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A JOURNEY THROUGH THE BIBLE

Reading: Zephaniah 1:1-18

37. THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH

If someone said to you, “*You’re so judgmental,*” would you consider it a compliment or an insult? *The concept of judgment has fallen on hard times.* Yet the fact remains that God, the God of the Bible is very judgmental. You see, while our culture insists that all issues should be viewed in shades of grey, in terms of moral equality God insists in viewing the world and the human race in the very stark terms of black and white, evil and good, sin and righteousness, wrong and right, sheep and goats, heaven and hell. As we come to the Book of Zephaniah we encounter a very judgmental prophet who speaks for a judgmental God. There are no shades of grey in the Book of Zephaniah, no compromise, it’s all judgment. Some people would like to rewrite the Bible and leave out the references to God’s judgment.

But the Bible is God’s truth to us, His revelation of Himself so that we can know Him and respond to Him. And if we would know God, we must know Him in His many dimensions. *You see, some folk think that the Old Testament presents a God of judgment, while the New Testament presents a God of love.* In fact we find hundreds of references to the love and mercy of God in the Old Testament, while in the New Testament we see

many references to the justice and judgment of God. Now we see all these facets of the character of God revealed in the Book of Zephaniah. The name Zephaniah means “*Hidden of the Lord,*” or “*he whom the Lord hides.*” For this reason some scholars have said that he was born in the latter part of Manasseh’s reign (686-642 B.C.) So his parents gave him this name for his life being spared during the atrocities of King Manasseh. (2 Kings 21:6) During Manasseh’s reign royal offspring were being sacrificed to the god Molech, under the king’s direction, so Zephaniah was hidden by the Lord so that he could avoid the slaughter. Now this man was no ordinary preacher. He is the great, great grandson of King Hezekiah, one of Judah’s most famous rulers. (1:1) He has royal blood in his veins, but more important he has the message of God upon his lips. Now the background for Zephaniah’s prophecy was a time of political, spiritual and moral upheaval. Think of the situation,

1. POLITICALLY:

The nation of Assyria was losing its world power, and Babylon was becoming the leading world empire. Zephaniah tells us when he prophesied. It was “ in the days of Josiah, the son of Amon king of Judah.” (1:1) So Zephaniah exercised his ministry during the reign of godly King Josiah (640-609 B.C.) Now it was during the reign of King Josiah that Judah was reformed and Zephaniah’s preaching may have played a vital part in initiating Josiah’s desire for a national reformation. 1.

2. SPIRITUALLY:

Look if you will at (1:1) Now most translations translate “ *Hizkiah*,” as “ *Hezekiah*,” the godly king of Judah. Do you recall that Hezekiah was succeeded by Manasseh ? Manasseh (695-642 B.C.) who reigned for 55 years was the most wicked king in Judah’s history. He revived Baal worship, made his son pass through the fire, observed times, used enchantments and dealt with mediums and wizards. (2 Kings 21 2 Chron 33:1-9) Amon, (642-640 B.C.) Manasseh’s son took the throne after his father’s death, and continued the idolatry of his father. He was assassinated by his servants only two years into his reign. (2 Chron 33:21-25) Amon was succeeded by his son Josiah (640-609 B.C.) who was only eight years old when he began to reign over Judah (2 Chron 34:1) At age sixteen he “ *began to seek the God of his father David*,” (2 Chron 34:3) Then at the age of twenty he started a great reformation in the land destroying the idols and judging the false priests and prophets.

But my revival cannot be legislated. Outwardly this revival was impressive, inwardly it fell far short of what was needed. The people got rid of the idols in their homes but not in their hearts. It was legislation not dedication, it was reformation not regeneration. The people went along with what they were required to do, but their hearts were not in it. Now it was during Josiah’s reign that Zedekiah preached. Internal evidence seems to suggest that he prophesied just before Josiah’s reforms, which occurred in 622 B.C.

3. PROPHETICALLY:

As regards the Prophets: Zephaniah, Jeremiah and Habakkuk were contemporaries and have been called the “ *the eleventh hour prophets to Judah*.” As regards the Prophecy: this book is all about “ *the day of the Lord*.” Now some people confuse “ *the day of the Lord*,” with “ *the Lord’s day*.” In the church we often call Sunday “ *the Lords day*,” because Sunday, the day the Lord Jesus rose from the day is when believers gather together for worship and celebrate His death and resurrection. But what the Bible calls “ *the day of the Lord*,” is something else altogether, like the difference between a horse chestnut and a chestnut horse. Now this subject, “ *the day of the Lord*,” is found time and again in the Old Testament. It is mentioned by name at least eighteen times in the Old Testament (Is 2:12 13:6,9 Eze 13:5, 30:3 Joel 1:15 2:1 2:11 2:31 3:14 Amos 5:18,20 Obad 15 Zeph 1:7 1:14 Mal 4:5) and four times in the New Testament. (1 Thes 5:2 2 Thes 2:2 2 Pet 3:10 Rev 1:10)

The phrase “ *the day of the Lord*,” has a two fold meaning. **Presently** it refers to God’s judgments on Judah and Jerusalem. In this case “ *The day of the Lord*,” would be the Babylonian invasion, and the final ruin of the city and temple. **Prophetically** it refers to that future day of judgment when God will pour out His wrath upon the whole world. (Rev Ch’s 6-19) Another term for this period is called “ *the time of Jacob’s trouble*,” (Jer 30:7) “ *the tribulation*,” that is so vividly described in (Rev Ch 6-18) So “ *the day of the Lord*,” has an immediate fulfilment and an ultimate fulfilment. Immediately it refers to God’s judgments on Judah. Ultimately, it is that time when God will send tribulation

to the world, judge the nations, save His people Israel and then establish His righteous kingdom. Now when we read carefully this book, we soon see that what Zephaniah has to say falls into three parts. In the first part the prophet seems to be looking inward, in the second part, he is looking outward and in the last part he is looking forward.

(1) THE PROPHET IS LOOKING INWARD:

1:2-2:3

As Dr. S. Baxter says, “ *A glance through these verses will show us at once that everything here refers to the judgment that is coming on Judah.*” (1:4,7,8, 11,12 2:1) Notice the word “ *because,*” in (1:17) Why is all the terrible calamity described in the previous verses coming on Judah ? “ *Because they have sinned against the Lord.*” (1:17) So the prophet announces that judgment is coming and nothing will escape. So “ *The day of the Lord,*” is

(a) DESERVED:

Judah had felt the blessing of God’s “ *mighty hand and outstretched arm,*” (Deut 26:8 Ex 6:6) when He delivered them from the Egyptians. But now God’s privileged people because of their wickedness would be judged by His hand. (Jer 21:5-7) Did you notice that the prophet mentions five types of wickedness for which Judah would be judged ?

1. There was Immorality:

Zephaniah mentions “ *the remnant of Baal,*” (1:4) for

Baal worship was licentious in the extreme. The name Baal means master or lord and is often used synonymously with idolatry. The name Chemarim refers to foreign priests brought into Judah to conduct Baal worship. The religion of Baal was extremely sensual open immorality was practiced “ *on every high hill,*” and “ *under every green tree.*” (1 Kings 14:23)

2. There was Astrology:

“ *Them that worship the host of heaven upon the housetops,*” (1:5) You see, they erected family altars on the flat roofs of their houses and burned incense in the morning and evening to the sun, moon and stars. (Jer 19:13 32:29) Many today who are involved in astrology deny that they worship the stars but many practice horoscope readings and gear their day according to its predictions. A Gallup poll indicates that the stars influence many lives and many Christians consult their daily or weekly horoscopes.

3. There was Insincerity:

For Zephaniah speak of “ *them that worship and that swear by the Lord and that swear by Malcham.*” (1:5) The name Malcham is the same as Molech (Lev 18:21) and Milcom (1 Kings 11:5) the national god of the Ammonites. What these Judeans were guilty of was syncretistic worship. They were hypocrites and compromisers. They wanted a foot in both camps and the Lord promised to cut them off. I wonder could I be speaking to someone this and you claim to be a

believer but you are involved in an organization that embraces ancient religious systems which are condemned in the Bible ? My God has a word for you this get out, keep out, and stay out. “ *Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers*,” (2 Cor 6:14)

4. There was Apostasy:

For look at what the prophets says in (1:6) ? The word “ *apostasy*,” means a falling away, a deliberate and total abandonment of the faith previously professed but not possessed. Apparently apostate teachings are finding fertile ground in which to germinate through some churches and colleges today. A report in Redbook magazine in the U.S.A. revealed that in a survey of ministers in training, “ *56% rejected the virgin birth: 71% rejected life after death: 54% rejected the bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and 98% rejected Christ’s return to earth.*” My do you see now why judgment was coming on Judah ?

5. There was Infidelity:

For there was “ *those that have not sought the Lord nor enquired oh him.*” (1:6) The same could be said of many Israelis today. According to David Levy 45% are secular Jews and do not practice their religion. These unbelievers have no interest in God whatsoever. Do you know something ? Within 50 years of Zephaniah’s prediction, judgment fell on Judah. Its judgment was total, its captivity was complete, nothing went untouched when the Day of the Lord came. So we see “ *The day of the Lord,*”

deserved.

(b) **DECLARED:**

For here in (1:7-13) Zephaniah declares the coming judgment. He says “ *Hold thy peace at the presence of the Lord God for the day of the Lord is at hand,*” (1:7) Did you notice that the judgement is described as sacrifice to which the Lord had already invited his guests ? Judah was to be the sacrifice, the hated Babylonians were the guests who would slaughter the nation and devour it, like an animal sacrificed in the Temple. Zephaniah then mentions seven groups of people who are going to suffer the judgment of God. *The princes:* (1:8) *the king’s posterity:* (1:8) *the plunderers:* (1:9) *the people* in general: (1:10) *the polluted merchants:* (1:11) *the passionless people:* (1:12) and *the property of the wealthy:* (1:13) I mean do you see what (1:13) says ? The Lord was not going to allow them to enjoy the houses that they had obtained through ill-gotten gain.(Amos 5:11)

Do you recall the warning that Paul gives that is so relevant to all of us who live in this materialistic age ? He says, “ *But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare and into many foolish and hurtful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil*,” (1 Tim 6:9-11) My there is nothing wrong with owning things the problem comes with things begin to own us. So you can see that this “ *day of the Lord,*” is (a) (b) and this “ *day of the Lord,*” is

(c) **DESCRIBED:**

The word “ *near*, ” is emphatic, stressing how quickly it will come. The coming invasion of the dreaded Babylonians was rapidly approaching. To describe “ *the day of the Lord*, ” Zephaniah piled up words and phrases expressing doom and gloom and piled into a series of five couplets. Do you see them in (1:15) ? You can hear the cries of the captives and the shouts of the warriors, you can see the victim’s blood poured out like cheap dust and “ *their flesh like dung*. ” (1:17) What a scene of destruction and carnage and all because the nation refused to submit to the word of the Lord. My this is but an illustration of what will happen in the end times when God’s judgment falls on a wicked world, only that final “ *day of the Lord*, ” will be far more terrible.

(Rev Ch 6-19) Many years ago a gentleman bought an expensive barometer in the city of New York. That evening he brought it home, unpacked it and hung it on his wall. The needle of the barometer was pointing towards hurricane. So he took off the wall, shoot it, put it back, but still the needle pointed towards hurricane.

Again, he took it down, shook it, put it back up, but still the needle remained unchanged. That evening he decided to write a nasty letter to the store where he had purchased the barometer, and in the letter he pointed out that the barometer was faulty for its needle was always pointing to hurricane. The next morning, on his way to work, he posted the letter. **That evening when he came home from his work the barometer was gone but so was his house, the hurricane had come !** My there is coming a tempest upon this world, the like of which this world has never seen. It was not escapism but a sound

knowledge of Scripture which prompted Horatius Bonar to sing,

*I see the last dark bloody sunset
I see the dread Avenger's form,
I see the Armageddon's onset
But I shall be above the storm*

(d) DELAYED:

For the Lord offers them the possibility that even at this stage judgment can be delayed and turned away by repentance. My is this not the message that all the prophets have ? If the people will humble themselves, God will hear and forgive and show them mercy in return. Did you notice that Zephaniah called upon a godly remnant to “ *seek the Lord, seek righteousness, seek meekness*. ” (2:3) If the faithful remnant continued in righteousness “ *it may be they shall be hidden in the day of the Lord’s anger*. ” (2:3) The Lord did spare a godly remnant that stayed true to Him throughout the seventy years of captivity. Warren Wiersbe calls them “ *a company of the concerned*, ” who became the nucleus of the restored nation when they returned to the promised land. My will this not happen again during the Great Tribulation ? God will protect a remnant of Jewish believers from the final day of the Lord. (Rev 7:3-8 12:13-17)

The book of Revelation says “ *And the woman fled into the wilderness where she hath a place prepared of God*. ” (Rev 12:6) Many Bible scholars believe the faithful Jews

of the last days will flee to the city of Petra, south of the Dead Sea. One thing is sure, God will prepare a special place where this Jewish remnant will be protected and cared for. Do you recall what Zephaniah's name means ?

" He whom the Lord hides," a promise that not all believers will be exterminated by the Antichrist's Gestapo. And so in this opening section the prophet is looking inward to the judgment that is coming on Judah.

(2) THE PROPHET IS LOOKING OUTWARD: 2:4-3:8

Zephaniah looks away from Judah and Jerusalem to the surrounding nations. Notice he speaks about,

(a) THE CONQUERORS OF JUDAH:

The prophet names the various Gentile nations around Judah and announces that God will judge them for their sins as well. You see, though they were never given God's Law as were the Jews (Ps 147:19-20) the Gentiles are still responsible before God, for God has revealed Himself to them in creation and conscience. (Rom 1:18) Still again these nations had not always treated the Jews kindly and now the time had arrived for the Lord to judge them. It's interesting that these nations correspond to the four points of the compass for remember Zephaniah's vision extends to the end times. As in the past so in the present Israel is surrounded by anti-Semitic nations who are seeking their destruction. You see,

1. To the West: Philistia: (2:4-7)

Philistia had five major cities during Zephaniah's day, four of which are mentioned as being marked out for judgment, Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod and Ekron.

(2 Chron 26:6) All of this had an initial fulfilment in the time of Nebuchadnezzar but it will re-enacted in the end times. 1.

2. To the East: Moab and Ammon: (2:8-11)

Both of whom came from backslidden Lot (Gen. 19:33-38) They had mistreated God's people and proudly *" magnified themselves,"* therefore God would humble them. Their lands would be ruined. Their idols would prove powerless. When the end-times arrive, Jordan will again will become an active foe of Israel, and all Zephaniah's predictions will have their final fulfilment.

3. To the South: The Ethiopians: (2:12)

It seems that Ethiopia was included in this prophecy because they were allied to Egypt. Now Egypt was a hereditary foe of Israel and Egypt received judgment at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. We know from Ezekiel (Ch's 38-39) that Ethiopia will be ally of Russia when Russia invades Israel. 1, 2, 3,

4. To the North: Assyria: (2:13-15)

Assyria dominated the ancient world from 883-612 B.C. but Zephaniah prophesied that the Lord would *" destroy*

Assyria and make Nineveh a desolation and dry like a wilderness." (2:13) This took place in 612 B.C. and today Nineveh is a tourist attraction and the only things she has to show are her ruins. Now since the initial predictions about the destruction of these nations have come true, is it not reasonable to assume that the final predictions about the destruction of these nations will come to pass ? My God's promise to Abraham still stands. Those who bless Israel, God will bless, those who curse Israel God will curse. (Gen 12:1-3) The nations that have sinned against God by mistreating the Jews can expect the Lord to judge them. So Zephaniah speaks about the conquerors of Judah, but then he speaks about,

(b) THE CAPITAL OF JUDAH:

The point being that, if God judges the sins of the heathen, how much more will He judge the sins of Judah, the "*holy nation of God*,"? "*Woe*," he said "*to her that is filthy and polluted, to the oppressing city.*" (3:1) He traced Jerusalem's troubles to her people's rejection of God's Word and their departure from the Lord. (3:2) I mean here were a people who could see God's judgment day after day, but they did not take it to heart. They saw God punish other nations but they said, "*It will never happen here.*" Well, it did happen for in 606 B.C. the Babylonians came and destroyed the nation, the city and the temple. " Sin is a reproach to any people," but especially the people of God. My what happens to a nation that has been founded on Biblical principles when it abandons the gold standard of the Word of God ?

Well, look at U.S.A. look at the United Kingdom. Look this at the cities in our nation. Look at pagan Ulster this! God's Word has been rejected, and the warning of coming judgment has been despised. People are trusting in Eastern philosophy. The sin of Sodom is publicly embraced. "*Woe to Ulster*," is the warning from God. But notice that Zephaniah does not end his prophecy with gloom but with gladness. For "*the day of the Lord*," extends beyond the judgment of the Great Tribulation and the Lord's return, to include the entire Messianic Kingdom. You see, Zephaniah reminds us that Israel's greatest days are yet to come. So here the prophet is not looking inward, nor he is looking outward,

(3) THE PROPHET IS LOOKING FORWARD: 3:9-20

God will one day regather His people, punish the Gentile nations, and restore Israel and Judah to their land. Did you notice that (3:8) is certainly a prediction of the Battle of Armageddon, when all nations shall gather against Jerusalem in the last days ? (Rev. 19:11-21) But Jesus Christ will return and judge these nations, and then establish His kingdom. You see, the prophet is looking forward,

(a) TO ISRAEL'S RESTORATION:

He saw the exiled Hebrew people coming from "*beyond the rivers of Ethiopia*," (3:10) which is the upper Nile region of southern Egypt, Sudan and northern Ethiopia. The Jews of our day have already trekked from there to

the reborn state of Israel. Notice also that Israel's final restoration will be a time of blessing for the Gentiles, who will be cleansed and able to praise and worship the Lord aright. (3:9) (a)

(b) TO ISRAEL'S REPENTANCE:

The Jews won't have "*to be put to shame*," for when they see Christ, they will be ashamed of what they did to the Lord and will mourn over their transgressions. Zechariah says, "*And they shall look upon me whom they have pierced and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn.*" (Zech 12:10) It will be a time of deep repentance and confession that will lead to salvation. The pride of race, religion, and ritual so characteristic of the Jews down through the centuries will be a thing of the past. J.C. Hoover was a missionary to the Jews in Denver, Colorado. One day he was traveling in a car with a Jewish Rabbi. As they drove up to the synagogue the Rabbi said to his friend, "*Mr. Hoover you Gentile Christians are looking for the second coming of your Saviour, Jesus Christ, and we Jews are looking for the first coming of our Messiah. Who knows but He might be the same person.*"

The Rabbi paused for a moment and then he said, "*Mr. Hoover, how do you think we will recognise our Messiah ?*" Quietly and reverently, the missionary read the words of the prophet Zechariah, "***And they shall look on Me whom they have pierced.***" (12:10) The Rabbi was silent as he got out of the car and slowly walked into the

synagogue. My the day is coming, when Israel, although blind at present, will recognize the Lord Jesus as the Messiah, and He who was crucified by them, will then be received by them. (Zech 13:1) "*So all Israel shall be saved.*" (Rom 11:26) So the prophet is looking forward to (a) (b)

(c) TO ISRAEL'S REJOICING:

"*Sing, O daughter of Zion, shout, O Israel, be glad and rejoice with all the heart O daughter of Jerusalem.*" (3:14) Israel will rejoice because of Christ's Return: for "*the Lord hath taken away thy judgments.*" (3:15) The charges against the nation would be forgiven. Israel will rejoice because the Lord has cast out its Enemy: (3:15) Israel will rejoice because "the Lord is in the midst of it," (3:15) Israel will rejoice because the nation will "not see evil or fear any more." (3:15) What joy lies ahead for the nation of Israel. My down through the long centuries they have been hounded and haunted from country after country in country after country. They have known no rest or safety. At times they have prospered in the land of their exile but sooner or later Anti-Semitism always reared up its head and the tale of their woes began again.

But Zephaniah saw a day when all that will be over. He saw Israel as a merry people, rejoicing, singing, and shouting with joy. Why God is with them, even more, He holds them to His heart, like a loving mother holds a baby, He even sings to them. My do you know that our God is a singing God ? *God the Father sings to the Jewish*

remnant entering the kingdom. (3:17) God the Son sang at the close of the Passover Feast and then went to the Garden to pray. (Matt 26:30 Heb 2:12) God the Holy Spirit sings today through the hearts and lips of Christians who praise God in the Spirit. (Eph 5:18-21)
Tell me, is this fruit of the Spirit evident in your life ?

(d) TO ISRAEL'S REDEEMER:

For “ *the Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty, he will save.*” (3:17) My for centuries, the Jewish people have taken hope and comfort in the promise that Messiah will one day come and bring world peace, secure the land of Israel for them, and rebuild the Temple on its historic site in Jerusalem. Will Zephaniah assured them that Christ will one day be visibly present in His glorious person to fulfill all the promises He has made to the nation. That has not yet happened but Zephaniah assures us it most certainly will.

It's interesting that the book of Zephaniah begins with a king and ends with a King. The prophet referred to a Past king, his relative Hezekiah, but now he looks forward to a Promised King, the Lord Jesus. My are you looking forward to the coming reign of Jesus Christ ? Do you pray with anticipation for it ? Do you live in the light of it ?

At the service of the coronation of our Queen, a close friend of the Royal Family sat close to the Queen Mother. She told how, that during the coronation service, when it came to the moment when that stripling of a girl was crowned Queen, she turned and looked at the face of the

Queen Mother and saw the tears streaming down her cheeks. Most people watched it on television and the crown was placed upon the one who had the right to wear it, the only one. My have you crowned Him ? Lord of all ? Have you placed the crown upon His head ? And has the action of a moment become the attitude of a lifetime ?

**I can hear the chariot's rumble, I can see the marching throng,
And the fury of God's trumpet spells the end of sin and wrong,
Regal rolls are now unfolded, heaven's grandstands all in place
Heaven's choir is now assembled, start to sing
'Amazing Grace,'**

**The King is coming, the King is coming
I just heard the trumpet sounding,
And soon His face I'll see
The King is coming, the King is coming
Praise God He's coming for me**

