

SESSION ELEVEN

THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH

Is the "Day of the Lord" Coming Soon?

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Zephaniah bears the name of the prophet who wrote it, namely, יְהוֹנָדָב (the LORD has treasured up, or perhaps the LORD has hidden). According to Zeph 1:1, he ministered during the days of Josiah, the king of Judah. Josiah's reign was 641/40 - 609 BC.¹ The historical reference to Nineveh in 2:13 suggests that Nineveh had not yet been destroyed, from which we can conclude that Zephaniah would have been written prior to 612 BC. Otherwise, it is hard to know what period in Josiah's reign Zephaniah would have written. According to 2 Chr 34:3, Josiah began to purge the land of evil and idolatry in his 12th year (629/28 BC). In his 18th year (623/22 BC), the book of the Law was found, which led to the reform effort. Some scholars feel that Zephaniah was written after Josiah's reform effort of 622 BC, when it was becoming apparent that the reform was only superficial and many of the people were continuing in idolatry. This cannot be proved, however. In any case, the Book of Zephaniah was written at a time when the nation's idolatry was about to bring catastrophic judgment upon her. Indeed, the Babylonians would shortly destroy Jerusalem and the Temple in 586 BC, not too long after Josiah's death.

THE "DAY OF THE LORD"

One of the dominant themes of the book is the announcement that the "Day of the LORD" was very near (1:7,14). Primarily, the Day of the LORD is a time of awesome judgment from God. The book opens by declaring in 1:2-4 that God is going to pour out a judgment on the whole world. This universal judgment will also fall upon Judah and Jerusalem (1:4). The expression "from the face of the earth" which occurs twice in 1:2-3, was used in Gen 6:7 and 7:4 in regard to the great flood judgment. Like the flood in Noah's day, the Day of the LORD will be a universal judgment. However, it will be even more awesome than the flood (note the destruction even falls upon the fish of the sea).

What are the reasons for this judgment? No doubt, the book reflects the situation of Zephaniah's day in the period preceding the Babylonian invasion. According to 1:4-6, idolatrous practices were partly to blame. The Temple precinct was filled with violence and deceit rather than being a holy site given to the worship of the LORD (1:9). The people had ceased to heed instruction from the LORD (3:1-2), and both the civil and religious leadership had become thoroughly corrupted (3:3-4). One of the most condemning statements against the people, however, was their attitude about the LORD. In 1:12 we see a rebuke of those who say in their hearts, "The LORD will not do good or evil." In other words, they had come to the mistaken notion that God simply did not intervene in the nation's affairs, and therefore it mattered little whether they did good or did evil. Regardless of how the people behaved,

¹Leslie McFall, "A Translation Guide to the Chronological Data in Kings and Chronicles," *BibSac* 148:589 (Jan-Mar 1991): 45.

God was not going to do anything one way or the other. Unfortunately for Judah, this was a disastrous conclusion, and thus He warns them that judgment is near. For the rich among the people, they failed to take seriously the divine warning, thinking their money could buy their way out of trouble (1:18).

The question arises whether the "Day of the LORD" refers to the near invasion of the Babylonians when Jerusalem and the Temple would be destroyed followed by the exile of the people from the land. Apparently there is some fulfillment with the Babylonian destruction of 586 BC, for Zephaniah emphasizes the nearness of God's judgment: "Near is the great day of the LORD, near and coming very quickly" (1:14; cf. 1:7; Ezek 7:7,10). The judgment is also to be a universal one, falling upon other Gentile nations. The examples given in chapter two would certainly fit well with this general historical period. The Babylonians were involved in Nineveh's destruction in 612 BC (2:13-15), as well as bringing disaster on the other near neighbors of Judah depicted in 2:4-11.

On the other hand, certain details suggest that the "Day of the LORD" must have some eschatological fulfillment far beyond the 6th-7th centuries BC. First, the conclusion to the book (3:14-20) depicts a time after the judgment when Israel is regathered, restored and blessed with the LORD dwelling as King in her midst (note 3:15; cf. Zech 14:9). Second, the New Testament takes up the concept of the Day of the LORD and applies it to the final judgments yet to come (e.g., Rev 6:17). Schneider concludes, "Although Zephaniah's contemporaries had surely referred 'the Day of the Lord' to Jerusalem's fall in 587 B.C., later generations—including the NT writers—saw that Zephaniah's prophecies still awaited a complete fulfillment that God would effect at the end of the age."² Thus, the people in Josiah's day were warned that judgment was coming as the Day of the LORD. This had a *partial fulfillment* with the Babylonian invasion and exile in the 6th century BC, but a more complete and *final fulfillment* awaits the end of the age (primarily in the Tribulation period). Confirmation for this is found in the Apostle Paul's teaching in 2 Thess 2:1-4 that the Day of the Lord had not yet come (and would not come until the Antichrist was revealed).

THE URGING OF REPENTANCE

Despite Zephaniah's dire warning that judgment was imminent, there was still hope. This comes out most clearly in 2:1-3:

Gather yourselves together, yes, gather, o nation without shame,
 Before the decree takes effect—
 The day passes like the chaff—
 Before the burning anger of the LORD comes upon you,
 Before the day of the LORD's anger comes upon you.
 Seek the LORD, all you humble of the earth who have carried out His ordinances;
 Seek righteousness, seek humility.
 Perhaps you will be hidden in the day of the LORD's anger.

²Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1979-1988), s.v. "Zephaniah, Book of," by D. A. Schneider.

From this passage, one could conclude that there still remained an undetermined time interval in which there was a window of opportunity to turn to the LORD. Pride would have to give way to humility as one wholeheartedly sought the LORD. Despite such a gracious offer, few would avail themselves of the opportunity. Few accepted any instruction from the LORD (3:1-7).

A GODLY REMNANT

Severe judgment was definitely coming upon the land, but this would not mean a total destruction of all life. The judgment would remove the proud and ungodly from the land, but as a result there would survive a godly remnant that would be left to worship the Lord. This is depicted most clearly in 3:11-13: the proud exulting ones will be removed and a humble lowly people will be left who take refuge in the name of the Lord. Thus, the Day of the Lord is primarily a purging judgment that is meant to blot out wickedness from Jerusalem by removing those who perpetrate it. This will have a partial fulfillment in the 6th century BC with the remnant that survives the Babylonian exile and returns to the land. The final fulfillment, however, will come at the end of the age (when the Day of the Lord finds its final fulfillment).³

Greg King does an excellent job of describing the characteristics of this godly remnant. He notes, "first, the remnant consists of people who are fully committed to Yahweh, and second, the remnant is composed of people who are righteous and ethical in their interaction with and treatment of others."⁴

Fully Committed to Yahweh

1. They have sought the LORD (2:1-3) rather than worshipping Baal, the heavenly bodies and other objects (1:4-6).
2. They are obedient to His commands and ordinances (2:3; contrast 1:17).
3. They are characterized by humility (2:3; 3:12) rather than being proud and self-exalting (2:15; 3:11).
4. They have not put their hopes in material wealth (3:12; contrast 1:18).

Righteous and Ethical with Others

1. They do no injustice (3:13).

King wisely points out that this same expression is used of the LORD in 3:5. He concludes, "So the ethical practices of the remnant are not simply righteous; they are also described as Yahweh-like. In their dealings with others, the remnant imitate their Lord."⁵

2. They are truthful—they tell no lies (3:13).

³Greg King reports the conclusion of Hasel regarding the identity of the remnant. Hasel "differentiates between three groups in discussing the remnant concept in Scripture: the historical remnant (the survivors of a catastrophe), the faithful remnant (who are distinguished from the former group by their genuine trust in God), and the eschatological remnant (who go through the cleansing judgments of the end times and emerge triumphant after the day of the Lord as the recipients of the everlasting kingdom)" ["The Remnant in Zephaniah," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151:604 (Oct-Dec 1994): 427; cf. Gerhard F. Hasel, *The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea from Genesis to Isaiah*, 3rd ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1980): 130].

⁴King, 417.

⁵Ibid., 420.

THE DESTINY OF ESCHATOLOGICAL SALVATION

The fact that there is a remnant implies that there are those who survive the Lord's judgment. With the ultimate Day of the Lord, there will be those who constitute an eschatological remnant—who remain to experience the salvation brought about by the Lord. This eschatological salvation is no doubt connected with the Second Coming of Christ. According to Zeph 3:15, the remnant lives to experience the time when the LORD will dwell in their midst as the King of Israel, a promise parallel with Zechariah 14:9. The eschatological nature of this scene is further established in the final verse of the book (cf. 2:7). In 3:20, the remnant is told:

At that time I will bring you in, even at the time when I gather you together; Indeed, I will give you renown and praise among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes," says the LORD.

The terms for regathering and "restore your fortunes" are taken from Deut 30:3-5 in which God had revealed the plan for Israel's restoration. So, this looks to the time when Israel will be regathered and restored, and brought into the bond of the New Covenant (notice that the Deut 30 passage looks forward to a *circumcised heart*). Thus, the joy and rejoicing of Zeph 3:14-20 is connected with that time after the Tribulation judgment when the Lord Jesus Christ shall have returned and established His millennial reign on the earth.

Greg King has shown that Zephaniah had both present and future goals in mind in writing of the day of the Lord:

The present goal was simply to motivate the people of Israel to engage in wholehearted worship of Yahweh and to carry out righteous ethical practices. Regarding the worship of Yahweh, Zephaniah 1:4-6 implies that only exclusive, devoted, wholehearted worship of Yahweh is acceptable. . . .

Regarding the future goal of the day of the Lord, Zephaniah pointed toward the establishment of Yahweh's kingdom on the earth.⁶

Yet, Zephaniah goes even further. The time of millennial kingdom blessing will not just be for the remnant of Israel. Zeph 3:9-10 adds the insight that Gentiles will survive the judgment to constitute part of the Lord's worshippers!

⁶Greg A. King, "The Day of the Lord in Zephaniah," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152:605 (Jan-Mar 1995): 32.