

# Zephaniah • The Grievous vs. the Glorious

## Introduction

**Note To Small Group Leaders:** This study will take longer than usual, so you will want to ensure you have enough time to properly devote to its entirety.

In Scripture there is a unique event identified as “the day of the LORD”. This is not to be confused with the day when as believers we finally meet Jesus, but is a very specific, appointed time on God’s calendar for earth’s history. It is expressly dedicated to that single, final day when the whole earth experiences the wrath of God’s judgment for all their sin throughout the whole of human history. Several places in Scripture specifically admonish not to look forward to nor desire the coming of this day because it is not a day of rejoicing, but of the worst despair and destruction possible – it is the most “grievous” of days. And yet there **IS** a day to come which is the complete opposite, the most “glorious” of all days is to come.

<sup>1:1</sup>The word of the LORD which came to Zephaniah son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah son of Amon, king of Judah:

<sup>2</sup>I will completely remove all things  
From the face of the earth,” declares  
the LORD.

<sup>3</sup>I will remove man and beast;  
I will remove the birds of the sky  
And the fish of the sea,  
And the ruins along with the wicked;  
And I will cut off man from the face of  
the earth,” declares the LORD.

<sup>4</sup>So I will stretch out My hand against  
Judah  
And against all the inhabitants of  
Jerusalem.  
And I will cut off the remnant of Baal  
from this place,  
And the names of the idolatrous priests  
along with the priests.

<sup>5</sup>And those who bow down on the  
housetops to the host of heaven,  
And those who bow down and swear to  
the LORD and yet swear by Milcom,

<sup>6</sup>And those who have turned back from  
following the LORD,  
And those who have not sought the  
LORD or inquired of Him.”

<sup>7</sup>“Be silent before the Lord GOD!  
For the day of the LORD is near,  
For the LORD has prepared a sacrifice,  
He has consecrated His guests.

<sup>8</sup>Then it will come about on the day of  
the Lord’s sacrifice  
That I will punish the princes, the  
king’s sons  
And all who clothe themselves with  
foreign garments.

## [Read 1:1-13 & 3:1-5]

### Q: What does Zephaniah’s name mean?

A: “Zephaniah” literally means “he whom the LORD protects or hides”.

### Q: If he is a descendant of king Hezekiah, how might that add something to the overall message being conveyed?

A: He would be descended from a king known for a time of spiritual revival, now prophesying during the reign of Josiah, another king of Judah under which a spiritual revival was experienced. It could be a subtle way of reinforcing what it means to be “protected” or “hidden” by the Lord by being spiritually faithful. It might also suggest that the revivals taking place in Judah are not entirely from the heart, that there are those just going through the motions, so to speak.

### Q: What is the main message of v.1-3?

A: The book begins with God’s pronouncing a sentence for sin. The four “I will” statements are all judgments which will be carried out because of sin. The repeated use of “I will remove” and “I will cut off” speak of physical destruction and ruin.

### Q: How does God in v.7 characterize the greater meaning of the sentence to be carried out?

A: It is called “a sacrifice” and those carrying it out are labeled “consecrated”, the spiritual condition one must be in to properly carry out a sacrifice to God according to the terms of His Word. This is a very serious way of stating that since they themselves are not consecrated and properly offering the sacrifices required by the Law, they themselves will pay the price.

### Q: According to v.10, what will Judah’s response be? Why are these places specifically mentioned?

A: There will be cries of anguish heard throughout the land. The Fish Gate is the way by which the invading army will initially enter Jerusalem. The invading enemy would then proceed to the Second Quarter and on to the small hills within the city on which notable houses and buildings stood. So the cries of anguish would follow this path as they first enter Jerusalem and then proceed inward, taking over everything.

<sup>9</sup>“And I will punish on that day all who leap on the temple threshold, Who fill the house of their lord with violence and deceit.

<sup>10</sup>On that day,” declares the LORD, “There will be the sound of a cry from the Fish Gate,

A wail from the Second Quarter, And a loud crash from the hills.

<sup>11</sup>Wail, O inhabitants of the Mortar, For all the people of Canaan will be silenced;

All who weigh out silver will be cut off.

<sup>12</sup>It will come about at that time That I will search Jerusalem with lamps,

And I will punish the men Who are stagnant in spirit, Who say in their hearts,

‘The Lord will not do good or evil!’

<sup>13</sup>Moreover, their wealth will become plunder

And their houses desolate;

Yes, they will build houses but not inhabit them,

And plant vineyards but not drink their wine.”

<sup>3:1</sup>Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled,

The tyrannical city!

<sup>2</sup>She heeded no voice,

She accepted no instruction.

She did not trust in the LORD,

She did not draw near to her God.

<sup>3</sup>Her princes within her are roaring lions,

Her judges are wolves at evening;

They leave nothing for the morning.

<sup>4</sup>Her prophets are reckless, treacherous men;

Her priests have profaned the sanctuary.

They have done violence to the law.

<sup>5</sup>The LORD is righteous within her;

He will do no injustice.

Every morning He brings His justice to light;

He does not fail.

But the unjust knows no shame.

**Q: According to v.13 what is the price of God's sentence?**

A: All their material wealth and inheritance. In ancient Israel, one's lands were handed down from generation to generation as an inheritance, a physical symbol of a greater spiritual blessing, of belonging to God. To have God take it away says something very serious about their relationship with Him.

**Q: For each of the verses listed below, what are the specified sins for which this sentence has been pronounced?**

1. (1:4-6) Idolatry. "...those who have turned back from following the LORD..." (v.6)
2. (1:8-9) Leaders who follow the customs of foreign gods. "...clothe themselves with foreign garments" (v.8) and "fill the house of their lord (not the Lord, the One True God) with violence and contempt". (v.9) Leaping over a threshold is an imitation of a Philistine custom undertaken while worshipping their god.
3. (1:11) Greed. "The Mortar" is a prominent place in Jerusalem where merchants dwelt, and another translation for "the people of Canaan" is "merchant people". Combined with "all who weigh out silver" this is an Old Testament way of describing material greed.
4. (1:12; 3:2) A complete indifference to God. "The LORD will not do good or evil" and "She did not draw near to her God".
5. (3:1) Not just rebellious, but rebellious to the point where violence and crime are a natural part of their character – "the tyrannical city".
6. (3:3) Not just no longer carrying out justice, but perverting it for their own ends. "They leave nothing for the morning".
7. (3: 4-5) A religious system which itself could now be called godless because of the complete corruption of both the prophets and priests. "...the unjust knows no shame". (v.5)

**Point:** God's judgment always begins with His house first. Before pronouncing sentence on the rest of the world, God begins by pronouncing His sentence on Judah.

**Observation:** It's worth studying Matthew 23:13-33 as a parallel study to this passage, the place where Jesus specifically pronounces eight "woes" upon the religious leaders of His day for their total corruption of God's Law into institutions designed to take advantage in all the same ways the religious leaders of Zephaniah's day did.

*"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence.*

*– Matthew 23:25*

<sup>2:1</sup> Gather yourselves together, yes,  
gather,  
O nation without shame,  
<sup>2</sup> Before the decree takes effect—  
The day passes like the chaff—  
Before the burning anger of the LORD  
comes upon you,  
Before the day of the LORD's anger  
comes upon you.  
<sup>3</sup> Seek the LORD,  
All you humble of the earth  
Who have carried out His ordinances;  
Seek righteousness, seek humility.  
Perhaps you will be hidden  
In the day of the LORD's anger.

### [Read 2:1-3]

**Q: What is Zephaniah advising that they do in the face of God carrying out His sentence upon Judah?**

A: They should repent.

**Q: If they repent, will that erase the sentence that God has pronounced upon them?**

A: God's judgment has been pronounced and there will be no escaping "the day of the LORD" when that sentence is carried out. "The day of the LORD" is coming no matter what because the point of no return has been reached where God's judgment is concerned. A time has been reached when repentance can only help them **endure** that day, not entirely **escape** from it.

**Q: What is ironic about Zephaniah stating, "Perhaps you will be hidden"?**

A: That is the meaning of "Zephaniah" – "he whom the Lord hides".

**Q: But what must be done to obtain this protection?**

A: "Seek the LORD", "seek righteousness", and "seek humility". Such people are characterized as those "who have carried out His ordinances" – that is, put His Word into practice.

### Summary

*Under ideal circumstances God's people would remain faithful and never experience judgment. Under normal circumstances the extent of their sin might be characterized as "nominal" and the worst they would ever need to undergo is discipline from the Lord to coax them back onto a path that they really haven't deviated from too greatly. But when His people become so sinful and corrupt that they are no longer distinguishable from the non-believers and false religions around them, a point comes where God's judgment becomes inevitable. There may still be afforded them a small window to yet repent and personally return to Him, but even so doing can no longer prevent experiencing the consequences for such disobedience. Can you see how this might apply to the church today?*

<sup>4</sup> For Gaza will be abandoned  
And Ashkelon a desolation;  
Ashdod will be driven out at noon  
And Ekron will be uprooted.  
<sup>5</sup> Woe to the inhabitants of the seacoast,  
The nation of the Cherethites!  
The word of the LORD is against you,  
O Canaan, land of the Philistines;  
And I will destroy you  
So that there will be no inhabitant.  
<sup>6</sup> So the seacoast will be pastures,  
With caves for shepherds and folds for  
flocks.  
<sup>7</sup> And the coast will be  
For the remnant of the house of Judah,  
They will pasture on it.  
In the houses of Ashkelon they will lie  
down at evening;  
For the LORD their God will care for  
them

### [Read 2:4-15]

**Q: How has the object of God's condemnation now drastically changed from the previous verses?**

A: Whereas God first focused on His people Judah, He here focuses on the Gentile nations around Judah.

**Q: How are these pronouncements organized?**

1. In v.4-7 are pronouncements against the cities of the Philistines – this represents Judah's western enemies.
2. In v.8-9 are pronouncements against Moab and Ammon – this represents Judah's eastern enemies.
3. In v.12 are pronouncements against Ethiopia – this represents Judah's southern enemies.
4. In v.13-15 are pronouncements against Assyria – this represents Judah's northern enemies.
5. In v.10-11 are pronouncements against "all the coastlands of the nations". This is a way of indicating that everyone in the whole earth is responsible to learn the lessons of Judah and the nations immediate to her vicinity. No one is actually exempt.

### Zephaniah • The Grievous vs. the Glorious, Page 3 of 8

And restore their fortune.

<sup>8</sup>“I have heard the taunting of Moab  
And the revilings of the sons of  
Ammon,  
With which they have taunted My  
people  
And become arrogant against their  
territory.

<sup>9</sup>Therefore, as I live,” declares the  
LORD of hosts,  
The God of Israel,  
“Surely Moab will be like Sodom  
And the sons of Ammon like  
Gomorrah—  
A place possessed by nettles and salt  
pits,  
And a perpetual desolation.  
The remnant of My people will plunder  
them  
And the remainder of My nation will  
inherit them.”

<sup>10</sup>This they will have in return for their  
pride, because they have taunted and  
become arrogant against the people of the  
LORD of hosts. <sup>11</sup>The LORD will be  
terrifying to them, for He will starve all  
the gods of the earth; and all the  
coastlands of the nations will bow down  
to Him, everyone from his own place.

<sup>12</sup>“You also, O Ethiopians, will be slain  
by My sword.”

<sup>13</sup>And He will stretch out His hand  
against the north  
And destroy Assyria,  
And He will make Nineveh a  
desolation,  
Parched like the wilderness.

<sup>14</sup>Flocks will lie down in her midst,  
All beasts which range in herds;  
Both the pelican and the hedgehog  
Will lodge in the tops of her pillars;  
Birds will sing in the window,  
Desolation will be on the threshold;  
For He has laid bare the cedar work.

<sup>15</sup>This is the exultant city  
Which dwells securely,  
Who says in her heart,  
“I am, and there is no one besides me.”  
How she has become a desolation,  
A resting place for beasts!  
Everyone who passes by her will hiss  
And wave his hand in contempt.

**Q: What is the basic message to the Philistines in v.4-7?**

A: Complete and total destruction will come upon them “at noon”, an expression that means it will come very suddenly and unexpectedly. Their land will be forever given over to be inhabited and developed by Judah.

**Application:** *Philistines represent enemies of God who were never on His side to begin with, who never gave any thought to coming over to God’s side in the course of life, and never will. They are people who actively reject God in totality and whose inevitable end is complete and absolute destruction.*

**Q: What is the basic message to Moab and Ammon in v.8-9?**

A: Because of their mistreatment of God’s people and elevation of self, they will experience the same kind of permanent judgment invoked on Sodom and Gomorrah.

**Q: Why is such a punishment particularly ironic?**

A: Because Moab and Ammon are themselves the descendants of Lot, the one righteous man who escaped the final judgment wrought on Sodom and Gomorrah.

**Application:** *Moab and Ammon represent those who at one time had a heritage of serving God but who have not simply turned away from serving Him, but strayed to the point of becoming the same kind of worldly person they were originally called away from. They are like those who were once in the church who have become worldly again operating according to their fleshly desires and yet still want to take over the church for themselves.*

**Q: What is the basic message to Ethiopia in v.12?**

A: They will undergo the same judgment (“slain by My sword”) as all the rest of these nations.

**Observation:** *In the Hebrew here the pronoun is in the third person. In other words it’s not “you” in the second person which would denote a closer relationship, but a third-party “you” intimating a more distant, alienated relationship from God.*

**Application:** *Ethiopia in this case represents those who are self-deceived into thinking none of this has anything to do with them, that they are far enough removed so as not to be held accountable. Whereas the Philistines represent outright enemies and Moab and Ammon represent internal enemies, Ethiopia represents those who mistakenly believe they are just passive observers.*

**Q: What is the basic message to Assyria in v.13-15?**

A: The very thing which Assyria never thought could ever come upon it will indeed happen. The kind of total destruction God enabled them to inflict on others as a tool of His judgment on all the nations will in turn be experienced by Assyria for never learning the lessons of that judgment.

**Q: Why might v.15 sound very familiar to us?**

A: It is basically the same thing God said about Babylon through Isaiah (Is. 47:8) and about the King of Tyre through Ezekiel in Ezekiel 28 (also a dual reference to Satan himself). These are all major types of the Antichrist and the work of his earthly kingdom as symbolized through Assyria, Babylon, and Tyre and their ultimate fulfillment in the final Babylon spoken of in Revelation.

**Application:** Assyria are those allowed by God to carry out His judgment who become self-deceived into believing they are insulated and exempt from that same judgment.

**Q: What is the basic message to the coastlands in v.10-11?**

A: They will suffer the consequences for not only worshipping their own gods, but actively campaigning against God's people in the process.

**Application:** The coastlands represent the general enemies of God's people who actively attack anyone following the One True God while rushing headlong to worship their own gods. They think they are far enough away that they can do their own thing with impunity.

## Summary

Whereas God's people may experience the consequences of subverting and corrupting His Word and ways, non-believers experience judgment for creating and following their own. It is possible for God's people to survive the same judgment coming upon all if they truly repent and return in time. It won't cancel that coming day of judgment, it can only be endured.

## [Read 1:14-18]

<sup>14</sup>Near is the great day of the LORD,  
Near and coming very quickly;  
Listen, the day of the LORD!

In it the warrior cries out bitterly.

<sup>15</sup>A day of wrath is that day,  
A day of trouble and distress,  
A day of destruction and desolation,  
A day of darkness and gloom,  
A day of clouds and thick darkness,

<sup>16</sup>A day of trumpet and battle cry  
Against the fortified cities  
And the high corner towers.

<sup>17</sup>I will bring distress on men  
So that they will walk like the blind,  
Because they have sinned against the  
LORD;

And their blood will be poured out like  
dust

And their flesh like dung.

<sup>18</sup>Neither their silver nor their gold  
Will be able to deliver them  
On the day of the LORD'S wrath;  
And all the earth will be devoured  
In the fire of His jealousy,  
For He will make a complete end,  
Indeed a terrifying one,  
Of all the inhabitants of the earth.

**Q: What is the specific designation of this particular event? Why might this be important?**

A: It is designated specifically as "the day of the LORD". This is an event throughout Scripture identified as that specific date in earth's history when God's judgment will be experienced by the whole world's population.

**Q: How is the day of the LORD characterized in v.15-17?**

A: "Distress", "destruction", "desolation", and "darkness". It's a time when everyone stumbles about like blind men in the midst of the worst circumstances imaginable. Mankind's physical predicament mirrors their spiritual condition.

**Q: What will be the ultimate price paid on the day of the LORD?**

A: "...their blood will be poured out..." (v.17) Those who rejected the work of the cross through the shedding of Christ's blood will themselves pay with their own blood.

**Q: What is the irony expressed in v.18 where the day of the LORD is concerned?**

A: Although it is a day when mankind stumbles about like a blind man, it will become clear to them that the very things they trusted in are powerless to save them.

<sup>6</sup>I have cut off nations;  
Their corner towers are in ruins.  
I have made their streets desolate,  
With no one passing by;  
Their cities are laid waste,  
Without a man, without an inhabitant.  
<sup>7</sup>I said, 'Surely you will revere Me,  
Accept instruction.'  
So her dwelling will not be cut off  
According to all that I have appointed  
concerning her.  
But they were eager to corrupt all their  
deeds.

<sup>8</sup>"Therefore wait for Me," declares the  
LORD,  
"For the day when I rise up as a  
witness.  
Indeed, My decision is to gather  
nations,  
To assemble kingdoms,  
To pour out on them My indignation,  
All My burning anger;  
For all the earth will be devoured  
By the fire of My zeal.

<sup>9</sup>For then I will give to the peoples  
purified lips,  
That all of them may call on the name  
of the LORD,  
To serve Him shoulder to shoulder.

### [Read 3:6-8]

#### Q: What is the situation conveyed in v.6-7?

A: No one seems to have learned the right lesson from any of God's judgments prior to the final one. When He brought a nation to destruction, instead of learning the right lesson and turning to "revere Me" and "accept instruction" (v.7), everyone instead not only continued unchanged, but became even worse. ("But they were eager to corrupt all their deeds".)

#### Q: So what is the final result of the pursuit of one's own ways?

A: In v.8 we are provided the definitive picture of the wrath of God's final judgment wherein the whole earth is consumed by the fire of His divine wrath.

**Application:** "The day of the LORD" is the inevitable point in history when God's wrath is experienced by those steadfastly rejecting His Word and ways.

### Summary

The verses studied to this point discuss the "grievous" day, the inevitable result awaiting those who steadfastly reject and even actively oppose God's Word and ways. God through Zephaniah now contrasts this to the "glorious" day to come.

### [Read 3:9]

#### Q: To whom is this promise addressed?

A: "The peoples". This is the Old Testament way of identifying all the nations of the earth, of referring to those outside of Israel.

#### Q: What is particularly important about receiving "purified" lips?

A: To understand the Bible's definition of "purified", substitute the phrase "unpolluted by sin". It's a way of stating how someone will be brought into such a right spiritual relationship with God that they will be able to serve and worship in His very presence, holy and set apart for Him.

*Then I said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts." Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth with it and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven."*

– Isaiah 6:5-7

#### Q: What might be implied in giving all the nations of the earth the ability to "call on the name of the LORD"?

A: It would appear to be the remedy to the judgment experienced at the Tower of Babel when speech was used to divide the peoples of the earth,

#### Zephaniah • The Grievous vs. the Glorious, Page 6 of 8

but here properly unifying them. At Babel they were working for themselves; here they “serve Him shoulder to shoulder”.

*Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

– Romans 15:5-6

<sup>10</sup>From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia  
My worshipers, My dispersed ones,  
Will bring My offerings.

<sup>11</sup>In that day you will feel no shame  
Because of all your deeds  
By which you have rebelled against  
Me;

For then I will remove from your midst  
Your proud, exulting ones,  
And you will never again be haughty  
On My holy mountain.

<sup>12</sup>“But I will leave among you  
A humble and lowly people,  
And they will take refuge in the name  
of the LORD.

<sup>13</sup>The remnant of Israel will do no  
wrong  
And tell no lies,  
Nor will a deceitful tongue  
Be found in their mouths;  
For they will feed and lie down  
With no one to make them tremble.”

<sup>14</sup>Shout for joy, O daughter of Zion!  
Shout in triumph, O Israel!  
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,  
O daughter of Jerusalem!

<sup>15</sup>The LORD has taken away His  
judgments against you,  
He has cleared away your enemies.  
The King of Israel, the LORD, is in  
your midst;

You will fear disaster no more.

<sup>16</sup>In that day it will be said to  
Jerusalem:

“Do not be afraid, O Zion;  
Do not let your hands fall limp.

<sup>17</sup>The LORD your God is in your midst,  
A victorious warrior.  
He will exult over you with joy,  
He will be quiet in His love,  
He will rejoice over you with shouts of  
joy.

<sup>18</sup>I will gather those who grieve about  
the appointed feasts—  
They came from you, O Zion;  
The reproach of exile is a burden on  
them.

### **[Read 3:10-20]**

**Q: To whom are these promises addressed?**

A: To God’s people Israel.

**Q: What is promised in v.10 & 19-20a?**

A: Israel will be re-gathered.

**Q: What is promised in v.20b?**

A: Israel will be restored.

**Q: What is promised in v.11-13?**

A: Israel will be refined.

**Q: What is promised in v.14-18?**

A: Israel will be rejoicing. God Himself will join in with them.

### **Summary**

*The work which God accomplishes for each individual who comes to Him by restoring them from the old life (the work of salvation) and leading them to a changed life going forward (the work of sanctification) is literally brought to term not just for the nations in general but for Israel specifically.*

### **Overall Application**

*The message through Zephaniah is a picture of the inevitable outcome for those who consistently cling to God’s Word and ways versus those who repeatedly and consistently reject them – whether or not they are Jew or Gentile, or someone who at one time served Him or someone who never chose such service. The warning for believers is that it’s not just the world’s false religions and corrupt institutions which want to overcome them, but that even the very house of God can be so corrupted so that it will inevitably experience judgment itself.*

<sup>19</sup>Behold, I am going to deal at that  
time  
With all your oppressors,  
I will save the lame  
And gather the outcast,  
And I will turn their shame into praise  
and renown  
In all the earth.  
<sup>20</sup>At that time I will bring you in,  
Even at the time when I gather you  
together;  
Indeed, I will give you renown and  
praise  
Among all the peoples of the earth,  
When I restore your fortunes before  
your eyes,”  
Says the LORD.