

## ZEPHANIAH: THE DAY OF THE LORD

Turn and Live! A series on the minor prophets  
Stonebrook Sunday AM, 5/9/21, Matt Heerema

### **Zephaniah 1:1 (ESV)**

1 The word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah the son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah.

We know a lot about Zephaniah from this one verse!

Zephaniah has the most complete genealogical listing of any of the prophets, and it's here for a reason. He was the great, great, grandson of one of the few faithful kings of Israel. It is noted here because Zephaniah wants to make plain his association with Hezekiah - "I'm with that guy."

We can also pinpoint, pretty accurately, the time period in which he preached to Israel, by a couple of factors - first it tells us that he was during the reign of Josiah – who we know some things about, and second from an interesting feature of Zephaniah: it's use of phrases and language found in the Pentateuch - the first five books of the Bible - also known as "the book of the law." Here's why that is interesting:

In the historic accounts found in 2 Kings 22 and 2 Chronicles 34 we learn of Josiah, king of Judah, and we are told a few things about him. We learn that the headline over his life was "He did what was right in the Lord's sight and walked in the ways of his ancestor David." - That is, he feared God and walked in repentance in response to the preaching of the prophets. Some of you may remember his story:

One day, King Josiah sent some men to gather money from a storeroom in the temple. Those men found a very important book. A book that had been lost to Israel during the previous generations of wicked kings: "the book of the law".

Guys, Israel has misplaced the Bible. It was in a closet somewhere. And when Josiah had it read to him, he tore his clothes because he knew the nation had not kept faith with God, and was guilty and would suffer the judgements declared at the end of the book of the law in Deuteronomy. Josiah instructed his priests to find a prophet and ask what was going to happen. Huldah the prophetess declared that indeed God's wrath was coming against their faithlessness.

So Josiah called the nation to repentance and a return to the covenant worship of the one true God, and to destroy the idols and cease worship of false gods. But the people were too far gone, and while some did repent, most did not.

It was in this context that Zephaniah begins his ministry. And we find in the book of his prophecies, that he relies heavily on phrasing from Deuteronomy and imagery from Genesis, both of which were part of "the book of the law" that was recently rediscovered. In fact, the book of Zephaniah is almost bookended by the curses of Deuteronomy, and the blessing and restoration promised for those who repent.

The book of Zephaniah has three main parts. The first part is a declaration of judgement and punishment against Judah. The second part is a declaration against all the surrounding nations. The third part is a beautiful and hope-filled look at the distant future, the new earth, when all wrongs will be made right, all sin eradicated, and a new people of God, chosen out of every nation, tribe, and tongue, worshipping God, and being rejoiced over by the God who saves.

Let's dig in.

## **PART 1: JUDGEMENT AGAINST JERUSALEM**

He starts his 3-part prophecy declaring the destruction that will come on Israel for their idolatry and faithlessness to their creator. He starts by saying God is going to essentially reverse the creation account in Genesis 1.

### **Zephaniah 1:2-2:3 (ESV)**

2 "I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth," declares the Lord.

3 "I will sweep away man and beast;

I will sweep away the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea,  
and the rubble with the wicked. I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth,"  
declares the Lord.

4 "I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem;  
and I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal

and the name of the idolatrous priests along with the priests,

5 those who bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens,  
those who bow down and swear to the Lord and yet swear by Milcom,

6 those who have turned back from following the Lord,  
who do not seek the Lord or inquire of him."

Baal was a Canaanite God, Milcom and Ammonite God. We are seeing that Israel has not given up their worship of the false gods of the neighboring nations, in spite of Josiah's reforms.

7 Be silent before the Lord God! For the day of the Lord is near;  
the Lord has prepared a sacrifice and consecrated his guests.

8 And on the day of the Lord's sacrifice—

"I will punish the officials and the king's sons and all who array themselves in foreign attire.

9 On that day I will punish everyone who leaps over the threshold,  
and those who fill their master's house with violence and fraud.

10 "On that day," declares the Lord,

"a cry will be heard from the Fish Gate,  
a wail from the Second Quarter,  
a loud crash from the hills.

11 Wail, O inhabitants of the Mortar!

For all the traders are no more; all who weigh out silver are cut off.

(Listing different districts of Jerusalem, north to south. Fish gate in the north, Second Quarter in the middle, and The Mortar was the merchant district where silver merchants did their thing.)

12 At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps,  
and I will punish the men who are complacent, those who say in their hearts,  
'The Lord will not do good, nor will he do ill.'

Zephaniah has now listed three types of people in Jerusalem: those who worship false gods, those who worship The Lord AND other false gods, and now those who are complacent toward God, who don't think God is involved in the affairs of men. We can recognize ourselves among these three categories from time to time. And to them, Zephaniah says the right judgement is coming:

13 Their goods shall be plundered, and their houses laid waste.  
Though they build houses, they shall not inhabit them;  
though they plant vineyards, they shall not drink wine from them."

14 The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast;  
the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter; the mighty man cries aloud there.

15 A day of wrath is that day,  
a day of distress and anguish,  
a day of ruin and devastation,  
a day of darkness and gloom,  
a day of clouds and thick darkness,

16 a day of trumpet blast and battle cry  
against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements.

17 I will bring distress on mankind, so that they shall walk like the blind,  
because they have sinned against the Lord;  
their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung.

18 Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them  
on the day of the wrath of the Lord.

In the fire of his jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed;  
for a full and sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.

2:1 Gather together, yes, gather, O shameless nation,  
2 before the decree takes effect –before the day passes away like chaff–  
before there comes upon you the burning anger of the Lord,  
before there comes upon you the day of the anger of the Lord.

3 Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land,  
who do his just commands; seek righteousness; seek humility;  
perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the Lord.

A final call to repentance, to seek the Lord and be spared from the destruction of the coming fire of the burning anger of God.

Zephaniah then turns to all the nations, and calls out all the surrounding nations by name.

## **PART 2: JUDGEMENT AGAINST ALL NATIONS**

### **Zephaniah 2:4-3:8 (ESV)**

4 For Gaza shall be deserted, and Ashkelon shall become a desolation;  
Ashdod's people shall be driven out at noon, and Ekron shall be uprooted.  
5 Woe to you inhabitants of the seacoast, you nation of the Cherethites!  
The word of the Lord is against you, O Canaan, land of the Philistines;  
and I will destroy you until no inhabitant is left.

6 And you, O seacoast, shall be pastures,  
with meadows for shepherds and folds for flocks.  
7 The seacoast shall become the possession of the remnant of the house of Judah,  
on which they shall graze,  
and in the houses of Ashkelon they shall lie down at evening.  
For the Lord their God will be mindful of them and restore their fortunes.

8 "I have heard the taunts of Moab and the revilings of the Ammonites,  
how they have taunted my people and made boasts against their territory.  
9 Therefore, as I live," declares the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel,  
"Moab shall become like Sodom, and the Ammonites like Gomorrah,  
a land possessed by nettles and salt pits, and a waste forever.

The remnant of my people shall plunder them,  
and the survivors of my nation shall possess them."  
10 This shall be their lot in return for their pride,  
because they taunted and boasted against the people of the Lord of hosts.

Zephaniah references “the remnant of my people” who he is going to describe in greater detail at the end, but notice here that the judgement comes against Canaan, Moab, Ammon - and that the remnant will inherit that land one day. Jesus said “the meek shall inherit the earth” - this is part of what he was talking about.

Zephaniah continues:

11 The Lord will be awesome against them;  
for he will famish all the gods of the earth,  
and to him shall bow down, each in its place, all the lands of the nations.  
12 You also, O Cushites, shall be slain by my sword.

13 And he will stretch out his hand against the north and destroy Assyria,  
and he will make Nineveh a desolation, a dry waste like the desert.  
14 Herds shall lie down in her midst, all kinds of beasts;  
even the owl and the hedgehog shall lodge in her capitals;  
a voice shall hoot in the window;  
devastation will be on the threshold;  
for her cedar work will be laid bare.

He goes on, possibly now against Jerusalem, but possibly continuing against Nineveh. If he’s speaking of Jerusalem, he’s breaking form from how he has been going so far, but it would make more sense of the phrase “does not draw near her God.” - however, if it is against Nineveh, it shows how thoroughly God pleaded with the Assyrian capital to repent, and how thoroughly he claims his lordship over that city and country. It's debatable, but I think he’s still speaking of Nineveh.

15 This is the exultant city that lived securely, that said in her heart,  
“I am, and there is no one else.”  
What a desolation she has become, a lair for wild beasts!  
Everyone who passes by her hisses and shakes his fist.

1 Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled, the oppressing city!  
2 She listens to no voice; she accepts no correction.  
She does not trust in the Lord; she does not draw near to her God.  
3 Her officials within her are roaring lions;  
her judges are evening wolves that leave nothing till the morning.  
4 Her prophets are fickle, treacherous men;  
her priests profane what is holy; they do violence to the law.

5 The Lord within her is righteous; he does no injustice;

every morning he shows forth his justice; each dawn he does not fail;  
but the unjust knows no shame.

6 "I have cut off nations; their battlements are in ruins;  
I have laid waste their streets so that no one walks in them;  
their cities have been made desolate, without a man, without an inhabitant.  
7 I said, 'Surely you will fear me; you will accept correction.  
Then your dwelling would not be cut off  
according to all that I have appointed against you.'  
But all the more they were eager to make all their deeds corrupt.

8 "Therefore wait for me," declares the Lord, "for the day when I rise up to seize the prey. For my  
decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms,  
to pour out upon them my indignation, all my burning anger;  
for in the fire of my jealousy all the earth shall be consumed.

And so here is the judgement against Judah, and all the rest of the nations that surround her. God's  
burning anger against idolatry, violence, oppression - all the earth shall be consumed by this first. But then  
the prophecy takes a surprising turn in part three.

This burning, consuming anger, we see, is not simply destructive: it is a purifying, refining fire, and what it  
leaves in its wake is beautiful!

## **PART 3: PURIFICATION AND SALVATION**

### **Zephaniah 3:9-20 (ESV)**

9 "For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech,  
that all of them may call upon the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord.  
10 From beyond the rivers of Cush my worshipers,  
the daughter of my dispersed ones, shall bring my offering.

Cush is the capital of Egypt, so God will have a remnant coming from all over the earth to Jerusalem!

11 "On that day you shall not be put to shame because  
of the deeds by which you have rebelled against me;  
for then I will remove from your midst your proudly exultant ones,  
and you shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain.

12 But I will leave in your midst a people humble and lowly.  
They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord,  
13 those who are left in Israel; they shall do no injustice and speak no lies,

nor shall there be found in their mouth a deceitful tongue.  
For they shall graze and lie down, and none shall make them afraid."

14 Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel!  
Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!  
15 The Lord has taken away the judgments against you;  
he has cleared away your enemies.  
The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil.

The Lord is going to scour the earth with his fire, in order to restore and protect his people. Those that have rejected The Most High God in favor of false gods - those who cheated, lied, stole, and oppressed in order to gain wealth and power in this world - those would be the ones destroyed.

They would be removed so that the faithful, the outcast, the oppressed, the lowly, the humble, would be able to live, finally, in safety, peace, and fellowship with their loving creator!

16 On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:  
"Fear not, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak.  
17 The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save;  
he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love;  
he will exult over you with loud singing.

18 I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival,  
so that you will no longer suffer reproach.  
19 Behold, at that time I will deal with all your oppressors.  
And I will save the lame and gather the outcast,  
and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.

20 At that time I will bring you in, at the time when I gather you together;  
for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth,  
when I restore your fortunes before your eyes," says the Lord.

## THE REPENTANT REMNANT

Zephaniah gives us some definition of this remnant who will be saved and preserved:

- Not mixing worship 1:5
- Seeking and following the Lord 1:6
- Not complacent 1:12
- Obey his commands, seek righteousness, seek humility 2:3
- Mourning for the festival (3:18)

### **“Mourning for the festival” (3:18)**

Echoing the prophet Jeremiah’s book: Lamentation. “No one comes to the festival... her priests groan, her young women are afflicted...” - The anticipation of the destruction of Jerusalem caused mourning for those who realized they would lose their proper place of worship of God!

One commentator puts it rather poetically:

“All those meaningful celebrations that punctuated the life of the devoted Israelite were denied to him by the devastation of Jerusalem. The celebration of the “passing over” of the angel of death could only foster bitter wailing among a displaced people. The consecration of the firstfruits of harvest could only remind them that they no longer possessed a settled land. Instead of sending the scapegoat into the wilderness, the found themselves expelled from the land of promise.” - O. Palmer Robertson

The remnant who would be saved were passionate seekers, followers, and worshippers of The Most High God. As other prophets like Nahum describe, this remnant seeks refuge in The Lord, and will be saved. They will not be disappointed. We the reader should recognize this is who we are to be! But so often we are not. We seek safety and comfort in other things. In other gods. But like Zephaniah does in chapter 2 verse 3, we are called back to seek the Lord in repentance. We are to be a *repentant remnant*.

## **THE RESURRECTED REMNANT**

To this faithful remnant, who would lament over the destruction of Jerusalem, there was given a partial and immediate fulfillment of these promises 70 years later under King Cyrus. Find that story in Ezra and Nehemiah. But Zephaniah has a bigger picture in mind. Verse 19 mentions renown in all the earth. And verse 20 has a strange statement that wouldn’t make sense, as Zephaniah nor the people who survived to see 70 years later, experienced all that is promise.

So what does verse 20 mean? The book of Job helps us here. He uses similar language:

### **Job 19:25-27 ESV**

“I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has thus been destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!”

Job knew that his circumstances were so bad, that he was in such a helpless position, that he needed an advocate, a helper, a Redeemer, and he knew he had one. One that he had never seen before, and if you read and understand Job, a Redeemer he had been hoping for but only just starting to understand. One that he knew he would meet one day, not in this life, but after the resurrection.



Verse 20 shows us that the remnant Zephaniah has in mind, that will benefit from all these promises of inherited land, peace, safety, security, renown and fame, would be a *resurrected remnant*. God is faithful to his promises. And just as Job knew he would see his Redeemer on resurrection day, so would this remnant.

God keeps the promises made through Zephaniah and all the prophets in Jesus Christ. To seek and follow after the True God of Israel is to seek and follow his promised Messiah: Jesus of Nazareth. In him we find the peace, the security, the redemption, the release from captivity, and the restoration of all the fortunes that matter.

Back to chapter 2, verse 3:

3 Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land,  
who do his just commands; seek righteousness; seek humility;  
perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the Lord.

And not only hidden on the day of anger of the Lord, but in Christ, The God of Israel says

19 ...at that time I will deal with all your oppressors.  
And I will save the lame and gather the outcast,  
and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.

20 At that time I will bring you in, at the time when I gather you together;  
for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth,  
when I restore your fortunes before your eyes," says the Lord.

Ultimately, Zephaniah tells us that:

Apart from Christ, we can expect the devouring, consuming, fiery judgement of God's anger toward our rebellion and unfaithfulness. That God's judgement on Israel was the handing over of his city, Jerusalem, and the temple was destroyed, and there is no longer a place for worship and sacrifice to God.

But the gospel is that Jesus Christ took that fire judgement upon himself, for his people. And no longer is a fire of judgement on us, but a fire of the Holy Spirit is sealed inside of us. Restoring us, purifying us, making us more like our Redeemer, our creator, our God.

Because Jesus was sacrificed on the cross, we are no longer destroyed, but renewed and become temples of the living God, and members of a heavenly city, which we, along with the remnant from Zephaniah's day, are waiting for.

What a great hope.

Let's pray.