

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STUDY IN THE MINOR PROPHETS - PART NINE - THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH

THEME Zephaniah is the first of the final series of four minor prophets. This group of books seem to deal with 4 aspects of the coming of Jesus, the Christ or Messiah, anticipated all through the Old Testament. He answers the question everyone wants solved - when will He come? He does so by focussing on one key phrase - the day of the Lord. We will see that this 'day' is actually three different days, the day of His death, the day on which the Spirit is given and the day of His return. All three days mark key points in history when Jesus did and will do things that will change our histories. The Christian message is unique among the religions of the world in that it is firmly based on facts in history, beginning with the historical fact of creation and reaching its climax in the return of Jesus to earth, ending history as we know it.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND is roughly the same as that of Habakkuk, the reign of King Josiah of Judah.(Zeph.1:1) As we have already seen he was remarkable evidence of what God can do with a child from a spiritually 'hopeless' home. Coming to the throne at the age of only 8 to take over a nation spiritually devastated by 57 years of godless leadership by his father and grandfather, failure seemed inevitable. We assume that one or more men or women of God quietly got alongside the young king and introduced him to a personal faith in the Lord. This story is a great encouragement to all those who work with children. Habakkuk and Zephaniah were almost certainly among those whom God used. God's choice of Zephaniah is interesting. As a great-great-grandson of Hezekiah, Zephaniah would therefore be a distant cousin to Josiah. Family connections are usually a help particularly when the family is royal. Hezekiah was the last godly king Judah had had before Josiah and therefore an example Zephaniah could readily refer back to. It may be that his side of the family had not forgotten Hezekiah's fine example in the way that Josiah's relatives had done. Paul talks in I Tim. 2:1-4 about prayer that gives us an inner tranquillity which makes us ready to face even kings, whom God desires should be saved as much as He desires for any man. Josiah died in battle in the year 609BC and so brought a brief golden era to an end. Only twenty three years later after a series of spiritually indifferent kings, in 586BC, the Babylonians attacked Judah, destroyed Jerusalem and took the Jews away into captivity. This terrible event is repeatedly anticipated by Zephaniah throughout his book.

OLD TESTAMENT REFERENCES are mainly to places and nations which have played a significant part in Israel's history, usually as oppressors who have been God's means of bringing His people back to Him. Each eventually faced judgement.

1. Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod and Ekron were all Philistine cities,(1:4-7) and reminders of what Israel had suffered in the time of Samson, Saul and David. (Judg.13-16; I Sam.)
2. Moab and Ammon were the sons of Lot whose descendants had caused trouble to Israel by inviting compromise or by domination.(Num.25; Judg.3) Moab's pride and mocking of Israel had been mentioned by Obadiah.
3. Now they were to suffer the same fate as Sodom and Gomorrah, whose total disregard of God's purpose for the human body had brought destruction upon them. (Gen.19)

4. Ethiopia seemed a long way away but every now and then they could invade with speed and power.(Isa.18)
5. Assyria had been the latest oppressor who had taken Israel captive and threatened Judah but now they too were meeting their fate as an empire.(II Kings 17-21)

NEW TESTAMENT REFERENCES are hard to find. There is no direct quote from Zephaniah into the New Testament although 1:7-13 could be the basis for parables of Jesus like the one in Matt.22:1-14 which describe a feast to which those who should have come did not bother so others were invited in their place.

As we have already seen there is one phrase in Zephaniah which is repeated over and over. In 1:7 he speaks of 'the day of the Lord' being near. The word 'day' is used 20 times in 3 short chapters always referring back to this phrase. It had been a common theme in some of the other minor prophets like Hosea, Joel, Amos and Micah. In the New Testament three 'days' take on enormous significance.

The first is the day of Jesus' resurrection which had to be preceded by the crucifixion. This gave us hope of eternal life. The sacrifice prepared by the Lord in 1:7 was that of Jesus on the cross, redeeming us from our sin and consecrating us.

The second is the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was given so that we might experience a taste of eternal life. When 3:9 talks about giving to the people 'purified lips', the idea is of a common language. After Christ's return the barrier of language will disappear so that we will understand clearly as before Babel. On the day of Pentecost the barriers of language were broken down for the moment as a glimpse of what was to come.

The third is the return of Jesus Christ when we will enter into eternal life, unclouded by sin, but those who refuse Him will face judgement. All three ideas are foreshadowed in Zephaniah. This book not only warns of the judgement of God which was coming on the enemies of His people but there is a glimpse of the exciting role we are to play in His coming kingdom.

AN OUTLINE OF THE BOOK MIGHT BE AS FOLLOWS:

- 1:1 Introduction - the writer and his family
- 1:2-6 God's judgement will mean an end of life on earth and of the worship of any other god.
- 1:7-18 The 'day of the Lord' begins with sacrifice, and ends with the punishment of those who rejected His invitation, beginning with leaders. They will lose everything.
- 2:1-3 Don't wait for judgement, seek Him and His righteousness right now before it is too late.
- 2:4-15 God will deal with those who have oppressed Israel, the Philistines, the Moabites, the Ammonites, the Ethiopians and the Assyrians. Their judgement will mean blessing for God's people.

3:1-7 Before the Jews got too excited about the fate which would befall the neighbours they should consider the spiritual condition of their own city of Jerusalem which was just as guilty.

3:8-13 So trust God now and be part of His kingdom with changed hearts and a united message - or be judged like the neighbours.

3:14-20 The day of the Lord is a cause for rejoicing for those who know Him because then we will fully know His forgiveness, His victory, His love, His healing and His presence.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What do we know about Zephaniah's family? What advantages and disadvantages would his ancestry give him as a prophet? How does I Tim. 2:1-4 apply to someone like Zephaniah?
2. What were the significant events in the time of Zephaniah? How are they hinted at in his book?
3. What important phrase occurs again and again in this book? To what events did it refer then and in the future? What will these events mean throughout history in the lives of believers and unbelievers?
4. For what two basic reasons would God judge Jerusalem then, and the world later?(1:2-6)
- 6) How should this understanding affect our presentation of the gospel today? Who were Baal and Milcom?
5. How does Jesus use 1:7-13 in a parable? What light does His parable cast on this section of Zephaniah? Why are people in NZ in 2003 'stagnant in spirit'?
6. How does the New Testament use and explain the expression 'the day of the Lord'? What does 1:14 - 2:3 teach about the need for a right attitude of heart if we are to be saved?
7. Why was each neighbouring nation of Judah to be judged? Where else in the Old Testament are these attitudes towards God explained as being the root of the world's problems?(2:4-15)
8. To which city does 3:1 refer? What are the symptoms of a 'tyrannical' society? How can they be seen in our society today?
9. What part are believers to play in Christ's future kingdom in heaven and His present kingdom on earth?(3:9-20)
10. Summarise Zephaniah's message. How does it follow the themes of the preceding minor prophets?