

# **A LOOK AT A BOOK: Zephaniah**

## **November 2, 2014**

### **The Message of Zephaniah: What's there to be thankful for?**

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To help us figure out what we have to be thankful for, we turn to the book of Zephaniah. Zephaniah is not called a “minor” prophet because he was unimportant, but because his book is short compared to the “major” prophets. We know more about the man Zephaniah than we do about most of the minor prophets, particularly from the first verse: “The word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah, during the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah” (1:1). Zephaniah’s father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and even great-great-grandfather are listed. Why would they all be listed? Well, to show who his great-great-grandfather was – the great king Hezekiah from the previous century. If your great-great-grandfather was Thomas Jefferson, you would probably mention that fact if you were called on to address the entire American nation. Zephaniah did not descend through the royal line of Manasseh, Hezekiah’s evil son, but through one of Hezekiah’s younger sons. There’s no way anyone could accuse Zephaniah of not being loyal, of not being a Hebrew of Hebrews, even as he said the difficult things that he would say in this book.

We also know from the first verse that Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of King Josiah, who reigned from 639 to 609 B.C. We have a couple of further reasons to believe that he prophesied early in Josiah’s reign, maybe around 630 B.C. – just after Nahum’s prophecy against Nineveh and just before Habakkuk’s’ prophecy against Judah. First, Zephaniah prophesied against the still powerful Nineveh (2:13-15), and Nineveh fell to the Babylonians in 612. Second, Zephaniah’s severe condemnation of Judah suggests that the great religious awakening for which Josiah was known had not yet occurred.

Zephaniah helps us to learn at least five things about God.

#### **God alone is God**

First, Zephaniah teaches us that God alone is God. We can be thankful for this awesome God who alone deserves our reverence and awe.

Right from the beginning of his book, Zephaniah points to God's judgment to show that God alone is God. After the introductory verse 1, we read Zephaniah confronting the wickedness of God's own people in Jerusalem, and that God would punish them.

### Zephaniah 1:2-9

These opening verses must be some of the most dramatic opening verses of any prophecy in the Bible: "I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth," the Lord says through Zephaniah. Three times he promises to "sweep away" (1:2, 3)! Twice he says they will be "cut off" (1:3, 4). Once he says he will "stretch out his hand against" them (1:4). And twice he promises to "punish" them (1:8, 9). The verbs say it all! God would be severe with his people.

And God delivered on his promise. One generation after Zephaniah's prophecy, Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. First, they invaded the city and carried away many exiles. Then, they came back and destroyed the city, its walls, and the great temple of the Lord. Zephaniah might have even lived to witness this destruction.

In Zephaniah's prophecy of course, the Lord was addressing the people of Jerusalem, all of whom were supposed to be his true worshipers. Had we asked them, some of them might have said they were simply worshiping both the Lord and other gods – being inclusive; being respectful; getting the best from all the different traditions; doing a little hedging of the irreligious bets, just in case there was some truth here or some power there. But the true God has no co-regents. Worshiping the true God and some other god is not worshiping the true God at all.

Sometimes, people hear us Christians profess our belief in only one God who alone should be worshiped and then assume that we also think the worship of other gods should be illegal. As someone who regularly preaches about the existence of only one God and the exclusivity of salvation through Jesus Christ alone, let me be absolutely clear: we do not teach or propagate this idea at all! True worship cannot be coerced by law. In fact, Christians have a long tradition of advocating legal protections for the free exercise of religion, even of those religions that claim they alone are the only true way to God.

At the same time we Christians are adamant about proclaiming what the Bible says: there is one God and one path of salvation. Such exclusive claims are not part of a recent rightward lunge by religious folk in reaction to growing cultural diversity. No, they are stamped on almost every page of the Old Testament.

Certainly we see it here in Zephaniah. The Lord will tolerate no rivals! Jesus taught this as well. He said that he was the only way to the one true God (e.g., John 14:6). What's more, he said that he was the one true God!

Notice also that God's command to "be silent" assumes that a connection exists between awe and reverence and a hushed quiet. In our entertainment-driven culture today, it's easy to understand the idea of going crazy with applause. But some things – perhaps the greatest things – still cause us to go silent, speechless, hushed.

### **God is active**

Zephaniah teaches a second thing about God for which we can be thankful: God is active. If you have been living in an unjust manner, but have counted on God's apathy or indifference, says Zephaniah, "wail!"

#### Zephaniah 1:10-13

In these verses, Zephaniah becomes even more specific about Jerusalem's coming destruction. The Lord's command changes from "be silent" before him (that is, worship him alone) to "wail!" The people of Jerusalem are told to shout out their distress.

All of Jerusalem will wail (1:10-11)! Zephaniah mentions the merchants and traders with their houses and vineyards, but he does not condemn them for their trade, per se. Rather, like a legal form folded in thirds, he begins by pointing to those who "are complacent" – those who are self-satisfied and pleased with themselves and their lot; those who have a habit of pardoning their own faults. Who are these people? The people in Jerusalem may be God's people, but they are spiritually apathetic and unaffected by God, like such wine. Of course, people who are unaffected by God implicitly tell the world that God himself is unaffecting and apathetic. Their complacency lies about him. Hence, we read in the third fold, these people think, "The Lord will do nothing, either good or bad." As is so often the case, those who are the most ignorant of true religion are also the most certain of it – certain that God is just like them!

Consider carefully the complacent man's presumption that "The Lord will do nothing, either good or bad." Is God really a do-nothing God?

## **God is just and merciful**

A third matter for us to consider is that God is both just and merciful! How grateful we can be for each of these aspects of his character! Let's turn again to Zephaniah's prophecy.

Zephaniah 1:14-2:3

As Zephaniah looks forward in the Spirit, he sees both the fall of Jerusalem that occurred several decades later and a preview of God's final judgment of the world. The prophecy is sobering. You can almost hear the desperate shouts and cries, and see the looks of anguish and the darkness, and smell the dust and the destruction, and feel the heat of the fire of God's jealousy, and taste the bitterness of the day. This day would be "the day of the Lord's anger" (2:3).

Zephaniah 1:17-18

Everyone is going to be judged. Everyone! That's what Zephaniah is saying. And we will not be judged for how our resumes look or how high we climbed on this or that ladder. No, we will be judged because we have "sinned against the Lord" (1:17).

Do not be so deceived by the objects and goods that all too soon will belong to someone else. Do not allow your possessions to possess you. No good will come of it.

As Christians, we know that the most amazing display of God's judgment occurred when he poured out his wrath on Christ on the cross. We also know that the most astounding display of God's mercy occurred when Christ, hanging on the cross, took upon himself God's wrath for our sins.

## **God is Judge of all the world**

Zephaniah teaches us a fourth thing about God about which we can be thankful: God is Judge of the entire world. We can be thankful because we know that he will do what is just and right, even if we have to wait for it.

So far, Zephaniah's prophecy has largely been directed to God's own people. But beginning in 2:4, he broadens his scope and makes it clear that all nations are in God's sight. First, he addresses the people on the coast of Canaan, the Philistines.

Zephaniah 2:4-7

Next, he addresses the Moabites and the Ammonites.

Zechariah 2:8-11

The Cushites, who lived in Ethiopia, then hear a dire word” “You too, O Cushites, will be slain by my sword” (2:12).

Even the mighty power of Assyria will fall under God’s judgment.

Zephaniah 2:13-15

Finally, Jerusalem is again addressed. Since she acts like the nations, God will treat her like the nations.

Zechariah 3:1-7

As we hear the nations called off one by one, we begin to realize where the prophet is going – God will judge the whole earth.

Zechariah 3:8

God would judge everyone for their sinfulness. No one would escape – from Ethiopia to the coast of Canaan to Assyria. He would judge the nations for callously rejecting his own people, as with Moab and Ammon. He would judge the nations for proudly rejecting him, as with Assyria. And he would judge those who knew themselves to be God’s people – at least externally – as with the city of Jerusalem. God pointed to all the nations around Judah and then pointed to Judah itself to teach that he was the Judge of all the world – he makes no distinctions!

The Bible teaches that Jesus Christ will be this world’s ultimate Judge. Preaching in Athens, the apostle Paul said, “For [God] has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:31). Jesus will be the ultimate Judge of all nations.

In the mean time, we who are God’s people must wait: “Therefore wait for me,” God says (3:8). Perhaps those in Jerusalem who truly belonged to God were tempted to believe their cynical and complacent neighbors who reasoned that

because God had not yet “fixed” the injustice of the land, he never would; that he didn’t care.

As members of churches, we do not simply need to hear about our own individual spirituality, with neat tips on life and purpose. We need God’s Word in its fullness, including the truths about God’s holiness and his righteous judgment on our sin. We must know and relish God’s promises to us in Christ.

### **God is the Savior of his people**

A fifth and final thing Zephaniah teaches us about God is this: God is the Savior of his people. Truly, it is not difficult to see what should provoke gratitude in us here, as God follows up his promises of judgment with promises of restoration.

Zephaniah 3:9-13

Hearing these promises, the prophet calls God’s people to sing.

Zephaniah 3:14-17

The book of Zephaniah then closes with God repeating his promises of restoration.

Zephaniah 3:18-20

The great news of Zephaniah is that God will save all his people. He will vindicate and change and gather and exult in his people! That is his plan and our great hope. In that sense, these last verses provide an Old Testament equivalent to the last chapters of the New Testament book of Revelation, where God lovingly gives his people who are about to endure a great trial a clearer view of their final end, so that they might be strengthened, encouraged, and prepared to follow him down a difficult path to a worthwhile destination.

The day is coming when God will stop judging governments in history, and will more directly rule his creation. That is the day for which you must prepare, and why you must be one of God’s saved people. God made you to know him, but you have sinned against him. Now, you have an accounting to give, but you cannot give it. And God will justly judge all of us for our sins, not because he is hard but because he is right. Yet in his amazing love, God came in the flesh and lived among us. He lived a perfect life and died on the cross as a sacrifice – a substitute – for the sins of all of us who would ever turn and trust in him. This God-man,

Jesus, was then raised to new life, showing God's acceptance of his sacrifice and vindicating his ministry and his claims.

For Christians, there is no doubt that the point of this book is to worship God.

Zephaniah 3:16-17

### **Questions for reflection**

- Religious pluralism is the idea that there are many right ways to worship "God" because "God" comes in many different forms. Why does religious pluralism appeal to our sinful nature?
- In our day, the exclusive claims of Christianity are becoming more and more unpopular. What will churches have to do in order to remain faithful to the biblical message? What are some of the subtle ways churches can begin to compromise that message?
- What would be "hedging your religious bets" look like in your own life?
- What is your favorite possession? Will you outlast that possession? What possession would you like to have more than anything else? Will you outlast that?

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Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament* (adapted with changes)