

Week 7: Prophets to the Southern Kingdom of Judah

Introduction

Last week we read the prophet Micah, who prophesied to the Kingdom of Judah. His prophecies are the longest ones to the Kingdom of Judah of the Minor Prophets. Of course, Isaiah and Jeremiah had much longer prophecies, but for the rest of this week, we will be reading one prophet per day. Starting with Joel's three chapters today, Zephaniah's three chapters tomorrow and Habakkuk's three chapters on Wednesday. On Thursday, we'll get a taste of Jeremiah, and then we'll finish our study by reading the narrative of the Captivity of Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom of Judah by Babylon.

Joel

The prophet Joel is the one that we know the least about, of all the prophets. His book cannot be dated with certainty - usually it says the word of the Lord that came to the prophet during the reign of kings x y z... but with Joel, we read in verse 1: "The word of the Lord that came to Joel the son of Pethuel." Period. So we aren't sure when exactly he prophesied, but his prophecy is thus understood by the church as being applicable to all generations and all time periods.

Joel is known as the prophet of the day of Pentecost. He prophesies about the pouring down of the Holy Spirit. His prophecies also focus more on the repentance of the nation as a whole, and not just the repentance of individuals.

Chapter 1

He starts with a fearsome message that sounds like a wakeup call to the inhabitants of the land. "Hear this, you elders, and give ear, all you inhabitants of the land! Has anything like this happened in your days? Or in the days of your fathers? Tell your children about it, and let your children tell their children, and their children another generation."

I want to comment on this first part because this is the importance of the upbringing of parents. Many parents these days are leaving their children to be babysat by the TV, the Tablets and the Phones. Or they are expecting the Church to raise their children. But not so, my beloved. If God grants you, you will be parents one day, and you need to know the importance of raising your children. Telling them your experiences and how God has worked in your life. Telling them your mistakes and how you learned from them. Telling them the wisdom that you received from your parents, and your elders and your servants. This theme is consistent throughout the Scripture that this is God's model for the bringing up of children.

What's the wake-up call? Seemingly, there was a plague in the land. A plague of locusts. And he mentions four types of locust: "What the chewing locust left, the swarming locust has eaten; what the swarming locust left, the crawling locust has eaten; and what the crawling locust left, the consuming locust has eaten." (v. 4)

How is this to be understood? Actually, as with much of the Old Testament and especially the prophecies, it can be understood on several different levels.

The first is the literal level - this is a real event that happened and the people are struggling to find food to eat because of this plague. And they need to turn to the Lord.

The second is the prophetic level - these four stages of locusts or these four kinds of insects, are seen by the Fathers of the Church to refer to the major conquests of Israel - the Babylonian, the Persian, the Greek and the Roman. And this is supported of course by the next few verses when the prophet Joel talks about "A nation has come up against My land."

Of course, there is a third level which is the one most important to us, the tropological level - related to moral metaphor. The four stages of locust refer to the four stages of sin. Sin can start small, but then consume us. It might start out as just "a small lie" - "just a thought" - "just a glance" - a chewing locust. It's just chewing... but very quickly can become a consuming locust and consume our minds, our hearts, and our actions. We discussed the four stages of sin when we studied the first two chapters of Amos - we said it starts as "thinking of evil" - then "doing the evil" - then "evil becomes a habit" (continuing to do it without repentance) - and finally even "preaching the evil" and teaching others how to do it.

The rest of the chapter is a call to repentance. The Lord would send certain things like plagues, occupation by a foreign nation, etc. as different ways to bring the people to repentance. I'll mention one more verse which is verse 14 - one of the famous verses of the Scripture: "Consecrate a fast, Call a sacred assembly; Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord." One of the very clear things understood in the Scripture and in the Church is the link between fasting and repentance. Fasting is not just a diet change, but a mode of repentance and of turning back from sin and from evil and reorienting my mind and my hear to the Lord. It's also a time to gather with the rest of the Body of Christ - to pray more liturgies together.

Chapter 2

A similar idea is given in chapter 2, verse 12: "Now, therefore," says the Lord, "Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning." So rend your heart, and not your garments" - in those days, someone might mourn or repent with sackcloth and ashes, but on the inside, there is no repenting. It's just an outward symbol. As we do today, I might be fasting from food, but inside there is no change. The Lord says Rend your heart, and not just your garments. And again in verse 15 of this chapter "Blow the trumpet in Zion, Consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly; gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children and nursing babes; let the bridegroom go out from his chamber, and the bride from her dressing room. Let the priests, who minister to the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar" - it's a call to the whole assembly. Whether you are an elder, a child, a nursing babe, a bride and groom on

their wedding day, or even a priest - the time of repentance is here. Blow the trumpet and make sure EVERYONE knows - the time of repentance is here.

And what will the Lord's response be?

In verse 18: "Then the Lord will be zealous for His land, and pity His people. The Lord will answer and say to His people, 'Behold, I will send you grain and new wine and oil, And you will be satisfied with them; I will no longer make you a reproach among the nations.'" and now we start to see prophecies about the New Testament. The Lord will save us from our sin and will bind Satan before us - "But I will remove far from you the northern army, and will drive him away into a barren and desolate land, with his face toward the eastern sea and his back toward the western sea; his stench will come up and his foul odor will rise, because he has done monstrous things. Fear not, O land; be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done marvelous things!"

And the Lord in this prophecy doesn't stop there, but reveals to us the next step in the economy of Salvation - the pouring of His Spirit upon us. If you're reading the Orthodox Study Bible, this section will be chapter 3. If you're reading New King James, then we're in chapter 2 verse 28:

²⁸ "And it shall come to pass afterward
That I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh;
Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
Your old men shall dream dreams,
Your young men shall see visions.

²⁹ And also on *My* menservants and on *My* maidservants
I will pour out My Spirit in those days.

³⁰ "And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth:
Blood and fire and pillars of smoke.

³¹ The sun shall be turned into darkness,
And the moon into blood,
Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord.

³² And it shall come to pass
That whoever calls on the name of the Lord
Shall be saved.

These verses are quoted in Acts 2. When the Holy Spirit comes upon the apostles in the 3rd hour of Pentecost, and they start to speak in tongues, and everyone in the multitude, from many different nations and languages - Parthians and Medes and Elamites and those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and Libya, Romans, Cretans and Arabs - each of them can hear the message of the gospel in his own language. And some of them said "well these people must be drunk" - but St Peter stands up and says "Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and heed my words. For these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel" and then he recites these verses.

Chapter 3 (4 in OSB)

If we just take a part of chapter 3 (or in OSB, it's chapter 4), we can read from verse 18: "And it will come to pass in that day that the mountains shall drip with new wine, the hills shall flow with milk, and all the brooks of Judah shall be flooded with water; A fountain shall flow from the house of the Lord and water the Valley of Acacias." and verse 20: "Judah shall abide forever, and Jerusalem from generation to generation."

As with all of the prophets, he ends with a message of hope. The Lord is coming, He will pour out His Spirit, there will be a final Judgment, and all of those who include themselves in His Body and in His Church, shall inherit the Kingdom of Heaven.

Listening to this message isn't a replacement for reading the Scripture. Read these short chapters, and let the word of God fill you, - having put the effort to listen to this introduction, the Lord will bless your time and your understanding even in the verses we have skipped over. I hope you'll read along!

Zephaniah

The prophet Zephaniah is from the tribe of Simeon, but he lived in Jerusalem. His name means "God has hidden" - and it seems like he was from the royal line of King Hezekiah that we read in verse 1. He prophesied during the days of the righteous King Josiah and his prophecies will focus on repentance from pride.

Chapter 1

When we read Chapter 1, it is talking about a difficult time and it's called in verses 7 and 8 "The Day of the Lord." Actually, this phrase or this title was used several times in most of the prophets we have read, and I kept meaning to discuss it, but I kept forgetting, or it was in a chapter that I didn't record a message about it. Anyway, what is the Day of the Lord?

Whenever you see this phrase "The Day of the Lord" - think Judgment day. It's a reference to judgment day. And Zephaniah is giving us here a clear picture of what that day will look like. In the first half of the chapter, who will be judged?

I'll just read some sections from the first several verses: "I will utterly consume everything from the face of the land, I will consume man and beast; I will consume the birds of the heavens, the fish of the sea, the stumbling blocks [which are the idols] along with the wicked. I will cut off every trace of Baal from this place, the names of the idolatrous priests with the pagan priests - those who worship the host of heaven on the housetops [remember we mentioned in another prophet that the host of heaven is like the sun, moon and stars];" and listen to this in verse 5: "Those who worship and swear oaths by the Lord, but who also swear by Milcom" - Milcom is an Ammonite god, but you see how the Lord is specifically talking about those who worship God, but have also taken for themselves other gods. There is no shared obedience with the Lord - you are either obedient to the Lord, or not. As the Lord says in Matthew 6: "You cannot worship God and mammon." And He continues: "Those who have turned back from following the Lord, and have not sought the Lord, nor inquired of Him."

And then near the end of the chapter, Zephaniah gives us a picture of what that great day of the Lord looks like. From verse 14-18: "The great day of the Lord is near; it is near and hastens quickly. The noise of the day of the Lord is better; there the mighty men shall cry out. That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of devastation and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet and alarm against the fortified cities and against the high towers. I will bring distress upon men, and they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the Lord; their blood shall be poured out like dust and their flesh like refuse. Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the Lord's wrath; but the whole land shall be devoured by the fire of His jealousy"

The Lord Jesus in Matthew 24 also tells us about the end times. He says "nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places." and "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken." - "And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."

I encourage you to read Matthew 24 and see all the similarities with this chapter in Zephaniah.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 starts with the answer to this Judgment Day. How do I escape the Day of the Lord's wrath? By repentance. Zephaniah says: "Gather yourselves together, yes, gather together,

O undesirable nation,

² Before the decree is issued,

Or the day passes like chaff,

Before the Lord's fierce anger comes upon you,

Before the day of the Lord's anger comes upon you!

³ Seek the Lord, all you meek of the earth,

Who have upheld His justice.

Seek righteousness, seek humility.

It may be that you will be hidden

In the day of the Lord's anger."

So to escape this day, seek righteousness and humility. Seek the Lord. It may be that you will be hidden. And this is where we related back to Zephaniah's name - God has hidden. What does it mean God has hidden? God has hidden my sin because I turned to Him and I repented. God has hidden me from the Judgment Day and hidden His judgment from me.

But those who don't turn to Him will not be hidden. The other nations, who refused the Lord in verse 4: "Gaza shall be forsaken, And Ashkelon desolate; they shall drive out Ashdod at noonday, And Ekron shall be uprooted. Woe to the inhabitants of the seacoasts, the nation of the Cherethites! The word of the Lord is against you, O Canaan, land of the Philistines: 'I will destroy you; so there shall be no inhabitant.'" from verse 8: "I have heard the reproach of Moab, and the insults of the people of Ammon, with which they have reproached My people, and made arrogant threats against their borders. Therefore, as I live, Surely Moab shall be like Sodom, And the people of Ammon like

Gomorrah." and in verse 11: "The Lord will be awesome to them, For He will reduce to nothing all the gods of the earth;" - 13: "And He will stretch out His hand against the north, destroy Assyria and make Nineveh a desolation."

Chapter 3

Then, in chapter 3, the same message extends to Jerusalem: "Woe to her who is rebellious and polluted, to the oppressing city! She has not obeyed His voice, She has not received correction; She has not trusted in the Lord, She has not drawn near to her God. Her princes in her midst are roaring lions; Her judges are evening wolves that leave not a bone till morning. Her prophets are insolent, treacherous people; her priests have polluted the sanctuary, they have done violence to the Law."

The Lord seeks the repentance of all, and especially the repentance of Jerusalem - Jerusalem, the people of God had everything! They had a Law, they had a Temple with the presence of God, they had sacrifices to atone for sins and priests to administer those sacrifices. They had prophets to help them turn back when they fell. And yet, they were insolent. In verse 7 the Lord says: "Surely you will fear Me, You will receive instruction' - so that her dwelling would not be cut off, despite everything for which I punished her. But they rose early and corrupted all their deeds."

But where is the message of hope that we always see at the end of the prophets? See here in verse 8: "Therefore wait for Me, " says the Lord, "Until the day I rise up for plunder." - when you read this verse in OSB: "Until the day of My rising up as a testimony". It is a clear prophecy of the Resurrection.

And so we will rejoice in God's faithfulness as we read in versed 14: "Sing, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away your judgments, He has cast out your enemy. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; You shall see disaster no more. In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: 'Do not fear; Zion, let not your hands be weak. The Lord your God in your midst, the Mighty One will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing." - We read these verses in Matins of Lazarus Saturday and again in the 9th hour of Palm Sunday, for very obvious reasons: "Rejoice O daughter of Jerusalem the King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst"

The prophet Zephaniah is full of Messianic Prophecy and also Prophecies about the Judgment Day and the Second Coming. I hope you'll read along.

Habakkuk

The prophet Habakkuk prophesied during the end of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, right before the Babylonian Captivity. The name Habakkuk means "to embrace" or "to wrestle" and as with most of the prophets, his name gives us an idea about his prophecy. Habakkuk is going to wrestle with some difficult concepts that we sometimes wrestle with too, and that many people in the world wrestle with. The book reads like a dialogue between Habakkuk and the Lord.

He starts in verse 1: "How long, O Lord, shall I cry out to You, and You will not hear me? Being wronged I cry out to You; You will not save. Why have You shown me hardship and suffering, to look upon misery and ungodliness? Judgment is before me, and the judge takes bribes. Therefore the law is disregarded and justice is done ineffectually, for the ungodly oppress the righteous; therefore justice shall go forth perverted." Habakkuk is asking the Lord about why is there evil in the world? And specifically, why is evil allowed to continue in Judah in God's land? Why should the wicked be allowed to prosper? Why should they even be allowed to oppress those who are good? It's very reminiscent of the questions that we see in our modern day - why is there evil in the world if God is good? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do good things happen to bad people? And the prophecy here starts with a prayer. Habakkuk is faithful and he prays to the Lord.

The Lord gives him an answer, and a clear answer... but we'll see that Habakkuk will wrestle with that answer too.

"Behold, you scoffers, take notice; look and be amazed and be gone, for I am working a work in your days which you would not believe even if someone told it to you. For behold, I am raising up against you the Chaldeans, a bitter and hasty nation that marches through the breadth of the earth to take possession of dwellings that are not theirs. He is terrible and awesome. His judgment and dignity proceeds from himself." etc.

So the Lord tells him "I am going to bring the Babylonians against Judah and they will overtake Judah." And of course, the Babylonians are pagans, and they are bitter and hasty and they do not know God. Whatever they do to Judah will not be according to God's commandments... so Habakkuk wrestles with this. Babylon is even worse than Israel! How could You, being a good God, use a corrupt nation like Babylon as a tool to bring about justice?

And then in 2:1, "I will stand on my watch, mounted upon the rock, and see what He shall say to me, and what might I answer when I am reproved?" - see how faithful Habakkuk is? Habakkuk assumes He will be reproved by God for his stubbornness, and yet he is faithful. He is straightforward with God, speaking to God about his concerns and ready to accept the response of the Lord.

Chapter 2

The Lord answers Habakkuk by giving him a vision and instructing him to write the vision on a tablet. "Write the vision distinctly upon a tablet, that he who reads it may flee. For the vision is yet for an appointed time, and it will come up at the end, and it will not be in vain; if he should tarry, wait for him, for he will surely come, and he will not tarry! If any man should shrink back, My soul will not be well pleased in him; but the righteous shall live by My faith." (2:2-4)

These verses are quoted by St Paul in his epistle to the Hebrews chapter 10. St Paul uses them to encourage the people to endure suffering as you wait for the fulfillment of God's promise. And he says "The just shall live by faith." And then he explains in the next chapter what faith is: "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" and then gives examples of those who were faithful: "By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain." - "By faith Noah prepared an ark for the saving of his household" - "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out, by faith he dwelt in the land of promise." etc. All of these works done by all of

these righteous by faith, as they awaited the promises of the Lord.

The same message the Lord is conveying here to Habakkuk. And Habakkuk is writing down to convey to us. Be patient and have faith. Even in struggles, even when we see evil surrounding us and our society devolving, have faith and be patient and do the works of righteousness.

But what about those who don't do the works of righteousness? Verse 5: "But the one who is drunk and the scoffer, the man who boasts, shall accomplish nothing; he widened his soul as the grave, and as death he is never satisfied, and he will gather to himself all the nations and will take to himself all the peoples." But what about the arrogant man? The one who drinks and scoffs and boasts and is never satisfied, and who is drowning in his pride? What about this Babylonian? Pride is the fountain of all vices, and so the Lord will give five woes here that all stem from this pride:

1. Verse 6: "Woe to him who multiplies to himself possessions which are not his."
 - Babylon was greedy for more land and more possessions.
 - So we can take this as a message for ourselves about the sin of greed.
 - Maybe I am greedy with my money and I am willing to do whatever it takes to make more money, compromise my values, cheat the system, etc. Or even just being stingy and not giving to others or to God.
 - Maybe I am greedy with ambition: titles and certificates and academic competition - I'm looking to join random clubs and get leadership roles not to serve others, not to grow myself, but to grow my resume.
 - Maybe I am greedy with attention... I crave constant attention or validation through likes and interactions, I get jealous at what others have.
 - Maybe I am greedy with overconsumption... indulging in food, drink, luxury, comfort, impulsive spending, etc.

2. Verse 9: "Woe to him who takes advantage of evil gain for his own house, so that he may set his nest on high, that he may be delivered from the hand of evil."
 - The message here is also about greed, but more particularly about self-reliance or self-sufficiency. If I just get the right grades, the right resume, the right job, I will be secure from failure. If I have enough money, I will be secure from poverty. If I post on social media about how great I'm doing, and all my fancy meals, and all the places I'm traveling to, then everyone will know I am stable, and I'll be secure. This kind of security is called "Spiritual atheism."
 - Our society today is focused on hacks... study hacks, money hacks, productivity hacks. But the idea of surrendering myself and my problems to the Lord - that's not practical. Or that's weakness, I need to show strength. And I set my nest so high, that I have to live under pressure to keep it from falling.

3. Verse 12: "Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed, who establishes a city by wrongdoing."
 - For the Babylonians, this was slavery and murder. Atrocious injustices that they would commit against their fellow humans in order to expand their cities and their nation.
 - What injustices do I commit against my fellow human?

- Do I use people for their talents or their money or their popularity? Do I have real friendships or is it based on what I can get from others?
 - Maybe I see someone as easy to make fun of, I look funny around him, so let me keep him around...
 - Maybe I'm just mean to people
4. Verse 15: "Woe to him who gives clouded and intoxicating drink to his neighbor, that he might look upon his private parts.
- These are the sins of intoxication and sexual immorality
 - Let me be aware of the things that intoxicate me - whether it's alcohol and drugs, or maybe it's social media; maybe it's movies or TV; maybe it's gambling; maybe it's watching sports or Fantasy Sports - that's the newest craze of addiction in Florida.
 - Let me be cautious of what my eyes look at, and where my eyes wander.
5. Verse 19: "Woe to him saying to the wood, 'Awake and rise up,' and to the dumb stone, 'Be exalted.'
- This is the sin of idolatry
 - What is my god? Is it money? Is it fame and popularity?

The point here is that God will USE corrupt nations to bring about His righteousness, but He does not ENDORSE them. All nations will be accountable to His justice. All will be judged in the end. When we see our society around us devolving into the Babylonians - with an obsession of self-sufficiency, of materialism, of sexual immorality and where God always comes second, let me be faithful and do the works of righteousness and be patient for the coming of the Day of the Lord.

Chapter 3

When Habakkuk hears this message from the Lord, he turns to the Lord and prays. And we will read this praise of Habakkuk on Bright Saturday during the Old Testament Praises section.

"Lord, I have heard Your report and was afraid; I considered Your works and was greatly astonished. You shall be known between the two living creatures; In the approaching years You shall be acknowledged; You will be revealed when the time comes. When my soul is troubled, You will in wrath remember mercy."

He goes on to talk about the destruction of the Lord: "The earth stood and was shaken to and fro; He looked and the nations melted away. The mountains were shattered by force; The everlasting hills wasted away. Were you angry, O Lord, with the rivers? Or was Your wrath against the rivers, Or was Your fury against the sea?"

And at the end, he gives his response: "For though the fig tree will not bear fruit and there be no grapes on the vines; the labor of the olive tree fail and the fields yield no food; though the sheep have no pasture and there be no oxen in the cribs; Yet I will glory in the Lord; I will rejoice in God my Savior. The Lord God is my strength; He will direct my feet to the end; He will set me upon high places, So to conquer by His song."

And we see here again the name of Habakkuk: "To embrace." He embraced the Lord's promises and with faith, awaits the coming of the Lord.

One last thing - after this, Babylon will come and take Judah captive as the Lord revealed to Habakkuk. And we know that Daniel will be carried away to Babylon - Habakkuk will NOT be carried away. But he does go to Babylon once in a wonderful story mentioned in the Book of Daniel.

Daniel 12

I want to read for you the last section in the Book of Daniel from Daniel 12:33 according to the numbering of the Orthodox Study Bible:

"Now the prophet Habakkuk was in Judea. He had made a stew and had broken bread into a bowl, and was going to the fields to take it to the reapers. But the angel of the Lord said unto Habakkuk, "Go, carry the dinner you have into Babylon to Daniel, who is in the lions' den. Habakkuk said, "O Lord, I have never seen Babylon, nor do I know the den." Then the angel of the Lord took him by the crown, and carried him by the hair of his head, and with the speed of the wind set him in Babylon over the den. Habakkuk cried out, saying, "O Daniel, Daniel, take the meal God has sent you." Daniel said, "You have remembered me, O God, and You have not forsaken those who love You." So Daniel arose and ate; and the angel of the Lord immediately set Habakkuk down in his own place once more. After this, on the seventh day the king went to the lions' den to mourn for Daniel, and he came to the pit and looked inside- and there sat Daniel. The king cried out with a loud voice, "Great are You, O Lord God of Daniel, and there is no other besides You." Then he drew him out of the den, and cast in those who had plotted Daniel's destruction; and they were devoured in a moment before his face."

It's a wonderful story about this great prophet Habakkuk, and I suspect one of the reasons the Lord in His providence and His wisdom chose Habakkuk for this service and this great blessing, was to show him the land of captivity in the flesh, that he had showed him previously with the prophetic vision.

I hope you will read and contemplate on these three beautiful chapters of the Prophet Habakkuk.

Jeremiah

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