



# THE MINOR PROPHET CHALLENGE

## *The Prophecy of Zephaniah*

### INTRODUCTION TO ZEPHANIAH

All introductory material has been excerpted from *The Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* published by Zondervan Publishing. We highly recommend it for your personal study library.

#### Author

That Zephaniah's lineage was traced back to the fourth generation (1:1) is unique in prophetic literature. This may indicate that the Hezekiah (715-686 B.C.) mentioned in the fourth generation is the well-known king by that name. The name Zephaniah, which means, "Yahweh [the Lord] hides," is used of a priest who was a contemporary of Jeremiah (21:1; 29:25), as well as of other persons in the Old Testament (Zec. 6:10, 14). Although the prophet employed priestly vocabulary at several points (1:4-5, 7-9; 3:4,18), there is no conclusive evidence to indicate that he was officially associated with the temple.

#### Time and Place of Writing

Date: 640-621 B.C.

Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of Josiah (640-609 B.C.), but there is some question whether his ministry preceded or followed Josiah's reform in 621 B.C. His denunciation of syncretistic and Baal worship strongly suggests a date prior to Josiah's reforms. All that can be said with certainty is that Nineveh had not been destroyed (2:13-15); therefore the prophet's message was spoken prior to its annihilation in 612 B.C. Zephaniah was a contemporary of Jeremiah (whose call came in Josiah's 13<sup>th</sup> year; 627 B.C.), as well as of Nahum (663-612 B.C.) and perhaps Habakkuk (605-597 B.C.). If Zephaniah's ministry is dated at the earlier part of Josiah's reign, then Zephaniah may have been instrumental in precipitating Josiah's reforms since the sins he attacked (1:46) were those abolished through Josiah's reforms (2 Ki. 23:4; 2 Ch. 34:1-7).

#### Purpose

To call the people of Jerusalem and Judah to repentance in the face of the Babylonian invasion and hope in a grand restoration after the time of destruction and exile.

#### Finding Christ in Zephaniah

The book Zephaniah contains no direct Messianic prophecies, but the prophet's focus on "the day of the Lord" as the time of judgment and blessing connects his message with the work of Christ. The New Testament on one occasion identifies the day of the Lord with the gift of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Ac. 2:20). Normally, however, in the New Testament the day of the Lord refers to Christ's glorious return (1 Co. 1:8; 5:5; 2 Co. 1:14; 1 Th. 5:2; 2 Th. 2:2; 2 Tim. 4:8; 2 Pe. 3:10), and describes that day as the time when Jesus will destroy all his enemies and bestow incredible blessings on his faithful followers. These connections between Zephaniah's message and New Testament teaching point into two directions.

First, Zephaniah predicted that the destruction inflicted by the Babylonians would reach far and wide. Not only were the wicked in Judah to be judged, but the evil nations of the world would also receive God's judgment.

Second, Zephaniah predicted that the destruction by the Babylonians would not thwart the promises of God. God would purify a people for himself from among the nations and the exiled Jews, and he would bring then in joyous celebration to the wonders of a renewed Jerusalem. This prophetic vision is fulfilled in Jesus. In Christ Gentiles are united with believing Jews into one body (Eph. 2:11-16). When Christ returns redeemed men and women from every nation will bow before him in joyous praise (Rev. 7:9-10) in the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:1-3).

## IMPORTANT THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT ZEPHANIAH

### Zepha-who?

It is easy to overlook the book of Zephaniah or to confuse it with another prophet. His name is too similar to Zechariah and his message (judgment/hope) seems too similar to many other prophets—as the idea most associated with him (“Day of the LORD”) is also picked up by other prophets (see Joel; Amos 5:15, etc.). But we believe that all Scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness—so there must be something special of value in Zephaniah.

### Superscription: A Royal Prophet under Josiah (1:1)

Ironically enough, for as little as we know about Zephaniah the book and Zephaniah the man, we know more about his genealogy than just about any other prophet, as we have four generations of his ancestry! Why? His great-great grandfather was named Hezekiah. Although it does not say that this is the Hezekiah who was king (ruled about 716-687 BC), the unusual four level genealogy shows that there is some emphasis on this Hezekiah, which could be because he was the king. A royal pedigree for Zephaniah would make sense in light of the descriptions of the leaders of Judah. Zephaniah’s ministry was under King Josiah (640-609 BC). Between Hezekiah’s time and Josiah’s time, Judah regressed into greater idolatry during the reigns of Manasseh and Amon. However, Josiah brought great reforms to Israel around 621 BC. Scholars are divided on whether Zephaniah was before the reforms or after the reforms, as there are indications in the text that could be read either way. The exact chronological placement of Zephaniah’s ministry during Josiah’s reign is not as critical as realizing that Zephaniah was likely the last minor prophet before the exile. In many ways, his message was designed to prepare the people for exile (one final warning!) and minister to them in the midst of it.

### Worldwide Judgment is Coming Soon (1:2-18)

#### Destruction of Earth, God’s People (1:2-6)

Judgment will come upon the whole earth (1:2-3). The imagery of this judgment is the opposite of the creation process; the LORD is undoing His creation and destroying the earth. Furthermore, it is reminiscent of the flood. The LORD promises to destroy the earth. However, hadn’t God promised never to do that again? The judgment, though, will come particularly on Judah and Jerusalem, as there is idolatry, seen in the worship of Baal, the starry host, and Molech, which other nations worshipped (1:4-6). What is particularly noteworthy is that the people are both bowing down to the LORD and to the gods of other nations (1:5)! Syncretism is going on among the people of God.

#### Nearness of Day of LORD (1:7-18)

Twice in this passage we hear that the Day of the LORD is near (1:7; 14). What is the Day of the LORD here? It seems to draw on an Ancient Near East expression that refers to the time when a deity or king goes to battle against his enemies. It would be a time of celebration and feasting, as the king would be enthroned. This celebration will

feature the offering up of sacrifices. The twist here is that the feast is the officials and king's sons, those members of Judah who are engaging in idolatry, following the ways of the foreign cultures (1:8-9)! The people who were prospering and living as if God had no involvement in the world—those people would be destroyed (1:10-13). Not only do these people practice syncretism, they seem to be complacent and do not consider that the LORD will actually do something—they live as practical deists or, better yet, atheists (1:12). The Day of the LORD would be a day of battle and destruction (1:14-16), ultimately because of the sin against the LORD (1:17), which will cause the destruction of the whole earth that cannot be diverted through gold and silver (1:18). The wrath of God poured out on sin is coming soon.

#### Summary of Sins

- Syncretism/Compromise with the religion of the people (1:5, 9)
- Complacency/Practical deism (1:12)
- Violence/deceit (1:8)
- Seeking after wealth (1:11, 13, 18)

This chapter seems to promise great judgment and does not seem to give any hope, even for God's chosen people. Has He turned His back on His people? Has He broken His promises to Noah and Abraham? Is there any hope for them?

## Seek God Because Judgment Comes (2:1-3:8)

### Exhortation: Seek God, Humility, Righteousness (2:1-3)

After proclaiming judgment, we find an application: seek God and perhaps find protection from the upcoming judgment. Seeking God is found by seeking humility and righteousness. However, this exhortation only seems to apply to the humble in the land (2:3); the whole nation will not return. God will protect a people but not the whole nation. If Judah needs proof of the fact of judgment, they should look at what will happen to the nations.

### Four Corners of Earth Judged... (2:4-15)

Yet again in the prophetic literature, we have oracles against the foreign nations. Why include these in the message to God's people? When one considers the location of the different nations, one recognizes that they are to the West, East, South, and North of Judah—judgment will come all around them! This shows that the whole earth really will be judged. However, one catches the theme of hope even within these judgments, as the judgment on the foreign nations will lead to the prosperity of God's people. For the most part, these nations will be conquered by the Babylonian empire. Against the Philistines (2:4-7)

The cities of the Philistines, west of Judah, are the subjects of judgment here. Not only are the Philistines judged, though, the "remnant of the house of Judah" shall take their land (2:7). This "remnant" idea is key to think about in this book; judgment comes upon the whole earth but there seems to be some group that escapes it.

### Against the Moabites and Ammonites (2:8-11)

Geographically, Moab and Ammon were east of Judah. Genealogically, they were the descendents of Lot. There is irony in their judgment, as they will be made like Sodom and Gomorrah—though Lot escaped the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, his

descendants would not because they taunted the people of God! The focus on their crime of taunting the people of God also shows that God has not forgotten his people (2:8-11). Furthermore, one sees that “the remnant of my people....the survivors of my nation” shall plunder and possess them (2:10), so a group escapes judgment.

Against the Cushites (2:12)

These are the inhabitants of Ethiopia, to the south. See text....I got nothing else!!!

Against the Assyrians (2:13-15)

Though Assyria is actually northeast of Judah, one can see that this is consider “north” from 2:13 as well as the idea that Assyria invaded Palestine from the north. Nineveh will destroyed, lying in ruins with animals running amuck. The world order is turned upside down!

### And Judah Judged as Well (3:1-7)

We read a woe (funeral chat) here directed at the “oppressing city.” The way 3:1 reads, one could think that the “oppressing city” is Nineveh, but 3:2 shows that the “oppressing city” is actually Jerusalem, as the city has a relationship with Yahweh, who is “her God.” The judgment on Judah comes upon the officials, both political (3:3) and religious (3:4), as their behavior is the opposite of the LORD’s (3:5).

Judgment will come because they have not listened to the warning signs of judgment that the LORD has given the people (3:6-7). Does God abandon His people here?

### Exhortation: Wait for the LORD’s Judgment (3:8)

One would expect a statement of definite judgment here—but the exhortation is to a chosen people of God (a remnant!) to wait for the LORD to come with His judgment, when these things will happen. Why should they wait? It seems that they will be preserved through this day; this is a call for hope in the midst of the judgment, which will be unpacked in the next section.

## Restoration of a Purified Remnant (3:9-20)

Not only will God preserve a people through His judgment upon the nation and Judah, He will purify a people through His judgment. We see the reversal of Babel happen here (3:9-10), as the speech of the peoples will become one once again. Instead of the people being scattered and confused, they will be purified and brought near. The purpose of this gathering is to praise God (instead of at Babel where they sought to exalt themselves). The judgment upon the earth will mean that God has purified this remnant, taking away the things that bring shame (3:11). In a sense, judgment eliminates those who are not His people; the ones left are the ones who are humble and lowly, who seek refuge in the LORD, and who do not practice injustice (3:11-13). This remnant does not seem to be a high class of people; they are the low people. They have done nothing to earn God’s favor; it is chosen and saved by the grace of God alone. The day of judgment will purify the people to the point that they have joy and glory (3:14-17). The ultimate joy is not in the land but in the fact that the LORD is in their midst (3:15, 17) and rejoices over them. This restoration will bring great fame to the remnant (3:18-20), but this is after establishing the primacy of worship of God. However, this remnant is not the strong and powerful but the weak, the lame, the shamed (3:19). The glory goes to God!

## Why a Zephaniah?

One thing that is unique about Zephaniah's message concerning the day of the LORD is the cosmological dimension, found both in the judgment as well as the hope. Judgment will come upon Israel and the nations—as well as the face of the earth! However, worshippers will be gathered from their scattering about the earth, so there is an international flavor to the remnant. More than ethnic Israel will be worshipping God! In fact, that is a key point of advancement in Zephaniah's message as the foreshadowing of ultimate judgment comes with Babylon, as seen in the concept of the "remnant."

Zephaniah's message is not that God is going to restore all of Judah but that a "remnant" will be brought back, which will possess the land (2:7; 9). From 3:9-10, though, this remnant is not just Judah, though, as it involves worshippers from all nations. The Day of the LORD is going to feature judgment on the complacent and hypocritical, while it will feature the glorification of the remnant, the humble who call upon the LORD. Not only will the remnant survive, though, but God will purify them so that they might bring Him glory. As He delights in this people, He brings glory to Himself.

This was an important message for the nation of Judah to hear before they went into exile, which is one part of the Day of the LORD. They might think that God had abandoned them; that He had forgotten His promises. However, Zephaniah shows hope in that God still has a people; it is a remnant of Israel, not the whole nation, and it also includes other nations. Furthermore, the fact of judgment (as foreshadowed in the Babylonian exile) should not cause them to lose hope but remind them that God will use judgment to purify His remnant. They are to know that God is still in control and still has a people while in exile. Therefore, the remnant of God is called to repent and seek Him as it waits for the ultimate Day of the LORD. This same message applies to us today—in the midst of the chaos of the world, we are to know that God is calling out for Himself a remnant and will bring them into His presence.

## Connecting to the New Testament

Although one might not find many quotes of Zephaniah in the New Testament, the themes of Zephaniah are present in the New Testament, such as a remnant chosen by the grace of God (Romans 9-11), inclusion of a sheep of another fold (John 10), and people from all the nations (Revelation 5). Furthermore, until the Day of the LORD, this group (the visible church) will be a mixed multitude of grain and weeds (Matthew 13:24-30). One notes the similarities between Zephaniah and 2 Peter 3. Both talk about the nearness of the Day of the LORD and the cosmological implications that go about with this judgment, also noting that people will go about living their own lives, ignoring signs of judgment. In the meantime, one is called to seek humility and righteousness (Zeph 2:3) and holiness and godliness (2 Pet 3:11, 14). However, Peter also seems to answer a possible objection to people who have read a book like Zephaniah—the Day of the LORD was said to be near but it hasn't come! How do we deal with that? It is not that the LORD is slow but that He is merciful and gracious, as He is "slows" so that more will repent (2 Peter 3:9)—that the fullness of the remnant might come. His grace shines in His waiting.

## WHY IT MATTERS—APPLYING LESSONS FROM ZEPHANIAH

1. Consider the sins of the nation of Judah (compromising with other religions, not really thinking that God will do anything, deceit, violence, etc.). Where do you see similarities to these sins:

- In your own life?
  
- In the life of our community at NPC?

2. What might it mean to “seek righteousness and humility” (2:3) in Naperville? How can you do that as an individual? As a family? As a church?

3. How does the concept of a “remnant” in Israel affect how you view of the church community? The world as a whole? How should we minister in light of this reality (in outreach, in church discipline, in children’s ministries, etc.)?

4. The prophets use the coming judgment upon sin as a means to call for repentance. Is this something that we usually do in church? Should we use this in evangelism? If we do use it, how can we avoid abusing it as others have?

5. The remnant is described as lowly (lame, oppressed, shamed, etc.) but those terms will probably not be used to describe people living in the western suburbs. Can the privileged in the world be a part of this remnant? How can we be part of the remnant as the privileged in the world? How can we bring the gospel to our affluent society?

Good Questions to Apply to Zephaniah (as well as any of the Minor Prophets):  
Christ said that the Old Testament is about Him (John 5:39, 46; Luke 24:25-27). Where do you find Christ and the gospel in the book of Zephaniah?

People often say that the prophets are filled with judgment, not grace. Where do you find grace in the book of Zephaniah?