This Week in the Word
Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens. Ps 119:89.
SEVENTH DAY BAPTIST

Lesson 1, June 4th, 2016

The Day of the Lord

Scripture Study – Zephaniah 1:4, 14-16; 2:3

Background Scripture – Zephaniah 1 & 2

Key Verse:
Seek the Lord, all you meek of the earth,
Who have upheld His justice.
Seek righteousness, seek humility:
It may be that you will be hidden
In the day of the Lord's anger.
Zephaniah 2:3

INTRODUCTION

Our Study Scripture looks at what is quite likely the most unpleasant subject in the Bible. This subject is the Judgment of God. In this book of Zephaniah you will find that this Book is devoted to this one theme, and hence its treatment is blunt, clear, forceful, uncompromising, and concentrated.

Keep in mind firmly as we examine this matter that God takes no delight in the death of the wicked. In addition, precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.

This subject matter is so unpleasant for many people that they would like to eliminate this subject of judgment from Scripture, for they believe that the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ has such a tender heart, is so full of grace, His patience is so infinite, and He is so kind, that judgment o a no-no for Him.

Despite the fact that Jesus often spoke of the judgment of God and it seems clear from Scripture that God can and has acted in vengeance some people think that the God of the New Testament is not the same God of the Old Testament and so since the God they have created will not act to destroy, complacency and indifference is not as bad as some make it out to be.

The fact of the matter is that Scripture warns that some, including believers, are wise and some are foolish, and that there are beautiful blessings awaiting the wise, and dreadful consequences for the foolish, for they latter will be shut out from the presence of God.

Scripture speaks frequently about the remnant, the relatively few people who will remain true to God and faithful to His word through the times of trouble that come upon the earth. It was such in the past, and it will continue to be the case in the future time of trouble.

The constant assurance including the assurance given in the Book of Zephaniah is however that God will watch over His people, keep them in faith, and hide them under the shadow of His wings, as the earth reels from the vengeance of God.

The emphasis in this Book of Zephaniah is on the "Day of the Lord", this unique day when God manifests His hand directly in human affairs.

This is not a time when God is working through nations and bending them to do His will and bringing about circumstances to execute judgment. This is a day when God will execute judgment in His wrath, and so this will be judgment directly executes as indicated by the consistent use of the personal pronoun "I" in chapter 1.

What is most interesting is the fact that Zephaniah was the last of the pre-exile prophets, that he prophesied between 640 and 612 B.C. so that he prophesied during the reign of the godly king Josiah (640 to 609 B.C.), who tried valiantly with all the power of the crown to clean out the idolatrous practices and institutions created by his wicked long reigning grandfather Manasseh (695-642 B.C.) and his equally wicked father Amon (642-640 B.C).

Note the seriousness of God for obedience to His word. Note also that when evil is allowed to flourish it takes hold and corrupts so deeply that even when there are attempts at reformation evil continues to lurk below the surface and awaits its chance to rupture and destroy the body.

One writer gives us a glimpse of the history of the times so we will be well warned as we note the dangers inherent in what is happening today:

"Manasseh (695-642 B.C.) and **Amon (642-640 B.C.) had encouraged the people of Judah to depart from the Lord for over 50 years, so wickedness had become ingrained in them.**
In the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign (622 B.C.) Hilkiah the priest discovered the Law of Moses in the temple, and after Josiah read it, he instituted major reforms throughout Judah. Josiah's reforms were good because they were official. He eliminated much of the display of idolatry in the land and revived the celebration of Passover, among other things. See 2 Kings 22:4-25 and 2 Chronicles 34:3- 35:19 for lists of his extensive reforms.
But unfortunately his reforms did not change the hearts of most of the people, as Jeremiah revealed in his earlier prophecies.
So the people to whom Zephaniah ministered had a long history of formal religion without much commitment to Yahweh,
God sent a prophetic word to Zephaniah because the Judeans of his day still needed to get right with Him in their hearts. The prophet announced that God was going to send judgment to Judah for her wickedness".

Be warned therefore that when you allow iniquity, bad behaviour, and deviations from the truths of Scripture to begin to take hold in your church, group, or nation, it will spread and take root, and when you realize the danger you are in and try to clean up the mess, that might not be possible. Wisdom tells us that
'*the little foxes spoil the vice*'.

Our enemy Satan is smart and wily, and well experienced in dealing with man. Do not take any chances with evil. You are not personally smart enough to win in that game, though you might be proud of yourself and think you are more capable than you really are. So the Apostle warns us to **"examine yourself".** Do not like Peter and the other disciples think you are stronger than you really are.

Some scholars have examined the possible meaning of the name of Zephaniah "**Yahweh hides (or has hidden)", "Hidden in Yahweh", "Yahweh's Watchman",** or **"Yahweh's Treasured"** and believe given the fact that he has the longest listing of his ancestry of all the prophets, going back to Hezekiah, (it is assumed the godly king), that he was of royal blood, lived in Jerusalem, and though he directed his message to the people of Judah, primarily spoke to the upper echelon of society rather than to the average Israelites.
The last in line of the pre-exilic prophets, he repeated much of what they had warned about the Day of the Lord when the world as well as Judah would be punished but as one writer stated:

"**Obadiah, Joel, Amos, and Isaiah had all spoken of this day, but Zephaniah alone emphasized more strenuously than them all the universality of its judgment while also surprisingly predicting the conversion of the nations as one of its fruits".**

It is noteworthy that the term **day of the Lord** is used more than 25 times in the Bible. It stands in contrast to the 'day of man' when he retains control and is in rebellion for man's short period of time. We note the description of this "day" given by one scholar:

"Whenever we find the phrase "the day of the Lord" it always suggests a contrast with the "day" of man. The day of man is any day when *man* appears to be in control of human affairs. It is a day of God's patience.
The day of the Lord is any day when *God* is clearly in control of human affairs. It is a day of God's judgment and or blessing,
The phrase "the day of the Lord" is by no means unique to Zephaniah, but it is the key to the message of this book. Zephaniah used it more frequently than any other prophet. It was his burden, and he explained the meaning of this phrase more than any other prophet.
The "day of the Lord" that Zephaniah predicted was an eschatological day in which God would judge the people of Judah and Jerusalem. This judgment will take place during the first part of the eschatological day of the Lord, the period we refer to as the Tribulation.
Zephaniah also predicted restoration following judgment (Ch. 3) This refers to the second part of the eschatological day of the Lord, the period we refer to as the Millennium".

THE TEXT

Verses 1-3 have the word of the Lord to the prophet Zephaniah and he gives graphic pictures of the judgment. He pronounces universal judgment with God devastating the planet and consuming everything. Some believe this involves some hyperbole in applying it to the present time in Judah, while its full force awaits a time of the future. It certainly suggests however that there would be a ruthless invader that would sweep over the land with a scorched earth policy.

But the language seems to indicate that God would destroy in reverse the order of things that God created. He would one day in His own choosing consume both man and animal life. Plants, birds, fish, as well as the false religious things which had caused people to stumble would perish.

God had spoken and He had full authority. He will visit in vengeance with direct intervention in human affairs. This will be cataclysmic judgment.

The prophets started with judgment on the world in verses 2-3.
Then following in what is called the chiastic form of Hebrew writing he focuses on judgment on Judah. 1:4-15.
Then he deals with judgment on Israel's neighbours. 2:4-15
Then he reverts to judgment on Jerusalem. 3:1-7.
Then he returns to Judgment on all the nations. 3:8.

The circle is complete. The imminent judgment will come and affect the people. But God will not forget the rest of the world.

Verse 4.
Following the broad sweep of judgment the prophet moves from the outer parts of the world to the inner core of His people.

'Stretching out the hand' is a figure of speech that means He will do a special work of punishment. Judah cannot and should not think He has ignored their doings and will only afflict the outsider nations.

When He acts against Judah and Jerusalem it will be so thorough that all the corruption and horrible practises of idolatry they had inherited from Manasseh and Amon would be wiped out. No trace of Baal worship would be left. There would have to be terrible judgment to eradicate the gross idolatry being practised.

The idol worshippers as well as the priests of Baal and the unfaithful priests of Yahweh would be removed and all memory of them and their bad reputation would be taken away. One writer comments that this is exactly what happened:

"In light of the complete uprooting of idolatry described in 2 Kings 23 we can see that God's promise to *cut off every trace of Baal* and destroy the rest of the expressions of idolatry was fulfilled.
We can also see that this prophecy was an invitation, as if God said,
"Baal and the idols are going to go. You can get rid of them in righteousness or I will get rid of them in judgment, but rest assured that they are going to go".

Verse 5. The worshippers of "the hosts of heaven", the sun, the moon, and the stars and planets which the people did on their flat housetops (see 2 Kings 21, 23 and Jeremiah 19 for these pagan practises), would be punished.

Today many superstitious believers as well as others who do not know God believe in faithfully reading and observing horoscopes as a direction for their lives and activities.

Also, those who worshipped both Yahweh and Baal at the same time, alternating their worship as it suited them, would be punished.

Syncretistic worship was a serious deviation and existed when persons worship the true God in the Temple, synagogue or church while at the same time choosing to have someone or something else determine their behaviour. It exists today.

With respect to oaths taking that the prophet condemned one writer points out:

"Swearing to and by a deity meant pronouncing an oath that called on that god to punish the oath-taker if he or she failed to do what he or she promised. Swearing by another god involved acknowledging its authority, which God prohibited in Israel".

This oath-taking too would attract judgment.

The practice of following the ways of Milcom or Molech, the god of the Ammonites was particularly horrible. This involved offering children by fire to this god. See 2 Kings 23:10.

Verse 6. All those that had apostasized, and moved away from worshipping the true God of Israel alone, and who had not been praying to Him as they should have, would bring judgment on them. Those that had not loved God with all their hearts were guilty of forsaking Him and would suffer the consequences.

Those then that were open pagan worshippers, those that mixed the worship of Yahweh with that of pagan idols, going one day to the Temple and the next day to the pagan idols temples, and those that did not care about worshipping Yahweh at all would be destroyed. All would perish as God's judgment came. One writer comments:

"Sometimes it is the apathetic and indifferent who are more responsible for a nation's moral collapse than those who are actively engaged in evil, or those who have failed in the responsibilities of leadership".

Judgment would come to royalty, the princes and the king's children, and to the merchants. Those that loved to follow pagan and foreign customs in their dress, and who brought foreign customs and superstitions into the house of God (verse 9), as well as those who loved violence and deceit would not escape.

Verse 14. After picturing the day of the Lord as a day of great sacrifice when the people of Judah and the world would serve as the sacrifice, (verse 8), the prophet pictured the day of the Lord as a time of a great and terrible battle. It was near and coming quickly.

When Yahweh acted the men of war would cry out bitterly because it would be like bitter fighting. They would be helpless. The men of Judah and Jerusalem could not prevent their first deportation in 605 B.C. shortly after Zephaniah prophesied. The best of the nation was taken away. It was ruin.

Verse 15-16. Warning that the people of Judah and Jerusalem should not be complacent or indifferent, Zephaniah now described the "day of wrath" in great detail. He used five pairs of words or synonyms to stress his point.

It would be a day of wrath that would bring:

- emotional distress and anguish or trouble.
- devastation or physical destruction and desolation
- the terror of darkness and gloom
- thick blackness and clouds
- trumpet blasts and battle cry.

The fortified cities of Judah and the battlements and high towers would be of no use to stop the invaders.

The men of war and the people would be so distressed that they would stumble around and grope around as if they were blind.

They had sinned and would pay the penalty of their blood spilled in the dust, unable to help themselves out of trouble,

Chapter 2:3

Now came the invitation, the calamity could be avoided. The terrible things the prophet had spoken of should stir the people to repent and turn to their God so that punishment would be avoided.

Zephaniah wanted the people to come together like Nineveh had done in the distant past which had led to God sparing them. The shameless and undesirable nation of Judah yet had time to repent and ask God for forgiveness so that He would postpone His decree and turn away His fierce anger.

Nineveh had repented and God had spared them and so Judah should do the same and repent.

So the prophet called on those who were humble, the remnant of Judah, to seek the Lord and continue to pray to Him and depend on Him for their protection.

Those who were the meek of the earth, they that knew God and His character, and thus would uphold His justice, should seek after righteousness and be humble before God.

They the meek had to in these difficult times live righteously, put themselves under God's sovereign authority. They had to listen to Him and obey Him.

In the midst of calamity it was possible that God would preserve His remnant and hide those while He poured out His anger on those that would not repent.

CONCLUSION

Humility and dependence in the face of suffering brought about by atrocious leadership and the unrepentant hearts is not an easy task.

Often people of God are led into trouble by those that should know better. It was not that Manasseh did not know better. When God punished him and he was locked up in a gentile prison he repented and prayed, and God allowed him to be released from the foreign jail. But what he had done and what his own son would do could not be reversed. The people would now have to repent or face the wrath of God.

There is a line drawn in the sand by God. There must be repentance before that line is crossed.

If the unrighteous rule the only thing for the righteous to do is to lean on the strength of God.

We are responsible to live holy and righteous lives as we look forward to the coming of the day when there will be a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness will dwell.

So be on guard so that you remain faithful and do not fall away because of the pressures of church, nation, or state. The future Day of the Lord is coming, irrespective of what the scoffers say.

There will always be unprincipled people, those who are complacent and indifferent. We need to keep on growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. God is faithful and will keep us in the day of His indignation.

So keep yourself distinguished from the world while you anticipate the day of the Lord and His coming. It will be difficult but quite possible to keep yourself unspotted from the world through the power of the Spirit.

So never give up. It will be well worth it. The New Heaven, the New Earth, and the New Jerusalem beckons. The sufferings of the present world cannot compare to the glories of heaven that are yours now that you name is written in the Lamb's book of Life.