

Zephaniah

Written and taught by Ray Nickles, Teacher, Lighthouse Bible Church
November, 1995 - April, 1996
Second Edition printed 2002

Zephaniah

Background

His ministry was during the reign of Josiah, king of Judah from 640 to 609 B.C. Josiah had been preceded by two evil kings, Manasseh and Amon. For more than 50 years during these prior kings reigns Judah had worshipped Baal and many other gods, deities based on the heavens and seasons. (2 Kings 21:3,6, 16, 21) The government was corrupt with princes, judges and priests all using the law to their advantage while vying for the money and land of the common citizen and the poor.

Josiah was eight years old when he took the throne and by the age of 16 was showing an interest in the Lord and in the history of his people. Starting about the age of 20 he begins to purge idolatry from Judah and to re institute the old laws.

At this time the Assyrians are in control of much of the area. Israel has gone into captivity and Egypt and Babylon are trying to break free from Assyrian rule.

He is a contemporary of Jeremiah and Nahum.

The Message

The focus of Zephaniah's message is that the 'day of the Lord' is coming. Judgment is first prophesied for Judah and then expanded to include the Philistines, Moabites, Ammonites and the Assyrians. Following the judgments he gives a message of hope resulting in the promise of future glory for Israel.

Because he reiterates many of the same ideas of the prophets before him his writings are said in some ways to be a summary of their messages.

v.1:1 The word of the Lord which came unto Zephaniah the son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hizkiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah.

Zephaniah presents himself as being a prophet of the Lord. Also, to confirm that he is an Israelite he gives an extensive ancestry dating back four generations. Nothing is known of his father, Cushi, his grandfather, Gedaliah or his great grandfather Amariah. There is speculation however about Hizkiah, who is believed, by some, to be none other than Hezekiah, former king of Judah. This cannot be confirmed by Biblical references.

Zephaniah confirms that his prophecies take place during the reign of Josiah which began around 640 B.C. The biggest question of his ministry is whether it is during the beginning or near the end of Josiah's reign. Most feel that it is at the beginning because of the corruption carried over from the prior reigns of Manassah and Amon and prior to the reforms instituted by Josiah.

v.1:2 I will utterly consume all things from off the land, saith the Lord.

Zephaniah does not seem to be a person of sedulity. His first words are a prophecy of total destruction. 'Utterly consuming all things' conjures up visions of the Flood where God says he will "*destroy from off the face of the earth*" (Gen. 7:4). This is a sign of the times in which he was living. Had things gotten so bad they could be compared to the time just before the Flood? (Gen. 6:5) Would God once again consider destroying all he had created?

If there is any doubt about who's word Zephaniah is bringing it is immediately made known. This is not a local or national god speaking, it is the universal God, the creator of all things and capable of destroying all things off the face of the earth.

v.1:3 I will consume man and beast; I will consume the fowls of the heaven, and the fishes of the sea, and the stumblingblocks with the wicked; and I will cut off man from off the land, saith the Lord.

To expand or qualify what it means to 'utterly consume' a list of things is given. The highest form of living thing, man, to animals, are all land based creatures. Birds are air based creatures and fish are sea based creatures. Basically this covers all living things. (Hosea 4:3)

The 'stumblingblocks' are the idols or pagan gods. So that the wicked will know who God is, even their ideas and misconceptions of God will be destroyed. Their eyes will be open to the truth of the Lord. (Rom. 14:11)

v.1:4 I will also stretch out mine hand upon Judah, and upon all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this place, and the name of the Chemarims with the priests;

The power which God has, that was just described, will first be directed toward Judah. The outstretched hand is a designation of the punishment being directed at Judah and in particular the people in Jerusalem. (Is. 9:12, 17, 21; Ex. 6:6; Deut. 4:33-35)

The punishment will be directed at those who had forsaken the Lord. Zephaniah begins with a list of those that will come under this outstretched hand of judgment.

First are the Baal worshippers. Baal worship had been around a long time. Various reformations had attempted to eliminate it from the land but with varying degrees of success. Josiah will also make another attempt but in the end God will bring about the final demise of the worship of this god.

(Baal: A Phoenician and Canaanite god whose name means lord. Baal was represented by the sun and had corresponding gods for other heavenly bodies and nature. Baalim is the plural of Baal in Hebrew and is used as a general term for the concept of god)

Second are those that promoted the worship of the false gods. Chemarims is a general term for idolatrous priests. It refers to the priests appointed by the kings of Judah for the worship in high places and/or the idolatrous worship of the Lord. (Hosea 10:5) The false priests must be cut off from their priesthood just as the worship of Baal must be cut off from the people.

v.1:5 And them that worship the host of heaven upon the housetops; and them that worship and that swear by Malcham;

Third are all those that worship the false gods. These are the people who never knew the Lord. The housetops were places of worship. The flat roofs of the houses were places where altars were setup and where sacrifices were made to the gods such as Baal. They were high places open to the sun and other heavenly bodies the people worshipped. (2 Kings 23:5, 12; Jer. 19:13; 32:29)

Fourth are those with divided allegiances. They were worshipping the Lord and at the same time Malcham. (1 Kings 18:21) Malcham (a.k.a. Moloch) was an Ammorite god honored by the sacrifice of children by fire.

"They have a good opinion of the worship of the God of Israel; it is the religion of their country, and has been long so, and therefore they will by no means quit it; but they think it will be very much improved and beautified if they join with it the worship of Moloch." Matthew Henry

v.1:6 And them that are turned back from the Lord; and those that have not sought the Lord, nor enquired for him.

Next there are the individuals that knew the Lord but decided not to maintain the faith. Some rejected the Lord and followed after religions that had more earthly appeal. Still others turned away if pressured or persecuted.

Then there were 'casual believers'. Those who went to the temple out of show or because it was required, not really wanting to get to deeply into what they were taught or wanting to gain any insight into the God in which they believed.

Finally, there were those who didn't believe in anything. They didn't look, seek out or inquire about anything they had heard or seen. (Jer. 2:13, 17; 15:6)

v.1:7 Hold thy peace at the presence of the Lord God: for the day of the Lord is at hand: for the Lord hath prepared a sacrifice, he hath bid his guests.

A piece of advice is given to all these groups of people, hold your tongue. Do not speak out against the Lord but rather submit yourselves to him and repent of your sins. Be in awe of his greatness and in his presence.

The reason for this is that his day is at hand. The day of the Lord is a time when he will take action for or against certain groups of people. (Joel 1:14-15)

For this occasion God is requiring a sacrifice. Since the people could not present a sacrifice acceptable to God, he would prepare a sacrifice himself. God will decide who and what will be involved in this sacrifice. In this way he is said to bid or prepare his guests. He has consecrated them for his purpose. (Is. 13:3; Jer. 46:10)

v.1:8 And it shall come to pass in the day of the Lord's sacrifice, that I will punish the princes, and the king's children, and all such as are clothed with strange apparel.

The execution of the sacrifice the Lord is planning is 'the day of the Lord'. The prophet indicates the class of people to be called or bidden to be partakers in this sacrifice. First are the members of the ruling family. They should have been good examples to the people, encouraging them to forsake the pagan gods and demanding the idols be destroyed. Instead they led the people away from God into pagan worship by introducing these pagan gods into society.

(Even though Josiah took efforts to rid the land of the pagan elements the kings following him reverted back to pagan worship. (2 Chron. 34:28; 2 Kings 23:31-32, 36-37; 24:8-9, 18-19) The fulfillment came when Babylon invaded. (Jer. 39:6))

Others in the upper or ruling class wore clothing inconsistent with the traditional dress of the Israelites. These people did this to ingratiate themselves or identify themselves with visitors of foreign nations. Implied here is that they would also worship the foreign gods to show their good will and further ingratiate themselves to their foreign visitors.

The custom and dress were to show that the Israelites were separate and distinct people and they were denying this.

v.1:9 In the same day also will I punish all those that leap on the threshold, which fill their masters' houses with violence and deceit.

The next class of people which will be offered in the judgmental sacrifice may consist of two types. Understanding of this verse is unclear because of the tradition of pagan worship of the "*threshold*". It would appear the custom in the worship of a particular god was not to tread on the threshold in the temple of Dagon. This custom was adopted in the worship of the Lord. Those who had added such practices were the ones being singled out. (v.5)

A second meaning comes from coupling the threshold with the masters violence and deceit. The servants of the rich crossed the threshold of another persons property, entering someone's house and by force or violence taking the possessions of others. This would also be done by false accusations, taking someone to court and obtaining their possessions by deceit through a corrupt judicial system. (Judges, lawyers, and lawmakers would fall into this class)

v.1:10 An it shall come to pass in that day, saith the Lord, that there shall be the noise of a cry from the fish gate, and an howling from the second, and a great crashing from the hills.

The fish gate, which takes its name from the market place at that gate, was on the north side of Jerusalem. "In that day" of judgment the city will be besieged from the north, through the fish gate. The cry will be one of distress as the enemy makes the invasion. Once the outer walls, where the fish gate was located, were breached, howls will come from the inner city behind the second wall.

The hills are probably Mount Zion and Mount Moriah. Mount Zion was the seat of government and where the wealthy lived. (1 Chron. 11:5), Mount Moriah was the seat of the worship of God, thought to be where Solomon built the Temple. (2 Chron. 3:1)

Ultimately the inner city would be overrun and the homes of the rulers and wealthy along with the Temple would be sacked and destroyed. (2 Chron. 36: 17-19)

v.1:11 Howl, ye inhabitants of Maktesh, for all the merchant people are cut down; all they that bear silver are cut off.

The word Maktesh is an obscure Hebrew word which can have two meanings. 'Market district' is one and it would seem to be appropriate. The people who lived in this area should howl as their homes and shops are destroyed by the invading army.

Another interpretation of Maktesh is 'mortar'. It is a name to describe a hollow shape, much like a bowl. Grain was ground up in a mortar and so the analogy to the merchants is one of being ground up by the enemy. Many commentators note the hollowed out shape of the valley of Siloam which ran through Jerusalem.

The reason for the destruction is that they had become 'merchant people', a term used for Canaanites. Canaanites had a reputation of being greedy and using deceitful practices. (Hosea 12:7)

Anyone having gained wealth by using deceitful means would not profit from it. The silver they bear will weigh them down rather than help them make an escape. If merchants thought their wealth would help them survive they would be wrong, it would be more of a hindrance than a help.

v.1:12 And it shall come to pass at that time, that I will search Jerusalem with candles, and punish the men that are settled on their lees: that say in their heart, The Lord will not do good, neither will he do evil.

When the time comes, the time designated by God, there will be an intensive search for those who will receive punishment. God knows who are his and there will be no place to hide for those being searched for by the Lord. (Amos 9:3)

There are a couple of types of people for which God is searching. First are those "*that are settled on their lees*". 'Lees' are the refuse of wine. The lees settle to the bottom as the wine rests. Just as the wine rests, as the lees form, there are those who rest and settle back in

their pleasure thinking they are secure. Those who believe in God believe that he is not moving in the world. They think that he takes no action either for good or for evil. (Amos 6:1; Job 22:12-14)

On the other hand there are those that do not believe there is a God and therefore there is not judgment of good or evil. Consequently if there is no judgment there can be no good or evil, only actions. (Is. 5:19-20; Mal. 2:17)

v.1:13 Therefore their goods shall become a booty, and their houses a desolation: they shall also build houses, but not inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, but not drink the wine thereof.

The consequences to those who will become the sacrifice will be that the wealth they have accumulated will become the spoils of war for their enemies. Their houses will be leveled to the ground, some even before they are inhabited. (Deut. 28:30; Amos 5:11)

Basically what it comes down to is that the things they had built up for their pleasure will be used by their enemies instead. (Micah 6:14-15)

v.1:14 The great day of the Lord is near, it is near, and hasteth greatly, even the voice of the day of the Lord: the mighty man shall cry there bitterly.

As Zephaniah speaks the time of judgment grows near and as each day passes the impending destruction approaches more rapidly. The voice spoken of here is that of the prophets declaring the day is coming. (Joel 2:1, 11)

The 'day' spoken of is not a single day but a period of time during which the judgments will take place. As this time approaches Zephaniah tries to describe the suffering it will bring. He mentions that 'day' six times in describing what it will bring. The first is that the mighty will cry. For all their power and how it may have served them in the past it will not prevent the Lord's day from taking place.

v.1:15 That day is the day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness.

The day will be one of wrath. It will be violent expression of God's anger towards a nation and a people that has turned against him.

Next, it will be a day of trouble and distress. The people will have to deal with the emotional effects of their punishment.

Then they will have to deal with the physical destruction of their property. All their possessions will be lost. There will be total desolation all around them.

As things become worse and worse a sense of foreboding will set in, the future will be dark and gloomy. They will have a feeling of hopelessness.

Finally, hopelessness turns into deep despair or depression emphasized by thick darkness. (Joel 2:2)

v.1:16 A day of the trumpet and alarm and against the fenced cities, and against the high towers.

The cause of this destruction will be war. The trumpets will sound an alarm that the enemy is attacking. The walls of the cities will be breached and the enemy will be inside to bring about the judgment. (Jer. 4:19)

v.1:17 And I will bring distress upon men, that they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the Lord: and their blood shall be poured out as dust, and their flesh as the dung.

In a vain attempt to struggle out of the situation the people will grope like blind men unable to find a way out no matter which way they turn. The reason for all this anguish is the sin they have committed. By falling away through idolatry and breaking the commandments they have brought God's wrath down on themselves.

As a summary of how God feels about what the people have done he makes two comparisons. First, he compares blood to dust. Dust is basically worthless, nothing can be done with it but to walk it under foot.

Second, their flesh is compared to dung, more commonly called cow manure. Probably good for fertilizer but not much else. Being compared to dung would be degrading and offensive to anyone but this is how God classifies these people.

v.1:18 Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the Lord's wrath; but the whole land shall be devoured by the fire of his jealousy: for he shall make even a speedy riddance of all them that dwell in the land.

The worldly possessions on which man puts so much importance will not do them any good in the day of judgment. Neither the wealth they have accumulated, not the images they have molded from the valuable possessions will be an acceptable substitute.

'That day' is once again referred to as "*the day of the Lord's wrath*". The destruction that will come will be sure and complete. Because it will be complete there will be no escaping the destruction.

The judgment will not linger for a long time. God's decision has been made and the execution will be a speedy one. (Jer. 52:4-7)

v.2:1 Gather yourselves together, yea, gather together, O nation not desired;

Zephaniah has completed telling the people of the judgments to come from the Lord, now he has hope that these judgments will not come about. If they change their ways they may be saved the judgment. He now sets about to encourage them to repent.

The word 'gather' has two meanings. One is that each individual was to gather themselves, to collect one's thoughts. The only way to repentance is to evaluate one's self and understand the sin in one's own life. A person must know himself thoroughly before he can repent. This is one of the ways Zephaniah was trying to exhort the people to repentance.

A second way is that the people should come together and exhort each other. To gather together as one congregation in a common cause. This common cause should be to seek out the Lord and live according to his commandments. (Joel 2:16)

Zephaniah's "design was not to drive the people to despair, but to drive them to God and to their duty - not to frighten them out of their wits, but to frighten them out of their sins" Matthew Henry

Speaking of the nation he calls them undesirable. In their present state of sin they are not acceptable to God. They are not a nation in which God takes pleasure. Not only were they not desirable they themselves had no desire to "*gather themselves together*" as they were exhorted to do.

v.2:2 Before the decree bring forth, before the day pass as the chaff, before the fierce anger of the Lord come upon you, before the day of the Lord's anger come upon you.

Zephaniah's plea for repentance has a tone of urgency. God's word is as good as fulfilled when it is spoken, the event just hasn't taken place yet. Unless God stays the execution the nation is lost, but as individuals they may still come to him before the decree actually happens.

The event, the day of destruction, will pass like chaff scattered in the wind. This destruction will be brought about because of the Lord's anger. That 'day' will be brought about by the Lord.

v.2:3 Seek ye the Lord, all ye meek of the earth, which have wrought his judgment; seek righteousness, seek meekness: it may be ye shall be hid in the day of the Lord's anger.

If Zephaniah's message of self inspection is taken to heart and sin is recognized then repentance should take place. Now the people are exhorted to take the next step. They have to seek after the Lord. They must have the desire to learn more about the Lord and to do what he commands. (1 Peter 2:2)

The meek are those that would submit themselves to God's will. They are the ones who would take a good look at themselves and see their sin and be ready to follow the Lord.

Those who have "*wrought his judgments*" are those who have caused God to make or form his judgments. These same people are the ones that need to turn their lives around and seek righteousness.

To seek after righteousness is to strive to do that which is right, to be living a holy life with a pure heart. The righteousness of the law is obedience to the law. (Deut. 6:25) The righteousness of faith is the justification given by God. (Rom. 3:21-24)

Zephaniah, knowing that judgment is coming to Judah, holds out hope to the individual. By seeking after the Lord the individual may be spared the judgment due the nation.

v.2:4 For Gaza shall be forsaken, and Ashkelon a desolation: they shall drive out Ashdod at the noon day, and Ekron shall be rooted up. v.2:5 Woe to the inhabitants of the sea coast, the nation of the Cherethites! the word of the Lord is against you; O Canaan, the land of the Philistines, I will even destroy thee, that there shall be no inhabitant. v.2:6 And the sea coast shall be dwellings and cottages for shepherds, and folds for flocks. v.2:7 And the coast shall be for the remnant of the house of Judah; they shall feed thereupon: in the houses of Ashkelon shall they lie down in the evening: for the Lord their God shall visit them and turn away their captivity.

As the day of the Lord approaches Zephaniah lets Judah know they will not be the only ones to be judged. The nations around them will also suffer a similar fate as Judah. The first of these nations is the Philistines. From the earliest times the Israelites had encounters with the Philistines. (Gen. 20-21, 26)

Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, and Ekron were four of five major Philistine cities. (Gath was the fifth, of which nothing is mentioned. This may be because it was either destroyed by Judah years earlier or was considered to be under the control of Judah having been captured)

Zephaniah makes no mention as to the reason for the judgment of the Philistines but Amos, Jeremiah and Zechariah all foretell of the fall of one or more of these cities, and Ezekiel tells of the general destruction of the nation. (Amos 1:6-8; Jer. 47:4-7; Zech. 9:5-7; Ezek. 25:16) Amos gives the most insight as to the reason for the judgment and it is because of their slave trade. Israelites were taken captive and sold to Edom.

The Philistines are also called the Cherethites and Canaanites. It is believed they originally came from the island of Crete and settled along the Mediterranean when the land was called Canaan. (Gen. 10:14; Josh. 13:3) Zephaniah must want to leave no doubt as to the identity of the people who are being singled out for this judgment.

The good news for Judah is once the land becomes deserted Zephaniah gives them hope by stating that a remnant will inherit this land for pastures on which they will graze their sheep. The bad news is there will be a captivity, but once the captivity ends this area will be waiting for them.

v.2:8 I have heard the reproach of Moab, and the revilings of the children of Ammon, whereby they have reproached my people, and magnified themselves against their border. v.2:9 Therefore as I live, saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Surely Moab shall be as Sodom, and the children of Ammon as Gomorrah, even the breeding of nettles, and saltpits, and a perpetual desolation: the residue of my people shall spoil them, and the remnant of my people shall possess them. v.2:10 This shall they have for their pride, because they have reproached and magnified themselves against the people

of the Lord of hosts. v.2:11 The Lord will be terrible unto them : for he will famish all the gods of the earth; and men shall worship him, every one from his place, even all the isles of the heathen.

Conflicts with Moab date back to the time of Moses (Num. 22-24) and with Ammon to the time of the judges (Jud. 10:6-11). Moab and Ammon are both descendants of Lot, being the result of his two daughters incest with him. (Gen. 19:30-38)

These two nations are to be punished because of their continued hatred of Israel. To 'reproach' and 'revile' is to scorn and condemn. They did this whenever possible and usually when Israel was undergoing punishment from God. This abusiveness toward God's people was a reflection on God and his supposed inability to protect his people. (Judges 3:12-14)

As is generally the case when having this type of attitude there is an underlying sin. The sin of Moab and Ammon is one of pride. When these situations arose the two nations thought they were superior, thinking their invasion and occupation of Israelite territory was of their own doing and reproaching Israel and their God for being weak.

The destruction of both countries is compared to that of Sodom and Gomorrah which were both wiped from the face of the earth. Just as the two cities were never rebuilt neither would the two nations ever rebuild. In their place would be "*nettles*" and "*saltpits*", that is 'weeds' and 'wasteland'.

Again the hope for a remnant of Judah is given with this remnant taking the remaining possessions within this land. This will be the final insult and the reward of Moab and Ammon, Israel owning all that was theirs.

Not only would the possessions of the nations be taken away, so would their gods. Destroying the people showed that the false gods had no power and in fact did not exist. This sets the Lord apart as the only true God. In doing this no one could deny that he is the supreme and universal God worthy of the worship of all men.

The overall result of the other nations recognizing the Lord will mean that Judah, Jerusalem, will not be the only place the Lord will be worshipped. The kingdom of God will from this point begin to open to people of all nations. The "*isles of the heathen*" are the different nations into which God had divided the people. (Gen. 10:5)

v.2:12 Ye Ethiopians also, ye shall be slain by my sword.

Ethiopia (Heb. Cush) is thought to also include Egypt. This is because during the 7th century B.C. Egypt had Ethiopian pharaohs. Egypt had on occasion been a major pain to the Israelites. It is almost a sidelight that they are mentioned. Total destruction is not prophesied, only that they would be invaded and fall by the sword. (Jer. 46:10-13; Ezek. 30:4-9)

v.2:13 And he will stretch out his hand against the north, and destroy Assyria; and will make Nineveh a desolation, and dry like a wilderness. v.2:14 And flocks shall lie down in the midst of her, all the beasts of the nations: both the cormorant and the bittern shall lodge in the upper lintels of it; their voice shall sing in the windows; desolation shall be

in the thresholds: for he shall uncover the cedar work. v.2:15 This is the rejoicing city that dwelt carelessly, that said in her heart, I am, and there is none gone beside me; how is she become a desolation, a place for beasts to lie down in! every one that passeth by her shall hiss, and wag his hand.

The final nation prophesied for judgment is Assyria. Assyria was the most powerful nation on earth at this time. Once again the out stretched hand means God will take action against this nation and that action will be destruction. (v.1:4)

Nineveh, probably the greatest city of its time, would become desolate, deserted. The city was built on the Euphrates River and had canals built to irrigate the land throughout the city. These canals would run dry as the city becomes a wilderness.

To show just how much desolation is brought on the city a typical scene is described. This picture has flocks of birds inhabiting the center of the city which would have been alive with people. All types of wild animals would be roaming the streets unafraid of men who are no longer there.

The cormorant (pelican) and bittern (bird) would make their nests on the columns or pillars (lintels) which once supported wall and buildings. The birds would sing from the windows of the deserted buildings. Finally, the expensive cedar woodwork on the interior of the buildings and palaces would be exposed to the open air because the roofs and walls will have been collapsed.

One of the reasons for their destruction was their pride. They thought that everything they accomplished was of their own doing. (2 Kings 18:34-35; 19:23-24) They thought themselves so great they would never be overcome. Nineveh, being such a great a city, considered it an impossibility to be destroyed. The people therefore feared nothing and lived lives of relative leisure and pleasure. (Is. 47:7-8) Another reason for destruction is the proliferation of false gods. (Nah. 3:4)

When the destruction comes about it would be incredible. People would stand and wonder how such a thing could possibly happen. Man still today wonders how it could have fallen or how the people could have let it fall.

v.3:1 Woe to her that is filthy and polluted, to the oppressing city!

The sins of the surrounding nations had been exposed and punishment of the nations prophesied, now Zephaniah turns his attention back on Jerusalem. He refers to the city as filthy and polluted. The word filthy refers to the moral decay of the people. The root word in Hebrew means 'gluttonous' or to be full of sin. To pollute is to corrupt or destroy the moral purity. It is also to defile or make unclean.

Jerusalem is also called the oppressing city which is reference to the rich who were disregarding the rights of the poor. (Amos 5:11; Jer. 22:3)

v.3:2 She obeyed not the voice; she received not correction; she trusted not in the Lord; she drew not near to her God.

Three major indictments are given as the reason for Jerusalem's impending doom. First is that they failed to obey the warnings of God's voice. The voice of God being the law and the word of the prophets. This included not receiving the word of correction. Correction would be admitting guilt, receiving discipline and receiving instruction in righteousness.

Second, is that they had no faith in God. Their faith was placed in idols, in false gods and in themselves. They built altars on the house tops and worshipped the hosts of the heavens. (v.1:5) They consorted with foreigners and made alliances with them thinking this was the way to preserve their country. (v.1:8) In the past they fortified their cities and assembled great armies.

And third, they did not draw near to God. The Lord was faithful to his people but they would not be faithful to him. Their desire was not to please him but to corrupt all that he had given them.

v.3:3 Her princes within her are roaring lions; her judges are evening wolves; they gnaw not the bones till the morrow.

Having set down some basic indictments against Jerusalem, God through Zephaniah goes about proving his case as to why the indictments were true.

There was a failure of leadership. The ruling class were as "*roaring lions*" using the positions of power to get whatever they wanted. The craving for wealth and power was satisfied by victimizing the common people. (Ez. 22:27; Micah 2:2)

The judges were as "*evening wolves*" and preyed on the people using the law as a means for profit. For the courts to function properly the judges had to have integrity. Once the moral principles of right and wrong were lost the entire justice system collapses. When there is no justice lawlessness and injustice take over causing total chaos in society.

Webster defines 'gnaw' to mean to wear away, to consume, to torment. So the phrase "*they gnaw not the bones till the morrow*" would generally mean to totally consume. The action is also meant to be done quickly. They gnaw not on the morrow or they don't wait till the morrow.

v.3:4 Her prophets are light and treacherous persons: her priests have polluted the sanctuary, they have done violence to the law.

The prophets were the ones called by God to guide and direct the people. God would reveal himself to them and they in turn were to convey God's message to the people. Those who now called themselves prophets were not taking their duty seriously. They were making light of the responsibility by giving false prophecy to take advantage of the people. They were claiming to be something they were not. (Jer. 23:32)

To take it a step farther, lies by the prophets made them traitors to God. They were betraying God to the benefit of themselves. It was treacherous because it was pulling the people away from God.

The priests were the teachers. They had two main areas of responsibility; to keep the temple and give the sacrifices, and to instruct the people in the law. Regarding these areas Zephaniah first says they "*polluted the sanctuary*". The official duties were not being carried out and they were not following the God ordained rites as to the offering of the people.

As to their second duty, they were not properly instructing the people concerning God's law. They were in fact openly violating the law themselves. By adding in their own laws or interpreting the law to fit their own personal needs they were doing "*violence to the law*". This corruption of the law would ultimately lead people into sin and away from God. (Ez. 22:26)

v.3:5 The just Lord is in the midst thereof; he will not do iniquity: every morning doth he bring his judgment to light, he faileth not; but the unjust knoweth no shame.

In the middle of all this filth and pollution was the Lord. The truth of God was in Judah all during this time. God's presence was with them, the people just chose to ignore it. Even though sin is all around God himself does not do anything wrong and could in no way be implicated in any unrighteousness of the people.

The fact is that every day God made himself known to the people. His judgments and his prophets were a sign to the people of who he was, what his commandments were and what the people must do to follow him.

v.3:6 I have cut off the nations: their towers are desolate; I made their streets waste, that none passeth by; their cities are destroyed, so that there is no man, that there in none inhabitant.

Another of the reasons for Jerusalem's problems stems from the fact that they failed to learn from past history and current situations. There was a refusal to learn from all that was going on around them or to discern the nature of God's actions in the world.

Jerusalem had been confident in her preparation of self defense, but in fact many cities also had such confidence. These other cities however had their walls breached and towers destroyed. These things God had allowed to happen. Why?

Other cities had streets teeming with people, merchants and shops. God had set them to ruin. These cities also had large populations and they became deserted. Why?

Judah's sister nation to the north was gone, taken into captivity. Why?

v.3:7 I said, Surely thou wilt fear me, thou wilt receive instruction; so their dwelling should not be cut off, howsoever I punished them: but they rose early, and corrupted all their doings.

God, through Zephaniah, is now saying that because of what he had caused to happen to nations and cities the people would surely be in awe of him, trust him and praise him.

One would think that after seeing God's actions in the world the people would be eager to receive instruction and correction so they would not have the punishment of God come on them as on the nations around them.

But the people would not heed the warnings. They would not believe destruction could come to such a great city, a city which housed God's people. So they continued in their evil practices as if nothing would ever change.

v.3:8 Therefore wait ye upon me, saith the Lord, until the day that I rise up to the prey: for my determination is to gather the nations, that I may assemble the kingdoms, to pour upon them mine indignation, even all my fierce anger: for all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of my jealousy.

This verse is an extension of the judgment set from the beginning of chapter 1. (vv.2-3) The starting statement of a complete and total destruction is made and now continued. From chapter 1:4 through chapter 3:7 specific judgments and appeals are made to Judah and the other nations. Returning now to the original statement the call is made to the faithful to wait on the Lord. The word prey is defined as meaning certain victory.

The remnant were promised a place to dwell after the judgment of the nations. God's plan, as has been shown, is to bring judgment onto all the nations of the earth. He will make them a sacrifice to himself. (v.1:7)

v.3:9 For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may call upon the name of the Lord, to serve him with one consent.

The tone of Zephaniah's words takes a 180 degree turn. Instead of prophesying doom and gloom he now takes on a attitude of joy and hope with promises of many blessings for God's people.

There are some significant events which will take place over the next 500 years. One is the captivity of the Jews, another the return to Jerusalem 70 years later. What can be considered a non event is the time between the Old and New Testaments where God makes no revelation. Then there is the birth and death of Christ followed by what is now called the common era.

When Zephaniah says "*then*" is there a specific event after which these blessings will happen? Some difficulty arises when attempting to place a time when such prophecy will be fulfilled. So "*then*" can only refer to sometime after the Babylonian captivity.

The first blessing will be that God will bring about a pure language. The people referred to here are all the people throughout the world. Among the Jews not only were other gods worshipped but there were many ways in which they worshipped the Lord. The Gentiles of the other nations did not know the Lord nor did they know how he was to be worshipped. The common theme of the prophets was that all people would be included in God's new covenant. (Is. 2:2-3; Jer. 3:17; Joel 2:28)

The promise is likened to a pure heart. God would put his spirit into all people. (Ez. 11:19, 36:26) Believers would be of one accord and one mind and of one message. (Jer. 32:39-40; John 4:23-24; Rom. 15:6)

v.3:10 From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia my suppliants, even the daughter of my dispersed, shall bring mine offering.

In establishing God's new presence in the world the emphasis is that all people will be able to recognize him as the one true God. This emphasis is stated by "*beyond the rivers of Ethiopia*". In other words from the ends of the earth. The Gentiles would join with the Jews in praise of the Lord.

Suppliants are 'humble petitioners'. They are those who will humble themselves before the Lord desiring to know and learn more about him.

Taking this promise into the New Testament, the new covenant does not dissolve the basic promise of the old covenant. The Jews still have the promise of being his chosen people but now in the light of the gospel message the Gentiles would be made part of the promise. (Acts 13:46-48)

v.3:11 In that day shalt thou not be ashamed for all thy doings, wherein thou hast transgressed against me: for then I will take away out of the midst of thee them that rejoice in thy pride, and thou shalt no more be haughty because of my holy mountain.

The day of the Lord now take on a new meaning. It is no longer used as a spectre of judgment but one of hope. As the people turn their hearts back toward the Lord he will forgive and forget the past sins against him.

The Lord will remove one of the sources of Jewish pride. This pride was in themselves, who they were, God's chosen people. They took too much pride in their heritage, of being the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. (Matt. 3:9)

There was also the pride that they had the Temple in Jerusalem where the presence of God dwelled in the holy of holies. They had the false idea that because God was there they had nothing to fear. They became conceited, also called having an attitude. (Micah 3:11; Jer. 7:4, 9-11)

v.3:12 I will also leave in the midst of thee an afflicted and poor people, and they shall trust in the name of the Lord.

The coming judgment, the Babylonian invasion, will leave only a remnant in Judah. Those

named in the judgment; the rulers, judges, prophets and priests will either be taken captive or killed. This will leave only the poor and disadvantaged. Since they had no wealth to speak of they would be used as serfs to cultivate the land. This remnant will see and understand what has happened and turn to the Lord.

v.3:13 The remnant of Israel shall not do iniquity, nor speak lies; neither shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth: for they shall feed and lie down, and none shall make them afraid.

The remnant, that is those not taken into captivity and those who returned when the captivity ended, will be faithful to the Lord. Being faithful they will not bring in the old pagan practices of years gone by. They will worship the Lord in truth with a pure heart. (v.3:9) Justice and love will be a guiding force in their lives.

As a result of their trust in the Lord they will be blessed with peace. They will be able to live without fear knowing that God will be their protection. (Ez. 34:12-15)

v.3:14 Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all the heart, O daughter of Jerusalem.

Knowing that God will provide for their physical and spiritual needs brings Zephaniah's expectation of rejoicing and praise to the Lord. He will bring about these blessings and much more.

The "*daughter of Zion*" and "*daughter of Jerusalem*" are synonymous with the remnant of Judah.

v.3:15 The Lord hath taken away thy judgments, he hath cast out thine enemy: the king of Israel, even the Lord, is in the midst of thee: thou shalt not see evil any more.

The cause for the peoples joy is because judgments will be taken away. Judgment was brought about as a result of their gross sin. Since their trust in the Lord has replaced the worship of idols and pagan gods, and justice and love replaces lying and greed there will be no judgment.

The enemies of Judah will be no more because God will not have need of them to execute his judgments. God therefore will clear them out.

Judah will have no more need of a king because the Lord will be their king and will be in the midst of them to whom they can turn, to whom they can call upon. (v.3:9) Because this is the case they will not see (experience) evil.

v.3:16 In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear thou not: and to Zion, Let not thine hands be slack.

As a city they should not fear any enemy because of God's presence and protection. (physical or earthly)

As faithful followers they should not be slack in their duty to bear witness of his greatness. (spiritual)

v.3:17 The Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing.

The God that will be with the people is a mighty God. He has proved this to the people time and again. This most recent deliverance from Babylon is a demonstration of his might. With this might he has become a hero to the people. He has saved them and promises them peace and joy.

God is joyous over the fact that he can save and is filled with joy when someone accepts being saved. (Is. 62:5) His great love allows him to be silent over and above all the sin man commits. His love brings to an end all thought of past transgressions and signifies that he takes pleasure in those who love him. (Is. 65:19)

v.3:18 I will gather them that are sorrowful for the solemn assembly, who are of thee, to whom the reproach of it was a burden.

During the captivity the Jews could not celebrate the festivals and feasts which had been a part of their heritage. Here God is addressing those people who sorrow over this fact.

The remnant in Judah could not come to the temple because it had been destroyed. This meant pilgrimages and sacrifices could not be made in the ordinary manner. (Lam 1:4, 2:6)

There were those to whom the absence of these feasts was a particular burden. The message from Zephaniah is that God would comfort those who were negatively affected by the taking away of these feasts.

v.3:19 Behold, at that time I will undo all that afflict thee: and I will save her that halteth, and gather her that was driven out; and I will get them praise and fame in every land where they have been put to shame. v.3:20 At that time will I bring you again, even in the time that I gather you; for I will make you a name and a praise among all people of the earth, when I turn back your captivity before your eyes, saith the Lord.

"At that time" refers to the restoration of Judah from captivity. God will bring back glory to the name Israel, he will undo (restore) all that was taken away during the captivity. The "halteth" refers to the helpless and those that were "driven out" were the people taken into captivity, forced from their land.

The end result for Israel is that they will be brought back to their former stature or status among the nations of the world. To be at such a low point and again attaining a national standing would draw praise from the surrounding heathen nations which had once looked down at them with disrespect.

To emphasize the promise of the future it is repeated with God's assurance of a restoration of the nation with all its past glory.

Summary

As with the other prophets Zephaniah's message establishes God's sovereignty over all things. God does have and is concerned with the relationship between himself and his people. This however does not alter the fact that he will dispense justice to both the believer as well as the unbeliever. And there is always the promise and assurance that there is restoration and that this restoration brings with it God's joy over the return to him.

Bibliography

Barnes, Albert. Barnes' Notes on The New Testament
Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1962

Henry, Matthew. Matthew Henry's Commentary Isaiah to Malachi,
McLean: MacDonald Publishing Company

Barker, Kenneth L. The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 7
The Zondervan Corporation

Fausset, A. R. A Commentary
William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company

Keil, C. F. and Delitzsch, F. Commentary on the Old Testament Volume 10
Hendrickson Publishers, Inc

Baker David W. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
InterVarsity Press