

Major Lessons from Minor Prophets
The Day of the Lord (Zephaniah and Nahum)

Lesson #9 for June 1, 2013

Scriptures: Zephaniah 1:14-18; 2:1-3; 3:1-5; Joel 2:1-11; Isaiah 11:4; 62:5; Nahum 1-3.

1. Like many of their fellow prophets, Zephaniah and Nahum pronounced doom against Israel's neighbors. But, Zephaniah also spoke out very bluntly against the corruption in Jerusalem.
2. The moral state of the southern kingdom deteriorated rapidly after the reign of King Hezekiah (729-686 B.C.). The religious reforms he instituted were soon eradicated by the evil influence of Manasseh (696-642 B.C.) and Amon (642-640 B.C.; cf. 2 Kings 21; 2 Chr. 33).

Into this scene of moral and religious degeneracy came the boy-king Josiah. Upon the discovery of the 'Book of the Law' (2 Kings 22:8ff. [probably Deuteronomy]), in the eighteenth year of his reign (621 B.C.; 2 Kings 22:3), Josiah launched a sweeping reform of the national order. His regime was backed by the prophetic ministries of Jeremiah and Zephaniah, but the prophets' call for repentance fell upon deaf ears. Wickedness remained unabated, and Judah was ripe for judgment.

Zephaniah is a book of contrasts; for no other prophet paints a darker picture of God's judgment, and no prophet paints a brighter picture of Israel's future glory. Historically, the Book of Zephaniah was used in the providence of God to prepare Judah for the reforms and revival under King Josiah. Through the prophecy the nation of the prophet's day was faced with its sin, reminded of coming judgment, and instructed concerning the ultimate glory that will come to Israel. . . **Zephaniah goes farther than any other of the minor prophets in emphasizing the future conversion of the Gentiles to the worship of the true God. . . Two recurring expressions are important: (1) "remnant" (Zephaniah 1:4; 2:7,9; 3:13), and (2) the "day of the LORD" (Zephaniah 1:7-10,14-16,18; 2:2,3; 3:8,11,16).**

The purpose of Zephaniah's prophecy is to set forth what the day of the Lord will mean to ungodly Judah, to the world powers (Zephaniah 1:2-3:7), and to the godly remnant (Zeph. 3:8-20). His theme is the day of the Lord, which destroys the false remnant of Baal (Zeph. 1), destroys the God-rejecting nations (Zeph. 2), and purifies the true remnant (Zeph. 3:8-20). (*King James Version Study Bible*) [bold supplied]

During the reign of Josiah the word of the Lord came to Zephaniah, specifying plainly the results of continued apostasy, and calling the attention of the true church to the glorious prospect beyond. ***His prophecies of impending judgment upon Judah apply with equal force to the judgments that are to fall upon an impenitent world at the time of the second advent of Christ.***—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 389. [bold and italics supplied]

3. Zephaniah 3:8 *Comments*—Zephaniah 3:8 has the unique characteristic of containing all twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, as well as the five final consonant forms. No other verse in the Scriptures repeats this incident. [Some trivia]
4. Zephaniah 3:9 "then will I turn to the people a pure language"—*Comments*—Grant

Jeffery notes that Zephaniah 3:9 gives a clear prophecy that God will restore the Hebrew language to the nation of Israel. No other nation in history has ever risen back up after centuries of being dispersed. In 1948 the nation of Israel was reborn.

No other language on earth has ever been restored after centuries of being quiet. The Hebrew language was restored along with the nation of Israel. The restoration of this ancient language is mainly credited to Eliezar Ben Yehuda (1858–1922). After he moved to Israel in 1881, he created thousands of words to fit the modern Hebrew culture, becoming the first author of a modern Hebrew dictionary, which promoted the rebirth of the Hebrew language in this restored nation.—Everett, Gary, *Study Notes on the Holy Scriptures, The Book of Zephaniah*.

ZEPHANIAH

We humans keep looking for a religion that will give us access to God without having to bother with people. We want to go to God for comfort and inspiration when we're fed up with the men and women and children around us. We want God to give us an edge in the dog-eat-dog competition of daily life. . .

That's when the prophets step in and interrupt us, insisting, "Everything you do or think or feel has to do with God. Every person you meet has to do with God." We live in a vast world of interconnectedness, and the connections have consequences, either in things or in people—and all the consequences come together in God. The biblical phrase for the coming together of the consequences is Judgment Day.

We can't be reminded too often or too forcefully of this reckoning. Zephaniah's voice in the choir of prophets sustains the intensity, the urgency. (Introduction to Zephaniah - *The Message*)

Nothing is apparently more helpless, yet really more invincible, than the soul that feels its nothingness and relies wholly on the merits of the Saviour. By prayer, by the study of His word, by faith in His abiding presence, the weakest of human beings may live in contact with the living Christ, and He will hold them by a hand that will never let go.—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 182. See also Romans 5:10.

5. How do you think the Israelis today feel about Zephaniah 2:5-9? Is this a good enough reason for them to think that, eventually, much of the Middle East will belong to the Jews? Is this still future?
6. After all that the Lord had done for their ancestors down through the years, how could the children of Israel say, "The Lord will do nothing, either good or bad"? (Zephaniah 1:12; Jeremiah 5:12; Compare 2 Peter 3:3,4) Was this wishful thinking on their part? Were they aware of their evil condition and hoping God would just leave them alone? Did they really think God was powerless?
7. Those who are disobeying God and are not ready to do anything about it are always ready to hope that God will not disturb them! This is often the attitude of teenagers. But, the children of Israel certainly had plenty of evidence that God had the power to do anything He wanted to. It is always difficult to admit that some evil that befalls one might be one's own fault! On the other hand, it did seem that other nations were winning all the battles. On that basis, the ancient peoples often felt that was proof that their "gods" were more powerful than the God of Israel and Judah.

8. What do you think Zephaniah had in mind when he repeatedly referred to “the day of the Lord”? (Zephaniah 1:2-18; 2:1-4; 3:16-20; Compare Joel 1:15; 2:1,2,11,31; 3:14) Was his strong language appropriate? About 30 years later, Judah was conquered by Nebuchadnezzar. (See Revelation 14:6-12)
9. Zephaniah is one of the few books in the Bible where it is suggested that God’s fury or anger seems to lead to His directly “destroying” people. (See Zephaniah 1:2-9,14-16; 1:18-2:3; 3:6-8) When were/are these passages to be fulfilled? This idea is fairly common in the Old Testament.
10. When the Ninevites repented in response to Jonah, God waited over 150 years to bring destruction on them. But, finally, He had to do something after they showed evidence of returning to their wicked ways. What could God do at such a point? Think of all the prophets God sent through the years—even His Own Son. And think of the parables that Jesus gave and how they mocked and scoffed and how they treated Him. Imagine God’s people claiming that His Son’s picture of God was Satanic! (John 8:48) How much further could God’s people go in rejecting Him? At that point, what else could God do but let them go? (Hosea 4:17; Hosea 11, especially 11:8) Is this the same message that needs to be given to our generation? What would you do with the people described in 2 Kings 17? Or, 2 Chronicles 36:15,16? “Laughing at His prophets”?
11. Aren’t Seventh-day Adventists really Christians who have also accepted the “third angel’s message”? (Revelation 14:9-11) Can we give this message in such a way as to be useful and meaningful to the world today? How many people in our world are worried about what is described in the third angel’s message? Do you see people being very concerned about this message? Or, are we like the people in Zephaniah 1:12?
12. If Zephaniah were standing on one corner preaching his message and you were standing on an opposite corner preaching the third angel’s message, would there be an obvious contrast between the two of you? Is the whole world sitting up and taking notice as we preach to them the third angel’s message?
13. What does God ultimately want? Isn’t it that He be able to speak to us very plainly, yet quietly as a Friend, without a great display of “human emotion,” and yet, have us take what He says very respectfully and reverently? How can God accomplish that balance? Think of times when God acted very forcefully. The flood? The plagues in Egypt? Mount Sinai? Did these things lead to a great revival? Or, did people very quickly go back to their old ways?
14. Zephaniah was probably the last prophetic book written before the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem the first time in 605 B.C. Were circumstances serious enough to warrant his language? God originally called Abram out of Mesopotamia and promised him that he and his descendants would be a blessing to all nations. In the light of the messages of these minor prophets and 2 Chronicles 33:9, does God seem to be doing well with His plan? Was Israel ever really worse than the Canaanites? Is it ever possible to speak of God not succeeding in what He sets out to do? Could God even “fail” to accomplish His goals with the human race?
15. Does this sound like Abraham’s descendants were proving to be a great blessing to other nations? Or, even themselves? God soon allowed them to be taken off into Babylonian captivity. Only a relative small number of them ever returned; and even those who did return, almost immediately went back to committing the same sins that had apparently led to their ancestor’s going into captivity. Then, under Ezra and Nehemiah, they apparently experienced a great reformation and revival. They never went back to idols of gold and silver or to the “fertility cult” religions of those around them. But, despite becoming exemplary blueprinting “adventists,” they crucified Jesus Christ when He came to them!

Was that what God intended? Did He have to wait so many years for a group who would kill His Son? What was He waiting for in the days of Zephaniah? In our day?

Nahum

At the time that Nahum delivered his prophecy, Assyria (and its capital, Nineveh) appeared invincible. A world free of Assyrian domination was unimaginable. Nahum's task was to make it imaginable—to free God's people from Assyrian paralysis, free them to believe in and pray to a sovereign God. Nahum's preaching, his Spirit-born metaphors, his God-shaped syntax, knocked Assyria off her high horse and cleared the field of Nineveh-distraction so that Israel could see that despite her world reputation, Assyria didn't amount to much. Israel could now attend to what was really going on.

Because Nahum has a single message—doom to Nineveh/Assyria—it is easy to misunderstand the prophet as simply a Nineveh-hater. But Nahum writes and preaches out of the large context in which Israel's sins are denounced as vigorously as those of any of her enemies. The effect of Nahum is not to foment religious hate against the enemy but to say, "Don't admire or be intimidated by this enemy. They are going to be judged by the very same standards applied to us." (Introduction to Nahum - *The Message*)

16. Does God sometimes "punish" His children by just allowing them to reap the consequences of their own behavior? At other times, does He actually bring on the punishment?
17. Considering all that has been said in the Scriptures about God's wrath and what He does when He gets "furious," it is likely that in most cases God just allows people to reap the natural consequences of their own behavior. When they are worshiping all sorts of idols and false "gods," the true God has to step back and let them suffer the consequences. This has been demonstrated repeatedly in the past. (See Deuteronomy 8:15; 31:16-18; Joshua 7:1-12; 23:16; Judges 2:12-14, 19-23; Judges 3:7-9; Judges 10:6-12) There are times when God has acted to preserve even some of His connection with mankind such as at the flood when almost no one seemed to be listening to Him any more. He has repeatedly used crisis interventions to get our attention so He can have a chance to say something important about Himself or about our relationship with Him.
18. When children go astray from their Christian roots, is it their fault? Or, their parents' fault? Or, both? (John 9:1-3; Proverbs 22:6) Would it be fair to say of a human parent who had come to his wits end in trying to deal with his child that when he allows that child to reap the consequences that he is showing his "wrath"? Would *wrath* be the best word to use? How do you describe God's so-called "emotional reaction" to sin? (Nahum 1:1-6,8-10; Hosea 11:7,8) Should we call that "divine displeasure"? Is it "wrath"? Why would the Bible call it wrath? Can you think of a better word? How do you think God should react to sin? How should He portray Himself as reacting to sin? Is it possible that God sometimes uses this type of language to startle us or to wake us up to realize the seriousness of what is going on? Does God always do as He did in Nahum and almost immediately describe His love and His fairness? (Nahum 1:7)
19. God's wrath is nothing more than His letting go and handing over—in loving disappointment—those who are bent on leaving Him anyway, thus allowing them to reap or experience the tragic and awful consequences of their own destructive and rebellious behavior.
20. Is it not likely that if Nahum had spoken in kind, gentle words to the people of Nineveh who were so cruel, that they would have despised the Hebrew prophet and the Hebrew God? Considering the story of Jonah which took place about 120 years earlier, is it possible that the Ninevites now thought: "We don't have to take this God too seriously. After all, He

didn't do anything the last time He threatened us"? Don't we have other references about people taking advantage of God's kindness? (See Romans 2:4) Did the Ninevites recognize that Yahweh, the God of Israel and Judah, was the One who destroyed their army as it surrounded Jerusalem? (2 Kings 19:35; Isaiah 37:36)

21. People who are as cruel as were the Assyrians need to be spoken to in very strong language before they pay much attention. Jonah also spoke in very strong language; and the Ninevites listened to Jonah. This is evidence enough that God's use of strong language is sometimes effective. The fact that God was gracious and did not destroy them when they repented may have been given by some of them as an excuse for not changing, but this shows an incredible misunderstanding of God and His character.
22. Is it possible that God cared enough about the Assyrians that He hoped that His captive children might bear a witness to them? Century after century, is God just working to win a few people from each generation—a few Canaanites, a few Jews, a few Egyptians, a few Assyrians, a few Babylonians, a few Romans, a few Europeans, a few Americans—and after He has won enough, then He will say the work is done?
23. We have already seen that two entire books of the Bible, Jonah and Nahum, and their complete recorded messages were for the benefit of the Assyrians. There are many other passages and even some other books in the Bible primarily written for the benefit of other peoples: Obadiah; Daniel; as well as parts of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zephaniah, etc. It is true that the Scriptures were given primarily to the Jews, but they were to spread that message to the world. While they failed to do as they were instructed, God did His best to get the word out to the whole world.
24. How can God inspire serious reverence and respect without causing fear? If people come to understand how loving and kind God really is and how He feels about them, how is He supposed to maintain reverence?
25. Throughout the Old Testament, God was continually going back and forth between speaking very harshly and getting a fear response and then acting more lovingly and kindly and losing the respect of the people. (See Romans 2:4) To maintain reverence without fear is one of God's most challenging tasks. How would you do that? Think of times when God inspired "fear" and temporarily got peoples' attention like at Sinai (Exodus 20:18-20); the she-bears (2 Kings 2:24); Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1-11); Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Numbers 16:1-35); Uzzah (2 Samuel 6:1-8); etc. This is certainly not God's ideal way of handling things! God wants us to do what is right because it is right. He wants to treat us as friends.
26. Is it true that the closer God's children come to the point where He can no longer help them, the louder He raises His voice and the more seriously He speaks? (See Revelation 14:6-12) Can you imagine Jesus speaking in the words of books like Jonah and Nahum? Or, was it the Father? Or, the Holy Spirit?

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