

ANCIENT WORDS FOR MODERN DISCIPLES

September 18, 2022 | *The Day of Judgment—The Day of Salvation (Zephaniah)*

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Zephaniah called Judah to wait for God's salvation. Why is waiting for something we yearn for so challenging?

Read Zephaniah.

Ask God to give you insight for ways you need to apply the warnings within Zephaniah.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

The day of the Lord will be terrible for those who will receive God's wrath but wonderful for those who wait for His salvation.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

-There is no room for half-hearted obedience to God. You are either committed to following God with your whole life or you are not committed to following Him at all.

MEDITATE

"The Lord has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil" (Zephaniah 3:15).

GETTING STARTED

+This section will introduce Zephaniah and the main theme of his prophecy.

- ❑: *Zephaniah ministered during the reign of Josiah. What do you know of Josiah's reign [2 Kings 22:1-23:30]?*
- ❑: *Given what you know of Josiah's reign, is the content of Zephaniah surprising? Why or why not?*

Zephaniah ministered during the reign of King Josiah (640–609 B.C.), and he may possibly have been a descendent of King Hezekiah. The genealogy at the beginning of book includes a Hezekiah, but we cannot be sure if this individual was the king known by that name. He is not identified as the king, but Zephaniah is the only prophet whose ancestry is traced back four generations. His genealogy may have been extended to reveal his connection to the king.

Josiah was regarded as one of the most godly kings in the Old Testament. He remodeled and restored Jerusalem's temple. During this process, the builders discovered a book of God's laws which prompted Josiah to conduct a religious reform with the intent of reviving the nation's spiritual life. Second Kings 23 shows that Josiah's reforms were wide-ranging and supported by many. But Zephaniah reveals that Josiah's reforms must have had only a limited influence on the people. Outside of Josiah's direct influence, the people were still spiritually rebellious.

Zephaniah's message contains two emphases—judgment and salvation. Zephaniah is notable for the way he changed emphases while maintaining the same theme, which is the day of the Lord. As with most of the other prophets, the day of the Lord is synonymous with God's judgment (Zephaniah 1:7–10; 14–16). Nevertheless, when Zephaniah turned to salvation, he continued to speak of the “day” in a similar fashion (Zephaniah 3:11, 16). Likewise, Zephaniah presented God as the divine warrior who wars against His people in judgment, yet when Zephaniah turned to salvation, he still presented God in valiant and warrior-like terms (Zephaniah 3:12, 3:17).

- ❑: *What does Zephaniah's emphasis on judgment and salvation teach us about half-hearted obedience?*
- ❑: *Why could Zephaniah use the same themes when speaking of judgment and salvation?*

APPLICATION POINT – An overly simplistic summary of the prophets is “things are going really bad, but they

will get a lot better in the future.” But in Zephaniah it is easy to see this dynamic at work. He talked about the judgment approaching disobedient Judah and the salvation awaiting those who trust God in the future. His two-pronged emphasis reveals the nonsensical outlook many of us maintain about our obedience and commitment to God. Many of us want just enough God in our lives to feel good about ourselves and to be saved from any judgment awaiting us in the future, but we stop well short of the absolute obedience the Bible requires. Zephaniah doesn’t leave this option open for us. We will know God in judgment, or we will know Him in salvation. There is no in-between.

▣ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+The structure of Zephaniah is fairly straight-forward. The first chapter of Zephaniah is an oracle condemning Judah. Zephaniah 2:1–3:8 is a little harder to understand. These verses begin with a call to repentance. Then the judgment of the nations is revealed as a warning of what is to come if repentance is refused. These verses conclude with judgment because repentance was rejected. Zephaniah 3:9–20 looks forward to the salvation of a remnant from exile.

1. JUDGMENT

2. REPENTANCE

3. RESTORATION

GOING DEEPER

+This section will investigate each part of Zephaniah in more detail and offer personal applications.

1. JUDGMENT

▣ ZEPHANIAH 1

Q: *What specific groups can you identify who are addressed in Zephaniah 1?*

Q: *How did Zephaniah bracket this oracle against Judah [Zephaniah 1:2-3; 17-18]?*

Zephaniah begins with an oracle announcing the coming destruction of Judah. The prophet did not outline a case against the people. Instead, he proclaimed God's coming judgment. Although we are left to infer the reason for judgment, it should be obvious by this point in our study of the Minor Prophets. The people who received Zephaniah's oracle did not need an explanation. Judah had become increasingly unfaithful in its relationship with God to the point of rejecting Him.

Zephaniah identified at least three distinct groups within this oracle of judgment. The priests and other leaders of Judea would be cut down by God's judgment. Zephaniah mentioned idolatrous priests and non-idolatrous priests. These non-idolatrous priests were presumably the priests of the Lord, but notice that they received the same condemnation as the idolatrous priests (Zephaniah 1:4). They had failed so badly in their duties that they were on the same plane as those who taught the people to follow other gods. Zephaniah also condemned the officials and king's sons. They wore foreign attire. This could allude to idolatrous religious attire or simply mean they wanted to be like the leaders of foreign countries. Zephaniah also condemned Judah's merchants. They appear to have traded in idolatrous ideas as much as they did in goods and produce (Zephaniah 1:10–13).

The depth of Judah's fall can be observed by the interplay between Judah and the nations in this oracle. Zephaniah framed the oracle by announcing God's coming judgment on all of humanity (Zephaniah 1:2–3; 17–18). Judah had become indistinguishable from the other nations and would be judged along with everyone else who opposed God. Their covenant relationship with God no longer significantly set them apart from the other nations.

🔗: *Zephaniah identified different groups who failed to keep Judah's covenant with God. What kind of "group" are you in within society (business workers, teachers, service industry, students, stay-at-home mothers, etc.)? How could you get caught up in what the group is doing and neglect your prior commitment to God?*

🔗: *Zephaniah referred to complacent men in Jerusalem (Zephaniah 1:12). Is complacency in your relationship to God something you struggle with? Why or why not?*

APPLICATION POINT – Zephaniah believed the men in Jerusalem had become complacent (Zephaniah 1:12). They did not think God would do anything, good or ill. They had made God a non-factor in their daily lives. For them, God was something nice if you were into that sort of thing and had time, but they were not going to worry about organizing their lives around His righteousness. How easy it is for us to adopt the same mindset, even if we would not admit it or put it into those terms! Many of us think we would prioritize God more if He were more

active in the world. Because we see so many examples of God working on behalf of His people in the Bible, we think they must have had an easier time anticipating His activity in their world. Zephaniah 1:12 tells us this was not the case. People during Bible times also struggled to see God working in their lives, but this did not excuse their outlook! Zephaniah condemned their faithlessness.

2. REPENTANCE

■ ZEPHANIAH 2:1–3:8

Q: *Was Zephaniah’s call to repentance corporate or individual?*

Q: *What quality did Zephaniah emphasize was needed for repentance [Zephaniah 2:3]? Why is this quality needed for repentance?*

Although God’s judgment was coming, there remained a small window for repentance. Zephaniah summoned the entire nation to gather for repentance in order to avert the judgment of God. The repetition of the word “before” (Zephaniah 2:2) adds to the sense of urgency. The nation had to act quickly. This does not necessarily mean God’s judgment was imminent but that the people’s repentance must be. They were in harm’s way. The quicker they repented, the safer they would be. More importantly, the quicker they repented, the sooner they would be walking in accordance with the will of God.

Although Zephaniah summoned the entire nation to repent, he did not necessarily hold out hope that most people would respond to his summons. He knew that repentance demands humility. It takes humility to see how you have deviated from God’s will. To admit you have deviated from God’s will. To repent for failing to follow God’s will. Zephaniah knew his call to repentance would likely fall on many deaf ears because they did not have the humility needed to repent.

Q: *Is humility something you struggle with? If so, can you see the challenges that a lack of humility creates for repentance?*

Q: *In seeking humility, how can you protect yourself from false humility?*

APPLICATION POINT – Humility is challenging for everyone. Ironically, the very act of recognizing your own humility put your humility in danger. People are susceptible to a wide range of sins and temptations. The sins one person struggles with may not be an issue for another person at all. But everyone seems to struggle with pride to some extent. We naturally think more of ourselves than we ought, and self-righteous pride makes the repentance Zephaniah called for nearly impossible. Confession is one practice Christians should consistently follow that also helps ingrain humility and our need for repentance. Consistently acknowledging specific sins in private prayer helps us recognize how far we fall short of God’s will and how much we need His grace.

Q: *Why did Zephaniah follow this call to repentance with oracles of judgment against the nations?*

Q: *Why did Zephaniah not call the nations to repentance?*

Immediately after calling Judah to repentance, Zephaniah announced judgment on several nations (Zephaniah 2:4–15). This may feel somewhat disjointed for modern readers, but the juxtaposition of repentance and judgment accomplishes a rhetorical effect. As was the case in Nahum, the judgment of the other nations would be for the benefit of a repentant Judah. Judah would not have to worry about the nations that constantly antagonized them. Furthermore, in at least one instance, the judgment of the nations would mean an enlargement of Judah’s territories (Zephaniah 2:7). If Judah would repent, God would restore their former power. Since territories in the ancient Near East often changed hands based on who held the most power, it is likely that the judgment of the other nations would have also enlarged Judah’s territory even though this is not explicitly stated.

On the other hand, if Judah failed to repent, the judgment of the other nations would function as a warning. The judgment of the nations was Judah’s future if they persisted in disobedience. The meaning of these oracles is tied to Judah’s response to Zephaniah’s call to repentance.

Q: *In what ways do you see God active in the world today? How is He continuing to bring judgment on the unrighteousness?*

Q: *How should Christians respond when they experience calamity today?*

APPLICATION POINT – Zephaniah indicated that God would bring the downfall of these other nations. Unlike the reigning sentiment of his time (Zephaniah 1:12), God does intercede into the course of human events. The same is true today even though we should be cautious of overestimating our ability to determine God’s purposes in what He does. Like the nation of Judah, Christians should see the inherent warning when disaster strikes the nations. But for the grace of God mediated to repentant sinners, this would be us. Furthermore, even though we are covered from God’s wrath by the blood of Jesus, God may still discipline us when we are disobedient to His will. We should see God’s hand behind the events unfolding within our world and be warned of what it will be like to endure His discipline.

Q: *How did Judah respond to Zephaniah’s call for repentance [Zephaniah 3:1-7]?*

Q: *Why didn’t Zephaniah describe Judah’s judgment independent of the nations [Zephaniah 3:6]?*

Zephaniah 2:1–3:8 is not written in a narrative form, but it feels like a saga as we move from Zephaniah’s call to repentance to Judah’s refusal. Zephaniah began this announcement of judgment with the word “woe,” which is reserved for the deepest lament over one’s predicament. Not only had the people refused to repent, but their hearts had become even more perverse (Zephaniah 3:3–5).

Surprisingly, Zephaniah did not announce Judah’s judgment directly. Instead, he announced the judgment of the nations (Zephaniah 3:6), but he did it in a way that indicated that Judah was included. He alluded to the special relationship God had with Judah (Zephaniah 3:7). The point is clear. Judah had become one of the “other nations.” They would suffer God’s wrath just as the rest.

Q: *How does the gospel influence how we apply Zephaniah 3:1-8?*

Q: *Why do believers have hope even when they have persisted in unrepentant sin far too long?*

APPLICATION POINT – Zephaniah 3:1–7 reveals how central repentance is for the people of God. Everyone sins and deserves the wrath and punishment of God. Apart from repentance and faith in Christ, this is what everyone will receive. Believers should never assume they have no further need of repentance after an initial response of faith in the gospel. Although receiving Christ as Savior does initiate sanctification, we will never reach a state of sinless perfection in this life. So, we must always be ready for repentance lest Zephaniah 3:1–7 apply to us.

4. RESTORATION

■ ZEPHANIAH 3:9-20

Q: *How are pure speech and the gathering of peoples [Zephaniah 3:9-10] related to the tower of Babel narrative [Genesis 11:1-9]?*

Q: *How is Zephaniah 3:11 related to the call to repentance in Zephaniah 2:1-3?*

Zephaniah 3:9 is the turning point in the book. Up to that point, the book is about judgment and pleading for repentance. But Zephaniah 3:9 transports us to an unspecified time in the future after repentance was refused and judgment had come. The land and cities had been conquered by foreign armies and the people had been exiled. Now, God's judgment was over, and He was prepared to restore humanity to Himself. As was the case earlier in Zephaniah, the fate of Judah was wrapped up in the fate of the nations. What God did to the nations was happening to Judah. What God did for Judah the rest of the nations benefit from as well.

Zephaniah 3:9 is remarkable for the way it alludes to the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9). At Babel, the people opposed God by building a tower they intended to reach into the heavens. In response, God confused their language and scattered them over the face of the earth. In Zephaniah 3:9, God declared that He would give the people a pure

speech. But now the people would use their speech not to oppose God but to serve Him. This theme anticipates Pentecost, when the linguistic challenges created at Babel were overcome, and the great multitude in heaven cry out in a single voice (Revelation 19).

Q: *What does the reversal of Babel reveal about the nature of God's restoration?*

Q: *What do these connections between Genesis, Zephaniah, Acts, and Revelation reveal about the nature of God's Word?*

APPLICATION POINT – Ever since sin entered creation, it has marred everything it touches. At Babel, the people's sin resulted in God confusing their language and scattering them across the earth. When God restores His creation from the effects of sin, He will undo these things. This should provide believers with immense comfort. No matter how badly sin has marred your life or the lives around you, God can restore through faith in Jesus Christ. The gospel can heal broken relationships. The gospel can heal broken bodies. The gospel can give hope where there is none.

Q: *What did Zephaniah command in Zephaniah 3:14? Why did he do this?*

Q: *How does Zephaniah 3:16-17 compare with Zephaniah 1:18 and 3:8?*

Zephaniah concludes with song! Despite all the disobedience and judgment, the prophet was able to point the people toward hope for the future. The people could rejoice knowing that God will one day restore a remnant of humanity to Himself. God will take away His judgment. There will be no more enemies or evil (Zephaniah 3:15). God will exult in His people. Every pain and anxiety will be quieted by God's love (Zephaniah 3:17).

Q: *In what ways have you already seen God's restoration in your life? How can you make your joy known to God?*

Q: *Why is it important that the sorrows of the past are forgotten in the midst of praise?*

APPLICATION POINT – One of the centers of Christian worship is the celebration of what God has restored through Christ. Zephaniah's command to sing shows why worship is so vital in the Christian life. We worship because of what Christ has accomplished for us. Unfortunately, the worship practice of many Christians is a pale reflection of what Christ has accomplished. Zephaniah 3:14–17 encourages us to make our worship more thoughtful and less restrained.

NEXT STEPS

Zephaniah takes us through the horrors of God's judgment and the wonder of His restoration. There are times in the Christian life when one of these themes is more relevant for us than the other. There are times when we are caught up in sin and need to be aware of God's discipline through judgment. There are other times when we feel the brokenness of the world around us and need to be reassured of God's ability to restore all things to Himself. Read through Zephaniah one final time this week and underline specific verses that will speak to you 1) during the times you need to hear Zephaniah's warning and 2) the times when you need to hear Zephaniah's hope. You may want to use different color pens.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

God, forgive me for living half-heartedly. You are worthy of my whole commitment. Your judgment will bring complete turmoil. There is no room for an inconsistent faith in you.

Lord Jesus, Zephaniah's hope of restoration was made possible by your sacrifice. Thank you for the hope I have in the cross.

God, during the times when I am caught up in sin, lead me to genuine, heart-felt repentance. Help me to never treat sin as if it were not a big deal.

Father, I look forward to the day Zephaniah foresaw when you will completely restore all things to yourself. I praise you for the work of the gospel and that your restoration is already being made evident in my life.

