

Lesson 4

Zephaniah 1: Jehovah Hides

Introduction

Zephaniah's ministry took place during the reign of King Josiah of Judah. It is believed his ministry was relatively short. Most commentators date his work to somewhere between 630 and 625 B.C. Zephaniah's name means "Jehovah hides" or "Jehovah has hidden" or "treasured." Is there a connection between the meaning of his name and the contents of his book? There are several theories out there, but there is no strong evidence for any specific one. Four Zephaniahs appear in the Old Testament:

- The prophet that is the focus of this lesson.
- A priest mentioned in 1 Chronicles 6:36.
- Judean father or fathers of various contemporaries of the prophet Zechariah, Zechariah 6:10, 15.
- A priest who lived during the days of Jeremiah. This priest was in opposition to Jeremiah and was eventually taken into captivity by the king of Babylon. See Jeremiah 21:1, 37:3, 52:24.¹

Zephaniah was the son of Cushi, 1:1. In fact, his ancestry is listed to four generations previous. He was the great-great grandson of Hezekiah, the very good king of Judah in the waning days of the eighth century B.C. Being of the royal line of descendants, he most likely lived in Jerusalem. Reading through the book, he appears to be very familiar with the moral and ethical morass the city found itself in. We know nothing of Zephaniah's occupation.

The domestic political situation

Our last lesson left off with Micah, who prophesied during the reign of Hezekiah. Hezekiah was a good king, faithful to God. Following the death of Hezekiah, Judah was forced to deal with the reign of his son, Manasseh. Manasseh labored hard to return Judah to the ways of Baal-worship, the mystical gods of the east, sorcery, black magic, etc. All the religious reform executed during the reign of his father was reversed. Manasseh might have done this to make Judah appear as being loyal to the great Assyrian empire which dominated the world scene at this time. Manasseh even worked vigorously to persecute the prophets. Jewish tradition says that Isaiah was sawn in two by those employed by Manasseh. His reign would last for fifty-five years (697-642 B.C.). His reign was one that caused violence and innocent blood to fill the streets of Jerusalem, 2 Kings 21:16. After his death he was buried in the garden in his own home, 2 Kings 21:18; 2 Chronicles 33:30. After Manasseh, his son Amon succeeded him. Amon continued the pattern of wickedness. After two years, the servants of Amon *conspired against him and put him to death in his own house*, 2 Chronicles 33:24. Then the people rose and killed all the conspirators against Amon and installed his son Josiah as king in his place.

Josiah was eight years old when he came to the throne. Eight years into his reign, 632 B.C., *while he was still a youth*, he began to initiate religious reform across the land. This was a bold move. Because of the dominance of the Assyrians, issuing religious reform could have been perceived by them as rebellion. In

628 B.C., Ashurbanipal, King of Assyria died. Seizing upon the opportunity that Assyria would be focused on internal matters, Josiah stepped up the religious reforms. This is seen in 2 Chronicles 34:3-5:

in the twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places...They tore down the altars of the Baals in his presence, and the incense altars that were high above them he chopped down; also the Asherim, the carved images and the molten images he broke in pieces and ground to powder and scattered it on the graves of those who had sacrificed to them. Then he burned the bones of the priests on their altars and purged Judah and Jerusalem.

These reforms continued throughout the reign of Josiah. In the eighteenth year of his reign, 622 B.C., he ordered the high priest to cleanse the temple, 2 Chronicles 34:8-24. During that cleansing, Hilkiah discovered the book of the law. The book was read to the king, and he reacted with fear when realizing the country was being punished because of the idolatry of his ancestors. The religious reforms continued throughout the life of Josiah. He was killed in 609 B.C. in a battle against the Egyptians. With his death, the direction of the nation changed for the worse.

The international political situation

After Hezekiah, Assyria pushed its domination to the south toward Egypt. By 663 B.C., the Assyrian Empire stretched from one end of the Fertile Crescent to the other. It was a huge empire to govern, filled with different peoples, languages, and cultures. During the reign of Ashurbanipal (669-633 B.C.), the country reached its highest pinnacle of power and influence. After his death, the country began a rapid descent to destruction. With a series of civil wars and insurgencies by the Babylonians and Medes, Assyria fell apart.

In 625 B.C., Nabopolassar, king of Babylon, declared its independence from Assyria. War soon raged between these two nations. In 614 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar, son of Nabopolassar, and the general of the Babylonian army, fought the Assyrians at Nineveh and won. By 612 B.C., Nineveh was destroyed. Hailey writes, "612 B.C. is an important date in history. The remnant of the Assyrian army fled west where it entrenched itself near Haran. After destroying Nineveh, Nebuchadnezzar reorganized his forces and followed the Assyrians to Haran where he attacked and destroyed the remaining forces of Assyrian power in 609 B.C. This left the Chaldean nation the undisputed master of the East."²

As the Assyrians now find themselves in the unfamiliar position as the underdog, in 609 B.C., Egypt came to the aid of what was left of the Assyrian forces. Pharaoh Neco led his forces up from Egypt toward the Assyrians to help them meet the Babylonians at Haran. Although we cannot be sure as to the reasons (scripture is silent on this issue), Josiah led the armies of Judah out to battle against the Egyptians as they headed north. It was in this battle that Josiah was killed in 609 B.C., 2 Chronicles 35:21-24. Josiah did succeed, however, in preventing the Egyptian forces reaching Haran in time to assist the Assyrians in their last battle against the Babylonians. Over the next five to six years, Egypt dominated the land of Judah, relegating their kings to little more than vassals subject to Egyptian wishes.

Moral and religious conditions during the days of Zephaniah

Zephaniah lived during a period of well-known prophets, all doing their best to move the people back to a relationship with the Lord. Jeremiah, Nahum, and Habakkuk prophesied during the time of

Zephaniah. Although Josiah made significant reforms in Judah, it seems that the people still hung on to their immoral lifestyle, at least to some degree. The first chapter of Zephaniah describes a people who:

- were idolatrous, mixing worship of the Lord with that of idols, 1:4, 6
- tolerated idolatrous priests, 1:4
- filled the land with violence and deceit, 1:9
- engaged in dishonest business practices, 1:11
- trusted in their economic wealth and power, 1:13

The message of Zephaniah is one of stern warning. *A Day of the Lord* was coming to punish the nation for its wicked ways. The concluding verses of the book contain hope for those who would turn to the Lord. Although they would have to endure the chastisement of the Lord, there was coming a time in which they could *take refuge in the name of the Lord*, 3:12.

Judgment is coming upon the world and upon Judah

The *Day of the Lord* is something seen throughout the book. In the Minor Prophets, the *Day of the Lord* symbolically describes a day in which God would pour out His vengeance on those who rebel against Him. There are several *Days of the Lord* in Scripture – they do not all refer to the end of time. But in verses two and three, before pronouncing judgment upon Judah, Zephaniah does seem to be looking ahead to the final judgment when he says the Lord will *completely remove all things from the face of the earth*, 1:2. There is coming a time when God will destroy the earth and its works, 2 Peter 3:9-11. This will be a day when the wicked of the earth will be destroyed for their acts of rebellion against God.

Beginning in 1:4, the attention turns to Jerusalem and Judah. Not only will God have complete victory over evil at the end of time, but there will also be occasions for God to render judgment before then. What was going to happen to Judah was one such time. In the eyes of the people, the judgment against Judah might have come as a surprise. They regarded themselves as the *chosen* ones of God. They were entitled to special favor since the presence of God filled the temple. How could God *ever* destroy them? Verses four through six outline reasons why the time was ripe for destruction. God had been completely rejected. The people *turned back from following the Lord And... have not sought the Lord or inquired of Him*, 1:6. “Milcom” in 1:5 refers to the god of Ammon, Molech. In “swearing” by Molech, the people had elevated Molech to the same status as the Lord. This would not go unpunished.

Because God was about to reveal Himself through the judgment to come, silence was commanded, 1:7. The *Day of the Lord* was approaching. The picture of a sacrifice is used here, and Zephaniah says the guests have been consecrated. Who are the guests? In this case, it is the armies of Babylon. Who is being sacrificed? In this case, it is the people of Judah. Zephaniah informs the people that their rulers (the princes, the king’s sons) would be included in this judgment. There would be no escape. Those *who clothe themselves with foreign garments* probably refers to those who were (1) either caught up in idol worship to foreign gods, (2) displaying their allegiance to Egypt or Chaldea, or (3) both. All loyalty to the Lord was absent. There was no thought of the power of God, His deliverance for them in times past, or the consequences of their sin. *Leaping on the threshold* may refer to superstitions held by the people. Smith points out that this had been an ancient Philistine practice, 1 Samuel 5:5.³ Whatever the case, it

must have been adopted by the people here. God has always condemned His people from following superstitions. Our faith is to be based upon the power of God. Judah had also become filled with bloodshed and violence which God could no longer tolerate.

The city would be destroyed. The *Fish Gate* guarded the northeastern section of Jerusalem—which would have been attacked first. The *Fish Gate* is mentioned in 2 Chronicles 33:14 as part of Manasseh’s fortification program. The *Second Quarter* is thought to have been in the area around the *Fish Gate*, but its exact location is unknown. The *crash from the hills* could refer to the surrounding Chaldean armies surrounding the city and pressing in on it from the surrounding hills. It must have been very scary. The merchants of Jerusalem were not going to be exempt from this destruction. The *Mortar* and *people of Canaan* seem to be referring to this. The *people of Canaan* is mostly a derogatory term directed toward the dishonest merchants of Judah—who had become much like the people they drove out of the land generations before. The land was full of apathetic and spiritually complacent people who refused to believe God would punish them for sin. Does this sound that different from some in our own time? These were *stagnant in spirit* and said *The Lord will not do good or evil*, 1:12. How “stunning” it must have been to them as the armies gathered on the hills surrounding Jerusalem. Could this *really* be happening?

This day was coming sooner, not later

Verses fourteen through eighteen are written with a sense of urgency. The *day of the Lord* was *near and coming very quickly*, 1:14. It is described as a day of:

- wrath
- trouble and distress
- destruction and desolation
- darkness and gloom
- clouds and thick darkness
- trumpet and battle cries against the fortified cities. (The enemy forces would besiege and invade the Holy City.)
- distress on men – making them walk as blind men. (This symbolizes complete and total confusion.)
- bloodshed (*poured out like dust and their flesh like dung*)

Nothing was going to enable them to escape. They could not buy their way out of their predicament with money. God demands total allegiance and this they had not given Him. As a result, the entire nation was going to cease to exist. It would come to a brutal, violent, and terrifying end. *The wages of sin is death*, Romans 6:23a.

For Discussion

1. What notable king of Judah was Zephaniah related to?

2. When did the ministry of Zephaniah take place?

3. Describe the political situation in Judah from the time after Hezekiah to Josiah.

4. Under whom did the Assyrians reach their greatest level of power?

5. What nation rose to challenge Assyria and eventually take its place as the dominant world power?

6. Who were Zephaniah's contemporaries?

7. What was the general lifestyle of the people in Zephaniah's day?

8. Does this contradict or conflict with your impression of Josiah's reforms? How?

9. What is the *Day of the Lord*?

10. Why might the people have found Zephaniah's prophecy surprising? Are there any twenty-first century lessons here? What?

11. In the picture of the sacrifice (1:7), who are the consecrated guests of the LORD? Who is the offering? How does this vivid picture affect you?

12. How prevalent are superstitions in our time? List some of them. How do you think God feels about this?

13. How had complacency affected the people of Zephaniah's day? What about our own?

14. Describe the *Day of the Lord* in 1:14-16.

15. Would any escape from this judgment?

(Endnotes)

- 1 International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Electronic Database Copyright (c)1996 by Biblesoft
- 2 Hailey, Homer, E. *A Commentary on the Minor Prophets* (Louisville, KY: Religious Supply, 1993), p. 224
- 3 Smith, James E. *The Minor Prophets*. p. 409