

SESSION #41

ZEPHANIAH

1. Setting

Our next prophet ministered in the same time period as the last one we looked at, Nahum. Zephaniah was one of the last prophets of Judah during the time of King Josiah. He became king when he was just 8 years old; a boy king, who turned out to be a good king. It seems that Zephaniah was probably related to Josiah through some family connection and thus was in a good position to influence the king, especially in his early years.

When Josiah was 26 years old, a lost copy of the law of God was found in the temple and brought to the king. He was shocked to realize that his nation had gone so far from God's precepts recorded in that scroll. As a result, he led the nation back to some degree of repentance and obedience to the Lord once again. However, the people were not as deeply affected by God's law as Josiah was. They had made some outward changes, but their heart attitudes had not really changed much at all.

So, Zephaniah has to be God's messenger of some more bad news for Judah.

2. Message

His message is encapsulated in this phrase: *A Day of Desolation and Deliverance*. Judgment is coming but there will be reason for hope as well.

Zephaniah uses a phrase which we saw in session 37 as being first used by Joel: *The Day of the Lord*. Zephaniah uses this phrase more often than any of the other prophets. "The Day of the Lord" refers to a whole complex of events which will happen both in the day of the prophets and then also at the end of history. That "Day" will involve judgment in particular, as God Himself comes to earth in glory and power to intervene in the affairs of humanity, bringing tremendous judgment followed by wonderful restoration.

Zephaniah gives us a glimpse of what that will be like as God intends through judgment to bring His people to blessing. He will punish but He will also perfect, as Zephaniah describes in multiple prophecies.

First of all, there will be judgments for Jerusalem. Babylon will come as God's disciplinary tool against the people of Judah in the near future.

And in the final days of history, there will be another Day of the Lord when God brings judgment in a final sense. We have not yet reached this "Day", as 2 Peter chapter 3 tells us. When we looked at the message of Joel in session 37, we found that we are now in "the day of man". God is delaying the coming of the Day of the Lord because He is patiently waiting for people to be saved. But it will certainly come.

Following the judgment, there will be an element of hope, with a double prophecy from Zephaniah. God's OT people will be delivered, return from Babylonian exile and there will be a restoration to the land which God had promised to Abraham and his descendants.

In the end of human history there will be another restoration. This will come after the final judgment of God against sin in the world and is referred to in Revelation chapter 20 as the "thousand year reign of Jesus Christ", also known as the Millennial Kingdom. He will reign as King of kings and Lord of lords over a restored creation.

Zephaniah also describes God's tough and tender love. The tough love involves punishment for the sins of His people. But God's tender love will result in restoration for His people after that discipline. In modern terminology, God has a velvet-covered brick in His dealings with His people.

Chapter 1 is filled with judgment and terror. But, as the Life Application Bible points out, a whispered promise of hope appears in chapter 2. "*Perhaps even yet the LORD will protect you from his anger*" (2:3).

This whisper "grows to a crescendo" in chapter 3. "*Be glad and rejoice...! The Lord himself...will live among you! At last your troubles will be over...*"

Zephaniah is the last of the 9 pre-exilic prophets. There are three more Minor Prophets who show up after the Exile and which we will deal with in future sessions, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. Zephaniah summarizes all the themes which have appeared in the messages of the other 8 pre-exilic prophets.

First of all, a warning to the generation of their own time that sin will not be overlooked by God. He will judge it.

Second, an announcement of coming judgment primarily because of sin persisted in.

And thirdly, an invitation to the people living in the time of these prophets to repent of their sin. If they will do that, God will restore them.

Then fourthly, these prophets see into the distant future when there will be a tribulation, and a final judgment, followed by the Messianic Millennial Kingdom. All 9 of the pre-exilic prophets touch on these four themes one way or another, which Zephaniah summarizes for us.

3. Structure

Zephaniah is an emphatic and rather dramatic prophet as he delivers God's message to the people of Judah.

First, he says, "*Look within!*" (chapter 1 especially). Look at your hearts and see what's going on. Recognize that because of the state of your hearts individually and nationally, God's wrath is coming down on Judah. So, he makes an appeal to Jerusalem to recognize the direction in which their sins are taking them. "*Look within!*" – repentance is needed.

Secondly, "*Look around!*" God will not only judge Jerusalem and Judah, but He will also judge all the neighboring nations. Zephaniah pronounces these judgments against the nations to the west, the north, the east and the south much like Amos did. He wraps up his prophecies by noting that God will judge sin wherever it is found. If He will judge the nations around Judah, who don't know God like they do nor have his word in written

Scriptures like they do, imagine how bad the judgment will be against Judah, especially in Jerusalem.

In the early verses of chapter 3 we see “woe” pronounced against Judah, because – as so many of the prophets have already reiterated – the people who have the greatest privileges also have the greatest responsibility. Judah and Jerusalem had been the recipients of God’s wonderful privileges and blessings. They were not to be consumers of these blessings; they were responsible to share these with others. Since they did not live responsibly, God will bring a “woe” upon them.

“Look within! Look around!” And now, in the second half of chapter 3, the message is *“Look beyond!”* Just like so many of the prophets, Zephaniah’s message ends with hope. After God has dealt with sin by judging it, there will be healing in the end.

Zephaniah looks off into the future and sees their soon-coming restoration as they come back from exile. Then he looks away off in the future and also sees the Messianic Kingdom which will be God’s restoration of His people at the end of time, gathering them from all the nations and establishing His Millennial Kingdom with Jerusalem as its capital.

The New Jerusalem is described by Zephaniah in chapter 3:17, *“The LORD your God in your midst, the Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing.”* G. Campbell Morgan called the final verses of this chapter *“the very sweetest love song in the Old Testament”*. Can you picture this? Following His role as Judge, God comes to His people and “sings!” He sings and rejoices over them, expressing His love for them in such beautiful terms.

For the people of God in the day of Zephaniah who heard this message, and for us as well in our day, there is reason to rejoice in the hope of the glory of God and in the fact that God will indeed bring about the destruction of everything that destroys. We don’t see justice yet in our world. But it doesn’t mean that justice is not coming. For God is a just and holy God and He will bring justice in the end. And when He does, everything that destroys will be destroyed and He will make everything new again.

So, on the new day which Zephaniah looked forward to, songs will take the place of sobs and sighs. There will be an end to wickedness, injustice, unfairness and all that blights humanity.

There is a sharp contrast between the opening of the book and the closing of this book.

Chapter 1 verse 2 says, *“I will utterly consume...says the Lord... I will sweep away...”* That is the judgmental work of God. But Zephaniah’s message ends in a completely different way in the final verse of the book: *“I will bring you back...I will gather you... I will give you fame and praise...”* (3:20) A sweeping away with judgment, but then a gathering back into the loving embrace of God our Father. A wonderful picture of hope indeed!

So, brother or sister, keep pressing on! There is glory ahead! We have hope!

Our next prophet is Habakkuk who has good reason for concern as he dialogues with God.
