

## Zephaniah

Introduction

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### Why read this book?

To reinforce your confidence that God will make everything right. When justice is distorted, when the line between right and wrong is blurred, when leaders become corrupt, it's easy to become discouraged. And when religious leaders fail, discouragement can turn to cynicism. Zephaniah reassures us that we can still trust God—that even in dark times our faith can still burn brightly.

### Who wrote this book?

Zephaniah, whose name may mean *the Lord hides* or *the Lord protects*.

### When was it written?

During the reign of King Josiah of Judah (640–609 B.C.), but before the city of Nineveh was destroyed (612 B.C.).

### What was happening at this time?

Despite King Josiah's well-intended civil and religious reforms, leaders were corrupt and idolatry was widespread. The Assyrian empire, the superpower which had ruled over Judah for more than a century, was disintegrating. Shortly after Josiah's death and Zephaniah's ministry, the Babylonians conquered Judah, destroyed the temple and took many into exile.

### To whom was it written and why?

Zephaniah wrote to the people of Judah, warning them of impending judgment for their sins. He hoped to stir them to repentance before it was too late. But he also assured them that God's judgment would pave the way for a new society in which justice would prevail and all humankind would worship the Lord.



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### What to look for in Zephaniah:

The balance between judgment and salvation, between God's anger and his compassion. Like most prophets, Zephaniah writes in a poetic form marked by vivid figures of speech and emotionally charged language.

—*From the Quest Study Bible (Zondervan)*

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Leader's Guide

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*How God works in our lives*

*What's that old campfire song that goes, "[Next] verse same as the first, a little bit louder and a whole lot worse"? Maybe it's part of the Minor Prophet training manual. Zephaniah summarizes the preceding prophets and keeps bringing the message of the Day of the Lord.*

Scripture: Zephaniah

Based On: "The Minor Prophets: God Still Speaks to Us Today," by Tom Cowan

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### Part 1 Identify the Issue

Zephaniah appears to have been a person of social standing, and was probably related to the royal line (see 1:1). Zephaniah was ministering during the reign of King Josiah (640–609 B.C.), which would make him a contemporary of Jeremiah. His prophecy probably came before the reforms which were instituted by King Josiah. The primary purpose of his writings is to announce God's approaching judgment to Judah.

Zephaniah's main theme is the coming of the Day of the Lord (see the Book of Joel), when God will punish the nations, including Judah. In many ways, his writings are a summary of the writings of the prophets who preceded him.

You will get the historical context and background of Zephaniah by reading 2 Kings 21–23. This gives us a picture of the social, moral, and religious conditions in Judah at that time. The reforms of Josiah certainly included a purge of many of the foreign cults and their practices. Zephaniah uses the phrase “the Day of the Lord” more than any other prophet.

The Book of Zephaniah can be divided into a number of clearly defined parts.

**1:2–2:3** An opening prophecy focusing on the coming Day of the Lord.

**2:4–3:8** A series of judgments against the surrounding nations, ending with an oracle against Jerusalem.

**3:9–20** A closing that anticipates a bright new day of God's blessing.

[Q] Any message of judgment is unpopular today. Why is this?

[Q] What parts of the world might welcome a message of judgment?

[Q] How do you imagine the Day of the Lord?

[Q] How do you imagine the rule of the Messiah?

### Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

**Teaching Point One: The Day of the Lord is imminent.**

“Zephaniah's forceful prophecy may be a factor in the reform that occurs during Josiah's reign—a ‘revival’ that produces outward change, but does not fully remove the inward heart of corruption

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... [But] Judgment day is coming when the malignancy of sin will be dealt with ... after the chastening process is complete, blessing will come in the person of Messiah."<sup>1</sup>

Read Zephaniah 1:2–2:3.

[Q] This section has a strong description of God sweeping away everything. Why do you think the language is so strong?

[Q] Why is the wrath of God ready to come against the nations with such force?

[Q] Notice how this section ends (2:3). Where will we find spiritual safety?

**Teaching Point Two: On the Day of the Lord, all nations will answer to God.**

Read the second section of the book, 2:4–3:8.

This section contains an announcement of God's rule over the entire world and a warning that all nations are answerable to him. This truth runs counter to everything in secular thinking. In a format similar to the other prophets, Zephaniah lists how the judgment of God will come upon other nations, then slowly closes the circle around Jerusalem. Note how 3:2 lists four faults of the people.

1. They obeyed no one.
2. They would not accept correction.
3. They did not trust in the Lord.
4. They did not draw near to God.

Yet as God's people, they should have been doing precisely the opposite of these things.

[Q] How is this central idea of judgment echoed in the following passages?

- Acts 17:29–31
- 1 Peter 4:17–19

[Q] Many people today want to find comfort in the statement that "we are all God's children" no matter what we believe. How should we respond to this?

**Teaching Point Three: The Day of the Lord will usher in a "day of blessing."**

<sup>1</sup> Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa, *Talk Thru the Bible* (Thomas Nelson, 1983).

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In the final section of Zephaniah, we come to an idea that is woven into many of the prophetic writings. While we cannot miss the emphasis on judgment, this is never the final word. Many of the prophecies contain strong words of censure and rebuke, but they often finish with an appeal for repentance and humility. We are invited to come and seek the Lord. Destruction is threatened only if people will not repent.

In Zephaniah, this word of encouragement comes in the last 12 verses. This promise probably refers to a literal re-gathering of the people in their own land. Yet it also looks forward to a future time of blessing from God. There is a new day to come for the people of God, a day marked by peace, joy, and security. But it is only for those who really are God's children. Read Zephaniah 3:9–20.

[Q] What is the end of this story for the remnant of Israel, as described in these verses?

[Q] What does the Lord promise the remnant? Make a list.

[Q] What will be the response of the people?

[Q] Do you see Christ in this passage? How does that encourage you?

### Optional Activity:

**Purpose:** *To remember God's righteousness and restoration.*

**Activity:** *Give everyone in the group index cards. On them write Zephaniah 2:3:*

*Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land,  
you who do what he commands.  
Seek righteousness, seek humility;  
perhaps you will be sheltered  
on the day of the LORD's anger.*

*Memorize the verse this coming week, and at your next meeting discuss how the verse shaped your faith walks.*

## Part 3 Apply Your Findings

The Day of the Lord is coming soon. Everyone will answer to God, but in the end, God's faithful will experience real rejoicing and blessing!

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[Q] How does the message of this book help and encourage us as God's people today?

[Q] How will it affect your daily interactions this coming week?

**Action Point:** On your own, read Zephaniah 1:14–15 and 2:3. Who in your world needs to hear the good news of the Day of the Lord? The bad news? When and how will you take that news to him or her? Pray for the Holy Spirit to go before you.

*—Study by Tom Cowan, with Kyle White*

