

Judah after Israel's Fall (725-585 BCE)
Zephaniah Prophecies about the Day of the Lord
Josiah's Reforms

Readings: *Zephaniah 1:1-3:20; 2 Chronicles 34:3-7*

Reflections:

- Zephaniah is a distant relative of Josiah. Both are fourth generation descendents of King Hezekiah. Most scholars date Zephaniah around 635 to 625 BCE during Josiah's reign. It appears that the young king leader needs the clear support of a prophetic voice like Zephaniah. His message will follow many of the same themes we have witnessed to date. He will have a particular focus on the Day of the Lord as the Spirit of God continues to point his people to the coming day of God's salvation.
- The prophecy of Zephaniah opens with the first warning of judgment. One of the warnings that the reader must take to heart is "...I will...punish those who are complacent...who think, 'the Lord will do nothing, either good or bad.'" This is a warning for those who over time may be lulled into the false notion that God really doesn't care what they do. God will judge and when he does, it falls swiftly!
- The Day of the Lord is a reference to God's swift judgment. The reason the term "day" is used is in contrast to month or year. It refers to the swift and decisive act of God to bring his people to account. "In the fire of his jealousy the whole world is consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth." This Day of Judgment looks forward to the final judgment of the entire planet. Now this prophecy was announced over 2500 years ago. And so we may wonder why God would warn everyone so long ago about something that was thousands of years away. The reason is that it gives us insight into the reality of God's ultimate judgment against sin and rebellious humanity. As we gaze into this revelation, it causes us to see the seriousness of God toward proud, violent rebellion. Although we may not be alive at the time of the Day of the Lord, it should still cause us to properly respect the God we will all face on the day we die and pass from this life to the next.
- What is the only proper response to squarely facing the reality of God's judgment against sin? "Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility, perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord's

anger.” We see again the priority of humility and seeking a true relationship with God. As Isaiah declared, there will come a shelter for those who seek the Lord. He is the servant of the Lord, one who by his suffering will open the way for salvation and provide a refuge for all who humbly seek God.

- The second section starting in Zephaniah 2:4 follows a pattern we have come to expect. It begins by listing all the enemies of Israel and the judgments against them for their oppression. Philistia, Moab and Ammon, Cush, and Assyria are all facing God’s ultimate judgment for the prideful evil they consistently perpetrate. Who is next in line? Judah. Listen to what is spoken of God’s people. In comparison, they are far more rebellious than their enemies. “She obeys no one, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the Lord, she does not draw near to her God.” Once again we see how the people are rejecting and refusing to live in true relationship with God. It is not first and foremost about their failure to maintain religious ritual but their failure to live in relationship. And who is held most fully responsible for this failure? Her officials, prophets and priests! It is the spiritual leadership of the nation that has ultimately failed. As we will see with the coming Messiah, it is the temple officials, the teachers and priests who will be the most strongly opposed to Jesus and will be the primary obstacle to the nation turning to God and understanding his heart as revealed by Jesus (see Matthew 23).
- God is not first and foremost a God of judgment. In the final verses of Zephaniah we again see God’s heart for forgiveness and restoration. Here we see a vision that will one day be fulfilled by the people of God’s new kingdom. “Then I will purify the lips of the peoples that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him shoulder to shoulder. ...But I will leave within you the meek and humble, who trust in the name of the Lord. ..They will eat and lie down and no one will make them afraid.” What a beautiful picture of God’s blessing on those who truly seek him with humble hearts. “The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.”
- Zephaniah concludes with a promise of hope for all those who are true to God: “I will rescue the lame and gather those who have been scattered.... At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home. I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth.” Israel will one day be restored to their land but only to be taken captive to a new enemy, the Roman Empire. It will only be when the Messiah comes and reveals the new kingdom, a spiritual kingdom for the poor in spirit, the weak, and humble, that those who truly seek God will be gathered from all the nations and find their home.
- We return to 2 Chronicles 34:3-7 to read about the young king Josiah and his leadership to turn the nation back to God. In the eighth year (sixteen years old) of his reign, while he was still young, he began to seek the God of his father David. David is referenced here because of his incredible heart for God and desire to truly live in relationship and friendship with God. “In his twelfth year (eighteen years old) he began to purge Judah

and Jerusalem of high places, Asherah poles, carved idols, and cast images.” We see three things. First, that Josiah began with having a true heart for God. As he matured, he passionately sought God with the same passion he had learned that David had. As he grew in relationship with God, he increasingly took on an active leadership role to change his nation. The story of Josiah should give all Christ-followers an incredible vision for children, senior high students and young adults. Each of these stages of life has incredible potential with God.