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MINISTRIES

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Minor Prophets, Major Messages | Zephaniah: Wrath and Mercy

The so-called “Minor Prophets” are a collection of twelve prophetic books in the Tanakh—that is, the Old Testament. Even though they are called the “Minor Prophets,” these books contain “major messages” that remain relevant to believers today. In this series, we will unpack the major messages of each Minor Prophet. We will discuss their practical applications for believers today and how they connect to the Messiah’s work and teachings in the New Testament.

In this teaching, we are looking at the Book of Zephaniah. Let’s dive in.

Zephaniah: An Overview

Zephaniah was the great, great grandson of King Hezekiah, and he prophesied during the reign of King Josiah (Zephaniah 1:1). King Josiah is famous for his efforts in bringing Israel back to the Torah, reinstating the celebration of Passover, and taking a strong stand against idolatry (2 Kings 22-23). Zephaniah’s prophesies are widely believed to have taken place prior to the reforms initiated by King Josiah in 612 BC. And there is a possibility that Zephaniah himself played a role in the movement that led to these reforms (J. Gordon McConville, *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Prophets* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 219).

The Book of Zephaniah begins with a proclamation of judgment upon the land of Judah. The prophet declares that YHWH will sweep away everything from the face of the earth:

Zephaniah 1:2-6

“I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD [YHWH]. “I will sweep away man and beast; I will sweep away the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, and the rubble with the wicked. I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD [YHWH]. “I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal and the name of the idolatrous priests along with the priests, those who bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens, those who bow down and swear to the LORD [YHWH] and yet swear by Milcom, those who have turned back from following the LORD [YHWH], who do not seek the LORD [YHWH] or

inquire of him.”

For the rest of chapter 1, Zephaniah warns about the coming day of YHWH—a time of judgment upon the people of Judah. Zephaniah describes how God will search Jerusalem with lamps, exposing and punishing all who are complacent and who say in their hearts, “YHWH will do not good, nor will he do ill” (Zephaniah 1:12). Zephaniah says that their homes will be destroyed (Zephaniah 1:13) and there will be much distress and anguish as God pours out his wrath upon them (Zephaniah 1:14-18).

Zephaniah then turns his attention to the surrounding nations. He mentions the Philistines, Moabites, Ammonites, Cushites, and the Assyrians, and announces that destruction awaits them because of their pride and mistreatment of God’s people (Zephaniah 2:4-15). In the midst of this condemnation, however, Zephaniah expresses hope for those who walk in humility and obedience:

Zephaniah 2:3

Seek the LORD [YHWH], all you humble of the land, who do his just commands; seek righteousness; seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the LORD [YHWH].

After this, Zephaniah once again pronounces judgment upon the people of Judah and the city of Jerusalem (Zephaniah 3:1-5). Zephaniah describes Jerusalem as rebellious and stubborn. Its leaders are compared to lions and wolves, eager to devour the vulnerable (Zephaniah 3:3). Its prophets are fickle and treacherous. Its priests profane the holy things and “do violence to the law” (Zephaniah 3:4). For these reasons, God declares that he will pour out his wrath upon all nations, including Jerusalem:

Zephaniah 3:8

“Therefore wait for me,” declares the LORD [YHWH], “for the day when I rise up to seize the prey. For my decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation, all my burning anger; for in the fire of my jealousy all the earth shall be consumed.

After writing at length about God’s wrath, Zephaniah then shifts his focus toward God’s promise. God has a promise of salvation for a remnant from the nations (Zephaniah 3:9-12) and the people of Judah (Zephaniah 3:13). In fact, God takes it upon himself to give the people pure speech so that they would call upon him and be saved (Zephaniah 3:9). The book closes with a call upon Jerusalem to rejoice because YHWH has taken away his judgments against them and is among them:

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! The LORD [YHWH] has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the LORD [YHWH], is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: “Fear not, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak. The LORD [YHWH] your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival, so that you will no longer suffer reproach. Behold, at that time I will deal with all your oppressors. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you in, at the time when I gather you together; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes,” says the LORD [YHWH].

Zephaniah's Major Message

The Book of Zephaniah depicts God's fierce anger and wrath against evil, but also guides us toward a message of hope and restoration. Zephaniah reminds us that while God's wrath is real, ultimately, he does not want the wicked to perish; rather, he wants them to turn to him and be saved. As it says in Ezekiel:

Ezekiel 18:23

Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD [YHWH], and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?

Ezekiel 18:32

“For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone,” declares the Lord GOD [YHWH]; “so turn, and live.”

Not only does God desire that people choose to repent and follow him, but according to Zephaniah, God himself helps them do so! God promises to “purify” the speech of his people:

Zephaniah 3:9

For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD [YHWH] and serve him with one accord.

The Hebrew term translated “I will change” is *hapak*, which has the force of “overturn” or “overthrow” (R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1980), 221).

So, YHWH promises to radically overturn the speech of the peoples. They will be completely transformed so that they call upon YHWH and serve him in unity. As it says in Jeremiah, God not only desires to forgive his people their sins but also wants to write his law on their hearts, transforming them from the inside out and empowering them to be obedient (Jeremiah 31:33-34).

God's warnings of judgment are very real, but also real is the hope of salvation and transformation for all who humble themselves and turn to the Lord.

Interesting Connections

When addressing the believers in Rome regarding God's wrath, Paul uses language closely resembling Zephaniah's prophecies of coming judgment. In Romans 1, Paul describes the types of sins people were engaged in—idolatry, sexual immorality, murder, gossip, slander, pride, disobedience toward one's parents, etc. Then, in Romans 2, he describes God's judgment upon those sins:

Romans 2:2-9

We know that the **judgment of God** rightly falls on those who practice such things. Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape **the judgment of God**? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up **wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed**. He will render to each one

according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be **wrath and fury**. There will be **tribulation and distress** for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek.

Like Zephaniah, Paul pronounces God's wrath upon all who sin, meaning, he pronounces God's wrath upon everyone:

Romans 3:23

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

The message of God's wrath is consistent throughout the Bible, but so is the message of his mercy and love. Like Zephaniah, Paul writes that those who turn to the Lord will be spared God's wrath:

Romans 5:9

Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his [Messiah's] blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.

How Zephaniah Points to the Messiah

Zephaniah points to the Messiah in a couple of ways. For one, both Zephaniah and Yeshua emphasized humility. Zephaniah exhorts his listeners to "seek humility" (Zephaniah 2:3). Similarly, Yeshua admonished his followers to humbly serve each other (Matthew 20:26-28). He taught that whoever humbles himself like a child will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:1-4). He taught that those who exalt themselves will be humbled, while those who humble themselves will be exalted (Matthew 23:12).

Second, Zephaniah's promise of hope and salvation finds its ultimate fulfillment in the Messiah. Again, even though Scripture is clear that we all deserve wrath, God does not want us to be destroyed. As he repeatedly spoke through the prophets, he wants his people to repent and live. God wants to save us so much that he sent his own Son to deliver us from sin and death.

John 3:16-17

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

The salvation we receive through the Messiah extends into eternity. Just as Zephaniah prophesied about a restored Jerusalem, where the people live in peace and God's presence dwells among them, Revelation says the same thing about the end of the age. Revelation speaks of a time when the promises of restoration declared by prophets like Zephaniah reach their final and ultimate fulfillment. Yeshua will return, destroy all evil, and usher in a New Jerusalem, where God's people dwell in peace and safety:

Revelation 21:1-4

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and

they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

And that is Zephaniah’s major message. There are consequences to sin. God’s wrath is real, but so is his mercy and love. Amidst God’s warnings of judgment, there is hope for those who humbly turn to the Lord and repent. Those who seek after the Lord will inherit eternal life and enjoy God’s presence forever in the New Jerusalem.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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