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Zephaniah

The book of Zephaniah is about God's power and judgement. The prophet Zephaniah speaks to God's unfaithful people. He tells them that a special time of judgement is coming. It is called, "the Lord's day of judgement". On this day, God will show his power once and for all. It will be a terrible day, a day to fear. On this day, God will judge all the wrong things people have done.

But Zephaniah also says the day of the Lord will be the happiest day ever. True, it is the day that God will judge his unfaithful people. But it will also be a day of great blessing. People from all over the world will gather in Jerusalem to worship and follow God. All the proud and wicked people will be gone. God will allow only the humble people to remain in his holy city. These are the people who have put their trust in God.

The book of Zephaniah teaches that God is in control of the world. He is powerful and will do what he has promised. He will punish the proud and wicked people of the world. But he will show mercy to the humble people who trust in him.

In the book of Zephaniah, the prophet...

Announces the Lord's day of judgement for the world and Judah (1:1-18)

Calls for people to change their lives (2:1-3)

Announces that the Lord will punish Judah's neighbours (2:4-15)

Announces judgement and a better future for Jerusalem and the nations (3:1-13)

Sings a song of hope (3:14-20)

1 This is the message that the LORD gave to Zephaniah. He received this message during the time that Josiah son of Amon was king of Judah. Zephaniah was the son of Cushi, who was the son of Gedaliah. Gedaliah was the son of Amariah, who was the son of Hezekiah.

The Lord's Day for Judging the People

² "I will destroy everything on earth," says the LORD.

³ "I will destroy all the people and all the animals.

I will destroy the birds in the air and the fish in the sea.

I will destroy the evil people and everything that makes them sin.

I will remove all people from the earth." This is what the LORD said.

⁴ "I will punish Judah and the people living in Jerusalem.

I will remove from this place any sign of Baal worship.

No one will remember the priests who serve the idols there.

⁵ And those who go up on their roofs to worship the stars* will be forgotten.

They claim to worship me.

They say, 'We promise to follow the LORD,'

but they also worship the false god Milcom.

So I will remove any memory of them from this place.

⁶ They have turned away from me, the LORD.

They have stopped following me.

They no longer ask me for help."

⁷ Be silent before the Lord GOD,

***1:5 stars** Literally, "army of heaven". This might mean the stars and planets or the angels.

because the LORD's day for judging the people is coming soon.

The LORD has prepared his sacrifice, and he has told his invited guests to get ready.[†]

⁸“On that day of sacrifice,” says the LORD,

“I will punish the king's sons and other leaders.

I will punish those who follow strange customs of worship.

⁹Yes, I will punish the people who worship foreign gods[‡] and those who fill their master's house[¶] with lies and violence.

¹⁰“At that time,” says the LORD, “people will be calling for help at Fish Gate in Jerusalem

and mourning in the new part of town. They will hear the sound of destruction in the hills around the city.

¹¹You people living in the lower part of town will cry, because all the traders and rich merchants will be destroyed.

¹²“At that time I will take a lamp and search through Jerusalem.

I will find all those who are satisfied to live their own way.

They say, “The LORD does nothing. He does not help, and he does not hurt!”

I will find them, and I will punish them.

¹³Then others will take their wealth and destroy their houses.

Those who built houses will not live in them,

and those who planted vineyards will not drink the wine from the grapes.”

¹⁴The LORD's day for judging is coming soon!

It is near and coming fast.

People will hear very sad sounds on the LORD's day of judgement.

Even strong soldiers will cry.

¹⁵The Lord will show his anger at that time.

It will be a time of terrible troubles and a time of destruction.

It will be a time of darkness and gloom, a black, cloudy and stormy day.

¹⁶It will be like a time of war when people hear horns and trumpets in the defence towers and protected cities.

¹⁷“I will make life very hard on the people,” says the LORD.

“They will walk around like the blind, not knowing where they are going, because they sinned against the LORD. Their blood will be spilled on the ground.

Their dead bodies will lie scattered on the ground like manure.

¹⁸Their gold and silver will not help them!

At that time the Lord will become very upset and angry.

The LORD will destroy the whole world! He will completely destroy everyone on earth!”

[†]**1:7 prepared ... get ready** Literally, “prepared his sacrifice. He has made his called ones holy.” Here, this time of judgement is compared to a fellowship meal when priests offered a sacrifice to God and had the guests get ready for this special meal with God.

[‡]**1:9 people ... gods** Literally, “those who wear foreign clothes. On that day I will punish all who jump over the threshold.” See 1 Sam. 5:5.

[¶]**1:9 master's house** This means the temple where the people worshipped God or their false gods.

God Asks People to Change Their Lives

2 Come together, you disgraceful people,
and change your hearts
²before you become like a dry and dying flower.
In the heat of day, a flower will wilt and die.
You will be like that when the LORD shows his terrible anger.
So change your lives before the LORD shows his anger against you!
³All you humble people, come to the LORD!
Obey his laws.
Learn to do good things; learn to be humble.
Maybe then you will be safe when the LORD shows his anger.

The Lord Will Punish Israel's Neighbours

⁴No one will be left in Gaza.
Ashkelon will be destroyed.
By noon, the people will be forced to leave Ashdod.
Ekron[§] will be empty.**
⁵You people living by the sea, who came from Crete,^{††}
this message from the LORD is about you.
Canaan, land of the Philistines, you will be destroyed.
No one will be left alive!
⁶Your land by the sea will become empty fields
for shepherds and their sheep.

⁷Then the land will belong to those who are left alive in Judah.
The LORD their God will care for them and let them enjoy great success again.
Then they will let their sheep eat the grass in those fields.
In the evenings they will lie down in the empty houses of Ashkelon.
⁸I know what the people of Moab and Ammon did.
They embarrassed my people.
They took their land to make their own countries larger.
⁹So, as surely as I live, says the LORD All-Powerful, the God of Israel,
Moab and Ammon will be destroyed as completely as Sodom and Gomorrah.
Their land will be overgrown with weeds.
It will be like the land covered with salt by the Dead Sea.
My people who are left alive will take that land
and everything in it.
¹⁰The people of Moab and Ammon will be punished for being so proud
and for insulting the people of the LORD All-Powerful.
¹¹The LORD will terrify them,
because he will destroy their gods.
Then everyone in all the faraway lands will worship the Lord.
¹²People of Ethiopia, this even means you!
The Lord's sword will kill your people.
¹³Then the Lord will turn north and punish Assyria.
He will turn Nineveh into a pile of ruins,
as empty as a desert.

§**2:4 Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron** Philistine cities. In Hebrew, Zephaniah is making wordplays on the names of these cities.

****2:4 empty** In Hebrew this word is like the word meaning "Philistines". Also in verse 6.

††**2:5 people ... from Crete** Probably the Philistines, who came from the island of Crete.

¹⁴ Flocks and herds will live among the ruins,
 as well as all kinds of wild animals.
 Owls will sit on the pillars that are left standing.
 Their calls will be heard coming through the windows.
 Crows will sit in the doorways.
 The fine cedar wood in the buildings will be ruined by the weather.
¹⁵ Nineveh is so proud now.
 It is such a happy city.
 The people think they are safe.
 They think Nineveh is the greatest place in the world,
 but it will be destroyed!
 It will be an empty place where only wild animals go to rest.
 People who pass by will mock and shake their heads
 when they see how badly the city was destroyed.

Jerusalem and the Nations

3 O Jerusalem, city full of sin!
 You have turned against God
 and mistreated your own people.
² Your people don't listen.
 They refuse to make things right.
 They don't trust the LORD.
 They don't show any need for God.
³ The leaders are as frightening
 as roaring lions.
 The judges are like hungry wolves
 that hunt at night and by dawn have eaten everything.
⁴ The prophets there are always making
 secret plans
 to get more and more.
 The priests don't show respect for what is holy.
 They disobey God's teachings.
⁵ But the LORD is still in that city,
 and he does what is right.
 He does not mistreat anyone.

Every day he makes fair decisions for them.
 Not a day passes without his justice.
 But those who are wicked keep on sinning
 without feeling any shame.
⁶ "I have destroyed nations,
 tearing down their defence towers.
 Their streets are in ruins,
 and no one goes there any more.
 Their cities are empty;
 no one lives there.
⁷ I thought this would make you respect me.
 I thought you would change and do what I wanted.
 Then I would not destroy your city.
 I would not punish you the way I planned.
 But you wanted only one thing:
 to continue doing nothing but evil!
⁸ "So just wait," says the LORD.
 "Wait for me to stand and judge you.
 I have the right to bring people from many nations
 and use them to punish you.
 I will use them to show my anger against you.
 I will use them to show how upset I am,
 and the whole country will be destroyed.
⁹ "Then I will change people from other nations
 so that they can speak the language clearly
 and call out the name of the LORD.
 They will all worship me together,
 shoulder to shoulder, as one people.
¹⁰ People will come all the way from the
 other side of the river in Ethiopia.
 My scattered people will come to me.
 My worshippers will come and bring their gifts to me.
¹¹ "Then, Jerusalem, you will no longer be ashamed
 of the wrong things your people do against me,

because I will remove
all the bad people from Jerusalem.
I will take away all the proud people.
There will not be any of them on my holy
mountain.‡

¹²I will leave poor and humble people
there,
who will look to the LORD for help.

¹³The survivors of Israel will not do bad
things or tell lies.

They will not try to trick people with
lies.

They will be like sheep that eat and lie
down in peace,
and no one will frighten them.”

A Happy Song

¹⁴Jerusalem, sing and be happy!
Israel, shout for joy!

Jerusalem, be happy and celebrate!

¹⁵The LORD stopped your punishment.
He destroyed your enemies' strong
towers.

King of Israel, the LORD is with you.
You don't need to worry about anything
bad happening.

¹⁶At that time Jerusalem will be told:

“Be strong, don't be afraid!

¹⁷The LORD your God is with you.

He is like a powerful soldier.

He will save you.

He will show how much he loves you
and how happy he is with you.

He will laugh and be happy about you,
¹⁸like people at a party.

I will take away your shame.

I will make them stop hurting you.”^f

¹⁹At that time I will punish those who
hurt you.

I will save my hurt people
and bring back those who were forced to
leave.

I will give them praise and honour
everywhere,

even in places where they suffered
shame.

²⁰At that time I will lead you back home.

I will bring your people back together.

I will cause people everywhere to hon-
our and praise you.

You will see me bring back all the bless-
ings you once had.”

This is what the LORD said.

‡3:11 *holy mountain* Mount Zion, one of the mountains Jerusalem was built on.

^f3:18 The Hebrew text is not clear.