

Zephaniah—the Day of the Lord

In approximately 695 BC, Manasseh became king of Judah and Jerusalem at the age of twelve, and he reigned for 55 years in Jerusalem. Unfortunately for Judah he was a very evil king who rebuilt all the pagan idols and altars of Baal, and even went so far off track as to put pagan idols and altars in the Temple in Jerusalem. Manasseh became Judah's worst and longest reigning king. 2 Kings 21:6 tells us that he even made his own infant son "pass through the fire", a nice way to say infant sacrifice to the fertility gods. Manasseh misled and seduced the people of Judah to do evil "more than the Canaanite nations whom the Lord destroyed before them." God sent prophets to warn Judah, and these prophets predicted that God would "wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down." (2 Kings 21:13) Still, the people paid no attention to the prophets of God throughout Manasseh's 55 year reign. At the end of Manasseh's reign, God finally acted to punish Manasseh by sending the King of Assyria to capture him and take him off as a prisoner. 2 Chronicles 33:11-13 records that they led him off with painful hooks in him, and in his pain he was finally humbled before the Lord and begged God in earnest prayer to help him. It must have been a whale of a prayer because the text says God was moved by his supplication and entreaty, and intervened so that Manasseh was released and returned to Jerusalem. From that point on, Manasseh "knew that YHWH was God alone". He went so far as to remove the idols from the Temple and to order the people to serve the God of Israel only, but the people continued in their wicked ways. Soon after these events Manasseh died, and his son Amon took his place, and reverted to the evil and idolatry that the nation had embraced. Amon was murdered after a two year reign, and the people made his son Josiah king at the age of eight in about the year 640 BC.

Good King Josiah

In the Book of Zephaniah it is recorded that the word of the Lord came to Zephaniah the prophet in the days of King Josiah, and that King Hezekiah was his great grandfather. That made him a cousin of King Josiah, and he was probably older than Josiah since it sounds like he was appointed by God as an adult when the boy king Josiah had the crown forced on him by the death of his father. I ask myself the question, "Why was Josiah a true believer in God when his father and grandfather were evil idolators?" Did they have a really good "young life" program at Jerusalem High? I doubt that based on the condition of the country left by evil King Amon. I believe that at eight years old King Josiah was positively influenced by advisers and relatives that had access to him, and that at sixteen years old King Josiah "began to seek the Lord of his father David" (2 Chronicles 34:3) through the leadership of godly men like Zephaniah. The prophet was Josiah's cousin, and he had access to the royal court. Zephaniah's message was just what the king needed to motivate him to rid Judah of idolatry and restore Judah to the covenant that they had made with the one true God. In 628 BC, King Josiah ordered that all the idols and places of idol worship be done away with, and all the altars of Baal destroyed. It was perfect

timing because the powerful presence and influence of Assyria had waned after the death of the Assyrian monarch Ashurbanipal about 630. In that vacuum of power in the Middle East, Josiah ordered reforms not only in Jerusalem, but in all of Judea and even up north in what had been Israel. In Zephaniah 1:4-6, the evil conditions of Jerusalem he describes are no doubt before Josiah's reform movement, and therefore it is likely that Zephaniah's message and relationship with the King was instrumental in stirring King Josiah to institute reforms. At the age of 26, King Josiah turned his attention on the Temple in Jerusalem. It had been neglected for 60-70 years, and evil King Manasseh had attempted to eliminate the true priesthood along with the Torah (first five books of the Bible). When the workmen began repairs and restoration of the Temple, they discovered hidden in the Temple a copy of the Torah. The high priest gave the Torah to King Josiah, and in 2 Chronicles 34:19-33 we have the king's mourning and fear of God for his nation's long obsolescence of following the Word of God. Apparently, for the last 70 years they had not had a Bible, had not been obeying God's Word, and were totally ignorant of all the commands God had given to celebrate Passover, Pentecost, the Day of Atonement, etc.

God spoke to King Josiah and the people through prophets like Zephaniah, Nahum, and Jeremiah, that during Josiah's reign of 31 years, God would spare them any of the righteous wrath that God had built up against their forefathers, but when Josiah passed away and new evil kings took over, the day of God's righteous wrath would visit Jerusalem and it would be wiped out and its people taken into exile.

Judgment on Judah

In Zephaniah 1:2-18, the prophet delivered predictions of the soon to be destruction of Jerusalem. Josiah died in 609, Judah was defeated by Babylon in 605, and Jerusalem was completely destroyed in 586 BC. Zephaniah's message has both a near term and an end time view. In the far view of the end times, God will judge the entire earth and destroy it, but in the near to Zephaniah's time, He would destroy Jerusalem and its people. In verse 2-3, we see the far term prediction of God's judgment against all unrighteous on earth. Much like the great flood of Noah's day it will involve the whole earth, but in the end time there won't be second chances like Noah's family got. We all ask why God doesn't do something about evil in the world, but we may fail to realize that to eradicate evil, God must eliminate all sin and sinners, therefore we are asking God to wipe out the human race.

In Zeph.1:4-9, the prophet turns particularly to Judah in the near term. In order to cut off idolatry and unbelief, God would shortly "stretch out His hand" against Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. They had every chance, every warning, and every possible sign from God yet they failed to respond, so now after about 700 years of apostasy, God's patience was over. In this passage we can see some of the grievances of the Lord. The priests, the royalty, and the hypocrisy of professing believers had all participated in worship of the fertility cult, foreign religions, violence, deceit, greed, materialism, and complacency. How bad will God's judgment be? In Zeph.1:10-18,

no one will escape, but from all over the city will come cries of distress and sounds of destruction. Walls and buildings will come crashing down, and the merchants, vineyard owners, and loan sharks will be finished. Their temporal possessions, which took up all their time and attention, will become plunder for the coming invaders. Wealthy and powerful men have always been able to buy their way out of trouble, but not this time because their judge is God, and their attacker is God sent.

The Call to Repentance—Zephaniah 2

Now that the prophet had announced in chapter 1 that the judgment of Judah was imminent, and the judgment of the whole world would some day follow; He proceeds to call on Judah and the whole world to repent and return to the Lord. There is still time to come as a nation and repent before it is too late. You can read the urgency in his message to act “before the decree takes effect”, before the anger of the Lord explodes into the “day of the Lord” characterized by death and destruction. In Zeph.2:3, the repetition of the hoped for response “Seek the Lord” reveals the intended result of Zephaniah’s prophecies. He is not just giving information about the future, but he desires that they respond. It is also a message for us and to people of all time to seek God before it is too late. Our only refuge from death is to seek the Lord. It is necessary that we as sinners facing judgment pursue God passionately. Jeremiah worked at the same time as Zephaniah, and he wrote in Jer.29:13, “you will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart; and I will be found by you declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you...” Our destiny is determined by our heartfelt commitment to seek God.

Zephaniah’s audience may have asked-why the urgency? In Zeph.2:4-15, he gives the answer of considering the nations around them that have been devastated or shortly will be devastated by God’s righteous wrath. Whether it be the Philistines to the west, or Moab and Ammon to the east, or Cush (Ethiopia) to the south, or Assyria to the north, God is going to shortly destroy all of them. God is personally involved in the affairs of all nations, and all unrighteousness will be punished, therefore humble yourselves and seek God now.

Jerusalem’s Future—Short Term Woes but Eventual Restoration

In Zephaniah 3, it is clear that God would severely punish His chosen people, but then some day restore them not only to the land, but also to an abiding relationship with God. He gave three problems in the behavior of the citizens of Jerusalem in verse one. They are rebellious against God, and have broken their covenant with God. They are defiled or polluted morally. Thirdly, he calls it the tyrannical city in that they use their privilege to oppress and mislead the people. In verse 2, we can read about their unbelief in that they would not listen to God’s Word, would not entrust their lives to God, and did not seek Him. This is particularly a problem because the sin of unbelief leads to all the other sins. Surely the leaders in Jerusalem are better, but in verse 3-4 we read that the false prophets, the priests, the princes, and the judges all stand condemned. We read the rich imagery of princes who are

like lions feeding on helpless prey, judges who are like wolves who hungrily feed on victims in the darkness, prophets who are supposed to speak for God but only speak for themselves, and priests who profaned the Temple with idols. In verses 5-7, we have a beautiful contrast of God's faithfulness. While the people are acting selfishly, immorally, and greedily, God is righteous and never does any injustice. God punishes unrighteousness, so surely after seeing His punishment on the nations around them the people would revere God and receive positively His instruction. But sadly in verse 7, "they were only eager to corrupt all their deeds". Because of this, some day God will gather all the nations and pour out His indignation on them and all the earth will be devoured (see Zeph.3:8, 2 Peter 3:10, Revelation 21:1)

After God's universal judgment, Zephaniah predicts in 3:9-20, the formation of a new community of holy people. The restored remnant of a purged and forgiven Israel, and the converted peoples from all the nations will come together in the Kingdom. With a new spirit of humility and holiness they will no longer tell lies or be rebellious toward God. It will be a time of peace and security, and it will all be governed by God's personal presence. This is what we look forward to and live for now. God has made this future possible by sending Jesus into the world to defeat sin and death, and so by faith we long for that day when evil is ended and we dwell peacefully in the glory of our Savior and Lord.

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