

## INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY OF

# Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Malachi

**35th, 36th, and 39th** of 39 Old Testament books, this little-read trio of minor prophets contains some classic texts of the Hebrew Bible.

**Habakkuk and Zephaniah** prophesied during the reign of King Josiah in the seventh century, just prior to Jerusalem's captivity, or exile, in Babylon. Thus, they are "pre-exilic" prophets.

**Malachi** is "post-exilic," since his ministry occurred in the fifth century, after the Jews returned from Babylon and rebuilt the temple. Last of the Hebrew prophets, Malachi signals a silencing of the prophetic voice until John the Baptist — a period of more than 400 years.

**Habakkuk**, like Job, asks why God permits the existence of evil. A sensitive soul, he sighs over the suffering of his Jewish brethren at the hands of a wicked enemy. When the Lord announces that the cruel Chaldeans (Babylonians) will bring more punishment, the prophet cries out, "Why?" and "How long?" (1:2-4, 13, 14).

God replies that Habakkuk should proclaim His word and wait patiently and trustingly for final deliverance (2:2-4). "The just shall live by his faith" (v. 4) is adapted by the apostle Paul as a clarion call for the new covenant doctrine of justification by faith (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11).

Encouraged by this word from heaven, the prophet pronounces woes on the wicked (2:5-19) and ascribes glory, power, and mercy to the Lord in His holy temple (2:20—3:16). He concludes with a pledge of absolute devotion to the Lord God, despite every adversity he may face (3:17-19).

Other key verses: "The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of

the LORD, as the waters cover the sea" (2:14); "O LORD, revive Your work in the midst of the years! . . . In wrath remember mercy" (3:2).

**Habakkuk in a sentence:** The prophet complains to God about injustice among the nations, receives counsel to wait and trust, and then pledges his devotion to God, who will deal with the wicked in His own way and time.

**Zephaniah**, grandson of King Hezekiah, predicts a great day of the Lord with much devastation and distress. This trouble and darkness will begin with Judah (1:2-18); extend to Gaza, Moab, Ammon, Ethiopia, and Assyria (2:4-15); and return to rebellious Jerusalem (3:1-7).

Amid his threats, the prophet offers space for repentance, calling the people to gather and seek the Lord before the day of His anger arrives (2:1-3).

Saving good news till last, Zephaniah promises deliverance to the faithful remnant in Zion. "Shout, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! . . . You shall see disaster no more. . . . The LORD your God in your midst, the Mighty One, will save; . . . He will quiet you with His love. . . . [He] will restore to the peoples a pure language, that they may call on the name of the LORD, to serve Him with one accord" (3:14-17; 9).

**Zephaniah in a sentence:** The prophet foresees a great and terrible day of the Lord yielding to ultimate relief and restoration for those who repent and wait on God.

**Malachi** expresses his burden about some attitudes and practices that are becoming part of the second temple era. His special targets:

- those who question God's love and grace (1:2-5; 3:13-15)
- priests who bring inferior offerings to the Lord (1:6-14)
- people who break the covenant and divorce their spouses (2:10-17)
- those who rob the Lord of His tithes and offerings (3:8-12)

The final Old Testament prophet foresees both John and Messiah: "Behold, I send My messenger, and He will prepare the way before Me. And the LORD, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple. . . . The Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings; . . . He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the LORD an offering in righteousness" (3:1; 4:2ff; 3:3).

**Malachi in a sentence:** The prophet brings God's charges against Israel's people and priests, then promises the coming of the Messiah to cleanse the righteous and judge the wicked.