

ZEPHANIAH: TEACHER'S NOTES

Title and Inscription [1:1]

Read 2 Chron. 33,34,35 and 2 Kings 21,22,23 for the historical background for the period of this prophecy. It is possible that Zephaniah is the descendant of King Hezekiah and if so, that makes him the only prophet known to be of royal blood.

- I. Judgment upon the whole world Judah in particular. [1:2-18]
 - A. A world judgment. (2-6)
 1. Prelude: judgment on the whole world. (2,3) The judgment to come will be universal. The far reaching consequences of this judgment are comparable to those of the flood. The judgment will affect man and beasts. We have already noted other prophets that have made this same pronouncement (Joel 1:18; Hos. 4:3; also Jer. 12:4). The "stumbling blocks" represent idols and the sins that accompany them. Man is responsible for this judgment being brought against him.
 2. Judgment on Judah and Jerusalem for idolatry. (4-6) Jehovah will stretch out His hand and utterly consume and cut off Judah for their sins. Jerusalem will be cleansed of the Baal worshipers. The priests of the idols would also be cut off. Also the unfaithful priests of the Temple would share the same fate as the priest of the idols. Here we have three classes of false worshipers mentioned: star worshipers, false swearers, and "those turned back from Jehovah." Moses had specifically forbidden worshiping the heavens (Deut. 4:19). This would include astrology. The false swearers divided their allegiance between God and the idol gods. The third group had simply become indifferent towards Jehovah. They could not care less about God and the things of God.
 - B. Judgment on sinners of every rank. (7-13)
 1. On princes. (7,8) Silence is demanded in the presence of Jehovah (Hab. 2:20). The "day of Jehovah" always refers to a time of judgment against the wicked. Judah will be the sacrifice for these sins. The surrounding nations will be the witnesses and (from Habakkuk) we know that the Babylonians will be the executors of the judgment. The members of the royal family are held responsible for the conditions in Jerusalem. While Josiah, the current king, was godly, his descendants would not be, and therefore would not be spared. Many of the wealthy as well as the rulers had taken on the affectations of the foreign lands. They were condemned because they had forsaken the customs of their own divinely appointed kingdom and had adopted those of a heathen people.
 2. On thieves (or idolaters). (9) "those that leap over the threshold" could refer to the priests of the idol Dagon, because of the situation described in 1 Samuel (5:4,5). It is more likely however, that it is a reference to a ring of burglars or thieves.

3. On traders. (10,11) The "fish gate" is thought to have been located near the northern wall, towards the east in the city of Jerusalem. The destroyers would come from that direction (1 Chron. 33:14; Neh. 3:3; 12:39). Mishneh is thought to be a section of the city located near the fish gate. The location of the section of the city known as Maktesh is unknown, but it was obviously a place of trading. The "Canaanites" here are actually Judeans, who are acting like Canaanites (Hos. 12:7). They were unscrupulous in their business dealings. Along with these evil merchants, their bankers would also be cut off.
 4. On indifferent and wealthy. (12,13) The depraved and the indifferent will also be brought under judgment. Jehovah would search Jerusalem until every one of these would be found. "To settle on the lees" is a metaphor that comes from the treating of wine. If allowed to remain too long on its lees, wine would become harsh and syrupy and unfit for consumption (Jer. 48:11,12). These people looked on God as just another idol. In the judgment, God would demonstrate to them the true difference between the idols and Himself. Their end would be destruction.
- C. The imminence and terrible nature of the judgment. (14-18)
1. Imminent. (14) The day is near. A bitter day of complete defeat. So complete that not even the strong will survive.
 2. A terribly dark day. (15-17) The day will overflow with divine wrath. A day of trouble and distress, waste and desolation, darkness and gloom, clouds and thick darkness, trumpet and alarm, all directed against the fortified cities. This distress is a direct result of the sins of the people.
 3. There will be no deliverance. (18) They would become lost in their own environs, their blood would be spilled, and they would become as manure on the ground. Jehovah had determined their destruction and there would be no escape. Jehovah's jealousy is as a consuming fire. His righteous resentment and indignation at being replaced in the people's hearts by idols and having His righteousness exchanged for pagan wickedness, fueled this fire of jealousy.

Applications for Today

- A. 1:5 - It impossible to have unity between God's religion and man's religion. Accepting the tenets of Islam, Buddha, etc. rejects the distinct Lordship of Jesus Christ. Jn. 14:16; 8:24; 12:48; Mt. 6:24
- B. 1:18 - When the Lord comes in final judgment, nothing in this world will deliver the evildoer. Mt. 16:26; 1 Jn. 2:15-17

II. Exhortation to repentance and perseverance. [2:1-3:8]

- A. Call to repentance and to seek the Lord, that they may be hidden in the day of the Lord. (2:1-3) In His address to Judah, Jehovah uses the term "O Nation," the same

one He used for the heathen nations. Judah had sunk to their level. Judah is called to repentance to avoid the punishment and judgment that has been decreed. The people must "seek Jehovah." Those who would answer the call would be meek, humble, lowly and submissive towards God. Only those hiding under the sheltering wings of Jehovah can hope to escape the judgment.

- B. Reason: God will judge the nations near and far. (2:4-15)
1. Judgment upon the nations that are near. (4-11)
 - a. Upon Philistia. (4-7) In a scene similar to the one in Amos 1, we see the surrounding nations condemned. The four cities of Philistia represent the entire nation. The Cherethites were a tribe or branch of the Philistines (2 Sam. 8:18; 20:23; 1 Chron. 18:17; 1 Sam. 30:14; Ez. 25:16). The Philistines are thought to have originated from the island of Crete (Amos 9:7; Jer. 47:4). Their seacoast would become desolate, the residences of their proud cities replaced with huts and caves. The coast would be the future home of the remnant of Judah (Jer. 32:42-44). This prophecy was fulfilled when the Babylonian captivity ended.
 - b. Upon Moab and Ammon. (8-10) Trouble between God's people and Moab and Ammon goes all the way back to Moses (Num. 22-24). The immediate sin of these nations appears to be their encroachment into Judah's territory. Their destruction is compared to that of Sodom and Gomorrah. The basis of their sin was pride, their reward: utter destruction (Is. 16:6; 48:26,29). Thus the end of the descendants of Lot.
 - c. Upon all the gods of earth. (11) False worship of some kind has always been the root of sin and evil on this earth. Jehovah would show His true supremacy over any and all idols. While the idols of these heathen nations have long since disappeared, Jehovah remains.
 2. Judgment upon powerful nations afar. (12-15)
 - a. Upon Ethiopia. (12) Egypt is represented here because it was currently under the rule of Ethiopian Pharaohs (Ez. 30:4-5,24,25; Is. 18:1,2).
 - b. Upon Assyria and Nineveh. (13-15) Now the prophet proclaims judgment upon Assyria. At this time Assyria was the most powerful, flourishing and dominating nation on earth. Zephaniah would have to be either inspired or crazy to make such a prophecy. The land of Assyria would become pasture land; the cities would be stripped of their glory. Only rubble and rubbish would remain. Ezekiel "comforted the Pharaohs by prophesying that Assyria would accompany them to Sheol (Ez. 32:18- 23).
- C. If God punishes the heathen, He will not spare Judah. (3:1-8)
1. Woe to the polluted city classes of sinners and sin. (1-7)

- a. Princes, judges, prophets, priests. (1-4) The prophet turns back to Jerusalem, the polluted and rebellious city. This rebellion had led to depravity, which in turn led to cruelty and oppression of the poor. Four charges are leveled against Jerusalem: (1) She did not obey the voice of God, (2) She did not receive correction or instruction, (3) She placed her trust in false gods, and (4) She did not draw near to God. Four classes of Her people are condemned: princes, judges, prophets and, priests.
 - b. Jehovah's constant reminder of His sovereignty. (5-7) No matter how man acts, God will always act in accordance with His divine character. He must do what is right (2 Tim. 3:13). Jerusalem had become so callous that they did not even realize they were sinning. God's attitude towards the heathen nations should have served as a reminder to Jerusalem that He would not accept idolatry. It did not (Deut. 9:4,5; Lev. 26; Deut. 28). Jehovah had asked Judah to "fear Him and receive instruction;" give Him reverence and regard His possessions and; do His will. Judah had chosen to do none of these things.
2. God has called; they have refused therefore, Woe! (8) The pious few are called on to wait for Jehovah. Isaiah is fond of this expression (Isa. 40:31; 42:4; 49:23; 64:4). It means to allow Jehovah to do His work. It involves both trust and patience. The "prey" mentioned here could represent the faithful remnant. This interpretation is in harmony with Is. 53:12. The decision to bring universal judgment was not to exterminate humanity, but to refine humanity. The judgment would be severe to the point that only the pure would survive.

III. After the judgment, salvation, and glorification for the remnant. [3:9-20]

- A. From among the heathen will God's remnant come. (9-10) Those that return to Jehovah would be purified (Isa. 6:5,7; Jer. 1:9; Dan. 10:16) and serve together. This is a prophecy of Messianic hope (Heb. 13:15,16). The remnant would return from the remote regions of the earth. If verse 10 is parallel to Isa. 66:20, then the dispersed Jews would return as an offering to the Lord through the work of the Gentiles (Rom.11:11-14).
- B. Israel restored will be cleansed and sanctified. (11-13) When the prophecy of verses 9 and 10 is fulfilled, then sins will be blotted out. The meek will inherit God's spiritual kingdom. Those strong in the faith, with confidence in Jehovah will replace those that are haughty. The remnant will be righteous and truthful. Their security will not be found in fortifications of their own making, but only in the Lord.

C. Israel comforted and exalted to honor. (14-20)

1. The people are to rejoice. (14-17) The prophet calls on the remnant to sing and rejoice in their salvation (Zech. 2:19; 9:9). In the spiritual kingdom (Zion), Israel, and Judah will be reunited. The removal of the judgments and the return of the King will be cause for celebration. The idols are destroyed and will not return. The pure love that God has for the redeemed is expressed in these verses.
2. The promise of Jehovah renewed. (18-20) The pious will be gathered to Jehovah. Those who afflict God's people will be dealt with severely. (Compare to Micah 4:6,7.) Note the "I's" of Jehovah: "I will gather, I will deal, I will save, I will Make, etc." The work of redemption will be the Lord's work. The people had been scattered because they had refused Him. He would bring them back. In this assurance and hope, the people could rightfully rejoice.

Applications for Today

- A. 2:3 - Men should seek the Lord (Acts 17:27). We are separated from God, when we erect barriers of indifference and sin (Isa. 59:1,2). The Lord will only be found by the meek and the humble (Mt. 5:5,6; Ps. 51:16,17).
- B. 3:8 - To wait upon the Lord involves two major attitudes: 1) the willingness to obey God's will and 2) patience (Ps. 25:3-5; Phil 4:11-13).