

Zephaniah:
God's Judgment and Mercy
Lesson 6

Key Verse

That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him,
though he be not far from every one of us.

—Acts 17:27

Key Verse Thought: Read the Key Verse and use the following definitions for better understanding of it:

- **seek:** *to seek God means to turn to Him, to strive humbly and sincerely to follow and obey Him.*
- **haply:** *nevertheless, but stronger meaning though indeed.*

This basically sums up the message the prophets continually presented before the people: to seek the Lord, for He is never far from His people. God never left His people; they left Him.

Emphasis: We are to understand the importance of turning to God, striving humbly and sincerely to follow and obey Him. If Christians would just do that, they would find Him – for He is not far. He is always waiting for His people to return to Him.

Lesson Summary: In this lesson, we take a break from the kings of Judah to study another minor prophet book, Zephaniah, as close to where it belongs in Judah's history as possible. Remember that we learned about King Manasseh and King Amon in our last lesson. Both of them were bad kings, and even though Manasseh finally humbled himself before God, King Amon continued in his sin never humbling himself before God. From this, we understand that the nation of Judah was in a deplorable condition.

The book of Zephaniah begins with, “**The word of the LORD which came unto Zephaniah the son of Cushi ... son of Hizkiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah**” (Zephaniah 1:1). He was the descendant of good King Hezekiah, and that means he was related to King Josiah. We will study the kingdom of King Josiah after learning of Habakkuk

next week. Zephaniah boldly spoke of the day of the Lord – and that it was coming soon. He understood God was displeased with His people. Zephaniah warned of immediate judgment and destruction. He encouraged the people to, “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” (Zephaniah 2:3).

Zephaniah warned the people of God’s coming judgment, but he left them with the hope that God promised to restore His people.

Suggested Bible Reading to Prepare for This Lesson

- Monday: Zephaniah 1
- Tuesday: Zephaniah 2
- Wednesday: Zephaniah 3
- Thursday: Zephaniah 1
- Friday: Zephaniah 2
- Saturday: Zephaniah 3

Zephaniah:

God’s Judgment and Mercy

1. Zephaniah Gives the Warning (Zephaniah 1)
 - Zephaniah speaks during the reign of King Josiah
 - The day of the Lord
2. Zephaniah Tells of God’s Judgments (Zephaniah 2)
 - Seek the Lord
 - God’s judgment upon the enemy
3. Zephaniah Tells of God’s Restoration (Zephaniah 3)
 - A call for the people to return to God
 - God will restore His people

Note: In our last lesson, we looked at King Manasseh and King Amon; kings' fourteen and fifteen of Judah. The state of the nation Judah was deplorable. Manasseh was very wicked, and although he humbled himself before God and took away the strange gods from the land, his son Amon restored them once he became king, becoming worse. Amon died after being king for only two years, and his son, Josiah, became king of Judah. We will study his reign after learning of Habakkuk next week.

1. Zephaniah Gives the Warning (Zephaniah 1)

We can read exactly who Zephaniah is. “The word of the LORD which came unto Zephaniah the son of Cushi ... son of Hizkiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah” (Zephaniah 1:1). We see that the prophet Zephaniah spoke during the days of King Josiah, but notice that he was of the lineage of good King Hezekiah (spelled Hizkiah here). So not only did he speak during the reign of King Josiah, king of Judah, he was kin to him (we will study King Josiah, the last *good* king of Judah, after we learn of the prophet, Habakkuk in our next lesson).

Think back for a minute about what we have learned. When God gave instructions to Moses as he prepared to send His people into the Promised Land to conquer it, part of the instructions were to drive out the people and eliminate the gods of the land.

10. And he said, Behold, I make a covenant: before all thy people I will do marvels, such as have not been done in all the earth, nor in any nation: and all the people among which thou *art* shall see the work of the LORD: for it *is* a terrible thing that I will do with thee. 11. Observe thou that which I command thee this day: behold, I drive out before thee the Amorite, and the Canaanite, and the Hittite, and the Perizzite, and the Hivite, and the Jebusite. 12. Take heed to thyself, lest thou make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land whither thou goest, lest it be for a snare in the midst of thee: 13. But ye shall destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down their groves: 14. For thou shalt worship no other god: for the LORD, whose name *is* Jealous, *is* a jealous God: 15. Lest thou make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and they go a

whoring after their gods, and do sacrifice unto their gods, and *one* call thee, and thou eat of his sacrifice; 16. And thou take of their daughters unto thy sons, and their daughters go a whoring after their gods, and make thy sons go a whoring after their gods. 17. Thou shalt make thee no molten gods. (Exodus 34:10-17)

Later, when Moses called all of the new generation of people to stand to make a covenant with God, he also reminded them what would happen if they forsook God for idols (see Deuteronomy 29:10-29). Especially note the following:

20. The LORD will not spare him, but then the anger of the LORD and his jealousy shall smoke against that man, and all the curses that are written in this book shall lie upon him, and the LORD shall blot out his name from under heaven... 24. Even all nations shall say, Wherefore hath the LORD done thus unto this land? what *meaneth* the heat of this great anger? 25. Then men shall say, Because they have forsaken the covenant of the LORD God of their fathers, which he made with them when he brought them forth out of the land of Egypt: 26. For they went and served other gods, and worshipped them, gods whom they knew not, and *whom* he had not given unto them: 27. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against this land, to bring upon it all the curses that are written in this book: 28. And the LORD rooted them out of their land in anger, and in wrath, and in great indignation, and cast them into another land, as *it is this day*. (Deuteronomy 29:20, 24-28)

We have watched as the kings of Judah repeatedly wavered between worship of God and idol worship – disobeying God’s commands upon entering into the land of promise. Even in our last lesson as we learned about King Manasseh and his son, Amon, we found the people deep in idol worship. Because they had disobeyed God’s commands, they should have expected God’s judgment. Judah had seen God’s judgment fall upon Israel as they were carried captive by Assyria.

Do you remember what we have learned? “Surely the Lord GOD will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7). God always let his servants, the prophets, know what was in store before it happened – that is why the prophets were always warning God’s people. Notice how Zephaniah begins, “I will utterly consume all *things* from off the land, saith the LORD” (Zephaniah 1:2). But more specifically, see the following. “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; 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; 6. And them that are turned back from the LORD; and *those* that have not sought the LORD, nor enquired for him” (Zephaniah 1:4-6). The word **chemarims** means “*priests who led the people in idolatrous worship.*” The word **malcham** means “*the national idol of the Ammonites.*” God had promised to remove both man and beast from the land – leaving it completely empty. The people had quit seeking after God.

Because the people had continually rejected God as their Lord, God would now be to them a judge. “Hold thy peace at the presence of the Lord GOD: for the day of the LORD *is* at hand: for the LORD hath prepared a sacrifice, he hath bid his guests” (Zephaniah 1:7). God was prepared to send judgment, and His prophets are once again, warning the people. The phrase “day of the Lord” is found in Zephaniah seven times (and twenty-six times in the Old Testament!). God has called man from the beginning of time to walk with Him in a right relationship. God’s people had entered into a covenant relationship with Him before entering into this Promised Land – yet they had forsaken their part of that covenant. Because the people had failed so miserably, constantly forgetting God and worshiping false idols, God had declared that his judgment was at hand. “And it shall come to pass at that time, *that* I will search Jerusalem with candles, and punish the men that are settled on their lees: that say in their heart, The LORD will not do good, neither will he do evil” (Zephaniah 1:12). The phrase “the men that are settled on their lees” can best be understood as the basest of the men – those who were content being foul with no regard for God or the things of God. Can this kind of a person please God? (Hint – see: Hebrews 11:6: “But without faith *it is* impossible to please *him*: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and *that* he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.”) In order to please God, one must seek him – with all of one’s heart.

Sadly, even with the prophets' warnings of the immediate judgment ("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" Zephaniah 1:14), we have yet to see the nation truly turn back to God, remaining focused upon Him.

A Deeper Path: The people of Judah had added many false gods to their land and their religious practices. Because they did not hold to God, alone, God declared judgment upon His people. Remember again, what Jesus declared, "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon" (Matthew 6:24). Jesus was delivering the same message God had reminded the people of all throughout the Old Testament: that there was only place for *one* #1 in a person's life – and it must be God.

See one reason the people had to be removed from the land: they had not given the land the Sabbath rest that God had required from them. "2. Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When ye come into the land which I give you, then shall the land keep a sabbath unto the LORD. 3. Six years thou shalt sow thy field, and six years thou shalt prune thy vineyard, and gather in the fruit thereof; 4. But in the seventh year shall be a sabbath of rest unto the land, a sabbath for the LORD: thou shalt neither sow thy field, nor prune thy vineyard. 5. That which groweth of its own accord of thy harvest thou shalt not reap, neither gather the grapes of thy vine undressed: for it is a year of rest unto the land" (Leviticus 25:2-5).

Read Zephaniah 1:7 again. "Hold thy peace at the presence of the Lord GOD: for the day of the LORD is at hand: for the LORD hath prepared a sacrifice, he hath bid his guests" (Zephaniah 1:7). Remember that this verse tells us that God was prepared to send judgment. God sent His prophets once again to warn the people. In addition, notice in this verse that God said he had prepared a sacrifice. See that **bid** means "*made clean; set aside for the worship of God*" and **guests** means "*called upon for a certain task – i.e.: to call upon God and serve Him.*" This sacrifice mentioned could be telling of the sacrifice God had prepared in His Son, Jesus. And consider that because of that sacrifice, when God would call upon man's hearts and He would save them. This would then allow those saved to be able to serve God. See the following: "10. By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. ... 12. But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right

hand of God ... 14. For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified ... 20. By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh ... 22. Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. 23. Let us hold fast the profession of *our* faith without wavering; (for he *is* faithful that promised;) ... 38. Now the just shall live by faith: but if *any man* draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him” (Hebrews 10 – selected verses). As we will learn in our next book of the prophets, Habakkuk, to “live by faith” is one of his messages.

2. Zephaniah Tells of God’s Judgment (Zephaniah 2)

Zephaniah called for the people to come together, before the day of the Lord came. “1. Gather yourselves together, yea, gather together, O nation not desired; 2. Before the decree bring forth, *before* the day pass as the chaff, before the fierce anger of the LORD come upon you, before the day of the LORD'S anger come upon you” (Zephaniah 2:1-2). They were encouraged to rally together before that day of the Lord. Then they were to, “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” (Zephaniah 2:3). Zephaniah wanted the people to seek God – for he was speaking the words from God’s heart. God desired His people to seek God and His righteousness. If they would turn back to Him in true repentance, maybe God would show his mercy and turn away from His anger (remember Jonah and the city of Nineveh?).

Zephaniah then began to list the desolations that would befall the enemy nations around Judah. God had heard the reproach and reviling (see Zephaniah 2:8) the enemy had showed God’s people, and promised destruction for, “This shall they have for their pride, because they have reproached and magnified *themselves* against the people of the LORD of hosts” (Zephaniah 2:10). These people (the Moabites and Ammonites) were the descendants of Abraham’s nephew, Lot. They had become an enemy of God’s people, and remained the enemy of God’s people. Because they remained enemies, desolations would come. “The LORD *will be* terrible unto them ...” (Zephaniah 2:11a).

Moreover, see what he says to the nation that thinks themselves greater than God. “13. And he will stretch out his hand against the north, and destroy Assyria; and will make Nineveh a desolation, *and* dry like a wilderness. 15. This *is* the rejoicing city that dwelt carelessly, that said

in her heart, *I am, and there is none beside me*: how is she become a desolation, a place for beasts to lie down in! every one that passeth by her shall hiss, *and wag his hand*” (Zephaniah 2:13, 15). If you remember, God had allowed Assyria to carry Israel captive from their Promised Land (the land of Israel). God was promising this proud nation that they too, would be desolated because of their pride. Remember that in the days of Jonah, that great city, Nineveh, repented and sought God. However, through this verse (and others) we understand that they once again turned from God, and thought of themselves as, “*I am, and there is none beside me*” (Zephaniah 1:15). Remember, there is only one **I Am** and that is God Himself. And, just as this verse promised destruction to the city Nineveh, as we learned in the book of Nahum, Nineveh (the capital of Assyria), was completely destroyed.

A Deeper Path: Just as Zephaniah called the Israelites to gather together before the day of the Lord (in Zephaniah 2:1-2), there is a similar call to the Christian Church today. “*Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching*” (Hebrews 10:25). We too, are to be looking for the day of the Lord. However, unlike the Israelites who were promised judgment and destruction for rejecting their God, we are looking forward to the day that Jesus will come and take His children (Christians) to heaven with Him. Then God will judge.

3. Zephaniah Tells of God’s Restoration (Zephaniah 3)

However, even with the promise that God would destroy their enemies, God wanted His people to wait upon Him. Once God had purged the land, “*For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to serve him with one consent*” (Zephaniah 3:9). God not only had a plan, He had a reason for all of this destruction. He wanted man to call upon Him and serve Him – in unity. They were to reject any form of idol worship forever.

Notice that God said that there would be found a remnant. “*The remnant of Israel shall not do iniquity, nor speak lies; neither shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth: for they shall feed and lie down, and none shall make them afraid*” (Zephaniah 3:13). This is an indication that not every single person in Israel had failed. Some still truly believed in and worshiped God. (Think back for a minute when Elijah thought he was the only one left who believed in God. God

told him that there were seven thousand who had not bowed a knee to Baal. There were people left who believed in God.) As you consider that, think of the Israelite boys that we have a record of in the book of Daniel – Daniel and his three friends. They remained faithful after being taken captive into Babylon. We will study them later.

Just as God promised He would purge the land and the people would serve Him and Him only, God then promised restoration to His people.

17. The LORD thy God in the midst of thee *is* mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing. 18. I will gather *them that are* sorrowful for the solemn assembly, *who* are of thee, *to whom* the reproach of it *was* a burden. 19. Behold, at that time I will undo all that afflict thee: and I will save her that halteth, and gather her that was driven out; and I will get them praise and fame in every land where they have been put to shame.
(Zephaniah 3:17-19)

God would not only save his people and bring them back into their land, but God would judge the nations that had brought His people destruction.

Finally, Zephaniah had a wonderful word to leave with God’s people. “At that time will I bring you *again*, even in the time that I gather you: for I will make you a name and a praise among all people of the earth, when I turn back your captivity before your eyes, saith the LORD” (Zephaniah 3:20). At the right time, God would not only bring them home and judge the enemy nations, but God would cause the entire world to recognize that they were God’s people. They would also understand that God was the One who brought them home.

A Deeper Path: In the coming lessons, we will see this restoration of Judah into their homeland, but they were not restored as a recognized nation until the year 1948. There will be a day when God will fully return to His people and the covenant will be restored, but see when this will happen. “For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in” (Romans 11:25). God has allowed a period of time when the Gentile

nations, those who recognize Jesus as God's Son and the Savior of the world, can establish a covenant relationship with God.

Zephaniah 1-3 at a Glance:

Chapter 1: The day of the Lord is near; “they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the LORD” (verse 17) and “the whole land shall be devoured by the fire of his jealousy” (verse 18)

Chapter 2: Called for the people to gather together to, “Seek ye the LORD ... seek righteousness, seek meekness,” judgment pronounced against the enemies around who had gone against, or rejoiced over the troubles of Israel

Chapter 3: God would remove the pride from His people and they would learn to trust in God; after their affliction, God would restore them to their land – and make them a name again

Reinforcement: Zephaniah was related to the king, and he received a word from God warning that destruction was imminent for Judah. God promised to search the land, punishing His people for forgetting their covenant with Him. Zephaniah also understood that God would use the enemy nations to chastise His people, and then pronounced judgment God would send to those nations He used to chastise His people. However, God would one day bring healing and restoration to His people and their land. We will learn the affect of Zephaniah's preaching upon King Josiah as we study him in a couple of weeks.

Zephaniah called for the people to seek the Lord – seeking righteousness.

Closing: It would be good to close with a short prayer reinforcing today's lesson. Always include any prayer requests you may have. *Today pray that we will learn to turn to God, striving humbly and sincerely to follow and obey Him, remembering that He is never far from us.*