

# The Prophets

## Lesson #23

### Introduction To Zephaniah

#### I. **Structure Of Zephaniah**

- A. Zephaniah contains only three short chapters, but these chapters are filled with some of the most vivid pictures of God's judgment to be found in the Bible. After a brief introduction of himself as God's spokesman, the prophet launches immediately into a description of God's approaching wrath. He portrays this great "day of the Lord" as a time of "trouble and distress," "darkness and gloominess" and "trumpet and alarm" (1:14-15).
- B. Zephaniah's prophecy makes it clear that the nation of Judah, as well as surrounding countries, will feel the sting of God's wrath. Judah's capital city, Jerusalem, is soundly condemned for its wickedness, rebellion and injustice. The prophet even portrays God with searchlamps as He exposes the corruption of the city and marks it for His certain judgment (1:12).
- C. In spite of its underlying theme of judgment and punishment, the book of Zephaniah closes on a positive note. After God judges the wayward nations, the prophet announces He will raise up a remnant of the faithful who will continue to serve as His chosen people in the world. The book ends with a glorious promise for the future, a time when God will "quiet you in His love" and "rejoice over you with singing" (3:17).

#### II. **Authorship And Date**

- A. Scholars are in general agreement that Zephaniah the prophet wrote this book that bears his name. Zephaniah's name means "the Lord has hidden." In his introduction (1:1), the author does something rather unusual. He traces his ancestry back four generations to Hezekiah, a former king of Judah noted for his faithfulness to God. Zephaniah must have been proud that he was the great-great-grandson of this beloved ruler, who had led his people back to worship of the one true God.
- B. The book also tells how Zephaniah the prophet ministered during the days of Josiah, a godly king who reigned over the nation of Judah from about 641 to about 609 B.C. Most scholars place the writing of the book at about 627 B.C. If this year is accepted, then the ministries of Jeremiah and Zephaniah began in the same year. Zephaniah saw the rise of the Chaldean power as the ultimate threat of a general world judgment.

### III. **Historical Setting**

- A. This book belongs to a dark period in Judah's history. About 100 years before Zephaniah's time, Judah's sister nation, the northern kingdom of Israel, had fallen to a foreign power because of its sin and idolatry. Zephaniah knew that the same was about to happen to the southern kingdom of Judah -- and for precisely the same reason. Hezekiah was succeeded by his son Manasseh, a lad of twelve years. It is doubtful that during any period of history Judah had a more wicked ruler than Manasseh.
- B. Under the leadership of two successive evil kings, Manasseh and Amon, the people of Judah had fallen into worship of false gods. In fact, Manasseh sought to undo all the good his father had done. He rebuilt the high places, reared altars to Baal and Ashtoreth and built altars to the host of heaven. He committed the abomination of making his son pass through the fire, practicing divination and enchantment and dealing with spirits. To all this he added the sin of bloodshed, filling Jerusalem with innocent blood (2 Kings 21:1-9; 2 Chronicles 33:1-10). Zephaniah delivered his prophecy and wrote this book to warn the people of God's approaching wrath.
- C. As Zephaniah predicted, God punished His people and the surrounding pagan nations through a superior foreign power. Josiah, who came to the throne at the age of eight, was the last good king to reign over Judah. At the age of sixteen he began to seek after God; and at the age of twenty he began to purge Judah. His reforms were among the most sweeping of any that were attempted by the kings who reigned over the southern kingdom. Zephaniah seems to not have been impressed with Josiah's reforms because he makes no reference to them. In spite of these reforms and his own good life, the people appear at this time to be nervous, cruel and corrupt. Social injustice and moral corruption appear to be widespread; luxury and extravagance are seen on every hand. The baalim were still worshiped and the worship which was offered to God was hardly different than idolatry.
- D. Not even this brief religious renewal under Josiah was enough to turn the tide of paganism and false worship that carried Judah toward certain destruction. Judgment came to the nation in 587 B.C., when the invading Babylonians destroyed the city of Jerusalem and carried its leading citizens into captivity in Babylon.

### IV. **Scriptural Contribution**

- A. Like his predecessor Joel, Zephaniah gives an emphasis to the day of Jehovah that should have struck terror in the hearts of the wicked, leading them to repentance. The day is "at hand" (1:7), "near" (1:14), a day of "darkness and terror" (1:15-16). It comes as a judgment

against sin (1:17), accompanied by great convulsions of nature (1:15). It falls upon all creation, both man and beast, Jews and nations (1:2-3; 2:1-15; 3:8). The day of Jehovah is a day of doom! The prophet sees it as a day of terror, imminent and falling upon all creation as a judgment for sin.

- B. The judgment of the Lord portrayed by the prophet Zephaniah springs from His nature as a God of holiness. Because God demands holiness and righteousness in His people, He will judge those who continue to sin and rebel (1:17). Yet the Lord also is merciful and faithful to His promise. To the committed remnant He offers encouragement and protection from the approaching dark day (2:1-3). To the righteous He promises the final realization of the covenant which He sealed with Abraham hundreds of years earlier. People of all nations will gather to worship the Lord (2:11; 3:9). His own people will be renewed in righteousness (3:11-13), and the King of Kings Himself will rule in their midst (3:15).

#### V. ***Special Considerations***

- A. The prophet Zephaniah shows keen familiarity with the city of Jerusalem (1:10-11). Since he was a member of the royal line, he was probably a resident of Jerusalem. It must have troubled him deeply to pronounce God's prophecies of judgment against his beloved city.
- B. One of the most beautiful passages in the book is the description of the joy of the Lord (3:8-20). His song of joy will join the happy singing of His people. The dark day of doom will not last. A happy day is coming for those who, like Zephaniah, are "hid in the day of the Lord's anger" (2:3).
- C. Zephaniah's main rebuke was against apathy, earning his nickname, "the prophet of indifference." The people before the Babylonian captivity were "settled on their lees" (1:12) or stagnant in spirit. The people were corrupt and selfish, and their spiritual lives had stagnated into a state of indifference. Because of this attitude, slaughter and destruction awaited them. Zephaniah compared the proud with the sludge in a wine vat, too stupid to care or to respond to what the Lord required; their elimination would purify Israel (3:11-13). He declared that the poor and humble might be the only ones to live and be blessed (2:3; 3:12).
- D. This is a teaching we would do well to heed. Perhaps the greatest enemy the church faces today is itself. Indifference and apathy abound. Gone is the zeal which used to fuel the ardent desire to see people coming to the Lord.
- E. As the church matures, the members tend to become more and more complacent. Too many church members have the mistaken idea that a

mature church is one that has their own building, their own elders, their own preacher and can support those who are needy. Although there is nothing wrong with any of these, they do not constitute a mature church. A mature church is one that is growing, working and united with one another and pursuing a common goal.