

## Lesson #29 - Zephaniah 2019

Before starting this lesson, read the book of **Zephaniah**. You may find it helpful to read the book, go thru the lesson and then read the book once again. Since it is a short book, it will not be difficult to do.

The books of the prophets demonstrate the prophets use extreme words for non-extreme meanings, especially when talking about God.

The Jews prayed, *Because You are a **jealous** God,*

*pour out Your **vengeance, wrath and anger** over that nation, leader or people.*

In the West, we pray, *Because You are a God who is **fair and good,***

*intervene to stop the evil and injustice of that nation, leader or people.*

Two very different prayers, but they mean exactly the same thing. With this extreme difference in language, it is important that somewhere in your Bible you make a list of these words and what they mean in our culture and language.

God's **jealousy** means He is **committed** to what is right and fair.

God's **anger** or **wrath** means His **judgment**; His **response** to injustice, disobedience or evil.

God's **vengeance** means His **justice**.

The books of the prophets also demonstrate that many of the prophets are severe, harsh and negative in their tone.

They are reacting and responding to what their nation and the nations around them are doing.

Zephaniah is a prophet who definitely fits these descriptions. His book is filled with extreme words and harsh tones. But once we know the political and spiritual background, we will not only understand why, but even agree with him. A review of Judah's history will give us the background.

**Hezekiah** had been a king who followed God the first 14 years of his kingship. But over the next 15 years, he became proud and careless. During that time, he had a son, but never gave him any spiritual instruction.

When Hezekiah died, this son **Manasseh** came to power when he was 12 years old. For 6 years his guardians ruled for him. He was the worst king Judah ever had and was in power the longest of any king - 55 years.

Then over the next 40 years, he killed as many godly Jews as possible and worshiped every foreign god he could find. In order to survive, believing Jews had to go into hiding – or as we might say, they had to go “underground”.

After 40 years, the Assyrians captured Manasseh and put him in prison. With this, the underground ended and believing Jews were free to once again live openly thruout Judah. During the 4 years Manasseh was in prison, he repented. God forgave him and he was set free to be king in Judah once again.

In his last 6 years, he got rid of all the idols in Judah; destroyed the pagan altars in Jerusalem; and commanded the Jews to worship only Yahweh God. Altho he did not destroy the high places or altars thruout the nation, the people used them to offer sacrifices only to Yahweh.

The prophet **Nahum** had been born and raised in the underground. His first 3 years of ministry were only to the **believing** Jews in hiding.

When they left the underground, Nahum's ministry was to the **unbelieving** Jews in Judah.

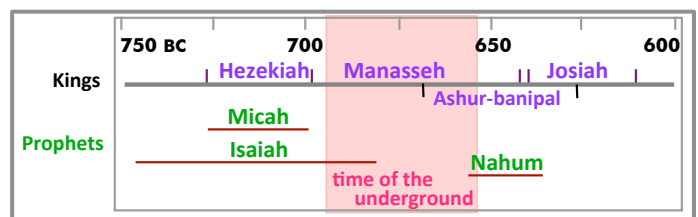
When Manasseh returned and the nation got rid

of the idols, Nahum gave a message of comfort to everyone in Judah. He told them the Assyrian empire would be destroyed and their nation would become independent.

Outwardly it looked like Judah had turned back to God. The king and believing Jews genuinely did follow God. But the majority of people got rid of their idols and worshipped Yahweh, only because the king said they had to.

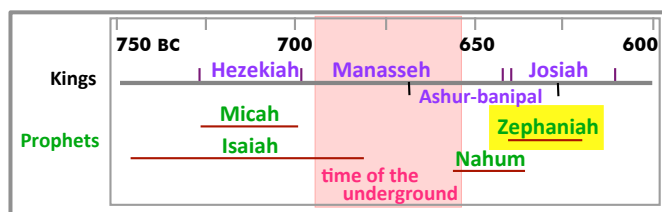
After 6 years Manasseh died and his **son** became king. He had no use for God. The majority of Jews were delighted because now they could openly worship their idols once again. Two years later, government officials killed their king and put his son in power.

This son's name is **Josiah**. He is king from 640 to 609 BC. Because he is only 8 years old, his advisors rule the nation. For the next 11 years they continue to lead the nation in idol worship. This means that in the nation of Judah, there is a believing remnant or minority. But the majority of God's people are living in open rebellion against God.



With this background, we can now fit **Zephaniah** into the picture.

According to 1:1, he is the great, great grandson of Hezekiah. This means Zephaniah and his parents were part of the royal family, related to Isaiah and all the kings of Judah. His parents, as believing Jews, were with Isaiah and the others in the underground during the days of king Manasseh. When Isaiah was killed, they began to fear for their lives. As part of the royal family, would they be next?



When they had a son, they took a step of faith. They believed God would protect him for ministry. To show their faith, they named him Zephaniah, *hidden or protected by God*.

Zephaniah spent his first 13-18 years in hiding. True to his name, he was protected and survived. By the time he is 20, the danger is over. Believing Jews are living openly thruout the nation. Zephaniah lives in Jerusalem. He and king Josiah are 2<sup>nd</sup> cousins. The year that Josiah is named king at 8 years old, Zephaniah is in his mid to late 20's and is called to be a prophet.

Zephaniah's **first** 5 years of ministry are the **last** 5 years of Nahum. They are contemporaries. Zephaniah ministry lasts some 20 years, from c. 640-620 BC. He writes this book within the first 10 years c. 630 BC. (The lines in the charts represent only the time of ministry for the prophets or the time of ruling for the kings)

When Zephaniah begins his ministry in 640 BC, Assyria is still the world power. Ashur-banipal is still king. In fact, he has just expanded his empire by taking Elam with its capital of Susa.



Ten years go by. Assyria continues to control the Middle East. Eighteen years earlier Nahum had said Assyrian would be destroyed. But when? How long was it going to take?

Nahum also had said that God would give freedom to Judah. This part *has* happened. Some 3 years after Assyria gave king Manasseh's his freedom, she let him strengthen and expand the wall around Jerusalem. When he died, she let Judah name a new king. When Judah assassinates him, names another king and has palace leaders run the country, Assyria does not interfere.

So for all practical purposes, in the last 10 years, Judah has become an independent nation. We would expect the Jews to be thanking God and looking to Him for guidance. But instead they are more rebellious than ever. With this, God can no longer remain silent. Like the Assyrians, the Jews have presumed upon God's love and mercy, so now they must learn of His justice and holiness. This explains the harshness of Zephaniah's message to his people.

#### OUTLINE

God's justice in the present 1:1 - 3:8  
God's mercy in the future 3:9-20

Zephaniah begins his book with a summary statement of what God is going to do thruout the land of Judah and the surrounding nations.

*I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth, declares the Lord. I will sweep away both people and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. The wicked will have only heaps of rubble when I cut off people from the face of the earth, declares the Lord. 1:2-3*

This is the Jewish style of extreme words to say that when God brings judgment to the area, it will become so desolate that even native animals will leave to find other places to live.

Zephaniah goes on to explain **WHY** God would do this to His people.

The first reason is their **idolatry**.

According to verse 4, the Jews in Jerusalem, at God's temple, on the temple grounds, are worshipping Baal. They have replaced the Levite priests with foreign priests of Baal. They are practicing the **Canaanite** religion. The name **Baal** means *lord* or *master*. God's people have rejected their Yahweh Lord and chosen to follow Baal lord.

According to verse 5, on the flat roofs of their homes, they have built altars. Every morning and evening they burn incense to worship the stars. This was a form of astrology and part of the **Assyrian** religion.

Some of the Jews insist they worship Yahweh God, but when they really need help they turn to the god Molech and burn one of their children alive as an offering to him. He was part of the **Ammonite** religion.

And then there are Jews who want nothing to do with God.

The 1<sup>st</sup> reason for God's judgment is **idolatry**, involving the gods of Canaan, Assyria, Ammon and the god of self.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> reason is **materialism**.

God's people think if they can get enough money and things, they can handle any situation.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> reason for judgment is their **attitude**.

They are arrogant and ungrateful.

Many have decided God is irrelevant.

He's not going to do anything against them; but, He's not going to do anything for them, either. 1:12 Isa. 41:23

These are the **REASONS** for judgment. But **WHO** is guilty?

God says, *I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem.* 1:4

The majority of **people** are guilty.

The Jewish **priests**, called the *idolatrous priests*. 1:4b They are working with the foreign priests of Baal.

The **princes** - the ones ruling in place of the king, as well as other members of the royal family. 1:8

Josiah is not included because he is still a teenager.

The believing remnant is not included, because they are so few in number.

Verses 2-3 are a summary statement about this judgment.

Zephaniah then describes their sin

The majority of people as well as civil and religious leaders are involved in idolatry, materialism, arrogance and ungratefulness. This is why God's judgment is coming and why it will be severe.

Zephaniah refers to this judgment as **the Day of the Lord**.

Altho it is called **Day**, it does not mean a literal 24 hours.

It refers to any extended time when God responds to injustice and evil.

In the original Hebrew, *Day of the Lord* is used 7 times in this book 1:7, 8, 14, 18; 2:2-3.

Zephaniah says of this judgment,

The great day of the Lord is near - near and coming quickly.

That day will be a day of justice, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness.

In the fire of God's justice, the whole world will be consumed, for He will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth

1:14,15,18

For the people of Zephaniah's day, this means the **Babylonian exile**.

Within 24 years some of them will be taken to Babylon.

Within 44 years both the temple and the city of Jerusalem will be leveled and burned.

When that happens, the Jews will see *their* world - their nation of Judah - consumed. Thousands will be killed so it will truly be a time of anguish and ruin. The land will be left desolate, so that even the animals will be affected.

As Zephaniah speaks and writes this message, the first to react are the minority of believing Jews.

There is fear as well as many questions.

They have been obedient for all these years, so why is God going to let them suffer? That is not fair.

What will happen to them? What should they do to prepare?

Zephaniah responds by first telling the **rebellious majority** to come together in national repentance.

Then he tells the **believing minority**...

*Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, you who do what He commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord's justice. 2:3*

Those following God must continue to do what is right.

They are to be humble.

They are to accept what God allows in their life, including suffering even when **they** have not been rebellious. God may protect them and they will be taken to Babylon instead of being killed. But there is no guarantee.

They must be willing to trust God, leaving their lives and fate in His hands, realizing God will give them living grace or dying grace, whichever they will need.

Zephaniah is making a play on words. His name means *hidden or protected by God*. He is saying, *As I was protected by God and **my** life was spared, perhaps you also will be spared.*

As Zephaniah tells the believing Jews what to do, he also wants to encourage them. He wants to assure them that God is fair. So starting with chapter 2:4, he tells them God has seen the **enemy nations** around them.

He has seen their cruelty, blasphemy, contempt for God and contempt for God's people.

Because of this, God will bring judgment on them. Altho they all are under the Assyrian empire, they still are in their land. God's judgment will be that they cease to exist as a nation or people. They will be taken off the map.

God's judgment over the **Philistines**. 2:4-5

They had migrated from Greece and the island of Crete and settled along the Mediterranean coast, west of the Dead Sea. They were in the land before the days of Abraham. God says He will destroy the Philistines so that none will be left. This literally happened. As a people they were **completely** destroyed by the Babylonians by the 500's BC.

The Jews will eventually get their land. 2:7

Today this is known as the Gaza strip. It is presently in the hands of the Palestine Arabs. But that is not God's final plan. His ultimate goal is to fulfill the promise to Abraham, that his descendants thru Isaac and Jacob – the Jews – will possess all the land in the area. However this will not happen completely until Jesus is King in His kingdom.

This is probably a good time to correct a myth that is often repeated in our media. It was Arafat who claimed the Palestine Arabs are the descendants of the Philistines and therefore have a right to the land. But history is clear that **all** Philistine people were destroyed 2500 years ago. Therefore it is impossible for Palestine Arabs to be descended from them. They have absolutely no biological or geographical connection with the Philistines. Unfortunately few people know ancient history, so Arafat could make the claim and many believed him.

Zephaniah encouraged the Jews of his day that God would destroy their enemy, the Philistines.

God's judgment over the **Moabites** and the **Ammonites**. 2:8

They were east and northeast of the Dead Sea.

According to history, they also were destroyed by the Babylonians by the 500's BC.

The only thing left of the Ammonites is their **name**. Today the capital of Jordan is Ammán.

God's judgment over the **Cushites** or **Ethiopians**. 2:12

*Cush* was the Hebrew name; *Ethiopia* the Greek name.

This is not the Ethiopia of today, known as Punt by ancient Egypt (Encyclopedia Britannica)

Ethiopia of the Bible is always southern Egypt. Later, it became known as Nubia.

Today it is called the Sudan.

The original people, the Cushites, were judged by God and ceased to exist as a people.

God's judgment over **Assyria**.

Earlier prophets said Assyria would be judged for her **cruelty** and **inhumanity**.



Zephaniah says it will also be for her **arrogance**.

*This is the carefree city that lived in safety. She said to herself, I am and there is none beside me. 2:15*

The phrase *I am and there is none beside Me* is a statement that God had made about Himself. Isaiah had recorded it in his book in 45:5. No doubt this phrase had become known to the surrounding nations. In arrogance, the king of Assyria, in his capital of Nineveh decides to take this phrase for his nation.

God had heard it and taken note. The prophet Nahum had said...

*No Assyrians would survive God's judgment. The capital would be destroyed by flood and by fire.*

Eighteen years go by. Zephaniah now adds another detail.

*...leaving Nineveh, her capital, utterly desolate and dry as the desert. 2:13*

This sounds impossible. Nineveh was built on the side of the Tigris River, with a branch of the river running thru the city. Around the walls were 150 foot-wide moats. There was water everywhere. Yet today the ruins of Nineveh are desolate and dry as the desert, just as God said.

Within 4 years of Zephaniah's statements, Ashur-banipal retired and 2 of his sons were named kings. With this, the empire quickly fell into decline. Within 18 years, in 612 BC, Nineveh was completely destroyed. By the 500's BC, the Assyrians as a race of people ceased to exist.

In chapter **2**, Zephaniah says God will bring severe judgment on Judah's **enemies**.

This is to encourage the believing Jews who are in the minority.

In chapter **3**, Zephaniah says God will also judge the **rebellious Jews in Judah** who are in the majority

- ✳ Jerusalem is a city of oppressors; the people are rebellious and defiled, meaning filled with sin. 3:1

- ✳ It is a deliberate, willful rebellion against God.

She obeys **no one**, she accepts **no correction**.

*She does **not** trust in the Lord, she does **not** draw near to her God. 3:2*

- ✳ Those who should be setting the example by their justice and spiritual life, are the most rebellious - the officials, prophets and priests. 3:3-4

- ✳ The people know God is right, but they do not care.

*The Lord within her is righteous; He does no wrong. Morning by morning He dispenses His justice and every new day He does not fail. Yet the unrighteous know no shame. 3:5*

God has shown His love and mercy by giving the nation its independence. Instead of appreciation, the people have shown contempt. Every day He has given them instruction thru His prophets Nahum and Zephaniah.

When judgment comes, the people need to understand it is their fault.

- ✳ God wanted His judgment on the northern nation of **Israel** to be an object lesson.

When Judah saw Israel destroyed and the people taken into exile, they should have learned and responded. 3:6

- ✳ *But they were **still** eager to act corruptly in all they did. 3:7*

Zephaniah has presented the evidence. The nations and especially Judah, are beyond repentance. Because they have rejected His mercy, now there must be justice.

From Scripture it is clear that **nations** can get beyond repentance and nothing can stop God's judgment.

There is nothing more anyone can do. However that is only true for nations.

For **individuals**, as long as there is life, it is never too late to repent. There is always hope.

God deals with nations in one way; He deals with individuals another way.

Because Judah, as a nation, is beyond repentance, God says,

*Therefore wait for Me, declares the Lord, for the day I will stand up to testify. I have decided to assemble the nations, to gather the kingdoms and to pour out My justice on them - all My judgment on evil. The whole world will be consumed by the fire of My justice. 3:8*

There is going to be upheaval thruout the Middle East. The world of the Jews as they know it in the days of Zephaniah - their nation - is going to be destroyed by fire within 44 years – i.e. in 586 BC.

This raises an important question. Since the other nations are going to be destroyed and cease to exist, what about God's people? When Judah is destroyed and her people exiled to Babylon, will they also cease to exist? Will it be the end of God's people and God's land? The answer is *no*.



The rest of chapter 3, verses 9-20 assure them of God's love and mercy in the future.

The destruction of the other nations and the exile of the Jews is going to bring a change to the entire area. After a time of exile, God will bring His people back to the land. For a time they will have a different attitude. They will have an impact on those living around them. There will be joy and thanksgiving when they can return to rebuild their city and temple. This will happen within 3 generations. In this context, a generation is 40 years.

Did Zephaniah's message make any difference to the Jews of his day?

In general, the believing Jews, the minority, would have been encouraged and instructed by it.

It would have given them explanations and insight.

Specifically, young king Josiah is influenced. He is 16 years old when this book is written.

Altho he is not yet old enough to rule, he is old enough to seek the Lord. It is at this time he decides to follow God.

Four years later, when he turns 20 and takes over as king, he leads the nation in reform.

According to the books of Kings and Chronicles he gets rid of every idol and every form of pagan worship that Zephaniah had mentioned in this book. 2 Kings 22-23; 2 Chron 34-35

Zephaniah wrote for the people of his day. But like the other prophets, he writes with double or dual meaning.

Within the context of each complete chapter,

the verses about the **Day of the Lord** refer to the Babylonian exile for the nation of Judah.

But, **individual verses** in those chapters also have a **future** meaning for the Jews.

The **Day of the Lord** in its greater and **future** meaning is another name for **Satan's kingdom**, commonly known as the **Tribulation**.

It will last for 7 years.

In the New Testament it is also called the **Day of the Lord's Wrath**, meaning the Day of His Justice.

In the future, before God sets up His Kingdom, He will send world-wide judgment to bring an end to injustice and evil.

The irony is that He will do it thru Satan's kingdom.

We as believers are in heaven with Jesus at this time.

Chapter 2:3, in its future meaning, is about the **Jewish remnant** at the time of **Satan's kingdom** (Tribulation).

*Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, you who do what He commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord's response to wrong.*

During the last half of Satan's 7-year kingdom, Satan's man will try to kill all the Jews.

God will warn the Jewish remnant who believe in Yahweh God, the God of their fathers.

God will provide a place for them where they can be hidden and protected. Because of this, they will survive.

At the end of **Satan's kingdom**, there will be a showdown. Satan and the people who followed him in his kingdom will fight against Jesus who has come to this earth to set up **His** kingdom. The description of what Jesus will do to Satan's forces is described in chapter 1:2-3.

*I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth, declares the Lord. I will sweep away both people and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. The wicked will have only heaps of rubble when I cut off people from the face of the earth, declares the Lord.*

Verse 15. *That day - the day of the Lord - will be a day of justice, a day or time of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness.*

The middle of verse 18 *In God's commitment to what is right, the whole world will be consumed, for He will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth;*

3:8 *Therefore wait for Me, declares the Lord, for the day I will stand up to testify. I have decided to assemble the nations, to gather the kingdoms and to pour out My justice on them - all My judgment on evil. The whole world will be consumed by the fire of My justice.*

Jesus does this to bring an end to **Satan's kingdom**.

Then Jesus will set up **His** kingdom here on earth and all of God's promises to the Jews will be fulfilled.

It will be time of great blessing and joy when all the Jews are brought back to the land of Israel. Chapter 3.

Instead of speaking against God, the Jews will delight in worshipping and serving God. 3:9

They will be holy and will live in the land without fear of harm 3:13

They will be given praise, fame and honor as God intended for them 3:20 cf. Dt. 26:18

Jesus will live in their midst as their King. 3:17  
He will be filled with love and delight for His people the Jews.  
His joy in seeing them as He planned will cause Him to break into singing.

Zephaniah was writing specifically to the Jews about the Jews, both in his day and in the future.

The New Testament gives us the promise that we as believers will return to this earth with Jesus to be a part of that kingdom and share in those joys and blessings. It is part of our future as well.

In the present, we will have joys and sorrows; good times and bad times.

God wants us to enjoy the blessings and good times to the fullest.

In the midst of the enjoyment, do not be thinking, *but I'm afraid this or that might happen.*

Enjoy each day for the blessings God gives you.

And when the bad times do come, remember what the prophets teach us about God.

*He is good* – To the very core of His being He is absolute and complete goodness.

This means He cannot make a mistake. He knows the details of our situation. He cares about us.

When there is nothing more we can do and we have no options left, then God will intervene and use His power to either change the situation or give us the grace to get thru it.

Because *God is our refuge*, He will support us in the times of our greatest helplessness and weakness.

Like the believing Jews in Zephaniah's day, we are facing national crisis and a rejection of God.

But as the believing remnant we can still delight in worshiping and serving God.

We can choose to be holy because Jesus is in our midst. He lives within us by means of the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus sees our lives committed to Him, He is filled with love **for** us and delight **in** us.

He sings joyfully because of us.

Jesus gives **us** joy and blessing, and our lives can also bring joy to Him!

### **EXTRA INFORMATION FOR THE STUDIOUS AND INQUISITIVE**

Old Testament dates of kings, prophets, or events – in chronological order (all dates are BC)

#### **Prophets**

Elijah 873 – 852

Elisha 862 -798

Joel 814 - 789

Jonah 790 – 755

Jonah in Nineveh c. 758 The king was Ashur-Dan III 773-755 – repented of cruelty

Within 40 years – c. 718 – the people and new king had returned to cruelty

Amos 773 - 745

Hosea 745 – 722

Isaiah 740 - 681

Isaiah in hiding 691 - 681

Nahum 655 – 635 wrote his book c. 648

Zephaniah 640 – 620 wrote his book c. 630

#### **Kings**

Judah - King Manasseh 697 – 652

Assyria

Ashur-Dan III 773-755

Sargon II 722 – 705

Sennacherib 705 – 681

Esarhaddon 681 – 669

Ashurbanipal 669 – 631 or 627

**Events** The underground lasted from 691 - 652