

The Prophecy of Zephaniah

The prophecy of Zephaniah comprises a declaration of coming judgments, and a vision of hope for a faithful remnant. In this article, we shall consider some of the main points out of each chapter, which it is hoped will provide the impetus for further study.

CHAPTER 1 – SECRET IDOLATRY

The first chapter describes the judgments to come upon Judah, against the idol worship that went on in the land:

“I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this place, and the name of the Chemarims with the priests: and them that worship the host of heaven upon the housetops; and them that worship and that swear by Yahweh and that sware by Malcham: And them that are turned back from Yahweh; and those that have not sought Yahweh, nor enquired for him” (Zeph. 1:4-6).

Notice that from speaking of the idols themselves, the prophet turns his attention to the worshippers, particularly three categories:

Worshippers in Secret

These worshipped on the housetops, where they could not be seen. The background to the prophecy is that it was given during the reign of Josiah, who legislated that all of the people could worship no other Deity, but Yahweh. They hid themselves and worshipped where they could not be seen on the top of their houses, and assumed themselves to be safe from the king. However, Yahweh Whom they had betrayed sees all things, being everywhere by His Spirit. They were not hidden from Divine Scrutiny, as all things are open and visible to Him. There is an obvious lesson for ourselves here: Yahweh sees all that we do. We can commit secret sins which our brethren and sisters don't know about – but we cannot hide ourselves from our Heavenly Father who knows the position of all his children. As the Psalmist wrote: “Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thoughts afar off ...” (Psa. 139:2). Even our individual thoughts are known to him – therefore if we are tempted to do a thing, let us just remember who is watching when we do it! Surely if we always bear that in mind, then we would not do half the amount that we do.

Dual Allegiance

This second class of people worshipped Yahweh, and also the pagan deity Malcham. They evidently assumed that as they worshipped Yahweh, that they should receive blessings from His Hand. Yet, Yahweh is a jealous God, and will not tolerate the worship of idols attached to the worship of Him. Down through the ages, men have perhaps been of this class more than many of the others. In the great Catholic apostasy, and her daughter harlot churches, we have a mixture of truth and error. The kind of wrong doctrine that does the most damage is that which has a smattering of truth to make it more respectable, but denies that same truth by other doctrines which nullify it.

In this self-seeking age, there is another aspect to this also: men desire to bow before the altar of Mammon at the same time as worshipping Yahweh. Hence Messiah taught:

“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” (Mat. 6:24).

Mammon is wealth personified, and it is in the pursuit of riches that the blind fall into a snare. Seeking the things of this life, rather than being wholly devoted to Yahweh, men seek their own good, and exert their energies in pursuing those things which time will testify are but vanities. We cannot serve two masters acceptably, and so much choose the one or the other in the time that remains.

Irreligious and Atheists

This third class are those who have turned back from Yahweh, “and have not sought Yahweh, nor enquired for him” (Zeph. 1:6). Here we have the spirit of those who have settled back in an apathetic refusal to seek after Him. It is written that “he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him” (Heb. 11:6). The individuals that Zephaniah spoke to either did not believe in Him, or if they did, they did not care to exert themselves in pursuing His Ways. Either way, the end result is the same to them. It is upon these three classes that judgment would come:

“The day of Yahweh is at hand: for Yahweh hath prepared a sacrifice, he hath bid his guests. And it shall come to pass in the day of Yahweh’s sacrifice, that I will punish the princes, and the king’s children, and all such as are clothed with strange apparel” (Zeph. 1:7-8).

As the slaying of animals for a sacrifice, Yahweh would come against His People. His guests had been invited – the nations set apart to carry out the judgments – and all things were made ready for slaughter. The reference to those who “are clothed with strange apparel” is interesting. The word “Chemarim” as cited above, literally means “black-robed ones”, evidently indicating a kind of religious garb worn by the officials of the apostasy. In the “Christendom” of our day, there are other “Chemarim” who also seek to convey a spirit of religiosity by the vestments they wear – yet they shall receive the same judgment, as they lead men into darkness and perdition by the errant nonsense that they teach.

CHAPTER 2 – AN APPEAL

Chapter 2 begins with an exhortation for the people to gather themselves together in a national repentance:

“Gather yourselves together, yea, gather together, O nation not desired … seek ye Yahweh, 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 Yahweh’s anger. (Zeph. 2:1,3).

This describes how the nation was to come together as one in their worship of Yahweh alone. Those who sought after Him, and His Righteousness, would be spared in the judgments to come. The prophet Joel gave a similar appeal:

“ … turn to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning … who knoweth if he will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind him … gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, and those that suck the breasts … let the priests, the ministers of Yahweh, weep between the

porch and the altar, and let them say, Spare thy people O Yahweh, and give not thy heritage to reproach ..." (see Joel 2:12-17).

Here, we see a Divine principle: the righteous would not be destroyed with the wicked. We see this time and time again in Scripture. At the flood Noah's family were saved; in the destruction of Sodom, Lot's family were delivered; in the departure from Egypt, the people of God were saved. History testifies that Yahweh knows how to deliver His people in a day of evil, and this is what the prophets exhorted, that even though the majority would suffer under the hand of their God, the faithful remnant would be spared, or "hid" in that day. Amos continues the theme:

"Hate the evil, and love the good, and establish judgment in the gate: it may be that Yahweh Elohim of hosts will be gracious at the remnant of Joseph" (Am. 5:15).

Interestingly Amos speaks of the judgment to come in terms reminiscent of the Passover, when Israel left the bondage of Egypt:

"... in all vineyards shall be wailing: for I will pass through thee, saith Yahweh. Woe to you that desire the day of Yahweh! To what end is it for you? The day of Yahweh is darkness, and not light" (Am. 5:17-18).

The marginal reference directs our attention back to Exodus 12, when Israel forsook Egypt in the darkness of the night. Then, the angel of death passed through Egypt, with Israel as Yahweh's Firstborn being spared. Interestingly, part of the background to Zephaniah was a great Passover that Josiah made (see 2 Chron. 35) – alluded to in the passage cited above, describing the great Sacrifice of the Day of Yahweh.

Again, there are many lessons in this for our learning. We are living in the days immediately before another "day of Yahweh", when there will be terrible judgments against those who refuse to accept the ways of the Great King. This day will bring a time of wrath and indignation against the sinful ways of man – yet there is hope for us, who trust in "Christ our Passover" to deliver us from death. Our position is that having turned from idolatry to Yahweh we "wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus which delivered us from the wrath to come" (1 Thes. 1:11-10). We can therefore look forward to the future without fear, for we have been delivered from the coming wrath, that we might be given a part in the kingdom that will follow.

CHAPTER 3 – THE GATHERING OF NATIONS

After describing the sins of the people, Chapter 3 speaks of the gathering together of nations against them. They will suppose that they are going to obliterate Israel, yet Yahweh has His own purpose for this gathering:

"... my determination is to gather the nations, that I may assemble the kingdoms, to pour upon them my indignation, even all my fierce anger ..." (Zeph. 3:8).

Due to the Jewish disbelief and rebellion against their God – both then and today – the nations will be gathered against them, and they in due course, will be overcome by the Almighty power of Yahweh Tz'vaot fighting on behalf of his people. This is the description of Zechariah:

"I will gather all nations against Jerusalem to battle; and the city shall be taken, and the houses rifled, and the women ravished, and half of the city shall go forth into

captivity ... then shall Yahweh go forth, and fight against those nations, as when he fought in the day of battle" (Zech. 14:2-3).

And Joel contains a similar description:

"in those days and at that time, when I shall bring again the captivity of Judah and Jerusalem, I will also gather all nations, and will bring them down into the valley of Jehoshaphat, and will plead (judge) with them there for my people and for my heritage Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations, and parted my land" (Joel 3:2)

The Remnant of Israel

After describing the sins of the people, and the judgments to come, the prophet continues to speak of the faithful remnant that will be left:

"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" (Zeph. 3:13).

Here, the remnant of the people possess righteous characteristics: refraining from iniquity and speaking lies, they shall at last be at rest, with no adversary or cause for perplexity. This is the day that we long for, spoken of so often in the prophets: the day of Israel's glorification. The prophecy concludes with a wonderful picture of the final restoration of Israel:

"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 Yahweh" (Zeph. 3:20)

Isaiah prophesied similarly:

"Whereas thou hast been forsaken and hated, so that no man went through thee, I will make thee an eternal excellency, a joy of many generations" (Isa. 60:15).

This development of Israel's glory is something which is of great interest to all of the saints down throughout the ages. Our Hope, like Paul's is "the hope of Israel" (Acts 28:20). As the Apostle testified elsewhere concerning this nation:

"... if the fall of them be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fulness?" (Rom. 11:12).

And again:

"... if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?" (Rom. 11:15)

In this short prophecy, we have many practical examples and exhortations for us to heed. Israel's example of unbelief, of combining Truth with Error, and even turning away from Yahweh altogether provides a stark warning for us, lest we do likewise. Let us therefore listen diligently to the words of Zephaniah. Let us fix our focus on that vision of glory to come like our Lord and Master, and we shall enter into the restored Kingdom of Israel, and rejoice as one spirit with Him throughout the ages of eternity.

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