

IX. “The Great Day of the LORD Is Near”

04-May-03 Zephaniah 1:1-18

Theme: Even as the Lord comes on His Day in judgment upon ancient Israel, so the Lord will come again in judgment at the end of the age.

Key Verse: Zephaniah 1:14a “The great day of the LORD is near; it is near and hastens quickly.”

Review

Last week we completed our study in Habakkuk by going through the great worship psalm of Habakkuk 3. The third chapter of Habakkuk is a confession of weakness and fear on the part of the embattled prophet. But it is more than about Habakkuk’s fear. Habakkuk also turned to God, and turning to God gave him victory over this weakness. It is significant that the book does not end on the note of fear. Fear is mentioned (3:16), but it is surpassed by faith as Habakkuk comes to rejoice in the God of salvation (3:17-18). This victory is available to all God’s people, whatever they are called upon to go through. This is entirely different from the world’s approaches to fear—resignation, detachment, or bravado. **The Christian way of dealing with fear is to rejoice in the God of salvation.**

Faced with fear, Habakkuk reminds himself of what he knows. **He knows that he worships a mighty God, and he remembers the powerful acts of God in past days.** A God like that is a joy forever. Remembering Him restores his joy and brings him victory over fear of the future. It is important to emphasize knowledge, for there are situations in life which only knowledge will help us. Emotion will not save us. Reason will not save us. **The only thing that can save us is knowledge of what we know to be true.** Habakkuk had knowledge of God’s mighty acts. Indeed, this whole chapter is a rehearsal of them, as God brings Israel out of Egypt, to Sinai, and into the Promised Land. **God’s mighty past acts in history amply demonstrate that He is able to save those who look to Him in faith. But He has also promised to save His people and therefore will save them.**

Habakkuk, who starts in depression, and doubts as to God’s righteousness and justice, ends with a lively confidence in God’s provision and sustaining power. Habakkuk’s faith has matured to the point that he humbly but persistently trusts in God’s design for establishing righteousness on the earth. So a book beginning with complaint and distress ends in joy. Faith triumphs in life despite many calamities. The “just shall live by faith” regardless of circumstance.

Introduction

Today, we are going to start our 3-week study in the book of Zephaniah.

Superscription (1:1)

*1 The word of Yahweh which came to Zephaniah
the son of Cushi,
the son of Gedaliah,
the son of Amariah,
the son of Hezekiah,
in the days of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah.*

Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

Zephaniah means “he whom Yahweh hides” or “hidden of Yahweh.” Although other “Zephaniahs” are mentioned in Scripture (cp. 1 Chr. 6:36; Jer. 21:1; Zech. 6:10), none can be identified with this prophet. The superscription traces Zephaniah’s lineage back to the prophet’s great-great-grandfather. **The recording of this extensive genealogy is unique in the prophetic books.** Most probably this genealogical tracing reaches back to the fourth generation because of an intention to focus on the last-named individual: *Hezekiah*. Very possibly Zephaniah’s genealogy intends to indicate his royal origins. This relationship of the prophet with the monarchy in Israel could have provided him with ready access to the **royal court**, as well as offering some position by which he could **lend additional weight to the radical reforms promoted by young King Josiah**. Josiah was the last good king of Israel, with a reign dating approximately from 640 to 609 BC.

The fact that Zephaniah anticipates a purging of those bowing down on their housetops and worshipping the starry host (1:5) supports the locating of Zephaniah’s prophecy prior to the thoroughgoing reform of Josiah which came as a consequence of his discovery of the law book. This particular consideration has led **most commentators to conclude that Zephaniah’s material must have dated before 622 BC.** However, one consideration especially points in another direction. As the material of Zephaniah is studied carefully, **the wealth of phraseology paralleling expressions in the law book of Deuteronomy is quite remarkable.** So it may be proposed that Zephaniah prophesied in the days of Josiah, and more specifically **in the days immediately following the discovery of the book of the covenant approximately in 622 BC.**

Exposition

I. Cosmic Covenantal Judgment Comes with Yahweh’s Great Day (1:2-18)

The “Day of Yahweh” may be seen as that theme which unifies the entirety of the book of **Zephaniah**. Certainly in the first chapter Yahweh’s Great Day binds together the message of the prophet. The destruction of the cosmos, judgment on God’s own people, the sacrificial feast of Yahweh, and the terrors of a finalizing theophany relate to “the Day.” These two verses are united by the concept of “sweeping away,” which occurs four times in the Hebrew.

A. Creation Reversed (1:2-3)

- 2 *I shall wipe out completely
everything on the face of the earth,
declares Yahweh!*
- 3 *I shall wipe out
man and beast;
I shall wipe out
the birds in the sky,
and the fish in the sea—
and the stumbling blocks with the wicked.
Particularly man I shall exterminate from the face of the earth,
declares Yahweh!*

2. Stunning are the opening words of the prophecy of Zephaniah. Everything on the face of the earth shall be utterly wiped away. By repetition of phraseology, by parallelism of members, by allusion to past revelation, the prophet confronts his audience with the crucial nature of the impending calamity. Particularly distinctive is the **echoing of the provisions of God’s earlier**

covenant commitment to Noah as it in turn reflected the ordering of God's creation (Gen. 6:7).

3. The order in which items are listed for destruction is precisely the reverse of the order in which they appear in the creation narrative. First man, then beasts, birds, and fish are designated as the objects of God's consuming judgment. Originally it was fish, birds, beasts, and man that God created. The reference to the destruction of the *stumbling blocks with the wicked* combines once more the idea of judgment on the created universe with judgment on humanity in its wickedness. **Beasts, birds, and fish, representative of the whole of creation, have become for humanity an occasion of stumbling. Because of his wickedness, humanity has twisted the good things of creation into a cause for sin.** Quite remarkable is the appearance of this striking combination of *stumbling blocks with the wicked* in the NT (**Matt. 13:41**). Jesus interprets to his disciples a parable of universal judgment, which suits precisely the context of Zephaniah's prophecy. At the end of time God shall send his angels, who will "gather together everything that makes stumble and the doers of lawlessness." **By this apparent allusion to Zephaniah, Jesus transfers the coming cosmic judgment described by the prophet from the devastation associated with judgment on old covenant Israel to the devastations associated with His final return. Jesus thereby indicates that the ultimate application of the prophetic threat of Zephaniah still is outstanding.** The cosmic judgment that will reverse the creation is yet to come.

B. Covenant People Cut Off (1:4-7)

- 4 *More specifically, I shall stretch out My hand
against Judah
and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem
and I shall exterminate from this very place
the remnant of Baal
the name of the Chemarim with the priests;*
- 5 *those who worship the host of heaven on (their) rooftops;
those who worship
by swearing to Yahweh
while swearing by their "King";*
- 6 *those who turn back from following after Yahweh,
who do not seek
Yahweh
and do not inquire
of Him.*
- 7 *Hush!
Before Yahweh the Lord;
for near is the Day of Yahweh.
For Yahweh has prepared a sacrifice,
He has sanctified His guests.*

The church is condemned for religious errors: there are three **categories of religious offenses** in 1:4-6: (1) **idolaters**, who worship false gods regardless of the name they use in worshiping them, (2) **adulterers**, who worship the true God but other false gods too, and (3) **apostates**, who have fallen away from worshiping God entirely. All are condemned. The Lord makes no difference

Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

among these offenses. Even at the height of Josiah's reform not all traces of pagan influence were eradicated, since it sprang up again soon after the good king's death (2 Chr. 36:13-14).

4. After announcing the cosmic character of God's imminent devastation, the prophet specifies a more exact object of judgment. Not just the world in general, but those who have been identified as God's own people in particular shall experience the consuming judgment of the Almighty. Two graphic words describe the coming judgment on God's own covenant people. God says, *I shall stretch out my hand* against them, and *I shall exterminate* [lit., "cut them off "] them. A "hand stretched out" symbolizes a person's moving into action with all the force at his disposal. In God's case, He "stretches out his hand" when He intervenes dramatically, employing means "beyond what is common." Particularly in the plagues of Egypt, God "stretched out" his hand to accomplish miraculous judgmental interventions (cf. Exod. 7:5). In an awe-inspiring manner God liberated Israel with a "mighty hand and a stretched-out arm" (cf. Deut. 4:34).

Five objects of God's exterminating activity within Judah and Jerusalem are indicated. Each of these itemized practices displays various corruptions in Israel's worship. Later the prophet will denounce the sins of the people against one another, such as deceitfulness and violence. But he **begins appropriately with an exclusive concentration on the sins committed directly against God in the worship practices of the people.** The first two items to be cut off are *the remnant of Baal* and *the name of the Chemarim with the priests*. No small number of commentators have interpreted the reference to the destruction of the *remnant* of Baal as indicating that Josiah's reform already must have been in progress. Already a significant portion of Baal-worship had been removed by the earlier reforms of Josiah. But now Zephaniah prophesies that the Baalism which still was left would be removed. The *Chemarim* (RSV "idolatrous priests") are joined to the priests of Baal as elements involved in the purging of Judah by Josiah in 2 Kgs 23:5, 8. The precise meaning of the term *Chemarim* is uncertain.

After dealing with the corrupt officialdom of Judah's worship (v. 4b), the prophet declares the inevitable extermination of all those who participate in improper worship practices (vv. 5-6). The fact that the people have been led into these practices does not exempt them from the judgment of God.

5. The first group denounced is *those who worship the host of heaven on (their) rooftops*. A form of this superstition has found its devotees in almost every ancient culture, and is manifest today in believers in the modern horoscope. According to Deut. 4:19, Israel is warned specifically not to "worship" the sun, the moon, and the stars, "all the host of heaven." Worshipping *on (their) rooftops* suggests in part the idea of an individualized, domestic control of worship. **On the private housetop, each person could worship in a manner that pleased only himself.** The Law and the Prophets combine to condemn the idea that a person's worship may be left to the dictates of his own conscience.

The next phrase of the prophet focuses on the syncretistic aspect of the worship of Baal in Israel. Zephaniah assures the utter devastation of *those who worship by swearing to Yahweh while swearing by their "King."* What could be more satanic than a religion that took to itself the name of the true God while at the same time professing devotion to his chief rival?

6. In his last specification of the causes for God's annihilating judgment, **the prophet turns from the sins of "commission" to the equally heinous sins of "omission."** The combination of terms seek and inquire underscores the fact that worshipping the true God requires a conscious and directed effort.

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7. Ultimately it was because of the coming Day of Yahweh that the recipients of the prophet's message were to stand in hushed awe (cp. Rom. 3:19). This solemn summons to silence by the prophet implies the imminence of the Lord Himself. Standing before His awesome majesty on His great day inspires the most humble and reverent demeanor (cp. Hab. 2:20).

Understanding that the Day of Yahweh involves a theophany in which God manifests His powers may serve as a useful starting point for comprehending the origins of the Day. But how may this theophanic manifestation be defined more precisely? The first chapter of Zephaniah's prophecy presents in sequence three connected images. The first depicts the reversal of the order of the cosmos as sustained by the provisions of the covenant with Noah (vv. 2-3). The second describes a sacrificial feast connected with the curses symbolized in the covenant-making procedure manifested at the time of the establishment of the Abrahamic covenant (vv. 7-8; cf. Gen. 15). The third presents a frightful image of God's appearance with darkness, thick darkness, cloud, and trumpet, reflecting the theophany associated with the establishment of the Mosaic covenant (Zeph. 1:15-16). Thus, it may be noted that the **Day of Yahweh in Zeph. 1 is associated with the establishment of the successive covenants made with Noah, Abraham, and Moses.** The Day of Yahweh therefore may be seen as the Day of his Covenant. **On this day, He establishes his sovereign lordship over men.** Either by instituting the covenant or by enforcing the provisions of the covenant, Yahweh manifests his lordship on that Day. No other day may be so fittingly designated. God's lordship throughout the world finds its meaningful structure in the coming of the great Day when He enforces the provisions of His covenant.

Zephaniah declares that Yahweh *has prepared a sacrifice and sanctified His guests* (Zeph. 1:7). Both of these actions are closely associated with the establishment of the covenant in the traditions of Israel (cp. Abraham's cutting of the covenant in Gen. 15:9-18; Jer. 46:10). This imagery of **covenantal sacrifice** relating to the enforcement of the curses of the covenant supplies the perspective from which the prophet Zephaniah views God's imminent judgment on Judah. **Because they had been bound in covenantal oath of self-malediction, they must experience devastation on the Day that the Lord of the covenant enforces His sovereignty.** The sacrifice which Yahweh has prepared in Zeph. 1:7 must be Judah and Jerusalem. For they have already been specified as the objects of God's judgment (vv. 4-6). This awesome announcement should not have caught the people by surprise, for they had pledged themselves by the self-maledictory oath of the covenant.

The irony here is that it is apparently the guests invited to the sacrificial celebrations who are themselves going to serve as the sacrifice (cf. Gen. 22:7-9). A sacrifice to please Yahweh is made by the offering up to His judgment of those who displeased Him.

The finality of cosmic overthrow associated with the coming of Yahweh's Day in the fullest sense never came in the context of events associated with the old covenant. It is not surprising, therefore, to find in the NT both passages which suggest an arrival of the Day of Yahweh in events current in NT times as well as passages looking to a future arrival of the great Day. When John the Baptist calls for repentance in view of the imminence of the coming judgment of God, his message parallels Zephaniah's announcement concerning the nearness of the Day of Yahweh (Matt. 3:1-12). It is not to be supposed that the coming of the kingdom is identical with the arrival of the Day. But the interrelation of these two idea-complexes suggests that the Day of Yahweh serves to inaugurate the kingdom. Only as the purging judgment of God sweeps the earth will the kingdom come.

When Christ deliberately parallels the tearing of His own flesh as covenantal sacrifice with the substitutionary death of the Passover lamb, He is interpreting His own death in the familiar terms of covenantal malediction (cf. Matt. 26:26-29; Luke 22:14-22). **The fury of God's wrath, that wrath that is epitomized in the outpouring of covenantal curses on the Day of Yahweh, falls on Him. Eating His flesh and drinking His blood by faith introduces the participant into the sacrificial feast of Yahweh, offered only to consecrated guests. In a certain sense, the Day of Yahweh has come.** But distinctive to the Day is the characteristic of finality. In a sense the Day came in association with certain events surrounding the advent of Jesus Christ. **But in another sense the Day is yet to come.** And as Zephaniah prophesied, it is near.

The old covenant Scriptures manifest a variety of phrases by which the coming Day of Yahweh may be designated. Zephaniah speaks in terms of "the Day," "that Day," "the great Day," "the Day of Yahweh," and "the Day of the overflowing wrath of Yahweh." In similar fashion, the new covenant Scriptures employ a variety of phrases in referring essentially to the same phenomenon. The Day of Yahweh may be designated as the "day of judgment," the "last day," the "day of the Lord," the "day of the Lord Jesus Christ," "the day" or "that day," the "day of Christ Jesus," the "day of Christ," the "day of God," the "eternal day," the "great day," the "great day of wrath," and the "great day of God the Almighty." Suffice it to say that **the cosmic judgment associated with a dramatic theophany now may be understood in terms of the glorious return of Jesus Christ. On the day appointed He shall consummate all things.**

C. Consumption of All Concerned (1:8-14a)

This section continues to expand on the theme of the Day of Yahweh. Explicit usage of the phrase *Day of Yahweh* brackets this material (vv. 7, 14), and three different phrases substitute for "Day of Yahweh" in the intervening verses: "On the day of the sacrifice of Yahweh" (v. 8), "in that day" (vv. 9—10), and "at that time" (v. 12) all introduce the permeating theme of the Day of Yahweh. **These verses narrow the object of judgment even more specifically** than had been done in the previous section. Originally the scope of God's judgment had been indicated as including the entirety of the cosmos (vv. 2-3). Then Judah and Jerusalem were specified (vv. 4-6). Now particular Judeans are designated (vv. 8-9, 11), as well as specific districts within the targeted city of Jerusalem (vv. 10-11).

- 8 *On the day of the sacrifice of Yahweh:*
 - a *I shall inflict punishment*
 - b *on the leaders,*
 - b *on the sons of the king,*
 - b *and on all who are clothed with foreign garments.*
- 9 *a I shall inflict punishment in that day*
 - b *on all who leap over the threshold,*
 - b *who fill the house of their lords with violence and deceit.*
- 10 *In that day, declares Yahweh, there shall be:*
 - a *A voice pleading*
 - b *from the fish gate;*
 - a *howling*
 - b *from the second quarter;*
 - a *tumultuous crashing*
 - b *from the hills.*

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- 11 *Howl, you inhabitants of the Pounding Place:*
a *For utterly devastated*
b *are all the people of Canaan;*
a *utterly exterminated*
b *are all the dealers in silver.*
- 12 *At that time:*
I shall search out Jerusalem
with candles;
a *I shall inflict punishment on the men*
b *who settle on their haunches,*
b *who say in their heart,*
“Yahweh will do no good, nor will He do evil.”
- 13 a *Their wealth will be*
b *dissipated;*
a *their houses*
b *pillaged.*
- a *They will build houses*
b *and never live in them,*
a *they will plant vineyards*
b *and never drink their wine.*
- 14a *Near*
is the great Day of Yahweh!
Near
and coming with great haste.

8. The first two categories of personages set for judgment relate to the leadership of Israel. The *leaders* and the *sons of the king* God Himself shall punish (v. 8). But what about the *king*? Since Josiah the king was manifesting the kind of commendable character appropriate for a sovereign serving as vicegerent under Yahweh, he would not receive the same kind of treatment accorded the disobedient. **The person of Josiah as king was excluded intentionally.** This specificity suggests also specificity with regard to the *sons* which the prophet had in mind. Unique to patterns of succession in Judah's history is the fact that no fewer than three of Josiah's sons ultimately ruled in the place of their father, all of them evil. **The third category of personages** condemned are *all who are clothed with foreign garments*. Likely is the possibility that the phrase **refers to those who dressed distinctively as priests of foreign gods.**

9. The final object of God's punishment in this series is described as *all who leap over the threshold*. This phrase is best understood by reference to the superstitious practice of the Philistines in stepping over the threshold of their temple. "To this day," according to the writer of 1 Samuel, this custom was practiced by the priests of Dagon (1 Sam. 5:5). The irony associated with the importation of such a pagan superstition is found in the next phrase. While gingerly leaping over their temple threshold, the people of Judah nonetheless *fill the house of their lords with violence and deceit*. They **observe the minutia of a senseless pagan law, but then run rampant over the basic ordinances of God in His own house.**

10. The next two verses turn from specifying classes of people set for judgment to indicating the consequences of judgment for the various sectors of the city of Jerusalem. The *fish gate*

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apparently refers to an entrance on the north of the city of Jerusalem, which normally would be the first place attacked by an invading army. The *second quarter* is mentioned in 2 Kgs 22:14. It could allude to the newer portion of the town added by Manasseh when he extended the wall of the city to the north. But the location of this section of town is not certain. The *tumultuous crashing from the hills* may describe the breaking down of the idols located on the hills surrounding Jerusalem.

11. Various suggestions concerning the identity of the *Pounding Place* have been offered. Possibly the term refers to the whole of the city rather than to one particular district. Encircled by higher hills, Jerusalem itself may be compared to a mortar, a pounding place. God in His judgment shall grind the whole of the city as though it were encased in a mortar. The remainder of the verse extends the description of the effect of the judgment on Jerusalem. The Day shall bring devastation for all merchants and businessmen of the city.

Thus far the prophet has specified political, religious, and commercial leadership as the objects of the coming judgment of the Day of Yahweh. None of these noble employments shall avail to deliver from devastation.

12. Zephaniah indicates furthermore that a thoroughgoing search shall be made throughout the whole city. None shall escape the scrutinizing eye of God. **Particularly the uninvolved, the indifferent, and the skeptical are selected for condemnation.** The complacency he refers to is spiritual. It is the kind that discounts God, saying, “The LORD will do nothing, either good or bad.” Unfortunately, this kind of complacency is widespread in our society today. Generally our society does not presume on God’s protection, though some disobedient Christians do. It discounts God entirely. Live for today, it says. There is no day of reckoning. Do you think this way? Are you continuing in sin because you suppose that there is no God or that, if there is one, He will do nothing?

13. So they will build houses and never live in them, they will plant vineyards and never drink their wine. Absolute frustration is the consequence of this curse of the covenant. All the labor of their hands shall be for nothing. Overrun by an invading army, their houses were to be pillaged. All their possessions were to be ripped from them (Deut. 28:30, 39).

14a. Twice the prophet underscores his certainty that this awesome Day of Yahweh is *Near*. Once more a theme of Zephaniah is underscored in the law book of Deuteronomy. God had repeatedly assured Israel that if they departed from His law, they would perish “quickly” from the land (Deut. 4:26; 7:4; 11:17; 28:20).

This concept of the “nearness” of the coming Day of judgment receives repeated emphasis under the new covenant administration as well. Zephaniah’s contemporaries saw with their own eyes the terrible fulfillment of these words of prophecy. **Since that day each new generation must face the possibility of experiencing the consummate fulfillment of this prophetic announcement.**

D. The Terrors of Theophany (1:14b-18)

These verses continue the theme of the Day of Yahweh which first had been mentioned specifically in v. 7. Now the concentration on this theme reaches the **level of saturation. No less than ten times in these five verses is the Day explicitly mentioned. The day is now characterized as a terrifying theophany in which the overflowing wrath of God is unleashed. Drawing heavily on the description of the awesome events of Sinai, the prophet**

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anticipates another manifestation of God's terrors in which the curses of the covenant will be inflicted, not merely inscribed. Now covenant enforcement replaces covenant inauguration. The focus of the prophecy moves from a nationalistic message to Judah to a universal, eschatological warning to all people. **The development of the two-sided nature and the universality of the eschatological day culminates in Christ's second coming, the final day (cf. 2 Th. 2:2), which is both two-sided and universal.**

- 14b *The voice of the Day of Yahweh:
A bitter crying—
there is a mighty hero!*
- 15 *A Day of overflowing wrath
is that Day.
A Day
of adversity and distress;
a Day
of destruction and desolation;
a Day
of darkness and thick darkness;
a Day
of cloud and thick cloud;*
- 16 *a Day
of trumpet blast and battle shout
against the fortified cities
and against the highest corner towers.*
- 17 *For I will bring distress
on man
and they shall walk
as blind men.
For against Yahweh they have sinned.
Their blood
shall be poured out
as dust
and their entrails
as dung.*
- 18 *Neither their silver
nor their gold
shall be able to deliver them
in the Day of the overflowing wrath of Yahweh;
for in the fire of His jealousy
all the earth shall be consumed.*
- For He will make a complete end;
indeed, a shocking end He will make
of all the inhabitants of the earth.*

14b. At the original theophany of Sinai, attention was focused on the voice of God declaring His lordship over the people (Deut. 4:12, 33, 36; 5:22-26; 8:20; 18:16). But now attention centers on

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a voice which responds to Yahweh's self-manifestation on his great Day. It is a voice of bitter despair on the part of the warrior who has been overwhelmed.

15-16. The Day is mentioned seven times in the next two verses, possibly echoing the days of creation. This echo of Genesis 1 could indicate that the judgment portrayed here is to be seen as a reversal of Creation. Light gives way to darkness, and the order of the well-established creation reverts to disorder. Five couplets poetically arranged characterize the Day and describe its accompanying phenomena. The dominant characteristic of this Day is that it is a *Day of overflowing wrath*. **The commonness of expression with Deuteronomy's description of the theophany at Sinai indicates the prophet's intention to depict the Day of Yahweh in terms strongly reminiscent of the establishment of the covenant with Israel mediated through Moses.** Extensive parallelism also may be noted between the expressions of Zephaniah and those found in the prophecy of Joel as he describes the coming Day of Yahweh:

Zeph. 1:15 "A day of darkness and thick darkness" "A day of cloud and thick cloud"	Joel 2:2 "A day of darkness and thick darkness" "A day of cloud and thick cloud"
Zeph. 1:16 "A day of trumpet blast and shout"	Joel 2:1 "They shall blast a trumpet in Zion and they shall shout in My holy mountain"

Similar expressions are found in Amos 5:18, 20, a third passage of principal importance dealing with the subject of the Day of Yahweh. Most likely each of these prophets drew from an older tradition which was readily available in Israel. The ancient covenant-making tradition associated with Sinai provides just such a common source of ideas. **Darkness, thick darkness, cloud, and trumpet blast all characterized the appearance of God at Sinai.** Once more Zephaniah has associated the coming Day of Yahweh with ancient covenantal manifestations. **Noah's covenant (Zeph. 1:2-3), Abraham's covenant (vv. 7-8), and Moses' covenant (vv. 15-16) provide the framework for understanding the appearance of Yahweh on His great Day.**

17. The consequences of the coming Day of Yahweh are specified more particularly. Humanity as the principal object of the wrath of God shall be devastated.

18. The prophet proceeds to describe the hopelessness of any possibility of escape from the overflowing wrath of the Day of Yahweh. In his opening verses, the prophet had spoken in terms of a worldwide judgment which would reverse the entire order of creation (vv. 2-3). **Now at the end of this material, he returns to this broader theme of the total destruction of the world.** If His own covenant people are to be destroyed, it can be expected that the whole of the universe will be consumed with them.

Conclusion

The prophecy of Zephaniah clearly presents itself as a treatise on the wrath of God. The great Day of Yahweh is coming soon. On that Day, the God who has pledged Himself repeatedly and in various contexts by the oath of the covenant shall devastate all who have broken the covenant. This terrible judgment is inevitable and unavoidable. The Day is coming soon.

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The significant thing about this opening announcement of God's wrath is that its **extreme and exaggerated language seems to go beyond any mere reference to the coming Babylonian invasion** (1:2-3). The language immediately reminds one of God's warnings to Noah of the coming world flood. But in Zephaniah the words are even stronger than in Genesis. Here even the fish are included, and there is no reference to survivors, as was the case with God's words to Noah and his family. The prophet is using hyperbole. The rest of the prophecy shows that Zephaniah is actually thinking of specific historical judgments upon certain specific cities and countries, including Jerusalem. This is precisely what occurred.

In 1:4-13, Zephaniah gives a capsule **version of the reasons for God's judgment**. His focus on universal judgment now narrows onto Judah. Zephaniah speaks of the religious problems of idolatry, adultery, and apostasy. He talks of four classes of people: priests, princes, merchants, and the masses. In terms of the nation's life, he speaks of religious activity, social customs, commerce, and the common life of those who tried to remain indifferent to what was happening.

In 1:15 Zephaniah begins to describe the **day of wrath**, using words which, taken from the Latin text of the Old Testament, form the basis of the hymn commonly called the *Dies Irae*. The hymn is attributed to Thomas de Celano, an assistant to Francis of Assisi, and it has been translated into more languages than any other hymn. It is an interesting feature of the description of the day of wrath that **Zephaniah mingles words that seem to refer to an immediate historical catastrophe with words that seem to refer to a final, all-inclusive world judgment**.

The extreme language of these verses is not without purpose. The warning of the immediate outpouring of wrath in the coming Babylonian invasion was fulfilled, but it was also **a type and warning of a greater judgment to come on all men and women. This is where Zephaniah speaks to us**. God is still the righteous Judge of the universe, and He will no more tolerate sin in us than was the case with His chosen people in Old Testament times. If we do not become new creatures through faith in Jesus Christ, we will be swept away with all the ungodly at the final judgment.

Zephaniah's Day of Yahweh, in which the wrath of God was to be poured out on Judah, found expression in the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. **But the "day of wrath" is yet to come (Rom. 2:5)**. This "great Day of his wrath" (Rev. 6:16-17) is as certain to come as was the devastation of Jerusalem. With eschatological finality, all who are not found by faith to be united in Him shall be consumed from the face of the earth (cf. Matt. 3:7; 1 Th. 1:10; Rev. 11:18; 14:10; 16:9; 19:15).

2 Th. 1:7-10 ⁷When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, ⁸in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, ¹⁰when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed.

Even as the Lord comes on His Day in judgment upon ancient Israel, so the Lord will come again in judgment at the end of the age.

Next week: Lesson 10 – Zephaniah 2 – "Seek the LORD"

Close in Prayer.