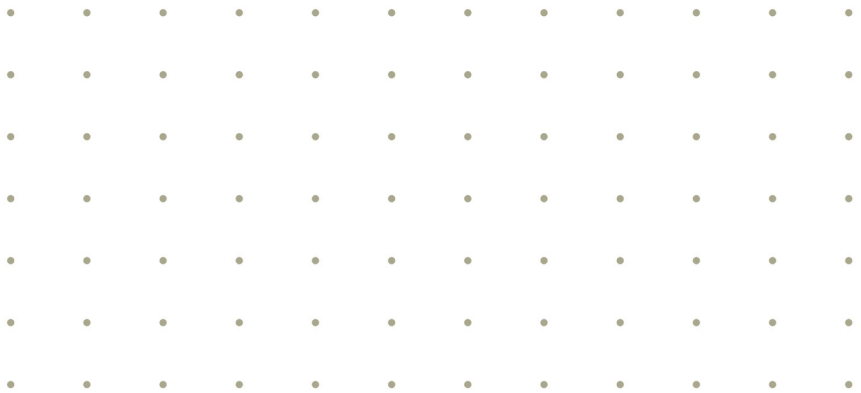




LAMENTATIONS, HABAKKUK, *and* ZEPHANIAH

A 12-WEEK STUDY

Camden Bucey



J. I. Packer

THEOLOGICAL EDITOR

Dane C. Ortlund

SERIES EDITOR

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Numbers	Song of Solomon	Mark	1–2 Thessalonians
Deuteronomy	Isaiah	Luke	1–2 Timothy and Titus
Joshua	Jeremiah	John	Hebrews
Judges	Lamentations, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah	Acts	James
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1–2 Samuel	Daniel	1 Corinthians	1–3 John
1–2 Kings	Hosea	2 Corinthians	Revelation
1–2 Chronicles	Joel, Amos, and Obadiah	Galatians	
Ezra and Nehemiah			
Job			

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HABAKKUK, AND
ZEPHANIAH

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Camden M. Bucey

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S E R I E S P R E F A C E

KNOWING THE BIBLE, as the series title indicates, was created to help readers know and understand the meaning, the message, and the God of the Bible. Each volume in the series consists of 12 units that progressively take the reader through a clear, concise study of one or more books of the Bible. In this way, any given volume can fruitfully be used in a 12-week format either in group study, such as in a church-based context, or in individual study. Of course, these 12 studies could be completed in fewer or more than 12 weeks, as convenient, depending on the context in which they are used.

Each study unit gives an overview of the text at hand before digging into it with a series of questions for reflection or discussion. The unit then concludes by highlighting the gospel of grace in each passage (“Gospel Glimpses”), identifying whole-Bible themes that occur in the passage (“Whole-Bible Connections”), and pinpointing Christian doctrines that are affirmed in the passage (“Theological Soundings”).

The final component to each unit is a section for reflecting on personal and practical implications from the passage at hand. The layout provides space for recording responses to the questions proposed, and we think readers need to do this to get the full benefit of the exercise. The series also includes definitions of key words. These definitions are indicated by a note number in the text and are found at the end of each chapter.

Lastly, to help understand the Bible in this deeper way, we urge readers to use the ESV Bible and the *ESV Study Bible*, which are available in various print and digital formats, including online editions at esv.org. The *Knowing the Bible* series is also available online.

May the Lord greatly bless your study as you seek to know him through knowing his Word.

J. I. Packer
Lane T. Dennis

WEEK 1: OVERVIEW OF LAMENTATIONS, HABAKKUK, AND ZEPHANIAH



▶ Getting Acquainted

Lamentations, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah are rich with God's truths concerning our sin and need of redemption as well as God's love for us in the Savior, Jesus Christ. The prophecies contained in these books are far removed from our historical context, but they are much needed and are applicable to our contemporary issues. While Lamentations, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah speak within particular contexts, they also transcend those contexts to address God's people in all ages. The apostle Paul declares, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16–17). This is true for the well-worn portions of our Bibles as well as for the shorter books of the Old Testament that receive much less attention. Together, Lamentations, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah express the pain and suffering of God's people as they live in a fallen world. The people suffer at the hands of their enemies, who have been sent by the Lord himself. But the people are not without hope, and this suffering is not meaningless, because God uses this form of fatherly discipline to sanctify and restore his people.

(For further background, see the *ESV Study Bible*, pages 1585–1588, 1847–1848, and 1857–1859; available online at www.esv.org.)

Placing Lamentations, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah in the Larger Story

The title of Lamentations in the Hebrew Bible is a Hebrew word translated “How,” which is the first word of Lamentations and begins chapters 2 and 4 as well. This term is an exclamation of how much Jerusalem has suffered. Although this suffering is overwhelming, the author pours out his heart beautifully. The book of Lamentations is structured in five poems, which align with the five chapters in our English Bible. The first four poems are acrostics; that is, each new line begins with the next letter in the Hebrew alphabet. The author of the book is not specifically identified, yet some believe him to be the prophet Jeremiah, who “uttered a lament for Josiah” (2 Chron. 35:25). Regardless of who put the lament to the scroll, the voice is corporate and expresses the suffering of the people. Lamentations is a eulogy for the death of the kingdom of Judah, which has been taken away into exile. The situation is stark and bleak, yet there is hope in God, whose mercies are new every morning. He is the faithful and compassionate one who forgets not his people—even as they suffer justly for what they have done.

Habakkuk shares a struggle that many Christians throughout the ages have experienced: If God is loving and in control, why are the wicked so successful? While Habakkuk demonstrates an understanding of God’s attributes, he still struggles to understand how God can use the wicked to accomplish his divine purpose. God’s ways are mysterious, and the realization of Habakkuk’s prophecy will mean suffering for the people of God, yet “the righteous shall live by his faith” (2:4). God’s people must look not to themselves but to another—to Jesus Christ. Their confidence does not rest in their own strength, nor in their ability to comprehend everything. It rests instead in the Lord, who is at work on behalf of his covenant people even before they cry out to him.

Zephaniah experiences the same suffering as Habakkuk. However, Zephaniah offers a theological perspective distinct from his contemporary. The prophet speaks of the “day of the LORD,” in which the Lord will put an end to corruption and wickedness. This has been the longing of God’s people throughout the ages. The faithful have always cried out to the Lord for help in the face of evil and injustice. But Zephaniah raises a deeper issue as he turns his attention inward. What happens when *God’s people* are the wicked ones? Judgment must begin in the house of the Lord (1 Pet. 4:17). All manner of injustice has spread throughout the nation of Judah, and before God’s people can enter their everlasting rest, they too must be sanctified. Zephaniah demonstrates how God’s wrath pertains to his relationship with the world generally and with his people specifically. The Lord visits his people in judgment many times in history, but the great and

final “day of the LORD” will come when Christ returns on the last day. God calls his people to seek him (Zeph. 2:3) so that they might escape the wrath to come.

Key Verses

“The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ‘The LORD is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him.’” (Lam. 3:22–24)

“... the righteous shall live by his faith.” (Hab. 2:4)

“The LORD has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil.” (Zeph. 3:15)

Date and Historical Background

Lamentations is the cry of God’s people, who have experienced devastation. The book was most likely written just after Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 587 BC. The author writes from personal experience and describes many horrific things in detail. While there is no precise date of composition within the book, it implies that temple worship, which would begin again in the time of Haggai and Zechariah between 520 and 516 BC, had temporarily ceased. Moreover, Lamentations conveys the sense of recent suffering. The people bear an open wound that has not yet begun to heal. Therefore, it was likely written closer to 587 BC than to 516.

Habakkuk was likely written several years prior to Lamentations, somewhere between 640 and 609 BC. The prophet delivered the word of the Lord just before the fall of Assyria. He prophesied that God would use Babylon (“the Chaldeans”) to punish Judah, just as he had used Assyria to punish Israel in 722 (Hab. 1:6). This prophecy was fulfilled in 587 and was the occasion for the suffering described in Lamentations. It does not appear that the Babylonians were at the city gates at the time of the composition of Habakkuk. Nonetheless, Habakkuk was aware of the imminent threat. Judgment would come because the people of Judah were spiraling downward in unfaithfulness. They had devolved into syncretistic practices, worshiping Baal on the high places and even offering child sacrifices to Molech. This was abhorrent to the Lord, and he was preparing to pour out his wrath upon them. By this time, Assyria had ruled Judah for more than a century, but Assyria was becoming weaker; Babylon would soon conquer them. Habakkuk prophesied in this tense political climate. He likely lived to witness the destruction of Nineveh by Babylon in 612 BC as well as the battle

of Haran (609 BC) and the defeat of the Assyrians at Carchemish (605). He may even have lived to witness the fall of Judah to Babylon in 587.

Zephaniah prophesied during the reforms of King Josiah (640–609 BC), who is described as a king who “did what was right in the eyes of the LORD and walked in all the way of David his father, and he did not turn aside to the right or to the left” (2 Kings 22:2). Through his reforms, Josiah sought to restore the nation of Judah by returning her to covenant fidelity after the reign of the wicked King Manasseh. Ever since the time of Zephaniah’s great-grandfather Hezekiah, many in Judah were not worshiping according to God’s commands (2 Kings 21:1–26). Josiah restored the temple and reinstated the Feast of Passover. The nation experienced a brief return to faithful practice, but it did not last. They quickly fell away from the Lord once again after Josiah died. “Israel” is mentioned in Zephaniah 2:9 and 3:13–15, but the northern kingdom had already been taken into exile by Assyria in 722 BC. In these verses, “Israel” refers to Judah and its capital, Jerusalem, which had not yet fallen. Jeremiah, Nahum, and Habakkuk prophesied at the same time, and together they describe the need for spiritual transformation. While the word of the Lord had been declared at many times and in many ways, there were many who still refused to respond in faith and repentance. God’s Word is constantly addressing the hardness of the sinful heart with the hope of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Outline

Lamentations

- I. How Lonely Sits the City (1:1–22)
- II. God Has Set Zion under a Cloud (2:1–22)
- III. I Am the Man Who Has Seen Affliction (3:1–66)
- IV. How the Gold Has Grown Dim (4:1–22)
- V. Restore Us to Yourself, O Lord (5:1–22)

Habakkuk

- I. Superscription (1:1)
- II. First Cycle (1:2–11)
- III. Second Cycle (1:12–2:20)
- IV. Habakkuk’s Prayer (3:1–19)

Zephaniah

- I. Heading (1:1)
- II. Judgment Coming against Judah (1:2–6)
- III. The Day of the Lord (1:7–3:20)

As You Get Started

What is your current understanding of how Lamentations, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah help us comprehend the whole storyline of the Bible? Do you have an idea of how aspects of the books' message are found elsewhere in the Old Testament or fulfilled in the New Testament?

What is your current understanding of what Lamentations, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah contribute to Christian theology? What might these books teach us about God, Jesus Christ, sin, judgment, redemption, repentance, salvation, or other such doctrines?

What aspects of Lamentations, Habakkuk, or Zephaniah have confused you? Are there any specific questions that you hope this study will help you to answer?

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a few minutes to ask God to help you understand and apply the truth of Scripture to your life as you begin this study of Lamentations, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah.



THE BOOKS OF LAMENTATIONS, HABAKKUK, AND ZEPHANIAH are rich with God's truth concerning our need of redemption. But hope and mercy have the final word as God promises to bless those who turn back to him in faith and repentance.

This accessible study takes readers through these books over the course of 12 weeks. The prophecies, though far removed from our historical context, are deeply relevant and applicable to today's contemporary issues—offering hope for restoration in our fallen world.

ABOUT THE *KNOWING THE BIBLE* SERIES

Over the course of 12 weeks, these studies explore books of the Bible and:

- Ask thoughtful questions to spur discussion
- Show how each passage unveils the gospel
- Tie the text in with the whole story of Scripture
- Illuminate the doctrines taught in each passage
- Invite you to discover practical implications
- Help you better understand and apply God's Word

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