

Zephaniah 1:1-18

"A Day Of Darkness, Distress & Devastation"

We only thought Habakkuk was a neglected book of the bible. When was the last time you spent time *in*, or heard a message delivered *from* the book of Zephaniah? We almost feel sorry for Zephaniah in that his written warning is rarely even looked at, much less paid attention to.

& For as brief as it is; though it ends in redemption & deliverance, it certainly opens in darkness & devastation. It's w/out doubt written in what we might consider to be a "minor key." So just be prepared, though hope is on the way, there is a heaviness to this book.

Like Habakkuk, Zephaniah was what we call a "pre-exilic" prophet. Of the 12 Minor Prophets in your bible, they're divided into 2 groups. 1 of which prophesied *before* Judah was taken into exile by the Babylonians, the other of which wrote during & after the return of Israel to the Promised Land. Of the 9 pre-exilic prophets, Zephaniah is the last. The final word of warning (we might say).

I should also say that as w/many of the prophecies found in scripture, we find "near/far" fulfillments in the word God gave him. He speaks over & over again about the "day of the Lord". This ultimate judgment that God will pour out upon a rebellious, Christ rejecting world. Yet what will be *fulfilled* in a time yet future was certainly *foreshadowed* in the destruction of Jerusalem as Babylon utterly annihilated it in the outpouring of God's judgment against it. So we see both historical confrontation & future Tribulation, which means there's plenty of application for you & me.

An outline of this book might be: the *decree of the Lord (Ch 1:1-6)*, the *day of the Lord (1:7-3:8)*, & the *deliverance of the Lord (3:9-20)*.

Vs 1

This very 1st Vs of the book of Zephaniah really sets it apart from most of the other writings of the prophets in that he takes careful measure to establish for us both the time in which he's writing & his personal lineage leading back to king Hezekiah. – He really leaves very little to speculation.

As to where Habakkuk sort of exploded onto the scene, seemingly out of nowhere (historically speaking), Zephaniah (who was writing in the same basic era) took great pains to pinpoint for us both who he was & when he was writing. He was the great, great grandson of king Hezekiah which would've made him a cousin to Josiah (the king who was upon the throne when he penned this prophecy). There was royal blood flowing through Zephaniah's veins.

Of course we find that very interesting because that indicates to us that he probably had unique access to king Josiah & there's little doubt that his writing served as a catalyst, or at least added to the energy that formed a revival (albeit not a great one) in the days of king Josiah. It was more of a time of moral reformation than it was inward transformation (as indicated by the rapid moral decline as soon as Josiah died & the fact that they indeed were taken into captivity as the result of their unrepentant sin).

Zephaniah would've been born under the reign of Manasseh, the single most wicked king in Judah's history, followed by the brief rule of his wicked son Amon. He saw the gross idolatry, the wicked rebellion & open defiance & disobedience of the nation against God. & His message is a harsh message of judgment that will come lest they repent.

& As I said, it seems that in this interim period between Amon's assassination & the time Josiah began making reforms (about 12 yrs into his reign), Zephaniah wrote this letter that undoubtedly influence his cousin Josiah in a righteous/godly way... Now; one might wonder, "12 yrs! That seems like a long time!" & You would be right. **But you need to understand that Josiah took the throne when he was 8 yrs old! His genuine (what we might call) "salvation experience" took place when he was 16. That's when he began to see the Lord. (I'm telling you; God can change the world through a young man or young woman's life that is dedicated & separated unto Him). God loves to use young people. He loves to use all people, but it's an awesome sight to see Him use young people.**

Josiah dedicated his life to God when he was 16 & as he sought the Lord, grew *in* the Lord, he started making changes to the landscape of the nation (both physically & spiritually) when he was 20. He started purging the land of idols & trying to undo all the damage that Manasseh had done.

But as I said, though what was happening in *his* heart was *transformation*. What was happening in the *nation* (more than not) was *reformation*. But here's the deal. It's not enough to simply change the laws of a country. That's essentially what Josiah did. & Though that serves a moral good, it's not just the outward that's in need of change. God's looking for a change of heart...

This country doesn't simply need more Christian politicians looking to pass Christian laws. That would be nice, but it's not really the answer. What's going to serve this nation is a transformation of the hearts of the people in it. Just obeying the law doesn't make people right w/God. We've got to be "born again" by the Spirit of God. – We've got to be forgiven of our sin & made alive to God through Christ Jesus...

It's not reformation we need. It's transformation. - & Real quick let's note the words, "The word of the LORD – which came to Zephaniah." Why do I highlight that? Because I believe a word of caution needs to be considered here. Zephaniah was charged *by* God to give his people the word *of* God. He wasn't speculating or speaking from his own heart, but from the Lord.

...I have noticed over the last few years this sort of upsurge in "prophetic words" that are cropping up on various Christian programs, or social media platforms & it seems that a lot of people today are quick to give us "a word from the Lord." - People who would have you believe that they conversate w/God like you would a good buddy. They're just always hearing from God. & They have a word for the church or this country or maybe your life personally. Especially in this politically charged climate in which we dwell currently.

I'm just telling you, be careful. Be cautious. Don't forget the admonition of the apostle John. *"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world."*¹ I'm real careful when someone starts saying words like, "God said...", "God told me", "God revealed to me." & I just want you to know that God doesn't take it lightly when others presume to speak on His behalf...

In the book of Ezekiel we read, *"Thus says the Lord God: 'Woe to the foolish prophets, who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing!'"*² He says, *"They have envisioned futility and false divination, saying, 'Thus says the Lord!' But the Lord has not sent them; yet they hope that the word may be confirmed. Have you not seen a futile vision, and have you not spoken false divination? You say, 'The Lord says,' but I have not spoken." Therefore thus says the Lord God: "Because you have spoken nonsense and envisioned lies, therefore I am indeed against you," says the Lord God. "My hand will be against the prophets who envision futility and who divine lies; they shall not be in the assembly of My people,"*³

Listen, if God gives you a word, it *will* come to pass. You don't have to "hope" it'll be confirmed. God never misses. He never gets it wrong. The glaring problem w/people confidently speaking on behalf of God is the fact that it's not uncommon for them to be *confidently wrong*. They speak w/confidence, they wax eloquent w/boldness. But their word falls to the ground & no one seems to notice or hold them accountable for it...

¹ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [1 Jn 4:1]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

² *The New King James Version*. (1982). [Eze 13:3]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

³ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [Eze 13:6-9]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Prophecies aren't to be despised, but test all things. Listen, if it doesn't come to pass then discard the source. The "prophet" is a false prophet.

This is "the word of the Lord" that came to Zephaniah.

Vs 2-3

Translation? God is going to judge the earth & everything in it. In beginning w/man & ending w/the fish of the sea, he reverses the order of creation. Essentially saying He's going to "undo" everything that's been done. When it comes to the judgment of God, no one & nothing will escape.

W/an unapologetic, horrifying abruptness Zephaniah announces the universal catastrophic, cataclysmic judgment of God that's coming to the world. God will utterly consume everything. Jesus said it like this, *"Heaven and earth will pass away,"*⁴ The sky above you & the earth beneath you; God will consume. Peter put it this way, *"But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up."*⁵ God will consume it all. Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness?

Over & over again throughout the word of God we're given the warning to watch, to be ready because this day is on the way. We serve a God who is patient (not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance). We serve a God (as we discussed last week) who delights in showing mercy. However, God is also just, He is holy & He is righteous. & As such His righteousness (holiness), His justice must be satisfied.

Is there anything anyone can do to escape this judgment? Fortunately, for us, there is. & We'll talk about that as our time comes to a close a little bit later.

But this is what's going to happen ultimately, globally. Setting the stage for eternity. But now Zephaniah narrows his scope to speak to the nation of Judah specifically & what would ultimately culminate in the being carried away into captivity into Babylon. Notice.

Vs 4-6

As I mentioned a minute ago, thanks to king Manasseh, idolatry was rife in Judah. Pagan influence was of epic proportions. & God says, "I'm going to 'stretch out My hand' against Judah." When God, "stretches out His hand" it means judgment is coming. God will not share His glory w/another, there is no other God...

⁴ *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Mt 24:35). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁵ *The New King James Version*. (1982). (2 Pe 3:10). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

& In turning to these pagan idols (Baal, Milcom [also known as Molech]) they turned away from God. & Let me just say that the beginning of the end for *any* nation is when they forsake God & pursue other priorities in His place (power, money, pleasure, you get the idea). They'd become guilty of sins of *commission* (worshiping idols & the practices that accompanied it) & sins of *omission*, not seeking the Lord. God considers it sin, not only when we *do* what's wrong, but when we *don't do* what's right.

But the downfall of any nation is always the same. It begins with (let's just call it) religious apostasy (a turning away from the True & Living God). From there it spirals into the decline of morality, then it becomes political anarchy. That's how nations fall into ruin. (I'll let you decide which phase we're in today in America).

Perhaps I should also point out that you don't have to be bowing down before little trinkets to be guilty of idolatry. Paul says in the book of Colossians, "*Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.*"⁶ If you find yourself guilty of covetousness, then you may be wrestling w/idolatry. A passion & priority that trumps God in your life...

But because of the sin of idolatry, God says He's going to stretch out His hand against Judah. & Cut off (notice) every trace of Baal. (The agricultural/fertility god of the Canaanites). God is letting them know that it's all got to go. They can either deal w/it in righteousness, in repentance, or He will deal w/it in judgment. – It's God's desire that we hear His word & respond in obedience. But He's willing to discipline us, because He loves us. He's looking out for us from the eternal perspective.

He also mentions Molech (Milcom). He was a horrific god of the Ammonites who was honored by infant sacrifice. The body of a man, the head of a bull & they would build a fire & heat him up till his arms were red hot & then place an infant in his arms...

But listen, God says, "I'm talking to you Judah..." Initially, Zephaniah began w/a prophecy that was broad enough to include the entire world. But God wasn't going to let them think that He would maybe be addressing others, but not them. – The reason I say that is because, sometimes we're listening to a bible study, everything is right on point & we're thinking, "Man, I wish so & so were here to hear this." & Maybe so & so would benefit from it, but perhaps God would say, "Listen, I'm talking to you!"

Notice God would cut off every trace. He wants *all of your heart*. Not most of it, w/traces of carnality or compromise. So often that's where we find ourselves. God wants to cut off every trace of the indulgence of the flesh. That we would seek Him, serve Him & walk in the Spirit.

To get rid of most of the junk in our lives isn't enough. "Well, I'm better than I used to be" is the mentality of some. That's not God's mentality. He wants the whole of our heart, not the most part of it.

The idols got to go. The false priests will be put away. – Then he mentions 3 forms of idolatrous worship. Those who worship the hosts of heaven (allow their lives to be led through astrology). Who worship the creation rather than the Creator...

Then there are those who try to worship God & Molech as well. "Hey I'm good w/God, I go to temple, I engage in the rituals, but I do this as well..." It can be very subtle, thinking we can get away w/certain things because we go to church on Sunday, do our religious duty before God thinking that earns us a bit of a "pass" in other areas. Today we might call it churchianity. People still living in sin, still practicing immorality, but think they're doing their religious duty by going to church. They pretend to worship God, but make a practice of giving themselves over to the things of the flesh. (Lukewarm at best).

Then there were those who were simply not seeking God at all. They weren't seeking Him & didn't care to... Idolatry, spiritual adultery & apostasy. These are among the things that invoke/incite God's judgment.

Vs 7-9

Rich, poor, princes & paupers, none will escape the judgment of God. Vs 7 says, "Be silent in the presence of the Lord God; for the day of the Lord is at hand." The idea being that such impending judgment should evoke fear, awe & silence. – You are in the presence of the Living God, hold quiet. Last week we highlighted how men react when they come into contact w/the holiness of God. That's the idea here... God is holy, His judgment is coming; that should evoke a reverence inside us... In Revelation Ch 8 when the 7th seal is opened, we read that there was silence in heaven for about a ½ an hour.

God says, "I'm preparing a sacrifice." Judah is the sacrifice; the Babylonians are the invited guests. Now you get the call for silence... Think about what's coming your way.

The royalty, those who you'd think would be the honored guests, will be sacrificed just the same. None will be exempt, they've adopted foreign policies & foreign practices, & they will be punished.

& It's not that it's wrong to appreciate another culture. It's that they'd abandoned the Lord, their identity in Him & His instructions for their lives. They didn't want to honor God, they wanted to be like the ungodly nations around them.

Vs 10-11

The short of this is that there will be a wailing from every direction. It's another way of saying, "No one will escape".

Vs 12-13

God just continues to emphasize the comprehensive nature of His judgment. False priests, idolaters, spiritual adulterers (unfaithful to God), those who've simply abandoned Him altogether. Political leaders, princes paupers, everywhere, in every direction, those who're settled in complacency, they're indifferent inwardly. They say in their heart, "The Lord won't do anything, good or evil..." These are those who feel like God is simply distant, or detached from their lives. "Maybe God created everything, wound it up like a clock, but He's not involved anymore. He's just let it go & won't interfere be it for our good or our bad. He doesn't really care... if He's even there." So they find themselves unmotivated to change their lives, no real need or desire to honor God. (Kind of like America today)

God says, "I'm coming for you." He says He'll search Jerusalem w/lamps. No one will hide from the judgment of God.

We should have a heart's desire to grow in Christ-likeness. To be more & more pleasing to God. I'd encourage you, if you haven't changed things up in awhile, think about it. Get involved in a ministry, maybe go on a mission trip. Try sharing the gospel w/someone or inviting someone to church. Challenge yourself to grow.

God tells them that because of their complacency their goods shall be treasure for their enemy. They'll be judged before they enjoy their new houses or the fruit of their vineyards.

Vs 14-16

Don't be deceived about nearness of God's judgment nor the extent of the destruction. It will be a day of wrath, distress, devastation, desolation & darkness.

But let me remind you that even in judgment, God is still a God of love. He judges because it is essential for Him to judge that which is evil. He has to be true to Himself, and God couldn't be good if He didn't judge evil. How could He be loving if He didn't judge sin? But because He loves, because He's good, because He's holy, He does judge sin.

These things are just a foreshadowing of the ultimate judgment whereby He'll remove sin altogether, forever. What a day what will be!

Vs 17-18

God makes it plain. He will judge the sinfulness of Judah if they don't repent. There will be no holding back the fullness of His judgment. Their silver, their gold won't be able to deliver them. God doesn't really care how much money you may have. It won't save you in the day of wrath.

We live in a day & at a time whereby it seems that if you have enough money, or are at a certain level of prominence politically, you're above the law. You can escape the just consequences of unlawful actions... (of sin). But none will escape the judgment of God. Every knee will bow, & every tongue will confess that J.C. is Lord to the glory of the Father.

The day is coming when the dead, both small & great will stand before the Throne of God & all who's names aren't found written in the Lamb's book of life will be cast into the lake of fire which burns w/fire & brimstone, day & night forever & ever.

Here's the good news. God has made a way of escape; Jesus has borne the wrath of God paying the penalty for your sin & mine. Therefore, God can & wants to justify you. & He will, in Christ. There is no other way, nor is there any other name, under heaven, given among men by which we must be saved... Believe on the Lord J.C. & you will be saved.

Prayer Points:

God we're a bit taken aback by the overwhelming reality of Your judgment. The just due of our sin & rebellion against You. But we're in awe over the fact that You have loved us & provided a means of salvation for us through simple faith in the Person of Your Son. Help us that we not become complacent, but that we seek You more, have a heart to draw near to You, to be like You for the glory of Your name.

If you've not surrendered your life to Christ. I'm not seeking to use a scare tactic, just simple truth. Judgment is inevitable, but grace is available. It's by grace we're saved through faith in the Person of J.C. Turn from your sin, trust in Him today.