

Bible Study Guide– Book of Zephaniah

Saturday, November 3, 2012

Background on Zephaniah

In Zephaniah 1:1, the author introduces himself as “Zephaniah son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah.” Among the prophets, this is a unique introduction with its long list of fathers back to Zephaniah’s great-great grandfather, Hezekiah. So why stop with Hezekiah? Most likely, the prophet wanted to highlight his royal lineage as a descendant of one of Judah’s good kings. The reference to “this place” in Zephaniah 1:4 indicates that he prophesied in Jerusalem, while his many references to temple worship display a strong familiarity with Israel’s religious culture. All these factors paint the picture of a man who was at the center of Judah’s political and religious world, a man whose close proximity to those in power would have given his shocking message an even greater impact.

Message of Zephaniah

This book mentions the day of the Lord more than does any other book in the Old Testament, clarifying the picture of Judah’s fall to Babylon and the eventual judgment and restoration of all humanity in the future. In this case, it refers primarily to God’s impending time of judgment on the nation of Judah. Zephaniah saw in the day of the Lord the destruction of his country, his neighbors, and eventually the whole earth (Zephaniah 1:2, 4; 2:10). Zephaniah wrote that the day of the Lord was near (1:14), that it would be a time a wrath (1:15), that it would come as judgment on sin (1:17), and that ultimately it would result in the blessing of God’s presence among His people (3:17).

Like the writings of many of the prophets, the book of Zephaniah follows a pattern of judgment on all people for their sin followed by the restoration of God’s chosen people. Zephaniah’s primary target for God’s message of judgment, the nation of Judah, had fallen into grievous sin under the reign of their king, Manasseh. Zephaniah’s prophecy shouted out for godliness and purity in a nation sinful to its core. The people of Judah had long since turned their backs on God, not only in their personal lives but also in their worship. This reflected the depth of their sin and the deep need for God’s people to be purged on their path to restoration.

Timeline of Zephaniah

The book tells us that Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of Josiah, the king of Judah from 640 to 609 BC (Zephaniah 1:1). We can begin to pinpoint exactly when Zephaniah prophesied by accounting for a few details in the text. First, in 2:13 the prophet predicted the fall of Nineveh, an event which occurred in 612 BC. Further, Zephaniah made frequent quotations from the Law (for example, compare 1:13 to Deuteronomy 28:30, 39), a document that remained lost in Judah for much of Josiah’s reign. Therefore, Zephaniah more than likely prophesied in the latter part of Josiah’s rule, after the king discovered the scrolls of the Law in 622 BC (2 Chronicles 34:3–7).

This all means that Zephaniah grew up under the reign of Josiah's predecessors: Josiah's grandfather, the evil king Manasseh, and Manasseh's son, the young and evil Amon. As a young man, the prophet-to-be would have been surrounded by the trappings of idolatry, child sacrifice, and unjust killings—strong influences on a young mind (2 Kings 21:16; 2 Chronicles 33:1–10). But Zephaniah grew into a man of God, able to stand before the people and proclaim God's message of judgment and hope to a people that had gone astray.

Application of Zephaniah's Message For Today

Those living in Judah had turned the worship of God into a fiasco. Not only had they built their own places of worship to revere other gods (called "high places" in the Old Testament), but they had begun to desecrate the temple, which at that time was the dwelling place of God (Zephaniah 1:9).

As modern-day believers in Christ, we, too, make a mockery of worship when we live in open sin. Do you come before the Lord with a false face, week in and week out, looking the part without acting it? Allow Zephaniah to remind you how seriously God takes your life and your relationship with Him. And if you have failed, remember the message of Zephaniah 3—God is always a God of restoration and hope.

******* Notes To Be Considered In Your Bible Study Of The Book Of Zephaniah *******

(Use Them Only As Thoughts; Not A Direct Translation Of God's Word)

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-kingdoms, 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 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)

Sources

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