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PRESBYTERIAN

# MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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Volume 13 Issue 3

January 19, 2014

## An Introduction to Zephaniah

Thus far in our survey of the Prophets, we've examined seven prophetic books.

- Joel written to Judah circa 845 BC.
- Jonah written on account of Nineveh circa 780 BC.
- Amos written to Israel circa 765 BC.
- Hosea written to Israel circa 750 BC.
- Isaiah written to Judah circa 740 BC.
- Micah written to Judah circa 735 BC.

- Jeremiah written to Judah circa 627 B.C.

Now we are going to look at the important prophetic witness which God gave to His people in 622 BC, the book of Zephaniah. On the surface, Zephaniah contains the Covenant Judgment of God against His wayward nation.

### The Background: The Prophet, the Date, and the Religious Setting

Zephaniah 1:1, “The word of the Lord which came to Zephaniah son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah son of Amon, king of Judah.”

Whether you realize it or not, the opening words of the prophecy of Zephaniah are unique to the prophetic literature. Of the sixteen prophetic books in the Old Testament, only Zephaniah begins with a lengthy testimony as to Zephaniah’s heritage. Consider this:

- Eight of the 16 prophets have no family history recorded at all!
- Six of the prophets have only the names of their fathers recorded!
- One gives the name of his father and grandfather.<sup>1</sup>

Yet when we come to Zephaniah we get a genealogy going back four generations to “Hezekiah” — who, because Zephaniah stops with this king, receives the emphasis! Now, in the words of J. M. P. Smith, “...when only one of sixteen prophetic books exhibits a striking variation, the probability seems to be on the side of that variation having been deliberate rather than accidental.” (John Merlin Powis Smith, 1911, p. 167)

Zephaniah is purposely stressing his royal lineage, the fact that he was a descendent of Hezekiah! Why? To answer this consider with me some of the initial information given here by Zephaniah. First, notice that Zephaniah served, “...in the days of Josiah son of Amon, king of Judah.” Recall briefly the historical background of the era. It began with King Manasseh, the son of Hezekiah (696-642 BC) in light of whose legacy Zephaniah and the last generation of Israel lived. Recall that Manasseh was an incredibly evil king who led the nation of Judah down a path of sinning which would even have shocked the base Canaanite culture which God’s people dispossessed when they took the Promised Land (cf. 2 Chronicles 33:1-2; 2 Kings 21:10-15).

Further in Manasseh’s regency, the worship practices of Baal were adopted “hook, line, and sinker.” In fact Manasseh remodeled the inner and outer courts of the Temple to accommodate the base worship practices of Baal. Even though Manasseh repented toward the end of his life (2 Chronicles 33:10-16), the damage had been done such that everything the king did to “undo” the harm which he brought on Judah was “too little too late!” Because of Manasseh, judgment would come! This ought to give us a renewed appreciation for the godly work of King Josiah or the prophets: Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, and the like. They did not

labor to avert judgment, for they knew it was coming. No! All that they did therefore had to be out of a love for the Lord and His Kingdom!

Secondly, Manasseh was succeeded by his son, Amon (642-640 BC). Amon, named after the Egyptian god Amun-Ra (who at the time was the chief god of their pantheon!), was just as wicked as his father (cf. 2 Chronicles 33:21-23). In fact, he crammed the fifty-five years of his father's sinning into the two years he reigned as king! Because Amon was so evil, God's sinning people assassinated him two years into his reign (cf. 2 Chronicles 33:24-25)!

This brings us to the righteous reign of Josiah (640-609 BC). Josiah was THE bright spot in the long and sad history of the final kings of Judah (cf. 2 Kings 22:1-2). Speaking of Josiah:

2 Kings 23:25, "And before him 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."

As Josiah was the son of Amon and grandson of Manasseh, the "people of the land" enthroned him at the age of eight upon the assassination of his father. He reigned thirty-one years. His regency was characterized by peace and reform. Hence, the years of his reign were among the most tranquil that Judah experienced under a king. In fact, the Bible focuses almost exclusively on Josiah's spiritual reforms, which occurred in three stages:

- The First Stage (632-628): Josiah's Personal Growth in Grace

Ascending to the throne at age eight (640 BC), Josiah was blessed with God-fearing advisors who resisted the idolatrous influence of Amon and Manasseh. And at the age of sixteen, Josiah personally "began to seek the God of his father David" (2 Chronicles 34:3). This no doubt marked the time he came to saving faith- when God regenerated him and opened his eyes to behold the Savior!

- The Second Stage (628-622): The Cleansing of the Land

At the age of twenty, Josiah initiated drastic reforms and so began to cleanse Jerusalem and the land of Judah of idolatrous objects (2 Chronicles 34:3-7). It is noteworthy that this reform was more extensive than that of Hezekiah's (2 Kings 18:4; 2 Chronicles 29:3-36). Josiah extended his cleansing of the land into the territory of Israel (now under Assyrian control). In fact, he personally supervised the destruction of the altars of the Baals, the incense altars, the wooden images, the carved images, and the molded images as far north as the cities of Naphtali.

- The Third Stage (622): Repairing the Temple and Reinstating Full Worship

At the age of twenty-six (622 BC), Josiah ordered that the Temple be repaired under the supervision of Hilkiah, the high priest (2 Kings 23). Recall this passage in 2 Chronicles speaking of Manasseh:

2 Chronicles 33:4-5, “And he built altars in the house of the Lord of which the Lord had said, ‘My name shall be in Jerusalem forever.’ For he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the Lord.”

During Manasseh’s reign, the worship of God was displaced with the worship and service of Baal and the many false gods of the Canaanites! Theirs was a morally corrupt and bankrupt religion which Manasseh imposed upon the nation. The result was that the temple was re-allocated and so redesigned to house the worship of these false gods. It no doubt was at this time that a faithful scribe or priest hid a scroll containing a portion of God’s word in one of the newly erected walls of the temple.

Now, years later during the regency of Josiah (622 BC), the temple was in disrepair and so unusable for the worship and service of Yahweh! Accordingly, Josiah commissioned Hilkiah to go about the work of restoration which would have involved tearing down walls and false altars AND replacing the holy vessels for God’s worship! In the process, a copy of the Book of the Law was discovered (2 Chronicles 34:14–15). This is believed by most scholars to be a scroll containing a copy of the book of Deuteronomy.<sup>2</sup> When the book was read to Josiah, he was horrified to learn how far Judah had departed from the covenant and so the calling that God had placed upon His people. This discovery provided new momentum for the reformation that was already in progress.

All of this serves as the background behind the ministry and service of Zephaniah. Because of the reference to “Josiah” in Zephaniah 1:1, we know that Zephaniah’s ministry overlapped the earlier part of Jeremiah’s ministry (recall, Jeremiah was called to minister as a prophet in 627 B.C.). In fact, Zephaniah condemns some of the same pagan influences as Jeremiah (Zephaniah 1:4–5; cf. Jeremiah 2:8; 8:2; 19:5, 13; 32:35)! However, unlike the book of Jeremiah which was penned over a long period of time, Zephaniah was penned at a moment in time, toward the end of the 7th century BC when:

- Four of the five Philistine capital cities were still an issue to Judah- Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, Gaza (Zephaniah 2:4–7).
- The eastern neighbors of Moab and Ammon still were hanging on- as they are referenced in Zephaniah 2:8–11.
- The destruction of Cush (Ethiopia) in 663 BC still lingered in the memories of many in Judah (Zephaniah 2:12).

Furthermore if you compare the book of Zephaniah with the book of Deuteronomy, you will find numerous quotations and allusions in Zephaniah to Deuteronomy. And this is significant, both as it relates to the dating of this prophecy as well as its theme! For example:<sup>3</sup>

Zephaniah 1:13b, “...they will build houses but not inhabit *them*...”

Deuteronomy 28:30b: “...you shall build a house, but you shall not live in it...”

Zephaniah 1:13c: "...and [they will] plant vineyards but not drink their wine."

Deuteronomy 28:39a: "You shall plant and cultivate vineyards, but you shall neither drink of the wine nor gather *the grapes*..."

Zephaniah 1:15: speaks of the Day of the Lord as, "...a day of trouble and distress"

Deuteronomy 28:53, 55, 57: uses the same terminology as it says, "...during the siege and the distress by which your enemy shall trouble you."

Zephaniah 1:15: again speaks of the Day of the Lord as, "...a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness."

Deuteronomy 4:11: uses the same terminology- referencing, "[The mountain] ... [with] darkness, cloud, and thick cloud."

Zephaniah 1:17b: "...they will walk like the blind..."

Deuteronomy 28:29: "And you shall be groping ... as a blind man gropes."

Zephaniah 1:18b: "...and all the earth will be devoured in the fire of His jealousy..."

=Deuteronomy 32:21-22: "They have provoked me to jealousy ... fire is kindled in my wrath, and it shall consume the earth and its produce."

Zephaniah 3:5a: "The Lord is righteous within her; He will do no injustice..."

Deuteronomy 32:4: "A God ... who does no iniquity, righteous and just (is) he."

Zephaniah 3:17b: "...He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy."

Deuteronomy 30:9: "Yahweh will return to rejoice over you for good."

Zephaniah 3:19b: "...and I will turn their shame into praise and renown in all the earth."

Deuteronomy 3:20: "For I shall set you for a name and for praise among all the peoples of the earth."

Deuteronomy 26:19: "And to set you high above all the nations which he has made for a praise and for a name."

It is clear that such parallels between Zephaniah and Deuteronomy are no accident. Obviously, Zephaniah was highly influenced and impacted by the teaching of Deuteronomy. And why is

that? Of all books with which to be burdened, why Deuteronomy? Because it was this covenant Law Book that was found in 622 during Josiah's Temple Reform! In light of this, the dating of the book of Zephaniah has been placed to 622 B.C. O. Palmer Robertson explains:

A(n)... explanation for the parallels of phraseology between Zephaniah and Deuteronomy may be found in the supposition that Zephaniah prophesied *after* the discovery in 622 b.c. of the book of the covenant that promoted Josiah's reform. As a consequence of the revelation of Israel's true status before their covenant God, Zephaniah addressed his contemporaries. Under this construction, Zephaniah appears as a prophetic helper to advance the reform instituted by Josiah. (Robertson, 1990, p. 256)

Now Zephaniah's strong dependence upon Deuteronomy (the covenant law book of the nation) together with Zephaniah's obvious highlighting of his Royal lineage reflects the fact that Zephaniah was intended to be a statement of the Covenantal Judgment that rested upon Judah at this time! In fact, let's consider this Covenant Judgment.

### A Key Theme: The Day of the Lord

Zephaniah 1:14-18, "Near is the great day of the Lord, near and coming very quickly; listen, the day of the Lord! In it the warrior cries out bitterly. 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, a day of trumpet and battle cry, against the fortified cities and the high corner towers. And I will bring distress on men, so that they will walk like the blind, because they have sinned against the Lord; and their blood will be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung. Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to deliver them on the day of the Lord's wrath; and all the earth will be devoured in the fire of His jealousy, for He will make a complete end, indeed a terrifying one, of all the inhabitants of the earth."

Zephaniah is a short book with only three chapters (53 verses), most of which are devoted to describing the judgment that awaited Judah on account of the nation's sin. Yet you must see that this book goes way beyond the situation in Judah in 622 B.C. The teaching of this book is quite relevant today! In fact, the phrase, "the day of the Lord" is employed twenty-two times by eight different Old Testament authors and three New Testament writers.<sup>4</sup> As such, it is a biblical concept we all must be familiar with. What does this expression mean?

The "day of the Lord" does not have reference to a chronological time period, but to a general period of wrath and judgment uniquely belonging to the Lord. It references that time when God vindicates His name by unveiling His character and so terrifying His enemies. Truly on this earth, Satan has had his day, the non-believer has had his day, and the evil and cruel men and women have had their day, yet the day is coming when God will have HIS day, and all who have rebelled against Him will be judged! It is at this time that the promise of Genesis 2:17 will be met out in its entirety!

Now when we consider the prophecy of Zephaniah and His statements concerning “the Day of the Lord” we note two things. First the day of the Lord referenced a TEMPORAL TRIAL/STRUGGLE in which there would be much suffering.

Zephaniah 1:14-17, “Near is the great day of the Lord, near and coming very quickly; listen, the day of the Lord! In it the warrior cries out bitterly. 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, a day of trumpet and battle cry, against the fortified cities and the high corner towers. And I will bring distress on men, so that they will walk like the blind, because they have sinned against the Lord; and their blood will be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung.”

This is consistent with other descriptions of the day of the Lord throughout Scripture involving trauma and great terror like these:

- Seismic disturbances (e.g., Joel 2:1-11; 2:31; 3:16).
- Violent weather (Ezekiel 13:5ff.).
- Clouds and thick darkness (e.g., Ezekiel 2:2; Zephaniah 1:7ff.).
- Cosmic upheaval (Zephaniah 2:3, 30).
- Wars, rumors of war, hardship, trial, and oppression (Mathew 24:6, 22; Mark 13:24).

So the day of the Lord is associated with temporal trial and struggle. However, the day of the Lord ultimately references the CLIMATIC DAY OF JUDGMENT surrounding the coming of Christ (both in His first advent as well as His Second Coming):

Zephaniah 1:18, “Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to deliver them on the day of the Lord’s wrath; and all the earth will be devoured in the fire of His jealousy, for He will make a complete end, indeed a terrifying one, of all the inhabitants of the earth.”

At this point it is appropriate to be reminded of the prophetic tool we call telescoping. In a telescope there are two lenses and individually both are important and powerful, but by themselves they are worthless when it comes to seeing distant things. Ah, but when we attempt to see through both of the lenses at once, then we truly see!

This concept transfers to the prophetic corpus. God will announce a judgment with a dual fulfillment. In the case of Zephaniah, there would be trial and tribulation that would come upon God’s people in short order in the form of warfare, exile, and national destruction (Zephaniah 1:14-17). Yet there clearly is reference to an epochal conflict and trial at the end of days in which God’s people once again would suffer and yet be finally and fully delivered (Zephaniah 1:18)! If we look at the one without the other we see the message with clouded vision. We must look through the first event to view the second event. Truly both events must be seen in order for us to understand the significance of the prediction and so the significance of the current struggle! Christ references a temporal trial in which many died:

Luke 13:2-3, “And He answered and said to them, ‘Do you suppose that these Galileans were

*greater sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered this fate? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”*

This is the focus and purpose of this book! It gives a graphic description both of a temporal judgment that was coming from the Lord as well as the final judgment in which all will stand before the Lord! And so, Zephaniah is a declaration of the Covenant Judgment which soon would be directed at God’s people on account of their national rebellion. Yet we are not yet finished, for notice that as dark and bleak as may be the “day of the Lord” in Zephaniah, nevertheless on account of Christ’s salvific work, this day is also understood to be a day of vindication for God’s people!

Zephaniah 3:12, 14-17, “But I will leave among you a humble and lowly people, and they will take refuge in the name of the Lord... Shout for joy, O daughter of Zion! Shout *in triumph*, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all *your* heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away *His* judgments against you, He has cleared away your enemies [that ultimately is what was going on here! N.B., the enemy of God’s people ultimately was not the Assyrians, Babylonians, or any other nation, people, or person. The enemy was sin/apostasy- that which God addressed with the exile!]. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you will fear disaster no more. In that day it will be said to Jerusalem: ‘Do not be afraid, O Zion; do not let your hands fall limp. The Lord your God is in your midst, a victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy, He will be quiet in His love, He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy.”

As dark and bleak as may be “the *ultimate* day of the Lord” in Scripture, nevertheless from the perspective of the Christian and God’s Kingdom, it is a great and glorious day! Notice in it:

- Believers will have the fullness of salvation conferred upon them (1 John 3:2; Romans 8:30).
- Our lives will be “revealed with Christ in glory” (Colossians 3:4).
- And we will live as described in John 16:22: where Christ told His disciples, “...but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one takes your joy away from you.”

That is the important message of Zephaniah! In fact, we see it from the very beginning in the very name given to the prophet.

Zephaniah 1:1: “The word of the Lord which came to Zephaniah...”

First off notice that Zephaniah was ever mindful that he was bringing NOT his own message or opinion nor are they the words of a vindictive king or master. But the very “word of Yahweh”- the covenant name of God which proclaims His awesome sovereignty and self-existence! As a royal heir to a nation in covenant with God, Zephaniah was called by God to bring of the Word of the Covenant (Deuteronomy) to bear upon the people of God.

Now as frightening and brutal as this calling would have been (recall, everything announced here



is something that Zephaniah himself would suffer through), nevertheless the glorious word of hope and consolation of this prophecy is found in Zephaniah's name. It means, "He whom Yahweh hides" or "Hidden of Yahweh."

Family of God, do you understand that our hope and consolation in the face of (1) God's judgment, (2) this state of sin and misery, and (3) the difficulties of living as aliens and strangers on this earth is NOT what we bring to the table BUT what God has promised and given us in Christ? This was Moses' consolation as he was "hid in the cleft of the rock" (Exodus 33:21-22). This was Ruth's hope and the basis upon which she followed Naomi (Ruth 2:12)! This was the passion of David when he fled from Saul so long ago:

Psalms 57:1: "Be gracious to me, O God, be gracious to me, for my soul takes refuge in Thee; and in the shadow of Thy wings I will take refuge, until destruction passes by."

This, David noted, was and is the consolation of all God's people:

Psalms 36:7-9a, "How precious is Thy lovingkindness, O God! And the children of men take refuge in the shadow of Thy wings. They drink their fill of the abundance of Thy house; and Thou dost give them to drink of the river of Thy delights. For with Thee is the fountain of life..."

And thus the exhortation and calling of Zephaniah is for God's people to take refuge, to hide themselves in God! If you leave this study or any study of this book without this passion, you haven't read the book!

Zephaniah 2:3: "Seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth who have carried out His ordinances; seek righteousness, seek humility. Perhaps you will be hidden in the day of the Lord's anger."

Zephaniah 3:12: "But I will leave among you a humble and lowly people, and they will take refuge in the name of the Lord."

However for now understand that consolation and joy in this life is derived NOT by what we do or experience, BUT by what God has done and is doing in Christ!

## Bibliography

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## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> That is, the book of Zechariah.

<sup>2</sup> One of the strongest links with Deuteronomy is its repeated references to a Book of the Law (Deuteronomy 28:61; 29:21; 30:10; 31:26; cf. Josh. 1:8; 8:31, 34; 23:6; 24:26). Another is the phrase all the curses written in (2 Chronicles 34:24; in place of 'everything written in', 2 Kings 22:16), referring to the contents of the Book of the Law in Deuteronomy 29:20, 21, 27; Josh. 8:34. Further connections with Deuteronomy include the centralizing of worship (vv. 3–7, 33; cf. Deuteronomy 12), the centralized Passover (35:1–19; cf. Deuteronomy 16:1–8), and above all the covenant ceremony (vv. 29–32; cf. Deuteronomy 31:10–13). (Selman, M. J., 2 Chronicles: an introduction and commentary, TOTC, Vol. 11, pp. 552–553)

<sup>3</sup> Other comparisons between Zephaniah and Deuteronomy are as follows: note the reference to God's threat that he will "bring distress" on Israel (Zephaniah 1:17; cf. Deuteronomy 28:29); the concentration on God's inspiring "fear" in Israel, often by the manifestation of his righteous judgments (Zephaniah 3:7; cf. Deuteronomy 4:10–11, 13; 5:29; 6:2, 13; 13:11; 14:23; 17:13, 19; 19:20; 21:21; 31:9–13); the description of the exiles as the "scattered ones" (Zephaniah 3:10; cf. Deuteronomy 4:27; 28:64; 30:3); the distinctive concentration on the "love" of God for Israel (Zephaniah 3:17; cf. Deuteronomy 4:37; 7:8, 13; 10:14–15; 23:6 [Eng. 5]); and the representation of God as the King, the Lord, a Mighty Hero (Zephaniah 3:17; cf. Deuteronomy 10:17).

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 2:12; 13:6, 9; Ezekiel 13:5; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14; Amos 5:18 [2x], 20; Obad. 15; Zephaniah 1:7, 14 [2x]; Zechariah 14:1; Malachi 4:5; 1 Thessalonians 5:2-3; 1 Corinthians 5:5; 2 Peter 3:10; and Revelation.

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10<sup>th</sup> Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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## About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on January 19, 2014. Greg is the minister of Bethel Presbyterian Church.