

THE BIBLE in a nutshell



Zephaniah

—by Dr Peter Hammond

“Seek the Lord, all you meek of the earth, who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility...” Zephaniah 2:3

Who was Zephaniah?

Zephaniah was the first of the 7th century B.C. prophets. Since the murder of the prophet Isaiah, there had been no Word from God until Zephaniah delivered these prophecies. Zephaniah 1:1 makes clear that the prophet was a direct descendant of King Hezekiah, his great, great grandfather. Therefore Zephaniah was a cousin of the reigning King Josiah.

Hezekiah was the last good king of the Southern Kingdom of Judah (Isa 36-39). During the reign of King Manasseh, who reigned for 55 years, royal offspring were sacrificed to the god Molech, under the King's direction. The name Zephaniah means “hidden by God”. Zephaniah survived the slaughter under the wicked King Manasseh. The Lord had hidden and preserved Zephaniah to be a prophet for His people.

Human sacrifices and perversion

After the reign of King Hezekiah, the nation of Judah had drifted far from God. Manasseh was

oppressive and evil reign of Manasseh, followed the weak King Amon, Judah continued to apostatise. Amon was assassinated after only two years on the throne. Josiah was only eight years old when he became King of Judah. Effectively, the High Priest, Hilkiah, was the real ruler of Judah in those earlier years.

When God audits us

Zephaniah came to warn the people of the Day of the Lord, and described it as an era of punishing wickedness, putting things right, righting wrongs and vindicating righteousness. The term indicates a time of spiritual audit when

Zephaniah had the difficult job of bringing condemnation and a warning of the Day of the Lord to the people of Judah. It was a time of spiritual audit and an era of punishment.

involved with astrology and spiritist mediums, in defiance of the Laws of God. Incited by Manasseh, the people of Judah turned to child sacrifice and the worship of Molech. Manasseh had phallic symbols and pornographic Asherah poles built on high places and encouraged the people of Judah to turn to the fertility cults, with all their sexual perversions and child sacrifices.

Worse than the Canaanites

Idolatry always leads to immorality. Amidst the spiritual confusion, compromise, cowardice and corruption, moral chaos escalated. In 2 Chronicles, God declared that the people of Judah under Manasseh had become even more evil than the original Canaanites. The Lord had removed the wicked Canaanites as a judgement upon them for their idolatry, immorality, perversion, violence and human sacrifice.

Now the Judeans had become even worse than the people they had replaced. After the

all records are examined, evaluated and set right. Fraud, extortion and embezzlement will be punished. Faithfulness will be rewarded. The Day of the Lord is like an eternal audit.

Structure of Zephaniah

The first third of the book of Zephaniah deals with: **Looking within.** God's judgements are coming upon God's covenant people.

The second third of Zephaniah deals with: **Looking around.** Judgement is coming to every nation throughout the world.

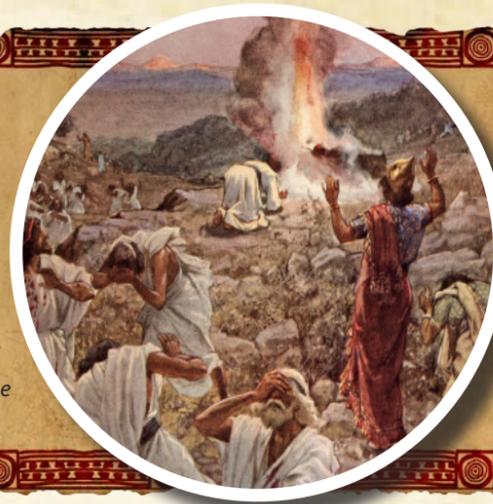
The last third of Zephaniah deals with: **Looking ahead.** God's Kingdom will ultimately triumph and all nations, races and languages will worship the Lord. His praise will be sung throughout the whole earth.

1. Look within

The Sovereign Lord is determined to root out all evil. He will conduct a thorough search in

The Day of the Lord

It was at this critical time that Josiah became king, that God sent the prophet Zephaniah to proclaim the Day of the Lord to the people of Judah. The term 'Day of the Lord' is mentioned 23 times in the book of Zephaniah. The 'Day of the Lord' describes a day of distress, desolation, darkness, devastation, disaster, Divine wrath, doom and destruction. *“I will utterly consume everything from the face of the land, says the Lord...I will cut off man from the face of the land, says the Lord. I will stretch out My hand against Judah, and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. I will cut off every trace of Baal from this place, the names of the idolatrous priests, with the pagan priests...those who have turned back from following the Lord, and have not sought the Lord, nor inquired of Him” Zeph 1:2-6.*



order to find, and destroy, all wickedness. *“And it shall come to pass at that time that I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and punish the men who are settled in complacency...” Zeph 1:12.*

The sins in Judah identified by the prophet Zephaniah are: idolatry, immorality, inter-faith compromise with other religions (syncretism), violence, deceit, failure to enquire of the Lord or to seek Him, complacency, greed, pride, arrogance, an unwillingness to be taught, lack of response to correction and rebuke, and lack of gratitude. *“...I will punish the princes and the king's children, and all such as are clothed with fine apparel. In the same day I will punish all those... with violence and deceit...and punish the men who are settled in complacency...” Zeph 1:8-12.*

In the light of these teachings from the prophet Zephaniah, the Apostle Peter writes: *“For the time has come for judgement to begin at the House of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the Gospel of God?” 1 Peter 4:17.*

Characteristics of apostasy

Zephaniah describes God as: “irritated” with the arrogant pride, corruption, complacency, greed, deceit and mixing of pagan religions with His worship. He condemns *“idolatrous priests with the pagan priests” Zeph 1:4.* The characteristics of apostasy are spelt out: a failure to carefully study the Law of God, a resistance to correction, inattentiveness to the voice of God, failure to trust in the Lord, failure to draw near to and to seek the Lord, all inevitably lead to corruption, pollution, rebellion, treachery, blasphemy, apostasy and judgement.

The wrath of the Lord

The prophet described God's anger as simmering and boiling, about to explode over the heads of the proud and complacent in Jerusalem. The prophets, priests, princes, profiteers and people

of Judah are evaluated and condemned. *“Woe to her who is rebellious and polluted, to the oppressing city! She has not obeyed His voice, she has not received correction; she has not trusted in the Lord, she has not drawn near to her God. Her princes in her midst are roaring lions; her judges are evening wolves that leave not a bone till morning. Her prophets are insolent, treacherous people; her priests have polluted the sanctuary, they have done violence to the Law” Zeph 3:1-4.*

Consequences of disobedience

False teachers, false shepherds and false prophets are severely condemned. *“I will bring*

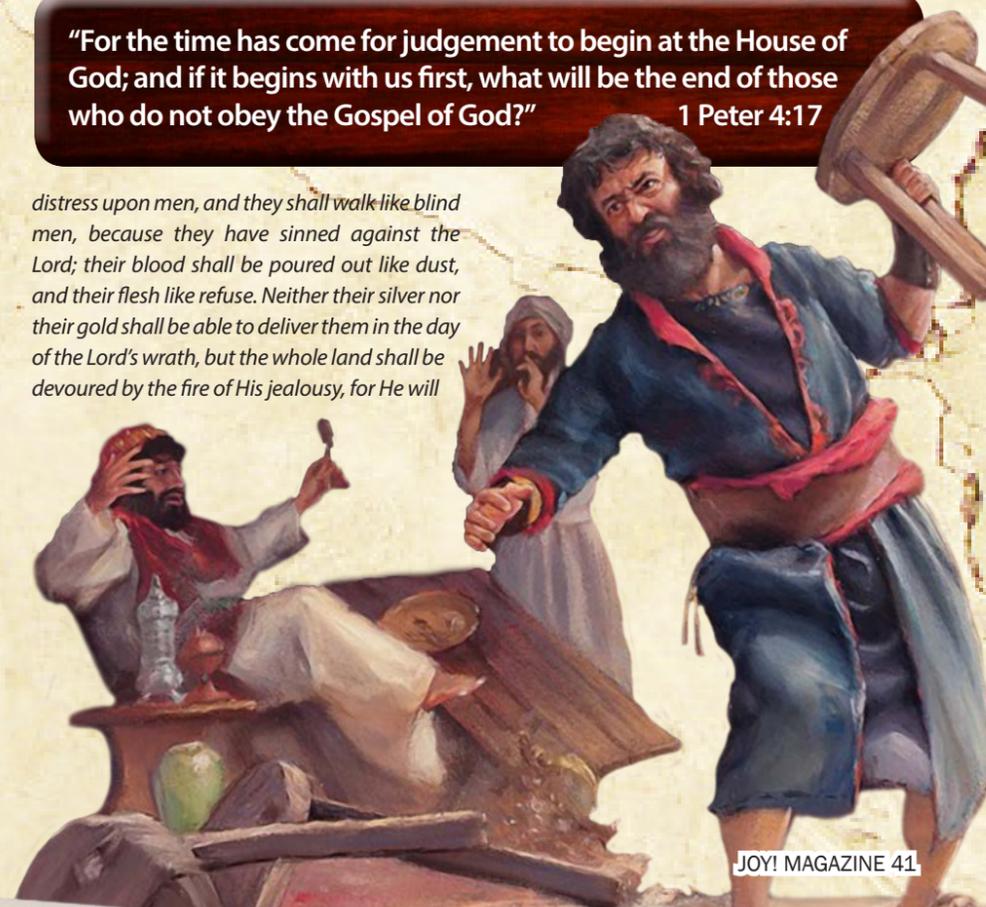
make speedy riddance of all those who dwell in the land” Zeph 1:17-18.

2. Look around

God's judgement is coming to every nation throughout the world. Zephaniah identifies: in the West, Philistia, to the East, Moab and Ammon, to the South, Egypt and Ethiopia, and to the North, Assyria. *“For Gaza shall be forsaken, and Ashkelon desolate; they shall drive out Ashdod at noonday, and Ekron shall be uprooted. Woe to the inhabitants of the seacoast...The Word of the Lord is against you, O Canaan, land of the Philistines: ‘I will destroy you!’” Zeph 2:4-5.*

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distress upon men, and they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the Lord; their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like refuse. Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the Lord's wrath, but the whole land shall be devoured by the fire of His jealousy, for He will



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Zephaniah



When God's people fail to be salt and light, the wicked deteriorate even more. When we fail to let the earth hear His voice, the nations degenerate and judgement becomes inevitable.

Pride comes before destruction

"Therefore, as I live, says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, surely Moab shall be like Sodom, and the people of Ammon like Gomorrah – everyone with weeds and salt pits and a perpetual desolation... This they shall have for their pride..." Zeph 2:9-10. God resists the proud, but He gives grace to the humble.

remnant of Israel shall do no unrighteousness and speak no lies, nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth; for they shall feed their flocks..." Zeph 3:12-13. God's people are humble, faithful, righteousness, honest, people of integrity, who are kind to their animals.

Are you humble? Are you faithful? Are you righteous? Are you honest? Are you a person of integrity? Is your word your bond? Do you say what you mean? Do you mean what you say? Are you kind to God's creatures? "Be glad and rejoice with all your heart... the Lord has taken away your judgements..." Zeph 3:14-15.

While this was being done, someone found a copy of the Law of God in an old cupboard. When Josiah read the Law of God he was horrified to see how far Judah had fallen and he ordered for the Law of God to be read to all the people of the kingdom (2 Chron 34:29-33).

Idols for destruction

"...He burned them outside of Jerusalem... he removed the idolatrous priests... he tore down the ritual booths of the perverted persons... that no man might make his son or his daughter pass through the fire to Molech... Now Josiah also took away all the shrines of the high places... Moreover did Josiah put away those who contacted mediums and spiritists, the household gods and idols, all the abominations that were seen in the land of Judah and in Jerusalem, that he might perform the Words of the Law which were written in the Book... Now before him there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses..." 2 Kings 23:4-25.

Tragically, Josiah's 31 year reign was ended prematurely, following an ill-advised attack on the Egyptian army, which was moving to attack Assyria. Josiah was killed in the ensuing battle and much of the good that he achieved during his reign was undone by those who followed him. As the Judeans drifted away from God, the Lord raised up the prophets Jeremiah and Nahum to continue the work of Zephaniah.

Discipline is designed to restore us

Zephaniah reminds us that, as God's people,

When God's people fail to be salt and light and we fail to let the earth hear His voice, the nations degenerate and judgement becomes inevitable.

we should expect God's discipline. But this discipline is a sign of the Lord's care and assures us that we are not to be judged along with the world in eternity. Judgement begins with the people of God, now, here, in time. We who bow to Christ in the Day of Grace receive mercy, forgiveness, grace, undeserved favour, restoration, discipline and deliverance. Is God your Saviour? Or your Judge?

A call to seek God

Zephaniah calls us to repent, now, while there is still time to seek the Lord. "Seek the Lord, all

In order to effectively communicate the Gospel of Christ, making disciples of all nations, teaching obedience to all things that the Lord has commanded, we need to resist being conformed to this world and be transformed by the renewing of our minds by the washing of the Word of God.

From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia

In Zephaniah 3:10 we have a prophecy: "From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia, My worshippers, the daughter of My dispersed ones, shall bring My offering." This prophecy has been

The Eternal God is all-knowing, everywhere-present and all-powerful. He will search out all the wicked and make an end of them. He will rescue, redeem and restore His repentant people.

Strong to smite and strong to save

Along with the messages of God's judgement upon the wicked, are promises of God's mercy for the repentant. The message of Zephaniah is that God is strong to strike and strong to save. He is the Eternal Judge, and the Mighty Saviour. "The Lord will be awesome to them, for He will reduce to nothing all the gods of the earth; people shall worship Him, each one from his place, indeed all the shores of the nations" Zeph 2:11.

Characteristics of God's people

The characteristics of God's people are emphasised: "...A meek and humble people, and they shall trust in the Name of the Lord. The

Reformation and revival

The prophecy of Zephaniah was mightily used of the Lord to inspire a great reformation under King Josiah. 2 Chronicles 34 documents some of the bold moves initiated by King Josiah (640-609BC). Josiah came to the throne at the age of eight in 640BC and he reigned for 31 years.

At the age of sixteen Josiah ordered the Baal altars, on which babies had been sacrificed in Jerusalem, to be destroyed. At age twenty, he ordered all the pagan altars and pornographic statues throughout the whole country of Judah to be dismantled. At the age of 28, when he noticed that the Temple of God was in bad repair, Josiah ordered it to be restored.

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you meek of the earth, who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility. It may be that you will be hidden in the Day of the Lord's anger" Zeph 2:3.

Redemptive judgement

God will judge all wickedness. The apostates and His enemies will face destruction at the hands of Almighty God. However, the Lord will sift, purge and purify His people, saving, delivering, redeeming, and restoring those who humbly repent of their sins and seek Him wholeheartedly. Zephaniah presents a message of redemptive judgement.

3. Look ahead

"For then I will restore to the peoples a pure language, that they all may call on the Name of the Lord, to serve Him with one accord" Zeph 3:9.

Language is a vehicle for communicating and expressing the truth. However, man's sinfulness has often corrupted and debased language in order to conceal the truth, distort history and pervert thoughts and actions. Part of God's redemptive purpose is to restore a pure language, that we might correctly divide the Word of Truth and wisely understand the signs of the times. Jesus is the Word of God. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

fulfilled as South of the rivers of Ethiopia are remnants of "My dispersed ones" who are bringing sacrifices of praise and obedience, proclaiming the Gospel and sending forth missionaries throughout the nations.

Saved to serve

From the perspective of Judah, looking South, "beyond the rivers of Ethiopia", is referring to the southernmost part of Africa. Beyond the Nile, Congo, Zambezi, Limpopo and Orange rivers, beginning at the southernmost tip of Africa, in Cape Town, in 1652, dispersed children of God prayed and worked to establish and spread the Protestant and Reformed Faith throughout the continent of Africa, and continue to minister throughout the nations of the world.

Christ in Zephaniah

Jesus is Immanuel, God with us, Mighty Saviour. "The Lord your God in your midst, the Mighty One, will save..." Zeph 3:17. Judgement brings destruction upon God's enemies. Judgement results in the salvation of those who trust in Christ. ■

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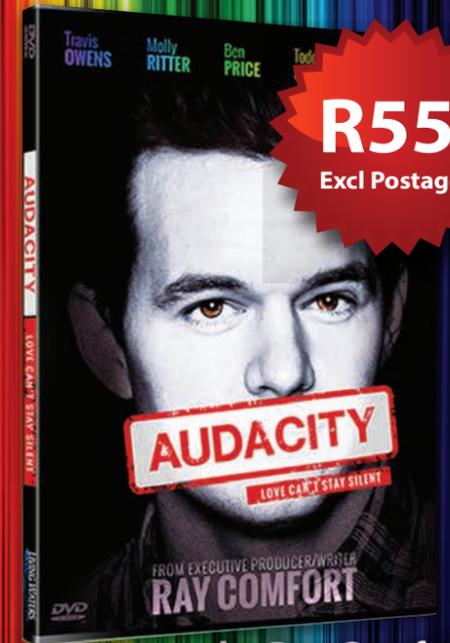


God never fails

"The Lord is righteous in her midst, He will do no unrighteousness. Every morning He brings His justice to light; He never fails..." Zeph 3:5. The presence of God is given as a warning to the wicked and as comfort to the repentant. The Eternal God is all-knowing, everywhere-present and all-powerful. He sees everything. He will search out all the wicked and make an end of them. He will rescue, redeem and restore His repentant people.

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