

A Prophecy of God's Judgment

Zephaniah 1:1-3

Zephaniah 1:1-3: *"The word of the Lord which came to Zephaniah the son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah. ²"I will utterly consume everything from the face of the earth," says the Lord; ³"I will consume man and beast; I will consume the birds of the heavens, the fish of the sea, and the stumbling blocks along with the wicked. I will cut off man from the face of the earth," says the Lord."*

Background Notes

Verse 1 reveals that the prophet Zephaniah was the great-great-grandson of Hezekiah. It is believed that this "Hezekiah" was good King Hezekiah, who reigned over Judah at the end of the 8th century BC. Thus Zephaniah was related to the kings of Judah, and he was the only prophet of royal blood.

Zephaniah prophesied during the days of King Josiah of Judah, who reigned from 640 BC to 609 BC, a reign of thirty-one years. King Josiah came to the throne when he was only eight years old, and he was a one of Judah's good kings. In fact, it was during his reign that a great revival took place in Judah. Read about this in 2 Kings 22-23 and 2 Chronicles 34-35. Josiah's revival is dated at about 621 BC.

Zephaniah's prophecy may have paved the way for Josiah's revival. Remember, the two kings who preceded Josiah were both wicked kings, Manasseh and Amon. They practiced idolatry and led the kingdom downhill, morally and spiritually. They even destroyed all the available copies of Scripture. But in 621 BC a hidden copy of the Law was found in the Temple. It was brought to Huldah the prophetess. She explained that God was going to bring judgment on Judah, according to the curses written in God's Law, because the people had forsaken the Lord and worshiped idols. Her message triggered a nationwide repentance that resulted in Josiah's great revival.

Unfortunately, the revival was short-lived, and the people soon went back to their sinful ways. As a result, God allowed Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian armies to sweep in and conquer the kingdom of Judah. Zephaniah's prophecy of judgment may have paved the way for Josiah's' revival, or it may have followed the revival when the people returned to their sinful ways. In any case, Zephaniah's prophecy looked forward to God's immediate judgment of Judah, and it also looks to God's worldwide judgment in the End Times. Zephaniah's prophecy also looks forward to Israel's blessing when the Lord returns (chapter 3).

Doctrinal Points

1. During the coming Tribulation period, the earth will suffer greatly.

In verses 2-3, Zephaniah looked beyond the immediate future to the far future - to the End Times. He saw the judgment of God making a clean sweep of the earth. *“I will utterly consume everything from the face of the earth,” says the Lord; “I will consume man and beast; I will consume the birds of the heavens, the fish of the sea, and the stumbling blocks along with the wicked. I will cut off man from the face of the earth,” says the Lord.*”

The phrase “face of the earth” (v2-3) can also be translated “face of the land,” but it appears that Zephaniah had more in mind than just the land of Israel when he pronounced God’s judgment. When will this worldwide judgment take place? We believe Zephaniah was speaking about the coming Tribulation period of the End Times. The next event on God’s prophetic calendar is the Rapture of the Church (1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4). No prophecies have to be fulfilled before the Rapture can take place, so the Lord could return for His Church at any time - it could take place today! The Rapture is imminent!

The Tribulation period will come at some time after the Rapture of the Church. It will last for seven years, based on the prophecy of Daniel 9. We believe that the Church will not go through the judgments of the Tribulation period. After the Tribulation, the Lord will return with His saints to this earth and set up His glorious 1000-year millennial Kingdom. All the Bible prophecies of worldwide blessing on this earth refer to this Kingdom time. And all the prophecies of worldwide judgment on this earth predicted in the Bible refer to the Tribulation period, so Zephaniah 1:1-3 refers to the Tribulation of the last days.

Notice the doctrinal point: during the coming Tribulation period, the earth will suffer greatly. The birds, the fish, the animals and the land itself will suffer. Listen to the words of Isaiah 24:1 concerning this same Tribulation period: *“Behold, the Lord makes the earth empty and makes it waste, distorts its surface and scatters abroad its inhabitants.”* And verses 3-6: *“The land shall be entirely emptied and utterly plundered, for the Lord has spoken this word. ⁴ The earth mourns and fades away, the world languishes and fades away; the haughty people of the earth languish. ⁵ The earth is also defiled under its inhabitants, because they have transgressed the laws, changed the ordinance, broken the everlasting covenant. ⁶ Therefore the curse has devoured the earth, and those who dwell in it are desolate. Therefore the inhabitants of the earth are burned, and few men are left.”*

Also listen to the description of the first and second “Trumpet Judgments” of the Tribulation period, as given in Revelation 8:7-9: *“The first angel sounded: And hail and fire followed, mingled with blood, and they were thrown to the earth. And a*

third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up.⁸ Then the second angel sounded: And something like a great mountain burning with fire was thrown into the sea, and a third of the sea became blood.⁹ And a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.” The Bible teaches that during the coming Tribulation period, the earth will suffer greatly.

2. During the coming Tribulation period, mankind will suffer greatly.

Zephaniah 1:3 says that God will cut off man from the face of the earth. Not only will the land with its plant and animal life suffer greatly during the Tribulation period, but people will also suffer greatly as well. There will be much death during this period. Again, Isaiah 24:6: *“Therefore the curse has devoured the earth, and those who dwell in it are desolate. Therefore the inhabitants of the earth are burned, and few men are left.”*

In His Olivet Discourse our Lord spoke about this future time. Matthew 24:21-22: *“For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened.”*

Under the sixth Trumpet Judgment, a third of mankind on the earth will be killed by three plagues. Revelation 9:13-18: *“Then the sixth angel sounded: And I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God, saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, “Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.” So the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour and day and month and year, were released to kill a third of mankind. Now the number of the army of the horsemen was two hundred million; I heard the number of them. And thus I saw the horses in the vision: those who sat on them had breastplates of fiery red, hyacinth blue, and sulfur yellow; and the heads of the horses were like the heads of lions; and out of their mouths came fire, smoke, and brimstone. By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed—by the fire and the smoke and the brimstone which came out of their mouths.”*

Think of it - **one third of the earth’s population wiped out!** And that is the number of people who will die from just **one** of the judgments of the Tribulation period, and there are many others.

You might wonder, “How is all this devastation possible?” Well, it’s really not difficult to imagine. In view of recent terror-related tragic events, how many people would die if terrorists got their hands on nuclear and biological weapons? That’s just one possibility of how God may allow unbelievers to reap what they have sown by deliberately turning away from God. Make no mistake about it: the Bible teaches that during the coming Tribulation period, mankind will suffer greatly.

Practical Application

Don't give up hope for another "Great Awakening"!

In view of the coming Tribulation period (and it may occur in the near future, when we consider the world situation), an obvious question comes to the mind of the believer: "Is it too late for a change of hearts in our nation? Is it too late to respond to God's wake-up call? Have we, as a nation, reached the point of no return?" I trust it is **not** too late!

America has had two great spiritual awakenings in its history. Let's pray for a third. It could happen! As you know, an "awakening" is not the same as a "revival," technically speaking. In a revival, God's people are **revived**. In an awakening, unbelievers are **converted**.

Let us pray that a grassroots spiritual awakening will be triggered in our nation at the present time. The promises of 2 Chronicles 7:14, although given to ancient Israel, can certainly be applied to our nation: *"If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land."*

Don't give up hope for another Great Awakening!