

Text: The Book of Zephaniah, 1:1-3:20

Title: Zephaniah in One Message

Truth: Classic prophetic pattern: Judgment coming, but salvation later.

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Introduction

Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of Josiah, the king of the southern kingdom of Judah. This locates his ministry between 640 and 609 B.C. It can be more precisely placed because it describes conditions that coordinate with the early period of Josiah's reign. This was before the book of the Law was found when Josiah was 26 years old (2 Kings 22:8-20, 622 B.C.) and reforms were undertaken. We suppose therefore that Zephaniah prophesied somewhere around 640 and 620 B.C.

The man Zephaniah was a prophet with *royal* lineage. He was a great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah (Hezekiah – Amariah – Gedaliah – Cushi – Zephaniah). This is fairly unique in Israel's history. King David was a prophet too (Acts 2:30), and Solomon after a fashion. But the royals were not usually prophets (especially the evil ones). Jesus, of course, will be King, and Prophet, besides being Priest.

After Hezekiah, a good king, Judah suffered the leadership of Manasseh and Amon, and the nation was plunged into sin and idolatry. The die was cast, and God's judgment was going to come, but it was forestalled by Josiah's tender heart (2 Kings 22:19-20, 2 Chronicles 34:27-28).

In the broader picture of world history, power is shifting from the Assyrian empire to the north and east into the hands of the Babylonians to the farther east. Nabopolassar was king and Nebuchadnezzar shortly followed to the throne. Just a few years after Josiah died, Nebuchadnezzar defeated Israel and took Daniel and friends to Babylon (605 B.C.) The historical context, therefore, is that Judah is in its last days as its own kingdom. God's judgment is about to fall. The northern kingdom of Israel is already gone.

The text is challenging because of the theme of the Day of the Lord. Will it be fulfilled soon or in the far future?

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I. Judgment on Judah and Call to Repent, 1:2-2:3

- A. The opening words of chapter 1 tell us that in judgment, God will utterly consume everything from the land. There was a near-term judgment that would effectively do just this (between 605-587 B.C.). The language of 1:2-3 speaks of the thorough, all-encompassing nature of God's judgment that was about to occur under the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. This refers to the land of Judah, not to the entire earth. God's purpose was to eliminate idolatry from the place where He had purposed to set his name. The nation got into Baal worship, with priests for that purpose, and worshipped the heavenly bodies, and the worship of Milcom. The people had turned away from God.
- B. But that is not the end of the story of God's judgment. Just because we talk about grace in the church age does not mean judgment is a thing of the past. There is a future "edition" of this judgment that 2 Peter 3:10 talks about: another judgment that will dissolve the

elements and put our current residence out of existence. As sure as you are here today, this will happen.

And yet we live today as if it is *not* going to happen. Many carry on as if how they live does not matter to God, that God is not watching, that God does not exist or does not care or is incapable of doing anything good or evil (1:12). They make a covenant with death (Isaiah 28:15-18), so to speak, thinking death will not hurt them when it comes. But this is not true.

We who know God sometimes get sidetracked, and materialism seduces us, and our minds deceive us, and we put more and more resources (energy, time, money) into things that are going to burn up. Peter asks the question that we ask again right now: “since all this is going to dissolve, what sort of person should we be like?” (2 Peter 3:11).

- C. God condemns syncretism (1:5). The heart of syncretism is that people do rituals to seem as if they are worshipping the true God, but they also swear oaths and do rituals for other gods at the same time. Many in Judah worshipped Milcom (also spelled Malcam). This was an Ammonite god, and the name derives from the word *king* followed by the Hebrew suffix for *their*, so “their king.” It is similar in name to Molech, also derived from the word for *king*, which was a Canaanite god whose worship consisted of child sacrifice. These idols were worshipped differently, so probably not like Zeus/Jupiter, local names for basically the same god. Baal is in with that bunch as well since his name means “lord.” The details are of little consequence to us since it is all idolatry and all completely condemned by God. It all amounts to Satan worship no matter what name the so-called “gods” take.

By the way, would you notice that the object of their worship was their king (“Milcom”) and lord (“Baal”)? **What you worship is your king.** God is the only true object of worship, and our only true King. He is our only Lord. Idolaters have other lords (like Baal) and other kings (like Milcom). If you refuse to have Jesus as your Lord, then may I ask just who *is* your lord? And if your lord is not Jesus, then how could I conclude anything other than that you are an idolator?

- D. Obviously if someone is steeped in idolatry, they are not going to seek the Lord nor follow Him (1:6). Their idolatry manifested itself in all kinds of pagan practices, including “leaping over the threshold” (v. 9). Compare this to 1 Samuel 5:1-5, where the pagan priests did not tread on the threshold of Dagon out of a kind of superstitious reverence. (Don’t step on the crack in the sidewalk!) There is no place for superstition in the church, much less idolatry.
- E. 1:7 and 14 say that the Day of the Lord is at hand. I find it difficult to avoid the conclusion that this DOL is near-term, in the period 605 to 587 B.C. There is another Day of the Lord which is farther off and still future to us in 2023. The two events are very similar, coming as they do from the same Lord, and with similar judgments, but in very different times.
- F. Wealth will not help one face or avoid God’s judgment (1:18).
- G. The promise of impending judgment concludes with a call to repent in 2:1-3. Notice how God extends an offer of hope to those who repent: *before* the decree is issue; *before* the Lord’s fierce anger comes upon you, *before* the day of the Lord’s anger. The word *before* is repeated three times, indicating that there is an important timing issue regarding judgment. Judah is told to seek God, to turn to Him in a timely fashion so that they can be hidden from the Lord’s wrath.

The door is open for *you* to be cleansed too, *before* the Lord’s wrath falls upon the earth in that final and calamitous day of the Lord’s judgment, *before* you die, *before* you face final judgment. Today is the day of salvation. Return to God as your Lord and king now, not only because of what we read in chapter 1, but also because all the other nations are going to face similar judgment. There is no place on earth for you to escape.

II. Judgment on Nations, 2:4-15

Bible texts like this have particular strength in times like we live in when the present-day nation of Israel finds itself under attack from nations to the west and south and north.

A. The cities of Philistia to the west are called out as facing doom. These cities were Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, and Ekron. (The other ancient city of the Philistine pentapolis was Gath.)

The Cherethites were connected to the Philistines but also farther to the west. The reference to “seacoast” indicates they were Mediterranean types, perhaps from the islands of that great sea.

The above lands will be overtaken by God on behalf of Judah.

B. God calls out Moab and Ammon to the east for their insults and threats against Judah. God is going to flatten them like Sodom and Gomorrah. Judah shall take over those territories as well and the people who remain of those nations will worship the true God.

C. Ethiopia to the south is included in a very brief statement of judgment (2:12). I wondered if this would be at the hands of the Babylonians. Around 605 B.C., the Babylonians did defeat Egypt and Pharaoh Necho at the battle of Carchemish near the Euphrates River (Jeremiah 46:1-24). This battle marked the complete end of the Assyrian empire, the full rise of the Babylonian power, and the end of Egyptian domination in the ancient near east.

In Ezekiel 30:24-25 God explains how He will use the king of Babylon to defeat Pharaoh of Egypt, but Ezekiel prophesied after 605 B.C., starting after 597 B.C. So, his prophecy must refer to some later event.

In the later period of history around Esther’s time in the Persian empire, King Ahasuerus ruled over Ethiopia (Esther 1:1). Historians tell us that Babylon did not defeat Egypt at this later time. They did battle one another in 601 B.C., but Egypt prevailed. In 568 B.C. Babylon again invaded Egypt in accord with the prophecy of Jeremiah 43:8-13. Obviously, Egypt did not entirely disappear after this point. In the end, I cannot presently say with certainty *who* defeated Ethiopia, but I know *that* it was done.

D. Assyria and her capital Nineveh to the north are also in the crosshairs of God’s judgment. This happened in 612 B.C. when Babylon defeated Nineveh at the Battle of Nineveh. Further battles wiped out Assyria entirely in 609 B.C. and at Carchemish in 605 B.C. (see note above). It is important to note that the Assyrian

capital city was formerly characterized by rejoicing and pride (2:15) and for this God severely judged her.

III. Jerusalem's Evil, 3:1-7

A. Chapter 3 opens with a section of charges against Judah concerning her sins against God. Here is a laundry list:

1. Disobeys God's voice.
2. Refuses correction.
3. Does not trust the Lord.
4. Will not draw near to God.

Pause and ask yourself: Do any of these character traits mark your life? When another Christian or a pastor, spouse or child, or the Bible itself, confronts you about sin like an Old Testament prophet did to Judah and Israel, how do you respond? With anger? Defensiveness? Retreat into silence? Attack the messenger? Deflect? Make excuses? Or do you obey, accept correction, trust the Lord, and draw near to God?

5. One final charge against the southern kingdom: its leadership is corrupt (princes, judges, prophets, priests, v. 3-4). Notice the thorough evil of the society: princes, judges (3:3), prophets, priests (3:4), and from time to time the kings, like Manasseh.

B. Despite the fact that God cut off many nations for their evils (v. 6), Judah still did all the same kinds of things. God uses an expression in v. 7 that indicates He was "certain" that they would fear Him and receive instruction and avoid being cut off. The extent of their evil was surprising even to the Lord (after an anthropomorphic manner of speaking). After everything He did for them, they persisted in their evil works. There was no mystery about God's requirements, nor about His justice. By way of illustration, once a younger sibling sees the trouble that the older sibling gets into, you would *think* that the younger one would learn. But not in this case. Instead, Judah got up early in the morning, so to speak, and did bad things all day.

C. God gives us some doctrine to chew on in verse 5. God is righteous. He does no unrighteousness. Whatever He does in response to their sin is not itself a sin. If punishing evil were itself evil, how could God implement justice? Is God unjust who inflicts wrath? (I speak as a man!) (Romans 3:5).

- D. The unjust are the opposite of all that, and in addition they know no shame. Sinful behavior, even lewd, debased, debauched, perverted behavior today does not cause people to be ashamed. Instead, they take their shame and turn it into pride.

IV. Future Judgment and Blessing, 3:8-20

- A. The Lord now turns His focus to a far future judgment after which there will be a massive gathering of the nations followed by salvation for the nations. First God will devour the earth with His jealousy. I read here a note of severity on idolatry.
- B. After the judgment, there will be a divine restoration of the nations, including Israel (3:9). This will result in the nations calling on the Lord and serving Him, as they should have done all along.

Note this: The reference to pure language in 3:9 does not refer to a single, superior language taking over the world. Hebrew teachers are fond of using this verse to say that in heaven we all will be speaking the pure tongue of Hebrew! That is a fun bit of eisegesis, but faithful exegesis teaches us that the restoration of pure language refers to cleansing from sin and the change of heart that is necessary to make the overflow of the heart bring forth pure speech (Matt. 12:34, 15:18; Luke 6:45; Rom. 10:10, Prov. 16:23; Psalm 19:14).

Three verses written by another prophet, *Hosea*, use the word *mouth*, and one of them is relevant here: 2:17 speaks about taking away the names of Baals from the mouths of the Jews. If a person uses pure speech, they speak of godly things, and do not use the names of false gods in their worship. The nations will no longer heap insults, reproaches, and arrogant threats upon Israel. These pure-speech people give evidence therefore of regeneration, which accomplishes the circumcision of the heart (Deut. 10:16, 30:6, Jer. 4:4, Rom. 2:29), and the circumcision of the lips as well, for again out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. A saved heart will result in saved speech and service to God.

- B. Israel will be gathered again (3:10-13). They will bring proper offerings; they will not be shamed for their deeds, because their past will be forgiven, and their present behavior will be holy. They

will not be haughty as they once were, but rather be meek and humble, trusting in the Lord. They will not tell lies nor deceit. They will experience peace all around.

- C. God through Zephaniah promises the presence of the King, 3:14-20. This section pictures the far future in which the Lord is installed as King over the nation and the people are strengthened by His presence. Those who are presently burdened by the sin of their surroundings are the type of people God will raise up, gather, bless, and give worldwide notoriety (3:18-19).

The text speaks of the future time when Israel can sing and be glad and rejoice with all their hearts because God will have forgiven them and removed their enemies. This is the fulfillment of Deut. 26:19—the exaltation of Israel.

Conclusion

All the goodness at the end of the prophecy is tied to this truth: “the LORD your God in your midst.” The repeated refrain throughout Scripture: God will be their God, and they will be His people. When God is near, there is no reason to fear or be weak. He will save and quiet you and rejoice over you with gladness and singing. This is true across the ages and will be the experience of all believers.

MAP

Other Notable Truths

- 1:12 suggests an attitude that God is irrelevant to the affairs of the day; that He will not care either way what happens. How false! Notice the use of the term “lamps” which indicates a thorough search for these types of people. They will not escape!
- Notice the “I will” statements of chapter 1 (2, 3 [3x], 4 [2x], 8, 9, 12, 17) and more in chapters 2 and 3. No uncertainty here!
- Notice that the book initially describes the Day of the Lord as a period of great darkness (1:15). That is followed by great light.
- Note 2:8, 10 where reasons are given for the destruction of the surrounding nations (pride, reproach, and threats against God’s people Israel). 1:17 gives an additional reason, this for the judgment upon Judah and Jerusalem: sin.