



The Book Of Zephaniah

Tells of God's Judgments
And His Punishments

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Zephaniah

OVERVIEW

Hope is the silver shaft of sun breaking through the storm-darkened sky, words of comfort in the intensive care unit, a letter from across the sea, the first spring bird perched on a snow-covered twig, and the finish line in sight. It is a rainbow, a song, a loving touch. Hope is knowing God and resting in his love.

As God's prophet, Zephaniah was bound to speak the truth—this he did clearly, thundering certain judgment and horrible punishment for all who would defy the Lord. God's awful wrath would sweep away everything in the land and destroy it. "I will sweep away both men and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea.

The wicked will have only heaps of rubble when I cut off man from the face of the earth,' declares the LORD" (Zeph. 1:3). No living thing in the land would escape. And that terrible day was coming soon: "The great day of the LORD is near—near and coming quickly. Listen! The cry on the day of the LORD will be bitter, the shouting of the warrior there. That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness" (Zeph. 1:14-15). We can sense the oppression and depression his listeners must have felt. They were judged guilty, and they were doomed.

But in the midst of this terrible pronouncement, there is hope. The first chapter of Zephaniah's prophecy is filled with terror. In chapter two, however, a whispered promise appears. "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" Zeph. 2:3). And a few verses later we read of a "remnant of the house of Judah" (Zeph. 2:7) who will be restored.

Finally in chapter three, the quiet refrain grows to a crescendo as God's salvation and deliverance for those who are faithful to him is declared. "Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy.

The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm” (Zeph. 3:14-15). This is true hope, grounded in the knowledge of God’s justice and in his love for his people.

As you read Zephaniah, listen carefully to the words of judgment. God does not take sin lightly, and it will be punished. But be encouraged by the words of hope—our God reigns, and he will rescue his own. Decide to be part of that faithful remnant of souls who humbly worship and obey the living Lord.

THE BLUEPRINT

Zephaniah warned the people of Judah that if they refused to repent, the entire nation, including the beloved city of Jerusalem, would be lost. The people knew that God would eventually bless them, but Zephaniah made it clear that there would be judgment first, then blessing. This judgment would not be merely punishment for sin, but also a process of purifying the people. Though we live in a fallen world surrounded by evil, we can hope in the perfect kingdom of God to come and we can allow any punishment that touches us now to purify us from sin.

1. The day of wrath (Zeph. 1:1-3:8)

The Lord gave these messages to Zephaniah when Josiah son of Amon was king of Judah. Zephaniah was the son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah.

[2] "I will sweep away everything in all your land," says the Lord. [3] "I will sweep away both people and animals alike. Even the birds of the air and the fish in the sea will die. I will reduce the wicked to heaps of rubble, along with the rest of humanity," says the Lord. [4] "I will crush Judah and Jerusalem with my fist and destroy every last trace of their Baal worship. I will put an end to all the idolatrous priests, so that even the memory of them will disappear. [5] For they go up to their roofs and bow to the sun, moon, and stars. They claim to follow the Lord, but then they worship Molech, too. So now I will destroy them! [6] And I will destroy those who used to worship me but now no longer do. They no longer ask for the Lord's guidance or seek my blessings."

[7] Stand in silence in the presence of the Sovereign Lord, for the awesome day of the Lord's judgment has come. The Lord has prepared his people for a great slaughter and has chosen their executioners. [8] "On that day of judgment," says the Lord, "I will punish the leaders and princes of Judah and all those following pagan customs. [9] Yes, I will punish those who participate in pagan worship ceremonies, and those who steal and kill to fill their masters' homes with loot.

[10] "On that day," says the Lord, "a cry of alarm will come from the Fish Gate and echo throughout the newer Mishneh section of the city. And a great crashing sound will come from the surrounding hills. [11] Wail in sorrow, all you who live in the market area, for all who buy and sell there will die.

[12] "I will search with lanterns in Jerusalem's darkest corners to find and punish those who sit contented in their sins, indifferent to the Lord, thinking he will do nothing at all to them. [13] They are the very ones whose property will be plundered by the enemy, whose homes will be ransacked. They will never have a chance to live in the new homes they have built. They will never drink wine from the vineyards they have planted.

[14] "That terrible day of the Lord is near. Swiftly it comes—a day when strong men will cry bitterly. [15] It is a day when the Lord's anger will be poured out. It is a day of terrible distress and anguish, a day of ruin and desolation, a day of darkness and gloom, of clouds, blackness, [16] trumpet calls, and battle cries. Down go the walled cities and strongest battlements!

[17] "Because you have sinned against the Lord, I will make you as helpless as a blind man searching for a path. Your blood will be poured out into the dust, and your bodies will lie there rotting on the ground."

[18] Your silver and gold will be of no use to you on that day of the Lord's anger. For the whole land will be devoured by the fire of his jealousy. He will make a terrifying end of all the people on earth.

[2:1] Gather together and pray, you shameless nation. [2] Gather while there is still time, before judgment begins and your opportunity is blown away like chaff. Act now, before the fierce fury of the Lord falls and the terrible day of the Lord's anger begins. [3] Beg the Lord to save you—all you who are humble, all you who uphold justice. Walk humbly and do what is right. Perhaps even yet the Lord will protect you from his anger on that day of destruction.

[4] Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron—these Philistine cities, too, will be rooted out and left in desolation. [5] And how terrible it will be for you Philistines who live along the coast and in the land of Canaan, for this judgment is against you, too! The Lord will destroy you until not one of you is left. [6] The coastal area will become a pasture, a place of shepherd camps and enclosures for sheep.

[7] The few survivors of the tribe of Judah will pasture there. They will lie down to rest in the abandoned houses in Ashkelon. For the Lord their God will visit his people in kindness and restore their prosperity again.

[8] "I have heard the taunts of the people of Moab and Ammon, mocking my people and invading their borders. [9] Now, as surely as I live," says the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, "Moab and Ammon will be destroyed as completely as Sodom and Gomorrah. Their land will become a place of stinging nettles, salt pits, and eternal desolation. Those of my people who are left will plunder them and take their land."

[10] They will receive the wages of their pride, for they have scoffed at the people of the Lord Almighty. [11] The Lord will terrify them as he destroys all the gods in the land. Then people from nations around the world will worship the Lord, each in their own land.

[12] "You Ethiopians will also be slaughtered by my sword," says the Lord.

[13] And the Lord will strike the lands of the north with his fist. He will destroy Assyria and make its great capital, Nineveh, a desolate wasteland, parched like a desert. [14] The city that once was so proud will become a pasture for sheep and cattle. All sorts of wild animals will settle there. Owls of many kinds will live among the ruins of its palaces, hooting from the gaping windows. Rubble will block all the doorways, and the cedar paneling will lie open to the wind and weather.

[15] This is the fate of that boisterous city, once so secure. "In all the world there is no city as great as I," it boasted. But now, look how it has become an utter ruin, a place where animals live! Everyone passing that way will laugh in derision or shake a defiant fist.

[3:1] How terrible it will be for rebellious, polluted Jerusalem, the city of violence and crime. [2] It proudly refuses to listen even to the voice of the Lord. No one can tell it anything; it refuses all correction. It does not trust in the Lord or draw near to its God.

[3] Its leaders are like roaring lions hunting for their victims—out for everything they can get. Its judges are like ravenous wolves at evening time, who by dawn have left no trace of their prey. [4] Its prophets are arrogant liars seeking their own gain. Its priests defile the Temple by disobeying God's laws. [5] But the Lord is still there in the city, and he does no wrong. Day by day his justice is more evident, but no one takes notice—the wicked know no shame.

[6] "I have wiped out many nations, devastating their fortress walls and towers. Their cities are now deserted; their streets are in silent ruin. There are no survivors to even tell what happened. [7] I thought, 'Surely they will have reverence for me now! Surely they will listen to my warnings, so I won't need to strike again.' But no; however much I punish them, they continue their evil practices from dawn till dusk and dusk till dawn." [8] So now the Lord says: "Be patient; the time is coming soon when I will stand up and accuse these evil nations. For it is my decision to gather together the kingdoms of the earth and pour out my fiercest anger and fury on them. All the earth will be devoured by the fire of my jealousy.

2. The day of hope (Zeph. 3:9-20)

"On that day I will purify the lips of all people, so that everyone will be able to worship the Lord together. [10] My scattered people who live beyond the rivers of Ethiopia will come to present their offerings. [11] And then you will no longer need to be ashamed of yourselves, for you will no longer be rebels against me. I will remove all the proud and arrogant people from among you. There will be no pride on my holy mountain.

[12] Those who are left will be the lowly and the humble, for it is they who trust in the name of the Lord. [13] The people of Israel who survive will do no wrong to each other, never telling lies or deceiving one another. They will live peaceful lives, lying down to sleep in safety; there will be no one to make them afraid."

[14] Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! [15] For the Lord will remove his hand of judgment and will disperse the armies of your enemy. And the Lord himself, the King of Israel, will live among you! At last your troubles will be over, and you will fear disaster no more.

[16] On that day the announcement to Jerusalem will be, "Cheer up, Zion! Don't be afraid! [17] For the Lord your God has arrived to live among you. He is a mighty savior. He will rejoice over you with great gladness. With his love, he will calm all your fears. He will exult over you by singing a happy song."

[18] "I will gather you who mourn for the appointed festivals; you will be disgraced no more. [19] And I will deal severely with all who have oppressed you. I will save the weak and helpless ones; I will bring together those who were chased away. I will give glory and renown to my former exiles, who have been mocked and shamed. [20] On that day I will gather you together and bring you home again. I will give you a good name, a name of distinction among all the nations of the earth. They will praise you as I restore your fortunes before their very eyes. I, the Lord, have spoken!"

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Day of Judgment

EXPLANATION:

Destruction was coming because Judah had forsaken the Lord. The people worshiped Baal, Molech, and the starry hosts. Even the priests mixed pagan practices with faith in God. God's punishment for sin was on the way.

IMPORTANCE:

To escape God's judgment we must listen to him, accept his correction, trust him, and seek his guidance. If we accept him as our Lord, we can escape his condemnation.

THEME: Indifference to God

EXPLANATION:

Although there had been occasional attempts at renewal, Judah had no sorrow for her sins. The people were prosperous, and they no longer cared about God. God's demands for righteous living seemed irrelevant to Judah, whose security and wealth made her complacent.

IMPORTANCE:

Don't let material comfort be a barrier to your commitment to God. Prosperity can produce an attitude of proud self-sufficiency. The only antidote is to admit that money won't save us and that we cannot save ourselves. Only God can save us and cure our indifference to spiritual matters.

THEME: Day of cheer

EXPLANATION:

The day of judgment will also be a day of cheer. God will judge all those who mistreat his people. He will purify his people, purging away all sin and evil. God will restore his people and give them hope.

IMPORTANCE:

When people are purged of sin, there is great relief and hope. No matter how difficult our experience now, we can look forward to the day of celebration when God will completely restore us. It will truly be our day of cheer.

TIMELINE

Zephaniah becomes a prophet; Josiah becomes king of Judah 640 B.C.

Jeremiah becomes a prophet 627

Book of the Law found in the temple 622

Zephaniah's ministry ends 621

Habakkuk becomes a prophet 612

Josiah dies in battle 609

First captives taken to Babylon 605

Babylon's second attack on Judah 597 Judah (the southern kingdom) falls 586

An invitation is given to open your heart's door.

Rev. 3:20

Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.

To ask Jesus to come into your heart please pray this Prayer:

Dear Lord Jesus, I believe you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. I ask you to forgive me of my sins and coming into my heart. I accept you as savior and will follow you as Lord. Amen.

References:

Holy Bible: King James Translation

Holy Bible: Living Bible Translation

Additional comments and charts are taken from: *Life Application Study Bible*. Illinois: Tyndale House 2007. Print