

Zephaniah

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As we've studied through the minor prophets over the past several weeks, I've really come to an appreciation of why God chose to preserve the prophecies of twelve of these prophets. This is not immediately obvious. After all, the same basic you're-doing-evil message runs through all twelve of them, so if we were designing the Bible, we might just stick in one for local color and let the rest rot. However, there's much more going on here than is apparent on the surface. Despite that basic similarity of theme, each one of the minor prophets is focused on a different element of the relationship between God and Israel. When we start reading them one after the other, it's almost like we're piecing together a mosaic that gives us a deeper appreciation of our relationship with God today.

We certainly see a part of this mosaic in the book of Zephaniah. Like most of the other prophets, Zephaniah is obscure. We find out nearly all we know about him in the opening biographical sketch of Zephaniah 1:1. This is noteworthy for two reasons. First, it appears likely that Zephaniah's great-grandfather was none other than Hezekiah the king, which at this point would probably still have made Zephaniah a person of some significance. Second, Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of Josiah, the last righteous king of Judah. As the histories tell us, Josiah spent his kingship working tirelessly to lead Judah back to God. However, as Zephaniah makes clear, all of this effort from the righteous king was utterly futile. By the time of Josiah, the rot had eaten too deeply into Judah for the nation to be saved. No matter what anyone did, the Lord was still going to come in judgment against a people that had already earned it.

So, then, what do we have to take from this rather depressing book? First, the errors of Judah are errors that we can easily repeat today. We need to pay attention to avoid them. Second, though, when we look at this prophecy, we learn from it what kind of people God does want. Let's learn more about these things as we study Zephaniah.

The Wickedness of Judah.

According to Zephaniah, the problems of Judah begin with **IDOLATRY**. We see him explore this topic in Zephaniah 1:4-6. Interestingly enough, Zephaniah is one of the few minor prophets to hit this topic hard. Most of the others have been more concerned with things like general wickedness and political corruption. Zephaniah, though, makes quite clear that the people of Judah are going to be punished for going after the Baals, the host of heaven, and Milcom.

For our purposes, though, what's most relevant about this warning is not the idolatry itself, but what lay behind it. As Zephaniah spells out, these were a people who did not follow the Lord, did not seek the Lord, and did not inquire of the Lord. Sure, they swore by the Lord sometimes, but they were just as quick to swear by Milcom. To them, true religion had become interchangeable with false religion. This can certainly happen to us, especially in a culture as tolerant as ours is. We should always be respectful of those of other faiths, but we should never fall into the trap of thinking that those other people are somehow pleasing to God, or that their faith will bring them to anything but disaster. There is only one road to heaven. It is spelled out in God's word. Either we are on it, or we are headed to destruction. That's not our truth to compromise, because some day we will face a God who has never compromised on anything.

However, not everything that Zephaniah says is different. He also returns to the familiar topic of **THE DAY OF THE LORD**. Look with me at Zephaniah 1:7-9. Once again, Zephaniah is warning of the dangers of compromise. He promises that punishment is coming to all those who dress in foreign clothing. This wasn't just a fashion decision. The Law of Moses laid down a number of rules for the dress of the Israelites, and in embracing the styles of the nations around them, the elite of Judah were rejecting God. Leaping over the threshold was apparently a pagan superstition also.

We also must recognize the dangers of compromise in our lives, sometimes in the very same issues. Just like the inhabitants of Jerusalem, how many of us have taken to dressing in a way that is foreign to God's people? We don't have regulations about tassels and mixing different kinds of fabric, but God certainly expects us to be modest in the clothing choices we make. When we're picking out clothes, our first consideration should never be whether an outfit is stylish or flattering. Instead, first we have to ask if it is godly, if by wearing it, we're sending a message that we're people of the world instead of people of the word. We have to ask if we're compromising. If we are, we need to return to the Lord before He returns to us and metes out the punishment that compromisers always receive from Him.

Third, and most interestingly, Zephaniah condemns the people of Judah for **COMPLACENCY**. We find this condemnation in Zephaniah 1:12-13. It's apparent that Zephaniah refers here to men who believe that God has fallen asleep on the job, that the good aren't really going to be rewarded, that the wicked aren't really going to be punished. Instead, they're convinced that things are going to continue on just as they always have. Zephaniah warns, though, that the reality is going to be shockingly different. The people who believed God would do nothing will lose everything.

Sadly, complacency is just as prevalent and just as deadly among Christians. When we first obey the gospel, we get on fire for the Lord, but over time, in too many hearts, that zeal fades. Instead, we become comfortable with our

spiritual position. We start thinking that it's good enough to show up for services and spend the rest of the week on spiritual autopilot. We're not interested in rooting out the sin in our lives. We're not committed to growing in our service to the Lord. Brethren, that's a prescription for disaster. The grace of Jesus is mighty, yes, but He does not extend it to Christians who are lazy and self-satisfied. Those are the lukewarm Christians who get spewed out of His mouth. If we fall into that camp, we're in just as much spiritual danger as the worst wino on the streets of Chicago. Like him, we need to make some serious changes. We need to repent and reform our lives before we run out of opportunity to do so.

The Nations Around Judah.

Of course, despite God's focus on them, the people of Judah weren't the only wicked nation in their region of the world, and Zephaniah also spends some time condemning the nations around them. Among others on this list, we see the nations of **MOAB AND AMMON**. Their doom is pronounced in Zephaniah 2:8-9. Like so many of the nations around Judah, they were giving God's people grief, and they were going to pay for it. The historical record confirms for us that these prophecies were indeed fulfilled. The Moabites were effectively obliterated by Nebuchadnezzar in the same general time frame in which he destroyed Judah and carried its people captive. The Ammonites were a little smarter about not offending the regional powers, and they lingered on for another few hundred years, but by the time of Christ, they too had disappeared. Even today, the land where these nations were is a wasteland with little to redeem it.

Similarly, we also see Zephaniah pronounce an oracle against **ASSYRIA** and its capital, Nineveh. This appears in Zephaniah 2:13-15. This is the centerpiece of God's judgment on the nations. The Assyrians were the largest of the nations that God condemned. They had dominated the Fertile Crescent from Israel to Babylon for hundreds of years, and predicting their imminent destruction was a little bit gutsier. However, it happened with breathtaking speed. Babylon successfully rebelled against them in about 625 B.C., and Nebuchadnezzar, who was then the Babylonian crown prince, sacked Nineveh in 612. Nineveh had been a major city for thousands of years, but just as God had predicted, the sack completely destroyed it. To this day, there has never been another city on the site. It's important that we recognize these things because they show that the Bible is both an accurate historical record and an accurate predictive record.

God's Relationship with Judah.

After thus condemning the surrounding nations, Zephaniah returns to a discussion of the wicked who are closer to home. Particularly, he contrasts **THE PEOPLE AND GOD**. Consider with me Zephaniah 3:3-5. This text is striking because of the way it portrays the complete breakdown of righteousness in Judah's ruling classes. The princes were predators, the judges were scavengers, the prophets were liars, and the priests were corrupt. In all of that mess, the only important figure who was still doing His job was God. In His justice, He did everything He could to lead Judah to repent short of destroying it completely, but they were so shameless that destruction became the only alternative.

Today, many people prefer a different image of God. They like to think of a God who changes, who conforms His likes and dislikes to their preferences for sin, who will certainly not judge them according to a dusty old book like the Bible. In reality, though, God is just and faithful. He has told us what is good, He has told us how He expects us to live, and He will not waver from those things. Regardless of what our hopes and expectations might be, He will judge us according to His word. If He were to do otherwise, He would deny Himself. We need to treat God like He means it.

However, even in executing His judgments on the people of Judah, God was going to be surgical in creating **A NEW PEOPLE**. His description of this people can be found in Zephaniah 3:11-13. In this, God summarizes Judah's problems with a single word—pride. All of their evil deeds were the result of a heart that refused to submit to God. God was going to solve the heart problem by solving the people problem. Once He was done punishing His people, only the humble and lowly were going to be left, and they weren't going to have any trouble following His word.

Each one of us needs to address this pride problem in our own lives. We need to ask, "Am I going to go through life doing what I want, or am I going to go through life doing what God wants?" And brethren, just because we're here doesn't prove that we've already made the right choice. It's easy for us to obey God when we didn't really want to sin anyway, yet reject His will when dealing with sin that is appealing. Who are we, really? Where do we stand? Either we're striving to serve God 100 percent of the time, or we're living for ourselves. There is no in-between.

Finally, God promises through Zephaniah that His people will have **A NEW RELATIONSHIP** with Him. We read about its essence in Zephaniah 3:15-17. Once the people were properly humble before God, they could rest secure in the knowledge that He would protect them. Everything else would be taken care of as long as they got that one most important thing right. They would be so special and important to God that He would rejoice over them.

This spells out the most tragic consequence of complacency and pride in our lives. Whenever we fail to devote ourselves to the Lord, we miss out on the amazing relationship that we are supposed to have with Him. When we rest in the hollow of the Creator's hand, nothing can take us away from Him. He'll see to it that we have everything that we need in this life and in the life to come. All we have to do is live in the way that He has commanded.