

## ZEPHANIAH

### Prophet of ‘Day of the Lord’

**Historical context.** Zephaniah preached in the Southern Kingdom during the reign of King Josiah, around 630 B.C. In its introduction to this book, *The Catholic Youth Bible* states:

*“Zephaniah follows the footsteps of the classical Old Testament prophets in denouncing the wrongdoing of society. His main contribution is considering pride (1:6, 2:10, 3:11) as the source of problems such as smugness (1:12), rebellion (3:2), and treachery (3:11). All these attitudes toward God lead to idolatry and social sin. Although all people sin, leaders have a greater responsibility, and their sins will provoke a harsh judgment during the coming day of the Lord (1:14). Only those who worship God humbly and who seek justice will be spared. Zephaniah calls them the remnant (3:12-13), meaning “a little piece that is left over.” They are the ones who will stay faithful to God through both good times and bad.*

*The book ends with a song of joy reassuring the people of Jerusalem that God still loves them and will save them in the end. We are not sure if the song is from Zephaniah himself or is the addition of a later editor. It is as if the writer knows that when people are experiencing the negative results of sinful actions, they need to be reassured that they are still loved. God’s punishment is to teach us, not to destroy us. Therefore, God’s people should not despair but keep their trust in God” (p. 1093).*

Though we live in a fallen world surrounded by evil, we can hope in the perfect Kingdom of God to come, and we can allow any bad experiences that touch us now to purify us from sin.

#### Division and content of chapters

- Oracles condemning the idolatrous practices of Judah (1:1-2:3).
- Oracles condemning the nations for their harsh treatment of Israel (2:4-15).
- Oracle against Jerusalem (3:1-7)
- The final section sounds more positive (3:8-20). The punishment of the nations will bring about

conversion (3:8-13), leading the prophet to proclaim a *Song of Joy* that God will once more restore the fortunes of the chosen people (3:14-20).

#### CHAPTERS 1:1 to 2:3— Day of the Lord, Day of Doom

*“I will completely sweep away all things from the face of the earth....” (v.2)*

*“...I will overthrow the wicked....” (v.3)*

*“...I will destroy from this place the last vestige of Baal....” (v.4)*

*“...The Lord has prepared a slaughter feast....” (v.7)*

[The day of the Lord] *“A day of wrath is that day...a day of destruction and desolation....” (v.15)*

*“Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to save them....” (v.18)*

This first section of Zephaniah can be divided into four parts:

- **1:2-6—Cosmic destruction.** God sweeps across the universe destroying everything in sight, man and beast alike. The reason for God’s fierce anger is Judah’s worship of false gods.
- **1:7-13—Day of the Lord, a day of slaughter.** The Day of the Lord is normally a happy celebration on which animals are sacrificed and shared in a big meal. But because of the people’s relentless worship of false gods, their festival day will be turned into a day of slaughter of its city’s leaders and inhabitants.
- **1:14-18—Day of God’s wrath.** These verses graphically describe the destruction that will come to Judah because of their sins against God.
- **2:1-3—Probation, perhaps for the humble.** Zephaniah recognizes the “possibility” of shelter for the humble when devastation comes on the day of the Lord.

**Pause:** On a global level, where is there widespread evil that deserves to be smashed by the wrath of God?

## CHAPTER 2:4-15 — Oracle against the nations

*“For Gaza shall be forsaken, and Ashkelon shall be a waste, Ashdod they shall drive out at midday, and Ekron shall be uprooted.”* (v.4)

*“Woe to you who dwell by the seacoast, to the Cretan folk! The word of the Lord is against you; I will humble you, land of the Philistines, and leave you to perish without an inhabitant!”* (v.5)

As we have seen in other prophetic writings, God often used the neighboring nations to punish Israel and Judah for their failure to live up to their covenant with God. But that does not mean that these enemies of Israel and Judah would get off scot free for their sins. They would not, as the oracle states.

## CHAPTER 3: Words of condemnation and words of hope for Jerusalem

*“Woe to the city, rebellious and polluted...! She hears no voice, accepts no correction....”* (vv 1-2)

*“For then I will change and purify the lips of the peoples that they may call upon the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord.”*(v.9)

*“Shout for joy, O daughter Zion! Sing joyfully, O Israel! Be glad and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has removed the judgment against you....”* (vv 14-15)

*“...I will save the lame, and assemble the outcasts.... I will bring you home...I will bring about your restoration....”* (vv 19-20)

This chapter can be divided into three parts:

- Words of condemnation for Jerusalem and her leaders (vv 1-5) and against the nations (vv 6-8)
- Words of hope and a promise of restoration(vv. 9-13)
- Two psalms (14-18a, 18b-20).

**Verses 9-13.** A noticeable transition appears here, a movement from condemnation to hope: *“I will change and purify the lips of the people”* (v.9). In verses 12-13, salvation is offered to “the remnant...a people humble and lowly.” In Matt 21:29, Jesus will say: “Learn from me, for I am *gentle and humble of heart.*”

**Verses 14-20—Joy.** The book which began with condemnation ends with a burst of joy. The people’s God is noted for wrath until he suddenly reveals his face of love (v.17).The psalm is a prayer of praise for the God of Israel. A renewed Israel celebrates its God and a rejoicing God exults in his people.

Finally, verses 14-18 are sometimes used as a first reading for a feast of Mary who is seen as the pre-eminent daughter of Jerusalem.

**Pause:** What steals your joy? What gives you joy at this time in your life?

## Resources

- The Collegeville Bible Commentary
- The Collegeville Bible Handbook
- The Daily Study Bible Series –Twelve Prophets 2