

**International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
June 5, 2016**

**Lesson Text: Zephaniah 1:4-6, 14-16; 2:6
Lesson Title: The Day of the Lord**

Introduction

The prophet Zephaniah is one of the Twelve Minor Prophets in the Old Testament. His name means “the Lord hides” or “the Lord hath hidden” (Psalm 27:5). He has the most extensive genealogy listed of any of the prophets (Zephaniah 1:1). The unusual detail concerning his genealogy seems to be he was the great-great-grandson of “Hizkiah” (Hezekiah), the famous king of Judah.

Zephaniah evidently lived in Jerusalem, as his familiarity with “the fish gate” and “Maktesh” (probably some location in the city) would indicate (Zephaniah 1:10-11). He prophesied to the people of the Southern Kingdom, Judah, around fifty years before the Babylonian captivity. While his prophesy deals with the judgment of a number of other nations to be judged, his primary message was for Judah.

King Josiah reigned during Zephaniah’s prophesy which places the time line around 639-608 B.C. The description of Judah’s spiritual and moral decay suggests the prophesy was given before Josiah’s great reform of 622 B.C. King Josiah inherited a kingdom saturated in pagan religion and sinfulness from the wicked reign of Manasseh (686-642 B.C.) and his son Amon (642-640 B.C.).

The prophesy of Zephaniah is really intense. In chapter one it opens with a description of the wrath of God whereby creation itself is reversed, as God pours out His wrath on sin. Nearly two-thirds of the book is consumed with the prophetic concept of the Day of the Lord being a day of judgment. Though the Day of the Lord effects all nations, it is specifically designed for the purification and preparation of Israel.

Reasons for the Coming Day of the Lord (Zephaniah 1:4-6, 14-16)

Verses 4-6

Verse 4

“I will also stretch out mine hand upon Judah, and upon all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this place, and the name of the Chemarims with the priests;”

If you were the great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah, one would assume your life would be secure and comfortable in Jerusalem. That was not the case with God's prophet, Zephaniah. God had called him to prophesy the coming judgment upon Judah in the form of the Babylonian Captivity.

Zephaniah began his prophesy by presenting several graphic pictures of the coming Day of the Lord. First, he presented a picture of devastating judgment in Zephaniah 1:2-6. This judgment will "*consume*" or "sweep away" man and beast. The prophesy is fearfully similar to the world-wide flood of Noah's day (Genesis 6-9). It is a judgment upon "*man*" and "*beast*." Not even King Josiah's attempts to lead the nation in reform and revival would stop the coming judgment of God upon His people.

In the first picture, God not only consumes man and beast, He also destroys the idols people worship. God will "stretch out" His "hand upon Judah, and upon all the inhabitants of Jerusalem." The words "stretch out mine hand" indicates God is about to act in an unusual manner, and use means beyond what is common. Any work of God where He mentions His "hand" calls attention to His works.

"Judah" and "all the inhabitants of Jerusalem" will be the recipients of the judgment to come. The Northern Kingdom, Israel, had already been led into exile. The Southern Kingdom, Judah, to whom Zephaniah prophesied, thought themselves to be safe, having survived the judgment on Israel. This is why Zephaniah declares God's judgment is not only on "Judah," but also over the entire holy city "of Jerusalem." No one will escape.

God will "cut off the remnant of Baal from this place, and the name of the Chemarims with the priests." "Chemarims" refer to the priests of Baal and "the priests" is most likely a reference to the remaining false priests in the land. Thanks to the evil influence and leadership of King Manasseh, Judah was steeped in idolatry. "Baal," the rain god of the Canaanites, was a fertility cult involving temple prostitution in worship. God promised to "cut off" or "root out" this vile religion from Israel once for all. The presence of pagan priests called "Chemarims," were at the heart of Judah's sinfulness. The word "Chemarims" means "black-robed," referring no doubt to their satanic dress. God's judgment will "root-out" the idolatrous priests and the false "priests" in the land.

Verse 5

"And them that worship the host of heaven upon the housetops; and them that worship and that swear by the LORD, and that swear by Malcham;"

Before King Josiah's reforms, the people of the land "worshipped the host of heaven upon the housetops." In other words, they worshipped the sun, stars,

and moon upon their roofs (Jeremiah 19:13). It is possible they chose their “housetops” because that would place them nearer to the objects they worshipped, or brought the objects nearer to them. False worship is always associated with superstition and deception.

“And them that worship and that swear by the LORD” they worshipped the sun, moon, and stars, in the name of Jehovah. They were hypocrites who worshipped what they wanted to worship and did it in the name of “the LORD.” “LORD” is the word for “Jehovah.” The Lord promised to “cut off” in judgment those who worshipped other gods in His name!

“Malcham,” also known as “Moloch,” was the fierce Ammonite god to whom little children were sacrificed (1 Kings 11:33; Amos 5:26). Imagine lying on your rooftop worshipping the sun, moon, and stars in the name of the Lord while offering your children as sacrifices to a Canaanite god!

Zephaniah’s words in verse 5, while spoken to Judah, are a convicting word people today who adopt their own methods and objects of worship but boast they still worship the Lord Jesus Christ. The prophet Ezekiel said, *“Go ye, serve ye every one his idols, and hereafter also, if ye will not hearken unto me: but pollute ye my holy name no more with your gifts, and with your idols”* (Ezekiel 20:39). All types of worship are abominable to the Lord whenever men depart in any measure from the word of God.

Verse 6

“And them that are turned back from the LORD; and those that have not sought the LORD, nor enquired for him.”

“And them” are words used by Zephaniah to include, as it were, those previously mentioned and everyone who “turned back from the LORD.” The reference to “them that are turned back from the LORD” indicates the people of Judah once knew God but had deliberately turned their backs upon Him. “Turned” means “to flinch, to retreat, to apostatize.”

Instead of seeking Jehovah, they intentionally and willfully turned away from Him, and sought, as it were, to destroy worshipping Jehovah by “not seeking the LORD” or “enquiring for him.” When men stop seeking the Lord and cease to pray to Him, it will not be long until they embrace other gods to worship. This may seem trivial to Judah and to men today but through the prophet Zephaniah, God declares judgment is coming upon “them that are turned back from the LORD.”

Verses 14-16

Verse 14

“The great day of the LORD is near, it is near, and hasteth greatly, even the voice of the day of the LORD: the mighty man shall cry there bitterly.”

When men worship the gods of their own making they quickly lose all sensitivity to God’s voice and presence. Zephaniah, in this verse, uses the words “the great day of the LORD is near, it is near, and hasteth greatly” to arouse the people to the reality of God’s coming wrath upon them. He is attempting to awaken them from their spiritual stupor by telling them what is about to happen will be terrible.

By defining the coming judgment as “the great day of the LORD,” Zephaniah is saying what the people endure is “God’s judgment.” This was important for them to understand and it is important for us to understand. Many people only identify Jehovah God as a God of love and mercy. He certainly is a God of love and mercy, but He is also a God of wrath and judgment (Revelation 6:16-17).

“Hasteth greatly” means judgment is coming and coming fast. Men, living in time and limited by sinfulness, easily misjudge how quickly God can send judgment (1 Thessalonians 5:3). Judah could not imagine judgment was anywhere close to them.

Zephaniah knew the Chaldeans would come speedily and even the bravest defenders of Judah would “cry there bitterly. The coming judgment is described as “the voice of the day of the LORD.” The “voice” of the Lord who had called to them in mercy is now the “voice” of judgment. When the “voice of the day of the LORD” comes, there will be bitter and terrible cries heard from “the mighty men” of Judah. “Cry” and “bitterly” stresses the truth the people of God will feel and experience during judgment. They will not be idle spectators as they had watched Israel be taken into captivity. Judgment will affect them personally.

Verse 15-16

“That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, A day of the trumpet and alarm against the fenced cities, and against the high towers.

Zephaniah describes the “day of the LORD” by piling up words and phrases designed to produce fear. The people had been listening to false prophets and were now despisers of Jehovah and hypocritical worshippers. They needed to be shaken from their self-confidence that all was well between them and God.

The prophet's words, "Day of wrath, trouble, distress, wasteness, desolation, darkness, gloominess, clouds, and thick darkness," makes it very clear the land will be dark and no one will escape God's judgment. The "trumpet and alarms" will sound everywhere but the people will find no safety in "the fenced cities" or in "the high towers." There would be no defense strong enough to withstand the judgment of God.

If Judah failed to repent there would be no escaping the coming judgment. God had been patient and longsuffering, but she abused His patience, and now He would put forth His power. The same is true of nations today. The glorious gospel has been preached and God's truth has circled the globe numerous times. God's patience is nearly past and the day of grace almost over.

As we read Zephaniah's words to Judah, we are reminded of the description in Revelation of those who will say to the rocks and the mountains, "...*Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb*" (Revelation 6:16-17). Here is the picture of where sinful humanity is headed. The wrath of God will be poured out upon this earth and men who have no hope will find no place to escape.

Reactions to the Coming Day of the Lord (Zephaniah 2:3)

Verse 3

"Seek ye the LORD, all ye meek of the earth, which have wrought his judgment; seek righteousness, seek meekness: it may be ye shall be hid in the day of the LORD'S anger."

The greater part of Judah was headed for judgment and there was nothing Zephaniah or any prophet could do. However, Zephaniah addressed the "meek of the earth" showing he believed some may repent and heed his warnings. The "meek of the earth" refers to whosoever would hear and heed the warnings, not just Judah. A "meek" person is someone who is humble and completely depends upon the Lord for help and salvation.

Zephaniah calls upon "the meek of the earth" to "seek the LORD." "Seek" means "to search out, strive after, desire." As judgment drew near, those who had "wrought his judgment" or acted in compliance with God's will, are encouraged to go after the Lord in prayer and brokenness. Zephaniah seems to be saying if there is ever a time to "seek righteousness" and "meekness," it is when judgment is close.

"It may be ye shall be hid in the day of the LORD'S anger" is no guarantee they would be spared. However, if the people humble themselves and "seek righteousness and meekness" it may be God will show mercy again and spare them. Remember, Zephaniah's name means "the Lord hides." There seems to

be a ray of hope for Judah, even in the name of the prophet who warned them to prepare for the coming “day of the Lord.”

Conclusion

The coming judgment of the Lord is an important biblical truth that we must take seriously, because it tells us where we are headed and what is going to take place in the world. During the coming Day of the Lord, God will send tribulation to the world, judge the nations, save His people Israel, and then establish His righteous kingdom.

Like the prophet Jeremiah, Zephaniah begged the people of Judah to trust God and turn from their sins, but both people and priests refused to obey. God would have spared the nation until the last moment before judgment came, but the leaders and the people were insensitive to God’s call.

The “day of the Lord” is soon to come upon this earth. The question is, “Are you ready?” Unless you know Jesus Christ as your Savior, you will have no place to hide. If you are not saved, seek the Lord today. Call upon His name and repent of unbelief. He will save you and hide you from the wrath to come (Colossians 3:1-4; 1 Thessalonians 1:10).

Amen.