

The Minor Prophets
Lesson 25: There's A Great Day Coming
(Zephaniah 1—2)

Introduction to Zephaniah:

- **Date Written:** Probably near the end of Zephaniah's ministry (640-621 BC), when King Josiah's great reforms began.
- **Purpose:** To shake the people of Judah out of their complacency and urge them to return to God.
- **Author:** Zephaniah. Believed to be the great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah. If he was, he was the only prophet of royal descent.
- **To whom written:** Judah and all nations.
- **Setting:** King Josiah of Judah was attempting to reverse the evil trends set by the two previous kings in Judah—Manasseh and Amon. Josiah was able to extend his family influence because there wasn't a strong super-power dominating the world at that time (Assyria was declining rapidly). Zephaniah's prophecy may have been the motivating factor in Josiah's reform. Zephaniah was a contemporary of Jeremiah.
- **The Christ of Zephaniah:** Jesus alluded to Zephaniah on two occasions (cf. Zeph. 1:3; Matt. 13:41 and cf. Zeph. 1:15; Matt. 24:29. Both passages about the day of the Lord are associated with Christ's Second Advent. Although the Messiah is not specifically mentioned in Zephaniah, it is clear that He is the One who will fulfill the great promises of 3:9-20.
- **The Key Verses:** "Seek ye the Lord, all ye meek of the earth, which have wrought his judgment; seek righteousness, seek meekness; it may be ye shall be hid in the day of the Lord's anger" (Zephaniah 2:3).
- **Theme:** The coming day of the Lord.

Introduction: When was the last time you sang a hymn about the future judgement of the world. We sing about heaven and the rejoicing and the celebration, but not about the judgment that will take place. Most modern hymnals don't contain songs about the day of the Lord, and you certainly won't find the phrase in your daily newspaper or weekly news magazine. For some, the closest they come to involving God in human events is when insurance policies mention "acts of God over which we have not control." But that is a far cry from Zephaniah's day of the Lord.

The day of the Lord is an important biblical concept that we must take seriously because it tells us where things are going and how they're going to end. During the day of the Lord, God will send tribulation to the world, judge the nations, save His people Israel, and then establish His righteous kingdom. God warns the world that judgment is coming, and it's foolish for anybody to be unprepared. The big question is "Where will you hide on that great day?" (See Zeph. 2:3).

In the first two chapters of his book, the prophet Zephaniah relates the day of the Lord to both the Jews and the Gentiles.

I. The Day of the Lord and the Jews (1:1—2:4)

You would expect the great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah to be living comfortably in Jerusalem, enjoying a life of ease. Instead, you find him ministering as God's prophet, which was a dangerous calling. His contemporary, Jeremiah, was arrested and put in a filthy cistern for admonishing the leaders of Judah to surrender to the Babylonians.

God had shown Zephaniah that judgment was coming upon Judah in the form of the Babylonian captivity, and the prophet had to share this message with the people. However, Babylon's invasion of Judah was but a feeble example of what would occur on that final day of the Lord, which would sweep over all the earth. Zephaniah opened his book by presenting *three graphic pictures of the day of the Lord*.

1. The first picture is that of a *devastating universal flood* (Zeph. 1:2-3).
 - a. The Hebrew word translated "consume" in the KJV means "to sweep away completely." The picture is that of total devastation of all that God created and is probably a reference to Noah's flood (Gen. 6:7; 7:4; 9:8 —10).
 - b. God gave man dominion over the fish, the fowl, and the beasts (1:28; Ps. 8:7-8), but man lost that dominion when Adam disobeyed God. However, through Jesus Christ, man's lost dominion will one day be restored (Heb. 2:5-9).
 - c. God will not only destroy His creation, but He will also destroy the idols that people worship—the "stumbling blocks" that offend the Lord (Ezek. 14:1-8). In Zephaniah's day, idolatry was rife in Judah, thanks to the evil influence of King Manasseh. When God stretches out His hand, it means that judgment is coming.
 - d. The prophet names two of the false gods that had captured the hearts of the people: Baal, the rain god of the Canaanites (Zeph. 1:4), and Malcoln (Milcom, Molech), the terrible god of the Ammonites (1 Kings 11:33; Amos 5:26). The people also worshipped the host of heaven (Deut. 4:19; Jer. 19:13; 32:29) and followed the godless example of the idolatrous priests ("Chemarim") in Zeph. 1:4.
 - e. These idolators may have claimed that they were still faithfully worshipping Jehovah, the true and living God, but Jehovah will not share worship or glory with any other god. In turning to idols, the people had turned away from the Lord and were not seeking Him or His blessing. They were guilty of the sins of commission (worshipping idols) and omission (ignoring the Lord).
 - f. During the Babylonian captivity, the Jews were cured of their fascination with foreign gods. Their temple was destroyed, their priesthood was scattered, and for seventy years they could not worship the way Moses had commanded them. When they were finally allowed to return to their land, one of the first things the Jews did was rebuild their temple and restore the sacrifices.
2. The second picture is that of a *great sacrifice* (vv. 7-13).
 - a. Since the Jewish people were accustomed to attending communal sacrifices (1 Sam. 9:11 ff.) this image was familiar to them. But this sacrifice would be different, for it was God who was hosting the sacrifice. His guest were the Babylonians and the sacrifices to be offered were the people of Judah! No wonder the prophet called for silence as he contemplated such an awesome event!

- b. You would expect the royal family and the religious leaders of the land to be honored guests at God's feast, but they are the ones to be sacrificed (Zeph.1:8-9)! God punishes them because they have abandoned His Word and adopted foreign practices, including wearing foreign clothes and worshipping foreign gods.
 - c. After the death of King Josiah in 609 BC, the last four kings of Judah were weak men who yielded to the policies of the pro-Egyptian bloc in the government. Instead of trusting the Lord, they trusted their allies, and this led to disaster.
 - d. Zephaniah must have been a resident in Jerusalem, for he knew the layout of the city (Zeph. 1:10-13). When the Babylonians, God's guests, would come to the sacrificial feast, they would enter the city, plunder it, and then destroy it. The Fish Gate was where the fishermen had their markets; the "second quarter" was where the rich people lived in their fashionable houses, built from the wages owed to poor laborers. "Maktesh" was the market and business district of the city where the merchants and bankers were located.
 - e. But the city would be destroyed, and the merchants' wealth confiscated. So thoroughly would the Babylonians do their work that they would search the city carefully and find even the people who were hiding.
 - f. The tragedy is that the invasion could have been avoided if the people had not been so complacent and indifferent toward what God was saying through His prophets. Judah was certain that the Lord was on their side because they were God's covenant people. They were like wine that sits undisturbed for a long time (Jer. 48:11; Amos 6:1) and congeals because it isn't poured from vessel to vessel to get rid of the bitter dregs.
 - g. The worship of false gods had polluted the nation, and the pure wine had become bitter.
3. The prophet's third picture of the day of the Lord is that of *a great battle* (Zeph. 1:14-18).
- a. The description is a vivid one: You can hear the cries of the captives and the shouts of the warriors; you can see thunderclouds of judgment and flashes of lightning; you behold the victims' blood poured out like cheap dust and their entrails like filth" (v. 17 NIV).
 - b. What a scene of destruction and carnage, and all because the people refused to submit to the word of the Lord. The fire of God's jealous zeal would consume everything, and no one would escape. Even the wealthy would not be able to ransom their lives, and the enemy would take away their ill-gotten riches.
 - c. What Zephaniah described here is but an illustration of what will happen in the end times when God's judgment falls on a wicked world, only that final day of the Lord will be far more terrible.
 - d. There will be cosmic disturbances that will affect the course of nature and cause people to cry out for a place to hide (Amos 5:18; 8:9; Joel 2:1-2, 10, 30-32; Rev. 6:12-17). Unless you know Jesus Christ as your own Savior, you will have no place to hide (Zeph. 2:3).

Therefore, the prophet closed this message with a plea for the people to repent of their sins and turn to the Lord for His forgiveness (vv. 1-3). Like the prophet Joel (2:16), he told them to call a solemn assembly and seek the Lord. Zephaniah especially called upon the godly remnant ("you meek of the earth") to pray and seek God's face, perhaps referring to the promise in 2 Chronicles 7:14.

Zephaniah and Jeremiah ministered during the same period in history, and both of them begged the rulers to trust God and turn from sin, but the kings, officials, and priests refused to obey. God would have rescued the nation at the last minute, but the leaders were insensitive to God's call and disobedient to His Word.

But the Lord did spare a godly remnant that stayed true to Him throughout the seventy years of captivity. They were a "company of the concerned" who became the nucleus of the restored nation when they returned to the land. In every period in history, it is the godly remnant that keeps the light burning when it seems as if the darkness is about to cover the earth. Today, God's needs a "company of the concerned," who will walk the narrow road regardless of what others may do, obey God's Word, and share His gospel with the lost. God is keeping His "book of remembrance" (Mal. 3:16-17), and you and I want our names in that book.

II. The Day of the Lord and the Gentiles (2:4—15)

God's judgment begins in the house of the Lord (1 Peter 4:17), which explains why Zephaniah started with the people of Judah; but now he explains how the day of the Lord will affect the Gentiles nations surrounding Judah. Though they were never given God's law as were the Jews (Ps. 147:19-20), the Gentiles are still responsible before God; for God has revealed Himself to them in creation and conscience (Rom. 1:18ff). Furthermore, these nations had not always treated the Jews kindly, and now the time had arrived for God to judge them.

The nations named may represent all the Gentiles, since these nations correspond to the four points of the compass: Assyria (north), Cush (south), Moab and Ammon (east), and Philistia (west). During the great day of the Lord, all the nations of the earth will taste the judgment of God.

a. Philistia (vv. 4-7).

- The Philistines were ancient enemies of the Jews (Gen. 20—21, 26). According to Amos 1:6-8, they took Jewish people captive from cities in southern Judah and sold them to other nations as slaves.
- But the time would come when their populous cities would be empty and their land desolate, a place for shepherds to feed their flocks.
- Their costal cities, made wealthy by vast shipping enterprises, would be destroyed by the enemy, and left in ruins. Nebuchadnezzar invaded Philistia and conquered it, and the only remnant of that great nation left today is "Palestine" which comes from "Philistine" (see Ezek. 25:15—28:26).
- However, the Jews will inhabit the land of the Philistines when the kingdom is established, and the Lord will enable them to live in peace.

b. Moab and Ammon (vv. 8-11).

- The Moabites and Ammonites originated from Lot's incestuous union with his two daughters (Gen. 19:30-38) and were hateful enemies of the Jews (Num. 22; Judg. 3, 10; 1 Sam. 11:1-5; 2 Sam. 12:26ff.). But these two arrogant nations would end up like Sodom and Gomorrah, wiped off the face of the earth (Gen 19; note the connection here with Lot).
- No more would they insult either the nation of Israel or the God of Israel. (See Amos 1:13—2:3 for further evidence of the wickedness and inhumanity of these two nations).

- Once again, the prophet promised that the Jews will occupy the land of their enemies when the kingdom is established.

c. Cush (v.12).

- This nation was in the upper Nile region. Some students think the reference includes Egypt, another long-time enemy of the Jews.
- It was Nebuchadnezzar and the swords of the Babylonian soldiers that conquered this ancient nation (Ezek. 30:4-5).

d. Assyria (vv. 13-15).

- Until the rise of Babylon, Assyria had been the dominant power, a ruthless people who were notorious for their pride and their cruelty to their enemies.
- A Century and a half before, God had sent the prophet Jonah to Assyria's capital city of Nineveh to warn them of God's judgment, and the people had repented, but successive generations went back to the old pagan ways, and Nineveh was destroyed in 612 BC.
- Within the next few years, the once great Assyrian Empire simply vanished from the face of the earth, and Zephaniah saw it coming.
- Since Nineveh thought it was an impregnable city, her citizens were careless and carefree when Zephaniah made his prediction, but God brought both the people and their city down into the dust of defeat (see the book of Nahum and Isaiah 45; 47:10).

Since the predictions about the destruction of these nations have all come true, isn't it reasonable to assume that Zephaniah's other predictions will also be fulfilled.

Before we leave Zephaniah 1 and 2, we must note some truths that apply to believers today.

- **First**, God judges His people when they deliberately disobey His law. His people are to be different from the other nations and not imitate their ways or worship their gods (Num. 23:9; Ex. 33:16; Deut. 32:8).
- **Second**, God's promise to Abraham still stands: Those who bless Israel, God will bless; those who curse Israel, God will curse (Gen. 12:1-3). The nations that have sinned against God by mistreating the Jews can expect Him to judge them.
- **Finally**, God's Word is true and will be fulfilled in its time. God's people can claim His promises and know that their God will be faithful, and God's enemies can be sure that His words of warning carry costly penalties. *"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God"* (Heb. 10:31).

Questions for Personal Reflections Or Group Discussion

1. The name Zephaniah means "Jehovah hides" or "Jehovah protects." What comfort does this give you? What mental picture do you have of this hiding place or protection?
2. Why do you think the day of the Lord isn't something most Christians sing about in church or think about very often?
3. What is our responsibility toward others concerning the day of the Lord? What should we say? In what setting should we say it?

4. If God were to clear out the idols in our culture today, what would they be and what might He do?
5. For what specific sins does Zephaniah announce judgment? Why does God hate those sins?
6. What emotions does Zephaniah 1 raise in you? Why?
7. What does Zephaniah plead for people to do in response to the foretelling of the awful judgment to come?
8. Why is humility so important in this situation?
9. Why can God hold the Gentile nations responsible when they never had the Law? What happened to these Gentile nations?
10. How should a godly remnant live in a world that disregards God? For instance, should they try to isolate themselves from the negative influences? What aspects of culture should they be involved in? What should they not be involved in?

Homework: Read **Zephaniah 3**. Study title, The Glory of The Kingdom