

Route 66

Zephaniah: Cosmetic Faith

Part 36 – May 9, 2010

This clear-cut, three-chapter book was written about 100 years after the destruction of Israel (*northern kingdom*), at a time when Judah (*southern kingdom*) was consumed with idol worship. Chapter 1 concerns the impending doom of Judah. Chapter 2 concerns the doom of the enemy nations. And chapter 3 concerns the future hope of God's people.

What makes the book so fascinating is the lineage of Zephaniah, the point in history when he appears, and his speaking style.



He opens with *poetic hyperbole*:

“I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth,” declares the Lord. “I will sweep away both men and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. – Zephaniah 1:2-3a NIV

At first glance you'd assume he's speaking literally. But, in chapter three he talks about the *return* of the Jewish remnant.

At that time I will deal with all who oppressed you; I will rescue the lame and gather those who have been scattered. I will give them praise and honor in every land where they were put to shame. – Zephaniah 3:19 NIV

So, it's obvious that Zephaniah doesn't *intend* his readers to take his opening statement literally, but metaphorically. He's emphasizing that the nation God established, empowered, and indwelt will be *completely* deconstructed and *utterly* dismantled. Notice the order he chooses: “men”, “animals”, “birds”, and “fish”. This is the exact opposite order listed in the creation account.

Then God said, “Let the waters swarm with fish ... Let the skies be filled with birds ... Let the earth produce every sort of animal ... Let us make human beings ... – Genesis 1:20-27 NLT

This is a poetic device. He's saying that Judah will be *de-created* or *un-created*. God will remove what He's built up; and it'll be the end of the Jewish world as they know it!

And this event is called “the great day of the Lord”. And Zephaniah uses the term more than any other prophet.

The great day of the Lord is near – near and coming quickly. – Zephaniah 1:14a NIV

In fact, after more than 800 years since the Lord established his people in the Promised Land, the kingdom of Judah will be crushed by Nebuchadnezzar within *one generation* (about 35 years). And this Day of the Lord won't only affect Judah, but all of the surrounding nations that have schemed against God's people. Throughout the Old Testament, the prophets list these many enemy nations by name (and we know historically that each came to ruin as prophesied), but Zephaniah only mentions four:

1. Philistia [fih-LISS-tih-uh] (on the coast, west of Judah)
2. Moab and Ammon (on the desert boarder, east of Judah)

He combines these side-by-side nations because Moab and Ammon were brothers - children of incest that involved Lot and his two daughters (after Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. (*Gen 19:30-38*) And so Zephaniah says, "... surely Moab will become like Sodom, the Ammonites like Gomorrah ..." (*Zephaniah 2:9b*)



3. Cush (to the far south of Judah)
4. Assyria (to the far north)

This is another poetic devise.

He uses these four targets to show that God's judgment will extend to the farthest reaches, north, south, east, and west!

And then, in chapter three he describes another future day when a remnant of Jews will be regathered, redeemed, and restored.

On that day they will say to Jerusalem, "Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save." - *Zephaniah 3:16-17a NIV*

And that's pretty much the whole book in a nutshell.

But, of all the prophets, Zephaniah stands out for one very distinctive reason: his *bloodline*. He's the only prophet with a royal pedigree.

The word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah, during the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah: - *Zephaniah 1:1 NIV*

Hezekiah is one of the most beloved and righteous kings of Judah. And Zephaniah is a full-blooded, fourth generation prince. This brings a new light to Zephaniah's boldness in condemning the arrogant members of the royal family who apparently, among other things, enjoyed parading around in opulent clothing.

... I will punish the **princes** and the **king's sons** and all those clad in foreign clothes. - *Zephaniah 1:8b NIV*



This is his own family he's talking about.

Let's look at the 19 kings of Judah. During the evil reigns of Hezekiah's son Manasseh and his vile son Amon, little Zephaniah was sheltered from the royal family's debauchery and raised to love the Lord.

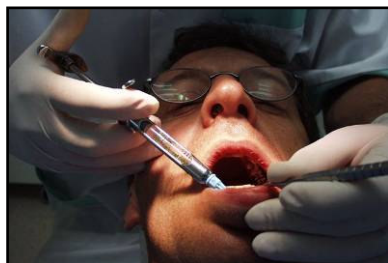
In fact, the name he's given means: "Yahweh has hidden". And we're told that he ministered: "during the reign of Josiah son of Amon". Josiah was the *last* righteous king of Judah. When Amon was murdered by his officials, eight-year-old Josiah was placed on the throne. And Zephaniah, now an adult, likely had a singular influence on the upbringing of the young king!

In the eighth year of his reign, while he was still young, he began to seek the God of his father David. In his twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of high places, Asherah poles, carved idols and cast images. - 2 Chronicles 34:3-4 NIV

Josiah launches an unprecedented campaign to stamp out impurity, reinstate the covenant-relationship, and restore true worship. This was God's drive to give His people one final opportunity. And Zephaniah was a big part of this great, last-chance warning. But, there was no true repentance among the people. So, when Josiah died in battle at 38, they immediately reverted back.

Their faith was more appearance than reality. Which way would your faith-needle tip: appearance or reality? In your heart of hearts, is your spiritual desire to be *used* more and more for God's good purpose and pleasure; or is it to *use Him* for your immediate satisfaction and gratification? If you played back the past six months of your personal prayers, what story would they tell?

Some folks want just enough Jesus to make the pain go away. I often see this when calamity strikes a marginal believer. All of a sudden they're in church, praying, reading their Bible ... until the adversity is over. They love Jesus as Savior, but not so much as Lord



It's like going to the dentist with a horrible toothache. He diagnoses the problem, injects some Novocain, and then you jump out of the chair and say, "Thanks, Doc! That did the trick!" Don't mistake surface change for inner transformation. Grace and good feelings can't be the central source of our wellbeing; only *Jesus* can. He *must* be the *epicenter*; anything less is insufficient.

It's like the groove in an old record. We put the Lord at the center, and then we go forward moving closer and closer to Him. But some put the Lord at the center, and then try to see how far they can circle *away* from Him without falling off the edge. One direction brings harmony, the other discord and confusion.

Zephaniah recognized this disharmony in his people and knew where it was leading them. So, he used the strongest language he could muster, to try and shock them out of their complacency. But a cosmetic faith had lulled them into a fatal indifference.



At that time [declares the LORD] I will search Jerusalem with lamps and punish those who are **complacent**, who are like wine left on its dregs ... - *Zephaniah 1:12 NIV*

They didn't *despise* the Lord; He just wasn't their center. And this made them spiritually shallow *and* apathetic.

Zephaniah compares them to "wine left on its dregs". Do you know what that is? The dregs are the sediments and impurities that settle to the bottom. The pure juice above is then separated and preserved. If "left on its dregs" it would stagnate and sour.

My grandparents drank a lot of Rainer beer. And when I was young I would sometimes go into their dark, moldering shed and organize all the empties into boxes to be returned for money. And, I used to get a kick out of pouring the backwash out of each bottle into a *main bottle*, and watch the bits of coagulated mold and cigarette butts plop out and bob around in the ooze. And then, when it was full, I would ... pour it out, of course; it was gross! Wine left on its dregs is like *that*.

And *this* is how the people of Judah presented themselves to God! Only closeness with Christ can filter out our dregs. The impurities naturally settle *down* as we draw closer and closer through Christ. And then *He* does the separating and preserving. Our only job is to trust and draw near.

Zephaniah is like *Dr. House* when it comes to diagnosing the problem:

[Referring to Jerusalem, he says] She does not trust in the Lord, she does not draw near to her God. - *Zephaniah 3:2b NIV*

And He offers them a simple cure:

Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord's anger. - *Zephaniah 2:3b NIV*

"Righteousness" above all else means a "right relationship". And "humility" means coming under His *Lordship*. And finally, Zephaniah shows the joy and comfort that comes from having the Lord as your true center while drawing in closer.

He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing." - *Zephaniah 3:17 NIV*

This is the deep renewal that I want for each of us. I want us to be like King Josiah who stamped out impurity, reinstated the relationship, and re-established *true* worship!