

8. Zephaniah 625 B.C.

The book of Zephaniah has three chapters. It is a Pre-Exilic Southern Kingdom book.

Author and Date

We know more about Zephaniah than most of the Minor Prophets. His name means “Hidden by Yahweh.” In verse 1, his ancestry is traced back four generations, unique among the prophets. He is the “*son of Cush, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah.*” Therefore, he was the great-great-grandson of Hezekiah, king of Judah, and therefore of a high social standing. So he was a distant relative of King Josiah, and he prophesied “*in the days of King Josiah*” [640-609 B.C.]

Zephaniah probably participated in the revival of Josiah, but after the revival had begun. For example, Josiah’s work in cutting off Baal worship (1:4) had already happened. Zephaniah probably joined the revival after Hilkiah found the book of the Law because Zephaniah has numerous references to the Law.

Background

Before Josiah’s reign, Manasseh (695-642) and Manasseh’s son Amon (642-640) had introduced wicked practices into Judah. They built altars to Baal and worshiped the sun, moon, and stars. Child sacrifice and astrology prospered (2 Kings 21:7). At age 8, Josiah succeeded Amon. At age 16, Josiah began to seek after the God of his forefather David. In 628, Josiah started a reform movement in which much of the idolatry was purged from Jerusalem and Judah. Then in the 18th year of Josiah’s reign (622), a copy of the Law was discovered (2 Kings 22:3-8). This reform, however, was superficial. While worship of Yahweh was reestablished, idolatry was not entirely removed. Both Zephaniah and Jeremiah prophesied about a coming judgment because Josiah’s reform still went unheeded.

Purpose

“The day of the Lord” is an expression used more frequently in this prophecy (24 times) than in any other Old Testament book. Eschatologically, it begins with the upcoming seven-year Tribulation. Essentially, it is any day when God is hands-on in control of human affairs. It is a day of God’s judgment and/or blessing. The purpose of the book is to tell the people of Judah of the impending judgment of God on the people of Judah for their disobedience, being unresponsive to the reforms commanded by King Josiah. Though the preservation of the true remnant is assured by the mercies of the covenant-keeping God, no prophet has made the picture of the day of the Lord more vivid.

Key Verse

It will come about at that time that I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the men who are stagnant in spirit, who say in their hearts, “The LORD will not do good or evil!” (1:12).

Theme

Subject: Individuals, not just a governing authority, who call for reform

Complement: are subject to the judgment of God

Outline

The Author and the Times of the Book of Zephaniah (1:1)

The Judgment of the Day of the Lord (1:2–3:8)

The Blessings of the Day of the Lord (3:9-20)

Commentary

The Author and the Times of the Book of Zephaniah (1:1)

“The word of the Lord which came to Zephaniah...” This introductory statement is also used by Hosea, Joel, and Micah at the beginnings of their books. The point is, God’s actual words, not a feeling or a mystical experience, are the source of the message, *which came to Zephaniah*.

The Judgment of the Day of the Lord (1:2–3:8)

- Judgment on all the earth (1:2-3)
- Judgment on Judah (1:4–2:3)
- The objects of judgment (1:4-13)
- The idolaters (1:4-7)
- The princes (1:8)
- The oppressors (1:9)
- The merchants (1:10-11)
- The indifferent (1:12-13)
- The description of judgment (1:14-18)
- The nearness (1:14a)
- The horror (1:14b-18)
- The deterrent to judgment (2:1-3)
- A summons to the nation: Repent (2:1-2)
- A summons to the humble (2:3)
- Judgment on the surrounding nations (2:4-15)
- On Philistia (2:4-7)
- On Moab and Ammon (2:8-11)
- On Ethiopia (2:12)
- On Assyria (2:13-15)
- Judgment on Jerusalem (3:1-8)
- The prophet’s indictment (3:1-5)
- The Lord’s judgment (3:6-8)

Verses 1:2-3, *“I will completely remove all things from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD. “I will remove man and beast; I will remove the birds of the sky and the fish of the sea, and the ruins along with the wicked; and I will cut off man from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD.*

With this shocking abrupt beginning, Zephaniah predicts the complete destruction of all life on earth. It reminds us of Genesis 6:7 before the Genesis Flood when, *The LORD said, “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky.”* Isaiah also said, *“The Lord will empty the earth and make it desolate”*

(Isaiah 24:1-6, 19-23), and Peter said, “*the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat*” (2 Peter 3:10). This sounds like a prediction of the final destruction of the earth before the *New Heaven and New Earth* (Revelation 21:1).

Verse 12, “*It will come about at that time that I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the men who are stagnant [literally, to get thick or congeal] in spirit, who say in their hearts, ‘The LORD will not do good or evil!’*” The judgment on Jerusalem includes a search of the city, as with lamps, for people who say that the Lord is not going to do anything. God’s judgment always includes a focus on the individuals, both good and evil, including those *who are stagnant* [thick, settled, or congealed] *in spirit*.

Verse 2:3, *Seek the LORD, all you humble of the earth who have carried out His ordinances; seek righteousness, seek humility. Perhaps you will be hidden in the day of the LORD’S anger.* Believers are described as those who seek after the Word of God and His righteousness with humility [seeing their value as dependent upon the Lord]. They are called upon to *seek the Lord*. The Babylonian invasion took the lives of many Jews, but others were saved and exiled to Babylon (2 Kings 24:14-16). The Lord protected His chosen remnant.

Verse 5, *Woe to the inhabitants of the seacoast, the nation of the Cherethites! The word of the LORD is against you, O Canaan, land of the Philistines.* Zephaniah specifically includes the names the cities and the land of the Philistines for judgment. It is interesting that they are called *the nation of the Cherethites* because this means a people who have their roots in Crete, which tells us where the Philistines came from because they are not Canaanites.

Verses 12-13, *You also, O Ethiopians, will be slain by My sword. and He will stretch out His hand against the north and destroy Assyria, and He will make Nineveh a desolation.* As Zephaniah names the destruction of the nations surrounding Judah, he also includes the Ethiopians the furthest major nation to the south, and Nineveh the farthest major power who would invade from the north. This is a prediction in 625 of an invasion that would happen 13 years later in 612.

Verses 3:1-2, *Woe to her [Jerusalem] who is rebellious and defiled, the tyrannical city! She heeded no voice, she accepted no instruction. She did not trust in the LORD, she did not draw near to her God.* After announcing judgment on the nations that surround Judah and their capitol cities, Zephaniah turns his attention to Jerusalem, who did not follow the reforms of Josiah. The difference between Jerusalem and her neighbors is Jerusalem had been given revelation from God, but *She heeded no voice, she accepted no instruction.*

Verse 7, *I said, “Surely you will revere [literally, fear] Me, accept instruction. So her dwelling will not be cut off according to all that I have appointed [or punishment I have appointed] concerning her.” But they were eager to corrupt all their deeds.* The heart of God is that He be feared and His instruction obeyed as a way to escape His judgments.

The Blessings of the Day of the Lord (3:9-20)

- The restoration of nations (3:9)
- The restoration of Israel (3:10-20)
 - Israel’s purification (3:10-13)

- Israel’s joy (3:14)
- Israel’s King (3:15-17)
- Israel’s regathering (3:18-20)

The Restoration of Nations (3:9)

“For then I will give to the peoples purified lips, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD,

to serve Him shoulder to shoulder.” Zephaniah is talking about the believing remnant of the 12 tribes of Israel who have been gathered to the Land.

An Application: This would be a great goal for any Christian organization or assembly of believers: purified lips, calling on the name of the Lord, serving Him shoulder-to-shoulder.

The Restoration of Israel (3:10-20)

Verse 12, *“But I will leave among you a humble and lowly people, and they will take refuge in the name of the LORD.”* God’s people in the Millennial Kingdom will not be a proud, arrogant people. They will be humble [dependent on God] and lowly (or *poor*) because their victory did not come from their own strength but from the Lord. The same is true of our spiritual victory which came from the cross of Christ.

An Application: Believers should always be humble and lowly.

Verse 20, *“At that time I will bring you in, even at the time when I gather you together; indeed, I will give you renown and praise among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes,”* says the LORD. In the Millennium, Israel will possess her Land as God promised (Genesis 12:1-7; 13:14-17; 15:7-21; 17:7-8), and the Messiah, Israel’s King, will establish His kingdom and will reign over Israel and all the earth (2 Samuel 7:16; Psalm 89:3-4; Isaiah 9:6-7; Daniel 7:27; Zephaniah 3:15).

An Application

There are two ways people tend to assess their life-situation: collectively and individually. The book of Zephaniah warns us about only or primarily seeing ourselves collectively, as say: Republicans, Democrats, or in terms of Critical Theory [there are two groups of people, the oppressors and the oppressed] or identities as part of a political or social cause. We are primarily individuals who will face the judgment of God, the Day of the Lord.