

ZEPHANIAH

The name “Zephaniah” means either “Yahweh has hidden,” or “Yahweh treasured.” This could refer to some personal protection his parents hoped for as they bore and named him in what were troubled times. It could also be prophetic of God’s protection for the people of the southern kingdom, Judah. It seems that Zephaniah descended from the royal line, Hezekiah being his great-great-grandfather. No other prophet had such noble earthly ancestry. Zephaniah grew up during the reigns of wicked kings Manasseh and Amon. He was no doubt a pearl that survived in the moral pigpen that these evil men produced in Judah. His prophetic ministry was during the reign of good king Josiah, who led the Jews in revival after discovering the law of Moses. At this time Assyria (who had defeated the North and taken those people captive) was an empire on the decline. Babylon was the rising star on the geo-political scene, and they would begin a 20-year siege of Jerusalem just a few short years after the death of Josiah. The first half of the seventh century B.C. (700 - 650) was fairly devoid of prophetic influence, but this man broke heaven’s silence with his words from God. His ministry was during the reign of good king Josiah, about 640 - 609 BC. The sins of Judah, led by their long-time king, Manasseh, would be called into account. Part of Zephaniah’s message was to announce judgment. The coming “day of the LORD” has yet-future implications, but also local contemporary applications in the Babylonian siege and deportation. Good king Josiah would be spared this national catastrophe, but Judah as a nation would not. Zephaniah 1:4 sets the tone for God calling Judah into account. The history of Israel as recorded for us in the double books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles is interwoven in time with the prophetic books of Isaiah through Malachi. When it pleased God, He sent a prophet or prophets to challenge the people to return to His Word and His will. Two prophets were at work at this same time, Jeremiah and Zephaniah. Jeremiah was a “major prophet,” that is, his recorded message was quite long. Zephaniah is called a “minor prophet” because of the shortness of his recorded prophecy, but his message to Judah is a “major message.” In the days of Josiah there was political prosperity, but religious apathy. The king’s efforts at reform did not reach the people except at a superficial level. Judgment was coming, and these two prophets were called upon to tell the people. Men do not like to hear such a message, especially when it looks like things are going so well, so generally they were not well-received. Though Assyria had not conquered Judah, another great war-like empire was on the rise; God would use Babylon to punish Judah. The now-familiar (hopefully) expression “day of the Lord,” is used 22 times in the prophets, twice each by Jeremiah and Ezekiel, 5 times by Joel, and 7 times by Zephaniah - more than any other prophet. Amos uses it 3 times, and Obadiah, Zechariah, and Malachi each use it once.

ZEPHANIAH CHAPTER 1

I. STATEMENT ABOUT JUDGMENT (1:1-3)

1) Several critically important and interesting things are seen in the opening verse. First, Zephaniah claims that he belongs to that special fraternity called “prophets.” What he is writing is “the Word of Yahweh.” Next we learn that perhaps uniquely among the prophets, Zephaniah was of royal blood - he was a direct descendant of King Hezekiah of Judah, thus also of David’s line. Finally, Zephaniah ministered during the reign of Josiah, one of Judah’s great and godly kings. Josiah reigned from 640 BC until 609 BC. For reasons too tedious to mention here, it seems that Zephaniah prophesied somewhere between 622 and 612 BC.

2), 3) The prophet begins without introduction to proclaim God’s intent to judge - first, all the earth, then His own people. Several (I counted 6) “I will” statements indicate just what God plans to do. Verse 2 is a broad statement of coming judgment on the earth, with verse 3 spelling out some particulars. When man sins, God often judges his environment with him, as in Noah’s day with the flood, and in Lot’s day with Sodom and Gomorrah. Along with mankind, God will judge beasts, birds, and marine life.

II. STARTING PLACE FOR JUDGMENT (1:4 - 2:3)

Peter would write several centuries later (1 Peter 4:17), “For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?” That is precisely the order that Zephaniah records here - Judah first, then surrounding Gentile nations!

A. CAUSE OF JUDGMENT (1:4-7)

4), 5), 6) Now Zephaniah details some of God’s judgment on Judah - and they who have benefitted by having the law, the Temple, the priesthood should certainly be judged along with the Gentile world. This judgment of Judah was to be at the hands of the Babylonians, whom God had raised up for that purpose. One is reminded that when Jesus comes again, there will be a judgment on Israel and on the nations. Specific sins of Judah and Jerusalem included Baal-worship, other idol worship, bowing down to the moon and stars, swearing by Milcom (false god of the Ammonites), and generally turning away from the Lord.

7) Zephaniah uses here the first of his 19 references to “the day of the LORD” (including other references to “the day,” meaning a day of judgment). Judah seems to be the “sacrifice” that the Lord has prepared, and Babylon makes up the guests who are consecrated. This day of judgment is near, and it will silence the calls of the people upon gods who don’t exist. The judgment will be executed by the only God Who does exist - Yahweh.

B. CHARACTER OF JUDAH’S JUDGMENT (1:8-13)

8) The punishment of God on the sons of the kings is a sad story indeed - from this point beginning with the defeat of

Jehoiakim by Nebuchadnezzar through the slaughter of King Zedekiah's sons before his eyes which were then put out so their death was the last thing he saw! Did their wearing of foreign clothes suggest they had abandoned Israel's culture and adopted that of Babylon? Perhaps.

9) "On that day" appears again, seeming to be a reference to the "day of Yahweh." This can be a local, temporal expression of judgment by God, or it can refer to that prophetic, eschatological era when God's absolute sovereignty over this world is manifest - including the Tribulation through the great white throne judgment. The "threshold" reference may suggest influence by Philistine worship; recall that in 1 Samuel 5:5 they would not step on the threshold after their god Dagon had fallen before the Ark of the Covenant, and his broken-off hands were lying on the threshold. Through violence and deceit the Philistines and their Jewish followers filled Dagon's temples with treasures. Only God's Temple was adorned with freewill offering gifts, never taken by extortion or fear.

10), 11) These verses seem to focus more on the soon-coming local judgment at Nebuchadnezzar's hands than on the eschatological "day of Yahweh." This will be all-encompassing, as indicated by the Fish Gate, the New Quarter, the hills, the market - the idea is that no one can expect to escape the judgment that is coming. The sin has been widespread, and so will be the judgment.

12) The "day of the LORD" is an expression of judgment, a time when God shows Himself mighty, especially to bless the righteous and judge the unrighteous. In the end time it is the tribulation and millennium, when God does just that. Men may disdain judgment, but it is coming. God will thoroughly examine and then judge His people.

13) When Israel as a young nation came into the land, God gave them houses they did not build and vineyards they did not plant. Now comes the reverse - in judgment, they will be taken away from houses they did build, and they will be removed from vineyards they did plant. This is true spiritual irony.

C. COMING OF JUDAH'S JUDGMENT (1:14-18)

14) God's judgment on Judah will be sudden, swift, and severe. Associated with these judgments will be sounds that are bitter. Zephaniah calls on his people to listen to the awful sounds! Even strong warriors will weep, so great will be the devastation. The cavalier attitude about sin will quickly change.

15), 16) Here are numerous characteristics of the day of Yahweh. From heaven will come wrath. Men will come to the end of themselves - they will experience distress and anguish. Their fair land will be raped - they will experience ruin and devastation. The former light will be supplanted by darkness, gloom, clouds, and blackness. The law (Deuteronomy 28:52) had promised that even fortified cities would be besieged because of their sin.

17), 18) God will not be mocked, as Paul would later write to the Galatians. He had promised them through Moses that sin would have disastrous consequences, including men groping like the blind (Deuteronomy 28:29). Zephaniah predicts it again here, adding that Jewish blood would spill and entrails would fall out. No amount of wealth can deliver them from the judgment that God ordains - the judgment to which all the earth can look forward from the God Who cannot abide sin.

ZEPHANIAH CHAPTER 2

D. COMMAND TO REPENT (2:1-3)

1) His appeal is urgent, thus repeated a second time - "Gather." He calls them a people with no shame. How much like this is the culture of our day, where men and women do in the light the things once done under cover of darkness. Losing our sense of shame is enslaving, not liberating.

2) The call is urgent! The only hope Judah has is in repentance and returning to the Lord and His righteous ways. So they must repent: 1. before the punitive decree arrives, 2. before the day hastens here like blown chaff, 3. before God's anger falls, 4. before it's too late. Even today there are time limitations; men must turn to God while there is still time!

3) Even though it appears certain that national judgment is coming, certain God-fearing individuals can be spared. Those who have humbled themselves before God, who have been obedient and righteous, can be among those who live - some of whom stayed in the land, others of whom went into captivity. 2 Kings 24:14-16 chronicles the survival of thousands, people who escaped Nebuchadnezzar's sword.

III. SURROUNDING NATIONS RECEIVE JUDGMENT (2:4-15)

A. POUNDING OF PHILISTIA (2:4-7) South West

4) Four of the five Philistine seats of government are mentioned here - Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, and Ekron. Only Gath is strangely not mentioned. In that order they are promised to be deserted, desolate, uninhabited, and uprooted. These ancient enemies of God's people will be pounded from heaven by the hand of God. The noon-time attack on Ashdod suggests a surprise, as that is when armies usually rested.

5), 6), 7) The Philistines lived mainly on the seacoast on the western border of Israel. Some of the towns are recognizable even today. The lands and cities of the Philistines will one day be the possession of the Israelites. Yahweh Elohim, the Creator, and therefore Owner of the land, will give it to His people. Because the Philistines were against Israel, Israel's God will be against them. Generations of abuse have not gone unnoticed by the Omniscient God, and they will be recompensed severely by the Omnipotent God.

B. PUNISHMENT OF MOAB AND AMMON (2:8-11) EAST

8) Moab and Ammon, like the Edomites, were distant cousins of the Israelites. They were descendants of the sons of

Lot's daughters through a drunken incestuous relationship with their father (Genesis 19:30-36). These two nations were often thorns in the sides of the Israelites. They were arrogant and could be inhumanely cruel. Once again we see lived out the principle that those who oppose Israel, God will oppose. One of the strengths of our own nation is that we, more than any other nation, have been a friend to Israel. If you ever wonder why God does not judge us for our extreme wickedness as a nation, perhaps this is one of your answers.

9) God promises to make them like Sodom and Gomorrah, and He foretells that they will be plundered and possessed by His people Israel. Sodom and Gomorrah have no future, and it appears Moab and Ammon will go the same way.

10) The pride of these nations and their persecution of the Israelites will be the reasons for their undoing.

11) Their false gods, like Chemosh, will be the object of the judgments that the true God will bring upon them. Moabites and Ammonites alike had bowed in worship before false gods. They had in many cases even sacrificed their children to them! These detestable practices will be called into account, just as will the murder of millions of unborn babies right here in our own country - lives sacrificed to the gods of convenience, economy and who knows what else!

C. PIERCING OF THE CUSHITES (2:12) SOUTH

12) These descendants of Ham's son, Cush, lived in the region that is now southern Egypt and Sudan. In the reign of Asa, when peace and rest had prevailed for a time, this nation (called in 2 Chronicles 14 "Ethiopians") attacked Judah (unprovoked) with one million soldiers. Judah and Benjamin combined had less than 600,000 armed men, but Asa asked God for help, and he received it. The Jews routed the Cushites and returned to Jerusalem with much spoil from their God-given victory. Yahweh never forgot Cush's villainous acts, and here He promised to pierce them with His sword.

D. PAYBACK FOR ASSYRIA (2:13-15) NORTH

For a larger, fuller discussion of God's plan to pay Assyria back for all her wrongs against His people, see the prophecy of Nahum. This cruel, warlike people left a scorched-earth in their path of conquest and destruction. The Northern Kingdom, Israel, fell to her in 722 BC, at great cost in suffering, death, slavery, and deportation of the people. Jonah's prophecy is about the capital of Assyria, the great city of Nineveh. There judgment was averted by the repentance of the king and his people. But their later atrocities against Israel were ever in the mind of Israel's God, and He will pay them back.

13) The people who got their marching orders of destruction for Israel from Nineveh, and who scorched the earth in their mission, will find their great city scorched like a desert, and made a desolation. Like sin - like punishment!

14) This city where men once pranced like the little "gods" they thought themselves to be, will be inhabited by wild beasts. The sounds of boasting about victories past and yet to come will be replaced by the evening hooting of the owl. Her once glamorous, cedar-lined buildings will be utterly devastated. O, that America would know that a nation cannot thumb their noses at God with impunity - that judgment will come! At this writing there is the never-ending battle for the soul of our nation. May we humble ourselves before God and pray and seek His face and turn from our wicked ways that He may hear from heaven, forgive our sins, and heal our land.

15) The prideful boasting of Assyria is now little more than a memory. She who once thought herself impregnable, invulnerable, is now a desolation, a lair for wild beasts - her devastation is so great. Those who might pass by her will whistle and shake their fists in contempt. Her 200-year greatness as a kingdom is reduced to nothing as God raised up enemies against her and aided them by natural acts to take down her walls and defeat her. The wise man, Solomon, said, "*Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall*" (Proverbs 16:18).

ZEPHANIAH CHAPTER 3

There was a united monarchy and kingdom in Israel under the first three kings, Saul, David, and Solomon (Ishbosheth, Saul's son tried to keep his dad's monarchy going briefly, but lost out to David). After Solomon, the kingdom divided, and north and south had separate kings over them. Josiah was the 17th king of David's line, and he was a good king who reigned over Judah for 31 years. Before he came to the throne, however, his father, Amon, and grandfather, Manasseh, had ruled in wickedness for almost six decades. Zephaniah ministered in the prophetic office to Judah. His message was one of scathing rebuke for the sin of the nation and pronouncement of the judgment God had ready for them. Like Joel, a key phrase the prophet used was "the day of the LORD." Prophetically, this includes the tribulation and the millennial reign of Christ, times when the sovereign rule of God over the earth will become manifest. There are also local expressions of God's might along the way that may be referred to as "the day of Yahweh."

D. PENALTY FOR JUDAH REVISITED (3:1-7)

1), 2) It must have grieved the prophet to speak so about the city of Jerusalem. Jesus had a similar experience on the Mount of Olives; there He wept over her unwillingness to hear and heed His Word. Here, Zephaniah cries out judgment for her wickedness and her unwillingness obey God, to accept correction when she doesn't, to trust in the Lord, or to come near to God. In my mind's eye, I see a young child. He disobeys his parent, but stares at the floor when called into account. He thinks his way is best because he doesn't trust his parent, and when attempts at affection are offered, he coldly pushes his parent away. How God's heart must break!

3) Politically, those who serve under the king are not spoken well of. They use their positions and power for personal gain rather than to dispense justice and bless the people. Zephaniah compares them to a pack of ravenous beasts who make a kill and voraciously devour it in a single evening, leaving nothing to eat in the morning.

4) The religious leaders are no better. Prophets (those who speak to man for God) and priests (who speak to God for men) are alike condemned by God. Other prophets spoke against those who said what people wanted to hear just so they might be paid. May God give us prophets today who will proclaim His Word without fear of men!

5) Here is a striking contrast - the rulers are wicked and the religious leaders are perverted, but God, Who dwells in the midst of them, is absolutely just. He cannot do wrong, and He is the same every day in giving out justice. In spite of His perfections, the unrighteous among Israel know no shame in their refusal to hear His prophets.

6), 7) Here is a history lesson, a warning, and a lamentation for Judah. God had been righteous in bringing to ruin the cities of nations that had rebelled against Him. One needs only visit some of the sites of ancient cities that have fallen into destruction and disuse to see this illustrated. Capernaum, the headquarters of Jesus, consists of ruins visited by tourists. Jerash in Jordan, and Beit Shean in Israel are two great cities that are just now being pieced back together. God had judged Israel, and was now warning Judah, but they would not listen. As He rose early to dispense justice, they met the dawn to spread corruption. They did not learn from history.

E. PAUSE TO SUMMARIZE JUDGMENTS (3:8)

8) With one voice the prophets speak of a time of future judgment on the nations. Joel (3:2) speaks of the geography of the gathering as the Valley of Jehoshaphat (the Kidron Valley, just east of the old city of Jerusalem). That God can gather the nations into judgment speaks of His sovereign power. Today He is patient with the nations, but the day is not far off when the fire of His wrath will be unleashed on them in great fury. Watch out!

IV. SALVATION COMES AFTER JUDGMENT (3:9-20)

A. CHANGE IN FORTUNE FOR GENTILES AND JEWS (9-13)

9) With impure lips and evil speech the nations have served false gods, giving them the glory due only to Yahweh. He will remedy that, giving them purified lips to speak His praise. Paul wrote in Philippians 2 that every tongue of Adam's race would join the chorus of praise, acknowledging that Jesus Christ is Lord. Will this be a reversal of Babel? Will we all speak Hebrew? Universal praise for God is the issue, more than the specific language to be used.

10) While these worshipers coming to Jerusalem from the far southern reaches of the then known world may be returning Jews from the diaspora, the context makes more sense if we see them as Gentiles coming to worship the Lord in the end times. In Matthew 8:11 Jesus made reference to Gentiles making pilgrimage to Israel during the kingdom. This seems to be a parallel thought to that.

11) Here it appears that the prophet is allowed to speak of things yet to come - the kingdom age, a time when Israel shall have been judged, redeemed, and restored. In Zephaniah's day the righteous among her know shame for her sins, but those sins based in pride will be purged by the Messiah, and there will be no more need for shame.

12), 13) The time spoken of here has clearly never come. Israel is in the land today, some of them (at this writing about half of the world's Jews are there), but the two chief characteristics mentioned here - purity and safety - cannot be said to describe their current circumstance. As much as I love the nation of Israel - and I do love them and pray for their peace, safety, and salvation - they are largely a secular state, a people away from God. Few have gone there for religious reasons, most for nationalistic. And no people on earth is as often attacked - in and out of their land - as are they. The Arab Muslims hate them and want them out! Few peoples on earth are willing to be their allies. May we always be!

B. CONSEQUENCE OF JOY BECAUSE OF THE CHANGE (14-20)

14), 15) There have been precious few times of rejoicing for Jews the last 100 years. Jerusalem's liberation from the Turks by Gen Allenby in 1917; the Balfour Declaration, also 1917, in which England backed a national home for the Jews in so-called "Palestine;" the UN vote to give the Jews a homeland in November, 1947; the declaration of Israel's statehood in May, 1948; the winning of several wars - about one a decade - since 1948. Here Jerusalem, "the daughter of Zion," is told to rejoice because "the Lord her King" was come to be with her. His presence turns back her enemies, removes her punishment, and secures her safety. This can only be the Kingdom age!

16) At that day to Israel will be said, "Don't be afraid; don't sit in idleness." Let joy cast out all fear, and let nothing prevent the accomplishment of God's will. The image of "slack, limp, hands" is one of despair and inability to act. The challenge to let the hands be so is an encouragement to rejoice because help is available. Verse 17 gives the reason for this challenge.

17) God is with you and will (1) mightily save you, (2) delight in you, (3) give you rest in His love, and (4) sing with joy over you. Divine presence brings security, gives God joy, quietly produces rest, and elicits song. The presence of God is always a blessing for the troubled saint or nation. His deliverance is not just survival; it is thriving, filled with love, and singing. What a God we serve! What a salvation He secures for us!

18) God speaks to those who are headed for exile, who, away from Jerusalem and the Temple sacrifices, mourn for their glorious past. He reassures, encourages those who longed for Temple worship, who bore the reproach of their enemies: "Sing us one of the songs of Zion" (Psalm 137:1-6). Those people in the captivity who have a heart for God sorrowed inwardly for the wonderful worship of the past; they suffered outwardly at the hands of their cruel Babylonian captors.

19) "At that time" - God has a schedule, a timetable for reversing the fortunes of His captive people. They have been brought low in shame, but there is to be a great turn of events. Their oppressors will be put down, the lame will be rescued, the ones scattered abroad will be gathered home, and those who have been put to shame will be given praise

and honor. This is in keeping with the promises of God in places like Genesis 12:3 and Deuteronomy 26:18, 19. 20) "At that time," again, in God's perfect timing there will be a dramatic turn of events: I will... (1) gather you home, (2) honor you before nations, and (3) restore your fortunes. Dispersed Israel will be returned; she will be restored to honor among the nations. These promises will be completely and finally fulfilled in the earthly reign of Messiah - the millennial kingdom. God affixes His seal to those promises - "It is the oracle of the Lord."