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Linda Parker

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# The Word of the Lord Came: The Challenges of Studying the Minor Prophets in the Local Church Setting

LINDA PARKER

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God has some things to tell you. He speaks through the voice of prophecy. Using men like Hosea and Zephaniah, he reveals his sovereign control and faithful love. In the words of Amos and Micah, he calls you to repent of self-indulgence and pride. He commands you to look with compassion on the wounded world around you. Through the voice of Joel, God calls you to come home.

If you thought the Minor Prophets had nothing to say to you, come and find out what you have been missing. Gifted teachers and scholars have compiled a series of lessons to help you listen to God's prophetic messages. Come and hear the words of the Lord!

With this charge, we called the Pleasant Valley Church of Christ in Little Rock, Arkansas, to hear a fresh word from the minor prophets. Admittedly, our adult education ministry team faced several challenges in offering a study of this scripture genre. First, we knew it would be a challenge to motivate ourselves and our members to become excited and enthusiastic about a section of scripture we had relegated to the basement of Bible study.

Second, although some resource materials existed to use as study guides for our teachers and students, we decided to strike out on our own. We also felt the need to amplify the prophets' message with a broader experience than Sunday morning Bible class alone. Finally, we wanted to bring the Christians at Pleasant Valley face to face with the prophetic call to action.

Facing these challenges, we moved forward on several fronts. We began preparing our members to open their minds to the possibility that they might be able to get something from a study of the minor prophets. Armed with the knowledge that God's word is living and active, we were determined to let him breathe life into the minor prophets for us. At first, more than a few blank stares and rolling eyes greeted the teachers' announcements of our next study topic. But spending class time asking members to share possible benefits of the study helped everyone to see past the "doom and destruction" preaching of the prophets. They began to see the prophets as a possible unmined treasure left buried too long.

We also circulated in our bulletin a statement from F. Lagard Smith in which he makes this self-revelation:

For me the prophets ripped away the outer trappings of my own religious exercise. They called out to me deep within my conscience. They exposed me, shamed me, and condemned me! But they also picked me up, gave me new direction, and told me what I could be with God's help. They showed me courage in the face of persecution, strength from the pitfalls of weakness.<sup>1</sup>

With these and similar strategies, we promoted the study from the class lectern and from the pulpit, inviting everyone to get involved. The blank stares began to give way to a curious consideration of the unex-



plored. God's word has done the rest. As we progress through the study, the acid tongues of the prophets are etching God's lessons onto our hearts.

In addition to cultivating interest in the minor prophets, our ministry team faced another major hurdle—the development of our own study material. Some excellent resources on the minor prophets exist, including two works by Dr. Jack P. Lewis, *The Minor Prophets*, and *Ethics of the Prophets*.<sup>2</sup> We thought, however, that the highest growth potential would be reached by creating our own study guide, using our own people.

Two motivations drove this decision. First, we hoped that knowing the study contributors personally would bring our students extra motivation to prepare for and dig into the lessons. It's one thing to hear what a remote author has to say on a given topic, but it's quite another to find out what the scripture means to your close brother or sister. Secondly, we wanted each contributor to experience the personal growth that comes from the writing process. As we worked to find contributors, we met the usual resistance. Eventually, however, we were able to compile an in-house study guide that offered our students introspection and scriptural challenge.

The guide contains a letter from our adult education minister, background chronology and history for the minor prophets, an introduction by Dr. Lewis, and lessons on the 12 minor prophets. The introduction by Dr. Lewis, who has earned doctorates from Harvard and Hebrew Union, gave obvious weight to our guide and set a tone of seriousness for the study. Among our lesson contributors, we had elders, elders' wives, domestic missionaries, foreign missionaries, adult children of members, former preachers, and current ministers. We wanted to reach into as many demographics as possible to bring many perspectives to these scriptures.

In compiling a resource from so diverse a group, we did, however, find it difficult to create a consistent presentation throughout the study guide. Although we offered each contributor a format to follow, we still ended up with quite a variety of styles, lengths, and organizational outlines. Some lessons leaned toward the academic; some leaned more toward personal application; some offered discussion questions; some did not. This inconsistency may be unavoidable, but in our next effort, we will try to address it more thoroughly with the contributors in advance.

As a companion to the study guide, we offered our adult Bible class teachers a class to help them prepare for the following week's lesson. Each Wednesday, the teachers were lectured by one of our own Bible scholars on the minor prophet to be studied the next week. Not only did the teachers benefit from the extra research and insight, they also got time to discuss issues from the text among themselves. This cultivated within our teaching circle a sense of camaraderie with each other and a feeling of eagerness to present the lessons.

Once we had worked to build enthusiasm for the topic and had compiled the resource guide, we were ready to initiate the actual study. From the beginning, we wanted to find a way to amplify the message. Sunday evening worship services provided the perfect venue. The week before the study began, we offered a service titled, "God is calling His People." The entire service centered on the message of the minor prophets. We sang songs such as "Great is the Lord Almighty," "Hear O Israel," and "Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah."

We also had a chorus of three men read key sections from each of the minor prophets. They read powerful scriptures such as the following.

Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O Lord. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy." (Hab 3:2)

"Even now," declares the Lord, "Return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity." (Joel 2:12-13)<sup>3</sup>



That night, our minister described the culture of the minor prophets, showing how their culture was so much like our own. He said in those days, even as today, the people had “money without morality, success without security and religion without righteousness.” These themes reverberated from the ancient days all the way to our current situation. This message helped bring the prophets into the modern-day setting and helped our members see their relevance in light of our current culture. The meaningful worship experience created anticipation for the coming study and started the process of exposing our hearts to the message to come.

In this Sunday night service and during following weeks, our worship has focused primarily on repentance as the call of God through his prophets. During one service, we had a lengthy time of silence in which each worshipper was called to personal repentance before a holy God. As the silence grew, the sense of community and renewed dedication became a song of sacrifice offered to the Lord through our repentance as a church.

Admittedly, in successive services, it has been hard to maintain that level of passion for the message of the prophets. No matter how committed to renewal a church might be, worshippers eventually start to feel a little overwhelmed by the negative aspects of the prophetic pronouncements. The continued focus, however, does draw attention to God’s expectation of his people and to our shortcomings in a way that can push the church toward action. As we look ahead to our final worship of this series, a plan is being formulated to call the church to confession and action before the Lord in light of what we have heard from his prophets.

The Pleasant Valley congregation will reap many benefits from allowing the Lord to transform this part of his word from dust on the basement floor into a sword that is living and active. In our church, the sword has brought our Bible students and worshippers to the point of recognizing the thoughts and intentions of their own hearts. The introspective message of the minor prophets has caused us to quit pointing the finger of guilt at other nations.

Our current setting, including America’s war with Iraq, provides a vivid backdrop for us to lay behind the minor prophets. The issues of God’s use of nations to punish each other, his mercy for the oppressed, and his demands for justice have stood out in bold relief. The prophets, however, constantly turned Israel’s eyes away from the offenses of its neighbors and enemies toward their own standing before a holy God. This vision brings us to our knees as we inspect our own consciences.

Almost every book of prophecy includes the phrase, “the word of the Lord came. . . .” As we have read, many for the first time, the minor prophets, “the word of the Lord” has come to our congregation. The church cannot come face to face with this word and remain unchanged. Those changes, for the most part, remain to be seen. Our study, like the growth of the body, is still in progress.

#### LINDA PARKER

Ms. Parker is a member of the Christian Education and Worship committees at the Pleasant Valley Church of Christ in Little Rock, Arkansas. She has a degree in journalism from Oklahoma Christian University and writes for various Christian publications.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 F. Lagard Smith, *What Most Women Want* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1992), 110.
- 2 Jack P. Lewis, *The Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1966), and *Ethics of the Prophets* (Henderson: Hester Publications, 2001).
- 3 NIV.