

INTRODUCTORY CD FOR NAHUM, HABAKKUK AND ZEPHANIAH

The Biblical history of the nation of Israel reveals the amazing grace and patient loving kindness of the Lord God. There *is* a recurring pattern of stubborn self-will and disobedience on the part of people whom the Lord had chosen to be His own, and had so richly blessed over many years.

“God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways,” said the writer to Hebrew Christians. (Heb 1:1) ” And the Apostle Peter taught that no true prophet declared his own opinion or understanding — but *“spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:21)*

Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah were among God’s faithful prophets, different men from different backgrounds, whom God called at a pivotal time in Israel’s history.

Little is known about Nahum, whom God asked to deliver a tough message: terrible words of condemnation and devastating judgement upon Assyria, the most powerful empire in the world of that time, and particularly upon her huge capital city, Nineveh.

Zephaniah was an aristocrat, the great-great-grandson of Hezekiah, one of Judah’s finest kings. He prophesied at roughly the same time as Nahum. From approx. 630 BC Zephaniah’s God-given message was directed towards the sins and failings of the ungodly people in his own land of Judah.

Habakkuk was a man of prayer and steady faith and a contemporary of young Jeremiah. About twenty years after Zephaniah had declared God’s stern warnings, this prophet was deeply concerned that many of Judah’s people, even priests and leaders, were still leading careless, ungodly lives. He longed that his people would turn back to worship and serve God in whole-hearted repentance.

All three prophets listened to God; all were convinced He was Sovereign over all He had created. Each referred to the character of their LORD God: His holiness, His long-suffering, patience and goodness shown in His many compassionate and powerful deeds for His people.

Even as children Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah would have learned about the LORD God: of His choice of Israel to be His own, His rescue of them from slavery in Egypt and how He had given them a good and fruitful land. This was so that “they might keep His statutes and obey His laws” (Ps 106:45) and above all else, to honour and worship their Almighty Lord and Saviour— and

“Make sure that there is no man or woman, clan or tribe among you, whose heart turns away from the LORD to go and worship the gods of other nations; make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison” (Deut 29:18)

Prophets like Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah who lived and served God in later times could look back and see God’s faithfulness — and trace through history His saving power and constant protection and provision for His people.

But they would also be aware that from the very beginning of life in their new homeland, the Hebrew people disobeyed God and His laws. They were proud of their status as God’s “special ones”, yet persisted in breaking the laws God had given them. Over many centuries, God continued to send His prophets to warn His disobedient people about their corrupt, ungodly behaviour, and to call them

to repent and turn back to Him. Sometimes they did **so**, but all too soon returned to their arrogant attitudes and sinful behaviour.

So in 722 BC, God allowed the Assyrian Empire to attack and invade the Kingdom of Israel. Many people were killed and thousands were taken to exile and slavery in Assyria. Some twenty years later, in 701 BC, the Kingdom of Judah was also attacked. God defended His people, but they became Assyria's fearful vassal state, forced to pay costly annual tribute.

Yet, in spite of all they'd seen and experienced, Judah's officials and their people continued to ignore God's commands, and God declared that judgement would fall on them also. But first He was going to destroy their oppressor: the evil empire of Assyria.

NAHUM

Assyria rose to power early in the history of civilization and at the height of that power controlled most of the known world. The huge, sophisticated capital city, Nineveh, was incredibly rich. With impregnable defences and advanced tools of war, including the first iron weaponry, she appeared to be invincible.

Yet Nineveh was always lusting after more power and wealth; corruption and cruel injustice were common. One of the most evil cities on earth, she was known and feared throughout the world for her ferocious cruelty and excessive torture of captives. Ninevites worshipped a multitude of gods/goddesses; and occult practices and witchcraft, debauchery and prostitution were common. God specifically condemned this nation's improper use of wealth, seduction and power for horrific purposes.

Sometime between 627 and 615 BC, God gave the prophet Nahum, a vision and burden concerning this super-mighty, but totally evil world power. *God commissioned a humble citizen of one of Assyria's small vassal states, to publicly proclaim that the LORD God of Judah would soon utterly destroy the entire Assyrian empire — including, and especially, the city of Nineveh!*

Understanding something of Nineveh's evil character makes it easier to accept the harshness of Nahum's message. His stark distressing images of Nineveh emphasize the horror of sin. Some of Nahum's words —given by God— are hard to read. They conjure up terrible visions of unrestrained evil and *although at the time it seemed impossible* that Nineveh could ever fall, Nahum obediently delivered God's words of judgement and destruction.

But first of all he reminded his listeners in powerful, poetic words about the LORD's character: His anger and tremendous power, His vengeance — and His goodness and care for those who trusted Him. Significantly, in his opening three verses, Nahum five times used God's sacred covenant name: the LORD YAHWEH. He was reminding his people that they belonged to a covenant-keeping God.

"He will not leave the guilty unpunished," declared Nahum. *"His way is in the whirlwind and the storm, and clouds are the dust of his feet... The earth trembles at his presence, the world, and all who live in it. Who can endure his fierce anger?"* (Neh 1:3ff)

Nahum also encouraged the people of Judah to recall God's power, justice and faithfulness. This good God was their refuge, their safe place. Yes, His people would be punished for their many sins against God, but He would deliver them. Furthermore, declared the prophet, *"The Lord will restore the splendour of Israel."*

God would not only deliver His repentant people to a right relationship with himself, He would restore their land and resettle them there once more.

Nahum's detailed description of the *future* battle against mighty Nineveh reads like an exciting eye-witness account— although in fact it would not actually occur for some years! With the eyes of faith, the prophet saw the sun glinting on clashing spears, metal shields, chariots and helmets; he heard the victims' cries and the noise of panic as the city's huge water gates were flung open and water flooded the river which wound through the city, and surged into the streets... Until the destroyer of so many nations was herself destroyed!

In 612 BC, the armies of Babylon and her allies invaded Nineveh, and the arrogant, unbelievably wicked city was destroyed, just as Nahum had predicted, along with the whole Assyrian empire. Nineveh's ruins were discovered in 1845 AD below the sands near present day Mosul, in Iraq.

Like Christians through the ages, we struggle to come to terms with the atrocities committed in our own times. Nahum offered no reason or explanation for what was about to happen —except for his bold statements in his opening speech, describing Israel's mighty covenant-keeping God *who cares for those who trust Him*. When we cannot understand or explain horrific events and injustices, that's a good place for us to start. *The LORD YAHWEH is utterly faithful.*

Nahum served God in a time of fear and shocking cruelty but he had no doubt that God was in control of His world— *always*. He heard God's promise to break off the Assyrian yoke and 'tear away the shackles' from His people. He painted a word picture of his fellow- Judeans waiting for news from the battlefield, then joyfully welcoming the messengers who'd run to tell them the wonderful news:

"Nineveh has fallen! Assyria is no more! God has delivered us and set our nation free!" Such marvellous *good* news would spread quickly!

Followers of Christ today also have some good news to tell! Over 600 years after Nahum lived, the apostle Paul referred to the prophet's image of the feet of messengers bringing people the good news of deliverance from captivity and peace from God.

HABAKKUK

Habakkuk was a man who knew his God, and talked often with Him. Every chapter of his book describes the prophet communicating with the LORD. His conversation or dialogue with God stretched over some time. Instead of giving this prophet messages to speak out directly to His people, God told him to carefully, clearly write down the words of their on-going conversation. This would enable a messenger to run to deliver God's message to those for whom it was meant.

As he witnessed the continuing sinfulness of his country's leaders and people, Habakkuk was upset. As far as he could see, God was doing nothing about Judah's constant conflict and violence, her careless disregard for God's laws, and consequent lifestyle of self-indulgence. So he took his concerns to the Lord — and asked the question so often on people's lips still today: "WHY?"

"O Lord, how long must I call for help before you will listen? I shout to you in vain; there is no answer... no one comes to save..."

Sometimes Christians struggle with doubt because, like Habakkuk, they have brought their hard questions to God, wanting and waiting for Him to do something — or to at least help them understand... *But God remains silent...*

When God *did* answer His prophet, Habakkuk didn't like God's answer! He was going to bring terrible judgement upon His sinful people by allowing the merciless Babylonian army to invade Judah. The prophet was shocked and horrified and spoke passionately on behalf of the godly people in Judah, who would be helpless if God removed His protection.

He understood that God had to discipline His people. But he knew about the Babylonians' cruel treatment of conquered enemies, and could not reconcile what he knew of God's holy character with His plan to use violent, evil pagans as His agents. Once again he brought his questions before his Lord, and waited, alone on the wall of Jerusalem for God to speak...

God described the Babylonians as totally unrighteous men, puffed up with proud self-sufficiency, whose own strength was their god. In contrast, God said that those who wanted to live in right relationship with Him would need to rely on their Sovereign LORD and TRUST His promises, living every day by faith and faithfulness. God would certainly repay Babylon for all her excesses and cruel oppression, and for the wrongs done to His people; He would bring shame, disgrace, and punishment upon them – as they had done to others.

In the meantime, God reminded His people, *and* challenged those who trusted in lifeless stone or wooden images, to remember that *"the LORD is in His holy temple; let all the earth be silent before Him"*.

A good reminder for Christians today!

As Habakkuk continued to look to His almighty, eternal God, and spent time listening for His word, His perspective began to change, even though he still did not fully understand God's intentions. When he began his prayer-conversation with God, his view-point was limited to his national and personal needs. Part of his maturing from fear to faith was learning to glimpse events more from God's view-point. In the short term his people would suffer, but they were to wait, watch, and trust their LORD.

The mercy of God shone through the evil and darkness he saw around him until finally he was able to accept God had indeed appointed Babylon to punish Judah. He learned that God's special people would not totally die out, because their God was their ROCK! Habakkuk was able to assure believers that even in the coming grim judgement-day, Almighty God, King of Israel and LORD of the nations, still reigned.

Christians today need that assurance too, especially, when they cannot understand the ways of our awesome Creator. As Habakkuk discovered, faith does not always silence questions or erase pain. It does however point us to peace and hope in accepting that our God WILL act, in His time, and in His way, according to His *good* purposes — which will be for our greatest good.

Habakkuk believed God was going to send the people of Judah into Babylonian captivity which meant suffering and humiliation. But he also knew that the Sovereign LORD God was in control of all things. In a powerful poetic prayer he recalled before them God's amazing works on behalf of their fathers throughout history: memories they could recall and rehearse during the exile-time away

from Judah, to encourage them to hold on to their LORD. He pleaded with God to repeat these awesome deeds, to demonstrate His greatness and to deliver His people once more. But in the end, Habakkuk faced the prospect of sure judgement with faith. Judah's dire situation had not changed, and he had no evidence that it would. Only God's word.

Nahum had trusted God against the evidence; Habakkuk trusted God against his own judgement, wishes and common sense!

As he rehearsed God's power and glory, Habakkuk began to shake with a special sense of awe – and expressed his joyful personal commitment of faith in the living God.

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails, and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Saviour. The Lord God is my strength..."

Whatever was going to happen, Habakkuk would trust the Lord of eternal holiness, mercy and justice. He would face the future with firm hope for his people—God's people — and with *joy!*

In a world dominated by selfishness, corruption and violence, God's prophet is a timeless witness to the faithfulness and sovereign purposes of Almighty God. He challenges Christians today: Whatever happens, however long or difficult the road we each must walk, can we affirm, "I will trust you my LORD"?

Both Habakkuk and Jeremiah probably lived to see the initial fulfilment of Habakkuk's prophecy when the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem in 597 BC. Then, in 539 BC, 66 years after Habakkuk's prophecy, the mighty Babylonian empire fell to the Persians.

ZEPHANIAH

Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of King Josiah, and was a contemporary of Jeremiah, Nahum and perhaps Habakkuk. He was an aristocrat, the great-great-grandson of Hezekiah, one of Israel's finest kings. He was also a man of spiritual fervour who loved God, and despite his status and connection with Judah's royal line, he obeyed God and delivered His stern messages of approaching doom to his own nation, Judah.

Eight year old Josiah was anointed king of Judah in 640 BC. He inherited from his infamous great-uncle, Manasseh, and his father, Amon, a corrupt, pleasure-seeking society. Injustice had taken root.

For centuries the LORD had loved and protected— and disciplined —His people. Now many of them, including some priests, had turned away from Him and drifted into worshiping and serving the gods of their neighbours, including Baal, god of fertility, or blood-thirsty Molek. This sometimes demanded child-sacrifice. Some still bowed before the LORD but also worshipped the stars and foreign idols. They felt no need to trust God or obey His commands.

In loving concern *and* anger, God warned His people again and again: He sent faithful prophets; He allowed Assyria to attack and destroy the ten northern tribes of Israel in 722 BC; and when Assyria had attacked Judah in 701 BC, He intervened at the last minute to deliver them. But before long many people unashamedly resumed their careless, ungodly ways and were complacent,

believing they would not need to account for their actions: “The LORD will do nothing, good or bad.”

At this time God was at work in the life of the boy-king, Josiah. When workmen repairing the temple in Jerusalem found a book which taught people how God wanted His people to worship and to live, Josiah read it. He was shocked and distressed to discover how far his people had drifted from God’s desires and commands. He tore his robes and wept before God— and immediately sent to the prophetess Huldah for advice. He was further shocked when she gave him a devastating message: the LORD was going to bring disaster on his land and its people, because they had forsaken Him and worshipped man-made idols. Zephaniah’s preaching may have influenced the king to promote spiritual renewal across the land. He would certainly have whole-heartedly supported the young king’s reforms.

Without preamble Zephaniah immediately began to proclaim God’s fearful message of judgement. The recurring theme of his whole message was the great “day of the LORD”: God was going to pour out his wrath against His sinful and unrepentant people: Judah’s corrupt yet complacent religious community; her arrogant princes and leaders, and her wealthy, ever-greedy merchants.

After Zephaniah’s vivid poetic prediction of this “*day of distress and anguish, of trouble and ruin, of darkness and gloom; this day of clouds and blackness, of trumpet and battle cry*”, the prophet paused to urge humble, trusting people, to “*seek the LORD...seek righteousness...seek humility...*” — offering some hope that a repentant, humble “remnant” who did so, might survive this terror-time judgement.

Judah’s proud, rebellious people were “eager” to live corruptly and continue their false worship and decadent lifestyle. But even while they refused to respond to Him, their holy, righteous LORD was there for them every new morning, unfailing, faithful— but always *just*. His constant love for them did not change.

It is believed Zephaniah delivered God’s dire warnings in approx. 630 BC. Yet few people had repented, and within 12 years of Josiah’s death, many people had resumed the life-style which Zephaniah had so sternly rebuked.

Zephaniah’s prophecy was partially fulfilled in 597 BC, when King Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian armies conquered Jerusalem, after a year of siege and starvation. During God’s ‘day’ of blackness, chaos and terror, people suffered terribly; some fled to Egypt; many were taken to exile in Babylon. By 586 BC, Judah was totally subdued: Jerusalem city, including God’s temple, was destroyed!

Although most of Zephaniah’s message concerned God’s harsh condemnation of His obstinate, disobedient people in Judah, he also spoke some of the loveliest words in Scripture. In the end, he burst into praise, crying

**“Sing... shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart... The LORD has taken away your punishment... The LORD your God is with you, He is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing.*

In conclusion: God used an unknown prophet, a temple musician and an aristocrat to declare His hard messages to His complacent, lukewarm or outright disobedient people, and in Nahum's case to pronounce God's coming wrath on the super-power, Assyria. This humble man trusted His Almighty Sovereign LORD God, and faithfully delivered His 'impossible' message.

Habakkuk thought God was taking too long to answer his prayer-questions, but grew in faith as he *trusted* God, obeyed Him, and finally, accepted God's way.

God asked Zephaniah, himself a prince of the house of Judah, to declare God's confronting forecast of his nation's unhappy future— *and he faithfully did so.*

These three prophets lived in dark and dangerous times, as do many people in our world today. With courage and faith they spoke God's words into the chaos and corruption of their decadent society —and Nineveh's.

Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah have much to say to our generation. As you study their times and God-given messages, may you discover a fresh glimpse of the LORD God whom they served: His utter righteousness and holy anger at the sinfulness that rejects His grace and goodness; His long-suffering, loving care for His fickle people. These prophets learned that the LORD God reigns supreme, controlling all things in the out-working of His eternal purposes for His world and for His people. They encourage us to rejoice and thank God for all **He** has done, and will do, for us, and to trust Him for all that lies ahead. For the LORD God promises every person who truly trusts Him that:

The LORD, the King of Israel is with you. Never again will you fear any harm. The LORD, your God is with you. He will save you and delight in you.