

## Unit 1: Major Themes from Minor Prophets

### Lesson 3 | March 16, 2025

#### Reject False Religion

##### Study Text

Amos 5:21–27; Micah 3:1–12; Zechariah 13:1–5; Malachi 1:1–14

##### Central Truth

Only God deserves our worship.

##### Key Verse: Malachi 1:14

I am a great King, saith the Lord of hosts, and my name is dreadful among the heathen (KJV).

“I am a great king,” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies, “and my name is feared among the nations!” (NLT)

##### Learning Objectives

- Students will learn the names, settings, and primary messages of Amos, Micah, Zechariah, and Malachi.
- Students will recognize the danger of false prophets.
- Students will act out of concern for righteousness and justice.

##### Introducing the Lesson

**Say:** From the beginning of human history, God has been speaking to people. And He still speaks to people today. But as long as there have been prophets speaking God’s words, there have also been false prophets causing chaos and confusion. Today’s lesson reminds us that just because someone claims to be a prophet doesn’t necessarily mean that they are.

##### Discussion Starter—Last Meal

*Prepare several slips of paper with this question written on them: If you knew you were about to eat your last meal, what would you want to eat? On one slip only, add an instruction for the person to try to mislead the group by writing down a food they would never want to eat. Collect all the slips and read them out loud. Then ask the group if they can figure out which person was not telling the truth.*

**Say:** Sometimes, it can be extremely difficult to discern whether a person is being honest. In the Old Testament, God’s people often believed false prophets, and the consequences were devastating.

For more than three hundred years, God spoke to His people through a collection of prophets who declared His words to the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. These prophets foretold judgment, called people to righteous living, and promised restoration after suffering. It must have been challenging to communicate

with such hardhearted and rebellious people, but it was made even more difficult when they also had to confront false prophets who spread destructive and self-serving lies. God made it clear that He would eventually deal with these false prophets himself.

## **Part 1—Empty Rituals**

### **Stop the Show**

Amos 5:21–24

**Say:** The northern kingdom knew how to throw a party. When it was time to celebrate Israel's annual festivals, Bethel may have been filled with music, adornments, and sacrifices, but something was missing in God's view.

The annual festivals of ancient Israel must have been extraordinary spectacles. The prophet Amos was writing to the northern kingdom, and his words in 5:21–24 paint a picture of what these gatherings in Bethel (the national center of worship) must have been like. On these days set apart to God, thousands of pilgrims would have been gathered to celebrate and sacrifice. The masses of people, the noise of instruments and singing, and the chaos of herds of sacrificial animals would have created an overwhelming display of outward piety.

But God had a different perspective—which was exactly what He commissioned Amos to announce. After declaring messages against Israel's neighbors (1:3 through 2:3) and Israel and Judah together (2:4–16), God spoke directly to Israel (3:1 through 6:14). This oracle is filled with terrifying words of judgment, but few are as pointed as the first two words of 5:21. It is difficult to replicate in English, but the Hebrew text starts with two back-to-back verbs: "I hate" and "I reject." In God's eyes, all of Israel's festival rituals were nothing but empty religious shows. Instead of honoring God or invoking His power and presence, these ceremonies only stirred His anger.

Amos was a farmer, but he was also a poet. His writing includes two major elements of poetry commonly used in ancient Israel: vivid figurative images and pairs of parallel statements. After Amos expressed God's rejection of Israel's noisy festivals, he picked up the message of what God was looking for instead. Using the powerful image of mighty torrents of water gushing down from mountain heights, he called the entire nation—from the most powerful to the least powerful—to order their actions according to God's standard of justice (verse 24). Oppression, violence, and corruption have no place in a just society. They render outward acts of worship completely meaningless.

Still today, we must recognize that worship is so much more than music, media, and step-by-step plans for church gatherings. The kind of worship that God receives must begin in His followers' hearts as they seek to honor and please Him. Jesus explained that "true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for those who will worship him that way" (John 4:23). True worship includes pure motivation, righteous integrity, and the pursuit of justice.

### **Resource Packet Item 1: Let Justice Roll Down**

Students will read passages from Amos to see what unjust behaviors angered God and then think of ways we can work against those kinds of injustice today.

### Discuss

? What issues of justice and righteousness seem to be neglected in your local community? What are God's people doing on His behalf in these situations?

? How can you explain the tension between outward expressions of worship and inward expressions of worship? Both are commanded in Scripture, but what is God's view about how they relate to each other?

### **Who Is It Really For?**

Amos 5:25–27

**Say:** Just because people say they are worshipping God doesn't mean they are. Amos reminded Israel that it's impossible to truly worship God if you're secretly honoring idols. When it comes to worshipping the one true God, it's all or nothing.

Amos 5:25–27 is notoriously difficult to translate, which explains why various English versions make such different translation choices. Even Stephen's quotation of this passage in Acts 7:42–43 demonstrates how tricky it is to bring the original meaning from Hebrew into another language. Several of the most important words in this passage can be translated either as the proper names of idols who had ensnared Israel (*Molech* or *Sakkuth*) or as other common words like *king* or *tabernacle*. Since Hebrew does not capitalize proper names, it can be difficult to decide between these possibilities. This passage teaches us the importance of context when interpreting Scripture. Although specific words are open to various translations, the message of the text is still understandable based on the context of the Amos and Acts passages.

Despite God's faithfulness to them, Israel continually violated His most basic and sacred law: "You must not have any other god but me" (Exodus 20:3). This was not a one-time mistake. Amos declared God's indictment against Israel's long-standing pattern of rebellion and idolatry (Amos 5:25–26). Just as their ancestors had gone through the motions of tabernacle worship in the wilderness while worshipping other gods on the side, Israel's loyalties were still divided. The result would be exile (verse 27).

Like Israel, if we allow anything to compete for our wholehearted devotion that should belong only to God, our worship is worthless. No one and nothing but God deserves that place in our hearts. As the Israelites learned, God will not share His glory.

### **Resource Packet Item 2: Modern-Day Idols**

Students will read an excerpt from Timothy Keller's *Counterfeit Gods* and think about ways they might be looking for fulfillment from something other than God.

### Discuss

? What are some idols people serve today, even while they're going through the motions of worshipping God?

? Why do you think people so easily fall into committing idolatry?

## **Part 2—False Prophets**

### **Self-Serving Prophets**

Micah 3:5–8

**Say:** As we learned in the last lesson, the prophet Micah was from the southern kingdom of Judah, but God called him to speak against the northern kingdom of Israel. People in Israel were using God’s name to manipulate others—something that still happens today. Micah had strong words for these impostors.

A prophet has one job: to accurately convey God’s message to its recipients. But the simplicity of the job description has not kept many so-called prophets from failing terribly. As Micah laid out the indictment against false prophets in Israel, the setting was important. Many biblical prophets were focused on idolatry, but Micah focused specifically on denouncing social injustice in both the northern and southern kingdoms. He continually denounced people with civil and religious power who victimized the poor and powerless (2:1–2, 11; 3:9–11). In Micah’s view, the great sins that would bring God’s judgment were injustice and oppression—and many false prophets were guilty of these sins.

Simply put, the false prophets were deceiving people in order to serve their own selfish interests. Their words did not align with what God was saying and doing, which led the people into ever-increasing error and sin. Their false message misrepresented God and put the nation at greater risk of judgment. In 3:5, the Hebrew text literally says that when the false prophets had something to sink their teeth into, they would give messages of peace and wholeness. But they would declare violence and war against those who would not give them things to consume. In other words, they shaped their messages not on what God said but on what they could get from their listeners—no matter how vulnerable those listeners might be.

Micah condemned this exploitative behavior. True prophets would never victimize the poor or peddle lies for personal gain. To show this contrast, Micah declared, “You will cover your faces because there is no answer from God. But as for me, I am filled with power—with the Spirit of the LORD. I am filled with justice and strength to boldly declare Israel’s sin and rebellion” (3:7–8).

Sadly, religious predators still exist. Churches that believe God still speaks today can be especially susceptible to false prophets. But Micah’s message reminds all of us that prophets should be examined on the basis of their character, their financial integrity, and whether their messages align with Scripture.

### Discuss

? How can Christians today guard against believing false prophets?

? What are some characteristics that mark true prophets?

## **The Final Shame of False Prophets**

Zechariah 13:1–5

**Say:** False prophets do not walk around with name tags that label them as liars and manipulators. No, they are subtle, crafty, and clever. The prophet Zechariah pointed to a day when God would silence everyone who spreads sin and confusion.

Most of the Minor Prophets spoke to either the northern kingdom of Israel or the southern kingdom of Judah before God's judgment fell against them. Israel was conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BC. Then, in 586 BC, Judah was overthrown by the Babylonians, who destroyed the temple and carried away Jerusalem's inhabitants.

A few of the prophets, including Zechariah, prophesied in Judah after the seventy years of Babylonian exile. One might think that the trauma of exile would cure the people's rebellion. But Zechariah's ministry shows us that some habits are very hard to break. The oracles and visions in the Book of Zechariah promised that God still cared for His people, but they also showed that the people's failures and trials were not over.

Chapters 9 through 14 of Zechariah focus on the day the Messiah would come to guide and care for God's people. The New Testament applies many of Zechariah's prophecies specifically to Jesus (Matthew 21:4–5; 26:31; 27:9–10; Mark 14:27; John 12:15; 19:37). As is often the case, these Old Testament prophecies had both immediate and ultimate fulfillments. Jesus would be the ultimate fulfillment. But in the meantime, false prophets were continuing to oppose God's work and cause chaos in Zechariah's day. The prophet made it clear that God had a plan to deal with them.

One day, those who peddled idolatry would be cut off. God would completely put an end to the destructive influence of false prophets (Zechariah 13:2). Note the significance of the Lord's title when He silences these liars: the Lord of Hosts. This military term refers to the commander of assembled warriors—in this case, the army of heaven. Zechariah's imagery helps us understand how serious it is to deceive God's people.

### Discuss

? Why do you think God sometimes waits to silence false prophets instead of immediately dealing with them?

? While they were exiled in Babylon, the people of Judah promised to obey the Lord. But Zechariah shows how they failed to follow through once the exile had ended. How do you see this pattern repeated in our day?

## **Part 3—Worthless Offerings**

### **Offering Insults**

Malachi 1:6–10, 13–14

**Say:** A couple generations after Judah returned from exile, a new problem surfaced. Even though the temple had been rebuilt and sacrifices were being offered again, God was not pleased. In fact, He was insulted.

Within two generations of the temple being rebuilt, there was a crisis at the altar of the Lord—the center of worship. As the crisis unfolded, a singular prophetic voice cried out. We recognize this voice by the name Malachi, although we cannot be sure whether it refers to a personal name or a title. The word simply means “my messenger” in Hebrew. But whether the Lord was saying these were His words through a man named Malachi or through His messenger, the message remains the same. God was using a messenger to rebuke the people for their sin against Him.

Throughout the Bible, God spoke especially strong words of correction to people in positions of leadership. Often, these rebukes were directed toward kings and prophets, but in this passage, God spoke to priests. As mediators between God and the people, the priests’ primary task was offering the sacrifices the Law required. Other prophets had explained that offerings mattered less to God than the hearts of those offering them. And in Malachi’s time, the kinds of sacrifices the people were presenting to God revealed their wayward hearts.

For a sacrifice to be worthy, it had to be willingly given and of the highest quality. This principle shows up on the earliest pages of Scripture. In Genesis 4:3–5, God received Abel’s offering of the “best portions of the firstborn lambs from his flock” (verse 4) but rejected Cain’s offering of “some of his crops” (verse 3). Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers include forty-four references to the command that only offerings without blemishes are to be presented to the Lord.

But by Malachi’s time, the priests were disregarding the point of sacrifice (Malachi 1:6–14). They offered animals that were “stolen and crippled and sick” (verse 13). God rebuked them, daring them to offer those kinds of gifts to their Persian governors and see what happened. If human overseers would be insulted by such offerings, how much more the glorious and eternal God?

Although there is no need for animal sacrifices today because of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, we are still called to offer ourselves as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to the Lord (Romans 12:1). Anything less would be an insult.

### **Resource Packet Item 3: Living Sacrifices**

Students will list some of the best sacrifices they could offer to God.

#### Discuss

? What are ways we might offer less than the best of ourselves to God?

? How does Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross show us what kind of sacrifices are pleasing to God?

### **It’s Bigger Than You**

Malachi 1:11–12



**Say:** Is it really such a big deal that the priests were offering mediocre sacrifices? Speaking through Malachi, God explained why these actions mattered more than we might think.

In Malachi 1:11–12, God explained why He was so displeased with the people's offerings. First, He declared that He was to be honored from the rising of the sun until it set in the evening. This was a poetic device to indicate that there is not a time or place where His glory does not dwell; He should be honored everywhere.

Next, He explained the significance of His name. In the Ancient Near East, names were viewed as far more significant than mere combinations of sounds distinguishing one person from another. Instead, they were intended to express nature and character—and might even impact one's reality. God declared that His name is, and will be, great among all nations. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul pointed to the same reality when he declared, "At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:10). Since this was God's ultimate goal, the sloppy and careless offerings of His people were working against His sovereign plan. How would the nations honor God's name if His own people treated Him with such dishonor?

Pleasing God is not all about you and your sacrifice. It is about reverencing the Lord in such a way that His name is exalted among the nations. When we casually handle what brings God glory, we are working against His purposes throughout history. This is why it matters how we live out our faith. When God's people dishonor Him, we shield His greatness from people who do not yet know Him.

### Discuss

? What are some ways people today might dishonor God?

? How can you make the Lord's name great in your family, community, and church?

### **What Is God Saying to Us?**

**Say:** God takes a very serious view toward those who distort His truth and mislead people. So it is vital for God's people to be able to discern between true and false prophets. In fact, it's a matter of eternal life and death. False prophets bring confusion and destruction to the Church, but the passages we read today can help us identify them by their words, actions, and attitudes. God loves us and wants to speak to us. When we stay in step with the Spirit and grow in wisdom by studying His Word, we will be able to hear and understand what He is saying.

### **Living It Out**

#### Ministry in Action

■ Pick one of the prophets we studied today—Amos, Micah, Zechariah, or Malachi—and read their entire book. Pay close attention to the contrast between messages from true prophets and messages from false prophets.

- Take time to pray for someone you care about who has been misled by false messages.
- Think of someone who is hurting or in need and do something simple to help them this week. (Send a card, give a gift, or perform an act of service.) What are some other ways you can pursue justice in your daily life?

#### Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Beware of False Gods.

Deuteronomy 12:28–32

Tuesday:

Do Not Make Meaningless Sacrifices.

Isaiah 1:10–18

Wednesday:

Reject False Messages.

Jeremiah 7:1–11

Thursday:

Reject Religious Pretense.

Matthew 23:23–28

Friday:

Lay Aside Legalism.

Colossians 2:16–23

Saturday:

Trust the Perfect Sacrifice.

Hebrews 10:5–10