



CATHOLIC SCRIPTURE STUDY

Catholic Scripture Study Notes written by Sister Marie Therese, are provided for the personal use of students during their active participation and must not be loaned or given to others.

SERIES IV

THE PROPHETS AND REVELATION

Lesson 10 Commentary Zephaniah and Habakkuk
Lesson 11 Questions Jeremiah 1-20

Zephaniah and Habakkuk

Prophets were silent for seventy-five years in Juda. During this time, the evil king Manasseh died. After two years his son Amon was murdered, and his son Josiah, only eight years old, became king. In the years until Josiah became eighteen the Kingdom went on as his degenerate father had left it; all sorts of idolatry were practiced, people worshipped the sun, moon and stars, as well as false gods. Astral worship was held on the roof of God's temple.

The young Josiah was to prove to be one of the wise and good kings of Judah. He sensed that the people were looking for leadership in re-discovering their Mosaic heritage. At that time, as though God was waiting for a Josiah to come, three prophets raised their voices against the apostasy and degradation of the nation: Zephaniah, Habakkuk, and Jeremiah (one of the greatest of all).

ZEPHANIAH

I. DOOMSDAY

Zephaniah came first with a short, direct and devastating message, which broke the complacency in Jerusalem. He saw God's judgment on these affairs:

Near is the great day of the Lord;
Near and very swiftly coming!
A day of wrath, anguish, destruction and darkness
Men have sinned against the LORD! (Zephaniah 1:14a-17b))

To the simple people, the message was! "Seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth, who have observed His law, that you may be sheltered" on that day (Zephaniah 2:3).

To the well-off, merchants and princes in the "New Quarter" wailing will be heard and battle sounds heard from the hills. But some over-confident ones will feel that "the Lord can not bring good or evil!" (Zephaniah 1:12). Houses will be devastated, anguish and distress is throughout the city. The next words seem a prophecy of the last days: "All the earth shall be consumed..., a sudden end to all who live on the earth" (Zephaniah 1:18, Thessalonians 1:8-9).

The prophet uses words expressing human emotions: anger, wrath, jealousy, for the judgments of God. Of course there is no sudden emotional movement in God. It is truth and His will that act in His world. We know that He wills salvation and glory for all who will take it (2 Peter

3:9). The great danger we must provide for is allowing ourselves serious sin and then remaining in it.

II. THE REASON (Zephaniah 1:17)

In one verse, comes the reason for all this damage and death. “Because they have sinned against the Lord.” Neither fortified cities nor walls will escape. A striking phrase shows us the powerlessness of money before the Lord’s judgment.

Neither their silver nor their gold
shall be able to save them
on the day of the Lord’s wrath (Zephaniah 1:18).

III. ZEPHANIAH’S ADVICE (Zephaniah 2:1-3)

A. To The People. Gather together—reflect upon their deeds, their lives, before the time of devastation comes. The humble of the earth should seek the Lord, for they have observed His law. They should seek justice (righteousness, holiness). All wickedness on the earth in men’s hearts, on that day shall receive its due. Then “Perhaps,” says Zephaniah, “you may be sheltered on the day of the Lord’s anger” (Zephaniah 2:3).

B. To The Nations (Zephaniah 2:1-15). Israel’s neighbors in the near future will see all their lands belong to the “remnant” of Israel, the faithful friends of God who survive the captivities to come and remain earnestly in God’s friendship. These neighbors addressed have reviled God’s people. Nineveh, for example, the great and prosperous city, will become a home for screech owls.

APPLICATION

The sharp contrast in “prosperous city” and “home for screech owls” can teach us that prosperity in this world can be a disadvantage where God is not recognized. Is it a cause of our neglect of God and our faith?

IV. REPROACH AND PROMISE (Zephaniah 3:1-20)

A. Jerusalem’s Failures. The meekness the people (and ourselves) are advised to seek has its opposite: “She hears no voice, accepts no correction” (Zephaniah 3:2). A second failure God reproaches his people for is surely one that our self-sufficient society does not think necessary: “In the Lord she has not trusted; to her God she has not drawn near” (Zephaniah 3:2b).

We see here the attitudes that mean so much to God. All His power will not be for us, until we trust, and draw near to him. It is not only our sins, but our lack of a loving, personal relationship with the God who laments our failure. Have you “drawn near to the Lord”? How could you gain this wonderful reality?

1. Leaders of the People. Those who hold offices for the people; princes, judges, prophets, priests, are described as roaring lions; wolves of the night, insolent, treacherous, profaning the holy (priests are named) (Zephaniah 3:3-4), but the Lord within the people and among them is “just and does no wrong.” He renders true judgment unfailingly at dawn (Zephaniah 3:5). These qualities of a judge, unfailingly, early, show consideration for the people, who may have had to wait hours of the day for a decision. This Lord has it ready “at dawn.”

2. God’s Judgment in Earth’s Time

a. Nations Destroyed. “Streets deserted, cities devastated, no man left living in them; defenses laid waste” (Zephaniah 3:6). Such things have happened in two world wars in our century; priceless monuments, churches, work of centuries of men and women, destroyed. What Zephaniah is telling us is that God’s judgment is used in time so that “surely now you will accept correction” (Zephaniah 3:7). A good God can not will this unless it will help his most priceless work: mankind.

b. The Earth Consumed. “This will come the day I arise as accuser” to gather “together the nations, therefore wait for me” (Zephaniah 3:8). Sobering words, read and pondered, can change a sinner, as God predicts in the next verses. God’s punishments are only for redemption, for saving.

c. Promises (Zephaniah 3:9-13)

1. All people will speak the same language (9a).
2. All will serve God with one accord (9c).
3. All will bring offerings to God (10).
4. Characters will change from rebellious, proud, to a people humble and lowly, who take refuge in name of the Lord (12).
5. The people of God will do no wrong, tell no lies.

d. Songs of Joy (3:14:20)

1. “Shout for joy, sing joyfully...exult with all your heart, daughter Jerusalem!” These verses are said every year in one of the church’s liturgies.
2. The Lord’s Action:
 - a. Remove the judgment against Jerusalem.
 - b. Turns away its enemies.
 - c. The Lord came into its midst.
3. Joy and saving from the Lord. The Lord, says the prophet, “will sing joyfully because of you, renew you in his love” (17). He promises to protect the city from disaster, save the lame, the outcasts, and give the city renown and praise in all the earth” (20).

Our God proves himself all the good that we believe of him in these words of Zephaniah!

HABAKKUK, 605-597 BCE

INTRODUCTION

Before the Babylonian victory over Nineveh and Assyria, and the capture of Jerusalem, Judah was in desperate need. Political intrigue and idolatry were widespread. The defense against Egypt, trying to recover her former glory as an empire, caused the good king Josiah to meet his death defending Judah.

Assyria’s downfall and the rejoicing over it soon turned to pain and subjection again, under the Babylonian king as new ruler of the Middle East world. The Mosaic faith was forgotten, compromised again with pagan ways; syncretism and its easy tolerance took over. Judah needed a deeper understanding of the meaning of Israel’s covenant with Yahweh.

Habakkuk gave a strong challenge to the simple view of God’s justice; Yahweh’s justice meant that good would follow from good actions; obedience would result in security on their land, victory against foes, and abundant life.

HABAKKUK QUESTIONS GOD.

A. Dialogue with God. Habakkuk begins with a dialogue between Yahweh and himself. “How long, Yahweh, must I cry for help and you do not answer? (St.. Monica waited seventeen years for her prayer to be answered, and what an answer! The conversion of her son Augustine gave the church a saint, one of the greatest teachers, a bishop, a writer, an outstanding personality.)

Why do you make me look upon trouble...the wicked gang up on the righteous? Does history justify the righteous? If Yahweh is ruler of guilty men, whose might is their god (Habakkuk 1:3-11). Divine judgment, proclaimed by other prophets, makes no sense if faith cannot discern some purpose in historical events. Habakkuk complains again, “You whose eyes are too pure to look upon

evil... why are you silent when the wicked devour those who are more righteous than they” (Habakkuk 1:13). In a moving and interesting commend, Habakkuk tells God: “I will stand at my guard post... and (to himself) keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what answer he will give to my complaint” (Habakkuk 2:1).

B. God Replies (Habakkuk 2:3). “The vision’s time will come, wait for it; it presses on to its fulfillment and will not disappoint, if it delays, wait for it...” God adds that “the just man, because of his integrity, shall live” (Habakkuk 2:4). St. Paul quotes Habakkuk’s words in Romans 1:17, and Galatians 3:11.

Do we trust God as he asks of Habakkuk? Or do we doubtfully abandon our contact with God over our problem? A rash man, says God, has no integrity; but the just man, because of his faith, shall live (Habakkuk 2:4).

C. Habakkuk’s Answer. Habakkuk calls “woe!” upon “those who store up what is not theirs.” These woes, from verse 6 through to verse 19, are pronounced upon those guilty of faults very much like our own, of our present day; “loads himself down with debts...your creditors will rise suddenly.” It would be good to read these verses carefully...

At the end of these reflections, Habakkuk reminds himself that these are descriptions of the unjust and the tyrants of other nations: “But the

Lord is in his holy temple, silence before him, all the earth!” After asking for silence, he breaks into a song, a canticle!

Singing of all kinds of trials, of other men’s injustice, he concludes with a statement of his faith that we can all use in our growth in faith.

“Yet will I rejoice in the Lord and exult in my saving God. God, my Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet swift as those of hinds and enables me to go upon the heights.”

A righteous person must face the enigmas (puzzles or mysteries) of history in faith, by living and acting in a conviction of trust in God; confident that the issues are in God’s hand and so, waiting patiently for the time when God’s sovereignty will be made clear (Isaiah 8:16-18). St. Paul reinterpreted Habakkuk’s question in his doctrine of “justification by faith” (Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11).

The Israelites, as they resumed their life as a nation, after the Captivity, came to a false nationalism that needed to die, and it does in the turbulent events at the end of the seventh century. But it was the revival of covenant faith in a time of nationalism that made possible the understanding of their conquest by others. Habakkuk helped with that.

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QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 11
Jeremiah (1)

Day 1 Read the notes.

- a. Share a quote that had meaning for you.
- b. From Isaiah 1-39, what prophecy do you feel is most important? Why?

Day 2 Read Jeremiah 1:4-10, Isaiah 49:1-3, Luke 1:13-15 and Galatians 1:15.

- a. What do we learn here about God and an unborn child?
- b. How has our nation offended against this Scripture about unborn children? Why do we consider this so evil?
- c. In God's call to Jeremiah, what words can also be our call as Christians?

Day 3 Read Jeremiah. 1:14-19, Isaiah. 2:8, Exodus 32:8.

- a. What is the offense of Judah's people against God?
- b. How do we offend in this way? (Ask yourself if this happens in your own life?)
- c. Read Jeremiah 2:26-37. To what does God liken one whom he called, led to freedom, and to God, and who later forsook him?

Day 4 Read Jeremiah 3:1-5, 19, 4:1-4.

- a. What does God show us of Himself in these lines?

- b. Read Jeremiah 4:13-14; 6:1-19. What do these verses prophecy? What would have saved them?
- c. Read Jeremiah 7:1-28. Of the evils mentioned, which apply to society today?
- d. Read Jeremiah 10:1-7, 17, 11:1-8. Choose some lines to which you reacted the most, share them.

Day 5 Read Jeremiah 13:1-27; John 12:35-36.

- a. In all the idolatry among the Jews, what are Jeremiah's beliefs?
- b. In Jeremiah 13:10, what "strange gods" do we worship in America?
- d. What reaction did Jeremiah have to God's words? How have God's words in this study affected you?

Day 6 Read Jeremiah 17:5-11, Mark 7:21.

- a. Give an example of verses 9-11 that we see in the daily news regarding riches gained unjustly?
- b. Read Jeremiah 18:1-12, 18-23, 20:1-6. Comment on one of these texts; What can you learn from it?
- c. Read Jeremiah 20:7-18. Give your reactions to Jeremiah's feelings?