

DECEMBER 19

As westerners these readings in the The One Year Bible seem very removed from real life. We are swiftly approaching Christmas and gifts and family and the irresistible push to be festive. Then comes that weird week between the holidays and again we will be festive on New Year's Eve. All of the words here regarding judgment and disaster are totally out of place....for a westerner.

Occasionally in the U.S. there is some major, violent tragedy where the work of one or a few causes the deaths of many and destroys friends and families and peace, yet we know that such things are very vile exceptions to the norm of life. Acts like the 9-11 World Trade Center strike, or the Boston Marathon bombing, or the Connecticut school shooting are like ugly statues thrown into a peaceful pond. We are all appalled, surprised and shocked, but the statues will sink out of sight and the pond waters will be calm again and the normal life of western society will return. We'll all go back to shopping, entertainment, eating too much and complaining about the government.

But what about the world outside of the west? Is the world really a place of festive lights and joy? Do the words we're reading seem as foreign to others as they do for us? In Syria, a country mentioned in the Bible, there have been well over 50,000 deaths in recent years. Most of those were civilians, dads, moms, kids. Not too many westerners are crying about them. Hundreds of thousands are in refugee camps enjoying...., enjoying what? The conditions in that country are totally third world for most people who are not in the camps but near the fighting. And that is just Syria. Then there are things we never hear of or see in China, India, South America, and Africa. There are tragedies taking place on other continents, in other countries, every day that never make the news but are not lost to the Lord. He sees it all. Most of the population on this planet only knows injustice. Most of the people on this planet will never own or drive a car. Most of the people on this planet know death and hunger and sickness.

There is a need for justice and for salvation. We might not understand God's timing, but His Word is very clear. Justice and salvation are coming. The root of the problem is in each person. We are all carriers of a spiritual disease that makes us rebel against God. That sickness isn't cured on a national level. It is cured on a person-to-person level as we are saved and share that salvation with another person. That salvation is about our Lord, and "Oh Joy!" we're back to Christmas and to all the festiveness. But, the harvest is real and utterly important to our neighbors and the billions who have no clue; because before it gets better, there is a judgment and every person must stand before that Christmas baby, that sacrificed and risen Savior. He will either be their Savior, or their Judge. The gospel is the message of the Savior who saves us from that coming judgment.

Zephaniah 1-3

Because of the limited information God has given us, a cursory reading only gives us a one-dimensional view of the great men of the Bible. In Zephaniah we get a view of the hard road that King Josiah walked. It was already told him that the sins of his grandfather, King Manasseh, would fall upon Judah and Jerusalem. Yet, driven by his passion for God and his love for his people, he bravely fought to save his people. He fought with all the power God gave him to hold back the night.

Somewhere in those 31 years there came a dark night when I think Josiah realized that it wasn't working. He knew nothing of the effect this revival had had on the parents of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. He could only see his family and those close to him, and their disinterest must have made him heartsick.

So how do you encourage such a brave and weary warrior? God sent His Word through Zephaniah. There are aspects of the coming storm that would have renewed Josiah's sense of urgency, but woven into this prophecy, Josiah received a picture of millennial glory. Josiah wasn't working just for his generation, and certainly not just for his children. He was working for the coming King, the Messiah, the One who was mighty to save, who would lead Judah and Jerusalem into eternal glory and offer salvation to the nations.

To see where Zephaniah fits, look at the chart, "Kings of Judah and Israel and the Preexilic Prophets."

Zephaniah 1

Vs. 1-7 Notice that the scope of this is both universal, to all the earth, and local, to Judah. Apparently, although Josiah had removed the monuments of the idols, some people's hearts still sought these gods. This is evidenced by the fact that after Josiah's death, few of the leaders, including his three sons, sought God.

V. 1 It is very likely that Zephaniah was a great-great grandson of King Hezekiah. This means he was a part of the royal family. Hezekiah probably had lots of sons, but we only heard about the son who took the throne, Manasseh.

V. 7 *The day of the Lord* is mentioned or referred to more in this book, in these three short chapters, than in any other book of the Bible. You get some insight into how God knew He could revive Josiah's heart and passion. The near day of judgment is telescoped to reflect some of that final rolling out of judgment on all of mankind. What renews your heart and passion for following Jesus in the harvest?

Vs. 8-13 These are those the Lord will punish in the near "day." Notice how each of these sections begins with some reference to *that day*.

V. 8 Josiah's sons were more interested in dressing like the Assyrians, Egyptians and Babylonians than in following Yahweh. What has changed since then? I'll bet they would have had iPhones and been texting their friends during sermons. We don't know about Josiah's son Jehoahaz, because Pharaoh Neco took him to Egypt after only two months on the throne; but we know both Jehoiakim and Zedekiah. Both were worthless men. All three of Josiah's sons were punished. I'm sure Josiah saw their lack of understanding and love for God, and I'll bet he felt helpless.

Vs. 9-11 Looks like it is talking about people who live for stuff.

V. 9 The *threshold* thing was superstition from 1 Samuel 5:4-5 and is mentioned in Malachi.

Vs. 12-13 This sounds like people who are complacent about following the Lord. This is also the attitude that implies, that the things God says are just not worth getting worked up about. If God is silent, apparently things are OK. Silence doesn't mean God doesn't care. God won't be complacent about punishing these people. Comfort can be taken away in a moment.

Vs. 14-18 Notice how God is telling Josiah about a future day of judgment. We are reading about this in Revelation. I think this gave Josiah a shocking view of the judgment coming upon all men. God's judgment was bigger than just Judah and Jerusalem. Josiah might have been discouraged about standing in the gap for this little country that somehow had a connection to a bigger purpose, but now Josiah is seeing that the gap he is standing in has something to do with the salvation of the entire world. This would have motivated a man like Josiah.

Zephaniah 2

Vs. 1-2 God calls the nation to repent before He unleashes His wrath.

V. 3 This reminds me of the 144,000 in Revelation. They are hidden and protected during the Tribulation. Josiah would have understood this as hope to all who came to the Lord. Every individual mattered.

Vs. 4-15 God is predicting the humbling of the surrounding nations and the glory of the remnant of the people who seek Him. Notice that interspersed in all of this is the greatness of God and the hope for those who seek Him.

Zephaniah 3

Vs. 1-5 This is judgment against Jerusalem. What would you say is the key verse here? I think this is the verse that gave hope to Josiah. His reforms had one focus, to get people to put their *trust in the Lord* and to *draw near* to Him. There were some people doing that.

Vs. 6-7 God had humbled the nations, like the Assyrians and some of the neighboring countries, to show Israel that they should hope in Him. But, the result was that the people of Judah and Jerusalem didn't take it to heart.

Vs. 8-10 In that day, God will summon all the nations together and humble and purify them. This is definitely for the end times.

Vs. 11-13 And at that time God will save a godly remnant of Judah. Again, this confirms to Josiah that the number will be small, so to keep on working.

Vs. 14-20 And God will save and exalt Zion. Notice that the Lord will be the King in their midst. This is what Josiah was working toward. God will eventually cleanse the remnant, humble the nations and come and reign in Jerusalem.

V. 16 I'll bet this helped strengthen Josiah's hands too.

V. 17 I hope that Josiah personalized this verse, "Josiah, the Lord your God is with you. He rejoices *over you with gladness* and *he will quiet you by his love*. He exults *over you with loud singing*. I think we can personalize this verse for ourselves too, because of the victory of Christ.

I'd like to think that Josiah was given strength and courage by this prophecy. Seeing the end, the glory of Israel, seeing Zion with her King, the Lord God reigning in her, must have given him hope. Josiah couldn't lose if he kept following, because God was still in control and the Lord would win the day.

We need to remember too, that regardless of our deep weakness and feelings of failing, we are simply called to follow the Lord we love into this harvest. We reach out to whom we can and we encourage and guide the believing to follow as disciples, who make disciples. The work and power are His and He has a unique relationship to those who hope in Him and follow. Josiah might have felt weak and hopeless in his work, but as the Lord reminded him and us, *Fear not ...; let not your hands grow weak. 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*. Jesus is with us in love and joy, and He is mighty to save.

Revelation 10

Chapter 10 begins a pause in the declaration of judgments from Jesus. This is not to say that there is no activity on earth or in heaven. Actually, there is a lot going on in both places. The seals and the trumpets (there is still one remaining trumpet) of the first 3.5 years have set the stage for the next 3.5. The events of chapter 11 will happen at the mid-point of the Tribulation and chapters 12-16 will happen during this final 3.5 years. Chapter 16 will unleash the final judgments that are very close to the end of the Tribulation and the second coming of Christ.

Vs. 1-7 This mighty angel is declaring a hidden, but very solemn, situation that will be fulfilled. The mention of the *rainbow* should make us think about God's promise to Noah never to fully destroy all of mankind as He did in the flood. The loud voice gives this mystery a special measure of importance. There will be ominous consequences. Apparently what will take place will almost bring the deaths of everyone on the planet. Jesus Himself said, *And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short*. (Matt. 24:22)

One question here is what the mystery was that John was not supposed to write down. It was something announced or mentioned by the prophets that will be fulfilled. Obviously this mystery isn't the incarnation or death and resurrection of Christ, or even the existence of the church.

Vs. 8-10 John is told to eat this small scroll. That the scroll tasted sweet is similar to what we saw in Ezekiel 3:3, but that didn't make Ezekiel sick. Daniel was made sick when he saw his visions. Daniel became preoccupied with the visions of the little horn, because it was able to make war with the saints of God and prevail. This would be a good time to look at Daniel 7:18-27 and particularly Daniel 8:24-27. Notice that in Daniel 8:26, Daniel is told to seal up the vision just as John was. Notice that Daniel became sick at the content of this vision.

I think that what is being announced here is that God is about to give the Jews and anyone who believes in Him (possibly with the exception of the 144,000) into the hand of the antichrist. The world stage has been set. The 144,000 have scattered throughout the earth, and many have come to Christ, and they too have been sharing. The world is wrecked, but the antichrist is rebuilding and creating order. He had made a treaty of peace with Israel, but in spite of that, the two witnesses have been a public threat to him. They have been untouchable. People in the world understand that God is behind what has happened, and now their hearts are beginning to be revealed both in hate toward these witnesses, and also toward God and anyone who names His name.

Time wise, the first 3.5 years are coming to an end. The army of the north spoken of in Ezekiel is coming toward Jerusalem. It appears that the disaster that will happen to this army encamped near the Dead Sea will come from those witnesses. The antichrist will approach Jerusalem with his army, and armed with satanic power; and he will kill the witnesses. He will take his place in the temple and desecrate it, and all the believing Jews in Jerusalem will flee to the hills around the Dead Sea. Satan will be thrown out of heaven and we'll read about Satan's pursuit of the Jews who will be saved in the desert. The antichrist will then reveal spiritual power. The persecution of Christians and believing Jews will encompass most of the last 3.5 years of the Tribulation.

God will defeat Satan through weakness. His own sheep will conquer Satan, ...*by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.* (Rev. 12:11) These disgusting, weak humans will wreck Satan. This I think is the mystery. God will give His people into the enemy's hand and it will destroy that enemy. The more Satan rages, the more he loses, and mankind judges itself by how it treats Jesus' disciples.

Look at what God said through Paul in Romans 8:35-39, *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

V. 11 So, John is told that in spite of this, the Word still needs to go out to all the people of the earth. *And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.* (Matt. 24:14)

Psalm 138

What an interesting psalm for today. We go from a discouraged Josiah, to a great movement in the Tribulation that will prove God's wisdom and strength through His suffering saints, to David, praising God in the midst of his troubles.

Vs. 1-2 Doesn't it strike you that David thanked God not only for His love, but because God had exalted His name and His Word? When David was in trouble and close to God's Word, he was invincible.

V. 3 What a great testimony of hope to us.

Vs. 4-5 David speaks of all the kings of the earth. This is future and it will be true in the Millennium. Even here, David saw beyond his life to the salvation of all peoples.

V. 6 This is what God said through Zephaniah, that the lowly who seek Him are regarded before God.

Vs. 7-8 David was still living a troubled life, but he knew God's presence and preservation. He knew God had a purpose for him and he knew God's *steadfast love*. Is it worth facing hardship to know the reality of God's steadfast love and to know His presence? I think it is and it is built into following Christ in the harvest. I think it is one of those "rewards" you only get a certain way, and following Him in the harvest is the way.

Proverbs 30:11-14

There is something for everyone here. There are kinds of "people" or "sins." How would you describe or title them?