

Zephaniah

The day of the Lord

February 4, 2010

The largest and most luxurious ship in the world during that time, the RMS Titanic was the iron wonder of the Industrial Age, the pinnacle of human ingenuity. So confident in her structure and strength were some of her passengers that they claimed, "Even God couldn't sink this ship!"

No one could foresee the catastrophe awaiting them in the icy waters of the Atlantic. The Titanic was four days at sea. It was April 14, 1912, a Sunday. She was speeding along, entirely too fast for a ship of her tonnage, as she approached the North Atlantic ice fields.

The wireless operators, busy arranging tickertape parades and parties that would celebrate the Titanic's arrival in New York, ignored or made light of repeated warnings of icebergs in the ship's path. Even Captain Edward Smith, with more than 40 years of experience, seemed complacent. After all, he too thought the ship was unsinkable.

Shortly before midnight, the crew spied an iceberg dead ahead. The liner veered left, avoiding a head-on collision but scraping the ship's hull along the iceberg's jagged undersea mass. The impact tore a three-hundred-foot gash along the ship's starboard side.

Water quickly flooded the bow of the Titanic. The huge ship began listing and tilting forward and the passengers realized they were in serious trouble.

The elegant vessel was equipped with only twenty lifeboats, far too few for the more than 2,200 passengers and crew. Finally, at 2:20 A.M., on April 15, 1912, the unsinkable Titanic heaved a final gasp and plunged bow-first into the freezing black waters of the North Atlantic sea. More than 1,500 lives were lost.

In many ways, the tragedy of the Titanic parallels the story of our world. We'd like to think that human ingenuity has made us safe from disaster, that we're too great to fall or God is too loving to send anyone to hell. Really? Under the surface, sin has ripped a gash in humanity's soul, and, whether or not we choose to believe it, we're sinking without Jesus.

Zephaniah radioed an urgent message to the nation of Judah and is sending one to our modern world as well: "You're heading straight toward disaster." But we need not despair, because there's hope! Unlike the lifeboats on the Titanic, God's mercy and grace have room for everyone. All we need to do is climb aboard.

A. THE AUTHOR AND THE TIMELINE

Zephaniah 1:1 The word of the Lord which came to 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.

The Scriptures reveal very little about Zephaniah's personal life like the majority of the minor prophets. But we know that he was a great-great-grandson of king Hezekiah from this verse. Zephaniah ministered in Judah during the time of king Josiah (640-

609), who led the nation in a spiritual reformation triggered by the finding of the Book of the Law in the temple in the year 622.

Zephaniah's name means "Yahweh hides" – which was his message in a nutshell. The day of the Lord was coming and there was no stopping it now. But if the people would repent, God would give them a place to hide. He would preserve them through the hour of testing and usher them into His glorious kingdom.

B. THE THEME OF THE BOOK

Zephaniah's major theme is "the Day of the Lord," that period of time when God will judge the nations and usher in His righteous kingdom. This theme is found in almost all the prophets, but it is particularly evident in Joel and Zephaniah.

When was the last time you've heard about "the Day of the Lord" in your daily newspaper or 6 o'clock news? Even if they do believe in God, most people don't connect Him in any way with either current or future events. The closest we come to involving God in human events is when insurance policies mention "acts of God over which we have no control." But that's a far cry from Zephaniah's "the Day of the Lord."

"The Day of the Lord" is an important biblical concept that we must take seriously. If we know how, where and when we are going to end our lives, we would do many things differently than what we are planning to do now, don't you agree? As a matter of fact, if all the human beings knew what would happen after they die – not when they are going to die, I don't believe that there would be one person who would not accept Jesus into their hearts before they die.

God warns the world that judgment is coming, and it's foolish for anybody to be unprepared. The big question is "Where would unbelievers hide from the all seeing eyes of God Almighty on the Day of the Lord?"

Zephaniah 2:3 Seek the Lord, all you meek of the earth, Who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility. It may be that you will be hidden In the day of the Lord's anger.

C. THE OVERVIEW OF ZEPHANIAH

Zephaniah can be divided into two broad sections, the judgment and doom section – 1:2-3:8 and the joy and deliverance section – 3:9-20.

1) Judgment and Doom

In this first section, it is filled with God's prophecies against Judah, the nations around her and against Jerusalem.

• Divine judgment on Judah – 1:2-18

In Zephaniah's day, an attitude of arrogance and invincibility filled the hearts of the Jewish people like the passengers of the Titanic. God's judgment was the furthest thing from anyone's mind. A good king Josiah was on the throne; the nation was growing; the Assyrians and the Philistines were no longer a threat to them. Besides, Judah had the temple. God wouldn't destroy His temple, would He?

Today, an attitude of arrogance and invincibility fill the hearts of many in America. Even though many are in the middle of economic difficulties and the threats from the Islam terrorists, God's judgment is the furthest thing from anyone's mind. If not so, the people would seek God, not the idol of greed and selfishness. Besides, after all,

just about everyone in America proclaims Christianity including P resident Obama. God wouldn't destroy America, would He?

Zephaniah 1:2 "I will utterly consume everything From the face of the land," Says the Lord;

This is not a hysterical cry of "The-sky-is-falling" threat. The same God who created the the entire world and the universe with a word could destroy it if He wanted to – and He will in the future judgment day.

The Lord wanted to deal with five groups of Jews: idolaters (1:4-6), worldly princes (1:7-8), violent oppressors (1:9), corrupt merchants (1:10-11) and the indifferent (1:12-13). The attitude of the last group is permeating through our society as well. They are cynical toward the faith in Jesus Christ and the only matter to them is serving their own belly.

Romans 16:18 For those who are such do not serve our L ord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.

The unbelievers of the time of Zephaniah and now have this one in common – they are guilty of sins of commission by worshiping idols of self-righteousness, greed, lust, etc. and sins of omission by ignoring the one True God.

• **Invitation – 2:1-3**

Zephaniah 2:1-3 Gather yourselves together, yes, gather together, O undesirable nation, 2 Before the decree is issued, Or the day passes like chaff , Before the Lord's fierce anger comes upon you, Before the day of the L ord's anger comes upon you!

As God's sheltering mercy was available to all those who would repent and come after Him in Zephaniah's days, His mercy is still available.

Yet so many people ignore it. That is such a mind boggling thing . But then again when my wife Karen told me about a book by Hal Lindsey " The Late, Great Planet Earth" before 1987, I laughed at her face. I have to admit that God's truth about the end times is nothing more than a foolish thing to the unbelievers who cannot comprehend truth because they do not have the presence of the Holy Spirit who can explain to them.

1 Corinthians 2:14 But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

• **Sure doom of the nations – 2:4-15**

Systematically, God's prophecies against the surrounding nations were given through prophet Zephaniah: Philistia to the west (v4-7), Moab and Ammon to the east (v8-11), Egypt / Ethiopia to the south (v12), and mighty Assyria to the north (v13-15). For their arrogance, idolatry and hostility toward His people, God would rain down on them desolation and destruction.

Philistia: The Philistines' coastal cities, made wealthy by vast shipping enterprises, would be destroyed by the enemy and left in ruins. Nebuchadnezzar invaded Philistia and conquered it, and the only remembrance of that great nation left today is the name "Palestine," which comes from "Philistine" according to Ezek. 25:15-28:26.

Moab and Ammon: The Moabites and Ammonites originated from Lot's incestuous union with his two daughters and were hateful enemies of the Jews. But these two arrogant nations would end up like Sodom and Gomorrah, wiped off the face of the earth. You don't find any descendants of Moab or Ammon anywhere.

Cush: This nation was located in the upper Nile region. Some students think the reference includes Egypt, another long-time enemy of the Jews. It was Nebuchadnezzar and the swords of the Babylonian soldiers that conquered this ancient nation. The other Bible students think that it is Ethiopia rather than Egypt.

Assyria: Until the rise of Babylon, Assyria had been the dominant power, a ruthless people who were notorious for their pride and their cruelty to their enemies. A century and a half before, God had sent the Prophet Jonah to Assyria's capital city of Nineveh to warn them of God's judgment, and the people had repented, but their following generations went back to the old pagan ways, and Nineveh was destroyed in 612. Within the next few years, the once great Assyrian Empire simply vanished from the face of the earth, and Zephaniah saw it coming.

• **Sure doom of Jerusalem – 3:1-7**

Would God judge His own people any less harshly for the same sins? The answer was "No." More than anyone else, Jerusalem's greatest enemy was itself. The corrupted rulers, idolatrous prophets and priests added fuel to the unbelieving heart of the people in Jerusalem. The city had crumbled internally, long before Babylon ripped through its towers and demolished its gates.

As we have witnessed Israel's vicious cycles that they had gone through from worship of God to abandoning Him for the sake of the idol worship, to punishment for their idolatries and back to worshipping Him again, America goes through the exact same cycle over and over and over again.

When God chastens us in love and we're suffering because of our sins, it's easy to cry out to Him for deliverance and make all kinds of promises. But when we're comfortable and enjoying His blessings, we tend to forget God and assume that we can sin and get away with it. Giving thanks glorifies God and is a strong defense against selfishness and idolatry.

It is one thing for the people to abandon God, but it is completely different for God to abandon His people. The greatest judgment God can send to His people is to let them have their own way and not interfere.

2) Joy and Deliverance

Although the Book of Zephaniah rumbles with judgment and doom, thankfully, it ends with joy and deliverance. This is the final chapter of the "day of the Lord," the light at the end of God's tunnel of judgment against the unbelieving world.

Through Zephaniah, God gives us a glimpse into the millennial kingdom, the time when the Messiah will rule the earth in perfect peace and righteousness. When, as one great body, the redeemed will lift their voices to God in praise and adoration. When judgment and heartache will be a distant memory. God's love and joy will rule the day.

Zephaniah 3:17 The Lord your God in your midst, The Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will

rejoice over you with singing."

D. APPLICATIONS

- 1) We must remember that the greatest judgment God can send to His people is to let them have their own way and not interfere.
- 2) It is far more important to be on God's side than to try and persuade Him to be on your side.