



Zephaniah

This is one of the more bleak of the prophetic books. It opens with a description of the day of the Lord which is characterised as bringing destruction upon the world. It itemises the human beings as well as the animals who will be swept away before the wrath of God. This prophecy seems to promise destruction for everyone – in Judah and in the nations around – and there is very little hope on offer at all to the recipients of its message. In the early chapters of the book, the only potential glimmer of hope is in 2.1-3 which talks of the importance of seeking the Lord, though no deliverance is promised to those who do. The end, however, takes a sudden turn for the better. The punishment is cast as a purification of the people who, once purified, have a renewed relationship with God.



How long will it take?

Reading time: 10 mins

Short of time? Just read 1.1-9; 2.1-3; 3.14-20



Genre

Prophecy



Anything tricky?

The whole of the book up to 3.14 is quite challenging, since it presents a future in which Israel and all the nations around will be punished for their sins. Only the final few verses of the book offer hope to the remnant who remain.



Inspiring quotes

The Lord within it is righteous; he does no wrong. Every morning he renders his judgment, each dawn without fail; but the unjust knows no shame.

(Zephaniah 3.5)

The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.

(Zephaniah 3.17)



About the Author

The opening verse attributes the book to Zephaniah who is said to be a distant descendant of Hezekiah: 'The word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi son of Gedaliah son of Amariah son of Hezekiah, in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah (Zephaniah 1.1).

What do we know about him?

Not much more than this. Other Zephaniahs do appear in the Bible but none who fit with this description.



What kind of Book is it?

Zephaniah is the ninth of the 12 minor prophets.

It is a prophecy almost entirely focused on the day of the Lord.



Look out for...

The day of the Lord is mentioned throughout the book. The phrase is a common one in the Old Testament and is used to refer to an event in the future in which God will intervene. Sometimes this is something to look forward to and sometimes something to be feared. Keep an eye out for how Zephaniah uses it.

Zephaniah contains a lot of gloom but is it all gloom? See if you can find glimmers of hope.

Notice how God's judgement applies both to the nations around Judah as well as to Judah itself. Ask yourself whether you feel differently about the punishment for God's people than for the others?



About the times

The opening verse also ties Zephaniah to the days of King Josiah. Josiah was king in Judah between about 640-609 bc. His reign is reported in 2 Kings 21.24–23.28. He was regarded as righteous by the writers of 2 Kings (most kings were not) because he instituted reforms in the land inspired by a closer following of the law. Judah fell to the Babylonian empire during the reign of Josiah's son Eliakim (who was renamed Jehoiakim by the Egyptians), thereby fulfilling Zephaniah's prophecy of doom here.

What were people feeling?

The challenge of this period in Judah's history is that disaster lurked just around the corner but, with the exceptions of some of the prophets, no one noticed and carried on confidently as normal.

Other books set around this time

2 Kings 17–25; 2 Chronicles 29–36; Nahum; Habakkuk; Jeremiah; Isaiah



How is it structured?

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| 1.1 | Introduction |
| 1.2-18 | Destruction is proclaimed |
| 2.1-3 | Seek the Lord even though it does not guarantee salvation |
| 2.4-15 | Messages of judgement against the nations |
| 3.1-13 | Further messages of judgement |
| 3.14-20 | God will bring hope and restoration to the remnant |



What could this mean for me?

The phrase 'seek the Lord' occurs more than once in the book – what do you think it meant for Zephaniah? How might we 'seek the Lord' in our everyday lives?

Discussion group questions

- Were there any parts of the book that you particularly liked or which inspired you?
- Were there any parts of the book that you disliked or which troubled you?
- What did you think the book was about?
- Discuss how you reacted to the anger of the Lord as described throughout the book. Did it make you uncomfortable? Do you think it was justified? How do you feel when people use this kind of language today?
- Discuss the final few verses (3.14-20) of the book. Did they change your view of the book at all?
- Language about 'the remnant' (i.e. those who remained faithful in the face of disaster) has been important throughout Jewish and Christian history. Is language of 'the remnant' at all helpful when thinking about Christianity today?
- Did you read anything in the book that touched you, expanded your faith or made you think more deeply about your life and how you live it?



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