

Zephaniah

Read Zephaniah 1:1. Note 2 things. Zephaniah went back 4 generations to identify himself. No other prophet traced his lineage that far back. We cannot be sure it seems that Zephaniah was saying he was the great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah, the last godly king before he was born. The kings following Hezekiah were godless men who led the nation further and further away from God. Read II Kings 21:1-2. That passage goes on to describe how he rebuilt the places of idol worship his father had torn down and erected altars to Baal. He desecrated the temple by erecting altars to false gods within its courts. When Zephaniah began his ministry things were anything but spiritually good in Israel.

Zephaniah's introduction says he prophesied during the reign of Josiah. Josiah assumed the throne when he was just 8 years old. When he was 18 a copy of the Law was found when they were cleaning the temple that had fallen into disrepair during the reigns of the kings just before him. Josiah insisted that the Law be read, proper worship re-established and the idols that had become a part of Jewish life be destroyed. Nothing in Zechariah hints at that revival so it is assumed that Zechariah performed his ministry before Josiah began his reforms. That means that Zephaniah actually saw a positive response to his message.

Zephaniah's book is out of historical order of when the books by the Minor Prophets were written. With Zephaniah we have the last of the books written by a pre-captivity prophet. Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi all wrote after the Israelites returned from their Babylonian captivity. It seems Zephaniah was placed last among the pre-exile prophets because he quoted heavily from the prophets that preceded him. He pulled together the writings of those who came before him and applied their message to his time. Zephaniah serves as an excellent summary of the primary message of the books which preceded his.

The key to Zephaniah is his use of, or description of, the term "Day of the Lord." Immediately after introducing himself in verse 1 Zephaniah jumped into the message God had given, Read Zephaniah 1:2-3.

God went on in verse 4 to say He would stretch out His hand against Judah and all who live in Jerusalem. We know the sinfulness of the people so they deserved judgment. That warning takes on significantly deeper meaning when we remember that Judah represented His people and Jerusalem His city. Sometimes we think that because we are Christians we are exempt from God's discipline. The sinful world needs His judgment, not us. Because we are His children He is quick to discipline us so we will continue to grow spiritually as He wants. Just because we belong to Him does not mean we can get away with sin. Because our sins may not be as serious as some we must never think they are acceptable to or overlooked by God.

The description of the coming judgment reminds us of the judgment in the days of Noah although here it is even more severe, even the fish are included. Read this chapter and see the seriousness of the coming judgment. It does not approximate the judgment that came from the Babylonians. Remember, the description of the "Day of the Lord" had a double prophetic

meaning. On one level it spoke of God's imminent judgment on Israel. On a deeper level it spoke of the final judgment described in Revelation. This sinful world will be completely destroyed. We will have a new heaven and earth.

Verse 5 is a condemnation of three categories on individuals. First there are "those who bow down on the roofs to worship the starry host." Literally those who have set out to worship false gods. Today he would say, "Those who worship money, power, success, sexual sins etc" They are the false gods that control the hearts and minds of Americans today.

The second group is described as "those who bow down and swear by the Lord and who also swear by Molek." Molek was one of the gods of the Ammonites. This group wanted to worship both Jehovah and the gods of this world. They went through the rituals of the Israelites and then went to the high places to worship false gods. Today we talk about those who have one faith represented by worship on Sunday and those who have a second faith represented by the way they live on Monday. Today we have Christians who worship God Sunday morning and then check their horoscope for the day, a practice specifically forbidden by God. Today we have Christians who worship Jehovah on Sunday and engage in the Hindu practice of Yoga on Monday.

The third group is described as "those who turn back from following the Lord and neither seek the Lord nor inquire of him." That is the description of those folks who used to be active in church but do not worship anywhere now. These are the people who gave up on church because they were too busy doing other things they thought were more important. They are the ones who gave up on God because He did not respond the way they wanted or as quickly as they wanted so they assumed God failed them.

Two other verses in God's description of His judgment stand out. Read verse 7. There are two thoughts in connection to this. First we need at times to be quiet and let God speak. Worship can often be one sided with our telling God what we want and what He should do. We must stop to listen to His Spirit speaking to us. The other aspect of it is that when God tells us we have sinned all we can do it be silent. We can seek to justify or excuse sin to ourselves and others but when God tells us we are failing in some area of our lives we need to listen and only say, "I'm sorry and with your help I'll change." Our culture wants to excuse sin because of a gene or our environment or family heritage.

Read verse 8. The last part reads, "all those clad in foreign clothes." Some think this is a prohibition against men wearing women's clothing and vice versa as seen in Deuteronomy 22:5. It seems, however, this is an idiom for looking and acting like the world. We do need to evaluate what the world offers by biblical standards and what things we want by God's standard of wise stewardship of all we have. We are supposed to be a different society, not of this world. Christians need to stand out for what they stand for and how they love as well as for what they oppose. We should be unique because we belong to Jesus.

The first two verses of chapter 2 are a call to repent before it is too late. One of the great messages of the Bible is that while we have a just God who must and will judge sin, we also have a loving God who is not willing that any should perish. The primary reason for declaring the "Day of the Lord" was to alert people to the urgency of repentance before it is too late. Read verse 3. The New Testament stresses the urgency of making Jesus our personal Savior. There is time but that time is up when we die or when the Lord returns. Either could be any time.

The rest of chapter 2 is condemnation of the nations around Israel that have not only sinned against God but have persecuted in one way or another God's people. The approach of Zephaniah was similar to that of Amos in that he selected representative nations from the east, north, west and south. God then returned to Jerusalem to remind them that they too had failed Him. Read Zephaniah 3:2. That summarizes too many in our day and age.

The good message of Zephaniah, and of the whole Bible, is that judgment on sin is never His final word for those who truly believe in Him. Even the judgments held out hope for any who would repent. The promise of judgment on sin is especially good news for those who are His. God told His people in the rest of Zephaniah that the day was coming when not only would sin be judged but everything would be made new. The people would worship Him as they should. That judgment is detailed in Revelation.

Knowing that sin will be judged should cause us to be careful how we live. To know there is hope for all who repent should challenge us to share more often the truth of Jesus. Knowing that Jesus is coming again should cause us to carry on faithfully knowing that our labor is not in vain in Him.