

Minor Prophets: Zephaniah

Day 1.

Zephaniah is not on many Christians' "Favorite Books of the Bible" list. Scholars have accused him of being less original, less poetic and less meaningful than the other minor prophets. Yet, Zephaniah has one of my favorite verses. Zephaniah 3:17.

Before looking at Zephaniah 3:17, it may help to know who Zephaniah was. Zephaniah was a prophet of God who was called to bring a message of judgment to the people of Judah in the seventh century BC during the reign of Josiah (640–609 BC), the last of the godly kings of Judah. This was a crucial period in the history of God's people because these were the final decades leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon in 586. The northern kingdom of Israel had already fallen to the Assyrians in 722. Judah was on the same path of sin and rebellion. Into this context came the prophet Zephaniah.

Zephaniah's book begins with one of the most dramatic declarations of coming judgment found anywhere in Scripture. His description of the calamity that is about to fall upon Judah hearkens back to God's judgment of the earth during the days of Noah. Zephaniah writes (in 1: 2–3):

*"I will utterly sweep away
everything from the face of
the earth," declares the Lord.
"I will sweep away man and beast;
I will sweep away the birds of the
heavens and the fish of the sea,
and the rubble with the wicked.
I will cut off mankind from
the face of the earth," declares
the Lord.*

Here the wrath of God against those who rebel against Him is on clear display. Those who think such language is harsh do not understand the truly evil nature of sin. Most of the book continues along this vein, with Zephaniah pronouncing oracles of impending doom against Judah and against the nations.

Thoughts?

Day 2:

The final section of the book (3:9–20), however, contains two oracles of salvation. This is not unusual in the prophetic books as the prophets move from oracles of woe to oracles of blessing. Zephaniah's oracles of blessing indicate that judgment is not God's last word for His people. He begins with an oracle concerning God's purification of a faithful remnant (vv. 9–13). This is followed by an oracle describing God's rejoicing with His people (vv. 14–20). In verse 14, God calls upon His people to sing and rejoice (v. 14), for He has taken away their judgments and removed their enemies (vv. 15–16). Then in verse 17, we read what O. Palmer Robertson calls "the John 3:16 of the OT."

*The Lord your God is in
your midst, a mighty
one who will save;
he will rejoice over you with
gladness;
he will quiet you by his love;
he will exult over you with
loud singing.*

God calls upon His people to sing and rejoice in verse 14. Then in verse 17, He sings and rejoices over them. Stop and consider this for a moment. The Lord God Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, the Holy One of Israel, rejoices over the remnant. He exults over the faithful with loud singing. Loud singing! Rejoicing! This is not Aristotle's "Unmoved Mover." This is not the abstract god of the philosophers. This is our God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. And this God, the living God, rejoices over His faithful remnant with gladness and loud singing.

Does this remind you of any New Testament passage? Consider the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). The father in this parable, who represents God, sees his prodigal son returning home, and what does he do? He runs to him, embraces him, and kisses him. This was not something a dignified, elderly Jewish man did at the time. Jesus tells us there is joy in heaven when a sinner repents (Luke 15:7). It is not only the angels who rejoice. God rejoices as well. Zephaniah 3:17 vividly reminds us that our Father in heaven is not some distant deist god who cares nothing for us. It is a picture of profound and deep personal love, the kind of love that would sacrifice all for our sake. The kind of love that did sacrifice all for our sake. To Him be all glory, honor, and power.

Day 3:

From David's organization of the Levitical musicians (1 Chron. 25) to the book of Psalms to the song of the redeemed in Revelation 19:1–5, Scripture has much to say about the music of the covenant and its importance in worship. What we might often forget, however, is that the Lord Himself participates in this music. This is one of the points of Zephaniah.

The prophet Zephaniah spent much of his ministry speaking about the day of the Lord, a day on which unfaithful Judah and the enemies of God's people would suffer His wrath (1:1–3:8). Much of this prophecy was fulfilled in the fall of Jerusalem and exile of Judah in 586 BC, although there remains a final day of the Lord in which all people will receive final judgment (Rev. 20:11–15). Nevertheless, Zephaniah's prophecy is not only about judgment, for he concludes his book by looking at the future salvation of men and women from the Gentile nations and from Israel (3:9–20).

Remarkably, while the redeemed most certainly rejoice in their liberation from sin and evil, Zephaniah tells us that the very God of the universe also sings with joy at the moment of His people's salvation. The same Hebrew word for rejoicing is found both in 3:14 and 17; the former describes the joy of the people and the latter describes the joy of the Lord. God Himself will sing and make music as He brings His children into the kingdom of righteousness, peace, and joy.

Day 4:

Such joy points to the deep affection our Father feels for His children, not on account of our worthiness but because of the simple fact that God has chosen to set His love on us (Deut. 7:6–8). It is in our Lord’s nature to love His children; this is who He is. O. Palmer Robertson comments, “Delight, joy, and singing on God’s part underscore the mutuality of emotional experience felt by God and the redeemed” (The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah, p. 339).

God is described in Zephaniah 3:17 as the “mighty one,” language that echoes the description of the son of David in Isaiah (Isa. 9:1–7). Here, it is hinted that the creator God and covenant Lord would enter into humanity, through David’s lineage, in order to accomplish redemption. This has been done in Christ Jesus, who sings over us and leads us in singing songs of praise to our Father in heaven.

God is the transcendent Lord, and so He is never to be trifled with. Yet that He is Lord over us does not mean that He is distant and aloof. Our Father really does have affection for those who are His; we are His children, and He loves us with a costly love. When we are discouraged or afraid, let this sure love encourage us to seek His face and adore Him for all the good that He has done for us, knowing that He truly does sing over His children.