

The Message of the Minor Prophets The Message of Zephaniah

[English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

Introduction – the context of Zephaniah

Our subject today is the message of Zephaniah, one of the twelve so-called minor prophets. These twelve books appear in the Bible in approximately their chronological order, and Zephaniah's is number nine. The last three, however, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, prophesied when the children of Israel, or at least a small remnant of them, had returned to their land after their time of captivity in Babylon. It follows, therefore, that Zephaniah's was one of the last prophetic voices to be heard before that cataclysmic period in their history.

If we are to appreciate the context in which Zephaniah prophesied, then, we must go back to the final days of the kingdom of Judah, when God was about to draw a line under the history of His persistently unfaithful and backsliding people. In a clearly declared judicial act, God was about to place His people under the authority of the gentile king of the Babylonians, Nebuchadnezzar¹, marking the start of what the Bible calls "the times of the Gentiles"².

Let's read chapter 1 verse 1, which introduces us to the prophet, and then look a little at the historical context in which he wrote. I'm reading from the English Standard version.

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.

As we read through the account of the kings of Judah, we can't help but notice how the depressing tale of departure from obedience to the Lord, which had been the norm from the start in the northern kingdom of Israel, became increasingly the norm in the southern kingdom of Judah also. In its latter years, when things in the southern kingdom were clearly on the slide, there were two kings who bucked the trend. They were outstanding, glorious exceptions, shining lights who stood out against the darkness which both preceded and followed them. These two heroes of faith were, firstly, Hezekiah and, secondly, his great grandson, Josiah. Hezekiah's reign is described in 2nd Kings chapters 18 to 20, and in 2nd Chronicles chapters 29 to 32. The accounts of Josiah's reign are found in 2nd Kings chapters 22 and 23, and in 2nd Chronicles chapters 34 and 35.

The verse we've just read states that the prophet Zephaniah was the great great grandson of someone called Hezekiah. It is quite possible, therefore, that he was a descendant of the earlier of these two godly kings. Zephaniah is the only prophet whose book provides us with a detailed genealogy like this, reaching back four generations. We can't be certain as to whether the Hezekiah mentioned in the genealogy, the Hezekiah he was descended from, was in fact king Hezekiah, but the fact that a genealogy is given at all, certainly suggests to me that they were one and the same. At any rate, we do know that at the time Zephaniah prophesied, the later of those two kings, that is, king Josiah, was on the throne.

Josiah became king at the age of eight. He was to reign for 31 years, and it was in the eighth of these that the scripture says that he began to seek the God of his father David. In the twelfth year of his reign, he set about the mammoth task of purging the country of the idols which were on every street corner³.

Josiah's campaign to bring about a great revival, and call the people back to the Lord, the beginning of which is described in 2nd Chronicles 34 verses 3 to 7, was thorough, exhaustive and tireless. It even extended a considerable way into the northern kingdom⁴, seemingly beyond those parts which had previously been annexed by king Asa of Judah⁵. This extension seemingly met with no opposition, perhaps because the people of the affected area had already, by then, been taken into captivity by the Assyrians.

The stark warning to Judah

Let us now take a look at some of what Zephaniah wrote. The book begins with some very strong stuff indeed. Here are verses 2 to 6 of chapter 1:

'I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth,' declares the LORD. '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. '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, 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, those who have turned back from following the LORD, who do not seek the LORD or enquire of him.'

Verses 2 and 3, which include the words "I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth" speak of a full and final judgement, which is surely yet to come. Peter writes about this in his second letter:

...The day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Peter chapter 3 verses 12-13).

Perhaps you have sometimes looked at the stars, and seen two stars which appear close together in the sky. Yet one of those stars may in fact be many times more distant from us than the other. In a similar way, the Bible may sometimes speak about two events, in the same breath, as it were. And yet one of those events is soon to take place, and the other lies in the distant future. I believe this is the case with these opening verses of chapter 1. Zephaniah speaks first of God's final judgement of the earth before addressing the "here and now" of the kingdom of Judah as it was when he wrote.

A little later on in this talk, we will look more at what I will call "the long view" of Zephaniah's prophecy. If verses 2 and 3 take the long view, verses 4 to 6 relate to the people of Judah in the present, as Zephaniah spoke. Their offence against God was the familiar one, which goes back to the earliest days of the nation's history. They were worshipping other gods, in defiance of the first of the ten commandments⁶.

In verse 5, which refers to those who bow down to the Lord, and yet swear by Milcom, is what I suspect grieves the Lord's heart most of all, that is, an attempt to mix up the worship of the true God with what is false and obnoxious to Him. Milcom is described elsewhere as "the abomination of the Ammonites"⁷.

The rest of chapter 1, verses 7 to 18, continues, for the most part, the theme that God will judge Judah. It contains specific references to Jerusalem, to the Fish Gate and the Second Quarter in verse 10, to “the Mortar” in verse 11, and to the entire city in verse 12. At the very end of the chapter, the prophet returns to the theme of total destruction, involving the whole earth. The judgement detailed in these verses, however, is scheduled for a specific future day, described as “the day of the LORD.”

The expression “the day of the LORD”, traditionally written with the word “Lord” in small capitals to signify the special name of God, Yahweh, also occurs in the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Amos and Obadiah, as well as in several New Testament books. I see this as another aspect of “the long view”, looking forward to the final vindication of God and the silencing of all rebellion against Him, yet with the understanding that, whilst its complete fulfilment will only come at the end, there will be partial fulfilments in the meantime, and the force and effect of it are meant to be felt at all times.

We might ask at what point during Josiah’s 31 year reign did Zephaniah prophesy? Unfortunately, historians and archaeologists cannot tell us this. However, I cannot imagine that the uncompromising condemnation of the nation, which chapter 1 of Zephaniah contains, would have seemed appropriate after Josiah’s revival was under way. It seems much more likely to me that Zephaniah prophesied while Josiah was still a youth, indeed that it may well have been the very words of his prophecy which touched the heart of the teenage king, perhaps which caused him to begin to seek the Lord, and encouraged him to set about the enormous task of rooting out all the idolatry in the land, and the wickedness which went with it.

The warning mixed with mercy

As we move on to chapter 2 of the prophecy, the tone seems to soften. The first three verses read:

Gather together, yes, gather, O shameless nation, 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. 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.

As we go through the long list of judgements announced in chapter 1, it seems that it is too late for repentance. The matter is already settled, and the blow is about to fall. But now there is a glimmer of hope, and the door of salvation is not yet completely shut. If only the people will seek the Lord, perhaps they will be hidden on the day of His anger.

This reminds me of the book of Jonah. The message Jonah was given to take to the people of Nineveh was, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”⁸ End of story, one would think. And yet, when the people repented, from the king on his throne downwards, the scripture says that:

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it (Jonah chapter 3 verse 10).

It is ever God’s way to be merciful.

The judgements on the other nations

The remainder of chapter 2 is occupied with judgements upon Judah's neighbour nations. Verses 4 to 7 are addressed to the Philistines, mentioning all but one (Gath) of their five principal cities⁹. Verses 8 to 11 deal with Moab and Ammon together. These two nations, originally descended from Abraham's nephew Lot¹⁰, lived to the east of the Jordan river. Verse 12 makes a brief mention of the Cushites, usually understood to be a people living south of Egypt, and predicts their defeat, and verses 13 to 15 predict the downfall of Assyria and its capital Nineveh.

In what is said here specifically about the Moabites and the Ammonites, and perhaps by implication about the other nations mentioned, their predicted downfall is on account of how they have treated God's people. Also, verse 7 states quite clearly that the Philistines' territory will become the possession of "the remnant of the house of Judah."

God will never abandon His commitment to His earthly people. Though we may see, in the fearful prophecies of doom in chapter 1, that they seem destined for certain destruction, yet God will ultimately have mercy upon them. In chapter 2, the tide is turning, and as we reach the last seven verses of the book, from chapter 3 verse 14, the transformation in their fortunes is complete.

Ultimate blessing for Judah and Jerusalem

At the end of chapter 2, the city on which God is pronouncing judgements is Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, but as we move into chapter 3, it seems clear that the focus has shifted back to Jerusalem, and that we have in this final chapter a promise that God will cleanse Jerusalem, rooting out all who are rebellious against Him, and finally showering His people with blessings. Those final seven verses read:

Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away the judgements against you; he has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: 'Fear not, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak. 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. I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival, so that you will no longer suffer reproach. 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. 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.

Verse 17 is my favourite verse:

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.

But I prefer the Darby translation:

He will rest in his love.

The verse paints a picture of the future day, when God's love will find its full satisfaction as God dwells in the midst of His people. The full meaning of this can only be understood in the light of the New Testament. Here in Zephaniah, we see a people whose sins have been put away. "The LORD

has taken away the judgements against you”, says verse 15, but we are not told here the full story of how God has brought this about. Like all Old Testament prophecy, it looks forward to Christ¹², and only finds its fulfilment in Him! Only by the blood of Jesus, shed on the cross at Calvary, can anyone’s sins be put away from the sight of God.

The long view

I said earlier in this talk that we would return to what I call “the long view.” I said this in the context of the opening verses of the book, which prophesy a full and final destruction of the entire earth and of all living things. My logic here is simple. Whilst terrible things have happened in the history of this world, it has not yet been totally destroyed. Therefore, when Zephaniah says that it is going to be, then either he is wrong, or the prophecy is yet to be fulfilled.

Now, for me and for the entire Truth for Today team, the deep conviction that the Bible is never wrong is part of the very foundations of our faith. Therefore, I conclude that the things which Zephaniah predicts in those opening verses speak of what is, today in the 21st century, still future.

There is perhaps another possibility, and some, who share my conviction about the inerrancy of scripture, might argue for it here. Do we ever find, in the Bible, the way of speaking which is known as hyperbole? According to Google:

A hyperbole is a figure of speech that uses extreme exaggeration to make a point or create a dramatic effect. It's not meant to be taken literally, but rather to emphasize a feeling, idea, or situation.

Could the opening verses of the book be extreme exaggeration, and not meant to be taken literally? Well, as I say, some may view it in that way, but as for me, I can only say that I can’t honestly convince myself that this interpretation of the verses is credible.

By my understanding, the predictions of the total destruction of the earth, which we find in the opening verses, and of the settled and permanent peace of Israel, with no enemies in sight, which we find at the close of the book, can only refer to the final unfolding of the purposes of God, as elaborated upon in other prophetic books of the Bible.

The message of Zephaniah for you and me

In conclusion, what are the lessons which we today should take away from the book of Zephaniah? In answer to that question, I would venture to say, the lesson of Zephaniah, even if we think it doesn’t apply to us, is to stop living our lives as though God were not there, and as though He were powerless to intervene in them. On the contrary, we should recognise that He is very much there, that He is very able to intervene in our lives, and that He is very likely to do so if we continue to ignore Him.

The character of God, as revealed in this book, reminds me greatly of a verse in Paul’s letter to the Romans, chapter 11 verse 22, the first part of which reads:

Note then the kindness and the severity of God.

In Zephaniah’s prophecy, stern warnings abound. We must ever speak reverently of God; and we must never treat sin lightly. The culture in which we live makes light of many things which God, in the scriptures, tells us that He strongly disapproves of. If we allow our thinking to be moulded by that culture, then we will grieve His heart.

Thus far, the “severity” part of the verse just quoted. But what also shines out in Zephaniah is that other side of the coin, the extraordinary patience and longsuffering with which God is prepared to

forgive and forgive and forgive. What place does this God, the God of Zephaniah, really hold in each of our hearts?

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on “The message of Zephaniah” in our series “The message of the minor prophets” talk number T1441.

¹Jer 27:6-8 ²Luke 21:24 ³2 Chron 34:3 ⁴2 Chron 34:5 ⁵2 Chron 15:8 ⁶Ex 20:2-3 ⁷1 Kings 11:5
⁸Jonah 3:4 ⁹Josh 13:3 ¹⁰Gen 19:36-38 ¹¹1 Peter 1:10-11

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