

# BIBLE CHALLENGE

## An 11 day study of the books of Mica, Isaiah and Ezra

The story so far: Last week we read of the fall of the Northern Kingdom, Israel in 722 BC. This week we turn our attention to Judah in the south and the prophets who spoke to that nation. As we trace the messages of the prophets to Judah in her last days, we'll be bouncing around the back of the Old Testament some. As you may have noticed the Old Testament is not always arranged in chronological order. In fact, the prophetic books are arranged in terms of major prophets first (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel), followed by minor prophets (Amos, Hosea, Micah, etc.), as opposed to being arranged in the order of who spoke first, or by what nation to which they were speaking.

Monday:

Read Micah 3:9 - 4:5, 5:2

What to look for:

- Micah is speaking to the south at about the same time as Amos is prophesying in the north, around 740 BC.
- Note the pattern of warning and promise contained in these verses. This is a pattern most prophets make use of (even negative, harsh Amos). They alternate their message between one of warning about what is to come if the people don't return to God, with a promise of how God will deal gently with them following the impending disaster. The prophets' goal in using this pattern of speech is to move people, through a warning coupled with a promise, to a deeper faith.
- Note specifically in 3:12 what Micah's warning is: the fall and destruction of Jerusalem. He is the first prophet to offer that disturbing image. But note also the promise 4:1 – the coming restoration of Jerusalem.
- Amid warnings of destruction comes the most significant promise of all: a future leader from David's town who will once again bring hope.

Tuesday:

Read Micah 6:6-8

- This is the heart of Micah's message to the south, one which is very closely related to Amos' in the north. Micah is calling the people to account for the way they segment their lives in which they believe they can get their relationship with God straight while at the same time have no concern for the well-being of their neighbors.
- Vs. 8 summarizes what kind of sacrifice the Lord wants, which will be acceptable to him.

Wednesday:

Read Isaiah 1:1-20

- Isaiah is Micah's contemporary. Both of them are preaching at about the same time, though in different locations. Isaiah is speaking from the heart of national power in Jerusalem. Their message is also roughly the same. Though Judah has seemed strong and healthy, Assyria (who is about to destroy the north) as well as other kingdoms are threatening Judah's well being from outside. Internally, the people are giving lip service to God and keeping up the outer appearance of religion, but little more.
- Vs. 2 – God is speaking like a parent. Vs. 3 – “Even an animal knows its master better than my people know me.”
- Vs. 5 – the metaphor for Israel switches to that of a human body. God is saying, in vs 5-8, that with everything falling apart around them, why doesn't that make them turn back to him? The answer is that they have a misguided trust in ritual, thinking that if they just toss a few routine sacrifices God's way that will take care of it.
- But note God's response in vs 10 and following. That will not satisfy God. Vs. 16-17 – this is the kind of sacrifice God wants: repentance and justice.

Thursday:

Read Isaiah 2:2-4

- If yesterday's reading contained the warning, today's is the promise that is coupled to it in classic prophetic style.
- The promise Isaiah offers is of a massive reversal of fortunes. Instead of the nations marching on Jerusalem to destroy it, it will be from Jerusalem that teachings will go that all the nations will want.

Friday:

Read Isaiah 6:1-13

- This chapter gives us a little autobiographical information about Isaiah.
- Vs. 6-7: It is God who does the cleansing of Isaiah, not Isaiah who first makes himself acceptable and worthy.
- Vs. 9-10: These are descriptive words, not prescriptive. It is what God says will happen, not necessarily what God desires to happen. When the word of God encounters the people, the response it will draw forth is one of incomprehension and unbelief.
- Vs. 13b – as long as there is a stump with a root, there is hope that the plant will grow again. See, for example, the third verse of LBW hymn #34, *Oh, Oh, Come, Oh, Come, Emmanuel* or verses one and two of LBW hymn #58, *Lo, How a Rose is Growing*. Both hymns refer to “the branch of Jesse” (Jesse being King David's father).

Monday:

Read Isaiah 9:1-7

What to look for:

- Isaiah, in the midst of predicting doom for the people of Judah, is also one of the great prophets of hope. There is a need for a hope that is more than temporary, and these verses contain some of Isaiah's richest promises. There will be a king who will be different from the kings they have had up to this point.
- You may recognize these words as those used by George Handel in his "Messiah".

Tuesday:

Read: Isaiah 40:1-11, 27-31

What to look for:

- Isaiah is a complex book. It appears in your Bible as a single, unified work. But when read closer it seems to be the work of two and perhaps even three different "Isaias". We read from the first chapters back in weeks 26 and 27 because the opening thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah are clearly identified with the time before the fall of Jerusalem and contain dire warnings of the coming judgment and exile. But at chapter 40 a change takes place and the text now begins to proclaim a release for the captives living in exile. Yet another change in tone occurs at chapter 56 and appears to speak to the experiences of the people who have returned from their captivity and are now rebuilding Jerusalem.
- To a people whose homes had been destroyed and who have now been living year after endless year cut off from the land of their ancestors, vs. 2 would be incredibly good news, announcing as it does that their "time of hard service" has been completed.
- Check out Mark 1:1-4 and Luke 3:1-6 for examples of how hundreds of years later the gospel writers understood this passage to point toward John the Baptist as the one who came to prepare the way for the new thing God was doing for his people in Jesus.

Wednesday:

Read Isaiah 42:1-9, 52:13-53:12

What to look for:

- These two passages are examples of what have come to be called the "Servant Songs" of Isaiah. In the Servant Songs, Isaiah speaks of an unnamed person whom he calls the *servant* who would, by means of his own suffering take on the suffering of the people in order to bring them back to God.

- It is difficult to know whether Isaiah was referring in these songs to the coming Messiah or to the nation of Judah as a whole, or perhaps both. To the exiles Isaiah's words would seem to indicate that their suffering as a people was far from pointless, but had a purpose. Through their suffering God would bring all the nations of the earth back to him.
- Note how the description of the servant so closely foreshadows a description of Jesus. New Testament writers were clear in their identification of Isaiah's suffering servant with Jesus, the Messiah who had finally come, not as one who conquered but as one who was "pierced for our transgressions" (53:5) His wounds were for our sake. This passage forms the foundation for the way in which the New Testament writers made sense of Jesus' death and resurrection. (Acts 8:26-35)

Thursday:

Read Isaiah 45:1-6

What to look for:

- Note the name of Cyrus, mentioned in vs. 1. Cyrus was the king of Persia. A successive wave of empires had overrun Israel and Judah, beginning with Assyria, then Babylonia. Now it is the Persians who will take over, led by Cyrus, and that is the turn of events that makes it possible for the exiles to return home. The date is 539 BC and shortly after Cyrus gains power he gives permission for the people to return to Jerusalem (in 520 BC).
- God has chosen Cyrus, summoned him by name (vs. 3), as his anointed, the one who will serve God's purposes in ending his people's exile, even though Cyrus does not even acknowledge God (vs. 4, 5). It is God who is at work in the world, accomplishing his will through events and through people though they do not even realize it. Can you think of a time in your life when God was at work though you did not recognize it, through decisions or occurrences that at the time seemed random or unplanned?

Friday:

Read Ezra 1:1-5, 3:1-3, 10-4:5

What to look for:

- In 1:1-5 the people are given permission to return to Jerusalem. But when they arrive they are greeted by a burned out city and a temple left in ruins from the destruction of over a half century before. They set about rebuilding the temple, beginning with the altar.
- Some of the people living in the surrounding area claim to worship God and suggest that they join together in a joint building effort. Recall that the area residents are people who had been brought in from other places years before, bringing their pagan beliefs with them and intermingling and intermarrying with the remnant of the people who had been left behind. Their faith was a strange brew

of pagan and God-centered beliefs. For the returning exiles to agree to cooperate with the local residents in building the temple might be something like Lutherans and Mormons agreeing to build a church together. The returning exiles decline the offer. The result was a delay in rebuilding the temple due to local opposition.

Monday:

Read Ezra 5:1, Haggai 1:2-9, Zechariah 8:1-13

What to look for:

- Haggai and Zechariah are both preaching at the time when the initial burst of energy for rebuilding the temple had worn off in the face of the local opposition.
- Note Haggai's approach: The problem is that the people are devoting all their time to building their own houses and restoring their own well-being while having no time left to build a sanctuary for worship. In vs. 5-6 and in vs. 9 he points out that though they had worked to improve their own lot, they hadn't made any progress. Their crops had failed, they had neither enough to eat nor drink. They had chosen the wrong priorities. What God wants in vs. 8 is for them to get their priorities straight, to give up trying to advance their own comfort and instead to take the risk of putting God's desires first, as evidenced by concentrating on building the temple.
- Note Zechariah's approach to the same issue: He looks beyond the current situation and shares a vision of a more magnificent Jerusalem in which the glory of God, which had left the temple at the time of the fall of Jerusalem, returns and the fortunes of the people are restored. But that means they must first rebuild the temple.