

Timeline / Overview

Zephaniah was the great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah (1:1) and lived during the final decades of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. It was when King Josiah (640 to 609 BC) had attempted to bring about real change in the land by removing idols and restoring the temple to the worship of Israel's God alone. However, Israel was just too far gone. Worshipping other gods was too entrenched in the life of the people and it ended up that Josiah's pride led him to a tragic death on the battlefield as he set Jerusalem on a collision course with Babylon (2 Chron 35:20-25). Zephaniah had seen all of this coming. For years he had been warning the leaders of Jerusalem. Zephaniah's contemporaries include Habakkuk and Jeremiah.

Judgment on Jerusalem (1:2 – 2:3)

The first section opens with this shocking reversal of **Genesis 1**:

Zephaniah 1:2 (ESV) - *"I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth," declares the Lord.*

God's good, ordered world is going to descend back into disorder and darkness and chaos, becoming uninhabitable once again (1:2-3). As you keep reading, you realize Zephaniah is developing all of these powerful poetic images to describe how Jerusalem's world is going to end (1:4-6). All of the city's institutions for worshipping the gods of the Canaanites will be destroyed. All the leaders who perpetrated injustice, all the economic centers where crooked lending and borrowing took place, all of it will be gone along with the city's walls. Zephaniah develops these almost apocalyptic images to show the significance of what's going to happen. It all refers to a great army that is coming to take out Jerusalem on "the day of the Lord" (1:7-18).

It's interesting that Zephaniah never mentions whose army God is going to use to bring this judgment. Now we know from the prophets Micah and Habakkuk that it's Babylon. However, Zephaniah never mentions their name, and it's because he wants to highlight God's role in orchestrating the rise and fall of the city. This is what gives Zephaniah hope (2:1-3). Not that Jerusalem as a whole can avoid this fate, but in the closing poem of this section he calls on anyone in Jerusalem who would seek the Lord. He says these will make up the faithful remnant, the people who could be spared if they repent (2:3):

Zephaniah 2:3 (ESV) - *Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, who do his just commands; seek righteousness; seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the LORD.*

Judgment on the Nations and Jerusalem (2:4 – 3:8)

In the second section, Zephaniah widens his focus to include the nations around Judah (2:4-15). So, the Philistines, the Moabites, the Ammonites, even the Assyrians. He accuses all of them corruption and violence and arrogance. He predicts that all of them will fall before Babylon too.

What's shocking is that the final people group targeted in this section are the Israelites in Jerusalem (**3:1-8**). It's like the leaders, and prophets, and priests of Israel are so corrupt and violent, so estranged from God, that He doesn't even recognize them as His people anymore. This section ends with God's final decision. He says that He's going to gather up all the nations (including Jerusalem) and pour out His burning indignation.

Zephaniah 3:8 (ESV) - *"Therefore wait for me," declares the LORD, "for the day when I rise up to seize the prey. For my decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation, all my burning anger; for in the fire of my jealousy all the earth shall be consumed.*

God's justice becomes this consuming fire that devours evil from the land. This is very intense.

Hope for the Nations and Jerusalem (**3:9 – 3:20**)

With the ending of **verse 8** in mind, the following line that brings us into the final part of the book comes as a surprise. We discover that the burning fire of divine judgment is not aimed at destroying people. Its purpose is to purify the nations including Jerusalem. So this section begins as God says that He's going to heal and transform the rebellious nations into one unified family (**3:9-10**). After being purified they are going to turn from their evil and call upon the name of the Lord (**3:9**). These images point to the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham in **Gen 12:1-3**, that God would find a way to bless all the nations and Jerusalem.

The conclusion of the book focuses on the restoration of the city at the center of the nations (**3:11-20**). God's presence is there in the restored city along with that faithful remnant that's been humbled and transformed by God's mercy. This is pointing toward the future king or messiah (**John 1:49**) who comes to save God's spiritual Israel.

Zephaniah 3:15 (ESV) - *The Lord has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil.*

Zephaniah 3:17 (ESV) - *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.*

The closing poem of the book ends with these very powerful images about God gathering up His family, the outcast and the poor and the broken, where He exalts them into a place of honor, and this is how the book ends.

Teacher's Notes

Handout notes are adapted from The Bible Project

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFZknKPNvz8>

Text

Zephaniah 1 (ESV)

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

² "I will utterly sweep away everything
from the face of the earth," declares the LORD.

³ "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.

⁴ "I will stretch out my hand against Judah
and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem;
and I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal
and the name of the idolatrous priests along with the priests,

⁵ those who bow down on the roofs
to the host of the heavens,
those who bow down and swear to the LORD
and yet swear by Milcom,

⁶ those who have turned back from following the LORD,
who do not seek the LORD or inquire of him."

⁷ Be silent before the Lord GOD!
For the day of the LORD is near;
the LORD has prepared a sacrifice
and consecrated his guests.

⁸ And on the day of the LORD's sacrifice—
"I will punish the officials and the king's sons
and all who array themselves in foreign attire.

⁹ On that day I will punish
everyone who leaps over the threshold,
and those who fill their master's house
with violence and fraud.

¹⁰ "On that day," declares the LORD,
"a cry will be heard from the Fish Gate,

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

¹¹ Wail, O inhabitants of the Mortar!
For all the traders are no more;
all who weigh out silver are cut off.

¹² At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps,
and I will punish the men
who are complacent,
those who say in their hearts,
'The LORD will not do good,
nor will he do ill.'

¹³ Their goods shall be plundered,
and their houses laid waste.
Though they build houses,
they shall not inhabit them;
though they plant vineyards,
they shall not drink wine from them."

¹⁴ The great day of the LORD is near,
near and hastening fast;
the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter;
the mighty man cries aloud there.

¹⁵ A day of wrath is that day,
a day of distress and anguish,
a day of ruin and devastation,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness,

¹⁶ a day of trumpet blast and battle cry
against the fortified cities
and against the lofty battlements.

¹⁷ I will bring distress on mankind,
so that they shall walk like the blind,
because they have sinned against the LORD;
their blood shall be poured out like dust,
and their flesh like dung.

¹⁸ Neither their silver nor their gold
shall be able to deliver them
on the day of the wrath of the LORD.

In the fire of his jealousy,
all the earth shall be consumed;
for a full and sudden end
he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.

Zephaniah 2 (ESV)

- ¹ Gather together, yes, gather,
 O shameless nation,
² before the decree takes effect
 —before the day passes away like chaff—
before there comes upon you
 the burning anger of the LORD,
before there comes upon you
 the day of the anger of the LORD.
- ³ Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land,
 who do his just commands;
seek righteousness; seek humility;
 perhaps you may be hidden
 on the day of the anger of the LORD.
- ⁴ For Gaza shall be deserted,
 and Ashkelon shall become a desolation;
Ashdod's people shall be driven out at noon,
 and Ekron shall be uprooted.
- ⁵ Woe to you inhabitants of the seacoast,
 you nation of the Cherethites!
The word of the LORD is against you,
 O Canaan, land of the Philistines;
 and I will destroy you until no inhabitant is left.
- ⁶ And you, O seacoast, shall be pastures,
 with meadows for shepherds
 and folds for flocks.
- ⁷ The seacoast shall become the possession
 of the remnant of the house of Judah,
 on which they shall graze,
and in the houses of Ashkelon
 they shall lie down at evening.
For the LORD their God will be mindful of them
 and restore their fortunes.
- ⁸ "I have heard the taunts of Moab
 and the revilings of the Ammonites,
how they have taunted my people
 and made boasts against their territory.
- ⁹ Therefore, as I live," declares the LORD of hosts,
 the God of Israel,
"Moab shall become like Sodom,
 and the Ammonites like Gomorrah,
a land possessed by nettles and salt pits,

and a waste forever.

The remnant of my people shall plunder them,
and the survivors of my nation shall possess them.”

¹⁰ This shall be their lot in return for their pride,
because they taunted and boasted
against the people of the LORD of hosts.

¹¹ The LORD will be awesome against them;
for he will famish all the gods of the earth,
and to him shall bow down,
each in its place,
all the lands of the nations.

¹² You also, O Cushites,
shall be slain by my sword.

¹³ And he will stretch out his hand against the north
and destroy Assyria,
and he will make Nineveh a desolation,
a dry waste like the desert.

¹⁴ Herds shall lie down in her midst,
all kinds of beasts;
even the owl and the hedgehog
shall lodge in her capitals;
a voice shall hoot in the window;
devastation will be on the threshold;
for her cedar work will be laid bare.

¹⁵ This is the exultant city
that lived securely,
that said in her heart,
“I am, and there is no one else.”
What a desolation she has become,
a lair for wild beasts!
Everyone who passes by her
hisses and shakes his fist.

Zephaniah 3 (ESV)

¹ Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled,
the oppressing city!

² She listens to no voice;
she accepts no correction.

She does not trust in the LORD;
she does not draw near to her God.

³ Her officials within her

are roaring lions;
her judges are evening wolves
that leave nothing till the morning.

⁴ Her prophets are fickle, treacherous men;
her priests profane what is holy;
they do violence to the law.

⁵ The LORD within her is righteous;
he does no injustice;
every morning he shows forth his justice;
each dawn he does not fail;
but the unjust knows no shame.

⁶ “I have cut off nations;
their battlements are in ruins;
I have laid waste their streets
so that no one walks in them;
their cities have been made desolate,
without a man, without an inhabitant.

⁷ I said, ‘Surely you will fear me;
you will accept correction.
Then your dwelling would not be cut off
according to all that I have appointed against you.’
But all the more they were eager
to make all their deeds corrupt.

⁸ “Therefore wait for me,” declares the LORD,
“for the day when I rise up to seize the prey.
For my decision is to gather nations,
to assemble kingdoms,
to pour out upon them my indignation,
all my burning anger;
for in the fire of my jealousy
all the earth shall be consumed.

⁹ “For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples
to a pure speech,
that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD
and serve him with one accord.

¹⁰ From beyond the rivers of Cush
my worshipers, the daughter of my dispersed ones,
shall bring my offering.

¹¹ “On that day you shall not be put to shame
because of the deeds by which you have rebelled against me;
for then I will remove from your midst

your proudly exultant ones,
and you shall no longer be haughty
in my holy mountain.
¹² But I will leave in your midst
a people humble and lowly.
They shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD,
¹³ those who are left in Israel;
they shall do no injustice
and speak no lies,
nor shall there be found in their mouth
a deceitful tongue.
For they shall graze and lie down,
and none shall make them afraid.”
¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter of Jerusalem!
¹⁵ The LORD has taken away the judgments against you;
he has cleared away your enemies.
The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;
you shall never again fear evil.
¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
“Fear not, O Zion;
let not your hands grow weak.
¹⁷ 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.
¹⁸ I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival,
so that you will no longer suffer reproach.
¹⁹ Behold, at that time I will deal
with all your oppressors.
And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.
²⁰ At that time I will bring you in,
at the time when I gather you together;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes,” says the LORD.

Timeline / Overview

2 Chronicles 35:20–27 (ESV)

²⁰ After all this, when Josiah had prepared the temple, Neco king of Egypt went up to fight at Carchemish on the Euphrates, and Josiah went out to meet him. ²¹ But he sent envoys to him, saying, “What have we to do with each other, king of Judah? I am not coming against you this day, but against the house with which I am at war. And God has commanded me to hurry. Cease opposing God, who is with me, lest he destroy you.” ²² Nevertheless, Josiah did not turn away from him, but disguised himself in order to fight with him. He did not listen to the words of Neco from the mouth of God, but came to fight in the plain of Megiddo. ²³ And the archers shot King Josiah. And the king said to his servants, “Take me away, for I am badly wounded.” ²⁴ So his servants took him out of the chariot and carried him in his second chariot and brought him to Jerusalem. And he died and was buried in the tombs of his fathers. All Judah and Jerusalem mourned for Josiah. ²⁵ Jeremiah also uttered a lament for Josiah; and all the singing men and singing women have spoken of Josiah in their laments to this day. They made these a rule in Israel; behold, they are written in the Laments. ²⁶ Now the rest of the acts of Josiah, and his good deeds according to what is written in the Law of the LORD, ²⁷ and his acts, first and last, behold, they are written in the Book of the Kings of Israel and Judah.

Hope for the Nations and Jerusalem (3:9 – 3:20)

Genesis 12:1–3 (ESV)

¹ Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

John 1:49 (ESV)

⁴⁹ Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”