

Zephaniah

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Zephaniah is the ninth of the twelve Minor Prophets. His prophecy is *the word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah* regarding God's judgment on Judah, Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Cush, and Assyria, and regarding the future of Jerusalem.

Author The prophet Zephaniah. His name means "the Lord protects, or hides or remembers". Zephaniah prophesied *during the reign of Josiah, king of Judah*. (640–609 BC). His family tree is given in 1:1.

Date Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of Josiah, one of the last kings of Judah. Zephaniah probably brought this prophecy a little before Josiah launched his programme of spiritual reform in 621 BC.

Background Josiah came to the throne at the age of eight. In the 18th year of his reign, in 622 BC, the Book of the Law was found while the temple was being cleared of pagan articles and this significantly helped Josiah's reforms. (See 2 Kings 22, 23). Zephaniah prophesied a little before this while the Kingdom of Judah was still suffering from the evils of its previous kings, Manasseh and Amon. After Josiah died the final kings of Judah all *did evil in the eyes of the Lord*, so the prophecies of Zephaniah against Judah and Jerusalem continued to be very relevant.

Zephaniah warned of coming judgment for Judah. This was fulfilled when it was conquered by the Assyrians and then when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC. Zephaniah also warned of coming judgment for the surrounding nations, especially for the way they had treated God's people. Many of these prophecies have already been fulfilled but all will finally be fulfilled at the Day of the Lord, when the Lord Jesus Christ returns.

Message Zephaniah denounced the evil in Judah and foretold the nation's downfall in 586 BC. He also described the *great day of the Lord* when all nations would stand before the Lord and be judged. (Zephaniah was not the only prophet to proclaim *the day of the Lord*. Others included Isaiah, Joel, and Amos). Zephaniah declared that on *the day of the Lord* God's judgment would be terrible for those who did not follow the Lord, but would be wonderful for those in a close relationship with Him. God's enemies will be exposed and punished, but sinful Judah would not be exempt so she also needed to repent and turn back to the Lord. If she did God would purify her and would bring much joy. *I will give you honour and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes, says the Lord.*

Zephaniah shows us that God has a plan for history and is working it out. We can choose to follow Him or suffer the consequences.

Outline

Warning about God's judgment. 1:1-3.

God is going to *sweep away everything from the face of the earth*. All living things will be affected.

God's judgment on Judah. 1:4-13.

God's people are not exempt from His judgment. *I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem*. They will be punished for their many sins of idolatry (4-6), violence and fraud (9), and indifference (12). Their anguish will be heard in every quarter of Jerusalem.

The Day of the Lord. 1:14-2:3.

Zephaniah now gives a detailed description of *the great day of the Lord* that is *near and coming quickly*. There will be much anguish, distress and suffering as God's judgment is poured on those who have *sinned against*

the Lord and as He makes a *sudden end to all who live on the earth*. Judah must repent before the fierce anger of the Lord comes upon her. *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.*

Zephaniah now describes what God's judgment will be like for the nations surrounding Judah:

Zephaniah's account of end-time events reinforces those given in other parts of the Bible. See *Isaiah 65, 66; Daniel 9, 12; Joel 2:28-3:21; Zechariah 12-14; Matthew 24, 25; Mark 13; Luke 21; 1 Corinthians 15:50-58; 1 Thessalonians 4,5; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; 2 Timothy 3; 2 Peter 3; 1 John 2; Revelation 6-22.*

God's judgment on the nations. 2:4-15.

2:4-7. Philistia. Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod and Ekron will be left in ruins. The *land beside the sea* will become a refuge for the remnant of the house of Judah where *God will care for them and restore their fortunes*. God's purposes for this area are still being worked out in the Gaza Strip with many clashes between its Palestinian inhabitants the modern day nation of Israel.

2:8-11. Moab and Ammon will become desolate wastelands because they insulted and *mocked the people of the Lord Almighty*. These deserted areas are part of modern day Jordan.

2:12. Cush will be *slain by the sword*. Cush is modern day Ethiopia.

2:13-15. Assyria will be destroyed *leaving Nineveh utterly desolate*. Nineveh was destroyed in 612BC as the Assyrian Empire collapsed. This was also prophesied by the prophet Nahum.

God's purposes for Jerusalem. 3:1-20

Zephaniah pronounced God's judgment on Jerusalem because she *obeys no-one, she accepts no correction. She does not draw near to her God*. God was doing His part for her and *new every day He does not fail*, but within the city there was much corruption, violence, pride and deceit. God had offered to correct this but now He had decided to *assemble the nations, to gather the kingdoms and to pour My wrath on them – all My fierce anger*. He was doing this to purify them so that *all would call on the name of the Lord*.

Those who respond to the Lord can be *glad and rejoice* because *the Lord has taken away your punishment The Lord, the King of Israel is with you; never again will you fear any harm*.

From this will come a whole new relationship with the Lord: *The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in His love He will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.*"

When God restores the people of Israel and brings her back He will take away her sorrow, burden and reproach and in its place give *praise and honour*.

So, Zephaniah starts with promises of great judgment, but finishes with great opportunities for salvation, restoration and relationship with God. The message for Judah; for the surrounding nations, and for us today is simple:

God's patience regarding evil is being sorely tested but His offer of salvation still stands. The day of the Lord is near so repent and turn to the Lord. If you do, wonderful blessings will ensue, but if you refuse to repent you will surely suffer the consequences.

Discussion questions

What is *the day of the Lord*? Where else in the Bible is this taught? What will happen at *the day of the Lord*? What are the implications of this for Christians, Jews, nations, people groups, and individuals?

How does the day of the Lord affect the modern day nation of Israel?

Prophets and evangelists have been talking about *the day of the Lord* for many years, but it still hasn't come in the way described in Zephaniah. Do you think it will happen as described, or is this just poetic language? What is the central message we need to hear concerning *the day of the Lord*? How can we be sure we are prepared *for the day of the Lord*?

How can God be the source of the great destruction described by Zephaniah, when He is a God of love?

What does the book of Zephaniah tell us about the character and nature of God, especially in relation to evil people, societies and nations?

What have you learned from your study of Zephaniah? How will you apply this in your life?