

James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of ZEPHANIAH

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THE BOOK of ZEPHANIAH

Zephaniah prophesied in the reign of Josiah, that is, between 638 and 606 B.C. He was, as he tells us, a great-great grandson of Hezekiah the King. The northern kingdom is now in captivity to Assyria, and by the time Zephaniah began prophesying, that empire was on the wane, and Babylon was rising to the ascendant. The prophet's name means "Jehovah hath hidden", and it suggests that he was born during the "killing-time" of Manasseh's reign. It may also, however, have some reference to the fact that the voice of the Lord had been silent for decades. After the end of Isaiah's and Micah's ministries, no word from the Lord was heard for nearly half a century, until, in Josiah's reign prophecy awoke again with Zephaniah. It may be that the captivity of Israel in 721 B.C. was meant to be God's word to Judah, a word of solemn warning, and that no further intimation was to be forthcoming for the time being. One is reminded of the warning Amos uttered earlier (Amos 8:11): here was its fulfilment in Manasseh's evil reign. "My Spirit shall not always strive with man." (Gen 6:3). We may never presume that God will always be pleading with mankind. But there is another lesson in this: after a long silence of fifty years God once again raised up men through whom He spoke to the nation. Are we not seeing something like this taking place in our own day? After the confusion and barrenness of liberalism, is not God raising up men to speak forth His word without fear or favour? It is perhaps significant that the word that is being recognised as having authority today is a word of warning and judgment as Zephaniah's was. This is a highly unpalatable thought for many people, and hotly disputed, but it unquestionably has the support of the Scriptures. It would be well for our thoughtless generation to pay some heed to the sober realism of the biblical message instead of deceiving itself with the sentimental idea of a God Who, because He is love, cannot be thought to be angry or punish a rebellious people (for background read 2 Kings 21:1-9, 16- 26, 2 Chron 34:1-7).

1) 1:1-3

These verses – and indeed the whole contents of the chapter - sound a dirge of unrelieved doom upon the nation. There is no summons to repentance, nothing but the pronouncement of judgment. This should be considered in relation to the national situation at the time. There are two possible interpretations. It is known that the young king Josiah initiated extensive reforms, and that a very considerable spiritual renewal took place, and it may be that Zephaniah's searing ministry produced in Josiah the impulse which led to the widespread movement described in 2 Kings 22 and 23. On the other hand, Zephaniah's ministry may have been exercised after, or in the midst of, the reform movement, and it is at least possible that his prophecy of doom in spite of the reformation shows that he felt it had not gone deep enough for any real staying of the avenging rod that was soon to fall upon the nation. In spite of the very extensive cleaning up operations promoted by the good king, the invaders were still menacing Judah, and Zephaniah felt only foreboding, seeing as he did beyond even the immediate enemy, the Scythians, to the even greater one to come, Babylon. In this attitude he shared a common insight with Jeremiah. There is evidence to suppose that the latter also felt a growing dismay as he saw the greatly welcomed reforms of Josiah failing to touch the national conscience at depth.

"They have healed the hurt of the daughter of My people slightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace" (Jer 6:14) That this has application to our own time should surely be obvious, and we shall consider it more fully in the next note.

2) **1:4-6**

"Slight healing" – this was Jeremiah's, and it would seem Zephaniah's complaint. The trouble was their diagnosis of the nation's sickness was too radical and searching for them to have much confidence in superficial cure. The moral and spiritual malady that had rotted the nation's heart was not, to them, something that could be rectified by a programme that merely scratched the surface of the problem. It is in this on the one hand, it is idle and futile to suppose that any merely political or economic programme however thoroughly planned and executed will avail to cure the recurrent crisis-pattern in our society, when the deep springs of life are polluted and are in such crying need of cleansing and purging. On the other hand, it is just as vain to suppose that any superficial dealing with the problem on a spiritual level will do anything to remedy the situation. Heavy corruption is not met by light repentance, and there is much to lead to the conclusion that what concern there is in the evangelical world about the spiritual state of our land is confined within very conventional patterns and in terms of an approach to the problem that in the very nature of the case cannot hope to do more than touch the fringe of the need. We have only to look at these verses to realise how futile any merely superficial solution, dealing with overt idolatry, would have been, when the idolatry was imbedded deep in the hearts of the people. When not all the searing words of faithful prophets availed to root it out, God had no other alternative but to purge His people by captivity. This, in fact, did cure them forever of idol-worship, and it may be that only a similar disaster will cure the sickness of our nation and bring purity and cleansing to it.

3) 1:7-9

The coming judgment on Judah is pictured here as a solemn sacrifice to which the Lord has bidden His guests. The 'victims' in this sacrifice are 'the princes and the king's children' (8), and the guests the heathen before whom Judah will be made a spectacle and who will share the spoil. This is very terrible and we find ourselves asking, "Would God do such a thing to His people? Where is His wonderful, watchful care over them now, if this be so?" Ah, yes, God would do this. What is more, history makes it plain to us that He did do so. All the grim and terrifying pronouncements made by Zephaniah finally came to pass. It is the evidence of history itself that forbids us to dismiss the prophet's words as gloomy and fanatical, not to say pathological, thunderings by a diseased and frenzied soul. This is a point often overlooked in modern considerations of the teaching of the prophetic books. What they foretold came to pass! And the lesson from this is that, when nations today do the same things, then, God being the same yesterday, today and forever, they may expect the same kind of judgment to fall upon them; and when peoples who have been specially favoured by Him will suffer the most. God is no respecter of persons, or of nations.

4) 1:10-13

The dramatic intensity of Zephaniah's words is very considerable. The cries of consternation at the irruption of the enemy through the gates of the city seem to combine here with apocalyptic manifestations ("a great crashing from the hills"): Commentators point out that Zephaniah tends to indentify the "day of the Lord" (a term often used to describe a visitation from the Lord in judgment) as "the Last Day". The prophet's reference to the complacent attitude of the people - "The Lord will not do good, neither will He do evil" - is a timely reminder for our own day. It is one of the curses of prolonged spiritual declension that it produces, even in those who preserve the remnants of a religious background, a practical atheism in the hearts of men. Even when they continue to believe in God, it is not a real God, a God Who does things, but a theoretical, fictional, "stained-glass window" God Who is remote from the affairs of life, a "looker-on" at the most, but never 'involved' in human situations. Any other kind of God would be too uncomfortable a proposition, and consequently the living God is relegated a position (they think) where He can do no harm. But God refuses to be bowed out of His universe or men's lives, and the attempt on their part to do so makes it all the more certain that they shall be made to smart for their arrogant presumption. God is not mocked.

5) **1:14-18**

The unrelieved gloom of these verses which describe the "day of the Lord" is all the more impressive when it is remembered that Zephaniah had seen (so we believe) the reforms initiated by king Josiah. G.A. Smith's comment here is interesting and thought-provoking. He writes:

"Here was a man (Zephaniah) of the same faith which the king, priests, and statesmen were striving to realise in public life, in the assured hope that the nation as a whole would be reformed and become a great nation, righteous and victorious. All this he ignored, and gave his own vision of the future: Israel a brand plucked from the burning; a few meek and righteous saved from the conflagration of a whole world. Why? Because for Zephaniah the elements were loose, and when the elements were loose, what was the use of talking about reforms? The Scythians were sweeping upon Palestine, with enough of God's wrath in them to destroy a people still so full of idolatry as Israel was; and if not the Scythians, then some other power in that dark North which had ever been full of doom. Let Josiah try to reform Israel, but it was neither Josiah's nor Israel's day that was falling. It was the Day of the Lord, and when He came this was neither to reform nor to build up Israel, but to make visitation and to punish in His wrath the unbelief and wickedness with which the nation was still rife". This is not to belittle reform or minimise its worth and significance in any given situation, it is merely to look at ultimate issues with the eyes of God, and to recognise that there is a Divine perspective from which it is seen that judgment on continued sin becomes inevitable. It is this kind of absolute and ultimate prophesying that is our need today -the ability to see beyond the immediate and short-term patterns of human behaviour and development to the long-term issues to which these finally lead. And again, we must remind ourselves that Zephaniah was right. As G. Adam Smith Jays, "Josiah's hope and daring were overthrown at Megiddo, and though the Scythians passed away, Zephaniah's conviction of the sin and doom of Israel was fulfilled, not forty years later, in the fall of Jerusalem and the great Exile".

6) **2:1-3**

These verses belong to the thought of chapter 1, and constitute a qualification of the otherwise absolute doom pronounced there. It is a word for the meek, and a slim hope of safety is held out to a small remnant within the nation. It is significant to note that there is no thought in Zephaniah of any national repentance - the reform movement initiated by the young king was altogether too optimistic in its expectations for the prophet's stern and austere foresight - but only a response from an insignificant minority. We note once again the hesitancy with which yet another prophet holds out this hope. "It may be", he says (3); it is not certain. This is ever a salutary reminder for a people who had been in the habit of assuming glibly that they had a claim as of right on the Divine forbearance and mercy on the ground of their election by Him. What is even more important to note is that "hiding from the Lord's anger" is promised on what Smith calls "sternly ethical" conditions. It is not to those who think themselves elect, and therefore inviolate, but to those who give diligence to make their calling and election sure by letting grace work moral transformation in their lives that Zephaniah's "way of escape" is opened. This should help to dispel the dangerously misleading notion that adherence to "right views" suffices to safeguard us against Divine judgment on "wrong living". Religion without morals invites the special displeasure of a God who has built His universe on strict and inviolable moral foundations.

7) 2:4-7

The remainder of the chapter is devoted to the pronouncement of doom upon the foreign nations surrounding Judah, and first of all, in these verses, the land of the Philistines. This recital of judgment is linked with the reference in 3 to the Lord's anger. It is interesting to see how wise is the sweep of this Divine visitation, and with what economy of effort the Lord is to bring many nations to account by means of His chosen instrument, Assyria. Philistia had for long, although intermittently, been a source of harassment and discomfiture to Israel, and now the cup of her iniquity was full, and judgment was inevitable. Two points in particular should be noted. The first is, that Philistia as a nation did in fact go out of existence, for it was evidently unknown in the time of our Lord, commentators pointing out that the last mention of it as a nation is found in the books of the Maccabees, a century and more before the time of Christ. This is the impressive thing about all these prophecies throughout the chapter; archeology has substantiated the prophet's words, and shown us how literally their destruction and desolation took place, and how permanently.

8) 2:4-7

The second point to be noted in these verses is this: the devastation that is spoken of here was so to reduce the land by ravaging and depopulation that it would be serviceable only as pasture land. For proud and prosperous cities thus to be humbled is deeply solemnising; but more: there may be a suggestion of something that is echoed more than once in prophetic literature, namely the reversion of a people from the brash and decadent complexities of modern civilisation to the simple, austere conditions of a pastoral existence. It is certainly true that the loss of her pilgrim faith, with its vigour and purity, was one that Israel scarcely ever recovered from; it is just as true in our own day that the loss of character that has accompanied the growing affluence of our postwar civilisation has brought incalculable impoverishment to the nation. To read the prophets, and sense their vigorous realism, is to begin to think that perhaps the best thing that could happen to us as a nation would be this kind of reversal, if it were to bring about a return to simpler, more honourable conditions conducive to the formation of true and stable character. It would be worth a very considerable extent of suffering to be brought back to the kind of living that once made Scotland great.

9) **2:8-11**

Next it is Moab and Ammon. Here again the final, irrevocable nature of the judgment impresses - a place of nettles and salt pits, what more desolate than this? The reference to Sodom and Gomorrah becomes more graphic and impressive when we remember that Lot, who narrowly escaped the destruction of the cities of the plain, was the ancestor of Moab and Ammon. It is the pride and arrogance of these peoples in their dealings with Israel that come up for judgment. Perhaps Zephaniah has in mind the story of Balak's attempt to get Balaam to curse Israel (Num 22-25), but there are numerous references throughout the historical books of the Old Testament and the prophets which bear witness to their insufferable pride and wickedness (cf Isa 16:6, 1 Kings 11:7, 2 Kings 3:26, 27, 23:13). When we read this ancient history in perspective what should impress us is not so much that God should have brought such judgment upon these wicked peoples, but that He should have been so incredibly long-suffering and patient with them in their continued and protracted depravity. This is an essential aspect of the Divine judgment which is almost entirely lost sight of today, in relation to judgment both on nations and on individuals. We should consider, far oftener than we do, how long and how patiently God has waited for us to show a change of heart, and how long and heedlessly we have persisted in going our own disastrous way, before baulking at the very idea of judgment as a harsh and "unchristian" doctrine. The marvel is that He stays His hand so long.

10) 2:12-15

Next there is a brief reference to Ethiopia which the scholars tell us, refers to Egypt. One recalls the sinister associations the very name of Egypt ever had for the people of God, and how they were repeatedly warned to have no kind of alliance with her (cf Jer 42:13-22). In the end, Nebuchadnezzar overthrew Egypt, to fulfil this prophecy of Jeremiah's. The main burden of these verses however is about Assyria, the immediate tyrant, and this prophecy was fulfilled, as we have already seen, in about 612 B.C. Those familiar with the "Fact and Faith" series of films such as "The Stones Cry Out" will appreciate the literalness with which the prophecy was carried out and fulfilled; even to this day, the ancient site of Nineveh remains a place of desolation, a haunt of wandering tribes, wild animals and birds. This almost awesome picture should make us pause awhile to contemplate the way in which the living Lord of history deals with the arrogant might of men, and brings their proud pretensions low. For so long Assyria had dominated the world-scene, and cast the dark shadow of oppression and dread across her subject-peoples, that it must have become almost inconceivable to any of the oppressed nations, through very weariness and despair, that she could ever be broken and set at naught. But happen it did, and presently Assyria was no more forever. Thus swiftly - and finally - does God sweep away evil powers that tyrannise the world of men. We should remember this when we tremble at the emergence of gigantic world-rulers of today. They are all in God's control; He fulfils His will through them, and none of them shall escape the judgment of His holy will.

11) 3:1-4

Zephaniah now turns back to Judah, and resumes his dirge against her. It is the same emphasis as in chapter 1, and follows upon it. The striking words in 2 may be meant to provide comment on 2:1-3, where the prophet made an appeal in the Lord's name to return to Him in penitence and new obedience, and if so, then these verses must indicate judgment coming after a last, final appeal has been spurned and ignored. Whether this is what the prophet has in mind or not, however, it is clear that 2 sums up in a remarkable way the whole tragic history of God's people. A long persistence in disobedience, a refusal through dulness and stubbornness of heart to learn the lessons of history, a continued waywardness and backsliding from God, a perverse refusal to turn in penitence to Him - these were the things that spelt ultimate ruin for the chosen people. These are also the things that lead individuals into misfortune and sorrow and disaster. Over every moral and spiritual downfall these words could be written as a grim warning for all to see. Here is a word that we should all take to heart, and learn from it that spiritual and moral shipwreck does not happen fortuitously without good and compelling reasons. Life has a moral and spiritual basis, and is controlled by inflexible laws that are violated at our peril. Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.

12) 3:1-4

It is significant to note that although princes, judges, prophets and priests are all alike included in the indictment, the king is not mentioned. Josiah, perhaps alone among those in authority, was above condemnation in the state of declension that had prevailed. God is not unrighteous to forget our labour of love, even when it is helpless to stem the rising tide of judgment. This should be our comfort, and an incentive to do all that is in our power to correct evil practices and unhallowed living.

13) 3:5-7

The supreme tragedy of all is that in the midst of the corruption and degradation of leaders and people and their refusal to heed the warning voice, the Lord was near at hand, waiting to be gracious to His people. The same thought is expressed with the greatest poignancy in Jeremiah 8:19, 22. It is ever so. We sin our sins, and depart from the ways of righteousness in the presence of a God Who could have, and would have, kept us straight and true, had we heeded His voice. The precise picture of the Lord given here refers however to His exemplification of the law of righteousness. The judges sitting at the city gates might take bribes and corrupt justice, but with the Lord there is righteousness, and His judgments are according to righteousness. He is therefore, being in the midst of them, taking stock of their iniquities and will judge them righteously, as He has judged the surrounding nations righteously. Why should Judah think that He, the righteous and impartial One, would make an exception in their case? He has cut off the nations (6) when they refused to heed His appeals to them (think of Jonah's mission to Nineveh!), why should He withhold judgment from Judah when she did the same things? This is very like Amos's words in the first two chapters of his prophecy, when he applies the same inflexible principles of Divine judgment according to works to the nations and Israel alike. There is yet another lesson to be taken from these words however. The fact that there is a just Lord in the midst is a source of hope and comfort for all who are prepared to fear Him and receive instruction (7). As John says (1 John 1:9), "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness".

14) 3:8-13

God's judgment on the nations, and His dealings with His people mingle here in a way that makes it difficult for us to grasp the prophet's detailed meaning, but the general drift of his words is quite clear. The judgment of the kingdoms of the world will also be judgment on His own people (there is no respect of persons with God); they shall be purged of all evil elements and left an afflicted and poor people who shall trust in the name of the Lord (12). Here, once more, is the doctrine of the remnant that emerges so prominently in the teaching of the prophets. Some think that the "suppliants" in 10 refer to the dispersed of Israel, being drawn from the ends of the earth to Jerusalem, and that these are the "afflicted and poor people" mentioned in 12. Others think the reference is to Gentiles being gathered in worldwide conversion to God. It is the genius of Hebrew prophecy that both meanings can be held together. Zephaniah has the near and the far blended in his words and while from one point of view the return to Jerusalem of a remnant saved so as by fire after passing through the crucible of the captivity is substantiated by the subsequent history of this people, it is also true that the age of grace, in which the gospel goes out to the ends of the earth in the time of the new covenant, when whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved, is here foreshadowed. The principle which emerges is: blessing and salvation through suffering, and this is true in relation to the people of God in olden time and in relation to the gospel itself. The sufferings of Christ are the salvation of men, and in the service of the gospel it is through "an afflicted and poor people", who bear in their bodies the dying of the Lord Jesus, that His blessing is mediated to them.

15) 3:14-17

In the concluding section of the book, Zephaniah projects himself into the future, and proclaims a time of restoration and renewal. It is in fact true that after the prophesied doom of the captivity of Babylon, there came the promised restoration of God's people. The remnant survived and returned to the land. These words contain a principle that has application to our own situation today, and we may take them to ourselves. We also may see a better day dawn, but it may only be through the agony of the fires of judgment that we shall do so. The time for singing and shouting, being glad and rejoicing (14) is not yet, so far as we are concerned, and the Lord will withhold it until grief and pain have wrought their perfect work in our hearts.

16) 3:14-17

The spiritual lesson of these verses is likewise clear. It is through the presses of pain, and often the hard bruising of our hearts by the word of the cross that the place of blessing is reached, and the first notes of the song are sometimes wet with tears. But, oh, what sweetness and joy to have such assurance as "thou shalt not see evil any more" (15), and "the Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save". Weeping endureth for the night, but joy cometh in the morning! The wonder of this glorious reality is transcended by something even greater, however, and that is the wonder of the Divine grace that condescends to such tender and loving and forgiving dealings with us. It is indeed more than tongue can tell!

17) 3:14-17

A further application of these words is possible, reaching out beyond the immediate to the far future and the end-time, when, as Paul puts it, "all Israel shall be saved" (see Romans 11). There are widely differing interpretations of the place of Israel in the economy of God, so far as the last days are concerned, but we must insist that no theological view worthy of the name can afford to dismiss the ancient people of God from the scene and maintain that the promises to them are fulfilled in the Church. It is true, of course, that these promises find their truest meaning in relation to Christ and the Church (see 1 Pet 1:12, 2:9ff), but this does not account for Paul's insistence in Romans 11 that the Jews have an integral part to play in the salvation of God (after all, Jesus said 'Salvation is of the Jews'), and that their 'fulness' (Rom 11:12) and their being 'received' (Rom 11:15) will be associated with 'life from the dead', that is, resurrection and the final consummation. Zephaniah is right therefore when he prophesies that in the last days the Lord will be in the midst of them, and that their age-long travails and oppressions will be no more (15). We may never know exactly how we must interpret such teaching, or at least we may not see clearly until the time is at hand. But we should recognise that one does not interpret mystery aright simply by ignoring it or attempting to explain it away.

18) 3:18-20

The messianic, "end-time" character of the passage becomes particularly clear in the last verses of the prophecy, and it is not difficult to think of parallel passages in the other prophetic books (cf Micah 4:6, Isa 35:3-6) which also speak of final restoration for the people of God. It is good to end on such a note, when the gloom of Zephaniah's book has been almost unrelieved throughout, good not because we like to give the story "a happy ending", but for the far more important and significant reason that it assures us that in the affairs of the world and of men evil does not have the final word. Without this, all would be gloom indeed, and hopeless despair. But in the history of Divine revelation this is something that is confirmed and sealed only in the death and resurrection of Christ; only there is evil finally robbed of the initiative and brought into subjection to the Divine will. In this sense also, Old Testament prophecy points forward, even if unconsciously, to the coming of Christ. Everything in history centres on Him, and the instinct of the prophets was right when they reached out in spirit, enquiring and searching diligently (1 Pet 1:10, 11) what the Spirit of Christ indwelling them was signifying when it testified within them concerning these things. It was true of them, as indeed in another sense it is also true of us even now, that they were able to see only as "through a glass darkly" (1 Cor 13:12), and that they knew in part and prophesied in part (1 Cor 13:9). The final consummation and fulfilment will be so immeasurably greater than they - or we - could have dared to hope.