

Living Messages of the Books of The Bible

GENESIS TO MALACHI

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

THE MESSAGE ZEPHANIAH

A. THE PERMANENT VALUE

Its Revelation of the Day of the Lord

I. The Content

- i. The direct Act of God. 1:12b.
- ii. Supernatural. 1:14-16.

II. The Extent

- i. Judgment upon Sin
 - a. Luxury and Indifference. 1:12 The last Stages
 - b. The evil Spirit. 3:2.
 - c. The Results. 3:3, 4.
 1. princes.
 2. Judges.
 3. Prophets.
 4. Priests.
- ii. The whole Extent.
 - a. Man, and all he has polluted.
 - b. National Life and History, as well as immediate sins swept away.
 - c. Chaos consumed.

III. The Intent

- i. The Enthronement of the Lord. 3:17.
- ii. The new Order. Vindication of the Trusting.
 - a. Songs instead of Sorrow.
 - b. Service instead of Selfishness.
 - c. Solidarity instead of Scattering.

B. THE LIVING MESSAGE

I. The Joy of the Assurance

“We rejoice in Hope of the Glory of God.”

II. The Responsibility of the Assurance

- II Peter 3
- | | |
|--------------------------------|----|
| i. “Holy Living and Godliness. | 11 |
| ii. “Looking for hastening.” | 12 |
| iii. “Give Diligence.” | 14 |
| iv. “Beware.” | 17 |
| v. “Grow.” | 18 |

THE key to the book of Zephaniah is the phrase **“the day of the Lord.”** The phrase is not

peculiar to Zephaniah.

Most of the prophets make use of it in the course of their prophesying. In our study of the permanent value and living message of the prophecy of Joel we noticed that Joel used it five times in the course of his brief message, and by his use of it we found that the phrase stands for a perpetual method in that activity of God which moves ever forward until at last it accomplishes all His purpose in the affairs of men. To him:

- The locust plague was “**the day of the Lord**”;
- The threatened invasion would be “**the day of the Lord**”;
- That ultimate procedure whereby God will establish His rule in the world will be “**the day of the Lord.**”

Zephaniah used this phrase more frequently than any other prophet. It was his burden.

Consequently we find, as we should expect, in his prophecy a fuller explanation of the meaning of the phrase than in any other of the Old Testament writings. The explanation of the phrase is the permanent value of this book of Zephaniah.

Wherever we find this phrase in any of the prophets or in the New Testament, it invariably suggests a contrast. Each prophet who uses it does so in a certain set of circumstances, in order to put such circumstances into contrast with that which he describes as “**the day of the Lord.**”

The contrast is always that between the day of man and the day of the Lord. Zephaniah uttered his prophecy in the time of Josiah. A remarkable thing which has puzzled expositors is that Zephaniah, whose prophecy opens with the declaration,

“The word of the Lord which came unto Zephaniah, the son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah,”

Never referred to the reform under Josiah.

The days of Josiah stand out, when we study the history of the people, as days of reform. I think the explanation is simple. The reform under Josiah, so far as it affected the nation at all, was a reform brought about by the popularity of the king, and not by heart repentance. Huldah the prophetess had declared that this would be so. Zephaniah took no account of the reform, knowing as he did that the hearts of the people were still in rebellion and in sin. Amid circumstances of rebellion, sin, and corruption, he spoke of “**the day of the Lord.**”

- The day of man is the day of the Lord’s patience.
- “**The day of the Lord**” is the day of man’s judgment.

Wherever this phrase occurs, it refers to God’s judgment, in order to the establishment of His Kingdom.

To Joel the locust plague was **“the day of the Lord,”** because it was a day of judgment; the coming armies constituted **“the day of the Lord”** because their coming was the coming of God’s judgment upon a sinning people. The ultimate **“day of the Lord,”** according to Peter, is the day in which **“the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.”** The day of man is the day of God’s patience. **“The day of the Lord”** is the day when patience has had her perfect work on the part of God, and He takes up the sword of judgment.

The permanent value of this book, then, is its unveiling of **“the day of the Lord.”**

One of the most significant things about the book is that it is impossible to deal with it from the standpoint of a calendar or almanac. It cannot be placed historically beyond the introductory words. As one reads it, the nations seemed to have ceased to be; all are involved in one sweeping hurricane of judgment. History seems to be forgotten. **“I will utterly consume all things from off the land”** is the first word. It is a picture of devastation, and kings as instruments of judgment are no longer to be found here. No longer through mediation is God dealing in judgment, but directly, absolutely, and finally.

The prophecy reveals the meaning of **“the day of the Lord”** in its broad processes, and in its detailed application. There are three things revealed in the reading of the book. Let us indicate them by three simple and related words.

- First, the content of **“the day of the Lord.”**
- Secondly, the extent of **“the day of the Lord.”**
- Finally, the intent of **“the day of the Lord.”**

According to this prophecy, what is the content of **“the day of the Lord”**? That can only be answered by a repetition of certain declarations of the book.

The first of these follows immediately after the first verse:-

“I will utterly consume all things from off the land, saith the LORD. I will consume man and beast; I will consume the fowls of the heaven, and the fishes of the sea, and the stumblingblocks with the wicked; and I will cut off man from off the land, saith the LORD.”

This is a declaration that God will visit this earth in direct and positive judgment, using the word judgment not now in that broader sense, in which we often use it as indicating administration, but in the narrower sense of vengeance, punishment. The prophet then proceeds to declare that this will be so in spite of unbelief:-

“And it shall come to pass at that time, that I will search Jerusalem with candles, and punish the men that are settled on their lees: that say in their heart, The LORD will not do good, neither will he do evil.”

Men are saying that God is neither doing good, nor will He visit men with judgment and

scattering. Zephaniah affirms that He will act in human history suddenly, swiftly, and irrevocably in judgment.

That is also the teaching of Peter in his second letter.

It is to be observed also that Peter insists upon it that God will act in spite of unbelief,

Again the prophet declares that this “**day of the Lord**” will be not merely a day as other days have been when God presses into His service the armies of men.

It will be entirely supernatural:-

“The great day of the LORD is near, it is near, and hasteth greatly, even the voice of the day of the LORD: the mighty man shall cry there bitterly. That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, A day of the trumpet and alarm against the fenced cities, and against the high towers. And I will bring distress upon men, that they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the LORD.”

All these terms, descriptive of the day, suggest that the judgment will be supernatural. The indefiniteness of the terms creates a sense of the terribleness of the judgment.

That, then, is the message of Zephaniah.

There is a day when God will come to judge the earth, when He will interfere in human history and end it; a day in which God will come Himself directly, supernaturally, immediately into the presence of human affairs, and that to judgment.

- The men of Zephaniah’s day said, **“The Lord will not do good, neither will He do evil.”**
- The men of Peter’s day said, **“Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation.”**
- The men of our own day are saying exactly the same thing, that God will never interfere in judgment in this way.

The declaration of this book is that there is a day of the Lord, a day in the history of humanity, when His patience will be at an end, and when He will bring to pass His act, His strange act, of judgment. This prophecy also declares the extent of that activity. Judgment is to be discriminative. It will be judgment upon sin.

Let us repeat the words already quoted, and ponder them;-

“And it shall come to pass at that time, that I will search Jerusalem with candles, and punish the men that are settled on their lees: that say in their heart, The LORD will not do good, neither will he do evil.”

The last stages of sin are luxury and indifference.

- **“Men that are settled on their lees”**; that is luxury.
- Men who say, **“The Lord will not do good, neither will He do evil”**; that is indifference.

There is the constantly recurring application of **“the day of the Lord”** in history. The history of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire shows that the last stages of sin before judgment fell in Rome were luxury and indifference. The final stage of sin in the history of man upon which the wrath of God will fall will be characterized by the same things. What is the secret of luxury and indifference?

“Woe to her that is rebellious and polluted, to the oppressing city! She obeyed not the voice; she received not correction; she trusted not in the LORD; she drew not near to her God.”

Opinions differ as to whether the prophet in these words referred to Jerusalem or to Nineveh.

For our purpose, whether Jerusalem, Nineveh, Rome, or London matters nothing. This is the spirit upon which judgment falls. The last stage of sin is that of luxury and indifference, and the spirit which issues in such a condition is that of disobedience to the voice of God, refusal to receive His correction, failure to put trust in Him, and distance from Him.

The result of such a spirit in the life of the city is that: **“Her princes within her are roaring lions; her judges are evening wolves; they gnaw not the bones till the morrow. Her prophets are light and treacherous persons: her priests have polluted the sanctuary, they have done violence to the law.”**

The extent of the judgment is that man and all he has polluted are swept away.

It has been said that this prophecy of Zephaniah is peculiarly desert and barren - no life, no flower, no fruit, none of the beauties of nature; nothing but a world swept by a simoom. If this is so, what is the reason of it? Look at the conditions described. Men settled on their lees in luxury, denying the interference of God. A city that did not obey the voice, received not correction, did not trust in the Lord, did not draw near to God. Men and city materialized, self-centered, luxurious; the rulers, princes, judges, prophets, and priests alike corrupt. The whole condition may be expressed in the one word-chaos. What, then, is the story of **“the day of the Lord”**? That of chaos consumed, disorder disorganized, evil conditions destroyed, until the whole city appears before the eyes of the astonished prophet as a simoom-swept landscape with never a blade of grass. What is it all for? What is the intent of this terrible activity? Read to the end:-

“Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all the heart, O daughter of Jerusalem. The LORD hath taken away thy judgments, he hath cast out thine enemy: the king of Israel, even the LORD, is in the midst of thee: thou shalt not see evil any more. In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear thou not: and to Zion, Let not thine hands be slack. The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing.”

A modern expositor has said that it is perfectly patent that this last chapter was not written by Zephaniah, because the contrast is too great between the picture of the awful, sweeping, irrevocable judgment, and that of the restoration. No one can imagine, he declares, that the same man wrote both. All of which is the result of the expositor's blindness. The last picture is that of the enthroned Lord, the picture of a new order; songs instead of sorrow, service instead of selfishness, solidarity instead of scattering.

That is the intent of judgment. Its content, God's immediate, supernatural visitation of the earth to destroy; its extent, sin and its last issues of pollution-man and everything he has spoiled; the intent, the established throne and the new order, in which God and His Kingdom sing over each other. The very contrast demonstrates the unity of authorship.

There was a man whose name was John. We describe him to-day as the apostle of love; Jesus described him in the early days as the son of thunder. In his writings two words are of constant recurrence - commandments and love. It is the man who sees most clearly the fierceness of God's wrath against sin, who sees most clearly through all the processes to the restoration, and therefore sings his song. If I seek the supreme example of this principle of the "**day of the Lord**," I come again to the Man of Nazareth, and listen to the word He uttered when from the slopes of the mountain He looked at the city of His love.

Was there ever such merging of fire and tenderness, of severity and goodness, as in His words, "**O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.**"

Zephaniah will write of "**the day of the Lord**" as a day of swift, fiery judgment upon a sinning earth, but he will end with the song that tells of the Lord's singing. What is the living message of this book? Zephaniah teaches that it is ours to rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. He called the men of his own day to sing for joy:

- Because of "**the day of the Lord**,"
- Because "**the day of the Lord**" is the day of destruction of the things that destroy,
- Because "**the day of the Lord**" will be the beginning of a new era when songs shall take the place of sighs, and service shall take the place of selfishness, and solidarity shall take the place of scattering. Surely Charles Kingsley had been reading Zephaniah when he wrote "**The Day of the Lord**":

"The Day of the Lord is at hand, at hand!
Its storms roll up the sky:
The nations sleep starving on heaps of gold:
All dreamers toss and sigh.
The night is darkest before the morn;
When the pain is sorest the child is born,
And the Day of the Lord at hand."

Mark the note of triumph in the next verses:

“Gather you, gather you, hounds of hell
Famine, and Plague, and War;
Idleness, Bigotry, Cant and Misrule,
Gather, and fall in the snare!
Hireling and Mammonite,
Bigot and Knave,
Crawl to the battlefield, sneak to your grave,
In the Day of the Lord at hand.

“Who would sit down and sigh for a lost age of gold
While the Lord of all ages is here?
True hearts will leap up at the trumpet of God,
And those who can suffer can dare.
Each old age of gold was an iron age too,
And the meekest of saints may find stern work to do
In the Day of the Lord at hand.”

That is sentimental and useless joy which finds its reason in the thought of escape. We need to-day a renewal of the passion that delights in judgment which ends the things of wrong and evil, and brings new birth to the whole creation.

“Who would sit down and sigh for a lost age of gold
While the Lord of all ages is here?”

The living message may be expressed in the words of Peter:-

- **“Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat?”**
- **“Be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace.”**
- **“Beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness.”**
- **“Seeing ye know these things . . . grow in the grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”**

~ end of chapter 35 ~

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