

November 24

Scriptures: Read Zephaniah 1

Key Verse: “The great day of the Lord is near... “ (Zephaniah 1:14)

Overview

The book of Zephaniah begins with the harsh words of a certain, thorough, and imminent judgment upon the land of Judah which would bring total destruction. Their spurning of God’s grace and mercy and their continuous, willful sinning affected not only themselves but every living thing within the land. Truly all the earth has suffered because of the sin of mankind. One of the Lord’s objectives in bringing this judgment upon His people and land was to eradicate idolatry, which had been a “stumbling block” to the people and was one of the foremost causes of His wrath. Specific mention is made of Baal worship, which the Lord especially detested, for it involved many immoral practices. Even the last vestige of Baalism was to be abolished from His land. The Lord declared that everything and everyone connected with idolatry would be cut off from the land by either destruction or captivity (1:2-4); this included all the idol worshippers, the idolatrous priests, and even the Levitical priests whose hearts were not consecrated to God alone.

Zephaniah continues to describe the specific types of people in Judah who would also meet with destruction. There were those who worshipped “the host of heaven on the housetops”, which was a form of idolatry that was practised mostly by women (cf. Jer. 44:15-22). There were those who had mixed the worship of God with the idol worship of Milcom, and when it seemed appropriate they swore oaths either by the Lord or by Milcom (1:5). In such a way, they raised a mere idol up to the level of God, but He will not share His glory (Isa. 42:8; 48:11). He was zealous for His holiness, and He would surely bring vindication. This same Milcom is also known as Molech, an Ammonite deity to whom the people of Judah had sacrificed their children.

There were others who had at one time served God alone (possibly because of the influence of Hezekiah) but had backslidden, likely returning to idolatry. As is described elsewhere in scripture, such backsliding is as disgusting as a dog returning to his vomit (1:6; 2 Pet. 2:21-22). Another guilty group were those who did not care to seek or serve the Lord but were complacent in their spirituality, being apathetic and indifferent to spiritual things (1:12). They resemble many people today who believe they are “good people”, but leave God out of their lives, as though He would make no difference. This attitude demeans and profanes the Lord. Therefore, they too were listed among the offenders and would meet with God’s wrath.

Yet another group destined for punishment were the princes of the land, who were the rich and powerful upper class people (nobility and royalty). They were guilty of oppressing the poor and perverting justice (cf. Mic. 2:1-2; 3:1-4). Zephaniah also makes specific mention of the doom that was to come upon the king’s children. At the time of Zephaniah’s writing, Josiah was king, but because he had been godly, the Lord told him that during his lifespan destruction would not be brought upon Judah (cf. 2 Chron. 34:26-28). Josiah’s sons, however, did not follow in his footsteps; they were all wicked and idolatrous. Therefore, immediately following Josiah’s death,

the Lord's judgment began to fall upon His children and continued for about 23 years, culminating in the complete destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.

There were also those in Judah who were not only content to worship idols but desired to be like the surrounding heathens in every way, including the wearing of "foreign [heathen] apparel" (1:8). In so doing they violated the Mosaic regulations regarding dress (cf. Num. 15:38-40; Deut. 22:11-12). Such ones did not show themselves to be as God wanted His people — separate and holy unto Him. Another class of people destined for punishment were those filled with violence and deceit. They are called "those who leap over the threshold", possibly an ancient expression for those who did not follow the customary practice of blessing a household before entering; rather, they enter to commit violence or steal.

The Lord would make sure that these kinds of people listed would not escape His wrath (1:12). Even the wealthy, who were used to bribing their way out of problems, would be helpless when God comes against them (1:18). With many descriptive words, Zephaniah paints a picture of the great and terrible day of the Lord and its dreadful impact on Judah (1:14-18). Zephaniah's description of God's coming judgment foreshadows the final day of the Lord's judgment upon the whole world. What a warning it gives, even for people today, to repent and serve the Lord in total consecration to Him.

Prayer

Lord, we know You are a jealous God and Your glory You will not share with another. Help us as a nation to repent, turn from our evil ways, and draw close to You and Your Word.