

Zephaniah

We turn next to the book of Zephaniah

What does the name Zephaniah mean?

- “the LORD hides” or “he whom the LORD hides”³⁰

The book of Zephaniah gives us more biographical information about the writer than any other prophet³¹

- As a matter of fact, Zephaniah traces his lineage back four generations to King Hezekiah

This would make him the great-great-grandson of king Hezekiah

- What a rich pedigree this king would have!

Verse one is clear about this lineage, “The word of the LORD which came to Zephaniah son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah son of Amon, king of Judah”

- This biography would have made him part of the royal line!
- He is the only prophet to be of royal descent³²

That Zephaniah’s ministry took place during the reign of Josiah is interesting to consider

- Josiah came to the throne at a very early age – eight years of age (2 Kgs 22:1)
- He reigned from 640 B.C. to 609 B.C.

Although Josiah became king at age 8, his first real reform took place in the 12th year of his reign – around the age of 20 (2 Chr 34:3-7)

- For the first 12 years, perhaps the idolatry and other sins inherited from his father and grandfather were tolerated

But in the 12th year of his reign, Josiah began to implement some moral reforms

- Let’s turn to 2 Chronicles 34:3-7, “For in the eighth year of his reign while he was still a youth, he began to seek the God of his father David; and in the twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the Asherim, the carved images and the molten images. 4 They tore down the altars of the Baals in his presence, and the incense altars that were high above them he chopped down; also the Asherim, the carved images and the molten images he broke in pieces and ground to powder and scattered it on the graves of those who had sacrificed to them. 5 Then he burned the bones of the priests on their altars and purged Judah and Jerusalem. 6 In the cities of Manasseh, Ephraim, Simeon, even as far as Naphtali, in their surrounding ruins, 7 he also tore down

³⁰ Charles L. Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets*, 221.

³¹ Dr. Alan B. Stringfellow, *Through the Bible in One Year*, 103.

³² Bruce Wilkinson & Kenneth Boa, *Talk Thru the Bible*, 278.

the altars and beat the Asherim and the carved images into powder, and chopped down all the incense altars throughout the land of Israel. Then he returned to Jerusalem.”

It could be that the prophecy of Zephaniah helped to lay the foundation for the revival and reforms implemented by Josiah³³

Zephaniah 2:13 says, “And He will stretch out His hand against the north and destroy Assyria, and He will make Nineveh a desolation, parched like the wilderness”

- This verse speaks of Nineveh’s destruction in 612 B.C. as a future event
- So Zephaniah must be before the fall of Nineveh

The political situation during the early reign of Josiah was one of independence³⁴

- Assyria as a world power was weakening
- The Babylonians were on the rise
- But in this short “window” of time, Judah experienced a little bit of freedom

Josiah’s father was Amon, a wicked king (2 Kgs 21:19-22)

- Josiah’s grandfather was Manasseh, also a wicked king (2 Kgs 21:20-21)

According to 2 Kings 22:2, Josiah “did right in the sight of the LORD and walked in all the way of his father David, nor did he turn aside to the right or to the left”

- Rather than identify with Amon, his earthly father, the writer of 2 Kings causes Josiah to be identified with David!
- Although David was not a sinless man, he was a godly man of integrity and faithfulness

Hilkiah the high priest found the book of the law of the LORD (2 Chr 34:8-35:19))

- The result of the founding of this book was a short-lived revival

For the 57 years prior to Josiah’s reign, Manasseh and Amon portrayed an ungodly kingship to the nation of Judah

- That powerful, negative influence was very hard for the people to overcome
- Josiah’s reforms were too little, too late

For many in Judah, the reform was merely external and outward

- It really didn’t affect the inward nature and character of individuals

The book of Zephaniah uses the phrase “the day of the LORD” more than any other prophet³⁵

- It is referred to in this prophecy alone 23 times

³³ Wilkinson & Boa, 278.

³⁴ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Handbook*, 259.

³⁵ Feinberg, 221.

This “day” is not one, 24-hour period of time

- It doesn’t speak of a day like Genesis 1-2 does

Rather, “the day of the LORD” is a phrase that speaks of an undisclosed period of time

- It encompasses immense and universal judgment
- But it also encompasses the hope after such times of judgment

In the book of Zephaniah, this future “day” will have both near-term and far-term fulfillments

- Near-term would be fulfilled in the days of the Babylonian exile
- Long-term would be still future for us, pointing to the Great Tribulation

In Zephaniah, different elements of “the day of the LORD” are mentioned

- 1:7 (near)
- 1:15 (wrath, trouble, distress, destruction, destruction, desolation, darkness, gloom, clouds, and thick darkness)
- 1:16 (trumpet, battle cry)
- 1:18 (the LORD’s wrath, the LORD’s jealousy, terrifying)

According to the order in our English Bibles, Zephaniah is the last of the remaining minor prophets to speak before the Exile

- From a chronological approach, Habakkuk was the last prophecy given before the Exile

We know that the Babylonian exile is approaching quickly

Zephaniah’s words come to Judah with a mixed message

- On the one hand, there is a tremendous amount of talk about future destruction, devastation, and disaster
- On the other hand, there is a hint of hope regarding restoration and salvation

As a matter of fact, that pretty much summarizes the two major divisions of the prophecy of Zephaniah

- Chapters 1-2 Prophecies of judgment
- Chapter 3 Prophecies of future blessing

I. Prophecies of judgment (1-2)

After the biographical information given in verse 1, the prophet launches into this universal description of God’s judgment in verse 3

- Man
- Beast
- Birds
- Fish

Of course, God exacted this type of judgment in the Flood

- God's promise was that He would never destroy the Earth again with water
- God never promised that He would never destroy the Earth again

Because there is coming a day when God will judge the entire Earth

- Not with water
- But with fire

But Zephaniah's words would have been terrifying to hear

- Verse 1 – he introduces himself
- Verses 2-6 – he immediately transitions to speak of judgment

Let's notice a few repetitions in these opening verses

- Three times the phrase "I will remove" is repeated (1:2, 3)
- Twice the verb "cut off" is used (1:3, 4)
- The phrase "I stretch out His hand against" is used (1:4)
- Twice God says that He will "punish" individuals (1:8, 9)

God's judgment is narrowed down to Judah in verse 4

- These verses speak of apostasy and idolatry
- Zephaniah's father and grandfather helped to promote these sins among God's people

Judah was attempting to worship the LORD and Baal at the same time

- This toxic mixture was abhorrent in the eyes of the LORD

In verse 7, the LORD calls for absolute silence

- The evidence against Judah was clear

Verses 14-18 include a vivid description of this future "day of the LORD"

- This passage seems to have both near-term and long-term implications³⁶

These verses are clear that judgment is inevitable

- Verse 17, they would grope like blind men
- Verse 18, their silver and gold couldn't save them

There is a very clear reason given by God as to why the Exile will take place

- Let's look at 1:17, "I will bring distress on men, so that they will walk like the blind, because they have sinned against the LORD (emphasis mine)

Why would the Exile take place?

- Because the nation of Judah had sinned against the LORD

³⁶ John MacArthur, *MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 1039.

The people of Judah, and other surrounding nations, will incur the judgment of God because they had sinned against the LORD

- He is holy, righteous and just

God's holiness and righteousness will not allow Him to overlook sin

- Any and every sin is a deviation from that holy standard

Remember what Habakkuk 1:13 said?

- The words are applicable to our discussion here, "*Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, and You cannot look on wickedness with favor. Why do You look with favor on those who deal treacherously? Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they?*"

The prophet Habakkuk struggled with the reality of God using the unbelieving, pagan nation of Babylon to judge Judah

- It didn't seem "right" – as defined from the prophet's own mindset

Like Habakkuk, Zephaniah sees how the LORD will use a pagan nation to judge Judah

- But the LORD would also hold Babylon accountable for their actions

It's as if Zephaniah looks around Judah in four different directions³⁷

- To the west is Philistia and the Philistines (2:4-7)
- To the east is Moab and Ammon (2:8-11)
- To the south is Ethiopia (2:12)
- To the north is Ninevah and Assyria (2:13-15)

Wherever the prophet looks, judgment will come

- Sin is everywhere!
- Sin is universal!

Look with me at 2:15 and note the proud words of the Assyrians, "*I am, and there is no one besides me*"

- Has anyone else used similar words as these?

Listen to Isaiah 45:6, "*That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun that there is no one besides Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other*" (emphasis mine)

- Back in Zephaniah 2:15, the Assyrians were so proud that they were beginning to think of themselves as Divine³⁸
- Yet, God would quickly and easily overthrow them in judgment

³⁷ Stringfellow, 103.

³⁸ MacArthur, 1040.

God never points out sin without purpose

- God showed Judah her sins in order that she might repent³⁹
- Look at 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”

In other words, if she repented, then there was hope of forgiveness

- Perhaps the Babylonian Captivity would be avoided!

II. Prophecies of future blessing (3)

Chapter 3 does foretell prophecies of future blessing

- But before we get to that point, the prophet deals with the sins of Judah (3:1-7)

In other words, it isn’t just the pagan nations of the world who will be judged by the LORD

- God’s own people would be held responsible for their sins against God

Many times, Judah wanted to act like the pagan nations around them

- God says, in essence, if they want to act like the other nations, then He will treat them like other nations⁴⁰

The good news is that the book doesn’t end on a note of disaster

- Rather, the book ends on a positive note

Yes, God would punish His people for their sins through the Babylonian Captivity

- It would be a very dark time in the history of Judah
- But they brought this on themselves because of their sin (1:17)

From 3:8-20, the language is that of restoration and hope and healing for the nation

- Part of this was fulfilled after the 70 years of the Babylonian Captivity
- Part of this waits to be fulfilled in the future during the Great Tribulation

It is interesting to compare the end of Zephaniah with the end of Revelation⁴¹

- Both have many references to God’s judgment
- Yet both have extremely gracious promises about restoration and healing from sin

There will be a great time of universal judgment

- But there are still great promises of hope and restoration for the faithful remnant who endures to the end

³⁹ Gerard Chrispin, *The Bible Panorama*, 383.

⁴⁰ Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament*, 874.

⁴¹ Dever, 879.

Jesus Christ alluded to the book of Zephaniah on two occasions

- Twice in Matthew, Jesus alludes to the words of this prophecy (Mt 13:41 with Zeph 1:3; Mt 24:29 with Zech 1:15)

Both of these NT references are associated with the Lord's second coming

- Not the Rapture
- But the Second Coming after the Tribulation and before the Millennium

It is interesting to compare Zephaniah with Habakkuk and the book of Lamentations⁴²

Zephaniah	Habakkuk	Lamentations
Decades <u>before</u> the fall of Jerusalem (ca. 630 BC)	Just <u>before</u> the fall of Jerusalem (ca. 607 BC)	Just <u>after</u> the fall of Jerusalem (586 BC)
God will judge	God, when will You judge?	God has judged
Preview of trouble	Promise of trouble	Presence of trouble

Zephaniah sees the near reference of the Babylonian Captivity

- It will be a horrible time of judgment for Judah and the other nations
- But God would be faithful to His people and restore them and rebuild them

But not all of the prophecy of Zephaniah was fulfilled in the Babylonian Captivity

- This is proven by the fact that Jesus Christ, some 600 years after the writing of this prophecy, spoke of future events that were based partly on the book of Zephaniah

The book of Zephaniah has much to say about God's wrath and judgment for sin

- As we said earlier, this is because God is a holy and righteous God
- He cannot allow sin to go unpunished

Notice who is the focus of these closing verses

- 3:12, "I will leave among you a humble and lowly people"
- 3:18, "I will gather those who grieve about the appointed feasts"
- 3:19, "I will save the male and gather the outcast, and I will turn their shame into praise and renown in all the earth"
- 3:20, "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"

God will see to the fulfillment of these promises

- Because He is the faithful God

⁴² This chart is borrowed and modified from Wilkinson & Boa, 280.

In a book that describes so much “gloom and doom”, listen to Zephaniah 3:17

- “The LORD your God is in your midst, a victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy, He will be quiet in His love, He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy.”
- What a picture of true love and compassion!

You remember from Ezekiel how the LORD removed the glory of His presence (i.e., Ichabod)

- What we see here is the opposite
- God is in the presence of His people as their King, rejoicing in His people!

During the upcoming period of exile, the Jews were not able to celebrate their various feasts (3:18)

- But God would remove any shame that is experienced by this

Zephaniah 3:19-20 speak of a future gathering and blessing

- This will occur after the Lord Jesus’ Second Coming

Once again, God’s people will be a light to the world and be a source of blessing to the entire world

- Just as God promised back in Genesis 12

This book has mentioned the concepts of future judgment and restoration

The most amazing display of God’s judgment was in the death of Christ⁴³

- The entire reality and potential of God’s wrath for sin was poured out on Jesus Christ, the perfect Lamb of God who took away the sins of the world
- He did that so that there would be a people for God’s own possession

Not only was the death of Jesus Christ the most amazing display of God’s judgment for sin

- It was also the most amazing display of God’s mercy
- Certainly, we are benefactors of that grace and mercy

Next month, we will finish our study of the Old Testament by looking at the three remaining minor prophets

- Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi

Again, the plan is to take off for the summer

- We will then begin our survey of the New Testament in August or September

⁴³ Dever, 872.