

The Message of Zephaniah for Today

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Historical Situation

Zephaniah was most likely a relative of King Josiah. Zephaniah was the great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah of Judah, whereas King Josiah of Judah was the great-grandson of King Hezekiah by another line.

This would make Zephaniah and King Josiah second cousins once removed. Zephaniah's prophecy can be placed in the middle of the seventh century before Christ, in the early part of King Josiah's reign (639-609 BC). Given the contents of Zephaniah, it seems clear that the reforms that occurred under Josiah's reign had either not yet taken place when Zephaniah received the words of the prophecy, or were in the early stages (the reference in 1:4 to the "remnant of Baal" could indicate that some reform had already occurred). Probably, Zephaniah's prophecy was the instrument God used to create an atmosphere of reform, in which the rediscovery of the law (2 Chron. 34:14ff.) would have an enormous impact.

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The "Day of the Lord" is the main theme of Zephaniah. Each one of the seven parts of Zephaniah contributes to this idea.

In the first section (1:1-6), language of judgment reminiscent of the flood narrative prevails. The Southern Kingdom is supposed to remember the flood and tremble, since there is no escape except by the way God commands. They are not supposed to think that, just because they are God's people, they will escape God's judgment. The primary sin mentioned is idolatry, especially in verse 5. Verse 6 describes the result of the idolatry in verse 5. Those who follow other gods will turn back from following the Lord. May the Lord consume our idolatries from us!

The second part (1:7-18) explicitly introduces the Day of the Lord (starting in verse 7) and outlines both what God will do and how

people are to respond now, given how they will respond in the future if they are complacent in the present. If there is repentance now, there will be no need for the far worse responses they will surely face if they wait too long. “Those that leap on the threshold” in verse 9 are most likely engaged in some kind of pagan ritual. It is not certain what “Maktesh” in verse 11 means, but it is likely the name of a place now unknown. The Lord God is still working, even if some of His work is behind the scenes. As in the book of Esther, the hidden providence of God directs all things to His glory.

Fortunately for the readers, there is still time in 2:1-3 before the Day of the Lord comes. There is yet time to “seek righteousness, seek meekness” (v. 3). There is no guarantee that such seekers will escape judgment altogether. However, they will certainly have a better chance at such an escape. It is time now to seek the Lord, while He may be found, and call on Him while He is near (Isa. 55:6).

The nations that have plagued Judah and sought to prevent her from repenting will get their recompense. In 2:4-15, Philistia (the cities of Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, and Ekron are Philistine cities), the Cherethites, the Moabites, the Ammonites, the Ethiopians, and the Assyrians, will all face their doom from the LORD God. At this point, it is worth noting that the structure of Zephaniah resembles that of the major prophets, with judgment oracles, oracles against the nations, and oracles of hope. The punishment of the nations is part of the Day of the Lord. God orders all things for the good of the church.

Since Judah has not yet repented, her doom is all but certain on the Day of the Lord (3:1-7). She would have conquered the nations and sat on top of them if she had repented, but it was not to be. In particular, the rich are oppressing the poor, the prophets are anything but true prophets, and the priests are doing the exact opposite of their duty (3:1-3). The nations were already cut off (3:6), yet Judah did not learn her lesson (3:7). Persecution and hardship always have something to teach us, and we should never ignore those lessons.

Despite the Day of the Lord’s judgment, grace remains for the remnant of God’s people (3:8-13). That grace is still part of the Day of the Lord is evident in verse 11. God’s fierce anger will never result in the complete destruction of God’s people. There

are always the seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal. God will always ensure that a remnant remains.

The reaction of God's people to salvation and being spared on the Day of the Lord should be that of singing, gladness, and great rejoicing (3:14-20). God is still in her midst (3:17) and has not abandoned her. The gathering of the scattered will still occur (3:20), and God's people will experience a sort of vindication (3:19). Salvation leads to doxology.

Jesus Christ and the Day of the Lord

The phenomenon called "prophetic foreshortening" describes how events in the Old Testament that seem to happen at the same time are, in the New Testament era, seen as spread out over time. It's similar to how foothills of mountains look just as close as the mountains themselves from a distance, but when you approach, you realize the foothills are still several miles away.

In the case of Zephaniah, the judgment and the grace are presented as occurring at the same time. Even during the exile (which is surely the immediate fulfilment of Zephaniah's prophecy), the grace was somewhat delayed relative to the judgment, even though God never abandoned the people in exile.

In the New Testament, Jesus's first coming fulfilled the Day of the Lord, bringing grace and some judgment upon humans primarily (though most of the judgment fell upon Jesus Christ Himself, as He vicariously bore the guilt of His people). However, the bulk of the judgment still awaits the world, as part two of the Day of the Lord is still to come. Now is the time of repentance, just as it was for Zephaniah's readers. There is still time, as long as it is called "today" (Heb. 3:13). There might not be a tomorrow, so putting off the claims of Christ is dangerous. Grace is for today, and today is the only time we can count on having it, for tomorrow is unknown.

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