

God's Twelve Voices that Shaped His People: Zephaniah

Adult Bible Class

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Introduction

Living messages of the OT prophets

Background of text, social setting, and prophet provides parallels in our day

Points of interest

Zephaniah, Jehovah hides, he whom Jehovah hides

Greek and Latin—Sophonias

Four-generation genealogy, royalty (about 100 years after Hezekiah)

Perhaps lived in Jerusalem, much awareness of situation there

“Day of the Lord”

Nineveh to be condemned after rescue in time of Jonah

Historical setting

Not identified with other men named Zephaniah in OT Scriptures

During reign of Josiah, 640-609 B.C. Contemporary of Jeremiah, slightly before Nahum and Habbakuk, difficult to be precise

Biblical backgrounds, Josiah, moral/religious degeneration and subsequent renewal/revival, 2 Chr. 33:1-12; 2 Kings 21:1-16. Renewal/revival that doesn't improve situation of people, for soon overrun by Nebuchadnezzar, exiled, king imprisoned and blinded.

Was Zephaniah before or after Josiah's reform in 621? The content of Zephaniah makes some case that the prophet spoke before Josiah's reform. No biblical connection between his message and the reform (seemingly spontaneous after finding book of law).

External circumstances include threatening (unnamed) power, threat connected with Day of the Lord. Overall theme of book is judgment.

Textual considerations

Arrangement of book similar to other OT prophets (major). (1) Indict the people of God, (2) denounce foreign nations, (3) preview future glory and restoration.

Various subdivisions within the sections, but the general overview is as follows:

- a. Lord will sweep earth clean, Day of Lord is a day of judgment which should cause repentance (1:1-2:3)
- b. Prophecies against surrounding nations (2:4-3:8)
- c. Despite sin of Jerusalem, future salvation is possible/certain (3:1/9-20)

First, Judah and Jerusalem, without excuse and in fact worthy of greater judgment, will not escape the universal judgment of the earth. The only hope is to turn to the Lord (God) in repentance.

Second, no nation will escape the Day of the Lord judgment. Punishment from God is not an end in itself but a means of bringing to salvation.

Third, the glory of penitent is foreseen, envisioned in the experience of Zerubbabel and Ezra, but extending to the Messianic era.

Special Study: Day of the Lord

Amos (5:18) is first writing prophet to use the phrase. Seems to reflect popular expectation that all enemies would be overcome and God, and thus Israel, would be exalted. The prophets generally reinterpreted the phrase as a day within history rather than a day at the end of history (cf. Joel 1:15; 2:1; Obad. 15).

In Zephaniah, the day of the Lord is described under the picture of a feast in which the nations are guests, those who serve as God's agents in the calamity of "the day." The victims are God's people who are violent, indifferent, or impure. They will be searched out (Zeph. 1:12; cf. Jer. 5:1). This day is at hand, and there is no deliverance other than to turn to God.

The day of the Lord theme often influences concepts of the final day of judgment at the end of the world. It is often difficult to avoid the identification. Nevertheless, Zephaniah's day is placed in the framework of history with a promised restoration to possess the land (2.7,9). This is not the result of social reform but of God's gracious action in judgment and renewal.

Contemporary lessons

Sins of Judah

- a. Religious syncretism, mixing worship elements, false gods
- b. Association with foreign values, foreign apparel, 1.8
- c. Fraud and violence, 1.9
- d. Lack of effective, spiritual religious leadership; condemnation of prophet, priest, judge, 3.3-4
- e. Indifference and apathy, 1.12; 3.5
- f. Refusal to change, receive correction, see situation, 3.2,7

Our lessons/principles

- a. All men/nations are within the power of God and accountable to him. God is at work in the world.
- b. Day of the Lord is a day of/for God. Often indicating the receiving of just due for sin, can also reference glory and honor (less frequent). These times in history foreshadow the description of Paul in Acts 17:30-31.
- c. Thus, the Day of the Lord is a day of wrath for sinners but salvation for the righteous.

Questions

- a. What happens when we lose our purpose?
- b. What points of connection or commonality do you see between the time of Zephaniah and our own day?
- c. With whom do you identify in the book?
- d. Has the day of the Lord prophecy in Zephaniah been fulfilled?
- e. Why are other nations included in the prophecy to Judah?