpose?
- Understanding the Prophet’s Tools for the Trade
- Maybe the Weirdest Characteristic of All
- The Prophets were Much more than Fortune Tellers.
- Also, read the chapter on Isaiah and the study questions.

I know, I know it sounds like a lot, but the good news is the first week is the heaviest and it’s only 10 pages!

The rest of the nine weeks, we only suggest that you read the pertinent material about the prophet we’re studying that particular week and get familiar with the Group Questions. That’s only about five pages a week! You can do that right? And just think about it, one day when you’re strolling around Heaven and Amos passes you by on the “Golden Street” along the banks of the “River of Life” you won’t have to avoid making eye contact. Because he’s a friendly guy (we know he’ll be friendly because he was a covenant-enforcer and you got into Heaven under an even greater covenant than he did!). And when Amos asks you if you’re familiar with his best-selling book? You’ll be able to tell him that you are, and you’ll sit down together and pick fruit from the Tree of Life and have a lovely conversation all because you read five little pages before you went to group!

You might be wondering why aren’t there any reading assignments from the Bible? Please don’t misunderstand us. If you’d like to also pile on the entire work of each prophet weekly, then, go for it! But keep in mind that right out of the gate, the book of Isaiah has 61 chapters. Jeremiah has 52, and Ezekiel boasts 48. Frankly, not only are these books long, they are extremely difficult to understand, especially Daniel and Ezekiel. The goal of this study guide is to provide you with an overview of each individual book and a deeper dive into one or two of its most famous stories. For instance, In the Book of Isaiah we’ll dive into chapter 6 and give you an overview of the rest. In the Book of Jeremiah, we’ll give you a taste of the most important features of the book, provide a character sketch of Jeremiah (who possessed a unique temperament for his assignment), and take a dive into his conversation with God at the potter’s house. As we move into the smaller works of the Minor Prophets, we are mostly able to break down the entire book. But after all that explanation, you still may be hungry to read at least one book. Then we suggest you read Obadiah. Though it’s the smallest book in the Old Testament, it still packs a powerful punch!

If you’re wondering what Pastor Bill will be preaching for weekend services during the Foretold series, he’ll be tackling some of the most famous stories from each prophetic work. Maybe you’re looking at the size and scope of the prophets and are feeling a little overwhelmed. Don’t fret. Ask God to open your mind and especially key into not only what He wants you to learn, but also what He wants you to apply to your life! Lastly, if you really struggle with reading or reading comprehension, there’s still good news! We’ll provide a video that will cover about 75% of the content that’s in this study guide. Details of how to ascertain this video will be forthcoming. So, the only thing left to do is pray. “Father, we know there’s nothing new under Heaven, forgive us and empower us to not repeat the same sins of the past, and live a life that’s pleasing to You, Amen!”



***Introduction to  
the Prophets***

# Who Were the Prophets and What Was their Purpose?



In our twenty-first century world, it's hard for us to get our head around what the ancient Old Testament prophets were like, much less what drove them to do the things they did. We do know that most of them were solitary, rugged individualists who were called by God for excruciatingly painful tasks. Most of them came from humble origins: peasants, shepherds or farmers but a few came from nobility, such as Isaiah and Daniel.

They served as prosecuting attorneys of sorts, continually enforcing the stipulations of the covenant that Israel had agreed to keep in the time of Moses, and reaffirming their promise with Joshua. These prophets were the heralds of an unapproachable holy King, and his announcements were always followed by the words "So says the Lord." The history of "God's mouthpieces" reads like the book of martyrs. They were constantly rejected, ridiculed, and always persecuted because of the oracles they spoke. They were the first "men of sorrows, acquainted with grief," appointed to endure rejection and maddening solitude. Their home was often the wilderness or a cave, and the desert served as their meeting place with God. Nakedness was often their wardrobe and wooden stocks their neckties. The songs they sang were composed through beatings, grief, and tears.

What set a prophet of Israel apart from all other men was the nature of their calling. Their call was not from men. No one could apply for the job. These guys were selected by God, and because He is sovereign, it was an offer they couldn't refuse (that's because He was the original "God-Father," get it?). These appointments were for life, so there weren't going to be any retirement parties or pensions so they could kick back and enjoy their golden years.

In fact, God so overwhelmed them with His messages, that we know very little about them as people. We are much more acquainted with what came *through* them as God's spokesmen. As the **covenant enforcement officers**, they pronounced God's judgments in the form of either blessings or curses. The prophets did not invent the blessings or curses they announced, but often they reported the good or bad news (most of the time a little of both) in very captivating and colorful ways: through rhymes and poems, drama and performance art, or actions that seemed to run counter to God's commands (such as Hosea taking the harlot Gomer to be his wife to highlight Israel's adultery).



**"I knew you before I formed you in the womb. Before you were born, I set you apart and appointed you as my prophet to the nations. Don't say, 'I'm too young,' for you must go wherever I tell you. And don't be afraid of the people, for I will be with you and will protect you. I the Lord, have spoken!"**

**Jeremiah 1:5,7-8**

# The Prophets' Tools for the Trade



When it comes to studying the prophets, it's important to understand the different forms of **prophetic utterances** that they employed to compose their **oracles** (divine messages). This is much like studying the different forms of literature in the Bible, like History (1 & 2 Chronicles, 1 & 2 Kings), Songs (Psalms, Song of Solomon), Legal Documents (Exodus, Deuteronomy), Apocalyptic Literature (Revelation and parts of Daniel), and Sermons (parts of Acts and James).

The first tool in their toolbox was the **lawsuit oracle**. In this decree, God is always portrayed as the plaintiff, prosecuting attorney, judge, and bailiff in the court while He makes His case against the defendant, Israel. (Is it just me or does this seem like it's always a slam dunk for the prosecution?) Full lawsuit oracles contain a summons, charge, evidence, and a verdict. And because the covenant has been violated, the types of punishments that will inevitably come upon the defendant are usually one, all, or a combination of: disease, destitution, deprivation, or death.

Another literary form at the prophets' disposal was the **woe oracle**. "Woe" was a common word that the Jewish people often cried out when they faced grave danger or disaster. God, through the prophets, used the word "woe" to grab the attention of the Israelites, much like our federal, state, and local authorities developed the **emergency broadcast** system to alert us in the event of an emergency. The woe oracle was designed to stop God's people in their tracks that they may repent before there was an actual emergency. It usually had three parts: an announcement of a coming danger, the reason for the distress, and a prediction of impending judgment.



**"Woe to me!" I cried. 'I am ruined!  
For I am a man of unclean lips, and  
I live among a people of unclean  
lips, and my eyes have seen the  
King, the Lord Almighty.'"**

**Isaiah 6:5**

The last literary device that the prophets often used was the **promise** or **salvation oracle**. It's easy to spot this element, for it's always a promise from the Lord that His divine discipline would not last forever and would eventually turn into a blessing. Like the woe oracle, it has three parts as well: the phrase "In that day," is used to provide future hope for those who are about to suffer God's momentary discipline. This is followed by a description of the radical change that has taken place in the hearts of His kids, and then the divine blessing ensues (for example: long life, prosperity, agricultural abundance, respect from their enemies, and safety). God repeatedly demonstrates how His discipline is never punitive. Instead, it always puts His children in a place where they are able to receive God's good gifts without any fear of them becoming entitled, but rather eternally grateful.

# Maybe the Weirdest Characteristic of All...



Another characteristic that made the prophets stick out from the crowd was their ecstatic episodes. Imagine finding yourself at a large, open-aired marketplace on a crowded street in ancient Jerusalem. A man catches your eye. Suddenly, his eyes become fixed on yours, but it's as if he's looking right through you. Violently, the stranger is overtaken by convulsions. Yet, his speech is eerily calm, almost alluring. Finally, you realize that most people in the crowd pay him no mind. They recognize that the Spirit has fallen upon him. The fit finally passes, and he goes on to tell all who would listen the things that he had seen and heard from Yahweh.

# Prophets were Much More than Fortune Tellers!

When you think of the word “prophet” what initially comes to your mind? For most of us a prophet is someone who can foretell the future and predict events that have not yet come to pass. But the Hebrew word that the Old Testament primarily uses for “prophet” is “nabi” which is the root word that means “to bubble forth, as from a fountain,” or “to utter.” The other word which is far less often used is “ro’eh” which means “seer.”

At this point you may be asking yourself, “Why the Hebrew lesson?” Well, the truth is that the prophets or “nabis” rarely foretold the future in their writings (less than 2-3% of their oracles were predictive). In fact, the prophets rarely foretold (predicted) the details of future events, rather they mainly forthtold (announced) to the people of Israel and Judah and the other surrounding nations how their willful disobedience was no longer going to be overlooked by Yahweh.

On those exceptional occasions, when God’s messengers did predict precise details of something God was going to do far in the distant future, the predictions were always pertinent to their present situation and had a valid meaning for their audience. And, God always had a larger plan for humankind. Since God’s redeeming purpose is culminated in Jesus Christ, somehow all prophecy does point to Jesus, at least indirectly.

Over the course of the next 10 weeks we’ll be exploring the lives of ten of the sixteen writing prophets. The first four: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel are considered the major prophets. This designation wasn’t given to them because their writings were more important, rather it’s simply because of the breadth of their work. We’ll also study the minor prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah and Malachi.

One of the keys to understanding God’s messengers, is to have a grasp of what was happening in the history of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel during the period when each individual prophet prophesied. The Bible organizes the prophets in three specific time periods: Pre-exilic (before the exile): Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, and Jonah; Exilic (during the exile): Ezekiel; and Post-exilic (after the exile): Malachi.



***Isaiah***  
***Chapter 6***

# Isaiah: The Prince of the Prophets



In the galaxy of Old Testament prophets, Isaiah stands out as one of God’s brightest stars. He was a leader of leaders, a major prophet in every way, and not just because of the volume of material that bears his name. As a prophet Isaiah was unusual. Most prophets were of humble origins, yet Isaiah was of noble birth. He was recognized as a statesman, having direct access to the royal court of his day. He consorted with princes and kings. Isaiah was probably considered “the most” godly person in all of Judah. God used Isaiah to “talk some sense” into many kings, keeping them from jumping off the tracks that Yahweh had laid down, that would’ve caused Israel to derail into disobedience. These kings included: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah.

The record of Isaiah’s call may be the most dramatic in all of the Old Testament. We are told it came to pass in the year that King Uzziah died; that’s when Isaiah saw the Lord. Uzziah had reigned for fifty-two years, and began his monarchy doing “what was right in the sight of the Lord.” Think about how long of a reign that was. That’s equal to the tenures of the last eight presidents (Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush Sr., Clinton, Bush, and Obama) not including our current president, Trump. So, it’s easy to see that when Uzziah died, it was a time of great crisis in Judah. Especially because he had won many victories over the Philistines and the other nearby nations. He rebuilt many of the towers and strengthened Jerusalem’s walls. Uzziah also restored the military power of the Southern Kingdom, almost to the strength it once enjoyed under King David. Yet, the story of Uzziah ended on a sad note. It seems, much like a Shakespearian hero, the more the king accomplished the more prideful he became. Eventually, Uzziah stormed into the Temple and arrogantly claimed for himself the rights that God had only given His priests. When the priests tried to stop him, he became enraged and was immediately struck down with leprosy.



**“Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.”**

**1 John 3:2-3**

From that point until his death, Uzziah lived alone in a separate house cut off from the Temple. Despite the fact that the king died in shame, his passing away still triggered a time of national mourning. The king was dead. Isaiah went to mourn Uzziah’s death and pray for the protection of Israel. But when he entered the Temple, Isaiah saw another King, the Ultimate King, the One who forever sits on the throne of Judah. He saw the Lord. Well, sort of. By the description the prophet gave us, it seems he saw everything in God’s throne room but the One who sat on the throne. We know from the encounter that Moses had, he desired to see God, yet no one on this side of eternity is allowed to see His face. Still, those who truly love Him long to do so just the same. We want to bask in the radiant glory of His divine countenance. 1 John 3:2 promises His sons and daughters that one day when Jesus returns, we’ll be like Him. We will not just see His glory reflected as a burning bush or pillar of clouds, we will see Him face to face as He truly is. Theologians call this the Beatific Vision.

# Keywords and Phrases

## in Isaiah



**Lord or LORD** - The next time you're reading your Bible pay attention to how the word "Lord" is spelled. In Isaiah 6:1 the word "Lord" is printed with a capital "L" and a lower case "o-r-d." This stands in contrast with the "LORD" that occurs in Isaiah 6:3. This is not an error in printing but denotes two different Hebrew words which are used in the original text. The first one is "Adonai" which is a title for God that means "Sovereign One." When you see the word "LORD" written in all capitals, it's telling you that the text is using the unspeakable name of God that was first given to Moses at the burning bush. This name is "YHWH" (in Hebrew there are only accent marks that denote the vowels). In Israel when someone either wrote or spoke the name Yahweh, they were immediately rendered unclean and had to have a mikva'ot, or ritual bath, as soon as possible.

**The Train of His Robe** - In ancient times, the flowing train on a monarch's robe was a symbol of glory and splendor. To understand the importance of a train, we have to remember that in those days, all clothing had to be constructed "from scratch"—only the rich and powerful could afford to add extra length to their robes. The longer the train, the more glorious and splendid the king. And as he paraded past his subjects, the length of his robe was meant to impress. The point that God's train "filled the Temple" conveys the magnitude of God's glory compared to any earthly king or queen. Symbolically, the robe represents God's infinite splendor and majesty, His glory. *If air is the atmosphere of earth, then God's glory is the atmosphere of Heaven.*

**The Seraphs (Angelic Beings) with Six Wings** - While we remain in our mortal bodies, it's impossible for us to see God as He is. The problem is not with our eyes, but with our hearts. Only after we're purified and totally sanctified, when we receive new bodies, will we have some capacity to gaze upon God face to face. Though the seraphim (seraphs) are not sinful, still they are created beings and have to shield their eyes from the constant direct gaze of God. They are wonderfully made with six wings. With two they cover their faces. With two they cover their feet. And the other two they use to fly. This special equipment is not some kind of angelic shoe with two little wings attached to the heel like Nike high tops! In fact, they cover their feet to remind them, and us, of the great distance there is between God and His creation. This is like when Moses had to remove his sandals at the burning bush as a reminder that he possessed "feet of clay" or that "he was formed from, and attached to the dirt," the seraphim or "fiery ones" (because God's glory catches them aflame) cover their feet in deference to God because they are also created.

**Woe to me, for I am Undone, or Ruined** - Here, Isaiah is pronouncing a "woe oracle" upon himself. (See The Prophet's Tools for the Trade section in the Introduction.)

# Isaiah's Response to a Holy God



The seraphim's song reveals God's message to the prophet. The lyrics leave no question as to what God is trying to communicate to Isaiah. The song is a repetition of a single word - holy. Over and over the three words are sung in succession. Now you may be thinking to yourself, couldn't God come up with more creative lyrics? Why so much repetition? There's more going on here than bad song writing! Hebrew is actually a very simple language. In English, we have a variety of ways to emphasize the importance of something. We may underline it, put it in quotes, italicize it, or use an exclamation point. But in ancient Hebrew, the only way to emphasize a point was through repetition. If you really wanted people to listen, you'd repeat something. Jesus often employed this technique when He began His sentences with: Truly, truly (or verily, verily if you read an older translation). The Bible, only on a handful of occasions, repeats something to the third degree. In fact, in Hebrew numerology, repeating something three times denotes perfection. The Bible never says God is love, love, love or wrath, wrath, wrath or justice, justice, justice. Yet, it does say He is Holy, Holy, Holy. I don't know about you, but I think God is making a point.

At this point in Isaiah's vision (v.4) things are going from bad to worse. All of a sudden, the songs of the seraphim are shaking the Temple to its thresholds and the whole place is filling with smoke. But that's not the only thing falling apart. It seems that Isaiah's body wasn't fairing any better than the building. In verse 5, the prophet pronounced a woe oracle upon himself (for more on woe oracles see: The Prophets Tools of the Trade section in the Introduction). The idea here is that Isaiah is "falling apart at the seams," which is a fitting description because the word "holy" is derived from a weaver's term which means something like a fabric that is a cut above everything else. Imagine, this is all happening to the godliest man in all of Israel! What's even more ironic is Isaiah's sudden realization that the most defiled part of the prophet's body was his mouth! He didn't say, "I'm a man of unclean habits" or "a man of unclean

thoughts." Instead he blamed all of his sin on his mouth! Wasn't it James who said the tongue is a fire, a world of evil among all the parts of the body, and full of deadly poison? Isaiah realized that he was not alone, that he came from a people who suffered from the same malady. Now that the disease was diagnosed, the prophet didn't have to wait very long to receive the cure!

Just then, one of the seraphs flew to him holding a live coal that was taken from the altar. The angel touched Isaiah's mouth and took away his guilt. Human lips are one of the most sensitive parts of the body. Isaiah must have felt the glowing holy flame searing his mouth! It had to be excruciating. The stench of burning flesh which filled his nostrils must have been seared into his memory. This is what the Puritans referred to as severe mercy, or costly grace. And though Isaiah only had his mouth cleansed and cauterized, he was forgiven to the core of his being. His guilt was removed, but his humanity was still intact. He felt God's conviction to the core, yet God left him his dignity. This was no cruel or unusual punishment. In that moment, the once disintegrated prophet was whole again!

And that's when he heard it, quietly at first, but steadily building. He heard the LORD saying, "Whom shall I send?" "Who will go for us?" "Whom shall I send?" "Who will go for us?" "Whom shall I send?" "Who will go for us?" Up to this point he had seen the glory of God, heard the song of the seraphim, and had experienced the severe mercy of the live coal on his lips. But this is the first time that he had heard the voice of God. Suddenly the Temple grew silent. No longer could he hear the angel voices. And as God's voice grew stronger, it sounded like a dam was breaking, releasing a torrent of many waters. There's a pattern here that's repeated over and over again in history: God forgives, and heals, then sends. God appears, humans shake in terror, God reveals humanity's purpose, and we become His spokesmen, all by uttering five words, "Here I am. Send me!"

# Group Questions



Tonight, begin with a time of praise and worship. This can be accomplished by listening quietly to some pre-recorded praise music. If someone has the ability to play an instrument, lead your group to sing praises to the LORD. That would be even better! Create an awareness of His presence in your midst by welcoming Him into your meeting. Then ask someone to read Hebrews 4:16 aloud.

1. Read Isaiah 6:1-8. What do you think Isaiah was thinking and feeling at this time? Uzziah's long and prosperous reign came to an end under a dark cloud (see 2 Chronicles 26:16-21). Why do you think God chose to reveal Himself to Isaiah at that particular time?

2. Take a look at Isaiah 6:1-5. What do you think is the significance of God's robe filling the temple? Why did the seraphim cover their faces? These angels cried out "Holy, holy, holy." What does the word holy mean? What can we learn from the seraphs about worship?

3. Read: Isaiah 6:5-7. What is the significance of the prophet crying out woe to himself? What were the two areas that Isaiah mentioned that felt especially sinful? Why do you think God chose this part of Isaiah's body? Has there ever been a time when you experienced the painful grace of God? Please explain.

4. Read Isaiah 6:8-11. As soon as the prophet was cleansed of his sin, he heard another voice repeating over and over, "Whom shall we send, who will go for us?" Despite almost being ripped apart at the seams, Isaiah hears God calling to him. There's a pattern over and over throughout history: God forgives, heals, then sends. What is He calling you to do?

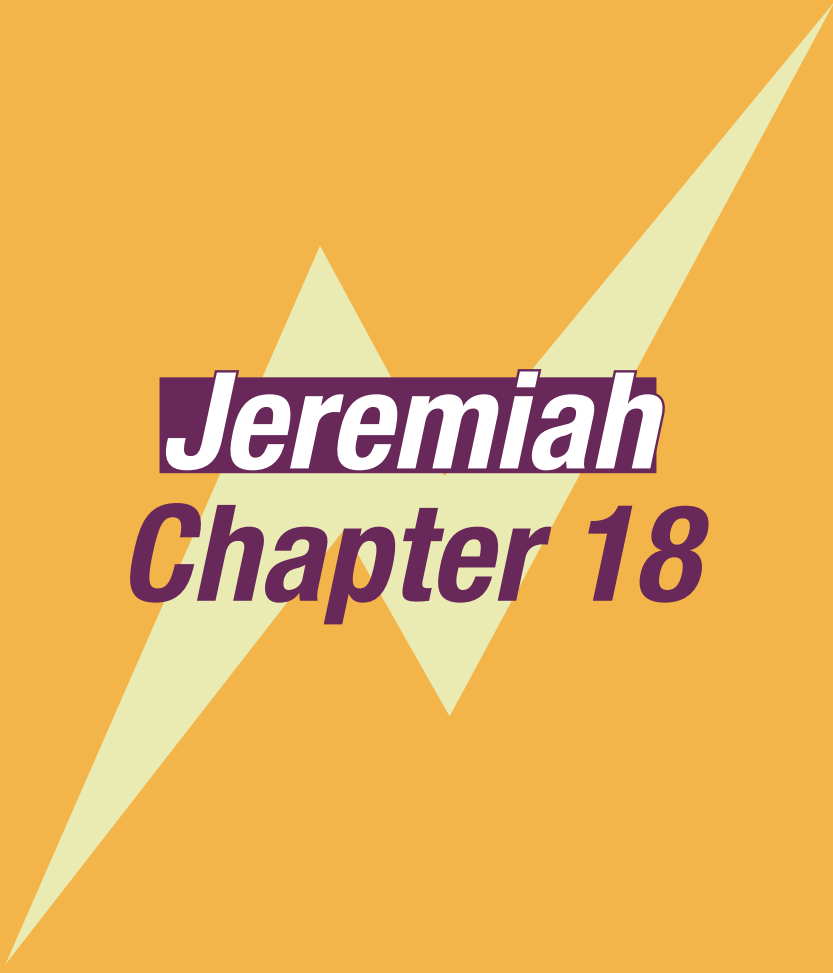
5. Isaiah volunteered to go even before he knew where or to whom God was calling him. God revealed that Isaiah was going back to his people who would eventually rebel and face judgment (which happened at the fall of the Judah). What does this teach us about the nature of God's call?

6. As a group, take some time to pray for one another, and ask God to give you the courage to follow Him wherever He leads.

## Icebreaker

**Ask someone to share about a time when God revealed Himself in a profound way when you least expected it? What was that like?**





***Jeremiah***  
***Chapter 18***

# Jeremiah: The Prophet Who Cried the Tears of God



**“I did not send these prophets, yet they ran. I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in my council, then they would have proclaimed my words to my people. And they would have turned from their evil ways. And from their evil doings.”**

**Jeremiah 23:21-22**

Sometimes when God shapes kingdoms through sweeping, momentous events, He often sends someone to help His people understand and interpret what He’s doing in the world. Although Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiyah, could trace his priestly lineage all the way back to Aaron (Moses’ brother and the first priest of the Old Covenant), God didn’t call him to be a priest. Instead, for five decades, Jeremiah took on the office of a prophet and called people to repentance without any significant positive response! He confronted kings, and common people, the influential and the insignificant. And during all that time, Jeremiah told anyone who’d listen that he didn’t want to be a prophet!

Like all the Old Testament prophets, God chose Jeremiah before he was formed in his mother’s womb, and then He thought it was a good idea to reveal His plan to Jeremiah while he was still a young boy. This gave God’s man a glimpse into the scope of his prophetic ministry: “Behold, I have put My words in your mouth. See, I have this day set you over the nations and over kingdoms, to root out and to pull down, to destroy and to throw down, to build and to plant.” (Jeremiah 1:9-10). Wow, that’s a lot to lay on a young boy’s heart, especially a child who had a ten-

der and compassionate disposition! That’s why Jeremiah always felt inadequate for the job. He believed his youth would cause anyone who heard him to reject the doom and gloom messages that God was giving him to communicate to many hostile audiences.

To add injury to insult, God commanded Jeremiah never to get married or have children (God wanted Jeremiah’s singleness to serve as a symbol of the coming barrenness that was about to overtake Judah, Jeremiah 16:1-13). Yet, celibacy in Old Testament Israel was rare among the Jews and only reinforced the people’s suspicions about Jeremiah’s emotional and mental health. And because of his difficult preaching, a coalition made up of his own family and many priests and prophets charged him with blasphemy for predicting the destruction of the Temple. The only thing that saved him from a certain death sentence was that it was found that another “more accepted” prophet, Micah, had made a similar prediction without being punished.

Jeremiah had two more brushes with death. Pashhur, the high priest, beat him and put him in stocks. After leaving Jeremiah for days, he continued to warn the people of Jerusalem of the coming judgment. Some of the princes of Judah grew so weary of his speeches, they decided to throw the prophet into a mire-filled cistern and left him for dead. But the Lord rescued Jeremiah once again. This caused all the false prophets of Jerusalem to band together and oppose Jeremiah. Just as vehemently as Jeremiah warned the people of the coming fall of Jerusalem, the false prophets claimed that God was about to bless the city and bring peace and security instead of judgment. The false prophets were so intertwined in the people’s sins, they could not prophesy against them. They claimed to know the Word of the Lord, but their claim was empty. And in response, this is what God prompted Jeremiah to say about them...

# Keywords and Phrases

## in Jeremiah



**Jeremiah's Confessions** - Jeremiah is well known as the “weeping prophet.” Many of his poems have been singled out for exposing the depth of his grief, which are due to the messages he was given by Yahweh to deliver to the people of Judah. Jeremiah longs to be separated from the bad news, yet when the people can't separate the “man from the message,” he suffers from their rejection and ridicule. In anger, Jeremiah turns on the people, and even prays for greater punishment of his enemies. Here are a few examples:

*Woe is me, what sorrow is mine, and my mother. Oh, that I had died in child birth! I am hated everywhere I go. I am neither a lender who threatens, nor a borrower who refuses to pay, yet they all curse me. Please step in and help me and punish my persecutors. (Jeremiah 15:10, 15)*

*People scoff at me and say, “What is this message from the LORD you talk about?” “Why don't your predictions come true?” “God, bring shame and dismay on all who persecute me, but don't let me experience shame and dismay. Bring a day of terror on them! Yes, bring double destruction upon them!” (Jeremiah 17:15, 18).*

So, what's the take-away of all of this? It's perfectly alright to be real and emotionally raw before the Lord. What's not okay is to fool ourselves into believing that we're justified in our own anger and have fallen into the trap of believing that we are the defenders of God and His righteousness. We should take on this attitude of Jesus and pray, “Father forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing!”

**Jeremiah's Book of Consolation** - In the very heart of the book of Jeremiah (chapters 30-34) is where the prophet unveils most of his **salvation oracles** (see The Prophet's Tools of the Trade section in the Introduction) that await those who endure the exile. The phrase “I will bring you back from captivity,” occurs six times and highlights a time in the not-so-distant future when God's discipline reaches its end. Chapter 31 is full of visions of a glorious resettlement in the promised land, and foreshadows a time in the future when the final remnant of Israel will enjoy a Redeemer who will offer a “New Covenant” that will be written on their hearts. This section also contains the story of Jeremiah buying a field “in faith,” despite the fact that the Babylonian armies were about to breach the walls of Jerusalem. Jeremiah “put his money where his mouth was,” to show God's people that normal life, would one day resume in Judah on God's timetable.

**Chapters 40-45: The Fate of Those Who Were Left** - These chapters tell the story of those who were left in the land of Israel during the exile, which is not told anywhere else in the entire Old Testament. Jeremiah remains with this group and joins Gedaliah, the newly-appointed governor of Judah. At first there are immediate signs of God's blessing for those Jews who were left in Jerusalem because they had accepted God's discipline. Yet a power grab ensued, the governor was murdered, and the people established new leaders. The people came to Jeremiah for a Word from God, and the prophet confirmed God's original message that Judah should accept Babylonian rule. The new leaders, fearing reprisal from the Babylonians, reject Jeremiah's advice, take him as a prisoner, and escape to Egypt. Sadly, the “weeping prophet” was never heard from again.

**Chapters 46-52: The Oracles Against the Nations** - The rest of the book of Jeremiah contains prophecies directed at the nations who had attacked Israel throughout the years that the Jews were in the promised land: Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Edom, Syria, Midian, Elam and Egypt, warning them not to gloat over Judah's demise because their time of judgment was near. Yet, the main target of God's wrath was aimed at Babylon (chapters 50-52). Though Babylon at this point in history was the world's leading superpower, the judgment and destruction of the empire would happen simultaneously as the salvation of Judah.

# Jeremiah and the Potter's Wheel



Because of the enormity of the size and scope of Jeremiah's writing, we're going to focus on a single story for this week's group study. We'll be taking a little deeper dive into Jeremiah 18:1-12. Today, God often speaks to us by using many things from our everyday lives. It was no different for those living in ancient times. On many occasions in Scripture, God used clay pots or jars to illustrate the relationship between the "Creator" and the "created" due to the fact that each creation was formed by a skilled craftsman and each individual vessel had a unique purpose in the mind of the maker. Some vessels were just ordinary pots used for cooking, food or water storage. While others were elaborate works of art that were made only to be put on display as decorative pieces. Yet the value of each piece was not only derived by its mere beauty or practicality, but also by its contents. What's great about the story is that it runs on two separate tracks. It has powerful lessons for each of us individually, but it also demonstrates how the fate of every nation is ultimately in God's hands.

The story opens with God instructing Jeremiah to "go at once" to the potter's house, and from there He would speak to him. This begs the question for us in the 21st century: How hungry are we to hear from God? One thing's for sure, according to a 2018 Pew Research poll, the fact that you're reading this curriculum would put you in a very "small group" of Evangelical Christians. Researchers found that only 10-15% of regular church attenders (defined as slightly more than 2 times a month) read their Bibles outside of church services, and even less attend a secondary Bible study for further instruction. When Jeremiah arrived, he found the potter hard at work, yet he was having difficulty molding a particular jar on his wheel to the point where it was completely ruined. Immediately, the craftsman turned the wet clay into a completely different vessel, which of course was certainly within his purview.

Just then, God spoke up and asked Jeremiah a philosophical question, 'Hey Jeremiah,

shouldn't I be able to do with Israel and with you, what this potter did with his clay, start all over?' Before Jeremiah could answer, Yahweh explained to the prophet His criteria for deciding if His creation is marred to the point that it's a total loss or if it could be salvaged. He said, "If I announce to a nation or kingdom that it's about to be torn down, uprooted or destroyed (I don't know about you but I'm experiencing déjà vu. Isn't this Jeremiah's call?), but then the nation or kingdom repents, I will not destroy it. But if the people reply, 'Don't waste your breath, we will continue to live as we want, stubbornly following our own evil desires', then I will scatter them before their enemies, and refuse to notice their distress!" Wow! Is that a warning to America who has decided to live stubbornly, following its own desires? Should we, as God's people, flee to a cave, get off the grid, or join a local militia group and start training for Armageddon? No! Or at least not yet (I'm only kidding)!

First, we must remember that these words are for Israel, not the church. We are under two different covenants. The people of Judah were still under the Law, the Church is under the blood of Jesus that has delivered us from the Law's tyranny! Still, there are many lessons we can learn and internalize from this story. First, who is the potter in this story? If you said "God" (I knew you would), you're right. And this should be a comfort for us. It also informs us that we are not in the hands of "chance" or "blind fate" but rather God who has a plan for us, is personally concerned about our lives, and wants what's best for us!

There's an old adage in the universe that says, "Anything that creates a thing, owns that thing." OK, I'll admit it's my adage! But think about it for a second. Doesn't an artist own the art which they create? So, let me ask you a question, "What is clay?" If I'm not mistaken, isn't clay a mixture of different kinds of dirt and a little water? Right? And aren't we made from a mixture of dirt and a little bit of water? One thing's for sure, clay doesn't have the power to



mold itself! The point of vv.6-10 is, since God made the clay, He's sovereign over the clay, and it would be in the best interest of the clay to submit to the Potter, because clay can't form itself into anything useful on its own. The apostle Paul had a few words on the subject in Romans.

*No, don't say that. Who are you, a mere human being, to argue with God? Should the thing that was created say to the one who created it, "Why have you made me like this?" When a potter makes jars out of clay, doesn't he have a right to use the same lump of clay to make one jar for decoration and another to throw garbage into? In the same way, even though God has the right to show his anger and his power, he is very patient with those on whom his anger falls, who are destined for destruction. He does this to make the riches of his glory shine even brighter on those to whom he shows mercy, who were prepared in advance for glory. And we are among those whom he selected, both from the Jews and from the Gentiles. (Romans 9:20-24)*

Or in other words, the clay seems to have a mind of its own and often resists. It's not as if the Potter makes His decisions on a whim without a design, but He already sees the finished product, and then sets into motion the perfect plan for our lives. Ephesians 2:10 tells us that we are His masterpiece, created in Christ to do good works, which God prepared beforehand that we would walk in them. And this should cause us to trust Him and believe that He who has begun a good work in us will be faithful to complete it (Philippians 1:6). Yet, the truth is, spiritual growth takes time, and that's because God doesn't put us all on a "heavenly assembly line." He doesn't send the angels to add new features or install "higher equipment packages" while we sleep.

We're masterpieces, so we're built by hand. The Master places His hands over the hands of parents, teachers, friends, family and fellow believers, to craft His work of art! And to put the "cherry on top," He places His emblem on His vessels...



**"Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this emblem: 'The Lord knows those who are his,' and, 'Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.' Those who cleanse themselves will become instruments for special purposes, made holy, and useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work."**

**2 Timothy 2:19,21**

So, let's recap. We are basically just dust mixed with water, or clay if you will. Unmolded, clay has little value. It's only valuable in the right hands for the right purpose. Clay, on its own, can't mold itself, but if the clay yields to being shaped, it will be put on the Potter's wheel. The wheel represents life, which is controlled by the Potter to properly arrange circumstances to successfully mold us. Our lives are not controlled by luck or chance, but by the Potter. While on the wheel, the clay may get discouraged because the Potter has to remove impurities that are deep within the clay, and this painful process takes a long time to complete. Those vessels which ultimately refuse to submit to the Potter are eventually destroyed. The vessels who allow the Potter to work out the "lumps" (through spiritual discipline), eventually become useful vessels for the Creator. Although not specifically mentioned but implied, there is no mention of a furnace. Yet no clay vessel is a finished product until it's gone through the fiery furnace. Trials serve as God's furnace to purify us!



## Group Questions

1. Jeremiah could trace his lineage all the way back to Aaron, who served as the first priest of the Old Covenant. So, for a little over a thousand years, all the men in Jeremiah's family understood that the "family business" was serving God in the Temple. Suffice it to say, it was quite a shock when God called Jeremiah to become a prophet. How do you think he felt? Has God ever asked you to do something that ran countercultural to your family's tradition or values? If your family doesn't apply, how about some of your closest relationships? What happened?

2. Read Jeremiah 1:10. God appointed Jeremiah to stand up against the nations and kingdoms. Some to uproot and tear down, destroy and overthrow; Others, to build up and plant. If you were tasked to hire someone who would be successful at this type of job, what are some of the traits you'd look for? Would you hire Jeremiah for this job? Why or why not? Why do you think God chose Jeremiah?

3. Read Jeremiah 18:1-12. By what pathway does God most often speak to you (like: hearing His audible voice, through His written Word, preaching, worship, circumstances, other people, or maybe other types of pathways)? How do you most often respond?

4. Read Romans 9:20-24. In our story about the potter and the clay, who's the potter? The clay? Why should this be a comfort to us? What kind of power does the potter hold over the clay?

5. Read Ephesians 2:10; Philippians 1:6 and 1 Corinthians 2:9. How does the potter go about his work? Is he spontaneous or a planner? In your answer provide some examples from some of His previous creations. The better translation in Ephesians 2:10 for the word "handiwork" is "masterpiece." Do you consider yourself a masterpiece? Why or why not?

6. God doesn't use an assembly line or a mass production approach when it comes to creating people. Instead, we're handmade. God uses the hands of others (such as: teachers, friends, family members, and fellow believers) to shape us into "vessels of honor." Who are some people that the Potter has used to shape you? What was the result?

7. Read 1 Peter 4:12-13. In our story, although not specifically mentioned but implied, there is no mention of a furnace; yet no clay vessel is a finished product until it's gone through the fire. Think back to a time when you faced a real trial in your life, how has God worked this out for your good and His glory?

8. Read Romans 8:28. If the potter's wheel symbolizes our lives which are being spun perfectly by the Potter to create the exact circumstances (both good and bad) that will mold us into His image - right now, in what difficult circumstances are you not allowing God to do His perfect work in you?

9. If God has used the "hands of others," to develop you, who is God calling you to invest in?



# ***Ezekiel***

# Ezekiel: Revelations

## from the Exile



The prophets Jeremiah and the younger Ezekiel may have known each other, or at the very least known of one another. What is certain is that the two men of God shared many things in common. Both came from a priestly family, grew up in and around Jerusalem, and both men seemed destined to spend their lives serving in the Temple. But Yahweh called them both to prophetic ministries. Also, both prophets understood hardship at an early age. While God never allowed Jeremiah to marry, Ezekiel was happily married until Yahweh revealed to him in advance that his wife was about to pass away from a sudden illness. This “sign” was to serve as a warning to Jerusalem and its Temple that they were also standing at death’s door. Soon after Ezekiel’s prophecy came to pass, the Babylonians breached the city’s walls during the first wave of the captivity in 593 BC. They carried off Ezekiel along with the best and brightest of Judah. Yet, the events that both prophets had warned the Jews about had not yet fully run their course. Both men had to continue to preach that the Temple would fall. Many in Judah were hanging on to the hope that Egypt might push back the Babylonians and return Palestine to the Jews, but this was only a pipe dream.

The book opens with a vision where Ezekiel is summoned into the throne room of Yahweh, and He proclaims His sovereignty over all the nations of the earth. Ezekiel is handed a scroll and is commanded to eat it. The prophet loves the message he’s been given to proclaim, thinking it’s sweeter than honey. This is an example of how Jeremiah and Ezekiel were polar opposites, both in their personality and approach to their God-given assignments. Jeremiah seemed to vacillate between having a heart of compassion for the people, and giving into a rage when they rejected him or his message. He would actually pray for God to punish them. Ezekiel, on the other hand, seemed to thoroughly enjoy the tasks he was given. He would often employ dramatic and unforgettable acts (performance art) to get his point across. One of Ezekiel’s first tasks was to challenge the inhabitants of Jerusalem who refused to believe that God had already made up His mind to punish Israel, and to convince them that eventually, the city, including the Temple, would be destroyed.



**Then I looked and saw a hand reach out to me. It held a scroll which he unrolled. And I saw that both sides were filled with funeral songs, words of sorrow, pronouncements of doom. The voice said to me, “Son of man – eat this scroll! Then go and send my message to the people of Israel.”**

**Ezekiel 2:9 – 3:1**

So, the creative prophet drew a picture of Jerusalem under siege on a piece of tile and placed it in a prominent place where it could be seen plainly by all those who walked along the street. He would lie on his left side for a period of time each day, for three hundred and ninety days. And then he lied on his right side in a similar manner, for forty days. Ezekiel explained that for each day he lied on his left side, the northern kingdom (Israel) would be in captivity for one year; and for each day he lied on his right side, the southern kingdom (Judah) would spend a year in captivity. He shaved off all of his hair and divided it into three parts which symbolized northern Israel, the Judeans left in Jerusalem, and those in captivity in Babylon. He rationed and cooked his food using dried human dung to fuel the fire! Then he carried all of his furniture out of his house so that thieves could take away all of his comfortable possessions. Ezekiel “acted out” many scenarios to warn the people of Judah until he was shipped off to Babylon. Yet in reality, Ezekiel’s real audience were the captives in Babylon. In fact, Ezekiel continued to prophesy in Babylon for over twenty-two years, well after the Temple had fallen. In the early years of the exile, Ezekiel often taught from Jeremiah’s oracles. Jeremiah had already predicted that the exile would last 70 years, so the remnant should repent of their sins that led to Judah’s destruction, seek to become a blessing, and pursue prosperity in the land where they found themselves. Initially, the Jews reasoned that those who remained in Judah were truly the blessed ones, but over time they accepted their lot, and made the best of their punishment.

# Keywords and Phrases

## in Ezekiel



**The Watchman (Ezekiel 3:17-21)** - Ezekiel's prophecies did not fall on friendly ears. But as a watchman, he had a responsibility to raise a warning when God's people were going astray. The best analogy in our modern-day context, is a soldier who's ordered to "stand a post." If he fails to warn his platoon that the enemy has appeared, he risks being executed. Thus, the watchman is always in jeopardy: either from the enemy who seeks to neutralize him, or from the hands of those he's responsible to warn. You may be wondering, what does this have to do with me? Well, I'm so glad you asked! As "God's watchmen," it's our obligation to warn the people who we do life with when it's obvious that they are heading down the wrong path. Isn't it ironic, how it's so easy to see everyone else's path, but so often we are blind to our own? Also, we must humbly accept the input from others and seek God and more mature believers to discern if a course correction is needed. By the way, standing up for God and His kids is always a difficult assignment. So be prepared to receive some pushback or rejection. Nevertheless, continue to pray that both parties won't get caught in the snare of the enemy.

**The Evil Shepherds (Ezekiel 34)** - Ezekiel understood when it comes to the state of a nation that everything either rises or falls on leadership. In the first couple of verses in chapter 34, Ezekiel takes aim against the unfaithful shepherds in Israel. The idea of the meaning of the word "shepherd" in the ancient Near East, often meant a king or a prince. Ezekiel makes his case against these "evil shepherds" based upon the five basic functions of shepherds found in Israel:

- The weak and the hungry must be strengthened.
- Where there is illness, the shepherd must provide avenues for healing.
- Where there is brokenness, he looks for the sheep to be bound up.
- Where there is disobedience, the shepherd looks for them to be brought back.
- Where they are lost, the shepherd must seek them.

Ezekiel charged that Israel's leaders had only led by force and cruelty. The flock had become their prey. Therefore, God promised that He will become a judge between the "fat and lean" sheep and will eventually establish only one shepherd over them, a good shepherd that would be willing to give His life for the sheep.

**The Fourth Temple (Ezekiel 40-48)** - One of the most unique features of Ezekiel is a prophecy about a fourth Temple, which is to be built during the millennial reign of the Messiah. Ezekiel's Temple is much too large to fit on the present Temple Mount site. In fact, the entire modern city of Jerusalem could be contained inside of its walls. And the only way this Temple could be built is if the topography of the city would change. Revelation 16 speaks of a great earthquake that divides the city of Jerusalem into three parts. Yet, many have argued since Jesus is ruling, there'd be no need for a Temple. Interestingly, all the parts necessary for animal sacrifice are missing from the Temple mentioned in Ezekiel. Also, there are no walls of separation for men and women, or Jews and gentiles. There is no veil to the Holy of Holies, and the Ark of Covenant is missing too (the ark signified God's presence). So, the question remains: what would be the purpose of a fourth Temple since King Jesus' death and resurrection have made Temples obsolete? Many scholars believe that it would serve as a "memorial" and a teaching center to instruct and remind future generations (people who will be born during Jesus' millennial reign) of the high cost that Jesus paid for sin. Also, it would serve as a visible reminder of the ultimate price humans paid for their disobedience against a holy and loving God.

# Ezekiel and the Valley of Dry Bones



The other day, I heard a story about two Baptist pastors who were away at a conference, and they were arguing about which one of their churches would be taken first in the Rapture. Just then, a pastor of a non-denominational church walked by and settled the dispute. He said, “Neither. It will be a tie.” They asked, “How do you know?” The non-denominational pastor said, “It’s biblical. The Scriptures say that the dead in Christ will rise first!” Hopefully, some of you thought this joke was funny, but the truth is that many of us have attended churches who have seen their glory days pass them by. There are countless reasons for a church to decline, both spiritually and numerically, but the one common denominator that seems to always be in play is that the church loses its passion for God. This always results in its people becoming unwilling to sacrifice for the mission of the church (to seek and save those who are lost). Now that I’ve offended anyone who was once a Baptist, or who was just being obedient by sticking with a declining church, or both, let’s quickly turn our attention to the Vision of the Valley of Dry Bones.

Ezekiel’s vision might be one of the most powerful scenes found anywhere in Scripture. It came to him about 10 years after he was taken into captivity, immediately on the heels of the Egyptians’ defense of their Kingdom against the Babylonians. Many of the Jewish captives were still holding out hope that somehow, the Egyptians would rescue them. God was not pleased that even after ten years His children were still putting their hope on anyone except Him. God takes Ezekiel to a dimly lit valley that is covered with dry, disconnected bones (this is a common picture for the Jewish people’s description of hell). Then, God asks Ezekiel if he thinks these bones can come back to life. Rather than a simple “Of course not”, he says, “Sovereign Lord, only you can answer that.” He is told to “prophesy to the bones” that God would bring them back to life, and so it happens: the bones came together, and they are covered with sinews, muscles and skin. He then prophesies to the wind, and it comes from the four corners of the earth and gives the bodies life. Was this just a strange dream?

The vision is meant to convey what God wants to do for His people of Judah, both the ones who are left in Jerusalem, and the ones who are in exile in Babylon. They are, for all intents and purposes, dry bones. At this stage in their history they had been invaded and conquered. The best of them, Ezekiel among them, had been deported to a strange land. It looked as if there was no prospect of their country ever rising again. The Jewish people, as a nation, seemed dead. So the question God was asking Ezekiel was, “Do you believe I can raise Israel to life again?” Given the evidence before him, Ezekiel’s answer was one of faith, not of doubt; it implies that God can do anything. The exiles would return. Nehemiah and Ezra tell that story. Jerusalem would prosper again. God used the hard lessons of exile to ensure the survival of Judaism after the final destruction of the Temple in AD 70. And those lessons continued to provide hope for almost two thousand years, when in 1948 Israel became a nation again. Only God can bring “dry bones” to life.

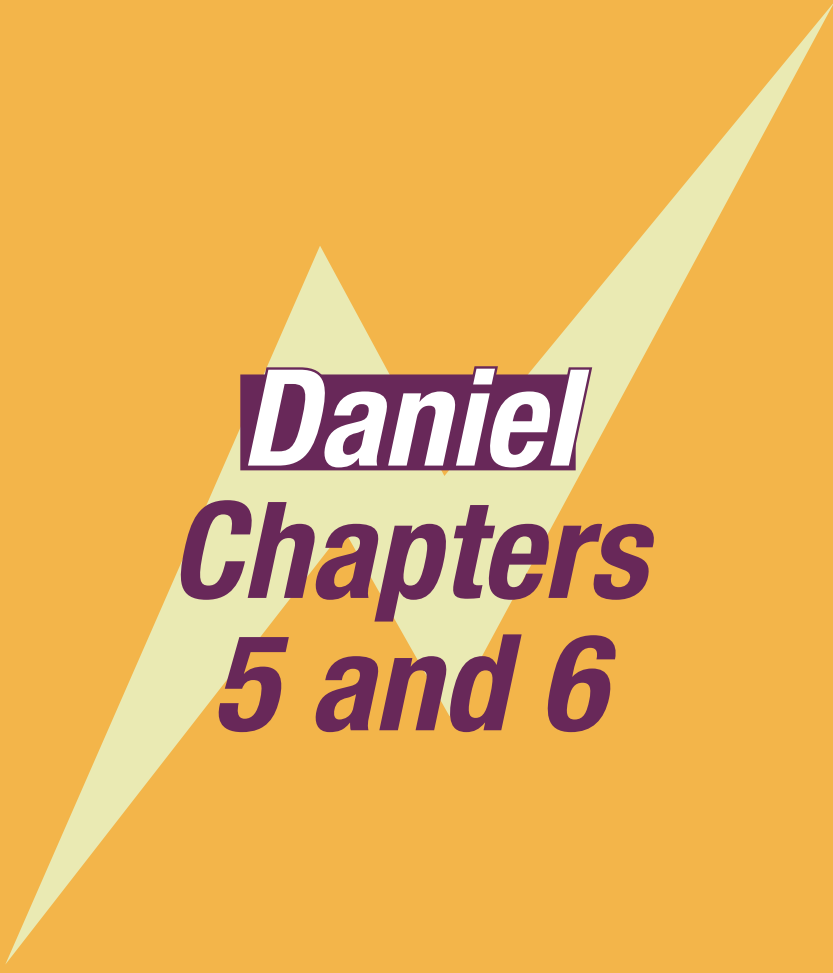
Also, the Valley of Dry Bones doesn’t just speak of God’s grace to Israel. It has a profound message to Christians today as well. In many places, the Church looks dead. Churches and chapels are empty, Christian witness is sparse or non-existent, and people within the Body have abandoned God’s Word. Some denominations who were once known as a light to the world are so dim that they don’t have the power to light up a coat closet. Others have protected their shepherds while they continue to prey on the sheep. Is there nothing left but the dry bones of apathy? Or do we believe, as Ezekiel did, that God can raise up His church once again? Will we risk becoming God’s watchman, even if it costs us personally? One thing’s for sure, what this story is trying to say is God brings dead things back to life. Isn’t that just resurrection? We should be experts in believing in that!



## Group Questions

1. If you lived in Old Testament times, would you want to become a prophet (or prophetess)? Why or why not? Can you think of some advantages? Disadvantages?
2. Describe some of the prophecies you are hearing today from the media, popular music, and the so-called experts. How does biblical prophecy differ from secular sources?
3. Read Ezekiel 3:1-10. What's your taste for God's Word? Is it sweeter than honey, so you eat it daily? Please Explain. Read Ezekiel 2:9-10. Do you find God's Word convicting, confusing or sad? How does this affect your commitment to reading God's Word? How can these two different vantage points reconcile?
4. Read Ezekiel 3:17-21. Then, read "The Watchman" in the Keywords and Phrases of Ezekiel section. Discuss how your group could become "watchmen or watchwomen" for one another without becoming "judgmental or holier-than-thou." Is there someone in your life who's heading down a path that will lead to pain and misery? How could you become a "watchman" to them?
5. Read Ezekiel 34:1-6. It seems that most days we hear of another leader being accused of abusing someone who is unable to defend themselves. Certainly, the church has not been immune. How can your group and fellow leaders of Rock Point engage in the "five marks of a good shepherd" (the weak and hungry are strengthened, healing for the sick, to "bandage" the broken, restore the disobedient, and seek and save the lost)?
6. Have you ever been part of an organization or church that has seen their "glory days" pass them by? In your opinion, what led to the decline? Now read Ezekiel 37:1-14. Maybe, Yahweh breathed new life in a church you attended, how did this happen?
7. Jesus called the New Testament Church a "body." Personally, what parts of your "spiritual body" need some new life? (Examples: your heart could use a greater compassion for others, your head needs more understanding of God's Word, your hands need to be used by God to help others, your feet need to go and proclaim the good news to some old friends, your knees need to become calloused by prayer, your ears need to become attuned to obeying Him, your arms need to pick up someone who's fallen in a ditch, your eyes need a fresh vision of Him, your nose needs to smell the wonderful fragrance of His presence, and your tongue needs to taste His forgiveness once again.)
8. This week spend some extra time in prayer for our world, nation, church, leaders, and our groups. This may be a good week to split up into groups of two or three and spread out, so everyone has a chance to pray.





***Daniel***  
***Chapters***  
***5 and 6***

# Daniel: The Prophet

## Who Obeyed the KING



The book of Daniel is the only apocalyptic book in the Old Testament. It is most similar to the book of Revelation, which is the only apocalyptic book in the New Testament. You're probably asking yourself, well what does that actually mean? The Greek word "apocalypse" just means "an uncovering of something hidden," and employs a language that speaks in pictures or symbols, more than words. But wow, does this book deliver an "uncovering!" For example, Daniel accurately reveals the first coming of Jesus, His death and resurrection and the destruction of Israel, Jerusalem, and the Temple. The book of Revelation begins with the events that will take place after these. The Book of Daniel gives an outline from King Nebuchadnezzar to the First Coming of Jesus, which is not found in the Book of Revelation. But Revelation gives us an outline of what will happen after the Second Coming of Jesus, which is not found in Daniel.

Because Daniel's work is strategically placed by God in the Old Testament, it is incredibly helpful to anyone, but especially the Jewish people who reject the New Testament and are in danger of missing the Rapture. Those who are left behind will be able to identify the beginning of the Tribulation Period, what group of nations will rule the world, and who will be their last leader. Plus, the book of Daniel gives us the clearest understanding of God's ability to protect the Jewish people throughout history, more than any other book. It also offers us an inside look into the influence of Satan's forces on the nations and their leaders. Therefore, the books of Daniel and Revelation enhance each other, and are like the bookends of prophecy. They help us understand the other. Isn't it amazing that these two different books, written by two different authors hundreds of years apart, are in more than just agreement, but complete each other!

Daniel was a member of the royal family of Judah. And though we don't know his exact birth date, he was probably born in Jerusalem in or around 620 BC. He was thirteen or fourteen years old when he was sent to Babylon. Even though Daniel was well educated, he was selected for additional training in the language,

literature and culture of Babylon. His Hebrew name "Daniel," which means "God is my Judge," was changed to "Belteshazzar," which meant "whom Bel favors." Unlike most of the other prophets, except maybe Isaiah, Daniel always distinguished himself because of his faithfulness to God. When he interpreted the hot-tempered King Nebuchadnezzar's dreams, he was promoted to a position of authority over all the wise men of Babylon. Despite his high aptitude for learning, he was uncompromising when it came to God's commands and never took credit for the things that he accomplished but rather gave the glory to Yahweh. These qualities were cultivated on his knees, for Daniel was one of history's greatest prayer warriors. He understood that his God was the One and only, and therefore Daniel was not intimidated by the power of the Babylonians. He was, however, always respectful to his captors. The result looked much like Jesus' childhood. He grew in wisdom, stature, and in favor with God and with people (Luke 2:52). Daniel spent the majority of his life as one of the most powerful men in the world and is widely recognized as one of the greatest men of all time! Because of Daniel's wisdom and influence, he was eventually promoted to the lofty position of the second in command over the entire Babylonian Empire, and only reported to King Nebuchadnezzar.



**"Whenever the king consulted them in any matter requiring wisdom and balanced judgment, he found Daniel ten times more capable than any of the magicians and enchanters in his entire kingdom."**

Daniel 1:20

# The Conspiracy

## Against the Prophet



Since you've turned the page in your study guide, a lot has happened. Please indulge me as I provide a little background before we move into chapter six. Nebuchadnezzar is dead, and Daniel is about eighty years old. The winds of change have blown hard in Babylon. Infighting has struck the royal family and the crown has changed heads several times. The palace has been declared off-limits to Daniel. Now, the main character is one of Nebuchadnezzar's grandsons named Belshazzar. His dad Nabonidus took the Babylonian army outside of the city walls to fight what was soon to be the greatest superpower in the world, the Medes and Persians.

A battle quickly ensues, and the Babylonians are routed and Nabonidus flees and goes into hiding. So, Belshazzar decided to show the remaining fighting men that he's not afraid. He throws a big party to show everyone his bravery. When the party was in full swing, Belshazzar gave the command to bring out the gold and silver cups which had been taken from the destroyed Temple in Jerusalem. Then the king, lords, wives and concubines began drinking from sacred cups (when the wine's flowing, everyone gets along even wives and concubines). Suddenly, a big hand appears and writes **"MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN"** on one of the palace walls. In response, Belshazzar summoned his wisemen to translate. And of course they're not able to decipher what the message meant. Finally, the queen's mother remembers that the wisest man in all the kingdom was Daniel. And after a very long history lecture from Daniel about how Belshazzar was walking in Nebuchadnezzar's "foolish footsteps," he translated the message from God: **"You have been weighed and measured and found wanting."** Recently, scholars have found a second meaning to the message. **"Your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and Persians."** Because Daniel was able to translate God's handwritten letter, the king rewarded him with a royal purple robe and was instantly made the third highest ruler in Babylon.

Maybe the reason for Belshazzar's bravado had more to do with the fact that the city of Babylon's walls were 87 feet thick and had never been breached. In fact, Babylon's Hanging Gardens, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, existed because the Euphrates river flowed through Babylon. This allowed the gardens to be lush and beautiful, and also provided the city with a powerful tactical advantage. The river actually flowed under and around its walls creating a giant moat. This made it almost impossible to cut off the city's food and water supply or breach its walls. For many weeks before the party, Cyrus, the commander of the army for the Medes and Persians, devised a plan that would be very difficult to pull off, even with modern machinery. About ten miles upriver, north of the city of Babylon, Cyrus had half of his troops build a large dam to divert the water into a low lying swamp. Cyrus sent the remainder of his troops to the southern side of Babylon. When the water stopped flowing, it eventually emptied the moat and made it possible for Medes and Persians to attack.

So as the party began to die down, a few small brigades attacked from the north and south. They were able to eliminate the guards and lower the drawbridges to let in the rest of Cyrus' troops. They caught Belshazzar and his fighters completely by surprise. The Medes and Persians attacked the Babylonian command and control structure who were so drunk, they were unable to direct their forces. Several weeks after Cyrus captured the city, Darius the Mede eventually came to Babylon and took control of the city and the empire. Darius was sixty-two years old at the time. It's interesting that Cyrus' mother was a Mede and his father a Persian. It was their marriage that brought this powerful coalition together. Also, we'll see later how God foreordained Cyrus' victory. Spoiler alert! In a few short years, the power of the empire will be back in the capable hands of Cyrus, and guess who's his number one influencer? Yes, it's Daniel. And it's King Cyrus who will allow the Jews to return to Palestine to rebuild the Temple and their nation. But, let's get back to King Darius.



Darius divided his expanding empire into 120 provinces, appointing satraps over each to handle the day-to-day operations. He appointed three governors to rule over forty provinces each, and Daniel was one of them. It was the job of these three governors to protect the interests of the king, and to keep the satraps corruption-free. Daniel possessed the resumé for such a task. Remember, in his younger days, he ruled directly under Nebuchadnezzar over the entire Babylonian empire. Because of his favor with Yahweh, Daniel overshadowed the other governors and found himself second in command once again. This didn't sit well with the other governors and satraps. They wanted to discredit Daniel but couldn't find any way to do it! They finally realized that the only way to get something on Daniel would have to be related to the worship of his God. So, they invented a conspiracy, claiming that some of the provinces were not following the wishes of the king, who was considered a god to the Medes and Persians. The satraps also persuaded Darius into writing and establishing a decree, that for thirty days, all citizens of the empire were to demonstrate their belief in Darius' divinity by praying to him and him alone. Anyone who violated this law was to be immediately thrown into the lion's den. Certainly, over the course of thirty days, someone would catch Daniel praying to Yahweh! According to the laws of the Medes and Persians, since the king was a god, he'd be admitting he'd made a mistake if he changed a self-imposed law. No god could do that! Therefore, Darius had to obey his own law or admit that he wasn't a god! It was a sinister plan. And this should serve as a sign to all of us who are awaiting Jesus' second coming - laws like these have come full circle. In many places in modern Iraq (the ancient site of Babylon), people are being beheaded for praying to any other god except Allah. Because it was Daniel's habit to pray three times a day, it didn't take much time to catch him in the act. The governors and the satraps came to Darius and demanded that Daniel be thrown into the lion's den for disregarding his decree. But their plan backfired.

Instead of being angry with Daniel, Darius saw through their thinly-veiled motives and turned his anger on the "tattletales." He also blamed himself for not seeing their treachery sooner. Yet, Darius understood that he had no choice but to give the order. If he admitted his humanity it would cause a coup, and the young empire probably wouldn't survive. Reluctantly, the king gave the command. But here's the amazing part, although Daniel had served the king for only a short time, Darius had already seen the goodness of Daniel's God in the life of his "friend." Sadly, Darius was a man who had to hide the fact that he wasn't a god, but he was able to recognize that Daniel's God was the real deal. He told Daniel, "Your God, whom you serve continually, He will deliver you." And that's the last words the prophet heard before he was thrown into the pit. As soon as Daniel was delivered to the lions, a large stone was rolled over the opening. It was sealed by warm wax and imprinted by the king's signet ring.

Sound familiar? Just as the disciples were unable to eat or sleep the night after Jesus' crucifixion, neither did Darius. He hoped the God of his "friend" would be able to do what he couldn't; rescue him. As dawn broke, both Jesus' disciples and Darius came back to the tomb, but ironically the king may have demonstrated more faith than Jesus' friends. As he approached the lion's den, Darius called out, "Daniel, servant of the living God, whom you serve continually, has your God been able to deliver you from the lions?" I find it fascinating, that a pagan king, whose gods were merely lifeless statues, understood that Daniel served a "living God." Also, I wonder if Darius truly understood Daniel's reply: Yes, I AM here. As a kid, I always put Daniel's lions and Jesus the Lion together. I pictured Jesus appearing to the pride and guarding Daniel all night. Lions only roar when they catch prey, so it must have been a quiet night of rest. But the silent roar of the true King echoed into eternity!



## Group Questions

1. Ask the group to answer the following questions one at a time: If someone were to say to you, “Can’t you see the writing on the wall?” what would you think they’re trying to communicate? If you could give a warning to yourself by writing something on the wall, what would it be?

2. Read Jeremiah 51:7; Revelation 14:8 and Daniel 5:1-4. Throughout history, Babylon has always been known for its indulgence, indifference, and for being irreverent. Why did Belshazzar throw the party? How did the Babylonians demonstrate indulgence? Indifference? Irreverence?

3. Specifically, how in your lifetime, have you seen indulgence, indifference and irreverence grow in our culture? How have these changes affected you personally? Which of these three is the most difficult for you?

4. Read Daniel 5:5-12; Luke 12:1-3; and 1 Corinthians 4:4-5. The writing on the wall seemed to terrify Belshazzar. God’s judgment was public and eventually catastrophic for Babylon. From time to time God weighs all of His kids’ character and makes corrections. What should be our attitude in times of correction? (For help see 1 Peter 4:19).

5. Read Daniel 6:1-5. What are some of the reasons that people get jealous of one another? Since the other officials couldn’t find a valid complaint against the way Daniel handled his business, from what other front did they stage an attack? Daniel was obviously open about his faith. For what specific reasons could someone not like you for simply being a believer? (Luke 21:17)

6. What are some current societal pressures that directly conflict with your faith? (Daniel 6:6-9) Why do we sometimes worry about what others think and less about what God thinks? (Ephesians 6:19-20)

7. Read Daniel 6:13. There’s no other way to put it. Daniel suffered for doing what was right. God allowed an unjust law to be upheld which caused a national crisis and put Daniel on death row. He did all this, just so He could reveal Himself to a king. Put yourself in Daniel’s shoes - how would you feel? How do you normally respond in crisis? How do you act when you suffer injustice?

8. Finish tonight’s meeting by taking the “Am I like Daniel?” self-assessment below. On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being “never” and 10 being “always” answer these three questions:

I serve God continually. (Daniel 6:16-20)

I’m innocent between God and men. (Daniel 6:21-22)

I believe in God and trust Him. (Daniel 6:23)





# ***Hosea***

# Hosea: This is Your Story, This is My Story



You are about to experience a scandalous story about the most unlikely couple who ever came together. It began with a man in love and an illicit affair, and that was just the beginning of their love story. This tale abounds with failure, anger, despair, forgiveness, and second... third... and fourth chances. And of course, restoration. It's a love story that will take your breath away and warm your heart. It's your story, and it's mine. And if you'll allow the pages of Scripture to sweep you away, you'll find the true meaning of love. We've turned a corner of sorts. In the first four sessions we explored the four major prophets. Now, we'll shift our attention to Hosea, the first of the six minor prophets (there's actually twelve but we're only going looking to at six). To get an understanding of Hosea's story, we'll have to venture back to the time of King Solomon's reign when all of Israel was united. Soon after Solomon died, his son Rehoboam decided not only to keep his father's debilitating tax practices, but to actually increase them. The 10 Northern tribes bitterly complained of taxation without representation, rebelled against Yahweh, and divided the nation into two separate kingdoms.

If you're reading along in your Bible, you've probably noticed that sometimes it refers to the Northern Kingdom as Israel, or Samaria (which is the capital) or Ephraim (the largest tribe of the ten northern tribes). In ancient times, you needed a few things to be recognized as a true kingdom: a king, a place to worship, and armies. Jeroboam, a servant in Solomon's royal court, seized power (against Rehoboam) and named the city of Samaria as the new capital of the North. He quickly erected two makeshift temples at Bethel and Dan, complete with matching sets of golden calves. They were replicas of the ones that Aaron crafted to be worshipped at the foot of Mount Sinai while Moses was away for 40 days when he received the 10 Commandments. As a result, the Israelites descended into idol worship – and the king's brash actions were forever known as the “sin of Jeroboam.”

Hosea was called to this Samaria, to warn the people of an impending judgment at the hands of a nation who was far more ruthless than any other people who inhabited the earth (the

Assyrians). But his message was hard to swallow because in the 8th century, both the Northern and Southern kingdoms were experiencing a time of great prosperity. (While Hosea was preaching in Israel, Amos and Isaiah were preaching in Judah.) Yet, prosperity was the least of Hosea's problems. God commanded Hosea to do a lot of crazy things that would seem contradictory to the character and holiness of a prophet.

First, God commanded him to marry a woman who was a prostitute. This was an arranged marriage personally chosen by Yahweh. Her name was Gomer. Her father's name was Diblaim which meant, “a double portion of raisin cakes,” which were considered a powerful aphrodisiac. Today, it would be like naming your firstborn son “Viagra.” Gomer's name meant “completion.” The underlying idea suggested a person with this name filled their lives to “completion” with the “ripened fruit of iniquity.” It would be like naming your daughter “Jezebel.” So, let's just say Gomer wasn't every mama's dream for her little boy! Also, it gives us more insight of what Gomer's upbringing must've been like.

Also, Yahweh told Hosea to shave his head and keep it that way (this was the common mark of someone who was in mourning), yet weddings were supposed to be joyous occasions. Probably not so much when you disgrace your family by marrying a prostitute! Also, the “shaved head” look didn't fit in with the signs of the times. Everyone was partying like it was 699, and the last thing the people were thinking was that these gods were angry.

Because finally, they had their own gods who they could control. And these gods were delivering the goods! Bumper crops, peace on all sides of the kingdom, and full treasuries were the hallmarks of the of 8th century in Judah and Israel. Yet, as history has taught us over and over again, storms tend to loom below the horizon.

Lastly, God instructed Hosea to burn down the places of idol worship and destroy those gods who were “so much more generous” than Yahweh (who only delivered them from Egypt, and gave them the Promised Land).



### Do You Want the Bad News, or the Really Bad News?

Well, I think you have the basics of Hosea's story so far: Spiritual guy pursued scandalous girl. Sincere guy dated skeptical girl. God-centered guy marries self-centered girl. Devalued daughter became a highly valued bride. Rejected woman became a chosen wife. Think about it, this was probably the first time in Gomer's life when she experienced any type of stability. Somehow, she was pursued by a man whose name meant "salvation" and actually lived up to his name! So, it should have been a happy and hopeful experience to hear that a baby was on the way, right? Well, not so fast. Maybe it would be a little easier to explain if I put it in a modern-day context. Now imagine you lived in 735 BC and Hosea was your pastor. All the women in the church have been eagerly awaiting the baby's arrival (maybe a few of the guys, but probably not "eagerly"). And let's face it, the last year and a half have been a little rough since the leader of the church chose to marry a prostitute. Just when the church had finally turned the corner, putting everything in the past, the big day finally arrived. That's when the new dad, with his baby in his arms, announced his name: Jezreel. Okay, it's not one of the more popular biblical names. But it had a certain ring to it... right?

It certainly does. Jezreel is where Jehu killed King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, who could have won the prize for the most sinful rulers in Israel's history, if there ever was such a contest. Jehu also killed all of the couple's heirs there, and this place is commonly known as the "blood of Jezreel." You may know its other names, "Megiddo" or "Armageddon" It was one the bloodiest pieces of real estate in the entire history of the world, both in the past and in the future. Funny, I don't remember seeing Armageddon suggested as a viable option in any of our baby names books. Now, I'd love to tell you that Hosea's other two children fared better, but nothing could be farther from the truth.

It was after the birth of Jezreel that Hosea seemed to notice a change in Gomer. She became restless and unhappy, like a wild bird trapped in a cage. He kept on pleading with a wayward

nation to turn from its sin and trust God for deliverance. Yet, things were good, the sun was shining, and it was too hard to believe that total annihilation could be just on the horizon. It was in those days that Gomer seemed to be embarrassed by the preaching of her husband. Just once, why couldn't he live in the moment? Though Scripture doesn't provide all the gory details, it seems to suggest when Gomer got pregnant for the second time, Hosea was convinced that the child was not his. At God's direction the prophet named the child, a girl this time, Lo-Ruhamah. Her name meant "not loved" or "unpitied," implying that she would never enjoy her true father's love. Her name was actually a prediction of a time in the near future when God would cut off His love for His people in the Northern Kingdom. In 722 BC, the Assyrians would invade Israel and wipe them from the face of the earth. No sooner had Lo-Ruhamah been weaned, Gomer conceived again. It was another boy. God told Hosea to call him Lo-Ammi, meaning "not my people" or "no kin of mine." It symbolized Israel's alienation from Jehovah, but it also exposed Gomer's sinful escapades. This child, born in Hosea's house, was not his!

It was all out in the open. Everyone knew about Gomer's affairs. While the entire second chapter of Hosea's prophecy describes Jehovah's relationship with His unfaithful wife Israel. Hosea reacts like any other husband who truly loves his wife, while wallowing in the shame of a public scandal. First, he pleaded with her (2:2). Then he threatens to disinherit her (2:3). She responds by running away because her lovers promise to lavish material things upon her (2:5). Hosea would take her back in loving forgiveness, but her repentance would only be short lived. The final blow occurred when Gomer sent a note telling Hosea that she was done with him for good. It's easy to believe that the people closest to Hosea were probably glad when she left for good, but not Hosea, he had God's undying love for her. He still dreamed of a day when Gomer could be a faithful wife. Finally, after all her lovers abandon her, she hits rock bottom and sells herself into slavery.



### **Lord, How Many Times Should I Forgive Someone...?**

Most of us know the story found in Matthew 18:21, when Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive someone who commits the same sin, over and over against him in a single day. The pious Peter throws out a number he thinks represents the greatest amount of grace a human being could possibly extend... seven. Obviously, Peter hadn't spent much time in the book of Hosea. The prophet was still in love with Gomer, even though she was an adulteress, and God wanted Hosea to seek her out and prove his love for her. Only someone who knows the loving forgiveness of God could ever love to the point of Hosea's self-sacrifice.

Christian husbands are commanded to love their wives as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5:25), and Hosea is an outstanding example of this kind of love. It's a love that bears all things, endures all things, believes all things, and hopes all things, a love that never ends. Hosea found her, ragged, torn, sick, dirty, and destitute, chained to an auction block in a filthy slave market. Gomer was a repulsive shadow of the woman she once was. And according to the Law this is less than what Gomer deserved. Hosea could have taunted Gomer, demanding to know where her lovers were now? Instead, Hosea completely overpays the auctioneers to secure her release: fifteen shekels of silver, and thirteen bushels of barley. Then, he brought her home and eventually restored her to the position of his wife, when he had every right to keep her as a slave or have her stoned to death.

So, Christians, how do we do this forgiveness thing? I would dare to guess, maybe only a handful or less of the people reading this group study are being asked by God to risk the kind of outer-worldly forgiveness as Hosea demonstrated. Many of us allow slights and petty agitations to require our forgiveness, or the occasional sharp word or subtle accusations to fester in our hearts. Then we tend to harbor them and let them eat at us, until they build up bitterness and resentment, which erode our relationships. Minor slights that are not taken to the throne room, drive a wedge not only between people, but create a greater distance between us and

God. Forgiveness does not necessarily mean, that we should just overlook the sins that have been committed against us. Today, most people would rather suffer in silence, move away to a distant land, or find a new church, rather than have an uncomfortable conversation with someone. God wants us to have open conversations and share what wrongs have been done to us. Gomer certainly knew how her actions were tearing Hosea's heart in two. The Bible tells us to approach one another kindly and lovingly, but we have the obligation to share how we've been hurt by the actions of others. Neither does forgiveness mean we can't take positive steps to guard against recurring sin. Sometimes that requires seeking out other Christians who are further along in their journey with the Lord, to help us see ourselves from a different vantage point. Or maybe it might be profitable to take some extended classes or seek counseling to find the root of our past hurts that cause us to withdraw from others. Cultivating deep relationships where you can "confess your sins to one another" without fear of betrayal is a direct pathway to real freedom in Christ.

Maybe we've suffered a major offense like Hosea's, and we can never seem to forget it. We stew on it and fret over it, and we keep bringing it up in a subconscious attempt to punish those who should be the closest people to us like our spouse or immediate family. We try to forgive, but a few days later it's right there again, preying on our consciousness. Big wounds sometimes take longer to heal. They will come back to our minds. There is no way to avoid it. But every time they do, we must first remind ourselves that we really did forgive, and rehearse how much God has forgiven us. Because the truth is, no one has hurt us more than we have hurt us, rebelling against a loving, healing God. We must go to Him, ask Him to take the destructive, unforgiving thoughts out of our minds, help us focus on the plans that He has for us in the future, and how He can use our past as stepping stones rather than stumbling blocks.



## Group Questions

1. Share a time in your life when you were faced with a crossroads in life. If you went to the left you could experience all the world had to offer, but it would cost you many of your values. If you went right, you'd probably have to walk the path alone. What happened? How was God involved in your journey?
2. God asked Hosea to do some pretty shocking things that may have seemed contradictory to the character and holiness of a prophet. What were some of these things (for help see Hosea 1:3-9)? What was God trying to communicate to the people of the Northern Kingdom? Has God ever spoken to you this way (symbolically)? Please explain.
3. What were some of the reasons why the people of Samaria had trouble believing in Hosea's message of a coming judgment? How do you respond to modern day messages of doom and gloom?
4. What were the economic conditions in the 8th century in Israel? How did these conditions affect the people's view of their relationship with God? Have you ever fallen in the same trap as the people living in Samaria? Please explain.
5. The people living in the Northern Kingdom also suffered from worshiping idols. Why would anyone worship an idol? What are some modern-day idols that you've been tempted to bow down and worship with your time, treasure, talent or testimony?
6. What would you say to someone who read this story for the first time and concluded that the God of the Old Testament was an angry God because He commanded Hosea to name his children, Armageddon (Jezreel), Not Loved (Lo Ruhamah), and Not My Kin (Lo Ammi)?
7. Hosea's only crime was loving a woman who was so broken she was unable to love him back. When you hear of another spiritual leader embroiled in a public scandal, what's your first reaction?
  1. Give them the benefit of the doubt
  2. Become tempted to give up on all organized religion
  3. Blast them on social media
  4. Secretly hope you could sit on the jury at their upcoming trial
  5. Pray for the leaders you love and support
  6. Think back to a time when you did something worthy of a scandal, but it never came to light, and humbly thank God for His grace
8. God's gift of love which He poured out on Hosea for Gomer, gave the prophet an incredible capacity to forgive his wife's indiscretions. Husbands, the Bible tells us that we are to love our wives like Christ loved the church. When it comes to extending forgiveness in your marriage, who normally makes the first move towards restoration? Wives, what's your process?





***Joel***

# Joel: The Days of Future Past



Let's face it, when it comes to most daily devotionals, Joel's writings rarely make the cut. The truth is, the book of Joel is one of the most neglected books in all of Scripture, even among scholars. It's an important book because it reveals the role of Israel in God's plan: from the time of the rise of the Assyrian empire (700 BC) all the way through the Millennium (the thousand-year reign of Christ on Earth). Also, Joel had a lot to say about the Gentile nations and their collision course with Armageddon. The primary themes in the book are Joel's prediction of the coming locusts, the Day of the Lord, and the coming of the Spirit. The name Joel means "Yahweh is God." There's no personal history available on the prophet, except that he was the son of Pethuel, and that he speaks to Judah from Jerusalem.

The Temple is mentioned four times. It was standing when he wrote (Joel 1:9, 13-14; 2:15). Joel is quoted in Amos 1:2 (Joel 3:16, 18), which means the book was already in existence when Amos wrote. When was Joel written? It must have been around 835-756 BC because there's no mention of either Assyrian (722 BC) or Babylonian (587 BC) invasions.

Since there's also no king mentioned, Joel probably was written during the period when there was no king in Israel, only a queen! 2 Kings 11-12 and 2 Chronicles 23-24 relay the sad story of Queen Athaliah, who had the royal seed of Judah murdered. After the death of King Ahaziah, the queen had all of her grandchildren put to death, but the baby Joash was spared (the only surviving royal seed). He was hidden by his aunt, Jehosheba, and Jehoiada the high priest in the Temple complex. Seven years later, Joash was crowned king of Judah (2 Kings 11:12) and Queen Athaliah was slain by her own people (2 Kings 11:16). The book of Joel may have been written just prior to Joash's coronation in 835 BC. That would make Joel one of the earliest writing prophets.

The book opens abruptly with Joel speaking to the elders who sat at the city gates and were considered the greatest judges in the land. He asks them to think about a time in history (800 years prior) when a nation had suffered God's judgment from the teeth of locusts. While the Children of Israel were safe in the land of Goshen, they witnessed a terrible plague of locusts, which was one of the ten plagues that

God poured out on the Egyptians to force Pharaoh to free God's people. Moses instructed the Hebrews to tell their children and repeat the works of God to all future generations (Deuteronomy 4:9; 6:6-7). Why? To remind them of God's mercy and goodness, and to warn them that God would be their judge, now and in the future (Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 2).

Because we live in the 21st century, it's really hard for us to understand just how devastating a swarm of locusts can be. So allow me to give you some details about this insect known as the "incarnation of hunger." Locusts are orthopterans (along with mantises and grasshoppers). There are 24,000 different species (282 in Arizona alone). Some can grow up to 10 inches in length! They multiply by parthenogenesis (if a male isn't around, the female can take care of it by herself). Each female locust can lay 250-300 pods, with 70-80 eggs in each pod. Larvae can go through as many as 4 stages, sometimes taking 6-7 years to fully mature. And they can fly up to 17 hours at a time. Scientists have found a single hormone that, when activated, causes locusts to swarm and become aggressive. The swarms they travel in are like military formations, make a wind-like noise when in flight, and eat not only plants but the roots below ground (you can actually hear their munching sounds at night). Density of a swarm can be 120 million locusts per square mile and can block out the sun! They have even been spotted 1200 miles out at sea! Joel mentioned four types of locusts that attacked Judah. First, the "gnawing locusts" arrived in spring, without wings. When they molted they became the "swarming locusts." These look like grasshoppers but are much larger. In the third phase, they became the "licking locusts," which looked like caterpillars with short wings. And lastly, the "hopping locusts" that are actually cankerworms who love to strip away at the roots. Out of all the recorded locust swarms throughout history, this one may have been the worst because it had all four stages! It also caused a great famine in the land. As Yahweh looked over the destruction from these invaders, His heart was broken for His people.



## The entire structure of the book of Joel is built on a comparison between what's happened in the past and what will happen in the future.

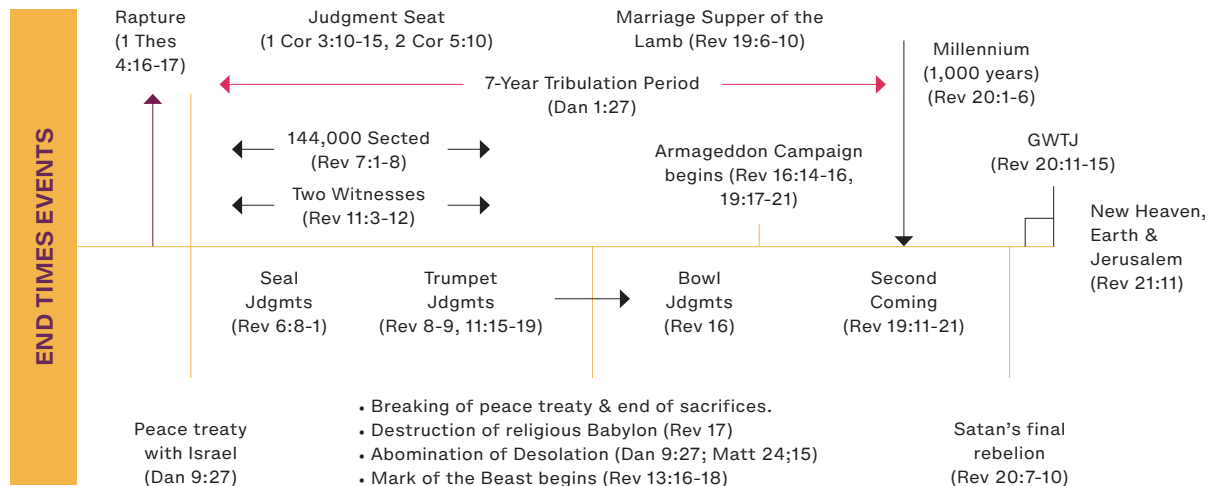
The entire structure of the book of Joel is built on a comparison between what's happened in the **past** and what will happen in the **future**. Joel suggests that since the Lord had heard His children's cries when they were in bitter bondage in Egypt and rescued them in the **past**, He would certainly do it again in the **future**.

In Joel 2:1-11, the prophet calls the people to return to Yahweh with all their hearts in fasting, weeping, and mourning; to actually tear their hearts, not just their garments. (Sometimes the Jews would tear their clothes as an outward sign of mourning or repentance, but often it was just a way to look holy). And since the people hadn't dealt publicly with their sin, they should blow the trumpet and sound the alarm to call everyone in the city to put on sackcloth and ashes (to show their pitiful state). Yet, there's some real irony here. Normally, when trumpets were blown, it was to warn the people of an invading army. The army of locusts had come and gone, but there was still an armed force ready to complete the job, the angels of the Lord and God Himself. It was the priest's job to blow the trumpets, to sound the alarm, and to call a solemn assembly to publicly admit their sins and beg God for His mercy and protection.

But, there's so much more to this story than first meets the eye. By using the phrase "The Day of the Lord," Joel is looking into the **future** when a great army will march into Israel. This army will be so powerful, the land before it will be green like the Garden of Eden and behind it will become a desolate wasteland. This army will spread across the mountains of Israel like

the millions of locusts in Joel's day. In the **future**, a trumpet will be blown in Heaven signaling the coming Tribulation Period—a seven-year period of gloominess and thick darkness, much like it looked when the great swarms of locusts charged Jerusalem. In the **future**, the earth will quake, the sun and moon will be darkened, and the stars will not shine. Yet, as believers, we shouldn't be concerned about going through this period, for the Apostle Paul promised those who are in Christ are no longer in darkness. So this "Day of the Lord" shouldn't overtake us as a thief in the night. You are all "sons of light, and sons of the day" (1 Thessalonians 5:4-5). And the Bible promises that we'll be long gone before this Tribulation begins. "For the Lord, Himself will descend from heaven, with a shout of the archangel and the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, so we will always be with the Lord." (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17) Christians will have a heavenly view of the terror on the earth!

The second half of Chapter 2 is just one long **salvation oracle**. Joel makes a promise to His people - that this "Day of the Lord" could be avoided in their generation, if they would return to God, and then He would be jealous for His land and spare His people (Joel 2:18). Joel reminded Judah, that in the **past**, Yahweh once informed Moses that He was tired of listening to Israelites grumbling so He was going to wipe them out and start all over again. Moses lamented and said, "If only all of God's people were prophets and He would place His Spirit upon them." (Numbers 11:29) In Joel 2:28-29 the prophet promises that one day in the **future**, all of God's kids would receive the indwelling of the Spirit. "I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days." Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, The Apostle Peter understood at Pentecost (Acts 2), what Joel foresaw, when Jews from many foreign lands heard the message of Jesus in their own language, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.



That's why we call the Book of Joel **the days of future, past!** In one little book, Joel connects Moses to -> Peter at Pentecost -> to the Tribulation Period. Now, Joel has one more rabbit to pull out of his hat to finish up the connection starting with Moses and ending in the **future** battle of Armageddon! Joel 3:9-16 and Revelation 20:1-3 describe a time in the **future** that takes place at the end of Jesus' Millennial Reign when Satan and three unnamed evil spirits are released for a short time, to once again "deceive the nations." These spirits will be able to perform signs and wonders and will go all over the world to recruit "kings" to prepare the nations for war once again. They will instruct Jesus' enemies to "hammer their plowshares into swords and their pruning knives into spears."

What makes this statement so sad is that the prophet Micah prophesied that Jesus will command His people to do the opposite, 1000 years before Armageddon - to hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, when He rescues a multitude of people out of the seven-year Tribulation Period! (Micah 4:3) The text doesn't explicitly identify these evil spirits, but it may be the unclean spirits that come out of the mouths of the Dragon (Satan), the Beast (Anti-Christ), and the False Prophet (Revelation 16:13). These troops will be mobilized from all over the world and will gather to attack Jerusalem and challenge the armies of the Lord. They will assemble in the Valley of "Jehoshaphat" or "Jezreel." Joel refers to this site as the "Valley of Decision." You probably know it as the Valley of Armageddon.

You'd think that all the people who will make it through the seven-year Tribulation period without receiving the Mark of the Beast, would just be grateful to receive a second chance to follow Jesus, right? Yet, during Jesus' Millennial Reign, Earth will be restored, and all the people will be shielded from temptation because the enemy will be chained and sealed in a pit (Revelation 20:1-3). It will be like the early days of Adam and Eve after they left the Garden. The prophet Isaiah tells us in those days, lifespans will increase (Methuselah lived 969 years, see Genesis 5:25) so the earth's population will soar (Isaiah 65:20). That's why it's amazing that Revelation 20:7 estimates the number of Satan's troops who surround Jerusalem will be as numberless as the grains of sand along the seashore. Joel tells us that the sun and moon will grow dark, and the stars will diminish their brightness. The LORD Jesus will roar from Zion and utter His voice from Jerusalem; the heavens and the earth will shake, but the Lord will be a shelter for His people, and will strengthen Christ's elect.

Joel's prophecy ends with a promise that God who dwells on the Holy Mountain of Jerusalem, will never allow foreigners to overrun Jerusalem again. The Book of Revelation speaks of a time when God will create a New Heaven that unites with a New Earth (Revelation 21-22), Yahweh will sit on the throne of a New Jerusalem, and we will see Him as He really is. The gates of the city will always be open, and everyone will have access, without any fear of ever being attacked. For He is our God, and we will be His people, forever.



## Group Questions

1. In the very early years of the 8th century BC, Israel's monetary structure was mostly derived from agriculture. They were considered the "bread basket" of the Middle East and sold their surplus to many other nations in the region. Now that they had been attacked by locusts, what do you think were some of the consequences that God's chosen people faced? Who was to blame?

2. Do you think there were people of Joel's day that explained this judgment away based upon a naturalistic worldview? In other words, do you think some tried to explain what was going on in purely scientific categories? If something similar happened to the U.S. in the 21st century, how would God's people explain the reason the catastrophe had occurred? Do you think God still uses nature as a means to bring about His judgment today? Why or Why not?

3. Read Joel 2:12-17. How does a person return to God with all their heart? Why did God require fasting, weeping, and mourning? Why does He want them to "rend" (tear) their hearts and not their garments? What does that saying really mean? Is God seeking the repentance of individuals only? Why does Joel call the whole congregation to do it together?

4. Read Joel 2:28-32; Jeremiah 31:31-33; Acts 2:14-24, 37-38. In these passages who was filled with the Spirit and cut to the heart? What are some pieces of evidence in a person's life that the Holy Spirit lives within them?

5. In Joel 3, God avenges the blood of His people and becomes a refuge for His children. He does this because He's slow to anger and abounds in steadfast love. Yet, nowhere in either the Old or the New Testament, does God forgive stubborn and rebellious people who refuse to repent. Read Joel 3:1-8.

- Do we believe that eventually God will judge all people?
- Have we returned to God with all of our hearts?
- Are we living for God alone, or are our loyalties divided?

6. End tonight's session with a time of corporate confession. Spend some time in silence so your group members may have a personal time to confess. Then spend the rest of your time together praying for our church, community, nation, and the world. Pray for those who are at work in other nations that are persecuted for Christ, that they wouldn't give up! Pray for the next generation to experience revival in their day.



A large, light green, stylized letter 'A' is centered on the page. It has a jagged, lightning-bolt-like shape. The word 'Amos' is written in a bold, white, italicized serif font across the middle of the 'A'.

***Amos***

# Amos: Let Justice Roll Down as a River



Amos was a shepherd and a fig tree farmer from Tekoa, which was located in Judah, near the border between the Northern (Israel) and Southern Kingdoms (Judah). The North had seized its independence about 150 years before Amos was called to prophesy against Samaria, where King Jeroboam II reigned. He was a successful military leader who expanded the size of the kingdom through military conquest and plunder, which significantly increased the wealth of the Northern Kingdom. But in the eyes of the prophets and especially Yahweh, Jeroboam may have been one of the worst leaders in Israel's history. The nation's wealth had led to apathy, particularly when it came to keeping God's law. Also, idol worship filled the land, which in turn led to injustice and the neglect of the poor. Finally, Israel's sin got to the point where Amos couldn't take it anymore. Yahweh called Amos to go on a trek towards the city of Bethel which was one of the two cities that had a temple (the other was Dan). God told Amos to begin preaching His word to the people. The book of Amos is a collection of the sermons, poems, and visions that Amos uttered over years which were compiled later to give God's people a sense of His divine message to the Northern Kingdom. And it's a message that's relevant for us today.

The book is fairly straightforward in its design. Chapters 1-2 are a series of messages to Israel and to the surrounding nations. Chapters 3-6 are poems and messages to Israel and its leaders. And chapters 7-9 contain a series of horrific visions which God gave Amos to serve as a warning to Israel to change its direction. So, without further ado, let's just dive into God's message through Amos. The book opens with a series of short poems that accuse all of Israel's neighbors of violence and injustice. Which is kind of strange, because the opening sentence of the book tells us that Amos was being sent by God to warn the Northern Kingdom (Israel). Yet, Amos begins his accusations against Israel's neighboring nations, such as: Gaza, Moab, Edom and Ammon. So, what's Amos up to? Well, if you look at a map, you'll see that Amos is creating a target. And when he's done, Israel will be right in the center of the bullseye, in the crosshairs of God's wrath. Systematically, Amos is predicting God's judgment to come on all these neighboring cities, but he is saving the best (or worst) for last. After threatening

Israel's neighbors, Amos unleashes a poetic accusation towards Israel, which is three times longer than all of the oracles that the other cities received, combined!

What's even more amazing is the fact that Amos' writing is some of the most complicated and witty literature in all of the Bible. It's almost impossible to explain in English, but in Hebrew the poems all rhyme! Not bad for a lowly shepherd/fig tree farmer. Amos blasts Israel's wealthy for ignoring the poor and allowing a grave injustice in the land. What's this grave injustice? Permitting the poor to be sold into debt slavery. It was for freedom's sake that Yahweh crushed the Egyptians for such cruelty, and now Israel was guilty of the same offense. And to make matters worse, the leaders denied the poor any legal representation. Amos couldn't stomach the injustice of it all, so in chapter three he reminds the leaders as to why God chose the Hebrews in the first place. He chose Israel among all the families of the earth (Genesis 12), to be a blessing to all of the nations. This all started when He called Abraham and his family. Israel had abandoned its purpose! The Hebrews had a great calling and even a greater responsibility, but now Israel will face great consequences.



**“I will bring my exiled people of Israel back from distant lands, and they will rebuild their ruined cities and live in them again.”**

**Amos 9:14**



This second part of the book (chapters 3-6) brings together many of Amos' most famous poems and several key themes. The prophet is constantly exposing Israel's religious hypocrisy. He describes how the leaders of the Northern Kingdom faithfully attend religious services, giving offerings and sacrifices, but all the while they neglect the poor and ignore injustice. Amos proclaims that their religion is all a "sham." And since the people were faking it, God rejects and hates their worship. Conversely, God says that a real relationship with Him will transform a person's relationships with others. The prophet defines true worship as justice flowing like a river, and righteousness will be present like an unfailing stream (Amos 5:24). There are two words that are super important for Amos, the first one is righteousness. It refers to a standard of right and equitable personal relationships between people no matter their social differences. And justice refers to concrete actions that people choose to employ to correct injustice. These types of actions also create even more righteousness. So, both of these attributes should permeate throughout God's people, like a rushing river that's continually renewed from its "Source."

The next key theme that Amos is focused upon is Israel's idolatry. When the Northern Kingdom broke away from Judah, Jeroboam built two new temples and he placed a golden calf into each place of worship. The consequence for allowing idol worship in Israel was that it opened the floodgates to many different types of pagan worship. The people worshipped the gods who controlled sex, weather, war, and last but not least, wealth. The worship of idols caused the people to commit greater injustices, because these gods don't require the same degree of justice and righteousness as the God of Israel. Not to mention the fact that these gods were unrighteous themselves.

The God of Israel was different. He told the children of Israel to both seek Him, that they may live and also to seek good not evil. So, in essence, true worship of the Creator God of Israel is synonymous with doing good. Amos' final key theme was the coming of the "Day of the Lord." Amos prophesied that this terrible day of reckoning was coming because His people had refused to walk in Yahweh's justice. Specifica-

lly, Amos predicted that a huge and powerful nation, who were the most unjust people on the planet, would come and conquer their city and take their people into captivity. We know that his prediction came true. Forty years after Amos' famous "woe oracle" was given, the Assyrian empire swooped in and destroyed their country, and eventually wiped out the entire Northern Ten Tribes of Israel completely.

The book closes (chapters 7-9) with several vivid descriptions of a series of visions which Amos experienced as he foresaw the coming of the Day of the Lord. In the first vision, Amos sees a great swarm of locusts that devours the entire land, and it's immediately followed by a terrible, scorching fire. The third vision depicts Israel being swallowed up like over-ripe fruit. And in the final vision, Amos sees God violently striking the pillars of Israel's great idol temple at Bethel, and the whole building comes tumbling down. This was an image of God's justice being applied to Israel's leaders, and the false gods they served. Or in reality, the little gods that served them! Their end had finally come!

Yet, in the final paragraph we see a glimmer of hope (9:11-15). It depicts this image of Israel as a destroyed building. And God says that out of the ruins He will one day restore the House of David. Or, in other words, He's going to bring the future messianic King from David's family line. And He will rebuild the family of God's people, which surprisingly, we're told is going to include people from all the nations. All of the devastation caused by Israel's sin and God's judgment, on that day, will be reversed. Now this final paragraph is very important. It's the only sign of hope on the other side of judgment, and it helps us see how this book is exploring the relationship between God's justice and His mercy. If God is good, He has to confront and judge evil among Israel and the nations. Yet, Yahweh's long-term purposes are to restore His world, and build a new covenant family. So, through Amos' words, we can still hear his call today: Learn from Israel's hypocrisy and disaster, and embrace a true worship of this God, which should always lead to justice, righteousness, and loving our neighbor as ourselves.



## Group Questions

1. Amos prophesied in a time period (8th Century BC) when the Northern Kingdom of Israel enjoyed great wealth and prosperity. When you look back over the course of your life, have you found it easier to walk with God in times of abundance, or times of need? How does wealth usually affect the morality of a nation? How is our wealth affecting our kids?

2. Amos' oracle (message) is commonly called a "chase sermon." It's a technique used to initially win over an audience by blasting other people's (or nation's) sins. The purpose is to stir up a crowd by first getting the hearers on the speaker's side and then saving the real target for last, heightening the dramatic effect. Amos was from the Southern Kingdom (Judah), sent by God to speak to the North. Why do you think God would send His blistering message to Israel through an outsider? How would you handle an assignment like this? Do you ever feel like an outsider when it comes to sharing your faith with friends or family? How have you handled it?

3. Read Amos 2:4-14. List some of the things that God had against Judah (vv.4-5). Then, list some of the things that God had against Israel. Which of these things is our country guilty of today? Read Amos 2:14-16. Who were the people of Israel trusting to keep them safe? Who is our nation trusting to keep us safe? How secure do you feel right now?

4. Read Amos 5:4-7. Here, Amos is speaking about the golden calves that Jeroboam set up in the temples to be worshipped in Israel. What kind of idols do you see God's people worshipping in the 21st-century church today? How can we pull these idols down? What happens if we ignore them?

5. Read Amos 8:4-6. In these verses, Amos is condemning people who would do anything for money. Most of us live in an area where, in relationship to the world's standards, we are experiencing great abundance. How can we keep our hearts pure and guard our lives from greed and the love of money and possessions?

6. Read Amos 9:1 and 9:11-15. The Book of Amos' final judgment oracle (v. 9:1) came to pass in 722 BC when the Assyrians swooped in and destroyed the Temple at Bethel and took the people of the Northern Kingdom captive. Verses 11-15 describe a time in the future, when Christ will reign from a New Temple in Jerusalem and Jewish refugees from all over the world will take up residence in a restored Israel. And many of these nations will also share in the same forgiveness and mercy that God's chosen people will enjoy. How do we reconcile the fact that God demonstrates perfect justice and mercy? Why is this important for God to be perfect in both?

7. As you enter your group's prayer time, brainstorm some practical ways your group could help right some of the injustice happening in our world. One idea your group might consider is taking part in our homeless outreach to the inner-city Phoenix. For more information, see the Mission's page at [rockpointchurch.com](http://rockpointchurch.com) by clicking Get Connected, and then Outreach (or directly at [rockpointchurch.com/missions](http://rockpointchurch.com/missions)).



# ***Obadiah***

# Obadiah: Some Family Feuds Never Die!



Throughout the centuries, sibling rivalries have been the cause for the downfall of many families, even nations. It first began with Cain and Abel, and from there history just seemed to repeat itself over and over again. If you're a fan of the tales of Robin Hood, you'll know this one. In 1192, King Richard of England was imprisoned by Duke Leopold of Austria as he returned home from the Crusades. While Richard was imprisoned, his brother John seized the throne. Two years later, when Richard returned home, he forgave his brother, but took away all of his lands, with the exception of Ireland. You've probably heard of the actor, John Wilkes Booth but his brother Edwin Booth was the true superstar. John's lack of notoriety was one of the contributing factors which led to his assassination of President Lincoln in 1865. Pop-culture has picked up on this theme in many movies. In the Lion King, Mufasa has to put down his brother Scar. Thor is forever throwing his hammer at Loki, and there's no love lost between Wolverine and his brother Sabretooth. Yet, probably the best example of the same type of simmering animosity that existed between the Edomites and the Israelites in pop-culture, is Fredo and Michael Corleone from the Godfather. They piled their revenge on one another from a dish served cold! They took the gun instead of the cannoli!

Sadly, sibling rivalry was alive and well among patriarchs of the Hebrews. The Book of Genesis tells us that Cain slayed Abel because Yahweh accepted Abel's offering, while rejecting his. The book of Obadiah is the by-product of the rivalry between Jacob and Esau. Although it's the smallest book in the Old Testament, a mere 21 verses, it packs a powerful punch! It's made up of a series of divine judgment poems against the Kingdom of Edom, a near neighbor of Judah to the west of the Dead Sea. The animosity between the nations began over a thousand years before Obadiah penned his oracle, when Jacob stole Esau's birthright, with some help from his mother Rebekah. Although the two brothers found forgiveness and reconciliation later in their lives, their ancestors once again picked up the long-running feud.



**“The arrogance of your heart has deceived you. You who live in the clefts of the rock, in the loftiness of your dwelling place, who say in your heart, ‘Who will bring me down to earth?’”**

**Obadiah 1:3**

The rift between the Edomites and the children of Israel took another hit when Moses tried to take the most direct route to the Promised Land through the land of Edom during the Exodus. Initially the King denied a rite of passage fearing they would subjugate his people and take all their resources. They eventually relented, but it was obvious that the two relatives didn't trust each other. “Turn northward and command the people, ‘You are to pass through the territory of your brothers, the people of Esau, who live in Seir; and they will be afraid of you. So be very careful. Do not contend with them, for I will not give you their land, not so much as the sole the foot to tread on, because I have given Mount Seir to Esau as a possession. You may purchase food from them with money, that you may eat, and you will also buy water from them with money, that you may drink.’” (Deuteronomy 2:3-6) Suffice it to say, the relationship between these two people groups were tenuous at best, but something happened at some point in the time of Obadiah that would put these relatives at odds for over 2500 years and counting!



Little is known about Obadiah. It's believed that he's from Judah, but we don't know anything about his family, and dating the book is difficult. Dates have ranged from 889-312 BC. Because Obadiah's oracles are much like Jeremiah's and his description of the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon (586 BC), it would probably make Obadiah a post-exilic prophet, writing somewhere just before or after the fall of Jerusalem.

This little prophecy has two halves. The first (vv.1-14) consists of accusations against the leaders of Edom because of their pride and self-exaltation. They said, "We live up in the heights, at home with the stars! Who can bring us down?" And they actually did live in the heights for they built their city along the high mountains around the Dead Sea. And it was that pride that led the Edomites to not just stand idly by as the Babylonians breached Jerusalem walls and plunder their city, but they actually participated in its destruction! The Edomites plundered many of the smaller cities in and around Judah. They also made slaves of many of the Jewish refugees who were trying to find safety. They sold the rest to pagan kingdoms after the fall of Jerusalem. That's why God voices His displeasure at the arrogance of the Edomites through Obadiah, promising that Edom would also be overrun and destroyed. Yahweh said, "As you have done to Israel, it will be done to you!"

As we move to the second half of Obadiah 's oracle, you'd think it would be an explanation of how the Edomites will eventually meet their doom. Instead, the topic suddenly shifts in verse 15. It says, "The Day of the Lord is near for all nations." But why does he suddenly shift from Edom to all the nations? Verse 15 serves as a hinge piece to the "Day of the Lord" when God will eventually humble all the nations that are His enemies. Here, Obadiah is referring to all prideful nations that act like Edom and will face God's justice in the same way. "They'll fall from their prideful perches and come to ruin."

Now the combination of these two sections, one about Edom and one about all the nations, show us why Obadiah was so interested in the little nation to the South. Obadiah sees pride as an example or an image of how one day God will judge the pride of all nations and will bring about their fall too. Although, in the "native tongue" of the Edomites, the word "Edom" means "red," because Esau had red hair all over his body. But in Hebrew, "Edom" is the same word as "Adam" which means "mankind" or "humanity." In Obadiah, Edom's rise and fall is a parable of how God's justice will oppose all the nations' pride and violence at "The Day of the Lord."

But as in all the prophets, God's judgment is never His final word. Do you remember the two books that preceded Obadiah, Joel and Amos? Joel painted a picture of a time when the "Day of the Lord" had finally arrived. At this time, He would perform a new act of salvation in Jerusalem. All of those who would call on Him and humble themselves, will be delivered. In the conclusion of Amos, the prophet said that after God had judged all of Israel's evil, He would once again raise up the house of David and build a new kingdom which would include Edom, and all the nations called by His name. So, the book of Obadiah has been placed right after Joel and Amos to expand on the promises about God's restoration of His Kingdom, by creating a New Jerusalem that will be populated by an ever-faithful remnant. And from there, God's Kingdom will expand until His peace rules throughout the world.



## Group Questions

1. Take some time going around the circle and sharing about your family dynamics. How many brothers and sisters do you have? Which one of your siblings were you the closest to? Why? How have your family dynamics changed over the years? Was there any sibling rivalry in your family? How many of your brothers and sisters walk with Jesus?

2. Ask someone to briefly tell the story of Jacob and Esau. What role did the parents play in the divide between the two brothers? (Genesis 25:19-34, Genesis 27). What was the big deal about the birthright? (See Genesis 27:28-29.)

3. Although the two brothers finally made peace (Genesis 33), their descendants rekindled the feud. According to Obadiah, what was the greatest sin among the Edomites? (See Obadiah, verse 3.) How did the Edomites treat their relatives in their greatest time of need?

4. The second half of the prophecy Obadiah speaks about the Day of the Lord. What is it? When will it come to pass? According to Obadiah, what is the one thing for which God will judge the nations?

5. End this session by praying for those who are different than you, asking God to give you the lenses of love that He looks through to see His most glorious creation, human-kind!

6. Sadly, it's the human condition that we fall to the temptation of judging others. It's easy to love people who are like us. It's more difficult to love people who are unlike us. From the list below, who are some of the people that maybe you or your family of origin may have trouble relating to, or even that you carry judgments and prejudice towards?

- Those in a different economic class
- Those with different social etiquettes
- Those from a different religion
- Those of a different race
- Those with different personality types
- Those who have contradictory values than your own (Baby Boomers, Millennials)
- Those with less education/training /expertise
- Those with different political views
- Those from a different country
- Other?



# ***Jonah***

# Jonah: The Prodigal Prophet



Like most people who grew up in the church, I've heard the story of Jonah (and sang the church camp song) what seems to be at least a million times. But now, as I'm writing this study guide, I'm going through several stages of puzzlement and wonder about this short book. The number of themes is certainly a challenge for the interpreter. Is it about race and nationalism (Jonah seems to be more concerned over his own nation's military security, than having a heart for missions, or for a huge city that's full of spiritually lost people)? Is it about God's eternal call to reconcile all of humanity to Him no matter what the cost? Still not sure. Is it about the amazing compassion of God, well, maybe? Why don't we just jump in and see where this voyage takes us? All aboard!

Jonah is unique as a prophet of Yahweh, because all the other prophets were about receiving God's words and then relaying them to their intended recipients. Jonah's story is about a prophet, a really sour and nasty one at that, (from this point on I'll just refer to Jonah as a prodigal prophet because there's maybe more than a great chance I'll meet him one day) and did everything in his power to keep God's words away from the Ninevites, because they were too sinful to receive the grace of God from Jonah's perspective.

Jonah only makes one other appearance in the Old Testament. It's when He goes to prophesy over Jeroboam II, one of Israel's worst kings. Jonah prophesies in his favor to win a battle on his northern border. But he wasn't the only prophet who was in the bullpen that day. Amos also confronted Jeroboam, and through God's Word, specifically reversed Jonah's prophecy! So, before the story of Jonah even begins, I'm a little suspicious of his character. But I admire the prophet as a writer, for the book of Jonah has a beautiful structure with this cool literary pairing, which I'll attempt to explain.

Chapters one and three tell the story of Jonah's encounters with non-Israelites, first the sailors, and then with Jonah's arch enemy the Ninevites. Each chapter offers a comic contrast between Jonah's selfishness and the pagans' selfless humility. Chapters two and four contain prayers of Jonah, one is a prayer of repentance... well, kind of. And the other is a prayer where Jonah chews out God for being too nice.

Now, this careful design is matched by a really unique style of narration. The story is full of all of these stereotyped characters, who ironically do the exact opposite of what you'd think they'd do. The man of God rebels and does the polar opposite of God's commands, while the sailors who are supposed to be immoral pagans, have soft, repentant hearts, and end up worshipping Yahweh. You have the King of the Assyrians (Nineveh is their capitol city), who was the most ruthless leader on the planet, humbling himself before God because of Jonah's five-word sermon. And then, even Nineveh's cows repent (I'll explain later)! This kind of story fits into what we would call today a "satiric" narrative style. These well-known characters are placed under extremely difficult circumstances, and they use humor and irony to critique their own stupidity and character flaws. Let's just dive in and we'll see how all the pieces work together.

The story opens as God commands Jonah to preach to the evil Assyrians, Israel's bitter enemy. But, instead of going straightaway to Nineveh, Jonah proceeds to Tarshish which is in the exact opposite direction, and the furthest point from God's target in the known world at that time. The big question is "Why?" Is he afraid? Is it the wrong season to visit Assyria? Well we're not told yet. Instead, he boards a ship full of pagan sailors, and immediately goes down to the belly of the ship to take a nap. As soon as the vessel hits the open ocean, God sends a massive storm that seems to follow the ship wherever it goes.

The sailors discern by the casting of lots (dice), that Jonah's God is the culprit. So they wake Jonah up to explain what's going on, and Jonah begins to spout off a bunch of religious "mumbo-jumbo." "I'm a Hebrew and I worship the God who made the sea and the dry land." And when the sailors ask Jonah, "What should we do?" He tells them to throw him overboard so they would be saved. It kind of seems noble at first, but in reality, it was an attempt at a pagan-assisted suicide. Also, he was probably thinking, "There isn't a better way of getting out of going to Nineveh!" Plus, there was an added bonus, Jonah's death would be on the sailor's heads! Yet, they were still reluctant to kill Jonah, and they repented to Yahweh for even considering Jonah's plan.



Eventually, they did end up throwing Jonah overboard, but God spoiled the prophet's plan. As Jonah sunk into the miry deep, God sent a Great Fish Uber to take him to Nineveh. While in the fish, Jonah utters a prayer, yet he doesn't say that he's sorry. He thanks God for not abandoning him, and he promises to obey God from this point on. God responded by causing the fish to "vomit his passenger back upon dry land."

Unfortunately, it's around a 300-mile walk from where the Fish Uber spat out Jonah to Nineveh. No one knows how the prophet got there. He may have walked. But, since the Assyrians were known for their chariots and probably had a garrison or two guarding the coastline, Jonah may have gotten a ride. Now you may be wondering, why would anyone pick up a strange man who smelled like fish guts? Well, I'm glad you asked! One of the gods that the Ninevites served was Dagon, the fish god. Dagon was really popular among the men because he was a fertility God (I'll let you figure that one out, for this story has a PG rating). Anyway, a stranger walking out of the mouth of one their gods would have been seen as a messenger, and if all that we're supposing is true, the message could've traveled faster than the messenger (by relay teams of chariots). When Jonah finally arrived, he gave his stirring message that he'd been practicing for weeks: "Forty more days and Nineveh shall be overturned." (It's five words in Hebrew.) Wow, his seven words still brings tears to my eyes! It's such a weird message. The prophet doesn't mention what they did to deserve such a fate, or any instructions on what they should stop or start doing. And there's no mention of God! Has Jonah intentionally given the bare minimum so their response wouldn't last?

Nevertheless, if Jonah was trying to sandbag the Ninevites his plan didn't work. For no sooner does he utter his five-word sermon, the king, and all of its cows, repent. These pagans were more responsive than the children of Israel! So, God forgives and doesn't bring destruction on the city. The last word Jonah uttered was the word "overturned." It could be used when a city is destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah, or it could also be used when something is transformed, completely changing into its opposite.

Jonah is fuming mad that Israel's greatest enemy won't be destroyed and he's furious at God for His loving compassion. Now, before we go ballistic with disgust and get all "judgy," we should swim a couple of meters in Jonah's flip-flops. When I said the Assyrians were the most ruthless, it wasn't an understatement. They used the flayed skin of their enemies to wallpaper their public buildings. You could pick up oil lamps made from the skulls of their captives in any market in the city. Adolf Hitler was fascinated with the Assyrians and developed his blitzkrieg battle tactics for Germany's tanks using Assyrian chariots as a model. Also, Hitler got the idea of dropping living human beings (mostly Jews) from airplanes to determine the limits a human body could endure without dying. The Assyrians just used high towers. When they would take war captives, the Assyrians would put giant fishhooks in their prisoners' mouths and drag them miles and miles across a blistering desert. Most didn't survive.

The final chapter brings everything together. Now Jonah utters his second prayer. He begins by telling God why he ran away, which happened all the way back in chapter one. It wasn't because he was afraid, rather he knew that God was so merciful it would be like Him to pardon the entire Assyrian empire. Jonah actually quotes God's description of Himself back to God, from the Book of Exodus. Jonah throws it back in God's face as an insult: "The LORD, God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." (Exodus 34:6) Abruptly, Jonah cuts off the conversation and asks God to kill him, for the prophet would rather die than live with a God who would forgive these people. Fortunately, for Jonah, God doesn't answer his prayer. He asks the prophet if his anger is even justified? Jonah ignores the question and goes outside the city, up on a nearby hill, waiting to see if the Ninevites might repent of their repentance and get roasted after all.



What happens next is really weird. God makes this vine grow at a world-record-setting pace to shield Jonah from the sun. And for the first time in the narrative, Jonah is happy. But God also sent some type of super cankerworm to eat up the plant. Jonah loses his shade, and there in the unrelenting heat, the prophet asks God if He would kill him once again. God responds in kind, and asks again, if Jonah's anger was justified. Undaunted, Jonah stayed on message, but this time he almost demands God to kill him. And those are Jonah's last words in the story. God's final words are what concludes the book. He says that this whole vine incident was an attempt to get through to Jonah. He was already invested in this vine which he only enjoyed for about a day, that's when God asked Jonah if he thought that humans were worth more than his precious vine (that he didn't plant or water, but only enjoyed)? Shouldn't God also be compassionate towards the great city of Nineveh? That's how the book ends, by God asking Jonah for permission to save Nineveh and all its people! Jonah replies with silence.

So, what's the point of this story? Should God put His workers through a more rigorous process before sending them out in the field? Should He have put Jonah through more aptitude testing? No, the point of this story is that God's not messing with Jonah, He's messing with you, and me, and anyone who reads this story. These last questions from God are not addressed to Jonah. They're addressed to us, the readers. God is asking us if we're okay with Him loving our enemies? This book serves as a mirror to anyone who stares at its pages. In Jonah we see the worst parts of our own character magnified, which should create in us humility and gratitude that God loves His enemies, because we were once His enemies, when we were slaves to sin. And I personally believe that Jonah makes it a point to meet all foreigners who'll pass through Heaven's Gates. For now he knows Jesus, the One who broke down the walls between God and humanity, so we are now free to love one another.

**These last questions from God are not addressed to Jonah. They're addressed to us, the readers.**



## Group Questions

1. When you were a kid, how did you usually express your anger or react when you didn't get your way? What was usually the result?
2. How has God been challenging you through this study in Jonah?
3. What do you think was Jonah's biggest problem: anger, pride, selfishness, depression, prejudice, or something else? Which of these issues seem to be your "Achilles' heel?"
4. Share a time when you, like Jonah, became angry and depressed at God over what seemed to you as an unjust situation. How did you finally get over these feelings? How long did it take?
5. How comfortable are you telling God you're angry with Him? Why is it important? What do we normally do with unresolved anger? What's God's cure for our anger?
6. Life is not about us. How much was Jonah's anger related to him just trying to be God? Specifically, how was Jonah demonstrating his "God complex?" Can you think of any circumstances which could exasperate this type of character flaw?
7. Jonah's assignment has been compared to a Jewish person being called by God to go to Berlin and witness to Adolf Hitler at the peak of the Holocaust. Do you think this is a good comparison to Jonah's mission? Why or why not? Honestly, what kind of faith would it take to even attempt such a journey? Do any of these considerations change your opinion about Jonah? Why or why not?
8. Like Jonah, we all want to receive God's forgiveness, but we're not always willing to give forgiveness. To whom are you unwilling to extend God's grace and forgiveness? What can result when we hold onto anger, even when it seems justified? Why do we struggle with giving forgiveness more than receiving forgiveness? What are some reasons (or excuses) we use for not forgiving? How do we benefit from forgiving?
9. God calls everyone on mission. Is there a special people group that God is calling you to serve? Is there a broken relationship that the gospel could be the remedy? Is God calling you to swallow your pride and forgive someone who has bitterly mistreated you? Where's your next mission field?





***Malachi***

# Malachi: God's Prosecuting Attorney



By studying the Book of Malachi, we have the best window to see what life was like after the Jews returned to the Promised Land after their seventy-year captivity in Babylon. Very little is known about the author. Malachi means “My Messenger,” yet he offered no other identifying information about himself, leaving out the typical markers that the other writing prophets include in their oracles, such as his father’s name or who was the current leader in Israel. Malachi lived about a hundred years after the Israelites had returned from their Babylonian exile. His message was directed to the people who had been living in Jerusalem for a long time. The Temple had been rebuilt for a while, but things were not going very well. If you’ve ever gotten the chance to read the stories of Ezra and Nehemiah, you understand how difficult life was for God’s people during this time period. When the Israelites first returned from the exile, their hopes were high. They returned to rebuild their lives and the Temple. It seemed that all the great promises of God were in the reach, and like us, they read all the promises of the prophets and believed they would come true. They also believed, more than any generation who came before them, that the Messiah would come and set up God’s kingdom over a unified Israel and over all the nations of the world and bring justice and peace for all. Sadly, that’s not what happened. The Israelites that repopulated the city proved to be just as unfaithful to God as their ancestors, resulting in poverty and injustice. In Malachi we find out just how corrupt the generation had become.

The book is designed as a series of disputes, and most sections begin with God saying something. His statements are between making a claim or leveling an accusation. Then, Israel responds by either disagreeing or questioning God’s statement. Finally, God responds and offers the last word. This happens six times. In the first three disputes, God exposes Israel’s corruption. In the final three disputes, He confronts their sin. The overall impression you get from these arguments and disputes is that the exile didn’t fundamentally change anything in the people. Israel’s hearts were as hard as ever. The first dispute starts when God says that He still loves His covenant people despite their failures. Yet, Israel rudely objects saying, “How have you shown us any love?” God reminds them of how He graciously chose the family

of Jacob their ancestor to become a carrier of God’s covenant promises instead of his brother Esau and the family that came from him, who eventually came to ruin. Then, God asks, “Don’t you remember the stories from Genesis and the book of Obadiah?” So right from the start of this first dispute, Israel is exposed for being suspicious, doubting God’s love and faithfulness.

The second dispute exposes a problem with Israel’s second Temple. God accuses the people of despising and defiling the Temple. Yet, the people fire back, “How have we despised You?” God responds by focusing on the people, and how they are bringing shamefully lame offerings of sick and blemished animals which shows that they do not value or honor their God. It’s not just the people, but the priests too, who ruin the Temple. They not only tolerate, but participate, in these corrupt forms of worship. And from top to bottom, God’s people have proven themselves to be faithless.

In the third dispute God accuses the Israelite men of treachery against Him and their wives, which of course, they deny. God exposes the toxic combination of idolatry and divorce taking place. What was happening? It seems that the Israelite men were marrying non-Israelite women, and then adopting the worship practices of their second wives by bringing their ancestral gods into their homes (for more info see Nehemiah 13). So, Malachi connects this wave of men divorcing their wives for no good reason as a blatant violation of covenant marriage. Yet, as a whole, the people all feel fine with this. But Malachi says, “No, it’s a betrayal of your covenant with God.”

Next, Malachi transitions into the second set of disputes that confront Israel’s rebellion. The fourth of the six begins with the Israelites accusing God of neglect, saying, “Where is this God of Justice?” They see injustice and corruption abounding and God seems to be choosing not to do anything, or He’s powerless to stop it. God responds by saying that He will send a messenger who will prepare the people for God’s personal return, in the Day of the Lord. He will come like a fire to purify His people and remove the idolatry, sexual immorality, and injustice so that only a remnant is left to be His people.



In the fifth dispute, God calls the people to turn back to Him, to which the people say, “How can we turn back?” So, God confronts their selfishness by showing them how they’ve stopped offering a tithe of their income to the Temple. That word “tithe” just means “one-tenth.” It’s the amount of their income and produce from their harvests they were to annually donate in support of the Temple and its priests. This practice is laid out in different parts of the Torah (The first five books of the Old Testament). We know from the book of Malachi and also from the book of Nehemiah that the people were neglecting this responsibility. This caused the Temple to fall into disrepair. God confronts them. He says that He wants to bless them with abundance, but only if they were going to be faithful. He tells the people to test Him and see. If they remain faithful with their “first fruits,” He would open up the windows of heaven and bless them abundantly. Then Yahweh uses the Children of Israel as an example. For forty years God met all their needs while they wandered in the wilderness. He fed them with manna from heaven and even their clothing and sandals didn’t wear out. In fact, this is the only place in all of Scripture where we are allowed to test God, such as this.

In the final dispute, the people accuse God and say it’s pointless to serve Him. They arrive at this conclusion by observing wicked, prideful people who seem to succeed in life while God just sits idly by and never intervenes. God responds, and for the first time in the book, it’s not a speech. Rather, it’s a short essay about the faithful remnant in Israel, people who fear the Lord. These people love to get together and talk about how to honor God and serve Him. So, to honor them, God orders that a scroll of remembrance be written for these people. Yet, this scroll isn’t about remembering their faithfulness. It will be given to them so they can remember God’s character and promises, and to pass it down to their children’s children. Here, Malachi is reflecting on the divine gift of the Scriptures and how they point us to the past to remember what he has done in order to inspire faithfulness in the future.

This leads us to the conclusion of the book. Malachi 4:1-3 picks up and develops the imagery of the fourth dispute, about the coming “Day of the Lord.” Yahweh says that He’s appointed a day of purifying judgment that will consume the wicked from among His people. But what He’s actually talking about is the future of the faithful remnant, because for them, the Day of the Lord is not a threat but a cause for joy. It will be like the rays of the rising sun that bring healing, resulting in life and hope for the future. And here’s God’s promise, “For those who revere His name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.” This promised will be fulfilled in the future during the Tribulation Period. At this brief time, the remnant (those Jewish people who miss the rapture and realize that Jesus is the Messiah) will be those who “revere the name of the risen Son of Righteousness that brings healing.”

At this point, Malachi’s disputes come to a close, but there’s still a little bit more to this book. The final three verses are not a part of the disputes. They actually function like a concluding appendix bringing closure, not just to the book of Malachi, but to the whole collection of the Torah and the Prophets. First, the reader is called to “remember the law of the Torah of my servant Moses.” This recalls the story and the laws of the covenant that you’ll find in the first five books of the Bible. Then, we hear this summary of the books of the prophets: “I will send the prophet Elijah before The Day of the Lord who will restore the hearts of God’s people.” This conclusion summarizes the Torah and the prophets as a unified story that points to the future. Israel was redeemed by God and then they betrayed Him through rebellion and hard hearts breaking the laws of the Torah. But the Scriptures anticipate a future day when God is going to send a new prophet like Moses or Elijah who’ll restore God’s people and heal their hearts. These verses present the Scriptures as a divine gift to read and ponder and to pray over. And like no other book, it tells the truth about the human condition, about our selfishness and our sin. But it also announces God’s promise that one day He will send a messenger who will personally show up to confront evil, restore His people, and bring healing justice to the nations.



## Group Questions

1. After a seventy-year captivity and a long period of silence from Yahweh, God's people were finally back in the Promised Land. Have you experienced long periods of God's silence in your life? What did you have to do to begin hearing from God again?
2. Read Malachi 1:1-5. In this first dispute, God tells His covenant people that He still loves them, despite their failures. Yet, Israel rudely objects saying, "How have you shown us any love?" Why did the people doubt His love? How did the story of Jacob and Esau prove God loved them? In what ways have you doubted God's love in the past? What gives you reassurance of His love today?
3. Read Malachi 1:6-14. What was wrong with the gifts the priests offered in verses 6-8? What kind of gifts does God ask us to bring to Him today? What does it mean to fear the Lord? Is that a difficult concept for you? Why or why not?
4. Read Malachi 2:1-6; 2:10-12. What was the issue God had with His people marrying pagan wives? Does this apply to believers today? Why or why not? A covenantal marriage under God encompasses three facets: A sexual component - oneness; A relational component- *companionship*, and a Spiritual component - *the Holy Spirit*. If you're married, in what areas do you need to recommit in your marriage covenant?
5. Read Malachi 3:1-5; Mark 11:10; Luke 7:27. In these verses, Malachi is the messenger of God's Word to the priests of the Old Testament, and John the Baptist is the messenger of Jesus in the New Testament. The Lord Jesus Himself is then ultimate Messenger of the New Covenant. When Jesus came, what kind of sacrifices did Jesus want from us? In what ways has Jesus been like a refining fire in your spiritual journey?
6. Read Malachi 3:6-18. Since God owns everything, what are some ways we can rob God? Re-read Malachi 3:10-12. What are the promises found in these verses, and how do they relate to us today? In most cases, God warns us not to test Him. Why this exception? Talk about a time when God showed his faithfulness and provided for you unexpectedly?
7. Read Malachi 4:2,5-6. Here, Malachi speaks of God's people experiencing joy. How would you rate your joy on a scale of 1-10? What keeps you from joy? Who do you think v. 5-6 is talking about? How do these verses serve as a bridge to the next book of the Bible?
8. Spend some time in prayer, thanking God for the gift we have in Jesus and His new covenant!



***Group Leader  
Guide & Group  
Agreement***

# Ideas for having a Great Group Experience



## BEFORE THE GROUP ARRIVES

### BE PREPARED

Your personal preparation can make a huge difference in the quality of your group experience. We strongly suggest previewing the video and all the materials ahead of time. How much is enough preparation? Prepare to the point that you know without thinking what the next thing is.

### PRAY FOR GROUP MEMBERS BY NAME

Ask God to use your time together to touch the heart of every person in your group. Expect God to challenge and change people as a result of this study.

### RELAX

Don't try to imitate someone else's style of facilitating a group. Conduct the group in a way that fits your style and temperament. Remember that people may feel nervous showing up for a group study, so try to put them at ease when they show up. That's why it's important to have all the details taken care of ahead of time. That way you can make your guests your sole focus when they arrive.

### GET THE VIDEO READY

Each of the video sessions are 15-20 minutes in length. It would be best if all your group members committed to reading each lesson before your group meets. Yet, the video is a fallback in case you have guests, or many in the group didn't have an opportunity to preview the material.

### ARRANGE THE ROOM

Set up the seating in the room so that everyone can see the television and each other. When it's time to talk, you should rearrange the room in such a way that's conducive for conversation.

## TIPS FOR FACILITATING YOUR GROUP MEETING

### TIPS FOR FACILITATING

Make sure that your time together is a discussion rather than a lecture. Resist the temptation to do all the talking and answering your own questions. When you ask a question be patient. If no one "takes the bait" rephrase the question and ask it again.

### YOU DON'T NEED TO HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS

Also, don't feel that you have to have all the answers. There's nothing wrong with simply saying, "I don't know the answer to that, but I'll see if I can find out an answer this week." You could also ask "Would anyone like to research this and report to the group next week?"

### ENCOURAGE EVERYONE TO PARTICIPATE

Be mindful not to let one person dominate the conversation. Yet, also be sensitive and not put pressure on quieter members of the group to speak during the first couple of sessions. Be patient. Ask good follow-up questions and be sensitive to delicate issues. One way to get the conversation really going is to always affirm people's input like, "Wow, that's a good perspective" or "I learn something from our group every time we meet!" Even if someone gives a wrong answer, you can respond with, "What led you to that conclusion?" Or you can always poll the rest of the group.



### **RESPONDING TO DISAGREEMENTS**

If a disagreement arises, don't be too quick to shut it down! This type of discussion can draw out some important perspectives. But if you can't resolve it that evening, offer to research it further and return to the issue the following week. However, if someone goes on the offensive, and engages in personal attacks, you'll need to step in. As is the case of any spirited discussion, it's easy to get over zealous. If this happens, remind everyone that people are fragile and there is no place for disrespect.

### **DETOUR WHEN NECESSARY**

If an important question is raised that's not in the study guide, take time to discuss it. Also, if someone shares something personal and emotional, take time for them. Stop and pray for the person who is suffering right then. Allow the Holy Spirit room to maneuver and follow His prompting when the discussion changes direction.

### **SUBGROUP**

One of the principles of group life is "when the numbers go up, sharing goes down." So, if you have a large group, sometimes you may want to split into 4-6 people for the discussion or prayer time. This is a great way to encourage quieter members of your group a chance to share. Choose someone in the group to guide the subgroup through the discussion. This involves others in the leadership of the group and provides opportunity for training new leaders.

### **PRAYER**

Be sensitive to the fact that some people in your group may be uncomfortable praying out loud. As a general rule, don't call on people to pray unless you have asked them ahead of time, or have heard them pray in public on another occasion. But your group's prayer time can be a training ground to help people build confidence as they learn how to pray out loud. Consider having prayer times that ask people to just say a word or a sentence of thanks to God.

### **HOW TO HANDLE THE INDIVIDUAL LESSON CONTENT EACH WEEK**

Because we are studying a chapter a week, it presents a significant challenge. Although groups will be provided a video that contains a content overview, nothing could probably enhance your group experience more than having everyone prepared ahead of time. Sadly, the greatest obstacle you may face employing this option is motivating busy people to read the material ahead of time! One thing's for sure if you could create some kind of a group competition, you'd probably have a better chance of success!

### **GREAT GROUP LEADERS FOLLOW UP**

It's been our experience that not everyone who promises to come to the group's kick off all show up. If someone said they were coming but wasn't able to make it, be sure to follow up with them (even if they told you ahead of time). Give them a call, shoot them an email or a text just to let them know they were missed.



# Group Agreement

People come to groups with a variety of different expectations. The purpose of a group agreement is simply to make sure everyone is on the same page and that we have some common expectations.

The following Group Agreement is a tool to help you discuss specific guidelines before your first meeting. The group agreement is the greatest safeguard against conflicts that sometimes arise in groups. Make sure that if new group members are added along the way, they read and agree to the group agreement as well. Also, at the end of each study, before rushing to the next one, it's great to take time and discuss how the group did collectively with the guidelines.

## WE AGREE TO THE FOLLOWING PRIORITIES

- Take the Bible Seriously**                      To seek to understand and apply God's truth in the Bible.
- Group Attendance**                              To give priority to the group meeting (call if I am going to be absent or late).
- Safe Environment**                              To create a safe place where people can be heard and feel loved (no snap judgments or simple fixes).
- Respectful Discussion**                        To speak in a respectful and honoring way to our mate and others in the group.
- Be Confidential**                                To keep anything that is shared strictly confidential and within the group.
- Spiritual Health**                                To give group members permission to help me live a godly, healthy spiritual life that is pleasing to God.
- Building Relationships**                        To get to know the other members of the group and pray for them regularly.
- Prayer**    To pray regularly with and for each other.

**Other**

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# Video

## Access

### GROUP VIDEOS

#### **youtube.com**

- Search “Rock Point Church”
- Click on logo to go to Rock Point Church YouTube channel
- Click VIDEOS tab and scroll down -or-
- Click the search icon at the end of the tabs (or the dropdown arrow on mobile) and look for “Foretold Group”

### SERMON VIDEOS

#### **rockpointchurch.com**

- Click WATCH at the top of the page (or dropdown menu on mobile)
- If necessary, click WATCH MORE at the bottom of the page





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by loving them like Jesus**

Rock Point Church  
24759 S. Power Road  
Queen Creek, AZ 85142

[rockpointchurch.com](http://rockpointchurch.com)