

# ZEPHANIAH

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## BACKGROUND

After the enlightened reign of Hezekiah (728-686 B.C.), Judah had endured 55 years under two of its worst kings, Manasseh and Amon, before Josiah was made king at age eight in 640. As he grew into adulthood, Josiah proved to be the most godly of Judah's kings. He experienced a personal spiritual awakening in 632 at age 16 ([2 Chron. 34:3](#)), and after the law was rediscovered in 621, he led a nationwide revival ([2 Chron. 34:14-18, 29-33](#)).

Despite Josiah's reforms and the initial positive response of the people ([2 Kings 23:3](#)), many in Judah remained lukewarm in their faith. Into this situation came Zephaniah, warning of the impending invasion by Babylon and of the "day of the LORD," the final and universal judgment at the end of human history ([Zeph. 1:1-3:7](#)). Looking still further into God's plans for his people, he foretold Judah's return from Babylon and the final, triumphant page of human history, the glorious millennial kingdom of God ([Zeph. 3:8-20](#)).

Nahum and Jeremiah were Zephaniah's contemporaries.

## AUTHOR

Descended from King Hezekiah ([Zeph. 1:1](#)) and therefore related to Josiah, Zephaniah may well have influenced the young king as he sought the Lord and tried to promote spiritual revival.

## DATE

While Zephaniah's ministry is said only to have taken place in the days of Josiah ([Zeph. 1:1](#)), it may well have been during the years between the beginning of Josiah's personal awakening (632 B.C.) and the onset of his more public revival efforts in 621.

## LOCATION

Apparently Jerusalem, since it is mentioned often ([Zeph. 1:4, 10, 12](#)).

## PURPOSE

- To warn of the coming "day of the LORD" and correct misconceptions about it. Many Israelites thought it would be a day for rejoicing, but Zephaniah revealed that idolatrous Israelites were considered God's enemies just as the Canaanites had been. It is not nationality but spirituality that counts.

- To hold out hope for a remnant that will survive God's judgment ([Zeph. 3:9-20](#)).

## UNIQUE FEATURES

- The expression "the day of the LORD" is found more times in Zephaniah than in any other Bible book. As explained in *Isaiah: Background* and the exposition on [Isaiah 2:5-4:1](#), the term can refer to any time God intervenes in history in a supernatural way, though most often it refers to judgment, particularly the Great Tribulation at history's end. Zephaniah used the term to refer to both the Babylonian invasion and the end times.

## COMPARISON WITH OTHER BIBLE BOOKS

*Genesis:*

- Both speak of God's cutting off humankind from the face of the earth ([Zeph. 1:3](#); [Genesis 6:7](#)).
- Genesis recorded the beginning of Moab and Ammon ([Genesis 19:36-38](#)); Zephaniah foretold their end ([Zeph. 2:8-11](#)). The fathers of these two nations were born to Lot through incest soon after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Zephaniah compared that event to the impending destruction of Moab and Ammon.
- Genesis recorded God's resting after Creation ([Genesis 2:2-3](#)); Zephaniah predicted God's resting again after completing his work of redemption ([Zeph. 3:17](#), KJV).

## OUTLINE

- I. A SAD DAY COMING ([Zeph. 1:1-3:8](#))
  1. Judah and Jerusalem judged ([Zeph. 1:1-2:3](#))
  2. Enemy nations judged ([Zeph. 2:4-15](#))
  - C. Judah and Jerusalem judged ([Zeph. 3:1-8](#))

## II. A GLAD DAY COMING ([Zeph. 3:9-20](#))

## TIMELINE

686 B.C.:	Death of Hezekiah, ancestor of Zephaniah
632 B.C.:	Josiah turns to Lord, Zephaniah begins ministry?
621 B.C.:	Law rediscovered, Zephaniah ends ministry?
586 B.C.:	Fall of Judah

**[Zeph. 1:1-13](#)** *Introducing: The day of the Lord.* After establishing his identity ([Zeph. 1:1](#); see *Author*) and divine mission, Zephaniah lost no time in warning of an approaching time of universal judgment, the "day of the LORD" ([Zeph. 1:7](#); see *Unique Features*). This terrible day would involve worldwide destruction ([Zeph. 1:2-3](#)), but Zephaniah began by focusing mainly on one nation: idolatrous Judah ([Zeph. 1:4-9](#)). God had "prepared" his people as a "sacrifice" for Babylon, his "guests" ([Zeph. 1:7](#), KJV)! No one, no matter how high or low, would escape ([Zeph. 1:8-9](#)). All would suffer ([Zeph. 1:10-13](#)). Till judgment began, Judah would be spiritually complacent ([Zeph. 1:12](#)).

Concerning "all who avoid stepping on the threshold" ([Zeph. 1:9](#), NIV), see [1 Samuel 5:1-5](#). Tradition holds that Nebuchadnezzar's army entered Jerusalem through the Fish Gate ([Zeph. 1:10](#)), known today as the Damascus Gate, on the city's north side.

*A most dreadful day!* The day of the Lord would be a dark and terrible day, from which neither Judah's mighty men ([Zeph. 1:14](#)) nor its wealth ([Zeph. 1:18](#)) could save it. The bodies of the dead would be cast aside as refuse because there would be no one left to bury them ([Zeph. 1:17](#)). The land "will be devoured" by a God jealous because of his people's forsaking him for idols ([Zeph. 1:18](#); see [Zeph. 1:4-5](#)).

**[Zeph. 2:1-3](#)** *Calling Judah to repent.* Amid his dire forecast of doom, Zephaniah held out some hope of escape to any who would repent and turn to God. But time was at a premium: They would need to repent "before judgment begins." The only way to turn a nation to God is to turn its citizens—one by one—to God.

**[Zeph. 2:4-15](#)** *Judgment in all directions.* God's wrath upon Judah would overflow to its enemies at all points of the compass:

*Judgment to the west: Philistia ([2:4-7](#)).* The great cities of Philistia would be destroyed. They would become pasture land—for the faithful remnant of Judah!

*Judgment to the east: Moab and Ammon ([2:8-11](#)).* Moab and Ammon would share the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah (see [Comparison with Other Bible Books](#)). Their land, too, would ultimately become Judah's possession. Someday, God will destroy all vestiges of idolatry and, even in the remotest parts of the earth, he alone will be worshiped ([Zeph. 2:10-11](#)).

*Judgment to the south: Ethiopia ([2:12](#)).* Ethiopia would also be judged. Ethiopia ruled Egypt from 720 to 654 B.C., so Egypt was probably included in this indictment.

*Judgment to the north: Assyria ([2:13-15](#)).* Assyria, proud world leaders for nearly 300 years ([Zeph. 2:15](#)), would experience sudden and complete destruction. The beautiful city of Nineveh would become a place fit only for wild beasts. Observers would express scorn and contempt at its memory. (See exposition on the book of [Nahum 1-3](#).)

**[Zeph. 3:1-7](#)** *He was there, but no one noticed.* Having pronounced judgment on all four sides, Zephaniah zeroed in on his true target: Judah. The sins of the surrounding nations had "polluted" Jerusalem. Its princes, judges, prophets, and priests were all guilty of violating their trusts to enrich themselves ([Zeph. 3:1-4](#)). Despite Jerusalem's sins, God, through his faithful prophets, had maintained a witness within its walls, yet still they had shamelessly pursued their sinful ways ([Zeph. 3:5](#)). God had punished Judah's pagan neighbors, hoping Judah would learn from it, but they did not ([Zeph. 3:6-7](#)).

**[Zeph. 3:8](#)** *"Wait for Armageddon."* God called the faithful among his people to "be patient" for the day when he will "accuse these evil nations." He will destroy them with "the fire of [his] jealousy" (compare [Zeph. 1:18](#)). A comparison with other Bible references to such a gathering suggests this describes the final great battle of Armageddon (see exposition on [Micah 4:9-13](#)).

**[Zeph. 3:9-13](#)** *Godliness will bring peace.* After the defeat of his foes, God will "purify the lips of all people," purging them of the vocabulary of idolatry, so that they can worship him ([Zeph. 3:9](#)). He will also purify and restore his people, and they will dwell in peace and be in fellowship with him and with all humankind ([Zeph. 3:10-13](#)). Because they are spiritually right they will be physically secure.

**Zeph. 3:14-20** *They'll be moved out, then he'll move in.* Once the Promised Land is rid of God's enemies, God himself will resettle his people there and dwell among them. It will be a time of healing, peace, and joy. The restoration of Judah following the Babylonian captivity was only a partial fulfillment of this promise. Its ultimate fulfillment will come when Jesus returns to earth and establishes his millennial kingdom.

## ZEPHANIAH

(PEOPLE TO REMEMBER FROM ZEPHANIAH)

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**Key Facts:** Prophet, spoke of the "day of the LORD" more often than any other OT prophet

**Total Bible References:** 1 ([Zeph. 1:1](#))

**Key References:** [Zeph. 1-3](#)

### *Zephaniah Speaks*

My great-great-grandfather once escaped the wrath of his enemies, but we will not! Perhaps the ministry of godly Isaiah prompted the Lord to save Jerusalem in the days of Hezekiah. But there will be no stay of execution this time. Hopefully, those few among us who still love God will look to him for protection in those frightful hours of judgment. ([Zeph. 1:2-4](#); [Zeph. 2:3](#); [Isaiah 37:21-36](#))

What terrible words his Spirit has directed me to employ in describing our deplorable spiritual condition: I had to describe my beloved Jerusalem as being rebellious and polluted and oppressing. I described our political leaders as savage lions and wolves devouring dead carcasses, and our prophets and priests as rebellious and polluted just like the city itself. ([Zeph. 3:1-4](#))

Horrible words, shameful thoughts, that should never appear in one's vocabulary referring to our once holy city! But there is hope! Grief will someday turn to glory. The Lord himself, the true king of Israel, will sanctify both our lips and our language, so that once again we—and all the rest of the nations—can call on his name and serve him as we should. ([Zeph. 3:9](#), [15](#))

### *Spiritual Lessons from Zephaniah*

- The Bible urges us to sing praises to God (see [Psalm 30:4](#); [Ephes. 5:18-19](#)). Too often in our times of need we substitute sighing for singing. However, the entire Trinity sings:
  - The Father sings ([Zeph. 3:17](#)).
  - The Son sings (see [Matthew 26:30](#); [Hebrews 2:12](#)).
  - The Holy Spirit sings (see [1 Cor. 14:15](#)).
- Zephaniah exhorts us to clean up our conversation in light of the Lord's approaching return ([Zeph. 3:9](#), see [Ephes. 4:29-31](#); [Ephes. 5:4](#)).

### *Key Verse*

"Beg the LORD to save you—all you who are humble, all you who uphold justice. Walk humbly and do what is right. Perhaps even yet the LORD will protect you from his anger on that day of destruction" ([Zeph. 2:3](#)).