

Minor Prophets: Zephaniah

INTRODUCTION

Written around 30 years before the fall of Judah to Babylon in 586 B.C., the book of Zephaniah is a warning to the people of Judah that if they continue to sin and do not repent, God will punish them along with all the other pagan nations. In this book, the prophet Zephaniah warns Judah of the approaching “day of the Lord,” a day of judgment against those who sin against God, and a day of victory and blessing for those who are faithful toward him. Zephaniah establishes God’s role as supreme Judge over the nations and reveals that e is merciful and patient but will correct all nations, including Judah, for their disobedience.

Zephaniah begins by highlighting God’s hatred of idolatry. Because God is the one true God and Creator of all things, he alone deserves all honor and glory. As a result, he condemns Judah’s waywardness and double mindedness. Just as we cannot serve two masters (Matthew 6:24), we cannot claim total allegiance to God and then bow down to other gods (Zephaniah 1:5). The only way to remain in a right standing with God and avoid his just wrath is to seek and follow the Lord wholeheartedly (Zephaniah 2:3).

In this book, God says that his purpose in his discipline of the nations, including Judah, is to sanctify them. His goal is to cleanse them of unrighteousness and steer their hearts toward truly following him (Zephaniah 3:9-13). The result of this purification, when the nations once again respect God and submit to him, will be true peace, protection, and prosperity. In the end, following God’s heart will always result in the least pain and suffering. As characters in God’s story, we will face trials and discomfort no matter what, but we are left with a choice of what kind of characters we will be and what kind of suffering we will endure. We can either suffer because of our rebellion against God, or we can suffer in full, abundant hope of God’s victory as our good Author in the end. In the book of Zephaniah, this same choice offered to the Israelites.

IMAGE FOR UNDERSTANDING

Have you ever been told by someone to not touch a hot stove or not to do something because it would only lead to pain for you? Did you listen to them? If not, what was the result?

Similarly, this book is about God telling the people of Judah not to “touch the hot stove.” He sees that they are growing more and more worldly and rebellious and is warning them that if they continue in their disobedience, they will face consequences. When reading this book, be discerning about how God may be warning you not to continue in a certain action and see how he is growing you to be a better character in his story. Look for God’s promises concerning those who repent or continue to follow him.

BOOK ORGANIZATION

Zephaniah 1-2: The Lord Sweeps

Zephaniah 3: The Lord Saves

JESUS IN THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH

The book of Zephaniah is all about God calling a wandering nation to repent. If the nation of Judah continues in its ways, then he will punish it; but throughout the book, he promises mercy toward those who repent and clarifies at the end of the book that this is the entire purpose of judging Judah. God uses pain to steer us away from sin and purify our hearts.

Similarly, all of us deserve God's wrath because of sin. It is more than just nations turning against God; each of us is born rebelling against Him. Just as God told the nation of Judah the consequences for its sin (earthly/temporal conquest and destruction), he tells us the wages of our sin (heavenly/eternal separation from him). Nations won't live forever, so God punishes them on earth (much like the "natural consequence" of touching a hot stove). Human souls are eternal, so they will face judgment before God after death (Hebrews 9:27). God uses the metaphor of judging nations (earthly/temporal institutions) to give us a glimpse into judging people (heavenly/eternal souls). By tracing the path of the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, we understand the gospel (reconciling individual souls to God) much better.

In short, God's relationship with Judah gives us insight into his relationship with us. Like Judah, He gives us a way out: through Jesus. Nations and cities find God's mercy through nationwide/citywide repentance (Jonah 3), and individuals find God's mercy through the sacrifice of Christ (Romans 10:9-10). If we turn to him and accept his gift of grace, then we will be forgiven. There is nothing we can do to deserve anything but God's wrath; instead, it is Jesus' blood that covers our sins and places us in right standing with God. He is the one who justifies us, as the Holy Spirit cleanses and sanctifies us. In reading this book, remember Jesus' role in our salvation and God's methods of purifying us as his children.

BIBLE STUDY SPECIFICS: HOW TO APPROACH THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH

OBSERVATION

- What is God teaching us in the text of the book of Zephaniah?
 - People: Who is Zephaniah speaking to?
 - Time: What was going on during the time the author was writing?
 - Events: What is he addressing? What does he prophecy that will soon happen? Why?
 - Purpose: Why might he be addressing this issue?
- What literary devices are being used?
- How does Zephaniah bring up the issue and address it?
- What is the author emphasizing, repeating, contrasting, or bringing attention to?

INTERPRETATION

- What does the author want the reader to notice? What are some common themes/words/phrases?
Example: "A day of wrath . . . a day of distress . . . a day of ruin" (Zephaniah 1:15-16)—shows the magnitude of desolation of the day to come.
- What is happening at this point in history? Who is reigning over Judah? Why is God still bringing judgment upon Judah?
- Explore how Zephaniah describes God's character in this book (how does he use God's character to help readers understand these issues better?)
- How does Zephaniah challenge our comfort zone and priorities? How does it reconcile God as sovereign yet also good and merciful?
- Trace the theme of prayer in this book. How does Zephaniah call the people of Judah to address God?
- Can we ever be "too far gone"? How is this book a reminder of God's mercy and forgiveness?
- Where can we trace Christ and his work in this book?
- Why is God talking about judging nations? How does God punish nations differently from individuals?
- How does God's judgment of nations for sin give us a glimpse into his judgment of individuals for their sins? What does this have to do with Christ's sacrifice for us and our conversion? How does it compare?

- Does the fact that we are believers covered by Christ mean that we will never be punished? Should we still obey God? How can we correctly balance salvation because of faith alone while taking our call to holiness seriously? See Romans 6.

APPLICATION

- How should we talk to God about our suffering as a result of being punished for sin? How does God want us to pray about it?
- How does God want us to face hopelessness? What does he want us to turn to for hope and peace?
- How should we respond to God's judgment?
- Is there anywhere in your life where God is warning you about your sin but hasn't punished you yet? How can you take him seriously starting today?

PRAYER

- The book of Zephaniah is all about God calling the nation of Judah to repentance. If you are aware of God calling you to repent of something, be sure to pray to him today to seek his forgiveness and mercy that are given abundantly to us through Christ Jesus.
- At the end of the book, God promises to restore Israel. See Zephaniah 3:14-20. How can we lean into these promises as believers today? How can we already see them being fulfilled? Let him "rejoice over you with gladness" and "quiet you by His love" (3:17).
- The book of Lamentations details the consequences promised by God in Zephaniah. In it, the author recalls total devastation because of his and the nation's sin and cries out to God for mercy and love. How can we turn to God in our pain? How can we place our hope in God through prayer? How can we see Lamentations as a warning to take Zephaniah seriously?

CHURCH HISTORY: WHAT HAS CHURCH HISTORY SAID ABOUT THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH

"This is a call to the people of Judah to cease every manner of opposition to God's word and will, to bow down in submissive obedience, in unconditional surrender, in loving service, to their Covenant God."

—Dr. Theodore Laetsch

"In a sense, the history of the times has nothing to say about Zephaniah's message. Throughout the book there is a sense of distance from historical event . . . Zephaniah is rooted in the flow of history . . . but his concern is only with the goal—the eschaton—the day when calamitous human efforts to run the world will coincide in an awesome climax with the Lord's purposes of judgment and hope. Humans may categorize their sins into the serious, the mediocre, and the insignificant. To Zephaniah (see James 2:10-11) the mere fact of sin excited and merited the whole weight of divine rage. The simple statement 'they have sinned' is sufficient."

—J. Alec Motyer

"Zephaniah can hardly be considered great as a poet. He does not rank with Isaiah, nor even with Hosea in this particular He had an imperative message to deliver and proceeded in the most direct and forceful way to discharge his responsibility. What he lacked in grace and charm, he in some measure atoned for by the vigor and clarity of his speech. He realized the approaching terror so keenly that he was able to present it vividly and convincingly to his hearers. No prophet has made the picture of the day of Yahweh more real."

— J.M.P. Smith

"God sent a prophetic word to Zephaniah because the Judeans of his day still needed to get right with him in their hearts. The prophet announced that God was going to send judgment on Judah for her wickedness. He also

assured the godly few in the nation, the remnant, that the Lord would preserve them and remain true to His promises concerning ultimate worldwide blessing for Israel in the future. Perhaps Zephaniah 1:7 summarizes what the book is all about better than any other single verse: “Be silent before the Lord God! For the day of the LORD is near.”

— Dr. Thomas L. Constable

WORKS CITED:

Constable, Dr. Thomas L. “*Notes on Zephaniah*”. Net Bible.org.
(netbible.org/bible/Zephaniah+1, accessed 20 May 2024).

