

LifeChange

A NAVPRESS BIBLE STUDY SERIES

*A life-changing
encounter with God's Word*

MINOR PROPHETS 2

**NAHUM, HABAKKUK, ZEPHANIAH, HAGGAI,
ZECHARIAH & MALACHI**

*Through the prophets, God called his people
out of their routine neglect to go
forward in active faith.*

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24 23 22 21 20 19 18
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CONTENTS

How to Use This Guide	5
Introduction — The Minor Prophets: Major Messages from Across the Centuries	11
One — God’s Judgment Against Nineveh (Nahum 1–3)	13
Two — Asking God Why (Habakkuk 1–2)	25
Three — Prayer of Faith (Habakkuk 3)	37
Four — Day of Judgment (Zephaniah 1–2)	47
Five — Day of Hope (Zephaniah 3)	59
Six — The Lord’s House and the People’s Hope (Haggai 1–2)	69
Seven — Visions in the Night (Zechariah 1–4)	85
Eight — More Visions and Encouragement (Zechariah 5–8)	97
Nine — The Coming Messiah and His Rejection (Zechariah 9–11)	109
Ten — The Coming Messiah and His Acceptance (Zechariah 12–14)	119
Eleven — Reprimands from God’s Heart (Malachi 1–2)	129
Twelve — The Coming of the Lord (Malachi 3–4)	141
Study Aids	151

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Along with all the volumes in the LIFECHANGE series of Bible studies, the two guides to the Minor Prophets (Nahum through Malachi in this second volume; Hosea through Micah in the first) share common goals:

1. To provide you a firm foundation of understanding, plus a thirst to return to the Minor Prophets throughout your life.
2. To give you study patterns and skills that help you explore every part of the Bible.
3. To offer you historical background, word definitions, and explanation notes to aid your study.
4. To help you grasp as a whole the message of each of the Minor Prophets.
5. To teach you how to let God's Word transform you into Christ's image.

As you begin

This guide includes twelve lessons that will take you chapter by chapter through the last six of the Minor Prophets. Each lesson is designed to take from one to two hours of preparation to complete on your own. To benefit most from this time, here's a good way to begin your work on each lesson:

1. Pray for God's help to keep you mentally alert and spiritually sensitive.
2. Read attentively through the entire passage mentioned in the lesson's title. (You may want to read the passage from two or more Bible versions — perhaps at least once from a more literal translation such as the New International Version, English Standard Version, New American Standard Bible, or New King James Version, and perhaps once more in a paraphrase such as *The Message* or the New Living Translation.) Do your reading in an environment that's as free as possible from distractions. Allow your mind and heart to meditate on these words you encounter, words that are God's personal gift to you and to all His people.

After reading the passage, you're ready to dive into the numbered questions in this guide that make up the main portion of each lesson. Each of these questions is followed by blank space for writing your answers. (This act of writing your answers helps clarify your thinking and stimulates your mental engagement with the passage, as well as your later recall.) Use extra paper or a notebook if the space for recording your answers seems too cramped. Continue through the questions in numbered order. If any question seems too difficult or unclear, just skip it and go on to the next.

Each of these questions will typically direct you to the text of one of the Minor Prophets to look again at a certain portion of the assigned passage for that lesson. (At this point, be sure to use a more literal Bible translation, rather than a paraphrase.)

As you look closer at this passage, it's helpful to approach it in this progression:

Observe. What does the passage actually *say*? Ask God to help you see it clearly. Notice everything that's there.

Interpret. What does the passage *mean*? Ask God to help you understand. And remember that any passage's meaning is fundamentally determined by its *context*. So stay alert to all you'll see about the setting and background of the Minor Prophets, and keep thinking of these books as a whole while you proceed through them chapter by chapter. You'll be progressively building up your insights and familiarity with what they're all about.

Apply. Keep asking yourself, *How does this truth affect my life?* (Pray for God's help as you examine yourself in light of that truth, and in light of His purpose for each passage.)

Try to consciously follow all three of these approaches as you shape your written answer to each question in the lesson.

The extras

In addition to the numbered questions you see in this guide, each lesson also offers several optional questions or suggestions that appear in the margins. All of these will appear under one of three headings:

Optional Application. These are suggested options for application. Consider these with prayerful sensitivity to the Lord's guidance.

For Thought and Discussion. Many of these questions address various ethical issues and other biblical principles that lead to a wide range of implications. They tend to be particularly suited for group discussions.

For Further Study. These often include cross-references to other parts of the Bible that shed light on a topic in the lesson, plus questions that delve deeper into the passage.

(For additional help for more effective Bible study, refer to the "Study Aids" section on page 151.)

Changing your life

Don't let your study become an exercise in knowledge alone. Recognize the passage as *God's Word*, and stay in dialogue with Him as you study. Pray, "Lord, what do You want me to notice here?" "Father, why is this true?" "Lord, how does my life measure up to this?"

Let biblical truth sink into your inner convictions so you'll increasingly be able to act on this truth as a natural way of living.

At times you may want to consider memorizing a certain verse or passage you come across in your study, one that particularly challenges or encourages you. To help with that, write the words on a card to keep with you, and set aside a few minutes each day to think about the passage. Recite it to yourself repeatedly, always thinking about its meaning. Return to it as often as you can, for a brief review. You'll soon find the words coming to mind spontaneously, and they'll begin to shape your motives and actions.

For group study

Exploring Scripture together in a group is especially valuable for the encouragement, support, and accountability it provides as you seek to apply God's Word to your life. Together you can listen jointly for God's guidance, pray for each other, help one another resist temptation, and share the spiritual principles you're practicing. Together you affirm that growing in faith, hope, and love is important, and that *you need each other* in the process.

A group of four to ten people allows for the closest understanding of each other and the richest discussions in Bible study, but you can adapt this guide for groups of other sizes. It will suit a wide range of group types, such as home Bible studies, growth groups, youth groups, and church classes. Both new and mature Christians will benefit from the guide, regardless of their previous experience in Bible study.

Aim for a positive atmosphere of acceptance, honesty, and openness. In your first meeting, explore candidly everyone's expectations and goals for your time together.

A typical schedule for group study is to take one lesson per week, but feel free to split lessons if you want to discuss them more thoroughly. Or omit some questions in a lesson if your preparation or discussion time is limited. (You can always return to this guide later for further study on your own.)

When you come together, you probably won't have time to discuss all the questions in the lesson, so it's helpful to choose ahead of time the ones you want to make sure and cover thoroughly. This is one of the main responsibilities a group leader typically assumes.

Each lesson in this guide ends with a section called "For the group." It suggests how to focus the discussion, how to apply the lesson to daily life, and so on. Reading each lesson's "For the group" section ahead of time can help the leader be more effective in guiding the group.

You'll get the greatest benefit from your time together if each group member prepares by writing out his or her answers to each question in the

lesson. The private reflection and prayer that this preparation can stimulate will be especially important in helping everyone discern how God wants you to apply each lesson to your daily life.

What to do in your time together

There are many ways to structure the group meeting, and you may want to vary your routine occasionally to help keep things fresh.

Here are some of the elements you can consider including as you come together for each lesson:

Pray together. It's good to pause for prayer as you begin your time together, as well as to incorporate a later more extensive time of prayer for each other, after you've had time to share personal needs and prayer requests. (You may want to record these in a notebook.) When you begin with prayer, it's worthwhile and honoring to God to ask especially for His Holy Spirit's guidance of your time together.

Worship. Some groups like to sing together and worship God with prayers of praise.

Review. You may want to take time to discuss what difference the previous week's lesson has made in your life, as well as recall the major emphasis you discovered in the passage for that week.

Read the passage aloud. Once you're ready to focus attention together on the assigned Scripture passage in the week's lesson, read it aloud. (One person could do this, or the reading could be shared.)

Open up for lingering questions. Allow time for the group members to mention anything in the passage that they may have particular questions about.

Summarize the passage. Have one or two persons offer a summary of what the passage covers.

Discuss. This will be the heart of your time together and will likely take the biggest portion of your time. Focus on the questions you see as the most important and most helpful. Allow and encourage everyone to be part of the discussion on each question. You may want to take written notes as the discussion proceeds. Ask follow-up questions to sharpen your attention and to deepen your understanding of what you discuss. You may want to give special attention to the questions in the margin under the heading "For Thought and Discussion." Remember that sometimes these can be especially good for discussion, but be prepared for different answers and opinions. As you hear each other, keep in mind each other's various backgrounds, personalities, and ways of thinking. You can practice godly discernment without ungodly judgment in your discussion.

Encourage further personal study. You can find more opportunities for exploring the lesson's themes and issues under the marginal heading "For Further Study" throughout the lesson. You can also pursue some of these together, during your group time.

Focus on application. Look especially at the “Optional Application” items listed in the margins throughout the lesson. Keep encouraging one another in the continual work of adjusting your lives to the truths God gives you in Scripture.

Summarize your discoveries. You may want to read aloud through the passage one last time together, using this opportunity to solidify your understanding and appreciation of it, and to clarify how the Lord is speaking to you through it.

Look ahead. Glance together at the headings and questions in the next lesson to see what’s coming next.

Give thanks to God. It’s good to end your time together by pausing to express gratitude to God for His Word and for the work of His Spirit in your minds and hearts during your time together.

Get to know each other better. In early sessions together, you may want to spend time establishing trust, common ground, and a sense of each other’s background and what each person hopes to gain from the study. This may help you later with honest discussion on how the Bible applies to each of you. Understanding each other better will make it easier to share about personal applications.

Keep these worthy guidelines in mind throughout your time together:

Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

(HEBREWS 10:24)

Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

(GALATIANS 6:2)

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

(ROMANS 15:7)

THE MINOR PROPHETS

Major Messages from Across the Centuries

The six books you'll focus on in this study represent the concluding portion of the final twelve books in our Old Testament. All twelve of them have together been grouped and perceived as a collective unit for millennia (as discussed more fully in the introduction to the first of these two LIFECHANGE volumes concerning the Minor Prophets). As we observed there, all of these twelve books "have their distinctive features, so there is no sense of monotony as we move from one to the next."¹

A few more observations:

"The Minor Prophets seem to have been preoccupied with nations and events that have little relevance to today's world. How unlike the New Testament they are! A careful study of these prophets, however, reveals that many of the themes they expound transit the Testaments. They speak of the love of God as well as his justice. Their prophecies are not all doom, but are often rich with hope. . . .

"Anyone who turns from reading the Minor Prophets hearing only words of recrimination and judgment has not read them fairly. Within the dismal events these prophets describe lurks the hand of God, and beyond these events is the bright prospect of a kingdom inaugurated by One whom Zechariah portrays as suffering betrayal, piercing, and eventual death. The Minor Prophets are not as time-bound as we may think."²

Timeline

Following is a suggested chronology for these last six of the Minor Prophets.³ (The dating for some of these books is uncertain.)

Nahum (in the reign of Hezekiah of Judah) — between 710 and 699 BC

Habakkuk (in the reign of Manasseh or Josiah of Judah) — between 650 and 628 BC

Zephaniah (in the reign of Josiah of Judah)—between 628 and 623 BC

Haggai (in the reign of Darius of Persia)—in 520 BC

Zechariah (in the reign of Darius of Persia)—between 520 and 480 BC

Malachi (in the reign of Artaxerxes of Persia)—between 433 and 424 BC

1. Leland Ryken and Philip Graham Ryken, eds., *The Literary Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), introduction to Habakkuk, “The book at a glance.”
2. Thomas Edward McComiskey, ed., *The Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009), ix.
3. Adapted from C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: The Minor Prophets*, vol. 10 (Edinburgh, UK: Clark, 1871; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 3.

NAHUM 1-3

God's Judgment Against Nineveh

"While most Old Testament prophetic books predict God's judgment against Israel and Judah, the prophecy in Nahum is directed against Nineveh, capital city and representative of the nation of Assyria. Because Assyria was a wicked nation, noted especially for its cruelty in warfare, the prophet makes no apology for predicting its destruction. He throws himself into his denunciation of Nineveh with enthusiasm and a taunting tone. . . . What Nahum utters against Nineveh is God's message to all evil nations."¹

"Nahum means 'comfort' or 'consolation' (of God). This is very thought-provoking since Nahum's entire message concerns the destruction of Nineveh. . . .

"Nahum prophesied . . . around 620 B.C., about the time of Habakkuk, Zephaniah, and the early part of Jeremiah's ministry. . . .

“Nahum’s book . . . provided answers to the questions of God’s people: ‘Has God forsaken us? Why are the Assyrians prospering? Are God’s promises empty?’ Nahum affirms that God may be ‘slow to anger,’ but He ‘will not at all acquit the wicked’ (1:3). Moreover, God is indeed ‘a stronghold in the day of trouble’ (1:7). This is also a vital message for today — in the press of circumstances and misfortune, God’s people are prone to forget that God is in control.”²

“As a true prophet of Yahweh, Nahum was profoundly aware that the Lord, the incomparable and all-powerful God, held universal dominion over the kingdoms of this world. Like his predecessor Isaiah, Nahum was also a gifted poet. Using a wealth of imagery and pictorial language, the prophet portrays the total destruction of Nineveh by an anonymous enemy, and so voices the universal relief and joy of all who suffered under the oppressive regime of a merciless tyrant.”³

1. For getting the most from the books of the Minor Prophets, one of the best guidelines is found in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, words which Paul wrote with the Old Testament first in view. He said that *all* Scripture is of great benefit to (a) teach us, (b) rebuke us, (c) correct us, and (d) train us in righteousness. Paul added that these Scriptures completely equip the person of God “for every good work.” As you think seriously about those guidelines, in which of these areas do you especially want to experience the usefulness of the books of Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai,

Zechariah, and Malachi? Express your desire in a written prayer to God.

2. Think also about these words of Paul to Timothy: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). As you study God’s Word of Truth in these final six books of the Old Testament, the Lord calls you to be a “worker.” It takes *work*—concentration and perseverance—to fully appropriate God’s blessings for us in this book. Express here your commitment before God to work diligently in this study of the last six books in the Minor Prophets.

3. Glance ahead through the pages of Nahum and briefly scan all three chapters. What are your overall impressions of the book, including its structure and its themes?

4. Now turn your focus to the first chapter of Nahum. What are the great truths about God that are evident in these passages?

Optional

Application: After His resurrection, when Jesus was explaining Old Testament passages to His disciples, we read that He “opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45). Ask God to do that kind of work in *your* mind as you study the book of Nahum, so you’re released and free to learn everything here He wants you to learn — and so you can become as bold and worshipful and faithful as those early disciples of Jesus. Express this desire to Him in prayer.

For Thought and Discussion: How familiar is the book of Nahum to you? What have been your previous impressions of this book?

Optional

Application: The prophet’s words of praise for God in Nahum 1:7 occur in a message of great judgment against an ungodly power. What personal encouragement do the words of praise in Nahum 1:7 bring to you, especially in light of the evil in today’s world?

Nahum 1:2-5

Nahum 1:6-9

Prophecy (1:1). Or “burden” (NKJV). See also Isaiah 13:1; 17:1; Habakkuk 1:1; Zechariah 9:1; 12:1; Malachi 1:1. “The Hebrew for this word is related to a Hebrew verb meaning ‘to lift up, carry’ and is possibly to be understood as either lifting up one’s voice or carrying a burden. Such an ‘oracle’ often contains a message of doom.”⁴

Jealous (1:2). “The emphasis is on God’s desire for righteousness.”⁵

Bashan . . . Carmel . . . Lebanon (1:4). “These three places were noted for their fertility, vineyards, and trees.”⁶

The LORD is good (1:7). “Even in the manifestation of His wrath God proves His goodness. . . . The goodness of the Lord is seen in the fact that He is a refuge in distress.”⁷

5. What do we learn about the Lord’s enemies in 1:8-11?

Overwhelming flood (1:8). “Symbolic of an invading army (see Isaiah 8:7-8).”⁸

6. What significance do you see in the Lord’s promise to His people in 1:12-13?

7. What is the emphasis in the message to Nineveh (or, in particular, Assyria’s ruler) in 1:14?

You (1:14). The NIV here adds “Nineveh” in brackets. The pronoun here “is masculine singular in Hebrew. Nahum suddenly switches to directly addressing the Assyrian king(s): the Assyrian monarchy would come to a decisive end.”⁹

8. What is the emphasis in the message to the Lord’s people in 1:15?

9. What does the first chapter of Nahum reveal most about God’s heart and character?

In the second chapter of Nahum, “the focus falls on Nineveh. Nahum’s prediction reads like an eyewitness account of the city being attacked, overrun by the enemy, and plundered.”¹⁰

10. In the battle description that unfolds in Nahum’s second chapter, what images impress you most, and what do they bring to mind for you?

11. What reason for the Lord’s judgment against Nineveh is given in 2:2, and what significance do you see in this?

Red . . . scarlet (2:3). “These terms emphasize the awe-inspiring appearance of the approaching army, whether the color refers to their actual robes or to the blood stains on them.”¹¹

12. How is the battle’s onslaught portrayed in 2:3-5?

13. How are Nineveh's failing defenses portrayed in 2:6-10?

River gates (2:6). "Nineveh was located on the bank of the Tigris River, and a smaller river flowed through the city. Conflicting ancient accounts ascribe the fall of Nineveh to flooding when the enemy redirected the dams and sluices of the water system."¹²

14. In 2:11-12, what is the effect of the lion imagery and what it says about Nineveh?

Lion and lioness (2:11). "The Assyrian kings exhibited ferocity in their attacking and 'devouring' other lands, and called themselves lions."¹³

15. What is the emphasis in the Lord's message of judgment in 2:13, and how does it serve as a focal point for chapter 2?

For Thought and Discussion: What does the book of Nahum reveal about God’s general attitude toward nations that are ruthlessly aggressive? And how might this message apply to some of the world’s nations today?

For Further Study: Nineveh is on center stage in two short books of the Bible — Jonah and Nahum. What contrasts do you see in the perspectives that these two books give us concerning Nineveh?

In the final chapter of Nahum, “the various parts all contribute to its literary unity, and together they emphasize the irreversible doom of Nineveh. The prophet . . . places the fate of Nineveh in a universal perspective.”¹⁴

16. As the battle descriptions continue in Nahum 3:1-3, what images impress you most, and what do they bring to mind for you?

17. What is the essence of the charge against Nineveh in 3:4?

18. What is the emphasis in the Lord’s message to Nineveh in 3:5-7, and how does it serve as a focal point for chapter 3?

19. For comparison with Nineveh, what is the main truth about Thebes given in 3:8-10?

Put and Libya (3:9). Put is “a neighbor of Egypt, but its location is uncertain.”¹⁵

20. As the battle descriptions continue in 3:11-15, what images impress you most, and what do they bring to mind for you?

21. What are the main points being made in the imagery of the locusts and grasshoppers in 3:15-17?

22. What is the final emphasis of the book in 3:18-19?

Who has not felt your endless cruelty? (3:19). Nahum and Jonah are the only books in the Bible that end with a question. Both books focus on the powerful Assyrian city of Nineveh.

“Although most Old Testament books end with a vision of blessing, the book of Nahum omits that conventional ending.”¹⁶

Optional Application: In what ways do you recognize that the prophecies in the book of Nahum will reach their complete fulfillment only at the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ? And what relevance does this fact have for your own life in this world?

For Thought and Discussion: Here in Nahum, what do you think accounts for the intensity of the Lord's language against Nineveh?

For Further Study: Scan the messages of judgment against ungodly nations that we find in such passages as Isaiah 13–23, Jeremiah 46–51, Amos 1–2, and Obadiah. What similarities to Nahum do you find in those passages?

23. In your study of the book of Nahum, what have you learned most and appreciated most?

24. What would you select as the key verse or passage in Nahum—one that best captures or reflects the dynamics of what this book is all about?

25. What does the book of Nahum communicate most to you about the heart and character of God?

26. List any lingering questions you have about the book of Nahum.

27. Because all of Scripture testifies ultimately of Christ, where does *Jesus* come most in focus for you in this book?

-
-
28. In Romans 15:4, Paul reminds us that the Old Testament Scriptures can give us endurance and perseverance on one hand, as well as comfort and encouragement on the other. In your own life, how do you see the book of Nahum living up to Paul's description? In what ways do the Scriptures help to meet your personal needs for both *perseverance* and *encouragement*?
-
-
-
-

Optional

Application: Which verse or verses in the book of Nahum would be most helpful for you to memorize so you have them always available in your mind and heart for the Holy Spirit to use?

For the group

(In your first meeting, it may be helpful to turn to the front of this book and review together the section titled "How to Use This Guide" on pages 5–9.)

You may want to focus your discussion for lesson 1 especially on the following issues, themes, and concepts, which are recognized as major overall themes in Nahum. How do you see these being dealt with in this book?

- God's justice
- God's anger against evil
- The moral responsibility of nations
- God's omnipotence

The following numbered questions in lesson 1 may stimulate your best and most helpful discussion: 3, 9, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, and 28.

Look also at the questions in the margins under the heading "For Thought and Discussion."

1. Leland Ryken and Philip Graham Ryken, eds., *The Literary Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), introduction to Nahum, "The book at a glance."
2. Warren Baker, ed., *The Complete Word Study Old Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG, 1994), introduction to Nahum.

3. *New Geneva Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), introduction to Nahum, "Author."
4. *NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985), at Isaiah 13:1.
5. *Complete Word Study Old Testament*, at Nahum 1:2,3.
6. *NIV Study Bible*, at Nahum 1:4.
7. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: The Minor Prophets*, vol. 10 (Edinburgh, UK: Clark, 1871; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 359.
8. *NIV Study Bible*, at Nahum 1:8.
9. *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), at Nahum 1:14.
10. *ESV Study Bible*, at Nahum 2:1-13.
11. *New Geneva Study Bible*, at Nahum 2:3.
12. *New Geneva Study Bible*, at Nahum 2:6.
13. *ESV Study Bible*, at Nahum 2:11-12.
14. *New Geneva Study Bible*, at Nahum 3:1-19.
15. *NIV Study Bible*, at Nahum 3:9.
16. Ryken and Ryken, introduction to Nahum, "The book at a glance."