

## **Lessons from Zephaniah**

If the books of the prophets were placed in chronological order, Zephaniah's would fit between Isaiah and Jeremiah.

Zephaniah's preaching condemned the hopeless corruption found in Judean society. He pointed to the need for repentance based on the fact that God's love still was calling His people to humility and faithfulness. His message was twofold: there is a threat of an imminent and universal judgment, which will include even God's own people; yet there is also a promise that the saved from all nations will join the remnant of Israel in serving God and enjoying His blessings. This week's study will show that Zephaniah's message still matters to those who proclaim God's message of hope to a fallen world.

### **A Day of Darkness**

The focal point of Zephaniah's message is the "day of the Lord" (Zeph. 1:7). For biblical prophets, the day of the Lord refers to a specific period of time in which God intervenes in human affairs in order both to save and to judge. Most people in ancient Israel believed that on this day the Lord would save and exalt Israel while the enemy nations would be destroyed forever. To the great surprise of those who listened, the prophet declared that the day of the Lord would be a day of doom even for God's people (see Zeph. 1:1-5) because they had sinned against Him (Zeph. 1:17).

Compare Zephaniah 1:14-18 with Joel 2:1-11 and Amos 5:18-20. Together, what picture do they present about "the day of the Lord?"

Zephaniah likens the coming judgment to the sweeping away of all life in the days of the great Flood (Genesis 6-8). The catalog of death in Zephaniah 1:2-3 is arranged somewhat in reverse order of God's original Creation: humanity, land beasts, the creatures of the air, and those of the sea (compare with Gen. 1:20-27).

The prophet warned the people that they would not be able to buy their way out of judgment (Zeph. 1:18). Neither silver nor gold would protect them from the Lord's anger. The complacent people in Jerusalem claimed that God would do neither good nor harm. They simply did not expect the Lord to do anything (Zeph. 1:12). But divine judgments reveal how much God actively works to ensure that there will be a future for His faithful people.

Zephaniah makes it clear that God's judgment is not only punitive but corrective. The Lord holds out a promise of shelter for those who seek him (Zeph. 2:3). The day of the Lord is more than the end of the world. It is the beginning of the future establishment of God's rule, which will last forever.

Read Zephaniah 1:18. In what ways do we even now experience the truth of the principle expressed here? That is, what kind of situations have we faced where all the money in the world could not save us?

### **The Humble of the Land**

In Zephaniah 2:1-3, we see the prophet's call to repentance. Even though the destruction is imminent, there is still time to be sheltered from calamity, but only if the nation will repent. The wicked who refuse to repent will be consumed on the day of judgment like chaff. In Psalm 1:4 the wicked are also likened to chaff and, in the end, they perish.

With the words “Seek the Lord,” Zephaniah is encouraging those who humble themselves before God to hold firm in their faith. The prophet teaches that to seek the Lord is the same as seeking righteousness and humility. This attitude of repentance is essential in order to escape the coming judgment.

Zephaniah calls the repentant people the “humble of the land” (Zeph. 2:3). How do the following passages shed light on this expression, which is also translated as the “poor of the land”? Matt. 5:3, Ps. 76:9, Isa. 11:4, Amos 8:4.

The humble are those people who have remained faithful to God and who are led and taught by Him. The psalmist says: “Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way” (Ps. 25: 8-9). The humble are urged to prepare for the coming judgment by seeking God, righteousness, and humility.

The possibility of survival for the humble who are faithful is expressed through the word perhaps. Survival depends solely on divine grace, and grace is something that never should be taken for granted. In the face of impending doom, there is hope for the future from God, who is merciful. The Lord has promised to shelter all those who trust in Him (Joel 3:16, Nah. 1:7). This type of trust casts out self-reliance, guile, and deception.

“Nothing is apparently more helpless, yet really more invincible, than the soul that feels its nothingness and relies wholly on the merits of the Saviour. By prayer, by the study of His word, by faith in His abiding presence, the weakest of human beings may live in contact with the living Christ, and He will hold them by a hand that will never let go.”—Ellen G. White, Ministry of Healing, p. 182.

What has been your own experience with these incredible promises? How can you learn to have that kind of close walk with the Lord?

### **A Corrupt City**

A Chinese proverb says that the darkest spot in the room is located right under the candle. This proverb could be applied to the moral state of Jerusalem in Zephaniah’s time. The prophet just has completed the pronouncement of divine judgments on Judah’s neighbouring countries (see Zephaniah 2) such as Philistia in the west, Moab and Ammon in the east, Cush in the south, and Assyria in the east. Yet, he does not stop there. He proceeds to expose the sins of those who dwell in God’s own city on earth, Jerusalem itself.

Read Zephaniah 3:1-5. Who is being condemned, and why? Ask yourself, how could God’s people, those given so much light and truth, end up so corrupted? How can we protect ourselves from having the same thing happen to us?

The capital city of Judah lies at the heart of Zephaniah’s concern. He indicts its leaders concerning the city’s moral degradation. The corruption stems directly from the failure of its leaders to live up to their designated roles and responsibilities (compare with Jer. 18:18, Ezek. 22:23-30). The corrupt court run by officials is likened to “roaring lions,” and the judges are characterized as “evening wolves.” The temple is faring no better because the priests do not teach God’s Word, nor do the prophets speak the truth.

“During the reign of Josiah, the word of the Lord came to Zephaniah, specifying plainly the results of continued apostasy, and calling the attention of the true church to the glorious

prospect beyond. His prophecies of impending judgment upon Judah apply with equal force to the judgments that are to fall upon an impenitent world at the time of the second advent of Christ.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 389.

Look around. However, alluring, the world is doomed to ultimate destruction. One even does not need to believe in the Bible to see how easily this destruction could happen. Why is the Lord our only hope, and how can we learn to lean on Him more and more and not trust in the vain and empty things of this world?

### **God’s Greatest Delight**

“The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.” (Zeph. 3:17).

In the closing section of his book (Zeph. 3:9-20), Zephaniah turns from a theme of anger to one of restoration. Beyond the judgment, we come to God’s ultimate goals. When the nations have been disciplined, they will together call on the Lord and serve Him cordially. The lips of the people will be purified so that all may worship and praise the Lord by serving Him. A small yet humble and faithful remnant will survive in Judah and will take the place of the proud leaders.

Most important, God will dwell among His people and He will make past wrongs right. No longer will they need to live in fear because the Lord will be with His people, dwelling in the midst of them. He will be their Deliverer and Savior. “They will eat and lie down and no one will make them afraid” (Zeph. 3:13).

Such blessings would normally cause God’s people to rejoice over Him, but the prophet declares that God will rejoice over them. His love and joy for His people will be so great that He will shout over them with jubilation.

How did the prophet Isaiah describe God’s joy over His redeemed people? Isa. 62:5, 65:19.

The great King, the divine Warrior, will protect and vindicate His people. He will grant them all the benefits of His victory, the one that He won for us at the cross. He will exalt the humble and turn disgrace, suffering, and alienation into an experience of honor, blessings, and His own presence. Prominence will be given to the lame and the outcast, a theme that lies at the heart of the message proclaimed by Jesus Christ.

Even amid such dire warnings, the Lord offered His people hope. How can we, as Seventh-day Adventists, trusting in the promise of the Second Coming, learn to live day by day with that hope? How can we learn to keep that hope alive, especially in times of trouble when the world offers us nothing but sorrow?

### **God’s Answer to Injustice**

Read Nahum 1-3. What verses especially teach us about the character of God? How can we apply what is seen here to our understanding of last-day events?

The prophecy of Nahum is God’s Word against the kingdoms of this world as represented by Nineveh. As the prophet looked at his world, he saw the hand of God moving against the Assyrian Empire. He announced that its capital city, Nineveh, would soon fall, never to rise again. Nahum spoke with absolute confidence because he knew God’s character and,

through the gift of prophecy (Nah. 1:1), he had been shown by the Lord what would happen. The Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished (Nah. 1:3, Exod. 34:6-7).

The Assyrians had plundered many nations and had an insatiable lust for power. Their cruelty was notorious. As God's "razor" (Isa. 7:20), they eagerly had shorn their neighbours. Now it was time for the razor to be broken. Instruments of God's judgment are not exempt from judgment. Nineveh exists no more, but the prophetic testimony lives on. It reminds us that though God's justice seems slow, nothing ultimately can stop it.

As we have seen in an earlier lesson, years before Nahum's time, the Ninevites, having heard Jonah's preaching, had repented, and God had spared their city. But the repentance had not lasted; the people returned to their old ways. Many countries that had suffered under its oppressive yoke would greet the news of Nineveh's fall with thunderous applause. A messenger will come to bring good news (Isa. 52:7) that the power of Assyria is broken, with its gods. God's people will again be able to worship in peace (Nah. 1:15).

As great as the Lord's anger is, more tender is His mercy. He protects those who await the fullness of His goodness. Nahum teaches that God cares for those who trust in Him, but that with an overwhelming flood He will pursue His enemies into darkness (Nah. 1:8). God was behind it all, for He had determined that Nineveh's day of judgment had come.

The prophet shows that God has awesome power. All creation trembles before Him. He does not tolerate sin forever. At the same time, He is the Savior of those who trust in Him. There is no middle ground. We are on one side or the other. "He who is not with Me," Jesus said, "is against Me" (Matt. 12:30, NKJV).

Further Study: "With unerring accuracy the Infinite One still keeps account with the nations. While His mercy is tendered, with calls to repentance, this account remains open; but when the figures reach a certain amount which God has fixed, the ministry of His wrath begins. The account is closed. Divine patience ceases. Mercy no longer pleads in their behalf."—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 364.

"Before the worlds unfallen and the heavenly universe, the world will have to give an account to the Judge of the whole earth, the very One they condemned and crucified. What a reckoning day that will be! It is the great day of God's vengeance. Christ does not then stand at Pilate's bar. Pilate and Herod, and all that mocked, scourged, rejected, and crucified Him will then understand what it means to feel the wrath of the Lamb. Their deeds will appear before them in their true character."—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 132.