

Zephaniah

- **Zephaniah** means “Jehovah hides,” or “Jehovah has hidden.”
- **(1:1)** Zephaniah was of royal blood, the great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah.
- The message of Zephaniah is directed at Judah during the Babylonian period, a few decades before the ferocious Babylonian armies would invade and level Jerusalem (586 B.C.), carrying away its survivors into exile.

Historical Context

- Zephaniah preached to the people of Judah in the years following Manasseh’s reign. It is doubtful that at any other period of its history Judah had a more wicked ruler than Manasseh.
- Manasseh’s name means “one who forgets,” which he did in regard to God, and all that his father King Hezekiah had done in the reforms to restore faithfulness to God among the people of Judah.

Hezekiah's son, Manasseh, was only twelve years old when he succeeded his father to the throne of Judea. In no way did he resemble his father whose piety and faith were not equaled by any other king who followed him. The young ruler, born of a late marriage, was immediately surrounded by the clique of court-notables who, during Hezekiah's reign, had gone into hiding. Manasseh's weak character and susceptibility to idolatry made him a willing tool in the ruthless and selfish hands of these men. Despite the ceaseless efforts and admonitions of the greatest prophets of all times, Isaiah and others, the people of Judea followed in the evil steps of their king. The temples and altars of the idol-worshippers which had been destroyed under Hezekiah were reconstructed. Even into the Holy Temple they brought idols, and some of the basic concepts of Jewish thought and tradition were falsified and distorted. A complete reversal to idolatry as it had been practiced under King Ahaz, Hezekiah's father, threw Judea into turmoil of immorality and lawlessness. The believers in the one and only God were persecuted, and even the sacred person of the prophet Isaiah was not spared. When he came out sharply against the evil ways of King Manasseh and his notables, Isaiah was murdered.

Manasseh suppressed the study of the Torah because he knew that as long as the spiritual structure of the tradition stood firm, his throne was not safe. Again and again God sent his prophets to warn the king of the coming punishment, but the warnings were given in vain. Manasseh, who unfortunately ruled longer than most Jewish kings, sank lower and lower into the most repulsive cults and witchcraft of the heathen peoples, and “filled Jerusalem from one end to the other” with the blood of the innocent (2 Kings 21; 2 Chronicles 33:1-9). Almost single-handedly he pulled down the whole spiritual structure which his father had set up for the people; and even though the king personally repented in his later years, he was never able to make amends for the damage he had done in the first decades of his evil rule (2 Chronicles 33:10-20).

- Manasseh’s son Amon followed in his father’s footsteps and was murdered by his own servants (**2 Kings 21:19-23**).

- Josiah, Amon's son, became king at eight-years-old, and is considered the last good king of Judah. Zephaniah prophesied during his reign (640 -609 B.C.), and many believe that the prophet's message helped to spur the incredible reforms that Josiah enacted (**2 Kings 22-23**). But it would be too little too late, as Judah's evils and unrepentant heart would make God's judgment inevitable.

2 Kings 23:25-27.

Before Josiah, there was no king like him who turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him. ²⁶ However, the Lord did not turn from the fierceness of His great wrath with which His anger burned against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked Him. ²⁷ The Lord said, "I will remove Judah also from My sight, as I have removed Israel. And I will cast off Jerusalem, this city which I have chosen, and the temple of which I said, 'My name shall be there.'"

2 Kings 21:10-15

¹⁰ Now the Lord spoke through His servants the prophets, saying, ¹¹ "Because Manasseh king of Judah has done these abominations, having done wickedly more than all the Amorites did who were before him, and has also made Judah sin with his idols; ¹² therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Behold, I am bringing such calamity on Jerusalem and Judah, that whoever hears of it, both his ears will tingle. ¹³ I will stretch over Jerusalem the line of Samaria and the plummet of the house of Ahab, and I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down. ¹⁴ I will abandon the remnant of My inheritance and deliver them into the hand of their enemies, and they will become as plunder and spoil to all their enemies; ¹⁵ because they have done evil in My sight, and have been provoking Me to anger since the day their fathers came from Egypt, even to this day.'"

Message:

The "Day of the Lord"

- The phrase "day of the Lord" usually brings to Christians' minds the events that take place at the end of history - but its usage has a much wider and richer history in Scripture.
- It is often closely associated with the phrase "that day."
- One key to understanding these phrases is to note that they always identify a span of time during which God personally intervenes in history, directly or indirectly, to accomplish some specific aspect of His plan.
- The phrase "the day of the Lord" is used often in the Old Testament (e.g. Isaiah 2:12; 13:6, 9; Ezekiel 13:5, 30:3; Joel 1:15, 2:1,11,31; 3:14; Amos 5:18,20; Obadiah 15; Zephaniah 1:7,14; Zechariah 14:1; Malachi. 4:5)
- It is also used often in the New Testament (e.g. Acts 2:20; 1 Corinthians 5:5; 2 Corinthians 1:14; 1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:2; 2 Peter 3:10). It is also alluded to in other passages (Rev. 6:17; 16:14).

- Zephaniah, more than any other minor prophet, uses “the Day of the Lord” as the central motif of his message:
 - (1:7) “The day of the Lord is near...”
 - (1:14) “the great day of the Lord is coming very quickly...”
 - (1:15) “A day of wrath is that day,
A day of trouble and distress,
A day of destruction and desolation,
A day of darkness and gloom,
A day of clouds and thick darkness”
 - (1:16) “A day of trumpet and battle cry...”
 - (1:18) “No deliverance...Complete...terrifying end to all the inhabitants of the earth...”
 - (2:2) “day of...burning anger (consuming) the chaff”
 - (3:8) “day when (God) will rise up as a witness against the nations...”
 - (3:8) “A day when the earth will be devoured by the fire of My Zeal...”

The Day of the Lord then shifts to a day of Salvation (3:9-20)

“Then I will purify the speech of all people, so that everyone can worship the Lord together. ¹⁰ My scattered people who live beyond the rivers of Ethiopia will come to present their offerings.

- ¹¹ On that day you will no longer need to be ashamed, for you will no longer be rebels against me. I will remove all proud and arrogant people from among you. There will be no more haughtiness on my holy mountain. ¹² Those who are left will be the lowly and humble, for it is they who trust in the name of the Lord. ¹³ The remnant of Israel will do no wrong; they will never tell lies or deceive one another. They will eat and sleep in safety, and no one will 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 never again fear disaster.
- ¹⁶ On that day the announcement to Jerusalem will be, “Cheer up, Zion! Don’t be afraid! ¹⁷ For the Lord your God is living among you. He is a mighty savior. He will take delight in you with gladness. With his love, he will calm all your fears. He will rejoice over you with joyful songs.” 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 fame to my former exiles, wherever they 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, as I restore your fortunes before their very eyes.

I, the Lord, have spoken!”

Zephaniah demonstrates the two spheres of God’s judgment and restoration. As dreadful as God is in judgment, He is all the more gracious in restoration.

God, The Divine Warrior: Destroyer and Deliverer

- **Terrible Destroyer**
 - “Sweeps away everything” (1:2)
 - Consumes Mankind “by the fire of His jealousy (1:18; 3:8)
 - Pours out “blood like dust” and “flesh like dung” (1:17)
- **Mighty Deliverer**
 - “Warrior who saves” (3:17)
 - “With His love He will quiet all your fears” (3:17)
 - “On that day you will no longer need to be ashamed” (3:11)

Application:

The Hyperbolic Language of the Prophets (see Joel 2:28-32 and Acts 2:15-21)

2 Peter 3:10-13

¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.

¹¹ Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, ¹² looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! ¹³ But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.

The Worldly Church and The Persecuted Church

The church today might apply the theology of Zephaniah from two alternate contexts. First, consider the church that is worldly, the church that lies complacent in attitude and action. Is this church exempt from discipline and judgment? There is a degree to which many in the church have absorbed a worldly form of religious syncretism. While most in Western Christianity do not follow pagan gods, the length to which the world infiltrates the church is striking. How far off is this from the situation Zephaniah describes in 1:4–9? Additionally, many within the church are complacent, settled down comfortably, and indifferent to the discerning eye of the Lord. Many live as if God will never act, whether by blessing or curse. How different is this from the situation Zephaniah describes in 1:12–13? Perhaps to this church, the message of Zephaniah is primarily one of prophetic warning. However, for another kind of church, the persecuted church, Zephaniah brings a message of hope and salvation. For the persecuted church, complacency is not an option, and the world offers little temptation to syncretism. With the number of persecuted believers higher in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries than in any other time in history, the message of Zephaniah is more powerful and relevant than ever. To the multitude of believers living under the tyranny of political and religious persecution, the message of Zephaniah is clear: “Therefore wait for Me—Yahweh your God is among you, a warrior who saves” (3:8, 17a). – Alan Fuhr