

“The Grace and Mercies of God’s Warnings”

Zephaniah 1:1-2:3

Last week when I went to drive somewhere in our van, the warning light for the battery came on. That’s strange, I thought. I can’t remember the last time I even saw that light come on. So, I did what I always do the first time a warning light comes on in our vehicles, I ignore it and hope it goes away. But it stayed on the complete drive where I went to go. When I got back in the van to leave, the light wasn’t on. ‘Okay,’ I thought, ‘Maybe it was just a freak thing.

But the next day, the light came on again. Then I start thinking, what am I going to do about this? The van was working fine. It started up no problem. Should I get it looked after, or shouldn’t I? What’s my schedule like this week? I had some time Tuesday, I called; they could look at it that morning. Great, I thought. Turns out the alternator was dying and it was living on borrowed time if I left it alone. So instead of ignoring the warning and one day finding myself stranded somewhere with a van unable to start, I (painfully) paid the repairs and drove home knowing that I had averted a possible future dilemma.

We live with warnings, don’t we? When The Weather Network issues its’ warnings of freezing rain, snow storms, etc., we usually change our schedule or just don’t drive during that specific time. That’s the purpose of warnings isn’t it? Something unpleasant might or will happen and we need to take action in order to avoid being hurt, a calamity or worse case scenario, death. We go to the doctor and he/she says your blood pressure too high, your cholesterol is too weigh, you have a cataract, there’s a shadow on the x-ray, etc, etc., And as disappointed as we initially are, we are grateful we were given a warning so that we could take action and avert greater threats to our health.

So why is it then that we often ignore biblical warnings about our spiritual health? Why do many people ignore God’s warnings of a future, painful, eternal reality of separation from God’s presence? And, perhaps even more importantly for us as believers, why do we hesitate to warn others about their future destination if they don’t turn to Jesus?

Welcome to the world of a prophet; the Isaiah’s, Jeremiah’s, Ezekiel’s and for the next 3 weeks, Zephaniah. The book of Zephaniah is short – an be read in less than 15 minutes – but it is perhaps the best example of what God clearly wants to accomplish through the prophets and prophecy. So, Zephaniah’s going to help us answer 3 basic questions? What’s a prophet? What’s his message and what does God desire? Because the prophet reveals the heart of God, they are important for us to study if we want to know the heart of God, what He desires for us.

What’s a Prophet? **(1:1)**

We’re not given a whole lot of information about Zephaniah as a person since the book is so short but enough to understand their basic purpose.

The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah, during the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah:

The most important thing to know about prophets was that a prophet was

A faithful deliverer of God's living Word (v.1a)

Almost every prophetic book begins with a reference in 1:1 that the speaker is sharing the word or an oracle from God Himself. This word came from God. The Hebrew word 'came' is the root word for God's Name, Yahweh. Yahweh means 'the One who exists; self-sustaining'. His word comes 'exists, lives', it comes to Zephaniah from God Himself. It is breathed out. It is a living Word so it always has meaning and always speaks. Zephaniah – or any prophetic book – continues to be relevant because their words are God's living words.

And they were faithful deliverers of God's words. The responsibility of a prophet was to faithfully declare exactly what God said, painful or not. Samuel was a prophet and he learned as a young boy from Eli that if God spoke to you, you had to declare His Word clearly. Samuel hesitated because it was judgment against Eli and his family. But Eli himself insisted because God would deal with Samuel if he failed to deliver God's message. We see the consequences of a disobedient prophet in Jonah. This was the most important role of a prophet; to faithfully (and it usually included judgment of some kind) declare God's living Word, because God wants people to be warned about what He might do.

Who specifically was Zephaniah? We are given his genealogy to the 4th generation. A very unusual thing to do, unless the 4th generation was significant. And it is. Zephaniah's great-great grandfather was none other than one of Judah's best kings, Hezekiah. That would make Zephaniah of royal lineage. A very unique combination. He probably had access to or at least information about what went on in the palace. When a date is given about a prophet it is always given in respect to the reign of the king in which he ministered. Why? Because almost every prophet was

God's appointed messenger to the king (v.1b)

Why the king? Because Israel's kings were responsible to uphold God's covenant and to pass that on to the people. Hezekiah was the last king who sought to live by God's Word and sought to lead the people to obey God. Sadly, his son Manasseh was Judah's longest reigning king (55 years) and he did much evil in God's eyes. Every king is introduced by whether he did evil in the eyes of the Lord or whether he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. God sent prophets to assist the kings to stay with the Word or confront them when they disobeyed the Word of God.

Zephaniah's name means 'God hides or God protects. While he ministered in the years of Josiah, he would have been born during the reign of Manasseh. Did God protect the royal infant Zephaniah from his grandfather and father Amon's wickedness? His father was no better than his grandfather, however, Manasseh did repent of his sins towards the end of his life and perhaps tried to have influence on his son's family. Would it not be ironic if the repentant Manasseh had something to do with protecting his grandson from his own father? Or maybe his mother was righteous. We don't know, but Jewish people did not give their children random names. They gave them names that reflected godly character or circumstances surrounding their life at the time or a name that they prayed he would reflect one day.

Josiah, Manasseh's grandson, was the first godly king since Hezekiah to help Judah return to God's ways. Josiah ruled from 640-609 BC but he was very young. Look with me at 2 Chron. 34:1-8,

Josiah was eight years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem thirty-one years. ² He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD and followed the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or to the left.

³ In the eighth year of his reign, while he was still young, he began to seek the God of his father David. In his twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of high places, Asherah poles and idols. ⁴ Under his direction the altars of the Baals were torn down; he cut to pieces the incense altars that were above them, and smashed the Asherah poles and the idols. These he broke to pieces and scattered over the graves of those who had sacrificed to them. ⁵ He burned the bones of the priests on their altars, and so he purged Judah and Jerusalem. ⁶ In the towns of Manasseh, Ephraim and Simeon, as far as Naphtali, and in the ruins around them, ⁷ he tore down the altars and the Asherah poles and crushed the idols to powder and cut to pieces all the incense altars throughout Israel. Then he went back to Jerusalem. ⁸ In the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign, to purify the land and the temple, he sent Shaphan son of Azaliah and Maaseiah the ruler of the city, with Joah son of Joahaz, the recorder, to repair the temple of the LORD his God.

And while repairing the temple what did they find? A Bible, specifically the book of the Law (Gen-Deut). And Huldah the prophetess read Deut to Josiah who ripped his cloak in repentance and declared they had disobeyed God and as a result disaster was coming. God spoke to Josiah through Huldah saying He would spare Josiah from this judgment but because Manasseh's sinfulness had led the nation so far from God, judgment would still be coming.

We can see then how a physically and spiritually young king Josiah needed the spiritual insight of a prophet and God sent Zephaniah to him most likely earlier in his reign. Jeremiah would assist Josiah also later in his reign.

What's a Prophet's Message? **(1:2-18)**

Prophets were usually sent to give

Warnings of coming judgment (vv.2-3)

² "I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth," declares the LORD. ³ "I will sweep away both man and beast; I will sweep away the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea— and the idols that cause the wicked to stumble." "When I destroy all mankind on the face of the earth," declares the LORD, ⁴ "I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem.

Zephaniah delivers God's cutting message that speaks of global judgment and local judgment. The language is a reversal of the creation and a reminder of the flood. God will 'sweep away' people, animals, birds and fish. God will cut off all the wicked from the face of the earth. And then, in case Judah doesn't think God is talking about them, Zephaniah singles them out in v.4, *I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem.*

Why His own people? Because it was the prophet's job

To confront disobedience (vv.4b-13)

Like all sinful confrontations, I'm sure Judah was surprised that God had singled them out. After all, they were the good guys. It was the Northern kingdom who were the bad guys. They were taken away by Assyria in 722 BC. We're the good guys, they would have thought. In Jeremiah they even point to the temple and say 'Hey, we've got the temple in the city of God's choosing with a son of David on the throne. You must be talking to the wrong guys!

But Judah had been led away from God through Manasseh's rule. What kinds of disobedience was Judah still guilty of even though Josiah was trying to change things?

Idolatry (vv.4-9)

I will destroy every remnant of Baal worship in this place, the very names of the idolatrous priests—

⁵ those who bow down on the roofs to worship the starry host, those who bow down and swear by the LORD and who also swear by Molek, ⁶ those who turn back from following the LORD and neither seek the LORD nor inquire of him.” ⁷ Be silent before the Sovereign LORD, for the day of the LORD is near. The LORD has prepared a sacrifice; he has consecrated those he has invited. ⁸ “On the day of the LORD’s sacrifice I will punish the officials and the king’s sons and all those clad in foreign clothes. ⁹ On that day I will punish all who avoid stepping on the threshold, who fill the temple of their gods with violence and deceit.

The sad thing was they worshipped idols while they still went to temple and worshipped God. They thought their idolatry didn't affect their walk with God! You can never serve two masters. God will not be mocked. He knows when our worship is hypocritical. He knows when we've paid more attention to our selfish pursuits than to Him. He knows when He's been placed on the back burner of our priorities.

The command that summed up all the commands was Deut. 6:4-5

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵ Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

God's unique oneness prefaces the call to love Him with all our hearts, not half our hearts and, as Israel was guilty of on many occasions, not just by mere words. God sees and knows our hearts.

Baal worship was associated with immorality. Molech was a god who promised riches if you sacrificed your children to him. Manasseh was guilty of that. The foreign clothes mentioned in v.8 were most likely the priestly clothes of these other religions. And avoiding the threshold was another pagan superstition that the Philistines used to worship their god Dagon. Not to mention prayerlessness and Bible ignoring mentioned in v.7.

This was the people of God who were guilty of all these sins. God says 'the Day of the Lord' is coming for you. The 'Day of the Lord' refers to a time when God will intervene and step into Israel's history and bring about catastrophic judgment. It already happened in 722 BC. It would happen in 586 BC when Nebuchadnezzar would destroy the temple and Jerusalem. It would happen again in 70 AD when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem again but it will also happen in the future when God will bring about a worldwide destruction just prior to Jesus' return that Paul talks about in 2 Thes.2 and Peter in 2 Peter 3 and the book of Revelation elaborates on from Rev. 6-19. But the final world-wide Day of the Lord judgment will last 7 years according to Daniel 9, from which the church will be spared according to Rom. 5:9; 1 Thes. 1:10; 2 Thes. 5:9; Rev. 3:10.

The prophets speak of both at times because they didn't know about the church; the mystery of the Jew and Gentile becoming one in Christ. They did not know about this 2000+ year gap between Jesus' first and second comings. They had a rough idea from Daniel 9:25-27 but that was it.

What other sins did Zephaniah speak against?

Injustice (vv.10-11)

¹⁰ "On that day," declares the LORD, "a cry will go up from the Fish Gate, wailing from the New Quarter, and a loud crash from the hills. ¹¹ Wail, you who live in the market district; all your merchants will be wiped out, all who trade with silver will be destroyed.

There are more places in the prophets where Israel's injustice is spelled out. The gates of Israel were named related to what happened through them. The fish gate was the market gate where fish were brought in and sold, often at exorbitant prices or with dishonest scales. Likewise, at the sheep ate where sheep were sold for sacrifices. God will destroy the economy and deal with injustice and dishonesty.

Zephaniah also pointed out

Indifference (vv.12-13)

¹² At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps and punish those who are complacent, who are like wine left on its dregs, who think, 'The LORD will do nothing, either good or bad.' ¹³ Their wealth will be plundered, their houses demolished. Though they build houses, they will not live in them; though they plant vineyards, they will not drink the wine."

Many in Judah lived under the false pretense that because they were 'God's people' no harm would come to them. Their false security caused them to be complacent and indifferent to the Word of God. 'the Lord will do nothing' they thought. They may have believed in His future Day of the Lord judgment but they believed it was far away.

How many of us live with a spirit of indifference that God won't let anything bad happen to us because we're His children? Or that we have lots of time to repent of our sins and believe in Jesus (if we don't)? And for those of us that do believe in Jesus, we will be assessed and rewarded according to our faithfulness to the Lord. We read that we can also lose rewards as well – not our salvation How we serve Jesus now will have eternal ramifications regarding our future responsibilities (1 Cor. 3:10-15).

The other purpose of a prophet was to deliver his message so that it ...

Shocks the hearer so as to bring action (vv.14-18)

¹⁴ The great day of the LORD is near—near and coming quickly. The cry on the day of the LORD is bitter; the Mighty Warrior shouts his battle cry. ¹⁵ That day will be a day of wrath— a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness— ¹⁶ a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the corner towers. ¹⁷ "I will bring such distress on all people that they will grope about like those who are blind, because they have sinned against the LORD. Their blood will be poured out like dust and their entrails like dung. ¹⁸ Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the LORD's wrath."
In the fire of his jealousy the whole earth will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live on the earth.

The language would seem to point to God's final Day of the Lord but either way, the language is startling and shocking. To wake people up out of their doldrums and draw them back to God before its too late – or to God before that final judgment comes.

Sometimes we need a scare or a kick in the pants – an experiential shock to wake us up and draw us back to God. A crisis of some kind, a close call, a serious problem, a health scare. The danger of course is if we don't act when the difficulty passes and we breathe a sigh of relief and grow complacent.

This section doesn't end here. It continues in vv.1-3 which is crucial to understanding the heart of God as He urges people through the prophets to repent:

What's God's Desire? **(2:1-3)**

Through warnings God wants people to

Seek Him before calamity (or the end) comes (2:1-2)

Gather together, gather together, O shameful nation, ² before the appointed time arrives and that day sweeps on like chaff, before the fierce anger of the LORD comes upon you, before the day of the LORD's wrath comes upon you. ³ Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the LORD's anger.

Like the warning lights on our vehicles, like the weather warning statements about bad weather, God sends us warnings about future judgment because He is merciful and gracious and doesn't want us to perish. Listen to 2 Pet. 3:8-9 as Peter warns us about the same future Day of the Lord judgment,

⁸ But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance

So why then does He bring judgment at all? Because He is holy and must deal with sin. Because He has promised He will remove sin from His presence one day and for Him to go back on his Word means He's a liar; and then He wouldn't be God. "Seek the Lord" Himself. God wants a relationship with people. Sometimes, like Israel here, we have drifted away from God. God can discipline us as well. He warns us because He loves us and wants us to come back to Him.

He delays judgment desiring repentance (2:3)

Three times we read 'before'. God would send smaller Day of the Lord judgments on Israel (722, 586, 70 AD) as a warning that a greater future judgment is coming. He sent the flood and warned it will happen again only next time by fire. Calamities and difficulties are smaller warnings and wake up calls to remind us that what God said about the future will happen one day.

But so is His promise about a great future with Him. This is the hope of His people, those who seek the Lord and humble themselves and pursue righteousness. Not every Israelite would die when the Babylonians came or the Assyrians came. But eventually everyone does die and we will all stand before God. Unbeliever to show they never trusted God. Believer to give account of their life as to how they served Jesus. We will experience God's amazing presence one day. But many of our family and friends will not. We are the prophets whom God has given His living Word to today. We are the

chosen messengers to graciously warn a lost world, many of whom are unaware of a dark future outside God's presence because they've never been warned yet.

How can we lovingly and graciously share the good news of great joy that Jesus our Saviour was born, and lived and died for our sins, but rose from the dead so that we and others can enjoy eternity with Him? Who do we know that probably has no idea the Day of the Lord is still coming? To respond to a warning always involves a cost, a sacrifice, a change of direction and even some pain, but the joys set before us, Paul says, far outweigh any sufferings we experience here.

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