



# Class 11 - Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Jeremiah, Lamentations

*Old Testament Seminar - Immanuel Church*

---

## Introduction

Good morning, and welcome to the Old Testament overview class! This morning, we'll look at three books that address the problem of evil in this world: Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah. Hmm. You say. The problem of evil. In the minor prophets? I always thought about the minor prophets as basically being about judgment. Well... you're right. And in addition I think you'll be surprised at some of the treasures we uncover this morning. The problem of evil — why bad things happen to good people — is at the heart of the human condition. If God is good and God is sovereign over everything, why do bad things happen? What purposes could God possibly have in all of this? The book of Job is probably the Bible's best-known discourse on this topic; the middle chapters of Romans also come to mind. But here at the end of the Old Testament we see this theme again.

So let's stop here for a moment and get some biblical context. ***What is the Bible's answer to the problem of evil?*** I know that's not the typical question you're greeted with at 9:30 in the morning. But that's no reason not to begin this class by thinking hard. ***What is the Bible's answer to the problem of evil?***

To summarize how these prophets answer that question:

- Nahum assures us that God will judge. Personally, powerfully, devastatingly. Now, of course, that provides the textbook answer that we're looking for. The problem of evil is ultimately resolved in God's judgment. But personally, if you're a sinner like me, it is monstrously unsettling.
- And so we move to Habakkuk. A dialog between the prophet and God about why God seems unwilling to judge evildoers. And when Habakkuk finds out the answer (that God will soon judge through an even more wicked people than his own), Habakkuk's horror in what seems to be even greater evil. The answer of Habakkuk? Trust. "The righteous shall

live by his faith<sup>1</sup>.” As we saw in the book of Job, God doesn’t explain his actions to our satisfaction. But he’s revealed enough about his character and his purposes that we can trust him. So if Nahum proclaims that God is judge, Habakkuk is a call to trust. There’s no explanation of the problem of evil in the Bible, but a strong call to faith.

- And yet in God’s mercy this is not the end of the story. Because then we come to Zephaniah. Which begins severely with a prophetic destruction of the entire world. And yet ends with a glorious description of God’s final answer to the problem of evil. Because, after all, the real problem of evil isn’t why bad things happen to good people — but why good things happen to bad people. Because we are all evil. So with Habakkuk calling to present-day trust, Zephaniah points ahead to future change and redemption. God himself makes his evil people good and brings them home to dwell with him forever.

So that’s a quick overview of what we’ll see. Nahum: God will judge. Habakkuk: we have the evidence we need to trust his mysterious purposes. Zephaniah: and we have the hope that one day the problem of evil itself will be undone as God turns his people to himself.

So with that as context, let’s dive into our first book, Nahum.

## Nahum

Nahum prophesied in the in the late 7th century BC, after the Northern Kingdom was conquered by Assyria but before the Southern Kingdom was taken into exile 100 years later. So it’s a time of real fear, as the Assyrians continue to threaten the South. Judah’s problems with Assyria go a long way back. Assyria has long repressed them, and had a reputation for brutality.<sup>2</sup> It’s been at least 125 years since they repented in response to Jonah’s preaching. But since then they’ve returned to violence, and are knocking on Judah’s door. All the while, there are rumors of another great foreign power growing further off to the east, Babylon. Based on events described in chapter 3, we can date this book after the fall of Thebes in Egypt but before the fall of Assyria. That likely puts it at the height of Assyria’s power.

The burning theological question in the people’s minds, of course, is what I laid out a few minute ago. Where is God in all this? Didn’t he promise to take care of his people? Yet their cousins up North have been completely destroyed and their fate looks no better. Who’s really in charge?

---

<sup>1</sup>Habakkuk 2:4

<sup>2</sup>In fact, it was the Assyrians who invented the most brutal form of execution that humans have ever thought up: crucifixion.

## Theme

We can summarize Nahum's prophecy like this:

*Yahweh is still jealous for His people, and ferociously protective of them, therefore they need not fear, for Yahweh is stronger than their enemies, and will strip them of their strength.*

Nahum is as close to a book about hell on earth as you can imagine. As you read through it, you'll see what I mean. This is about God righteously, enthusiastically, demonstrably destroying his enemies, who have abused his cherished people.

We'll take this book in three parts. God's intent to protect his people, 1:2-11. God's threatening judgment against their enemies, 1:12-2:12. And that judgment enacted. 2:13 through the end of the book. It'll be helpful for you to follow along in your Bible as I guide us through these passages.

## Yahweh will protect his people

Look at chapter 1, verses 1 through 5. As I read these verses listen for the way Nahum reinforces his message by drawing on imagery from the Exodus. At that time, the greatest display of God's protection for his people ever.<sup>3</sup>

An oracle concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum of Elkosh.

The Lord is a jealous and avenging God;

the Lord is avenging and wrathful;

the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries

and keeps wrath for his enemies.

The Lord is slow to anger and great in power,

and the Lord will by no means clear the guilty.

His way is in whirlwind and storm,

and the clouds are the dust of his feet.

He rebukes the sea and makes it dry;

he dries up all the rivers;

Bashan and Carmel wither;

the bloom of Lebanon withers.

The mountains quake before him;

---

<sup>3</sup>Cf. for example Exodus 19:18; 20:5-7; 34:6f; Deuteronomy 32:35, 41.

the hills melt;  
the earth heaves before him,  
the world and all who dwell in it.

Nineveh is the capital of Assyria. So this prophecy is about Judah's dreaded enemy. Did you hear the language from the Exodus? Verse 2: God is jealous for His people. Verse 3: He is slow to anger, yet full of justice. That's how Moses described Him on Mount Sinai (Exodus 20:5; 34:14). Verses 4 and 5 Yahweh rides on the clouds, dries up seas and rivers, and causes mountains to quake. Exactly what he did when He rescued His people from Egypt, brought them to Sinai, and then gave them the conquest of the Land (Exodus 19:16-18; Psalm 106:9; Joshua 3:13-15). Yahweh will again save, just like He did back then!

But Nahum's doing more than just recalling Exodus. He's also taking a jab at **the Assyrian gods**. You see, the Assyrians believed in the gods of nature. Here Yahweh is sovereign over all of nature. The point here is that Assyria only *appears* to be mighty and strong. But it is actually Yahweh who is, in the language of verse 3, "great in power."

The point of all this is in **verse 7**.

The Lord is good,  
a stronghold in the day of trouble;  
he knows those who take refuge in him.

So, verse 8, he will destroy Nineveh.

## God's threatened judgment

Moving on, God threatens judgment on Assyria in verses 9-15 of chapter one<sup>4</sup>. And rather than beginning with judgment and ending with grace like most other prophets, God's promises of grace — like in 1:15 — pop up periodically in a larger matrix of judgment for God's enemies.

Well then, what can we take away here? God is **jealous and protective** of His people, whether

---

<sup>4</sup>Removed: "Incidentally, there's some significant suspense here that doesn't quite come through in our English Bibles. Take a look at verse 12. Do you see those little brackets around the words "O Judah"? Again around the words "Nineveh" in verse 14. That means those words aren't actually there in the original text. They are implied and have been added in our translation for the sake of clarity. But in this promise of protection for God's people and threatening of judgment for God's enemies, God's people aren't explicitly identified until chapter 1, verse 15. And Nineveh isn't identified as the enemy in view until chapter 2, verse 8 — almost halfway through the book. It seems that the focus of the early sections of the book is God and his character, regardless of who the individual actors might be."

it's Judah then, or the Church now. He seethes with rage against those who harm his people. Whatever trouble, persecution, or distress the people of God may undergo in this world, we know that the Lord never leaves nor forsakes us. And one day he will vindicate us completely.

Jesus Himself gave us these words of consolation in **Matthew 10:28-31**, “do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.” The Church may seem to be burdened by immorality, false teachers, and all kinds of strange doctrines. But she will not be lost. The Lord, great in power, will preserve her until she is ready to meet her returning King.

## **A vision of Nineveh's demise**

And that takes us to the last two chapters of the book. What will this judgment look like? Horrific to watch. Chapter 2 opens with a picture of judgment. Then it turns in verse 11 to mock Nineveh as the so-called lion. See those chilling words in verse 13 that are repeated again in chapter 3: “Behold, I am against you, declares the Lord of hosts.” That is hell.

Chapter 3 begins with a vision of Nineveh being sacked, then turns in verse 4 to another taunt, of Nineveh as sorceress-whore. Verse 8 taunts Nineveh again, saying that just as Thebes fell suddenly from the height of power so will Assyria. And the book ends with a funeral dirge in verses 18-19.

This judgment is final. And why the taunting, mocking language? Because God delights to judge his enemies. Judgment is not some unfortunate logical necessity of his being a just God. One he only pursues with regret. He hates sin, and he hates those who do sin.

So interesting to think of what this must have felt like at the time. A no-name prophet, coming from the hill-billy tribes of Judah, delivering a book of judgment to the most powerful nation on earth. Did Nahum deliver this in-person? It's interesting that of all the prophets, this is described as a “book” in 1:1 — a document to be delivered. Did he deliver this to the nation of Assyria? Did he pay with his very life for these words of God? This side of heaven we'll never know.

But the city did fall. In 612 BC the Medes, Babylonians, and Scythians, laid siege to the city amidst a fantastic storm. The protective river and moat around the city flooded up against the walls until great chunks of them fell away, just as Nahum had predicted in 2:6. The invaders

walked in and stripped the city so bare that its location was forgotten for more than 2,000 years. Just as Nahum said would happen in 2:10.

A fair warning for us. Do you feel secure? Do you have life wrapped around your finger? Things change quickly. So take warning from this lost city of Nineveh. Use this book as a fearful reminder to put no trust in the world around you, but only in the God who reigns eternally.

Before we leave, look at the last sentence of the book. A question. Can you remember which other prophet ends in a question? Jonah. The prophet of God's mercy to Nineveh. Certainly that connection is no accident. Nineveh, once the object of God's mercy, became the object of God's wrath. And so we see our first answer to the problem of evil. God will judge evil. Personally, powerfully, completely.

And with that, let's turn to Habakkuk.

## Habakkuk

Habakkuk prophesies shortly after Nahum, in the late 7th century BC: still between the fall of the two kingdoms. The difference is that by now Assyria is no longer a threat. Rather his focus is on Judah's internal problems. The people are violent and lawless, and Habakkuk is calling out for justice.

### Theme

The ensuing dialog between Habakkuk and the Lord brings us our theme for the book:

*Yahweh is sovereign over even the actions of the wicked. For even in their wickedness they serve Yahweh's purpose. However, Yahweh is not indicted for evil Himself, for they will be judged for their own wickedness in due time. Thus, the people of Yahweh should patiently wait and trust in their God, and worship Him.*

I know, it's a long theme for such a short book, but Habakkuk really is packed with that much! Even when wickedness abounds, things are not outside of Yahweh's control, and everything is happening for his purposes. So when Yahweh's people are surrounded by calamity and injustice, they should trust in God and worship Him. Because they know that He sees all things and in holiness controls all of space and time.

To understand this book, we'll basically just walk through the conversation Habakkuk has with God. You'll see it captured in the outline on the back of your handout.

## **How long?**

Look at **chapter 1, verses 2-3**.

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,

and you will not hear?

Or cry to you "Violence!"

and you will not save?

Why do you make me see iniquity,

and why do you idly look at wrong?

Destruction and violence are before me;

strife and contention arise.

This is the prophet's opening charge. A call for justice. And so God answers in verse 5. And here is what he says:

## **Until God judges through a wicked nation**

"Look among the nations, and see;

wonder and be astounded.

For I am doing a work in your days

that you would not believe if told.

For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans,

that bitter and hasty nation,

who march through the breadth of the earth,

to seize dwellings not their own.

In Nahum, God comforts his people with his strength to protect them. This time, that same strength is against God's people, and he is still in control.

## Doesn't Yahweh Love Righteousness?

Not exactly the answer Habakkuk was expecting! So we read Habakkuk's response through the rest of chapter 1. To summarize: end of verse 13: "why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?" Sure, God's people have their issues. But they're nothing like the Babylonians! How can Yahweh be both good and sovereign over a universe where evil clearly exists? And how on earth can he use the wicked like this!?

## Be Patient and Trust!

God's answer comes in **chapter 2**. A few highlights:

1. God will judge these Babylonians. He will judge for their destruction of creation, their destruction of human life, their cruelty, and their idolatry. That's the thrust of these verses. Notice the words "wine is a traitor" in verse 5. Perhaps a reference to Belshazzar's drunken feast that last, fateful night of the Babylonian empire?
2. A second thing to notice, that interesting phrase in verse 4. God recognizes the Babylonians as "puffed up" yet says that the righteous... they will live by faith. Paul references this verse in Romans 1 and Galatians 3 — as does the author of Hebrews (10:38) to argue that justification has always been by faith alone.
3. Third, verse 14. "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea."
4. And finally, fourth, verse 20. "But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him."

Now, how do we piece this all together? If we had time, I could take you through the whole passage and I think it would be fairly self evident. But lacking that, let me summarize.

Lest we think God is no longer just given his treatment of his people, we can be assured: he will in fact judge the Babylonians. He knows what they are like. But beyond that, he has greater purposes in mind: that the knowledge of his glory might fill the earth as the waters cover the sea. While the people's labor is only fuel for the fire (verse 13), God is about something much, much bigger. His ways are indeed higher than our own.

So... bad things are happening. Yet we know that ultimate justice is coming and that God is using all of this for good purposes. What do we do in the meantime? We trust. "The righteous

shall live by his faith.” And we recognize that while he is God, we are not. Our place is not to accuse him of wrongdoing but in trust to be silent before him. “The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.” That is the end of the matter.

In times of calamity, God’s people are called to trust. Now, the people of Habakkuk’s day had reason to trust. After all, they’d seen how God used slavery in Egypt and the Exodus to proclaim his might for the good of his people. And we have so much more reason to trust! God has used the greatest evil in history, the murder of his perfect son, for our redemption. His ways may be mysterious. But for those whose faith has been credited as righteousness, we know that in all things he works both for his glory and our good.

### **Habakkuk 3**

Then the final chapter is Habakkuk’s faith-filled response of praise to Yahweh for His wisdom and salvation, and trust in His sovereignty. Let’s read his conclusion in **3:16-19**.

I hear, and my body trembles;  
    my lips quiver at the sound;  
rottenness enters into my bones;  
    my legs tremble beneath me.  
Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble  
    to come upon people who invade us.  
Though the fig tree should not blossom,  
    nor fruit be on the vines,  
the produce of the olive fail  
    and the fields yield no food,  
the flock be cut off from the fold  
    and there be no herd in the stalls,  
yet I will rejoice in the Lord;  
    I will take joy in the God of my salvation.  
God, the Lord, is my strength;  
    he makes my feet like the deer’s;  
    he makes me tread on my high places.  
To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments.

What a powerful confession of trust in God despite worldly circumstances!

Habakkuk understands God's message. He will wait patiently for justice, in the midst of great suffering. Beyond that, though his circumstances be bleak, he can rejoice in God. Joy amid suffering! How is this possible? Because God is his strength. Because he has come to find God so trustworthy that when God says his good purposes are worth suffering invasion and decimation... Habakkuk can be content. He can wait, and in that trust, find joy.

But that waiting, even in joy, is always looking ahead, to God's final answer. And that's what brings us to Zephaniah.

[Questions]

## Zephaniah

Zephaniah prophesies only a few years before Habakkuk. Though they're both prophesying the same thing (the fall of Judah to Babylon) they approach it in different ways. Habakkuk is vexed about how God can use a wicked nation for His purposes. Zephaniah is a lot less complex, simply saying that God's patience has run out with Judah, that their judgment is coming. But then pointing much more fully to God's final mercy.

Let me say one more thing about the historical context before we get into Zephaniah. It was a common phrase in ancient near-eastern documents to speak of "the day" of some great king. That "day" (the "day" of Sennacherib, or the "day" of Nebuchadnezzar) was the day that some truly great king, with great power, could destroy an entire enemy army, from start to finish, in a *single day*! Usually wars lasted for years. But to glorify themselves in their writings they would describe how they made waste of their enemies on the "*day*" of so and so. It's a metaphor for a king's great power and his totality of conquest.

## Theme

So with that we can understand a bit more about "the Day of Yahweh," which I've been calling so far in this class, "the Day of the Lord." And we can understand Zephaniah as well. Here's how I'll summarize this book:

*The Day of the Lord will be the most terrible "day" ever, and it is executed against all false gods. But even in that calamity, God will create a remnant for himself.*

Like in the book of Joel, the Day of the Lord is a major theme. Like we see elsewhere in the prophets, it comes first on the people of God and then the rest of the nations. It's a day both of wrath and salvation. The first chapter focuses on the Day of the LORD on Judah; the next section through 3:7 is the Day of the Lord on the nations. And then 3:8-20 focuses on the salvation of the remnant. We'll skip quickly through the first two sections to camp out more on the third.

The book starts out abruptly, with the destruction of all life. Verse 2:

“I will utterly sweep away everything  
from the face of the earth,” declares the Lord.  
“I will sweep away man and beast;  
I will sweep away the birds of the heavens  
and the fish of the sea,  
and the rubble with the wicked.  
I will cut off mankind  
from the face of the earth,” declares the Lord.

Sounds like the flood of Genesis, doesn't it? Judgment on the whole earth once again.

So he turns first to Judah. In the words of 1:12, these people are lost in complacency. “The Lord will not do good, nor will he do ill.” they say. Well — as it turns out, he is about to do a lot. And from their perspective, it's all bad news.

But, chapter two verse three, some hope. “Seek righteousness; seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the Lord.”

Chapter 2 then turns its attention to the rest of the nations. For God's enemies, there is no call to repentance or offer of mercy.

### **Zephaniah 3:8-20**

But it's not only a day of wrath. It's also a day of salvation for the remnant. Having come through such horrific judgment, how should the remnant view God's care for them? Look at 3:8:

“Therefore wait for me,” declares the Lord,  
“for the day when I rise up to seize the prey.  
For my decision is to gather nations,  
to assemble kingdoms,  
to pour out upon them my indignation,

all my burning anger;  
for in the fire of my jealousy  
all the earth shall be consumed.

Just like in Habakkuk. Be patient; God will judge your enemies. But Zephaniah goes further. Look ahead to verse 9:

Not only will God *vindicate* his people (verse 8), he will *change* his people (verse 9).

“For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples  
to a pure speech,  
that all of them may call upon the name of the Lord  
and serve him with one accord.

Note that this is happening to all peoples, not just Israel.

He will gather his people from all nations (verse 10), and he will exult in his people even as they praise him. There’s that famous section in 3:17: “He will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.” There is no more punishment left for God’s people (verse 15). No more enemies. No more fear. And God’s people, verse 20, will be at home. “At that time I will bring you in, at the time when I gather you together; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth.”

## Application

Friends, despite any troubles we have faced in this life, our greatest problem has already been solved. God has reconciled us to Himself in Christ! If we can really get our minds around that, then of course we will not fear the world as Nahum instructs us. We will not love the world as Habakkuk instructs us. We will glory in our God like Zephaniah instructs us. We will have confidence in God’s justice. We will wait patiently for him. And we will put our hope in this glorious promise of complete restoration for all of God’s people.

## Transition

Today we’ll return to the Major Prophets. We’re going to study Jeremiah and Lamentations, both written by Jeremiah. Just a reminder: the reason we’re moving backward in the Old Testament,

instead of just taking the books in canonical order isn't to confuse you! We're trying to understand the flow of redemptive-history. That is, we're trying to understand the historical account of how God has been working through history to redeem a people to Himself. Ultimately, to prepare the way for His Son, Jesus Christ. Though the Old Testament is comprised of 39 books, they come together to tell one story. We're trying to take that story in an order that helps us understand it better.

## Jeremiah

Now, what's happening as Jeremiah is writing? The Babylonians are threatening the Southern Kingdom, Judah. As the book progresses, Judah is invaded. By the time we reach the end, the people have been dragged away in three waves of exile (in 605, 597, and 586 BC). After the last wave, the Babylonians razed the city of Jerusalem to the ground, including Solomon's great temple. You can read about all of this in 2 Kings 22-25 and 2 Chronicles 34-36.<sup>5</sup> Jeremiah himself lived and prophesied through all this.

Why did God allow this to happen? That's the question 1 and 2 Kings answer. The covenant people have been involved in idolatry for decades. They've worshiped every strange deity from Baal to Molech to "the queen of heaven," and engaging in such acts of "worship" as temple prostitution and child sacrifice. That, on top of open dishonesty, corruption, injustice, adultery, oppression of the helpless, slander, and so on. They'd been sent prophets for a long time, but they would not repent. The people have made shipwreck of the covenant. Now Jeremiah is announcing the covenant curses that were written into the covenant from day one in Deuteronomy 27 and 28. But even as Jeremiah prophesies this destruction, he also, describes God's way forward to complete his plan of redemption — more clearly than any prophet we've studied so far.

One thing Jeremiah talks a lot about is our hearts. Our sinful, unchangeable-by-human-effort hearts. So let's start by talking about those hearts. ***How does God change a sinful human heart?*** (Push the class to think not merely about justification but sanctification as well.)

---

<sup>5</sup>The teacher may at this time also want to recommend three reference books that any serious student of the Old Testament should have in their personal library: The New Bible Dictionary edited by Marshall, Millard, Packer, and Wiseman (published by IVP), The New Dictionary of Biblical Theology edited by Alexander, Rosner, Carson, and Goldsworthy (also published by IVP), and An Introduction to the Old Testament by Dillard and Longman (Zondervan). I suppose while we're at it, we can add The Rose Book of Bible Charts, Maps & Time Lines [sic] (by Rose Publishing) to this list. These are great reference books for these sorts of historical and biblical-theological issues.

## Theme

Now Jeremiah is a big book, and no short theme statement can really do justice to the whole thing. But let me try to encapsulate the theological center of the book with this statement:

*The old covenant has failed; not because it itself was defunct, but because the people were not able to keep it due to their sinful hearts. Therefore a new covenant is needed which will involve new hearts for the people of God.*

If you're familiar with Jeremiah, it may sound to you like I just made a bee line for chapter 31. Not so. Chapter 31 is simply the theological mountain top that the rest of the book is climbing to and descending from. This is what the whole book is about. The question that Jeremiah sets out to answer is, Why was the covenant broken? In a deeper sense than "the people sinned." The conclusion he comes to very early in the book is that the covenant itself was just fine. The problem lies with the people. They have not been able to keep it. I'll repeat that: they are *unable*. They cannot keep the covenant, and it's because they're hearts are in love with their sin. And if their hearts are the problem, that's a pretty hopeless situation since corrupt hearts cannot change themselves. So for the first 28 chapters Jeremiah is *very* pessimistic. The people cannot keep the covenant because they have these depraved hearts, and they *cannot* change their hearts. The only possible solution is if God *changes their hearts* and makes them fit, from the inside out, to participate again in the covenant. Though, remember back to Deuteronomy where God promises to "circumcise your hearts:" this is something he's already promised to do.

The book is structured, as you see on the back of your handout, in five basic pieces. The first 29 chapters prophesy God's judgment against his people. Then we break in chapters 30-33 with a beautiful description of God's ultimate solution to this problem: new hearts. Chapters 34-45 then shift back to prophesy the final destruction of Jerusalem. Chapters 46-51 address the wickedness of the nations, including the invading Babylonians. And finally chapter 52 recounts the fulfillment of much of this prophesy: the invasion and decimation of Judah. All together, it amounts to the longest book in the Bible.

## I. Major Themes

OK. With that as intro, we'll tackle the first 30 chapters by focusing in on five important themes.

## 1. Breach of Covenant

First, throughout the book of Jeremiah God accuses Judah of breaking his covenant. He first lays out the charges in 2:9-12. Judah is guilty of nothing less than giving up the true God in exchange for worthless idols.

“Therefore I still contend with you,  
declares the Lord,  
and with your children’s children...  
Has a nation changed its gods,  
even though they are no gods?  
But my people have changed their glory  
for that which does not profit.  
Be appalled, O heavens, at this;  
be shocked, be utterly desolate,  
declares the Lord

As the book continues, God’s condemnation grows more graphic, more passionate, and more intense. He describes Judah’s sin as adultery. “as a treacherous wife leaves her husband, so have you been treacherous to me, O house of Israel” (3:20). He describes their sin as prostitution. “By the waysides you have sat awaiting lovers like an Arab in the wilderness. You have polluted the land with your vile whoredom.” (3:2)

So... Judah’s broken the covenant. That’s the first theme.

## 2. Repeated, Widespread Sin

But second, the breach of covenant was not a one-time event. It was a repeated habit that pervaded society. And for hundreds of years God had sent prophet after prophet to them. Listen to Jeremiah talk about his own ministry and those before him in chapter 25.

“For twenty-three years, from the thirteenth year of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, to this day, the word of the Lord has come to me, and I have spoken persistently to you, but you have not listened. You have neither listened nor inclined your ears to hear, although the Lord persistently sent to you all his servants the prophets, saying, ‘Turn now, every one of you, from his evil way and evil deeds, and dwell upon the land that the Lord has given to you and your fathers from of old and

forever.

It's gotten so bad that God says, "Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn toward this people. Send them out of my sight, and let them go!" (15:1).

Instead the people have listened to the lying words of false prophets. 6:14:

They have healed the wound of my people lightly,  
saying, 'Peace, peace,'  
when there is no peace.

False prophets tell the people what they want to hear instead of the truth they need to hear. I wonder how many preachers today are guilty of the same thing. In how many of our churches is God's word not preached faithfully, in such a way as people are changed. As Paul writes in 1 Cor. 4:20, "For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power." Our standard should not simply be, "did the preacher say things that weren't untrue" (though even the false prophets in Jeremiah's day failed that test, 7:8). Rather, our standard should be, "is the *whole* counsel of God preached such that people are being changed?"

### 3. Total Depravity

Third, let's look more deeply at why this happened. Yes, this disaster is the result of the broken covenant. But a deeper question than that: *Why was the covenant broken? Why* couldn't the people keep it? Jeremiah says in 6:10, "their ears are uncircumcised, they cannot listen; behold, the word of the Lord is to them an object of scorn; they take no pleasure in it." They *cannot* hear the word of God, because they have no desire to. Lack of desire so severe it equates to lack of ability.

Going even deeper, Jeremiah tells us in 17:1 "The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron; with a point of diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their heart." Sin is carved, etched, onto the heart! Look at verse 9. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" In 18:12 God tells Jeremiah to call on Judah to repent, but tells Jeremiah to expect Judah to reply "That is in vain! We will follow our own plans, and will every one act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart." The people are led by these evil hearts. Sin *drives and controls* them.

Finally, let's read 13:23.

Can the Ethiopian change his skin  
or the leopard his spots?

Then also you can do good  
who are accustomed to do evil.

Not only does the entrenched sin of a man's heart cripple and control him, it won't release him. As we just read in 17:9, the heart is beyond cure.

In its natural state, the human heart is incapable of hearing God's word. It's restricted in its desires, emotions, and feelings because sin is carved onto it. Sin is its slave master, driving and controlling it. And there's no way out. In a word, this is damning! Warning, disaster, logic, and will power are all powerless to turn us back to God. That's theme #3.

[Questions]

#### **4. Proclamation of Judgment**

Fourth, let's look at what happens after God charges Judah with breaking the covenant. Jeremiah writes in 11:11-12 "Therefore, thus says the Lord, Behold, I am bringing disaster upon them that they cannot escape. Though they cry to me, I will not listen to them. Then the cities of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem will go and cry to the gods to whom they make offerings, but they cannot save them in the time of their trouble." God asks, earlier, in 5:7, 9. "How can I pardon you? Your children have forsaken me and have sworn by those who are no gods. When I fed them to the full, they committed adultery and trooped to the houses of whores... Shall I not punish them for these things? declares the Lord?"

God will punish Judah for breaking the covenant. And this is where Jeremiah gets his reputation. In God's proclamations of judgment we have some of the most harrowing, horrific language in the Bible. 8:13:

When I would gather them, declares the Lord,  
there are no grapes on the vine,  
nor figs on the fig tree;  
even the leaves are withered,  
and what I gave them has passed away from them."

9:22:

'The dead bodies of men shall fall  
like dung upon the open field,

like sheaves after the reaper,  
and none shall gather them.’

12:11-12:

The whole land is made desolate,  
but no man lays it to heart.  
Upon all the bare heights in the desert  
destroyers have come,  
for the sword of the Lord devours  
from one end of the land to the other;  
no flesh has peace.

15:7-8:

I have destroyed my people;  
they did not turn from their ways.  
I have made their widows more in number  
than the sand of the seas

And it goes on, and on, and on, and on — for 30 chapters. So Jeremiah wails, chapter 6 verse 26:

O daughter of my people, put on sackcloth,  
and roll in ashes;  
make mourning as for an only son,  
most bitter lamentation,  
for suddenly the destroyer  
will come upon us.

As Hebrews 10:31 says, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

But there is still one last theme in these chapters:

## **5. Judgment as the Undoing of Creation**

The last theme we want to note is the character of God’s judgment. The judgment in Jeremiah isn’t simply the invasion of Judah. It may begin there, but goes much further. It is so complete, it is in fact an undoing of creation itself. Listen as I read from chapter 4.

I looked on the earth, and behold, it was without form and void;

and to the heavens, and they had no light.  
I looked on the mountains, and behold, they were quaking,  
and all the hills moved to and fro.  
I looked, and behold, there was no man,  
and all the birds of the air had fled.  
I looked, and behold, the fruitful land was a desert,  
and all its cities were laid in ruins  
before the Lord, before his fierce anger.

Do you hear Genesis 1 in reverse? There is something cosmic, something primal in this judgment that goes well beyond the fate of one nation in the 6th Century BC. 4:28, “For this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above be dark; for I have spoken; I have purposed; I have not relented, nor will I turn back.”

## **B. Jeremiah the Prophet**

Those are the themes of this first section. Now before going further, let’s look at Jeremiah the man. Think of our word “jeremiad.” It means “long and mournful complaint.” Usually with a negative connotation: the words of a pessimist, a prophet of doom and gloom. Is that Jeremiah?

Jeremiah was a man of God in love with the word of God. He writes in 20:9,

If I say, “I will not mention him,  
or speak any more in his name,”  
there is in my heart as it were a burning fire  
shut up in my bones,  
and I am weary with holding it in,  
and I cannot.

Sometimes we think of God’s inspiration as a gentle breeze carrying God’s messengers forward. Jeremiah experienced it as a driving hurricane, a consuming fire, an irresistible force!

And God’s words earned Jeremiah enemies. Jeremiah records a plot against his life by the priests and false prophets in chapter 26, and he was arrested for treason in chapter 37 because he prophesied the Babylonians would win. The king, recognizing that Jeremiah was a true prophet, privately pulled him out of prison to ask if there is a word from the Lord. “Yes,” Jeremiah replied, “You shall be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon.” Jeremiah, arrested, beaten, and on trial for his life, refused to compromise his message! Then Jeremiah challenged the king: “What

wrong have I done to you or your servants or this people, that you have put me in prison? Where are your prophets who prophesied to you, saying, ‘The king of Babylon will not come against you and against this land?’” What courage!

Jeremiah was driven to speak the judgment of God not out of a melancholy disposition, or clinical depression, but because he loved the word of God and was surrounded by sin. Jeremiah was a man of conviction.

But back to what Jeremiah wrote.

### **C. The New Covenant: Jeremiah 31:31-37**

Happily, Jeremiah is not just about sin and judgment. In this harshest of prophecy, we see promise of God’s continuing plan of redemption. And it isn’t just a glimmer; this is one of the most spectacular passages of promise in all the prophets. We read the theological climax of the book in Jeremiah 31:31-34:

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

Notice that in **verse 31** God is promising a new covenant here. Remember the problem with the first covenant was not God, or the covenant, it was the people and their sinful hearts. The solution of the new covenant is simply: give them *new* hearts! And what makes the new covenant so superior to the old one is that now the law is *within* the people of God. It shapes their desires, wills, wants, and loves. Indeed, they love it.

This becomes possible because God promises to forgive sins, as we heard in verse 34. Now that is good news! That is gospel! Those of us who have turned from their sin and trusted in Christ in this way do so only because, as we read in Jeremiah, God has given us new hearts. He has given us hearts and minds to love Him with, eyes to see and ears to hear the truth. And desires

that are no longer enslaved to sin. But set free to pursue the delight of beholding the majesty of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Do you have this new heart? In New Testament terms, have you been born again? Christianity is not mere intellectual assent to things that happened one weekend outside of Jerusalem two thousand years ago. It is a regeneration of spiritually dead people into a dynamic relationship with the Holy One of the Universe. Is that what you experience? Stare with an intense gaze into the gospel of Jesus, because it is there that the glory of God shines forth, to rescue people out of darkness, redeem them from sin, and give new birth.

And keep in mind how much more precious this message is having waded through the first 30 chapters of Jeremiah. If all we ever do is look at climax passages like this, we miss our own depravity that stands in sharp relief to the good news. Use Jeremiah to understand your own complete inability and unwillingness to follow the law of God apart from Christ. And then drink in chapter 31 as the good news it really is.

#### **D. Judgment Against the Nations and The Destruction of Jerusalem: Jeremiah 46-52**

Well. We could spend much more time on chapter 31, as the New Testament authors do. But for the sake of time, let's continue. In chapters 34-45, Jeremiah describes the final destruction of Jerusalem. And then chapters 46-51 are prophecies of judgment against other nations, including Egypt, the Philistines, Moab, Ammon, Edom, and a few others. Like the other prophets, Jeremiah condemns the gentile nations for pride, insolence, boasting, foolishness, for mistreating God's people, for trusting in riches and military power. This section finally culminates with a lengthy proclamation of judgment against Babylon itself. Babylon was the instrument God used to exact his punishment on Judah, and Jeremiah had been accused of treason by prophesying Babylon's victory. But Jeremiah is no traitor. He knows that even though God is using Babylon, Babylon is not guiltless. Babylon is condemned because she rejoiced in the downfall of God's people (50:11). And because Babylon was guilty of cruelty, oppression, and murder against God's people. Therefore Babylons overthrow was the "vengeance of the Lord," (50:15). Babylon is God's "war club" with which he shatters nations and kingdoms (51:20ff); nonetheless, God says, "I am against you, O destroying mountain, declares the Lord, which destroys the whole earth" (51:25). Though God judges his people, he will ultimately judge their oppressors as well. As Jeremiah says,

"For Israel and Judah have not been forsaken

by their God, the Lord of hosts,  
but the land of the Chaldeans [that is, the Babylonians] is full of guilt  
against the Holy One of Israel” (51:5).

Finally, Jeremiah records the fulfillment of his main prophecy. We read in chapter 52: “On the ninth day of the fourth month the famine was so severe in the city that there was no food for the people of the land. Then a breach was made in the city, and all the men of war fled...[The Babylonians] burned the house of the Lord, and the king’s house and all the houses of Jerusalem; every great house he burned down...So Judah was taken into exile out of its land.” The stay of God’s people in the promised land was seemingly at an end, and the nation has failed. So ends the prophecy of Jeremiah. Oh — except for the last few verses. Look at verses 31-34. Remember Jehoiachin? An earlier king of the line of David? He lives — and in fact, is invited to the king’s table. What an interesting way to end this chronicle of judgment. The seed of the woman, the seed of David, is still alive. God will still make good on his promises.

## Lamentations

Lamentations is set right after God has destroyed His own city, Jerusalem. In this poem Jerusalem is personified as a woman mourning for her lost children and has no one to comfort her.

### Theme

The message to those left behind after the destruction of the city is this:

*We are in mourning because God has done this, even though it’s our fault. Now we need Him to change our hearts, for He will again comfort us.*

Yes, I said that the focus of the book is that God has destroyed His city. The author makes that very clear in this book. This is another one of those books that is strong on the sovereignty of God. Nonetheless, it’s the people’s own fault that this has happened. Yet, as with every prophet, there is hope. And just like the book of Jeremiah, hope is held out in the prospect of receiving new hearts from God.

The book of Lamentations is highly structured. It’s a series of acrostic poems written in the rhythm of a funeral dirge. The overall structure puts the theme of God’s compassion, in chapter

3, in the center of the book, with discussions of sin and judgment on either end in chapters 2 and 4. We'll finish our time together this morning by walking through these poems.

## **The City's Sin and the Judge's Wrath**

The first poem recounts the fall of Jerusalem, and the sins of the people that brought about God's judgment. "How lonely sits the city, that was full of people!" he cries (v1). "Her foes have become the head, her enemies prosper" (v5). Worst of all, this desolation is deserved. "Jerusalem sinned grievously; therefore she became filthy; all who honored her despise her." (v8).

The second and fourth poems expand on the themes of sin and judgment, echoing much of what we saw in Jeremiah. "How the Lord in his anger has set the daughter of Zion under a cloud!" he says (2:1), "The Lord has swallowed up without mercy all the habitations of Jacob" (2:2). In the fourth poem the author says "The Lord gave full vent to his wrath; he poured out his hot anger, and he kindled a fire in Zion that consumed its foundations" (4:11).

## **The Compassion of God**

But in chapter 3, the middle of the poem, the theme changes and we read a meditation on God's compassion and goodness. "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness...It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord" (3:21-26)

A few verses later the author offers a meditation on the twin roles played by God's sovereignty and human responsibility. "Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come? Why should a living man complain, a man, about the punishment of his sins?" (v38-39). Both blessings and curses come from God, but we are responsible for our choices. There's no apologetic for that; it's just affirmed, and accepted.

Finally, the fifth and final poem in chapter 5 ends with a recognition of God's rightful kingship and a plea for his mercy. Verse 21:

"But you, O Lord, reign forever;  
your throne endures to all generations.  
Why do you forget us forever,  
why do you forsake us for so many days?"

Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored!

Renew our days as of old” (21-23)

Even in the midst of God’s most severe judgment, God’s people may still turn to him in hope, plea for mercy, and look forward to renewal. This can be a message of great encouragement and solace in the midst of suffering.

---

This material is adapted from a course with the same name developed by Capitol Hill Baptist Church. It has been modified for our purposes and has been condensed to fit our time schedule. The original version is available on their website at <https://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/resources/core-seminars/series/old-testament-overview/>