

Book Introductions: Job - Malachi

Job offers a hard look at suffering from both the human and divine perspective. In the first two chapters we catch a glimpse of the spiritual background as Satan and God discuss righteous Job (and then Satan is allowed to bring disasters into Job's life). From chapter 3 on we see Job responding, without the perspective of chapters 1-2. Much of the book is a cycle of debate between Job and three men, plus a fourth nearer the end. The "friends" are clear that suffering is a consequence for sin, so Job must be a terrible sinner. Job calls on God to disclose his righteousness. Where does wisdom come from in the harsh realities of life? It cannot come from human thought, it must come from God. Finally God speaks and Job is humbled by dozens of questions from the Almighty One. God is God. Job is dumbfounded. Finally God restores Job's fortunes again. There is no easy answer for undeserved suffering, but Job urges us to look heavenwards in every circumstance.

Psalms is a collection of collections of poetry, many written by King David. Psalms 1 and 2 act as an introduction to the book. The first psalm contrasts the enduring blessing of the believer who meditates on God's Word with the fleeting and vain existence of the wicked. Yet the book clearly demonstrates that life usually doesn't seem to work out as it should – the wicked seem to prosper, the righteous seem to suffer, things are not right. So the various psalmists ask questions, complain, occasionally have an emotional outburst. The second psalm points the reader to the hope of the believer – the coming Messiah. In the midst of the confusion we find thanksgiving and faith expressed. Psalms empathises with the many emotions of life, but urges us to draw near to God, to give thanks, to trust Him, to look to the Messiah and to give praise!

Proverbs is considered the classic expression of Hebrew wisdom poetry. The early chapters lay out a contrast between lady wisdom and lady folly, as a father disciplines his son for the challenges of life. From chapter 10 onwards the book moves into the familiar 2-4 line statements that contrast wise and foolish living. The book is written in the context of Jewish life under the Old Covenant. While our circumstances are different, the wisdom offered in Proverbs will serve us well if we grasp the basic issue of the book – the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding (1:7). Wisdom is not developed by accident, it takes diligence on our part to choose wisely in each circumstance of life. Choose lady wisdom, not lady folly. The book appropriately ends with a beautiful description of the wife of noble character.

Ecclesiastes has a tone of apparent pessimism that causes many to struggle with the book. Life is futile, but does this mean that life is not worth living? No, but it does mean that the best of humans won't be able to figure it out for themselves. God is the only one that makes sense of the mysteries of life. The author, probably King Solomon, attempted to find meaning through pursuing wisdom in philosophy, through materialism, pleasures of every kind, work as an end in itself, prominence and power. But nothing done "under the sun" satisfies. The apparent meaninglessness of life should not cause us to live it up, or to give up, but rather to look up. Only when we believe in God's providence are we able to live with mystery. Only in knowing that God is just can we truly live responsibly. Only when we trust that God is good can we find enjoyment in life. God does not give us all the answers, but He does offer us Himself, and perhaps, when all is said and done, that is enough?

Song of Songs is a love song that doesn't hold back in its vivid description of marital intimacy. It presents the developing romantic and intimate love of a man, perhaps King Solomon, and a beautiful young woman. In the swirling voices of the poem we hear both main characters, as well as various other voices too. We feel the very real and vivid swings of emotion from exhilaration, to despair, to delight, as the relationship moves through times of separation and restoration. Early Jewish readers linked this song to the messianic Psalm 45 and decided that the song prefigured Israel's relationship with the coming Messiah. Some Christians follow this approach and see it as a picture of Christ the king and the Church as His bride. Whichever way the song is read, it certainly celebrates the wonder of human intimacy – which is both a gift from God, and a picture of God's relationship with His people.

Isaiah was the first of the major prophets (740-686BC). The prophets were “covenant enforcers,” God's heavy hitters sent to speak powerfully to a people that were not listening to God's Word. The people of Judah were continually faithless toward God and consequences were looming. First, in chapters 1-35, there was the Assyrian threat (who had already defeated the northern kingdom) and then, from chapters 40-66, God's response to the promise of deportation to Babylon. (Chapters 36-39 repeat the events of 2Kings 18-20, providing a narrative bridge between the first and second “half” of the book). Judah was a nation under a dark shadow, but what a light shines through Isaiah's message! He doesn't simply call the people to faithful obedience rather than mere lip-service, he also calls for trust in God's great plan. This great plan included the coming Messiah who would suffer for the sins of others and also reign in righteousness over the nations! Reading the prophets can be difficult because they seem to be a patchwork of apparently disconnected messages. Perhaps it is helpful to read Isaiah as if it were a symphony, with great themes weaving in and out. These themes would include human sin, God's grace, coming judgment, kingdom hope and salvation!

Jeremiah lived almost a century after Isaiah. In the Bible's longest book we see the challenges Jeremiah faced as he offered an unwelcome message of coming judgment to an arrogant nation. Judah had survived the earlier Assyrian invasion, but now concluded that the temple was a God-given good luck charm! They faithlessly worshipped other gods, but felt certain they would be safe from foreign invasion. Jeremiah repeatedly warned that judgment was coming. He was treated as a traitor for urging the people to surrender to the Babylonian invaders. The people resisted the idea that God's plan was for Judah to go into exile and remain for 70 years. The majority opinion was wrong. Jeremiah spoke truth. The Chaldeans (Babylonians) came against Jerusalem three times and the city eventually fell. While many were taken into exile, Jeremiah remained with the few left behind. Jeremiah is no carefully written autobiography of a “glorious” ministry. It is raw. It tells of the painful realities of his personal and his peoples' experiences. Jeremiah presents the confused status of truth in a fallen society; where loyalty to God is seen as sedition, rewarded with imprisonment and death threats. Our situation may be very different, but will we represent the truth of God as faithfully as Jeremiah did?

Lamentations is traditionally considered an addendum to the great prophetic work of Jeremiah. Judah had sinned. Jerusalem, the capital, had been besieged and conquered. The prophet had observed the worst days in Judah's history, and was left to lament the tragic suffering of God's people. Lamentations lives up to its name in the five poems that make up the book (each originally in the form of an acrostic – each line, or group of lines beginning with the next letter in the Hebrew alphabet). Yet in the lamentation is woven a thread of divine mercy and faithfulness. Notice the verses in the heart of the book that gave rise to the great hymn, Great is Thy Faithfulness. In this book we see honest wrestling with God's terrible judgment that has left the heart of Judah in rubble. Yet God is not the enemy, for it is certain that God's great love and compassion will eventually prevail, and the enemies of God's people will themselves face judgment for what they have done.

Ezekiel was a contemporary of Jeremiah. Taken as a captive to Babylon he writes of Judah's last days before the exile. The decline of Jerusalem came in stages with an early surrender to the Babylonian forces. Zedekiah was made king over Judah by the Babylonians, but he rebelled in the end, sparking the backlash from Babylon that eventually brought Jerusalem to destruction (as seen in Jeremiah). Ezekiel was one of the captives watching the events unfold from afar, already in exile in Babylon. Many expected Jerusalem to regain independence, but Ezekiel told them otherwise. Jerusalem was doomed because of her ongoing apostasy. His preaching and writing style is highly dramatic and startling in its bold imagery. He begins with a vision of God's glory in the midst of unusual creatures and wheels. He vividly describes the departure of God's glory from the temple. He speaks strongly against the sin of Judah, as well as the sin of other nations around. Yet in the darkness of divine judgment there are flashes of hope. Ezekiel looks forward to the day when God's Spirit will restore and renew His chosen nation, doing a work in the hearts of God's people that the Law could never do from the outside. Ezekiel describes a scene of absolute death, suddenly stirring to life physically, then spiritually too. In Judah's darkest days, light shone forth from this sometimes unusual communicator.

Daniel was a prophet during Judah's exile in Babylon. The book combines dramatic narratives, prayers and visions of events still future from Daniel's perspective. Daniel and three friends were taken to Babylon in the first siege on Jerusalem. They were trained in Babylonian values and beliefs to become leaders in the captive cultural assimilation project. Would they lose sight of their God? Not at all! They retained their devotion to Yahweh and lived out their faith in the higher echelons of this foreign empire. But there was a bigger question looming in light of Judah's defeat to this foreign army with its foreign gods – was Yahweh, the one true God, really sovereign? Absolutely! Daniel saw the great emperor humbled and honouring God, he saw the empire defeated by the Medo-Persians, and he saw numerous visions presenting the sovereignty of God. The predictions in the book were so accurate, for instance, in anticipating the later transfer of power to the Greeks, that many have denied that Daniel could have written the book at all! Human kingdoms come and go according to God's plan, but only God remains on the throne, and only God will establish the ultimately victorious kingdom. Daniel is a book about the sovereignty of God in His faithfulness to His promises, and the faithfulness possible from His people, even in the toughest of times.

(The Book of the 12 – In the Hebrew Bible the 12 minor prophets are grouped together as one collection or book. They may be shorter in length than the major prophets, but they still pack quite a punch!)

Hosea is the shocking story of a prophet called by God to marry into a tragedy. Gomer, Hosea's wife, either is, or becomes, a prostitute. Either way, the marriage ended in divorce because of her infidelity, and then in a remarriage based on raw compassion. God directs the events to graphically display His own relationship with Israel. God, though he will punish unfaithfulness, still maintains his love and covenant devotion for his chosen people.

Joel writes in the context of a locust plague and a drought. This present catastrophe points forward to the coming "Day of the Lord" that will be like the locust plague in its devastation. In anticipation of God stepping into history so powerfully, the people are called to repent and to look to their compassionate God for restoration. In the prophecy Joel speaks of a coming day when God will bring salvation to His people, then send his Spirit, restore Judah and judge the nations.

Amos, a prophet from Judah, was sent north by God to warn the Kingdom of Israel to repent and to begin to seek God once again. His message begins with a series of promised judgments against the nations surrounding Israel, then moves to Israel herself. The message isn't well received; Amos is told to go back to Judah. God discloses the judgments to come and Amos pleads for God's mercy. Judgment is unavoidable but God promises a future restoration as well.

Obadiah, on God's behalf, charges the nation of Edom, who descended from Esau, with unwarranted hostility toward "your brother Jacob." When Jerusalem was attacked by a foreign army, they sided with the foreign invaders rather than their brother nation. God promises that their evil conduct will come back on their own heads.

Jonah is called by God to bring a message to Nineveh, the capital of Israel's enemy, Assyria. He disobeys, flees across the sea and receives a complementary return journey inside a great fish. God then called Jonah again. This time Jonah went in the right direction, but his heart was still in the wrong place. He preaches briefly to Nineveh, but to his dismay, they repent! Unlike Jonah's hard heart toward other nations, God's heart is concerned for all people. In Jonah we see God's sovereignty and mercy in bold relief.

Micah, a contemporary of Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah, added another voice to alert both kingdoms of greater Israel that God's patience with their arrogant idolatry and immorality was finished. The wealthy leadership—princes and judges—of both capital cities, Samaria in the north and Jerusalem in the south, were corrupt, abusing and demeaning the poorer people under them. Abuses involved prophets, too, as many of them promised peace rather than judgment. Amid Micah's warnings, however, there is the promise of a better day coming sometime after the impending judgment – Jerusalem will be eternally established under a king who will be born in the city of Bethlehem, the family city of King David.

Nahum, a few years after Jonah, preaches against Nineveh, but this time in the hearing of his own people. The former day of repentance brought about under Jonah's ministry had completely faded. God gives the prophet a distinctive vision of the fall of the proud city in graphic terms. Verbal pictures of clattering chariots, flashing swords, and pleading women, give a sense of the horror of invasion. The prophecy is a reminder that the nation used by God to punish the greater Kingdom of Israel will be punished herself for her godlessness.

Habakkuk is not a message preached to the people, but a conversation between the prophet and God. Judah was protected from the Assyrian invasion, but the people still lived in sin. Habakkuk asks how long this will go on. God tells him that He's doing something about it – He's bringing the Chaldeans against the nation! Habakkuk is shocked – that's not fair, they're worse than we are! God tells him that all who sin will be judged, but life is given to those righteous folk who live by faith. Habakkuk accepts God's plans, but asks for mercy in the midst of it all!

Zephaniah is dismayed by the same evil abuses in Judah that Habakkuk cited to God. Zephaniah's message is not focused on the immediate response of God, but the ultimate "Day of the Lord" that Joel had spoken of previously. God will intervene in history with fury unleashed. However, a remnant will survive because they hide themselves in Him.

Haggai comes after the exile, and historically sits alongside Ezra. Some of the captives have returned from exile, but they've become distracted from their temple rebuilding project. Their own homes matter more than God's, so the prophet comes to bring conviction. He shares four short and sharp sermons about the temple project, personal purity and future hope.

Zechariah wrote during the time of the Temple reconstruction. His cryptic visions address the immediate circumstances of the remnant nation of Jews as they struggle to reestablish themselves in Israel; and they also look ahead to days of future tragedy and subsequent restoration. A major thread in his visions is the coming "Branch" who will rule as Priest and King. This anticipation of Christ includes both his suffering and his exaltation—and it predicts a future day when he will return to Jerusalem, coming down from heaven to stand on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. From then on the King will rule not only Jerusalem but all the nations.

Malachi offers a picture of God's emotions as he confronts the newly restored Jewish society in Israel. Rather than live in awe and love, given God's care for them, the people, and the religious leaders in particular, were arrogant. Sacrificial ceremonies at the recently restored Temple weren't being taken seriously. Malachi's message comes in the form of God's charges answered by the defensive questions of the people. Once again the "Day of the Lord" motif emerges with a warning that in the coming Day the wicked and the righteous will once again be distinguished with judgment brought on the one and joy to the other.

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