

HAGGAI,
ZECHARIAH,
MALACHI
Pointing to the Promised King

KATHLEEN BUSWELL NIELSON



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A PERSONAL WORD FROM KATHLEEN

In preparing this study on three postexilic prophets, I read again this “personal word” written years ago for the first of my studies, a guide for the book of Proverbs. Often when we read words we wrote a long time ago, we cringe—and we’re anxious to make changes! I’m happy to find that these words stand. That is only because they are about the Living Word that never changes and never fails. May we followers of the Lord Jesus never stop hearing and loving God’s Word, by the power of the Spirit, and may we keep walking in its light, to the end.

I began to write these Bible studies for the women in my own church group at College Church in Wheaton, Illinois. Under the leadership of Kent and Barbara Hughes, the church and that Bible study aimed to proclaim without fail the good news of the Word of God. What a joy, in that study and in many since, to see lives changed by the work of the Word, by the Spirit, for the glory of Christ.

In our Bible study group, we were looking for curriculum that would lead us into the meat of the Word and teach us how to take it in, whole Bible books at a time—the way they are given to us in Scripture. Finally, one of our leaders said, “Kathleen—how

about if you just write it!” And so began one of the most joyful projects of my life: the writing of studies intended to help unleash the Word of God in people’s lives. The writing began during a busy stage of my life—with three lively young boys and always a couple of college English courses to teach—but through that stage and every busy one since, a serious attention to studying the Bible has helped keep me focused, growing, and alive in the deepest ways. The Word of God will do that. If there’s life and power in these studies, it is simply the life and power of the Scriptures to which they point. It is ultimately the life and power of the Savior who shines through all the Scriptures from beginning to end. How we need this life, in the midst of every busy and non-busy stage of our lives!

I don’t think it is just the English teacher in me that leads me to this conclusion about our basic problem in Bible study these days: we’ve forgotten how to *read*! We’re so used to fast food that we think we should be able to drive by the Scriptures periodically and pick up some easily digestible truths that someone else has wrapped up neatly for us. We’ve disowned that process of careful reading . . . observing the words . . . seeing the shape of a book and a passage . . . asking questions that take us into the text rather than away from it . . . digging into the Word and letting it speak! Through such a process, guided by the Spirit, the Word of God truly feeds our souls. Here’s my prayer: that, by means of these studies, people would be further enabled to read the Scriptures profitably and thereby find life and nourishment in them, as we are each meant to do.

In all the busy stages of life and writing, I have been continually surrounded by pastors, teachers, and family who encourage and help me in this work, and for that I am grateful. The most wonderful guidance and encouragement come from my husband, Niel, whom I thank and for whom I thank God daily.

May God use these studies to lift up Christ and his Word, for his glory!

INTRODUCTION

Reading the last three Old Testament prophets is, in one sense, like peering into the deepest, darkest layer of salvation history.

The people to whom these prophets spoke had a magnificent history behind them. We will review that history in Lesson One, remembering God's promise to bless this seed of Abraham and through them to bring blessing to all the families of the earth. God indeed blessed them, growing them into a great nation in the promised land. But they squandered that blessing, turned from their Lord God, and suffered the consequences of their sin as they were divided, conquered, and exiled from their land.

When Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi bring God's word to this people, they address only a remnant of weak, struggling Jews, servants of the Persian Empire, allowed to return to Jerusalem to rebuild a broken-down temple and city. God's people still have God's promises, but they're peering into the dark to see them.

Reading the last three Old Testament prophets is, in another sense, like seeing the brightest light shining out of darkness.

These three postexilic prophets are the closest of all the prophets to the fulfillment to come four hundred years later: the birth of Jesus—the promised seed of Abraham, the King in the line of David, the Savior who would finally and fully deliver his people. These prophecies lean far forward, reaching for the next

thing to happen in salvation history. We will see Jesus Christ shining through the words of these writers who spoke from God to a poor and needy people looking for a king.

We have the history of this period in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. But what a gift to have the writings of the prophets, words given by God to speak directly to his people. As God's people now, through faith in his Son who came, we also take these words to heart—for we, too, are a poor and needy people in many ways. We have seen the King in his first advent, the Savior who came to bear our sin and suffer God's wrath in our place to save us, forever. We celebrate his resurrection and his ascension into heaven—and now we wait for him. We, too, long to see the King, this time when he comes again.

Our aim in this study is to understand the words of these prophets first in their own context, as they addressed the remnant of Jews who returned to their land. We will ask how these words challenged and encouraged God's people then. And we will ask how these words continue to challenge and encourage us believers now. For these God-breathed words are alive and active, still sharper than a two-edged sword as they by God's Spirit penetrate our hearts and reveal the Lord to us. In a world so full of people and nations who reject the God of the Bible, we are indeed still a weak remnant—but a quickly growing one, and one (as these prophets predicted) bringing together believers from all the nations of the world to worship the King of the whole earth.

Each lesson in this study begins with an introduction that clarifies the theme of the book and the section to be covered. To read these three books in ten weeks does not allow for detailed study; the aim is to read them carefully, to grasp their basic meaning and structure, and to begin to let them pierce our hearts as the Spirit helps us hear and understand. These prophecies are unified literary masterpieces; we do well to take them in first as whole books, before we isolate too many individual words and

verses for complex study. Taking in the larger flow, we will aim to grasp how the books hold together and what major themes they develop from beginning to end. When we're done and we say "Haggai" or "Zechariah" or "Malachi," I hope we will say each name with a clear and satisfying sense of just what each book is all about—its essence.

There are no "commentary" sections in the study; necessary and helpful commentary is embedded in the questions that lead through the biblical text section by section. I have included a short list of commentaries that have been helpful to me and that may enrich your study of these books at some point. First and foremost, do read and reread the biblical text. At the start of each lesson, it will be helpful to read the whole section covered that week. Before beginning the study—and again afterward—it will be helpful to read through the books in their entirety.

When we're done, I pray these postexilic prophets will seem like bright lights to us, shining out of the darkness, lighting the way toward the promised King.

Lesson 1

(Introduction; Hag. 1:1–15)

GOD SPEAKS TO THE REMNANT

In Lesson One, our aim is to set the three final Old Testament prophets in their biblical and historical context, and to begin our acquaintance with Haggai. The wonder of the prophets is that God kept on sending his word to his people, throughout their sin-filled journey, which would finally culminate in the coming of Jesus the promised Redeemer King. The specific message of Haggai is that *the all-powerful Lord commands and helps his people not to falter in worshiping him to the very end, when through their line of promise God's glory will be revealed.*

Haggai 1 shows us a remnant of God's people who *have* faltered in worshiping him—just as his people today often do. They have ceased rebuilding the Jerusalem temple, the place and the means of worship God had provided. We'll see that God graciously sends his word, calling them to see their error and mend their ways (vv. 1–11), and that with God's empowerment they listen and respond (vv. 12–15). After all the Old Testament stories of God's disobedient people, what

a joy to read an account in which they hear and obey the voice of the Lord!

Reading these Old Testament prophets, we New Testament believers aim first to understand their messages in their original contexts. We also aim to see how these messages point ahead to Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of all God's promises (2 Cor. 1:20). As we read of the biological seed of Abraham, we joyfully count ourselves part of the family of God's chosen people by faith in Christ our Savior (Gal. 3:7–9, 29). The Bible's story is our story, revealing the triune God from beginning to end. These prophets called God's people to return to him and trust him fully; we today do well to open our ears to their God-breathed call.

DAY ONE—GOD AND HIS PEOPLE

Let's remember who these people are to whom Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi prophesy: they are descendants of Abraham. The whole story begins in the book of Genesis, which tells of God's creation of a perfect world and a perfect man and woman made to commune with him (Gen. 1–2). But sin invaded God's creation, as the first man and woman disobeyed God's command (Gen. 3). The Bible's early chapters tell how the world was filled with sinful rebellion against God, and how God punished this rebellion with a great flood, saving only Noah and his family, for "Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD" (Gen. 6:8). From the line of Noah came Abraham.

1. In Genesis 12:1–7, what promises does God make to Abraham, and how does Abraham respond?

4. The wait for that promised king was long and hard. Throughout the Old Testament, God's people kept turning away from the Lord. The kingdom under David split, and eventually both parts were conquered and taken into exile. The last place to fall (in 586 BC) was Jerusalem, the capital city of the southern kingdom of Judah. Read the final heartbreaking account in 2 Chronicles 36:15–21 and summarize the main characters and the main actions. *Note: The "Chaldeans" are Babylonians, who overthrew Jerusalem.*

5. As we read in Chronicles, the prophet Jeremiah foretold that the exile from Jerusalem would last seventy years (see Jer. 25:11–14; 29:10–14)—and then the Babylonians who conquered God's people would themselves be conquered. The process of exile began as early as 605 BC, well before Jerusalem's fall. In 539 BC, the Babylonians *were* conquered, by the Persians—and in the next few years groups of Jewish exiles began to return to their land, according to the decree of Persian king Cyrus (all in God's plan; see Isa. 45:1, 13). How does Ezra's account of the first return shape our perspective on King Cyrus and on all this history (Ezra 1:1–5)?

DAY THREE—CONSIDER YOUR WAYS
(HAG. 1:1–11)

We've seen the general historical context of the Jewish remnant that returned to its land by decree of the Persian emperor. Haggai 1:1 gives specific context: the events of this book took place in the second year of the third Persian ruler, King Darius—520 BC, about eighteen years after King Cyrus's proclamation and the exiles' return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. *Note: This early group of returned exiles was led primarily by two men, whom Haggai addresses repeatedly: Judah's governor Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and the high priest Joshua (or "Jeshua") the son of Jehozadak (1:1, 12, 14; 2:2, 4, 21, 23). Governor Zerubbabel was a descendant of King David (see Matt. 1:12–13), and Joshua was a descendant of Aaron the high priest. Another early governor, Sheshbazzar the "prince of Judah," is also mentioned in Ezra 1:8 and 5:14–16, but Zerubbabel emerges as the leader and governor during these events.*

1. Read Haggai 1:1–2 and Ezra 3:1–4:5 to grasp the situation of the returned exiles under Haggai's ministry. How far had the people progressed in rebuilding the temple, and what kinds of discouragements and excuses had stopped them? (In what ways can you identify with these discouragements and excuses?)

b. Deuteronomy 6:1–3

c. Joshua 1:5–7

d. Isaiah 41:8–10

4. We believers are part of the same story, with the same God at work. How do Matthew 1:21–23 and John 14:15–17 help us even more fully understand God’s promise “I am with you”? What words and phrases stand out to you in these verses, and why?

5. Look back over Haggai 1 to find the name for God repeatedly used: the “LORD of hosts” (as in the commander of a great army). How does the emphasis of this name deepen the impact of Haggai’s message?

DAY FIVE—REVIEW AND REFLECT

1. At the beginning of this lesson we said the specific message of Haggai is that *the all-powerful Lord commands and helps his people not to falter in worshipping him to the very end, when through their line of promise God’s glory will be revealed*. Briefly explain what parts of this summary statement Haggai 1 has brought to light.

Notes for Lesson 1