

Zephaniah

INTRODUCTION

About 100 years before this prophecy, the northern kingdom (the ten tribes of Israel) had fallen to Assyria. The people had been carried away by their captors, and the land had been resettled by foreigners. Under King Manasseh and King Amon, King Josiah's father, tribute had been paid to keep Assyria from invading the southern kingdom (Judea).

The alliance with Assyria not only affected Judah politically, but also Assyria's religious, social, and fashion practices set the trend in Judah. Official protection was given in Judah to the magical arts of diviners and enchanters. Astral religion became so popular that Judah's King Manasseh erected altars for the worship of the sun, moon, stars, zodiac signs, and all the host of heaven, on the roof of the temple (2 Kings 23:11). The worship of the mother-goddess of Assyria became a practice that involved all members of Judean families (Jer. 7:18). However, as the young Josiah took over the reins of government, the Assyrian threat was diminishing. The final blow to their power came with a Babylonian uprising that eventually resulted in the destruction of Nineveh (capital of Assyrian Empire).

After a long silence, true prophetic voices were once again heard in Judah. Along with Zephaniah, Jeremiah was encouraging the revival led by King Josiah. The Book of the Law had been found in the temple. As a consequence, the land was purged of idolatrous practices and priests, the temple was cleansed, and thousands of sacrifices were offered when Passover was once again observed (2 Chr. 34; 35).

In retrospect the reform was one of externals, since the hearts of the people had not been changed. Even so, there was a sense that everything was right with God and the world, for they were living in momentary peace and prosperity. Into this complacent atmosphere the devastating message of Zephaniah comes like a searing blast.

Zephaniah viewed the political development of Israel (the northern kingdom), Judah (the southern kingdom), and all the surrounding nations from the perspective that the people should learn that God was involved in all the affairs of history. Speaking as an oracle of God, he understands that God uses foreign governments to bring about judgment upon His rebellious chosen people. Zephaniah is appalled that, after the catastrophe of the northern tribes, the people of Judah still maintain the preposterous notion that God is helpless to do good or evil (1:12).

As is true in most of the prophets, Zephaniah's writings have three components: 1) the pronouncement of specific and often universal judgment for sin; 2) an appeal for repentance because God is righteous and willing to forgive; 3) a promise that the remnant who have made God their refuge will be saved.

Few biblical writers describe the wrath of God or the joy of God as vividly as does Zephaniah. God is seen searching the streets of Jerusalem with lamps to find the wicked He will punish (1:12); the prophecy describing the Day of the Lord in 1:14-18 is a terrible chant of doom. A call to repentance appropriately follows these passages. The first two and a half chapters prophesy judgment so complete that even nature will be consumed (1:2, 3) and "all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of My jealousy" (3:8).

Because of the repeated use of the term "the day of the LORD," the book of Zephaniah has meaning for end times. The Day of the Lord is either the period of time or the actual day when God will bring His purposes to culmination for mankind and for the earth. The righteous will be rewarded with eternal blessing, and the wicked will be consigned to eternal damnation.

Amos was probably the first to use the term "the day of the LORD" (Amos 5:18-20). Isaiah, Jeremiah, Obadiah, and Joel all speak of it as a time of final judgment. In the New Testament "the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6) carries the same meaning.

While the message of Zephaniah has future significance, Judah and the surrounding nations expected an immediate and local fulfillment of the prophecies. Beginning with Assyria, the judgments were fulfilled in a few years when the temple was utterly destroyed and the Jews were carried into Babylonian captivity.

Though the prophets were called by God to convey a dreadful message, they were also aware that wrath and judgment expressed only one side of God's nature. Habakkuk eloquently reminded the Holy One "in wrath [to] remember mercy" (Hab. 3:2). In the book of Zephaniah, God does remember, for He promises that He will purify and restore the faithful remnant (3:9). He assures this humbled people that no one will make them afraid again, for He has cast out their enemy (3:13, 15).

Zephaniah ends with God's tender promise that He will gather all those who have been driven out and will give them fame and praise among all the people of the earth (3:20).

(Spirit Filled Life Bible's Introduction to Zephaniah, Mary LaVonne Phillips)

Zephaniah 1:1-18

When the people of God make themselves like the heathen in practice, it is but just that God should deal with them as He does with the heathen adversaries of His majesty. The instruments of sin, and the occasions of stumbling, shall finally be destroyed "with the wicked" themselves (v. 3). Notwithstanding all the zealous efforts of the pious King Josiah, there still was a "remnant of Baal" (v. 4) in Jerusalem and Judah. Many also thought to make a compromise with conscience, by combining homage to Jehovah with homage to Malcham (v. 5). But such a combination of opposite lords is impossible, and they who make the attempt only deceive themselves, not God. So now, whosoever thinks to serve the King of heaven, and yet gives his heart to covetousness, which is idolatry, or to the pleasures of sin, which are the baits of the prince of this world, is offering to God the mock show of worship, while the substance of his devotion is rendered to Satan. For what communion hath light with darkness? and what agreement hath Christ with Belial?

Not only those who have positively "turned back from the Lord" (v. 6), but also "those that have not sought the Lord, nor enquired after Him," shall incur His wrath in the day of judgment. To go back from God is virtually to join the adversaries of God. There can be no neutrality. "He that is not with me," saith the Lord Jesus, "is against me" (Matt. 22:30). Once that any give Satan half their heart, they virtually give him it all. The Lord must have all, or else He will have none.

Many now murmur against God's dealings, or unbelievably deny His active interposition in the government of the world. But all such must "hold their peace at the presence of the Lord God," in "the day of the Lord" (v. 7), when He shall "bid" His ministers of vengeance to slay the wicked, as sacrificial victims to His justice (v. 8). Alike "princes," and their unscrupulous minions, "who fill their masters' houses with violence and deceit," shall perish (v. 9). Mercantile gains and loads of "silver" cannot deliver men "in the day of the Lord's wrath" (vv. 11, 18).

Men flatter themselves that their secret faults shall not come under the cognizance of the coming Judge. But He will "search" the hidden things of darkness with the "candles," (v. 12) of His word, His Spirit, and "the spirit of man," which is "the candle of the Lord, searching all the inward parts of the belly" (Prov. 20:27). Their own conscience, and the manifestation of the Lord in glory, will then convict the men who now "say in their heart, The Lord will not do good, neither will He do evil." Meantime, the practical disbelief of the judgment is one of the most successful devices of Satan, whereby he deceives souls so as to become "settled on their lees," secure and at ease, though still unreconciled to God. Let all, as the best preservative against such snares of the evil one, ever keep in mind that "the great day of the Lord is near, and hasteth greatly" (v. 14).

They who will not regard "the voice of the day of the Lord's" visitation in mercy shall hear, with anguish and terror unutterable, the sound of the last trumpet. No might can save the guilty then. "The mighty man shall cry there bitterly." The transgressors, "like blind men" (v. 17), shall see no way of escape, because they have sinned against the Lord, not merely against His justice, but against His love and mercy. "The fire of His jealousy" shall make a "complete end," and that an awfully "sudden" one, of all that are of this world, impenitent, unbelieving, and therefore unreconciled to God.

(Bible Commentary, Jamieson, Fausset & Brown)

Of what dreadful day does Zephaniah warn Jerusalem and what events will happen before the prophecy is fulfilled?

Gen. 12:2-3 Isa. 2:10-22 Joel 1:13-15 Rom. 11:25-27 2 Tim. 3:1-7 2 Pet. 3:1-18 Rev. 19:17-19

Zephaniah 2:1-15

National repentance is the only sure safeguard against national overthrow. Without it a people cannot be in favor with God. Even Israel, His elect nation, became for a time, through want of it, a "nation not desired" (v. 1).

The soul is like the "chaff" (v. 2), soon dissipated by the storms of carnal desire, and therefore needs to "gather itself together" by self-examination and earnest seeking after God, "before the day" for repentance pass, and with it the unconverted, "as the chaff, pass away" through "the fierce anger of the Lord." Whereas "the wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek after God" (Ps.10:4), even under chastisements, "the meek of the earth" bend humbly to the chastening of their Heavenly Father, and in patient trust and hope "seek, the Lord," not only in outward ordinances, but in the active exercise of "judgment, righteousness, and meekness" (v. 3). Therefore, whereas to the eye of sense no means of escape in the general calamity are apparent, yet God Himself will be their hiding-place in the day of His anger against the world.

The punishment, "desolation," and "rooting up" of others for sin (v. 4), is the strongest reason why we should repent, if we be as yet unconverted, or persevere in faith, if converted. Prayer is the best way alike to obtain and to maintain spiritual life. The present is the time for prayer, while still God waits to be gracious, and before the day of life, and with it the day of grace, be past. Woe be to the people who "have the word of the Lord against" them! (v. 5) For what then can be for them? Let all beware of provoking God to withdraw His Spirit from them. For if God once cease to strive with them in mercy, He will contend with them in judgment, and then nothing but utter destruction is before them. The fall of Judah's

foes (v. 7) is the signal for the restoration of the elect "remnant of Judah." For though He has long visited His elect nation in displeasure, yet, as being; "the Lord *their* God," He "shall visit them" in loving-kindnesses, "and turn away their captivity." This is the comfort of all the people of God of every nation, that their chastisements are comparatively "for a small moment," whereas God's promise to them finally is, "With everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the Lord thy Redeemer" (Isa. 54:8).

"Revilings" against the people of God (v. 8) only bring ten-fold reproach on the reviler at last. Pride, haughtiness, and injustice are peculiarly offensive before the great God. When the enemy "magnifies himself against" the possessions and against "the people" of God, it is against "the Lord of hosts" (v. 10) that he really magnifies himself. And God will reckon with the transgressor accordingly. "This shall they have for their pride," saith God.

The ungodly fancy that, because they escape immediate punishment, God takes no cognizance of their crimes: and believers at times are cast down because of the delay in the vindication of their cause; but God assures the former, to their confusion, and the latter, to their unspeakable comfort, "I have heard" (v. 8), I know it all. Let this be our stimulus to a holy walk, and to patient endurance unto the end.

All the "terrible" destructions of the God-forgetting world-kings, once so flourishing, are the necessary preparations for the setting up of the kingdom of God and His Christ. When God hath turned into "desolation," not only Nineveh and Babylon, but also their last spiritual antitype, "the rejoicing city, that dwelt carelessly, that said in her heart, I am, and there is none besides me" (v. 15), the Lord shall make "the kingdoms of this world the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ" (Rev. 21:15), and "men shall worship Him, every one from his place, even all the isles of the heathen" (v. 11). May that glorious kingdom soon come, and to this end may every obstacle in its way be speedily removed!

(Bible Commentary, Jamieson, Fausset & Brown)

What hope is there for meek and lowly souls when judgment comes?

Zeph. 2:3

What was the fate of Nineveh and what vice lay at the root of her evil-doing?

Zephaniah 3:1-20

Filthiness of heart and *oppression* in practice entail a heritage of "woe." Such was the state of Jerusalem (v. 1). Nor would she profit even by "correction" (v. 2). Disobedience to "the voice" of the Lord, distrust of His word, were her great sins, and the source of all her other transgressions. No wonder, then, that she "drew not near to her God." Let us avoid her sins, as we would escape her punishment. Let us "draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to us" (Jas. 4:8).

The presence of the "just Lord in the midst" of an apostate people (v. 5), so far from saving them from wrath, only brings it the nearer to them. Where the "prince," "judges," and "nobles" are rapacious (destructive and vicious), and God's ministers are 'light and treacherous,' God must indicate His own righteousness by punishing the guilty.

God's "unfailing" patience in "bringing His judgment to light," sparing no pains to lead His people from iniquity to repentance, might be supposed to be enough to melt the hardest heart. "But the unjust knoweth no shame" (v. 5). Had Jerusalem taken warning by the judgments of God on foreign nations (vv. 6, 7), and on the kingdom of the ten tribes, her "dwelling" would not have been "cut off." But she was at as much pains to "corrupt" and destroy herself as God was at to reform and save her. So the fatal stroke, long deferred by the forbearance of God, at last fell. Let us take warning by her example, and learn that outward privileges, abused and slighted, only increase men's condemnation.

The effect of the judgments of God will at last be, that the elect remnant will be moved by the Spirit of God to "wait upon Jehovah" (v. 8). Then shall He pour out "the fire of His jealousy" on the "assembled" enemies of His people. He "will be jealous for His land, and pity His people" (Joel 2:18). And the result of the fearful punishment of the God-opposed nations shall be, that "the Lord will turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord, to serve Him with one consent" (v. 9). *Lips* polluted with sin, blasphemy, and idolatry heretofore, shall then be purified by the Spirit of God, and through the blood of Jesus Christ. The nations that remain after God's judgments on the rebels shall, with conjoint effort, putting as it were all *shoulders* together, serve Him. Disunion of heart, indicated by the Babel-confusion of tongues, shall cease; and all "with one mind and one mouth shall glorify God" (Rom. 15:6). The nations shall gladly bring as an "offering" to the Lord "His dispersed" people from all the distant regions wherein they are now scattered (v. 10).

The characteristics given of those who shall share in that coming blessedness are such as are common to all the true people of God, of every age and every country. God will exclude all boasting. They that pride themselves on outward spiritual privileges, as the Jews of old "rejoiced in their" temple on God's holy mountain, which was their "pride," shall at last be taken away "out of the midst" of the true Israel. The spiritually "poor," who have no self-sufficiency or haughtiness, who are "an afflicted people" as their Lord was "afflicted" (Isa. 53:4), and who "trust in the name of the Lord" alone (v. 12), shall be "left" as heirs of the coming glory and blessedness. Let us see that we have the marks of the saved "remnant of Israel," "not doing iniquity, nor speaking lies" (v. 13); being "Israelites indeed, in whom is no guile" (John 1:47). Let us

search our motives, that there be no latent hypocrisy or self-deceit, "no deceitful tongue found in our mouth." Then, shall the Lord at His coming cause us to "feed and lie down" (v. 13) in heavenly pastures, as His sheep, "in whose mouth is found no guile" and who "are without fault before the throne of God" (Rev. 14:5).

The true Israel may well "be glad and rejoice with all the heart" (v. 14), in anticipation of the day when the Lord shall have "cast out her enemy," Satan, and Satan's representative, Antichrist, and when she "shall not see evil any more" (v. 15). Though the promise belongs to the literal Israel, it also belongs to the spiritual. And it should cause the fearful believer to take courage, and "lift up the hands that hang down" (v. 16; Heb. 12:12). Now, it is true, "sorrow" and "reproach" (v. 18) are often the portion of God's people; but all this is coming to a glorious end. Instead of their past "shame," God "will make them a name and a praise among all people" (v. 20). Instead of the mocking of enemies, and even at times the hiding of God's countenance, because of temporary backslidings, the true Israel shall experience in all its fulness the precious promise realized, "The Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; He will save, He will rejoice over thee with joy; He will rest in His love; He will joy over thee with singing" (v. 17).

(Bible Commentary, Jamieson, Fausset & Brown)

When God intends the restoration of Israel he prepares for their reformation and the revival of their virtue and piety; for this is God's method, first to make them holy and then to make them happy. (Matthew Henry) **Consider and comment on the song of rejoicing that breaks out at the end of this book in Zeph. 3:16-20.**