

3

A Day of Wrath

Zephaniah 1—2

a Future Devastation (1:1-3)

“I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD.

—Zephaniah 1:2

Zephaniah began his book by telling his readers that “the word of the LORD” came to him during the reign of King Josiah (vs. 1). The prophet received his message from God, proclaimed it to the people of Judah, and passed it on to us through the book bearing his name. Zephaniah’s ministry overlapped with Nahum’s during the reign of Josiah (640–609 B.C.), the last God-fearing king of Judah.

Unlike all other Old Testament prophets who wrote biblical books, Zephaniah traced his ancestry back four generations. Most scholars believe he did this to show that he was a descendant of the godly King Hezekiah. That would make him a cousin of King Josiah and the royal princes whom he denounced (see 1:8; 3:3). He was no stranger to the temptations that lured royalty.

Zephaniah began his message with a universal warning, “I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD” (1:2). Many of the Judahites had become complacent, thinking that God would not interfere in their lives (see vs. 12). The prophet’s opening words were meant to get the attention of these Hebrews who had become comfortable with their immoral lifestyles. If God would utterly destroy everything on the earth because of sin’s curse, how could they expect to escape? Nothing would be left untouched.

Verse 3 makes it clear that nothing will escape the fury of God’s anger. The detailed listing of all the animals that will be swept away signifies both the horror and the completeness of the judgment that will come upon the earth. Such universal destruction has occurred only once before in history, when God destroyed the earth during the time of Noah. The distinction between these two judgments is spelled out in “Universal Judgment and God’s Promise to Noah” on page 26.

The last phrase of verse 3 has been translated to indicate that the Lord will punish the wicked with their

own stumbling blocks such as the objects of their idolatry. Although the meaning of this expression is uncertain, the message of complete destruction for the wicked is clear from the context.

In Ephesians 5:6, 7, Paul said this after listing some of the world's sins, "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them." Knowing the future of sinful people, as described in Zephaniah, should compel us to dissociate ourselves from this kind of behavior.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I strive to please the Lord in everything that I do?*

b Judgment of Judah (1:4-13)

I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem.

I will destroy every remnant of Baal worship in this place, the very names of the idolatrous priests.

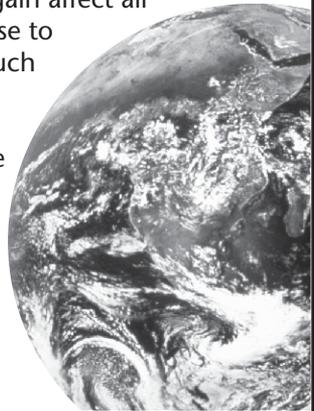
—Zephaniah 1:4

In verse 4, Zephaniah moved from a general notice of God's wrath to a specific warning of judgment against Judah and Jerusalem. The mention of God stretching out His

Universal Judgment & God's Promise to Noah

The words "face of the earth" (Zeph. 1:2) were also used to describe the Flood that covered the entire world during the time of Noah (Gen. 6:7; 7:4). In Zephaniah, the phrase indicates another judgment that will again affect all of creation. But in light of God's promise to Noah (8:21, 22), how could He send such devastation upon the earth a second time?

Zephaniah probably viewed this time of wrath as a part of the judgment that will end this present world and bring in the new heavens and earth (II Pet. 3:3-13; Rev. 21:1). God's promise to Noah extended "as long as the earth endures" (Gen. 8:22).



“hand” indicates a special work of punishment, one in which the Lord dramatically intervenes and decisively plays a role (see Isa. 5:25; 9:12).

Those who worshiped Baal, the Canaanite god of rain and fertility, were singled out as objects of God’s wrath. Josiah attempted to destroy Baal worship along with its priests (see II Chron. 34:4, 5), but some of it still remained. The coming judgment would completely abolish it from the land.

Another class of idolaters worshiped the hosts of heaven from the rooftops of their homes (Zeph. 1:5). The flat roofs provided a good view of the stars as well as a place to burn incense upon an altar. Josiah also acted against this practice, but again apparently did not eliminate it (see II Kings 23:5).

Other Israelites combined their worship of the Lord with the worship of Molech, a god worshiped by the Ammonites. The rituals involved in the worship of Molech included sacrificing babies in the flaming lap of the stone idol. These abominable actions would also stir up God’s anger.

Just as with Israel, the Lord demands our total devotion. While we do not have idols in our homes, we may have other interests that, if left unchecked, can become “gods” that diminish our commitment to God. Jesus made it clear that we cannot “serve two masters,” we cannot live for the things of this world and hope to honor God at the same time (see Matt. 6:24).

Ask Yourself . . . *What comes closest to being a “second master” in my life?*

The people who had turned “back from following the LORD” (Zeph. 1:6) may have been those who at first heeded the reformations under King Josiah, but later departed from serving Him. Others, however, had remained indifferent to the Lord from the beginning and were still living in complete disregard of their spiritual need for God.

Zephaniah commanded these faithless people as well as the idolaters to “be silent” because the “day of the LORD” was close at hand (vs. 7). The prophet described the judgments of that day as a sacrifice. But this time the people of Judah themselves would be the sacrifice, and ironically the dreaded Babylonians would be the consecrated priests offering them upon the altar. Such a thought indeed called for silent reflection and remorse.

Additional objects of this sacrificial wrath included the “officials and the king’s sons” (vs. 8). Instead of leading the people in God’s ways, these leaders promoted the idolatry and wicked behavior that was prompting the Lord’s wrath. The reference to “foreign clothes” indicated either their inward rebellion against the Lord or something related to the worship of idols.

The curious mention of “all who avoid stepping on the threshold” (vs. 9) may refer to a pagan superstition that began when the Philistine god Dagon fell into pieces on the threshold of its temple

Wine Left on Its Dregs

The phrase “wine left on its dregs” (Zeph. 1:12) was a common term of the day for indifference and callousness. At the end of the fermentation process, the liquid was poured from vessel to vessel to separate the wine from its bitter dregs. If this was not done, the wine became harsh and undrinkable. Like wine left on its dregs, spiritually complacent people become bitter and useless.

(see I Sam. 5:4, 5). But the context indicates that God’s anger was directed at those who avoided thresholds in their haste to leave homes with stolen goods. Maybe these robbers avoided stepping on the thresholds so as not to offend the gods thought to guard the homes.

Zephaniah 1:10 says that when the day of judgment finally comes, “a cry will go up from the Fish Gate.” The Fish Gate was on the north side of Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, entered Jerusalem through the Fish Gate when he and his army conquered the city. The “New Quarter” may have been a newer addition to the city built close to the Fish Gate.

The “loud crash from the hills” represents the progress of the Baby-

lonians as they occupied key positions within the city. The principal hills within the city were Zion, Moriah, and Ophel. The “crash” was the noise of the city collapsing as the conquerors made their way through its streets.

Judging from the context, the reference in verse 11 seems to be that of a market district where merchants gathered to sell and trade their products. This area would also feel the force of God’s judgment as the Babylonians destroyed everything in Jerusalem.

The searching with lamps suggests a thorough probe of every place in the city so that no one would escape the judgment to come upon Jerusalem (vs. 12). When the Babylonians entered the city, they took people from their homes, from the sewers, and from tombs. Just as Zephaniah predicted, no one was able to hide from this judgment, not even the complacent who did not believe God would notice.

In Deuteronomy 28:30-39, Moses warned that if the people disobeyed the Lord, they would suddenly find themselves unable to enjoy the things they had acquired in the land such as homes and vineyards. Zephaniah applied the principle in this passage to those living in Judah who would see those things taken away from them by the Babylonians (Zeph. 1:13).

If the people of Judah did not return to the Lord, they would see everything they had worked for taken away from them, just as Moses had warned.

C The Day of the Lord (1:14—2:3)

The great day of the LORD is near—
near and coming quickly.
The cry on the day of the
LORD is bitter,
the Mighty Warrior shouts his
battle cry. —Zephaniah 1:14

The calamities that Zephaniah prophesied for Judah foreshadowed the final calamity that will come upon the world, known as the “day of the LORD” (vs. 14). This day is called “great” because of its impact upon the whole earth. For the Israelites, they were to pay special attention because their own bitter day was quickly approaching.

Like many Old Testament prophecies, “the day of the LORD” had an immediate and a future fulfillment. Ultimately, the day of the Lord will mark the return of Christ. In Zephaniah’s day, this prophecy had its first fulfillment in the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians.

In verses 15 and 16, the prophet gave a vivid description of the terror of the approaching judgment. The first four terms of verse 15 (“distress,” “anguish,” “trouble,” “ruin”) describe the stressful nature of that horrible day when everyone will cry in anguish. The last four words (“darkness,” “gloom,” “clouds,” “blackness”) show its ominous conditions. Eventually the Babylonians would burn Jerusalem causing it to be filled with the smell of death.

The Day of the **LORD**

“The day of the LORD” was a popular term used among Old Testament prophets to indicate God’s entering human history to decisively judge sin. It refers to a time when God will pour out His wrath upon the nations as well as upon His chosen people, Israel.

But destruction is not the only purpose of the day of the Lord. It is also a time of universal restoration connected with the return of the Messiah. The day of the Lord ends with universal peace and the Lord Himself ruling over the nations (Isa. 11; Zech. 14).

There would be no stopping God’s judgment once it was set in motion. The “fortified cities” and “corner towers” would all fall before the Babylonians as they marched toward the city of David (vs. 16).

The suffering of the people in that day would be profound as the people staggered about in a state of

despair, reeling from the affliction that had come upon them because of their sins (vs. 17). The blood of the dead would cover the streets with bodies piled everywhere.

No amount of material wealth would be able to deliver Judah from this judgment (vs. 18). The people could not buy their way out of this; possessions would not protect them from the wrath of God. Their earthly treasures would be either burned or plundered by the Babylonians.

But there was something the people could do, before that day finally arrived, to escape the coming judgment. They could gather together as a “shameful nation,” acknowledge their sin, and ask God to turn away from His intended judgment (2:1). But they could not delay; they had to repent before “the LORD’s fierce anger” came upon them (vs. 2).

In verse 3, Zephaniah pleaded with the people to “seek the LORD” and pursue righteousness and humility. They could not just pretend to repent; their return to the Lord had to be shown through new attitudes and actions. If that happened, then perhaps they would “be sheltered on the day of the LORD’s anger.” Seeking the Lord was their only hope, but even then it might be too late to prevent disaster from overtaking the land.

As we look around our world today, we might wonder why God does not judge the wickedness and violence that are so rampant. But just as with Judah, our gracious God always gives everyone ample opportunity to repent before they experi-

ence His wrath. His desire is that no one would perish (see II Pet. 3:9). But for those who resist their chance to turn to Him, His discipline will be swift and sure.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I keep “short accounts” with God in regard to confessed sin?*

d Judgment on Surrounding Nations (2:4-15)

The LORD will be awesome to them when he destroys all the gods of the earth.

—Zephaniah 2:11

Having described the dreadful judgment about to fall on Judah, Zephaniah turned his focus to the nations around Judah. The Philistines (vss. 4-7), Moabites and Ammonites (vss. 8-11), Cushites (vs. 12), and Assyrians (vss. 13-15) would also experience God’s wrath at the hand of the invading Babylonian army.

The neighboring nation of Philistia, long a thorn in the side of Israel, would be completely destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar and his army. The four cities mentioned in verse 4 represent the whole area of the Philistines. The timing of the attack on Ashdod and Ekron, “at midday,” shows the unexpected nature of the attack. That was usually a time when everyone rested from the heat

of the day; it was not a likely time for an invasion.

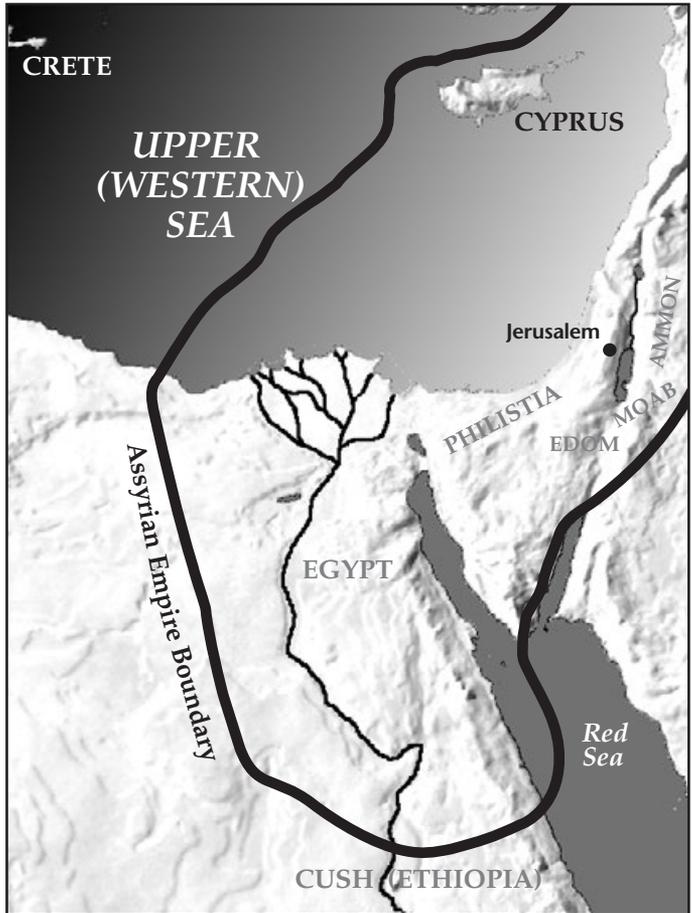
The term “Kerethite” (vss. 5, 6) probably indicates that at least a part of the Philistines, if not all, had immigrated from the island of Crete. The Lord warned that their once thickly populated land would be abandoned and turned into a desolate pasture for shepherds, with the ruins of their homes turned into folds for the sheep.

In the end, the land of Philistia would belong to the remnant of Judah (vs. 7). When they returned from captivity in Babylon, these Jews would occupy the territory of their longtime adversary. There the Lord “will care for them” and “restore their fortunes.” Despite the impending judgment, there was hope for Judah’s future.

For a long time, the Moabites and Ammonites heaped insults upon Israel and caused it problems whenever they could (vs. 8; see also Num. 22—24; I Sam. 11:1-5). After

the fall of Israel and the demise of Judah, Moab and Ammon reproached God’s people all the more and attempted to profit by seizing land from them. In response to their behavior, Zephaniah announced that they, too, would feel the wrath of God.

The fierceness of God’s anger with Moab and Ammon would result in destruction similar to that of Sodom and Gomorrah, often-used biblical symbols of total destruction (vs. 9).



The present-day ruins of ancient towns in these regions show the accuracy of Zephaniah's prediction that the area would become a desolate and permanent wasteland. The remnant of God's people eventually plundered the riches of Moab and Ammon and occupied their land.

The prophet identified pride as the cause that led these adversaries to taunt and mock God's people (vs. 10). Proverbs 18:12 says, "Before a downfall the heart is haughty, but humility comes before honor." Even when our opponents are in the wrong, God does not tolerate human pride in us. But He gives grace to the humble, to those who realize their need of His grace.

Ask Yourself . . . *In what area of my life could pride most easily gain a foothold?*

God's ultimate aim is not to destroy sinful nations, but to show the futility of trusting in other gods and cause people to turn to Him (Zeph. 2:11). The false gods are ruined when the nations that depend on them are defeated, for they have no existence apart from the minds of their worshippers.

The intended result of God's judgment is that nations everywhere will serve Him. Many believe this to be a reference to the second coming of Christ, when all the nations will acknowledge Christ as their Lord (see Isa. 2:2). Others see this fulfilled in the spread of the Gospel.

Zephaniah's next target was the Cushites, who lived south of Egypt and are often identified as the

Ethiopians (Zeph. 2:12). Without providing many details, God simply stated that they would "be slain by my sword." Ezekiel prophesied that God would put His sword in the hand of the king of Babylon when he came against Egypt (see Ezek. 30:24, 25). Cush did fall by the sword of Nebuchadnezzar as he led the Babylonians against them.

Assyria's demise, fully described by the prophet Nahum, is briefly recounted by Zephaniah in verses 13-15 of chapter 2. At that time, Assyria was a mighty empire and Nineveh, its capital city, was a fortress that boasted a fabulous irrigation system. Yet, in spite of all this, Assyria would be destroyed and Nineveh would be left "utterly desolate and dry as the desert" (vs. 13).

Zephaniah's prediction that Nineveh would become a place for "flocks and herds" has been literally fulfilled (vs. 14). Today, sheep still graze on the spot where the renowned city once stood. No one, apart from the Lord, could have imagined that such a powerful and prosperous city could be reduced to rubble in such a short time.

Nineveh itself certainly could not see that destruction was in its future. Boasting of its self-sufficiency, it proclaimed, "I am the one! And there is none besides me" (vs. 15). Only God can make that claim, and He did not overlook Nineveh's challenge to His authority. The city soon became an object of contempt, while the Lord remained, self-sustaining and worthy of all praise and adoration.