

Zephaniah



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Seek God While He May Be Found!

consider It

comprehend It

connect It

A 3 C's contemplative study™

By Dr. Jack M. Jacob

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All Scriptures quoted, partially quoted, or adapted from the New American Standard Version of the Holy Bible with 1995 Update.

Introduction to Zephaniah

Author: The book of Zephaniah is unique in that it both goes into more detail than the other Minor Prophets concerning the identity of its author, but it also provides less information at the same time. Before you put this book down and assume the author has lost his mind, allow me to explain myself. In 1:1, the book begins with the statement “The word of the Lord which came to Zephaniah son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah son of Amon, King of Judah.”

First, this provides us with more information than the rest of the Minor Prophets in that Zephaniah went back four generations to show his identity. Why would he do this? I am glad you asked. First, Jewish people would quote their pedigree to show the importance of their family, or to show they belonged in the Jewish nation. Zephaniah accomplished both. Since he was trying to show the importance of his family, it makes sense to assume that the Hezekiah mentioned as his Great-Great-Grandfather is none other than King Hezekiah (see 2 Kings 18-20).

Second, this would make Zephaniah a close cousin to Josiah, the new king who took the throne as an eight-year-old (see 2 Kings 22-23). This would help to explain his familiarity with court life in Jerusalem and would also suggest this was his dwelling place. It would also explain his harsh criticism of those princes and rulers who had not completely embraced the reforms of Josiah (see **Date** on page 3). This would also mean that Zephaniah was well-educated and wealthy.

Lastly, Zephaniah’s name itself means, “God has hidden or guarded”. Given Amon and Manasseh’s evil and the status of the kingdom during their reigns (although Manasseh did turn around late in life but much too late to make a major impact), it is not surprising to find that his parents named him this. Manasseh was famous for shedding innocent blood and especially that of children in sacrifice to other “gods”. They had no doubt hidden Zephaniah, praying he would be an instrument to bring relief from the evil.

I said there is both much information and not very much information identifying the author of Zephaniah. There is nothing telling us definitively where Zephaniah was from. There is also nothing identifying the specific occasion of the writing, but the above information can be logically inferred from the contents of the book.

Put all of the information together, and we have a well-educated, wealthy prophet with connections to the court at Jerusalem and this would play out in the purpose for his writing (see below) and would parallel his contemporary

prophets and show both God's consistency of message and His inclusion of all parts of society in His call to repentance.

Date: The only direct statement from Zephaniah, concerning the date of his prophecy, is that he received the word of the Lord, "...in the days of Josiah son of Amon, king of Judah (1:1)" We know that Josiah ruled from 640 BC, at age eight, to 609 BC (when he died at the hand of Necco II of Egypt in the valley of Megiddo or Armageddon). It should be obvious that the prophecy would have happened somewhere in between these dates.

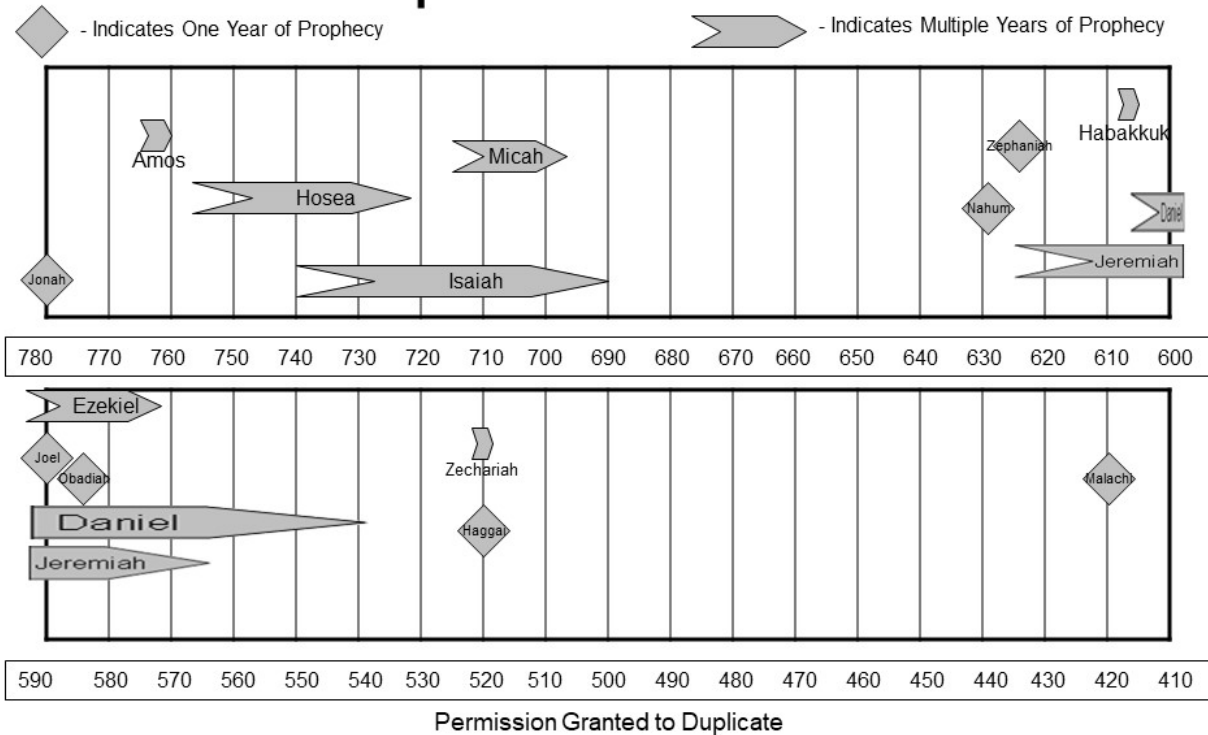
640 to 609 BC is too big a gap to deal with when trying to understand the situation into which Zephaniah prophesied. We know that Josiah was too young to rule completely on his own, so he had help from scribes and others until 628 BC. It is unlikely, though not impossible, that Zephaniah would have considered Josiah ruling when he did not have power to make unilateral decisions for the kingdom, so it would make sense to place the writing of the book after 628 BC.

Next, we also know that Josiah started his major reforms to stamp out Baal worship in 622 BC. He had started these reforms in 628 BC, but they were far from complete. As Zephaniah mentions "a remnant of Baal" and "those who bow down on the housetops to the host of heaven", this would seem to indicate the reforms had begun, but had not been completed. This puts the prophecy somewhere between 628 and 622 BC.

One last event helps us to narrow the time of the prophecy as well. In Assyria, the world power up to this point, civil strife was brewing. Ashurbanipal was dying and named his son, Ashur-Etil-ilam, as his successor. Upon Ashurbanipal's death in 627 BC, the commander of the armies, Sin-Shum-lishir, crowned himself king and Ashurbanipal's other son, Sin-Shar-ishkum, fought him for the throne, and this strife would last until 623 BC. While they were thus embroiled, there was no time to harass Judah. This gave Josiah time to institute his reforms and would have also created the urgency we see in Zephaniah for following those reforms. These events would put the prophecy between 627 and 623 BC. For the sake of symmetry, I am assuming the date of the prophecy in 625 BC, halfway between the bookends to which we have narrowed it down.

Contemporary Prophets: In order to see the contemporaries of Zephaniah, refer to the chart below. You should see that Zephaniah and Jeremiah were contemporaries and spoke to the same situations, albeit Jeremiah spoke to the masses while Zephaniah spoke to the court. Also, Jeremiah prophesied and served for a much longer period, but we hear the same topics, issues, warnings, and threats iterated in both works.

Prophetic Timeline



Historical Situation: We have already covered much of the historical situation in the section “Date” on page 4; however, there are some additional issues that will help us to understand this short, but powerful book.

First, if you took the opportunity to review the reigns of Manasseh and Amon earlier, you would no doubt notice that neither really had a profound respect for God or for His temple or prophets. This same attitude is reflected in the people and is part of the reason God gives for judging them. “And I will punish the men who are stagnant in spirit, who say in their hearts, ‘The Lord will not do good or evil.’”¹ Put plainly, they just don’t think God is important.

Next, because of world events (see **Date** section on page 3), the people were experiencing a time of peace and prosperity they had not known in their lifetimes. Zephaniah addresses this in 1:13 “Moreover, their wealth will become plunder and their houses desolate; Yes, they will build houses but not inhabit them, and plant vineyards but not drink their wine.” Like many of us in North America, prosperity had cooled their fervor for turning to God and admitting their need of Him and His activity in their lives.

¹ Zephaniah 1:12

Third, in their prosperity, not only had they forgotten God, but they had begun to defraud their own people. “Her princes within her are roaring lions, her judges are wolves at evening; they leave nothing for the morning. Her prophets are reckless, treacherous men; Her priests have profaned the sanctuary. They have done violence to the law.”²

Lastly, many scholars agree that Josiah was heavily influenced by Zephaniah’s prophecy and this would have been yet another reason to pursue the reforms of ridding the land of Baalism and other idolatry. If this were the case, then Zephaniah would have been used of God to bring about the greatest time of revival in the recent history of Judah.

God was not pleased with their lives and this is the subject of His warnings for them to repent. God expected them to respond to Him as they had been instructed through the law, but they had decided to not deal with Him at all. Since God would not be ignored, He comes with a strong word and warning.

Main Focus of the Book: The main focus of the book of Zephaniah is a surprisingly positive one. God warns the people about His right to judge, His manner of justice and the extent of His justice. Although He uses pictures of destruction that remind us of the destruction of the world in the time of Noah and of His destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, this is only part of His message. The main message is turn to God while you still have the chance. He promises to forgive and restore.

In addition to the main focus of the book, there are other smaller emphases as well including:

- God’s right to judge the world and not just Israel
- God always leaves a believing remnant
- God is God of the Universe
- God sees all and knows all

Believe it or not, all of these foci are packed into this little book.

² Zephaniah 3:3-4.

Outline of Zephaniah

- I. God's Right to Judge (1:1-2:3)
 - a. God is powerful enough to destroy. (1:1-3)
 - b. God knows and sees all. (1:4-6)
 - c. God rules over even the royalty. (1:7-8)
 - d. God is just. (1:9-13)
 - e. God's judgment cannot be overcome. (1:14-18)
 - f. The purpose of God's judgment is to lead to repentance. (2:1-3)
- II. God's Judgment on the Nations (2:4-3:7)
 - a. Philistia is doomed. (2:4-7)
 - b. Moab and Ammon are doomed. (2:8-11)
 - c. Ethiopia is doomed. (2:12)
 - d. Assyria is doomed. (2:13-15)
 - e. Surprise! Jerusalem is doomed as well! (3:1-7)
- III. God's Hope Offered (3:8-20)
 - a. Judgment is meant to lead to repentance. (3:8-11)
 - b. A remnant will not taste of that vengeance. (3:12-13)
 - c. God will deliver by taking up residence in their midst. (3:14-20)

Personal Word: Most people live their lives as though they have forever and do not have to worry about God's judgment. People who do not know Him do so ignorantly, but they are still accountable (Romans 1:18-23). If God holds those who do not know Him accountable, how much more those of us who claim to belong to Him? In this little book is packed a powerful reminder to us, "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."³

As you study this small book, resist the temptation to think there could not be anything for you here. While Zephaniah is talking to Judah and Jerusalem and their rulers, his message is also that God sees all and knows all and even Paul said that our works would be judged (see 1 Corinthians 3 and 4).

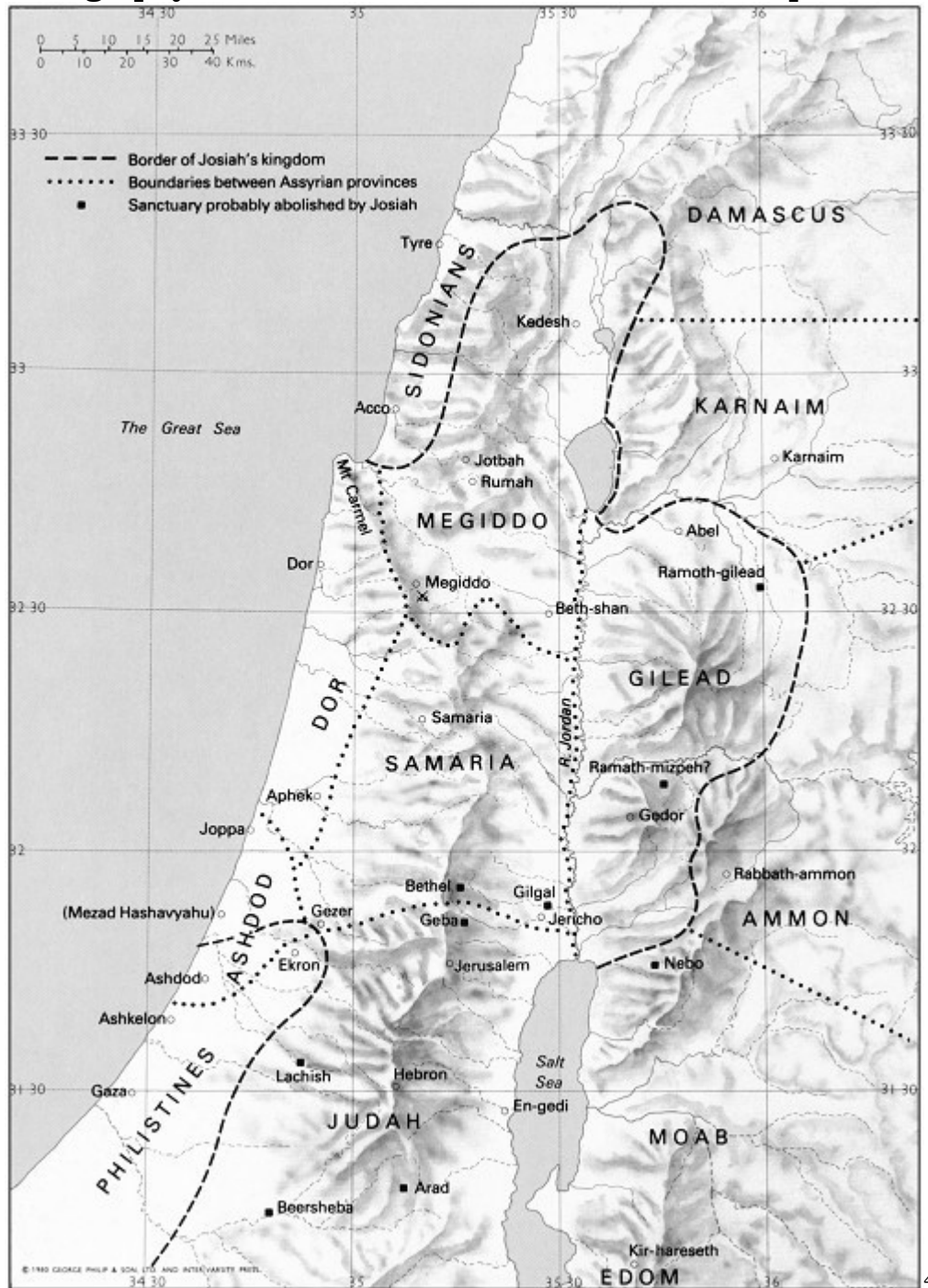
The message of hope that Zephaniah offered his listeners is still available today. Things might have gone terribly wrong for you, but maybe God is allowing this to happen to teach you a lesson. Maybe He is allowing you to experience life apart from Him because you have indicated this is what you desire. Just like in Zephaniah's day, call out to the Lord and He will respond!

May God richly bless you as you study His word.

Dr. Jack M. Jacob

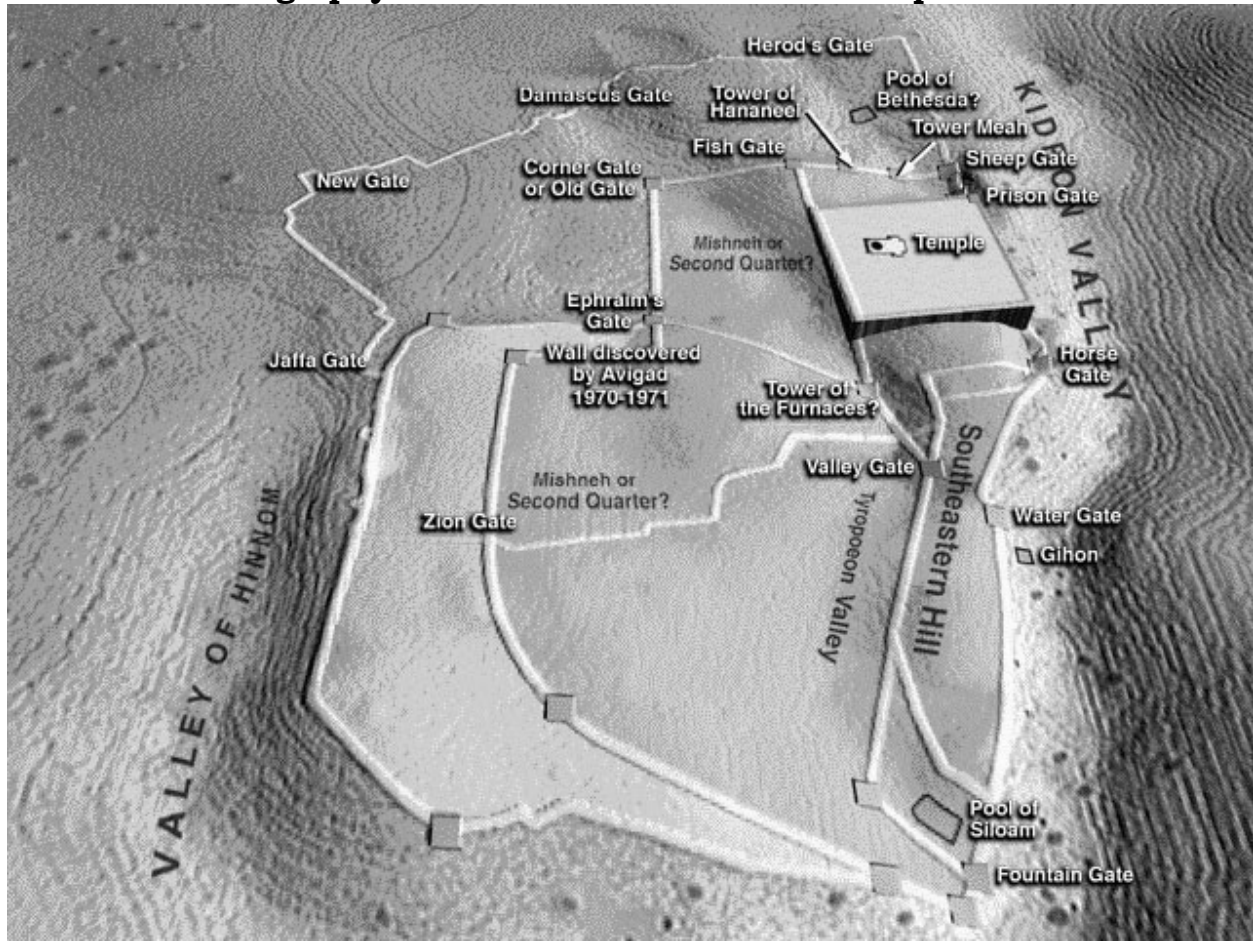
³ Zephaniah 2:3.

Geography of Ancient Near East in the Time of Zephaniah



⁴ J. J. Bimson, J. P. Kane, *The New Bible Atlas*, Intersarsity Press, Leicester, England, 1985.

Geography of Jerusalem in the Time of Zephaniah



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⁵ J. J. Bimson, J. P. Kane, *The New Bible Atlas*, Intersarsity Press, Leicester, England, 1985.

Reading Record for Habakkuk

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Record Observations Below:



Lesson One:
Just Who Do You Think You Are?
God?!
Zephaniah 1:1 through 2:3

Have you ever wanted to say that to anyone? No doubt, some time in your life, you have come to a point when someone was acting so overbearing that you just want to know if they were trying to act like God. I know it may come as a shock that a pastor would have this frustration, but I certainly do.

When I was growing up, I used to play with my little sister a lot. She had a friend that would come over to play. Upon her arrival, she would take total control of my sister and their play arrangements. She would even try to make me join them for their tea parties. (I should insert a disclaimer since I have a daughter of my own now, that I am not against tea parties now, but I sure was then!)

One particular day, I decided I had had enough. She had been bossing me all day and my stepmother had made it clear that I was going to participate with them. Finally, when I could take it no more, I yelled, "Who do you think you are...God?" My sister's friend responded just as quickly, "No, He's not a girl, silly, but I am just as important!" I had no response.

In speaking with many people, it seems the one aspect of God's character that they struggle with most is His sovereignty. They see this as threatening to their importance, sense of fairness, independence, or sensitivities. It seems they want to ask, "Who do you think you are...God?" Yes...yes, He is!

In this lesson, God begins this warning to His people by explaining to them His sovereignty and how that gives Him the right to both pass sentence on them and execute that justice.

Have you ever struggled with accepting God's sovereignty over your life or world? If so, what caused the struggle?

How did you deal with your struggle?

Consider It

1. How did Zephaniah get his prophecy? (1:1)
2. How did God describe the judgment He was bringing? (1:2-6)
3. Who did God include in this judgment? (1:2-6)
4. What different “gods” were being worshipped? (1:2-6)
5. For what reason was God judging Judah? (1:2-6)
6. What warning did God offer His people? (1:7-13)
7. Who did God include in this judgment? (1:7-13)
8. Who did God say He was going to punish? (1:7-13)
9. From where would the cries for help come? (1:7-13)
10. How was God going to punish them? (1:7-13)

11. How did God describe the “Day of the Lord?” (1:14-18)
12. What would not be able to save men from the judgment God was to bring? (1:14-18)
13. Who would be affected by God’s judgment? (1:14-18)
14. How did God encourage the people to respond? (2:1-3)
15. When did God want them to do this? (2:1-3)
16. What hope did God offer for the people who would respond this way? (2:1-3)

Comprehend It

1. Find the following on the map of Jerusalem on page 9 and circle them:
 - a. Fish Gate (1:10)
 - b. Second Quarter (1:10)
 - c. Hills (1:10)
 - d. Horse Gate (Maktesh or Mortar) (1:11)
2. Why is it important that Zephaniah tells us he got his message from the Lord?
3. Why did Zephaniah list four generations in 1:1?

4. What other passage in the Bible describes a destruction like 1:2-6?
5. How does this agree or disagree with God's promise in Genesis 9?
6. What right did God have to judge people who did not even know Him?
7. Which of the groups listed in 1:2-6 should have been part of the solution instead of part of the problem?
8. What does this tell you about how bad things had actually gotten?
9. How would the people have responded to the portion of God's complaint found in 1:6?
10. What does it mean that the "Lord has prepared a sacrifice; He has consecrated His guests"?
11. Why did Zephaniah specifically mention the princes of Jerusalem?
12. From your locating of the various parts of ancient Jerusalem in the previous section, what was God saying in 1:10-11?
13. What does it mean that men were "stagnant in spirit" in 1:12?

14. From the description, in what were the people really putting their trust?
15. If you were a Jew, what would you expect the “Day of the Lord” to hold for you?
16. Does this match Zephaniah’s description? Why or why not?
17. What would you consider to be the key verse in this section? Why?
18. List the various ways you sense urgency in this section:

Connect It

1. Have you ever had someone claim to have a “word from the Lord”? If so, describe it.
2. How did you know whether or not it was legitimate?
3. What advice would you give a new believer about how to discern God’s voice?
4. Is this important? Why or why not?

- d. The princes, the king's sons

 - e. Those who leap on the temple threshold
-
12. Why was being stagnant in spirit such a big deal?

 13. What would it look like to be stagnant in spirit?

 14. A wise man once said, "If you aren't growing in the Lord, you are backsliding." From this passage, would you agree or disagree? Why?

 15. God warned the people that their money would not save them. Is it a temptation for you to trust in money? Why or why not?

 16. God told the people to repent quickly and they MIGHT be saved. Is there anything you have read in this lesson or section of scripture that has brought to mind something from which you need to repent? Describe it.

 17. Pray and ask God to help you turn from this.

 18. What will you do to prevent this in the future?

Additional Observations



**Lesson Two:
Wait!
It's Not What You Think!
Zephaniah 2:4 through
3:20**

What do you see in this picture? Is it a two headed giraffe? If you look closer, you see it is two giraffes. One is standing behind the other, but their markings make them

appear to be some sort of freak of nature. Much of life is like that as well. Your parents making you eat your vegetables was not a plot to make you miserable, but one to make you healthy. God not letting you marry that person you thought you were in love with was not Him being cruel, but Him protecting you from a messy divorce when you realized you really couldn't stand the jerk. Maybe a story is in order...

A girl and her best friend got into an argument in church. The first girl walked away in a huff. Later, the second girl was talking quietly with a third girl. The first girl walked around the corner, saw them communicating surreptitiously, and assumed they were talking about her. She came unglued and gave them both a piece of her mind she really could not afford to lose. When she had finished venting, the other girls informed her, in a not very calm or kind manner, that they had been planning a birthday party for yet another girl, but did not want anyone to hear the plans because it was to be a secret.

We have all had situations that were not as they initially appeared. In this lesson, we look at Zephaniah's message of impending doom on the enemies of Judah. Just about the time Judah began celebrating, Zephaniah added their name to the list of doomed nations. They were shocked! To add even more to the situation, God described total destruction as the punishment, but then revealed that He would leave a remnant of faithful people who would not go through the destruction and that He stood ready to forgive them, if they would repent. Nothing was as it seemed!

As we think about our own lives, we are sometimes tempted to feel justified in holding grudges against people without considering their point of view. We are tempted to think we are putting in our religious time so God must be pleased. Nothing is as it seems!

Describe a time when you were embarrassed by jumping to the wrong conclusion about a situation:

How did you resolve the situation?

Consider It

1. When God told Judah about His judgment, with what nation did He begin? (2:4-7)
2. Who did God say would take over the caves and folds of the seacoasts? (2:4-7)
3. How did God say this would come about? (2:4-7)
4. For what were Moab and Ammon being judged? (2:8-11)
5. To whom were Moab and Ammon compared? (2:8-11)
6. In what did Moab and Ammon trust? (2:8-11)
7. Who was to inherit the land of Moab and Ammon? (2:8-11)
8. How was God going to destroy Ethiopia? (2:12)
9. Who else was God going to destroy? (2:13-15)
10. How did God say He would conquer Nineveh? (2:13-15)

11. Why did God say He was going to destroy Nineveh? (2:13-15)
12. How would the rest of the world respond to Assyria? (2:13-15)
13. Who did God announce His judgment on next? (3:1-7)
14. What were His accusations against them? (3:1-7)
15. Who did God blame for their situation? (3:1-7)
16. What did God say was the reason He would not cut them off completely?
(3:1-7)
17. What were God's goals in judging the nations? (3:8-11)
18. How did God describe those who would not be affected by His judgment?
(3:12-13)
19. What hope did God offer the nation of Judah for the future? (3:14-20)
20. How would this deliverance happen? (3:14-20)

21. What would the reputation of Israel be after God did this? (3:14-20)

Comprehend It

1. If you were from Judah, how might you feel as God listed the nations that oppressed you for judgment?

2. Who were the shepherds listed in 2:4-7?

3. How would it affect you to find out you were going to take over their land?

4. Find the following on the map on page 8 and circle them:
 - a. Gaza
 - b. Ashkelon
 - c. Ashdod
 - d. Moab
 - e. Ammon
 - f. Judah
 - g. Jerusalem

5. None of the nations listed in 2:4-15 were worshippers of Yahweh. What does this tell you about God's sovereignty? His fairness? Their "gods?"

6. Who were the Moabites and Ammonites?

7. What happened to Sodom and Gomorrah? (See Genesis 19)

8. What did God mean by saying Moab would be like Sodom and Ammon like Gomorrah?
9. What other prophet(s) had spoken of Nineveh's destruction?
10. At what point in chapter 3 do you think the people of Judah understood God was talking about them?
11. How would the people of Judah have responded who realized that God was talking about them?
12. What was God communicating by listing the wrongs of the various leaders?
13. Give the modern equivalent to the following:
 - a. Prince
 - b. Judge
 - c. Prophet
 - d. Priest

14. What do you notice about these groups?
15. How did God say the people had started in their relationship with Him?
16. What was God asking Judah to do?
17. How did God say the people would feel after they obeyed?
18. From your knowledge of the rest of the Old Testament, was leaving a remnant consistent with God's past activity? Give examples to support your answer.
19. How does the end of Zephaniah's prophecy compare to its start?
20. Has Zephaniah 3:14-20 happened yet?

Connect It

1. Describe a movie scene or event when you were glad someone got what was coming to them:
2. What was it that made you glad?

3. Describe a time when you got what was coming to you.
4. How did your feelings differ?
5. Do you think this difference was echoed by Judah as they read about God's judgments on their enemies?
6. How can you stand strong for God even when leaders are straying?
7. God rehearsed what He had done to defend and provide for Judah. List ways God has defended you and provided for you.
8. God promised total and complete forgiveness to Judah if they would repent. Do you have any sin for which you have repented and confessed to God but for which you can't let go of the shame? If so, is God the One causing the shame? If He is, why? If He is not, who is?
9. Can you find a promise in these verses that can help you to release that shame? If so, write the entire verse in your own words:
10. God told Zephaniah He would leave a remnant of believing people that would not be affected by His judgment. Elijah had to be reminded of this in 1 Kings 19. Have you ever felt like you were the only person who served God at your work? Your school? Your church? How might these scriptures speak to that thought?

11. Zephaniah 3:14-20 tells about God's activity in the future. Are there promises God has given you concerning the future? If so, list examples.

12. Do any of the descriptions of God's reaction to Judah's repentance seem strange to you? If so, which one(s)? Why do they seem strange?

13. God wanted the people to repent of being spiritually stagnant. Can you give specific examples of how you are growing spiritually? List them.

14. Is there anything that needs to be adjusted in your life because you studied Zephaniah? Consider the following areas:
 - a. How you think of God's character

 - b. Your own spiritual growth

 - c. In what you place your trust

 - d. How you see your enemies

 - e. How you understand God's promises

15. What do you plan to do to implement these changes in your life?

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